Rethinking Antagonism in Radical Democracy

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Abstract

This dissertation aims to reinstate the centrality of antagonism in contemporary radical democratic theories. Antagonism signifies a type of conflict where the parties involved do not share the capacity to (dis)agree on common ground, which renders decision-making a pure clash of power. I claim that radical democratic politics is ultimately antagonistic insofar as it pertains to exposing and tackling unjust inequalities in a political community in the form of struggle. More specifically, the primary source of antagonism, I argue, is the reluctance and resistance to change on the part of dominant members of society who benefit from the given unequal status quo. This dissertation employs the concept of backlash from feminist scholarship to capture such an antagonistic aspect of radical democratic politics and to critically examine the ways in which radical democratic theories treat backlash when theorizing democratic politics as a struggle.

By engaging with Claude Lefort, Ernesto Laclau, and Jacques Rancière, among others, I show that the theories of radical democracy often either do not take backlash seriously or take it too seriously in conceptualizing democratic politics. Neither of them meaningfully upholds democratic politics as a struggle. On the one hand, failing to take backlash seriously undermines the conception of democratic politics as a struggle—it becomes indistinguishable from a competition of different views and opinions, which presupposes equality (Chapters 1 and 2). On the other hand, taking backlash too seriously as the only possible response to democratic struggle risks foreclosing the possibility of uptake and envisaging the temporal logic of democratic struggle solely as a radical rupture between present and future (Chapter 3). Both accounts fail to adequately address social and political inequality as an object of democratic struggle by obfuscating the pervasiveness and persistence of backlash whose source is inequality. Against this background, I

argue that theories of radical democracy undermine their own assumption (society is the terrain of inequality) and aspiration (the goal of democratic politics is to mitigate and negate inequality) by neglecting backlash phenomena. As a result, an appreciation of the persistent and pervasive backlash must be the starting point of theorizing radical democratic politics (Chapter 4).

Résumé

Cette thèse vise à rétablir la centralité de l'antagonisme dans les théories démocratiques radicales contemporaines. L'antagonisme signifie un type de conflit dont les parties n'ont aucune capacité à s'entendre. Cette incapacité s'étend à leurs accords potentiels comme à leurs désaccords, et transforme le processus de prise de décision en un pur conflit de pouvoir. J'avance l'argument que la démocratie radicale est fondamentalement antagoniste dans la mesure où elle consiste à démasquer les inégalités et injustices au sein d'une communauté politique sous la forme d'une lutte contre celles-ci. La principale source d'antagonisme est alors la réticence et la résistance au changement exercées par les membres dominants de la société, qui bénéficient d'un statu quo inique. Cette thèse utilise le concept du « backlash » issu de la recherche féministe pour saisir cet aspect antagoniste de la démocratie radicale et pour examiner de manière critique la façon dont les théories démocratiques radicales traitent le « backlash » lorsqu'elles théorisent la démocratie en tant que lutte.

En me basant, entre autres, sur les travaux de Claude Lefort, Ernesto Laclau et Jacques Rancière, je montre que les théories de la démocratie radicale ne prennent souvent pas le « backlash » au sérieux du tout, ou au contraire, le prennent trop au sérieux dans la conceptualisation de la démocratie. Ces approches ne soutiennent pas de manière significative la démocratie en tant que lutte. D'une part, le fait de ne pas prendre le « backlash » au sérieux sape la conception de la démocratie en tant que lutte. Elle devient alors indiscernable d'une compétition entre différents points de vue et opinions, présupposant l'égalité entre les parties (chapitres 1 et 2). D'autre part, prendre le « backlash » trop au sérieux comme seule réponse possible à la lutte démocratique risque d'exclure la possibilité de l'adoption et d'envisager la logique temporelle de la lutte

démocratique uniquement comme une rupture radicale entre le présent et l'avenir (chapitre 3). Aucune de ces deux conceptions n'abordent de manière adéquate l'inégalité sociale et politique en tant qu'objet de la lutte démocratique car elles occultent l'omniprésence et la persistance du « backlash » dont l'inégalité est la source. Dans ce contexte, je soutiens que les théories de la démocratie radicale sapent leur propre hypothèse (la société est le terrain de l'inégalité) et leur aspiration (l'objectif de la démocratie est d'atténuer et d'annuler l'inégalité) en négligeant l'importance et la nature des phénomènes de « backlash ». Par conséquent, une appréciation de la persistance et de l'omniprésence du « backlash » doit être le point de départ d'une théorisation de la politique démocratique radicale (chapitre 4).

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Introduction
What Radical Democracy Tells Us about Democratic Politics

In the first quarter of 2022, the 'rush-hour subway action' by an organization called Solidarity Against Disability Discrimination (SADD), a disability advocacy group in South Korea, made several national headlines. SADD's rush-hour subway action was a protest aimed at raising awareness and demanding an increase in the government budget for disability rights, including the 'right to mobility' of people with disabilities.[1] More than anything else, what attracted media attention was the way the protest was carried out. There was nothing objectively spectacular about the protest. It merely involved SADD activists taking subways in metropolitan Seoul during commuting hours like everyone else. But what eventually made the protest highly disruptive and scandalous was the fact that many SADD activists were people with severe disabilities.

Seoul Metro is known as one of the world's most sophisticated, high-tech, and extensive public subway systems, "covering 500 miles (312 kilometers) and 288 stations and carrying almost seven million passengers per day" (Jones 2024). Seoul Metro is arguably the most important means of public transportation for people in Seoul. It is punctual, fast, and efficient. It is an integral part of the daily lives of millions of people. Through their bodily intervention, SADD activists revealed the plain and yet often forgotten fact that the rhythm of Seoul Metro cannot accommodate the pace of passengers with disabilities. Subways had to make longer stops than usual as the activists tried

[1] In 2021, the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MOEF) refused to allocate the national budget to subsidize the interprovincial transportation system for people with accessibility issues. Furthermore, the MOEF allocated 10.6 billion won (approximately 10.7 million Canadian dollars) for the additional disability rights budget, which was 0.8 percent of the SADD's proposal. This amount did not even come close to the proposal passed in the National Assembly Standing Committee, which was 6.6 trillion won (approximately 675 million Canadian dollars).

to get into a subway using wheelchairs, which caused one delay after another. The protest affected hundreds of thousands of people who use the Seoul Metro as part of their daily routines.

It is no accident that SADD activists have chosen the Seoul Metro as the site and the object of their struggle. The Seoul Metro runs on a meticulous schedule that is set up for able-bodied people, and the disruption caused by disabled passengers was an expected outcome of the protest. In the face of public apathy for and ignorance of disability rights, SADD activists sought to dramatize the difficulties that people with disabilities experience in their daily lives. According to Kyung-Seok Park, the head representative of SADD (2024, 31), the rush-hour subway action intended to raise a thorny question to fellow citizens: "Why is it not problematic for you that some people in this society never get to enjoy the things that you take for granted?" The protest succeeded in stimulating public attention. Local and national media spotlighted the rush-hour subway action. The protests staged continuously since December 2021 by SADD activists and their supporters seemed to gain momentum.

However, the situation evolved unfavorably to SADD. Public authorities responded aggressively to SADD's rush-hour subway action. The mayor of Seoul called for "zero tolerance" against the protesters, whom he labeled "the privileged." Seoul Metro immediately filed a damage suit against the SADD activists while pressing criminal charges against them. Police took more direct action to ensure "public safety." Armed with riot shields, police forces were dispatched to the protest sites. They prevented the protesters from approaching and getting into trains by force. Subways did not make stops at stations where demonstrations were held. In the meantime, Seoul Metro sent out public emergency alerts, noting that the subway would not stop at certain stations due to "SADD's illegal protest." The ruling conservative party politicians discredited the democratic legitimacy of the protest. They provoked negative public sentiment against the

protesters. Some of them publicly claimed that SADD's rush-hour subway action cannot be tolerated in a democratic society primarily because the protesters disregarded "the rights of other citizens" in claiming "the rights of their own." The 'next generation' (now-former) leader of the ruling conservative party, a young Harvard alumnus, lambasted SADD activists by describing their struggle as "taking the commuting hours of the millions of citizens of Seoul hostage," which is unacceptable in "a civilized society." Especially since politicians openly attacked the subway action, the protest had been exposed to more hostile reactions from ordinary citizens (Park 2024, 242–5). In particular, public remarks in online forums often echoed politicians' incendiary speeches as they denounced SADD's rush-hour subway action.

Contemporary democratic theory often celebrates the democratic credentials of disruptive political actions, such as SADD's rush-hour subway action (see Chambers 2024, 208). Disruptive political action is taken here to indicate a form of political expression or claim-making that involves transgressing formal and informal norms in order to address democratic deficits in existing institutions and to change them in a more just and egalitarian manner (Chapman 2024, 148, 151; Balibar 2015, 124; Hayward 2020, 449).[2] Even more centrist thinkers in the liberal-constitutionalist camp today would interpret SADD's subway action as an act of declaring the equal rights and membership of people with disabilities (see, for example, Arato and Cohen 2022, 116; Müller 2021, 173; see also Urbinati 2014, 236–7).[3] From this perspective, disability activists

[2] In this dissertation, I consider disruptive political actions to take various forms, narratives, sizes, and levels of organization. They include one-person or small-group performances (Bargu 2022; Mouffe 2013, chapter 5), spontaneous and more organized protests (Butler 2015, chapter 2; Ben-Shaul 2024), riots (Delmas 2018; Pasternak 2019; Boonen 2020; Mouser 2024), and grassroots social and political movements, including populism (Grattan 2016; Vergara 2020a). I define the category of disruptive political action in terms of its purpose and goal rather than its concrete forms and modalities.

[3] According to Lloyd and Little (2009, 5), the convergence between radical democracy and liberal democracy is not an accident. This is because radical democrats often "conceive of their enterprise in terms of the democratisation of liberalism" (Ibid.; see also McNeilly 2016, 278). This dissertation seeks to distinguish the two traditions of thought to highlight the distinctive contribution of radical democracy to democratic theory. See also note 28.

demand mutual respect as equal members of society to their fellow citizens by acting *as if* they had already borne equal rights to be seen and heard in public (see Rancière 1999). The fact that people with disabilities are not seen as equal members (but rather as the object of charity and care) by other "ordinary" citizens compels SADD activists to resort to disruptive actions to dramatize their capacity to voice. In doing so, the activists stage a disagreement against the dominant social norms and institutions that exclude people with disabilities from social and political life (see Breaugh and Caivano 2024, 455). Through disruption, SADD activists draw public attention to a deep-seated inequality between people with and without disabilities that remains largely unnoticed in Korean society, where ableism is a dominant norm (see Hayward 2020, 455). This is to say that the subway action meaningfully contributes to promoting pluralism. It allows citizens "to question and reconstitute the very meaning of what is common or sensible and what is not, and this is […] precisely what it means to engage in democratic politics" (Zivi, 2012, 8).

A particular strand of democratic theory that has largely influenced the formation of such a view is *radical democracy* (e.g., Lefort 1986a; Mouffe 1993; 2000; Wolin 2016a; 2016b; Connolly 1995; Rancière 1999; 2006; Laclau 2007 [1996]; 2005a; Negri 1999; Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Hardt and Negri 2004; 2017; Butler 2006; 2016a; Abensour 2011; Balibar 2014; 2015; Honig 1993; 2009). [4] Radical democracy is a constellation of theories that highlight the transgressive and transformative aspects of democratic politics by locating it at least partly outside the institutional domain of representative democracy (Ingram 2013, 190; Deleixhe 2022, 159;

[4] The survey here is by no means complete. Nor do I mean to dismiss divisions, nuances, and tensions among these thinkers. For contemporary students of radical democracy, the differences among the above thinkers are often considered more salient than their commonalities (see, for example, Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000; Wenman 2013). From this perspective, beyond contemporary radical democratic theories' common reference to (post-)structuralism (Marchart 2007; Breckman 2013a), their modes of conceiving radical democratic politics often significantly diverge (Tønder and Thomassen 2005; Kioupkiolis 2010; Thomassen 2017; cf. Laclau 2005b).

Breaugh and Caivano 2024, 450).

The term ‘radical’ originates from the Latin word “radix,” meaning “root.” Radical democracy is radical not because it assumes some absolute foundation of democratic (or more broadly political) life. On the contrary, it is radical because it does not assume such a foundation.[5] Radical democracy understands democratic politics to happen around the fundamental terms (e.g., norms, institutions, and identities) of democracy’s communal life (Marchart 2007; Disch 2021, 123; Chambers 2024, 210). From a radical democratic perspective, those terms are never static. They are subject to permanent change by members of society who are “capable of giving meaning to their life in common” (Holman et al. 2015, 19). In this context, proponents of radical democracy understand the purpose of democratic politics as reinstating the *contingency* and *contestability* of the foundations of political life (Isin 2008, 36; Rancière 1999, 15; Thomassen 2010, 170; Marchart 2007, 2). By defining democratic politics in such a way, radical democrats bring to attention the ontological dimension of ‘the political’ that is distinct from politics (Lefort 1988f, 216–9). ‘The political’ pertains to “the moments in which sociopolitical institutions and practices are instituted or challenged” (Thomassen 2010, 171; Arditi 2007; 110). Consequently, for radical democrats, political activities exceed the traditionally understood domain of politics, such as parliament and election. Every aspect of social life is political insofar as the dominant social relationships can be challenged and reconfigured from that space.

One way to explain why radical democratic politics is ‘democratic’ is that it exposes and tackles *social* inequalities in particular democracies at a given time and place. Social inequality is taken here to indicate a type of inequality that stems from individual and group differences (e.g.,

[5] At times, ‘radical’ is interpreted as connoting going back to the root of democracy: *isonomy*, which, in this context, refers to “the equal participation of the Many in the creation of law” (Breaugh and Caivano 2024, 449; Wolin 2016b, 106; cf. Urbinati 2014, 20).

race, gender/sexuality, class, age, religion, region, ethnicity, education, and ability).[6] Such differences are often a source of unequal distribution of opportunities and rewards among the members of a particular polity (Collins 2012, 446; Pease 2021), including in exercising political rights (Kramer 2017).[7] Social inequalities arise as those unevenly distributed opportunities and

[6] Another strand of radical democracy focuses on economic inequality (Hardt and Negri 2012; Kalyvas 2019b; Vergara 2020a; 2020b). It problematizes the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few as the primary source of determinacy in a democratic society. The argument goes that wealth disparity within liberal democracy deteriorates the quality of democratic life and frustrates the ideal of the self-rule of the people. As a result, the have-nots are second-class citizens whose membership in the political community is nominal at best since they cannot meaningfully exercise political rights (Green 2016; Breaugh 2013). This strand of thought is often labeled as 'plebeian democracy,' whose major source of inspiration is Machiavelli's republican thought (McCormick 2011). The adjective 'plebeian' comes from plebs of the Roman Republic, which refers to "individuals who had neither names nor the right to speak in public" (Breaugh 2013, xix). Plebeian democracy's initial focus is on showing how the existing social and political arrangements generate and reproduce second-class citizenship. From there, plebeian democrats valorize the poor against the rich as the agents of democratic struggle (Kalyvas 2019b). This framework is often used to analyze contemporary populist movements (Vergara 2020a; Mulvad and Stahl 2019). Then, what is the relationship between my approach and the one that places an emphasis on economic inequality? There is an overlap in problematizing the gap between the formal and informal dimensions of equality. Beyond that, I would argue that the framework of social inequality includes that of economic inequality. This is because the social inequality framework perceives 'class' as one of the sources of inequality, hierarchy, and exclusion in citizens' public interaction. In this vein, I would argue that the approach taken in this dissertation is more comprehensive than the one centered on economic inequality.

[7] According to Patricia Hill Collins (2012), social inequalities are the expressions of multiple, complex power relations within society. The fact that social inequalities are the expression of multiple, complex power relations implies that those inequalities tend to be interlocking and intersectional and that they are not engendered and reproduced by a single axis (e.g., race, class, or gender) (Collins 2015). The crux of the intersectional approach to social and political inequalities is that "different oppressions are distinct but […] interrelated and mutually reinforcing" (Pease 2021, 16). While appreciating the complexity of an inegalitarian and hierarchical order of society and the social processes leading to its formation (see, for example, Breaugh and Caivano 2024, 454–5), radical democrats often attend to concrete sites or instances of oppression and exclusion to conceptualize democratic citizenship (see, for example, Balibar who examines racism in the postcolonial French context to conceive the meaning of democratic citizenship and democratic politics (1991, chapter 1; 2015)). Doing so is possible partly because "social inequalities take various forms across national contexts, race, class, and gender are not equally salient" (Collins 2015, 7). However, radical democracy is not entirely free from the criticism that it tends to provide an overarching, simplistic, and mechanistic account of social change that does not reflect complex social reality and ignores contexts (McNay 2014; Colpani 2022; Ciccariello-Maher 2020). Because this dissertation is concerned with making an immanent critique of radical democracy that follows its premises, assumptions, and logical flows to address inconsistencies, I admit that my intervention is equally susceptible to the external critiques of radical democracy. Radical democracy would benefit from making less ambitious claims and assertions about the social and political world. However, my goal is to highlight its contributions rather than identify its limitations. I believe and intend to show throughout this dissertation that there are unique contributions that the theories of radical democracy can make to democratic theory and practice once the theoretical and logical inconsistencies in radical democratic theories are cleared out (which is the task this dissertation seeks to do). Admittedly, the extent to which the points raised by external critics of radical democracy undermine and even invalidate radical democracies' potential contributions is an important topic to navigate. However, I believe this question can be productively examined and debated only after the contributions of radical democracy are clearly put forward. This dissertation is considered a prior step to engaging with external critiques of radical democracy, leaving that task for future analysis. While avoiding making generalized empirical arguments regarding ongoing exclusions, oppressions, and injustices, I focus on addressing theoretical issues *internal to* radical democratic theories.

rewards generate the formal and informal structures of privilege and hierarchy in society and politics over time. This process, in turn, involves dividing the communal life of citizens into the center and margins. As I will show in the following sections, radical democracy perceives that social inequalities at least partly derive from an ordering of society (i.e., 'the political'), which shapes social identities and relationships in a particular way. This view is based on the critique of empty universality and the understanding that a particular (dominant) form of life constitutes the basis of the universal account of society (Laclau 2007 [1996], 15; Balibar 2020, 6; Young 1991, 144). Social inequalities are politically salient because they generate informal boundaries and hierarchies within the democratic public space (Gebhardt 2021, 138). From a radical democratic perspective, these boundaries and hierarchies are always already at work to frustrate the ideal of collective self-rule *from within*. They marginalize certain actors and voices in politics by making them less visible and audible than others in deciding the terms of community (Young 2002, 56; Rancière 1999, 31). Consequently, social inequality is the basis of political inequality.

In this context, radical democrats often include illegal, disruptive, and even uncivil forms of political participation to tackle social inequalities in what they consider a meaningful exercise of democratic citizenship (Balibar 2002; Boonen 2020, 540; Marchart 2022).[8] Disruptive political actions open up new spaces of politics and introduce new actors to the political arena (Dikeç 2017, 52). By doing so, disruptive political actions unsettle the prevailing order of society (Disch 2019b, 168; Holman et al. 2015, 19; Martin 2009, 98; see also Young 2001). For radical democrats, transgressing the status quo involves "bring[ing] visibility to the inequalities and injustices

[8] Democratic citizenship denotes that political participation, or citizens' active exercise of their political rights, ought to be the central component of individuals' rights and duties as members of democratic polities (Bellamy 2008; Dalton 2008, 78; Cohen and Ghosh 2019, 45; see also Dahl 1998, chapter 4). From this perspective, "one becomes a citizen through participation" (Tully 2014, 9, 39; see also Stewart 1995; cf. Galston 2002, 4). Political participation animates the ideal of democratic self-rule, that is, "government of the people should be conducted by the people" (Skinner 1989, 690 in Lyons 2021, 212).

permeating this world" and "the lack of democracy in existing [democratic] institutions" (Tambakaki 2019, 500; 2016, 930; Balibar 2015, 124; Mouffe 2000, 20; Wolin 2016a, 91). Accordingly, in radical democracy, disruptive political actions constitute an important site of democratic politics (Chambers 2024, 212).

Radical democratic politics is premised on the critical view that *any given status quo* of democracy is fundamentally and necessarily unequal, and, for this reason, democracy is understood as a never-ending ongoing process (Laclau 2001b, 7–12). This dissertation examines the implications of this critical view to rearticulate the radical democratic conception of politics. To achieve this goal, I consider the basic question of radical democracy anew. The question is as follows. What should radical democracy's normative conception of democratic politics entail, *given its critical assessment of a democratic society as always already marked by social inequalities*? I claim that radical democrats must take the place and role of *antagonism* seriously in conceptualizing democratic politics. Radical democratic politics ultimately boils down to an antagonistic confrontation between those who seek to expose and tackle unjust inequalities in a political community and those who seek to preserve such conditions. The primary source of antagonism, I argue, is the reluctance and resistance to change on the part of dominant members of society who benefit from the given unequal status quo. "Backlash" names this particular antagonism emanating from the prevailing order of society. The following two chapters critically address the tendency to obfuscate and downplay the antagonistic dimension of democratic life within the theories of radical democracy. This tendency represents a theoretical lacuna in radical democracy and prevents radical democrats from adequately addressing the problem of social inequalities in their theories. The last two substantive chapters then rediscover radical democracy's appreciation of antagonism as the constitutive aspect of democratic life that unfolds on the terrain

of inequality.

As I will explain further in the next section, the main target of criticism is what often passes as "agonism" in radical democracy. Agonism maintains that conflict, which is considered integral to democratic life, must be expressed within the ethical-political framework of mutual respect and recognition of opponents as equal interlocutors (Mouffe 2000, 101–4; Wenman 2013, 47).[9] I argue that agonism assumes the willingness and capacity of democratic citizens to treat one another as equals in making public decisions. This assumption obfuscates and trivializes a backlash against democratic struggle as a concrete manifestation of antagonism in democratic politics. In this regard, agonism represents a systematic failure of radical democratic theories to be allegiant to their own

[9] Concerning this definition of agonism, I should clear up the terminological confusion between radical democracy and its neighboring concept, agonistic democracy. One of the sources of confusion in terms of naming or drawing the conceptual boundary of radical democracy is the division between 'radical democracy' and 'agonistic democracy' (Wingenbach 2011, xvi; Wenman 2013, chapter 2; Mouffe 2014, 265; Tambakaki 2017, 578; see also Boonen 2020; Buti 2023). Scholars who differentiate between agonistic democracy and radical democracy acknowledge their shared commonalities. Both camps are focused on challenging and changing the socio-political status quo and emphasize the role of popular struggles in making such changes. However, it is argued that the difference lies in how radical and agonistic democrats view the temporality of social transformation. Radical democracy understands democratic politics as a momentary and revolutionary rupture or break with institutional politics for radical transformation (Wenman 2013). In contrast, agonistic democracy upholds an idea of democratic politics that unfolds over time. This dissertation does not rely on this conceptual distinction. Instead, it subsumes agonistic democracy under the category of radical democracy. I exclude from the outset certain thinkers often labeled as 'radical democrats' who largely ignore the temporal dimension of democratic politics (Badiou and Žižek). I also argue that other 'radical democrats' are concerned with sustaining the democratic space and not reducing democratic politics to an 'event' (Laclau and Rancière). Meanwhile, Chantal Mouffe defines the relationship between agonistic democracy and radical democracy differently (2014, 265). For Mouffe, agonistic democracy is an 'analytical approach' that lacks a specific content, whereas radical democracy is a political project (e.g., social democracy or neoliberalism). Mouffe understands agonistic democracy as the genuinely democratic mode of implementing radical democratic hegemony (Mouffe 2013, 133; 2018, chapter 3). I do not adopt Mouffe's distinction either. In fact, Mouffe cannot adequately sustain the analytical distinction between agonistic democracy as a formal approach to democratic politics and radical democracy as a substantive project of democracy. The reason is that Mouffe often assumes agonism as an integral feature of radical democracy. In Mouffe's definition, radical democracy is the political project whose goal is "the deepening of the 'democratic revolution,' as the extension of the democratic struggles for equality and liberty to a wider range of social relations" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, xv; see also Mouffe 2018, 18). For Mouffe, radical democracy must be pursued agonistically as opposed to antagonistically. Antagonism negates the ideals of equality and freedom at the heart of radical democracy (Mouffe 2000, 103). This dissertation argues against Mouffe's perspective, which is widely held among radical democrats today. It will show that agonistic democracy is merely one theoretical attempt to conceptualize radical democracy that champions agonism to achieve the substantive vision of radical democracy. My goal is partly to expose the self-negating aspects of an agonistic approach to radical democracy.

critical worldviews.

If democratic societies at any given time and place uphold a determinate identity of the people constituted by the society's internal boundaries and hierarchies, this condition will necessarily fuel a backlash against disruptive political actions.[10] This is because some would want to maintain the unequal status quo.[11] I do not think that this intuition is as widely shared among radical democrats today as it should be, given their critical understanding of a democratic society.[12] Nor do I think that backlash is a major theme in the scholarship of radical democracy. Instead, this scholarship is often preoccupied with celebratory remarks on disruptive political actions (see also McNay 2014).

This is not to say that giving meanings to those actions is not important. However, to properly uphold the democratic credentials and emancipatory potentials of such actions, radical democrats must appreciate the conditions in and against which disruptive political actions arise

[10] As I mentioned earlier and will address further as I develop my arguments, I am not saying that the determinate social condition is formed around a single axis (class, race, gender, religion, language, education, and so on). The determinate identity of the people in particular democracies is constructed by an amalgam of different identity factors. While those multiple identity factors overlap and co-exist to give rise to the internal hierarchies and inequalities of the democratic citizenry, I believe they can be studied together or separately (see also Martin 2022, 67). More to the point, the focus of this dissertation is less on navigating the complex relationship between multiple identity factors (e.g., how they affect one another in practice) than on addressing the condition of inequality itself, which results from the (contingent) mixture of different identity factors, as the starting point of a critical inquiry to radical democracy. The determinate image/identity of the people becomes conceptually, theoretically, and normatively salient when it is employed to critically address specific instances of the internal hierarchization of the democratic citizenry, which can happen according to different identity lines.

[11] While individuals may have different personal reasons for upholding the status quo, I am concerned with structural reasons. Some would defend the status quo because they enjoy unearned privilege from it. Others would do so because inequality is naturalized and deemed legitimate. Both cases have to do with the people's determinate identity inscribed in the societal fabric of particular democracies.

[12] To be sure, I am not arguing that radical democrats are entirely oblivious to a backlash in radical democratic politics that takes place from and against society's determinate formation (Connolly 1995, xx; Balibar 2015, 85, 86; Butler 2016b, 23). Some are more attentive to this problem than others and take backlash seriously in formulating their theories of radical democracy. I argue in the third chapter that despite his lack of employment of backlash in conceptualizing radical democratic politics, Ernesto Laclau avoids the logical inconsistency between his critical understanding of the social world and the normative proposal against the unequal status quo by appreciating the antagonistic dimension of radical democratic politics. This stance distinguishes Laclau from his intellectual partner, Chantal Mouffe.

(Matijasevich 2019). I submit that backlash constitutes a significant part of those conditions, and radical democracy can address it theoretically without adjusting or abandoning its assumptions. Radical democracy must revisit its theoretical foundations to capture backlash and appreciate its implication on democratic politics adequately. In this context, this dissertation aims to re-appreciate the place and role of antagonism in radical democratic politics by revisiting the fundamental premises of radical democracy. I name this task "radicalizing" radical democracy.

Radicalizing Radical Democracy

As briefly mentioned in the previous section, what makes radical democracy "radical" is the perception that a democracy's basic terms of communal life are contingent and contestable. From this perspective, dominant norms, institutions, and identities at any given time in a democracy are the products of a temporary crystallization of power. For radical democrats, such a condition gives rise to social inequalities. The idea of social inequality implies that any given order of democracy deems certain actors and perspectives 'more equal' than others. Radicalizing radical democracy is a theoretical attempt to develop a radical conception of democratic politics that faithfully builds on radical democracy's own critical view of an actually existing democratic society.

In this dissertation, I argue that the properly radical conception of democratic politics should have two primary features. The first one is the valorization of disruptive political actions as a key component of democratic politics (Breaugh and Caivano 2024, 451–4). This is already widely upheld by contemporary radical democrats. Disruptive political actions promote democratic self-rule by redefining the boundaries of political actors and spaces shaped by social inequalities. Those actions expose democratic deficits in a democratic society by bringing social inequalities to the surface (Hayward 2020). From there, disruptive political actions urge

democratic citizens to act against social inequalities (see Chapman 2024, 151). Another way of expressing this process is that disruptive political actions help promote *pluralism*. In a broad sense of the term, pluralism signifies the recognition of different and often conflicting views and opinions of citizens about how to live together as a community (Lefort 1988a; Müller 2007, 1; Habermas 1996, 362–383; Mouffe 2000, 18). Pluralism connotes the permanently open possibility for any particular views and opinions to form a dominant vision of the political community in the future, if not now. Pluralism is inseparable to the issue of equality. "[Citizens'] equal share in framing the rules that shape their political life" gives political dynamism by reflecting citizens' different values, views, and opinions in public decision-making over time (Bellamy 2015, 3; Wolin 2016a, 91). Inequality frustrates pluralism by causing the internal stratification of the democratic public space. Accordingly, for radical democrats, pluralism can never be fully realized *in the present* because social inequalities are constitutive of the ostensibly 'democratic' public space. The radical conception of democratic politics thus concerns realizing pluralism in and through the ongoing process of negating social inequalities.

The second feature of democratic politics that is less acknowledged and studied by radical democrats is what I call *backlash*. Backlash is a primary mechanism that hinders the radical democratic project. As I will elaborate shortly, the basic idea underlying backlash is that when social inequalities in a democratic society motivate movements to fight against them in the name of democracy, they would also give rise to counter-movements to maintain the unequal status quo from a subset of the population. I call those counter-movements backlash. From a radical democratic perspective, backlash is unavoidable in democratic politics. This is primarily because social inequalities generate unearned privileges for some, which are, in turn, often rendered natural in the eyes of democratic citizens (Pease 2021; see also Bhopal 2023, 113–4). The privileged

would perceive disruptive political actions as potentially threatening their status, while some ordinary citizens would see those actions as unfairly demanding privilege by and for a subsection of society. All this is to say that backlash is a normal feature of democratic politics that revolves around disruptive political actions.

Radicalizing radical democracy is a theoretical initiative that brings backlash to the center of developing a radical democratic conception of democratic politics. It seeks to reinvigorate radical democracy *from within* by addressing logical incoherence in the theories of radical democracy. The goal is not to discredit radical democracy but to help radical democrats better pursue their visions of an egalitarian society. The main problem that this dissertation deals with is a tendency in the scholarship of radical democracy to treat backlash as an empirically contingent, deviant phenomenon in democratic politics. I argue that such a tendency represents a theoretical lacuna in radical democracy as it negates radical democracy's own critical worldview. It is important to note that, by making this argument, I am not suggesting that radical democratic theories should consider backlash the *only* response to disruptive political actions for being logically coherent, which is the position I will introduce in Chapter 3. Radical democrats should not entirely give up the possibility for citizens to stand against or at least acknowledge existing inequalities and injustices revealed by disruptive political actions. To do so would be to reject the moral efficacy of a democratic constitution that stipulates the freedom and equality of all (see Lefort 1986a; Laclau and Mouffe 2000; Rancière 2004a; cf. Laclau 2015b, 84). As a result, radical democracy should assume the possibilities of backlash and uptake simultaneously.[13] My complaint

[13] Following Mary Scudder (2020b, 504), I understand uptake as "the fair consideration of the arguments, stories, and perspectives that particular citizens share in deliberation." The notion of uptake is the opposite of backlash, which, I later explain, involves detracting, distorting, and dismissing the claims against existing inequalities and injustices made by (but not limited to) those who suffer from them.

is that theories of radical democracy often uphold either one of the two possibilities, which is problematic in different ways.

The first two chapters will show that when radical democratic theories fail to treat backlash as a normal feature of democratic politics, they obfuscate it. They do so by presuming the willingness and capacity of democratic citizens to take marginal voices that challenge the status quo seriously in public decision-making. What slips out of sight is the problem of social inequalities that give rise to backlash in the first place. Hence, as long as radical democrats believe that social inequalities exist in democracies and are primarily interested in addressing and tackling those inequalities in the name of democracy, they must incorporate backlash into their normative theorizing of democratic politics. This is because backlash is a concrete manifestation of social inequality in democratic societies. The question of how to fight against social inequalities cannot bypass the problem of backlash. Accordingly, a properly radical conception of democratic politics must envisage democratic politics *against the backdrop of backlash*.

I argue that by radicalizing radical democracy, we can better understand the role of antagonism in democratic life. Radicalized radical democracy can demonstrate that antagonism is necessary on the part of those who wage democratic struggle to promote pluralism against the unequal status quo (Chapter 3). It can also capture the phenomenon in which antagonism appears in the guise of preserving pluralism to maintain the unequal status quo (Chapter 4). Therefore, radicalizing radical democracy allows democratic theorists to consider the normative implications of antagonism in politics in a more nuanced and productive way (Conclusion). This is a broader implication of radicalizing radical democracy. Instead of dismissing antagonism as anti-democratic, we can appreciate it as a part of democratic politics. As a result, my project helps democratic theorists make informed judgments about when to reject or endorse antagonism in

democratic politics.

Now that I have outlined the basic idea of radicalizing radical democracy, I turn to adding flesh to the bones of this idea. As a first step, I examine further the meanings and implications of pluralism and backlash illustrated above. As for pluralism, radical democracy ought to perceive pluralism as a matter of promotion rather than preservation. Regarding backlash, radical democracy ought to consider backlash ubiquitous rather than marginal in the public life of democratic citizens. Such understandings of pluralism and backlash would come from radical democracy's critical construction of a democratic society in terms of social inequality. Discussions in this section intend to problematize radical democratic theories' insufficient attention to backlash. I address such a tendency as a logical-theoretical problem in the following section.

Let me start the discussion by introducing radical democracy's critical worldview in terms of pluralism. Democratic theorists today, including radical democrats, often understand pluralism as the defining feature of a democratic society. According to this view, for a society to be called a democracy, its societal order should be subject to a permanent change (Lefort 1988a; Espejo 2011). This means that while there will always be a dominant, temporarily fixed order of society in a democracy, the current order should forever be open to conflicts and disagreements for a potential change in the future (Lefort 1988a, 19; Urbinati 2014; Mouffe 2000). Pluralism captures this dynamic and indeterminate character of democracy (Ferguson 2012, 117).

As I will explain in the first chapter, radical democracy tends to theorize pluralism more robustly than the other strands of democratic theory (Wenman 2003a, 62). According to some radical democrats, liberals and deliberative democrats often treat pluralism as an empirical fact of diverse values and opinions (i.e., the 'fact of pluralism') (see, for example, Rawls 1993; Galston 2002; Plattner 2010, 89; cf. Müller 2016, 82). The argument goes that liberals and deliberative

democrats tend to reduce the scope of pluralism to managing conflicts among the established differences for social harmony. In this context, Étienne Balibar criticizes "the liberal political discourse [for] always in a certain sense restricting the scope and field of conflicts that could potentially enter into the 'game' of pluralism and its specific agonism" (2015, 89). I think this criticism is central to understanding radical democracy's critical worldview and thus warrants elaboration.

The foundational idea underlying this criticism is that the 'symbolic representation' of the democratic community *precedes* its presence. For radical democrats, a political community requires the normative schema of what is true, right, legitimate, and so on that its members collectively abide by to sustain their communal life (Disch 2019a, 9; Thomassen 2017, 540). Such a schema forms a field of common sensibility and perceptivity, through which individuals understand themselves as members of the same society (Geenens 2019, 95). This schema is a symbolic order of society (Lefort 1988a, 11). The symbolic order is a form of representation (Thomassen 2005, 106). It constitutes the common world by staging what is socially meaningful (Breckman 2013b, 180). Importantly, for radical democrats, what is represented is not some preexisting essence of a particular democratic community. Building on the linguistic model that emphasizes "the noncorrespondence of words and things, the nontransparency of language, and the power of signs to constitute the things they purportedly represent" (Breckman 2013a, 11; Khan 2017, 554), contemporary radical democratic theories understand representation "not [as] the representation of an original presence but what brings about the represented—in short, it is a relation of *articulation*" (Thomassen 2005, 106 emphasis added).

Against this background, radical democrats are often keen to capture that the formation of democratic communities is inherently intertwined with power struggles, violence, and conflict

(Frank 2016, 77; Richard 2019, 67; see also Laclau 2001b; Bernal 2017; Duong 2020; Bofill 2021). In doing so, radical democrats understand this process as involving *a contingent valorization of certain experiences and constituencies as the material basis of the universal, supposedly indeterminate, identity/image of the 'people'* in particular democracies (Thomassen 2010, 177; Mouffe 2000, 97; Balibar 1991, chapter 3; 2015, 79–81; see also Boonen 2022, 920–2). This process leads to the inscription of a particular identity/image of the people in the social fabric of the political community (from policy design to cultural representation). I call it democracy's determinate social formation.

Democracy's determinate social formation generates a discrepancy between formal equality and informal inequality in the communal life of democratic citizens. The political upshot of such a discrepancy is that becoming a 'citizen-subject' is the precondition for individuals to be visible and audible within the 'democratic' public space (Norval 2001, 591; Brandzel 2016). The notion of the 'citizen-subject' consists of an inner contradiction. On the one hand, the 'citizen' side of the citizen-subject renders otherwise possibly unequal individuals equal through universal rights. On the other hand, the 'hegemonic' norms, values, and institutions that mirror the ideal image of a 'citizen' in particular democracies 'produce' citizens as a *subject* in practice (Rodd 2018, 319; see also Butler 2016, 4).[14] The result is the discrepancy between individuals' formal membership

[14] I understand *hegemony* in terms of the process by which a particular subsection of society presents its particular will as the general will of society. According to Antonio Gramsci (2005, 12), every social order is sustained by the dominant group's effort to achieve the "spontaneous consent [from the dominated group] to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group." Central to the concept of hegemony is the notion that consent obscures the structure of domination within society, making a given social order appear objective to the public (Laclau 2000, 54). Alternatively, Peter Thomas suggests that, when Gramsci originally employed the concept of hegemony, it did not "[refer] to a system of power and domination" but "a capacity to propose potential solutions to the social and political crises afflicting Italian society" (2021, 331–2). According to this reading, Gramsci used the term in a strategic manner, whose aim was to "constitute a real critique of the sovereign paradigm of modern state power." However, Thomas does not deny that hegemony for Gramsci involves such an aspect as 'the production of consent' (see ibid., 331).

status in the democratic community and their ability to practice political rights meaningfully (Lefort 1988a, 19; 1996, 49; Connolly 1995, 88–91; Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Mouffe 2000, 94–7; Butler 2000, 35–40; Laclau 2005, 166; Rancière 2006, 64; Balibar 2015, 79; Young 2002, 70; see also Myers 2020). The constitutive nature of this gap in democracies is the reason why radical democrats are critical of an abstract notion of democratic public space (Mouffe 2000, chapter 4; Young 1990, chapter 4).

In this context, radical democrats refuse to understand the meaning of democratic politics as an ongoing process of mutual deliberation among ostensibly equal citizens. This is because, for radical democrats, the basic questions constituting the 'democratic' decision-making, such as who speaks, what is spoken of, and how speech is made, are *political* through and through (Rancière 1999, 28–30; 2001, Thesis 7; see also Mouffe 2000, 98; Fraser 2009, 286).[15] Those criteria for participation embody social inequalities that underlie the given order of the political community. Against this background, for radical democrats, what makes disruptive political actions genuinely democratic is that they emerge against the perceptive configurations of the public domain that delimit participation and, by doing so, enable "a profound transformation of the symbolic ordering of social relations" (Norval 2001, 590; Tambakaki 2017, 579; Disch 2019a, 10; Mouffe 2000, 19–20; Connolly 1995, xiv; Wenman 2013, 29–33; Balibar 2015, 93). In other words, disruptive political actions are democratic because they reinstate the dynamic and indeterminate character of democracy against the status quo marked by social inequalities (Mouffe 2000, 104; Laclau 2001b,

[15] While emblematic, Rancière is not the only radical democrat who points out the 'perceptual (or perceptive)' nature of inequality in a democratic society. On the contrary, radical democratic thinkers often construe inequality, exclusion, and hierarchy in a democratic society as a problem of perception. As I will show in the following chapters, Mouffe and Laclau's 'hegemony,' Connolly's 'fundamentalism,' Balibar (and Young)'s 'internal exclusion,' and Butler's 'recognizability' in addition to Rancière's 'police,' addresses the democratic deficit within a democracy that is fundamentally perceptual (or perceptive). This tendency is common among radical democrats despite their different philosophical backgrounds and theoretical subtleties.

12).[16]

What I have discussed so far about radical democratic politics may be familiar to the readers of radical democracy. Now, I turn to a less studied aspect of radical democratic politics—the normalized and routinized antagonism in civic space against disruptive political actions that I call backlash. From my perspective, backlash is a ubiquitous feature of radical democratic politics but has not been widely addressed in radical democracy scholarship. As an abstract principle of politics, I understand *antagonism* as a particular kind of conflict based on a friend-enemy antithesis (cf. Disch 2021, 130). Carl Schmitt (2007) most forcefully articulated this idea of antagonism. For Schmitt (Ibid., 28), the enemy denotes "not merely any competitor or just any partner of a conflict in general" but a concrete existential threat to the integrity of the people and the political community. Politically speaking, designating someone as an enemy (of the people) involves rejecting their political rights and agency as equal interlocutors. This implies that there is no mutual ground for agreement and compromise within the antagonistic relationship. In other words, antagonism marks the sheer impossibility of debate or disagreement in deciding the terms of

[16] Defining democracy in terms of indeterminacy may strike as normatively ambiguous. The problem lies in the formalistic nature of this definition of democracy. Are all kinds of exclusions undemocratic? For example, should we call the January 6th U.S. Capitol Attack by Trump supporters a radical democratic action, given that the participants of this event were (felt) excluded from the mainstream political scene? Radical democracy's lack of consideration of the content of a political project in determining what counts as democratic has been a persistent source of its external criticism (Espejo 2015, 73). Some scholars often respond to this criticism by providing normative criteria for radical democratic practices (Mouffe 2018; Wolkenstein 2019). However, such attempts are seen as being in tension with the formalism of radical democracy (Cohen 2019b; Busk 2020, chapter 3). While admitting the normative ambiguity in the indeterminacy principle, others frame the outcome of the collective actions of the excluded as a matter of empirical contingency (Laclau 2005a, 87; Kalyvas 2019b, 549; Frank 2022, 1413). I think this response does not successfully reconcile the theoretical tension between the formalism of radical democracy and its (tacit) normative valorization of only certain political projects in the name of radical democracy. Finally (and I think this response is most satisfactory), one could argue that radical democracy takes a normative approach from the outset. This position limits the subject of disruptive political actions to the ones who seek to reinstate indeterminacy against the status quo. From this perspective, not all extra-institutional mobilizations qualify as 'radical democratic' because some seek to maintain and reinforce the (unequal) status quo. The January 6th Capitol Attack cannot be labeled as radical democratic insofar as its participants were mobilized around an essentialist understanding of the United States (on racial terms, among others). Even if the protesters invoked 'we, the people' outside the established realm of politics, it self-negates the 'normative' ideal of radical democracy, namely, indeterminacy (see also Kempf 2021). I will explain this point further in Chapter 3.

community. Against this background, I would claim that—and radical democrats would agree with this view—antagonism does not necessarily need to involve a literal killing of an enemy.[17] At the heart of antagonism is the complete rejection of others as (equal) participants in communal life, including public decision-making. This can be achieved in different ways other than literal killing. As Müller notes (2016, 82), "citizens might not be excluded officially, but the public legitimacy of their individual values, ideas of what makes for the good life, and even material interests are effectively called into question and even declared not to count." Hence, antagonism can aim at 'social death,' where the enemy is deemed nonexistent by being marginalized within political and social domains despite their concrete physical existence within the polity.

In this dissertation, I submit that *backlash* is a concrete expression of antagonism in radical democratic politics, which emanates from the prevailing social order.[18] It is what at least partly makes the processes of radical democratic politics antagonistic by provoking the antagonistic responses from those who challenge the unequal status quo. In the opening vignette, I have shown how influential politicians, public officials, and citizens often responded to SADD's protests with hostility and resentment instead of trying to listen to them.[19] They labeled SADD activists as "the

[17] Consider how democratic theorists today, including those who are sympathetic to radical democracy, often understand populism in terms of antagonism. Populism does not (at least not openly) seek to literally 'kill' its opponents. Instead, it makes its opponents politically impotent (Arato and Cohen 2021, 5). I think understanding antagonism in terms of aiming at one's 'social death' is plausible, especially in the context of today's so-called 'advanced' democratic societies. This is because, in those societies, the expressions of antagonism in politics are less likely to be expressed in a literal killing of an enemy but in different ways to remove an enemy from a communal life (e.g., populism, polarization, and cancel culture).

[18] This would be part of my response to the criticism raised against radical democracy concerning "where agonism ends and antagonism begins." See August 2024, 193–4.

[19] Those who have framing power are especially responsible for causing backlash. For backlash to be politically salient, it has to be articulated as a political claim that can be identified by various individuals, give them a sense of collective identity, and mobilize them. Political entrepreneurs are the ones who make backlash in the form of a political claim through a representative process (Saward 2006; Disch 2021). By 'representative process,' I mean that "would-be political representatives […] *make claims* about themselves and their constituents and the links between the two" (Saward 2006, 302 emphasis original). In doing so, they make their own constituencies (Ibid., 314). Michael Saward's important claim about political representation allows me to speak of backlash in terms of political action with real consequences rather than a vague social atmosphere.

privileged," denounced their actions as selfish and "uncivilized," and mobilized the rhetoric of 'mutual respect' to claim reverse discrimination of so-called "ordinary citizens." As such, backlash involves the practices of detracting, distorting, and dismissing claims of the victims of social inequalities that seek to challenge and change the status quo of particular democracies (see Edström et al. 2024, 298). Some of the concrete features of backlash include denying or minimizing the problem (e.g., its existence, extent, and significance) raised by the marginalized, blaming the problem on victims, denying the credibility of the message by rendering it as irrational, untruthful, or exaggerated, attacking the credibility of the messengers by impugning their motives and portraying them as a special interest group, and adopting a victim position by claiming 'reverse discrimination' (Flood et al. 2020, 396; see also Toole 2019, 608–9).[20] Especially regarding reverse discrimination, backlash in a democratic society often involves co-opting democratic languages (e.g., equal participation, mutual respect, and disagreement) to obscure and maintain existing inequalities (Lewin 2021). These various modalities of backlash are geared toward further marginalizing often already marginalized actors of democratic struggle from social and political life.

Primarily building on feminist scholarship, I define backlash as resistance to a real or perceived threat to the status quo of particular democracies generated by disruptive political actions (Mansbridge and Shames 2008, 625; Townsend-Bell 2020, 287).[21] The status quo signifies

[20] Claims of 'reverse discrimination' often derive from individuals' perceived marginalization detached from the objective socioeconomic and sociocultural realities in which they are situated (e.g., men's rights activism). By understanding 'reverse discrimination' as a form of backlash, radical democracy rejects self-perceived marginalization as a source of disruptive political action toward pluralizing democracy.

[21] Unlike my definition of backlash, feminist scholarship often understands backlash as a resistance against progressive social changes generated by feminist social movements and not necessarily a direct resistance to feminist social movements (Faludi 1991, 12; Mansbridge and Shames 2008, 626; Flood et al. 2020, 394). According to this view, backlash follows (either real or perceived) feminist gains to roll back those gains (Piscopo and Walsh 2020, 267). However, it is possible to appreciate the resistance to the progress generated by feminist social movements and to those movements per se in terms of a spectrum. Erica Townsend-Bell makes an analytical distinction between what

"the existing power arrangements of time and place." It "always endows certain individuals with greater capacity than others to enact their preferences or realize their interests" (Mansbridge and Shames 2008, 625).[22] The goal of a backlash is to secure, preserve or reinstate the status quo (Piscopo and Walsh 2020, 267; see also Jost et al. 2017a, 104). My argument is that radical democrats should understand these aspects as constituting a central part of radical democratic politics without entirely abandoning the possibility of uptake.

To begin with, when approaching disruptive political actions as a matter of theoretical and normative inquiry, radical democracy tends to focus on the actor's side of story to champion the democratic credentials of such actions (see, for example, Breaugh and Caivano 2024). It construes democratic politics predominantly in terms of "doing, acting, performing, practicing, enacting,

she calls 'remedial backlash' and 'preemptive backlash' (2020). According to Townsend-Bell (Ibid., 288), 'remedial backlash' is "the reactionary, hostile reclaimer of the status quo," which occurs in reaction to a (potential) loss of power. 'Preemptive backlash' is "an attempt to forestall power loss" (Ibid., 292; see also Browne 2013, 907). 'Preemptive backlash' prevents changes to the status quo. Townsend-Bell suggests that we understand backlash as a continuum because remedial and preemptive backlashes both "stem […] from opposition to those who should not have power [in the status quo]" (2020, 292). My definition of backlash aligns more with 'preemptive backlash' than 'remedial backlash.'

[22] There is a tendency in positivist political science to define backlash as a value-neutral concept. The recent article by Karen Alter and Michael Zürn exemplifies this tendency (2020). Alter and Zürn proclaim that for 'backlash' to be a meaningful concept in social science, "it must be a politics with its own specific dynamics that work in similar ways, following its own logics, across different contexts" (Ibid., 564). As part of the efforts to capture the general dynamics of backlash, Alter and Zürn reject "[t]he loose use of the word backlash" that links backlash with social backwardness. In this context, the two authors advance an understanding of backlash that "does not presume that backlash is a reactionary counter-movement contesting progressive change" (Ibid., 566). Alter and Zürn remove the normative connotation of backlash by assuming 'retrograde,' which is merely "returning to a prior condition," an essential element of the definition of backlash. Alter and Zürn state explicitly that they seek to render the concept of backlash "normatively neutral" (Ibid.). In other words, for Alter and Zürn, backlash can be either regressive or progressive. From a radical democratic perspective, I worry that Alter and Zürn's value-neutral conceptualization of backlash obfuscates democracy's determinate social formation that makes actually existing democracies fundamentally unequal. I also think it is unnecessary to dispossess the concept of backlash of its normative character to capture its internal dynamics. On the contrary, acknowledging the normative aspect of backlash should be a starting point to investigate how, when, and why backlash occurs. In recent years, feminist scholarship has made considerable conceptual innovations and refinements of backlash and its politics based on the normative understanding of backlash as a regressive movement (see Browne 2013; Townsend-Bell 2020; Rowley 2020; Hawkesworth 1999; 2020; Edström et al. 2024). This dissertation is heavily indebted to such developments. There seems to be an unbridgeable ontological gap between Alter and Zürn's positivist worldview and the post-positivist worldview of radical democracy (and the critical schools of political theory, including feminists). My post-positivist orientation should be clear by now. I invite positivist readers to step outside their familiar meta-normatively charged 'neutral' standpoint and consider the world laden with power and social relations forever trapped by inequality and hierarchy.

[and] engaging" (Zaunseder et al. 2022, 6; see also Zivi 2012; Frank 2021, 2; Wolin 2016b, 106). Radical democrats celebrate these aspects for their transgressive and transformative potential to create new political spaces, agendas, and subjectivities and reshape the hegemonic configurations of the public realm (Rancière 1999; Laclau 2005a; see also Frank 2010). At a minimum, "[a]ctivities of protest, boycott, and disruption [get] citizens to think seriously about what until then they may have found normal and acceptable" (Young 2001, 675). Radical democratic actions are premised on the aspiration of those voices marginalized by social inequalities to be heard as a valid or at least contestable political claim on fair terms by the broader democratic citizenry.

However, the scholarship of radical democracy often pays surprisingly little attention to the pervasiveness and persistence of backlash in civic life.[23] At best, backlash occupies a marginal space in radical democrats' normative theorizing of democratic politics. Backlash often designates an exception to civic life. Radical democrats largely assume ordinary citizens to fight against backlash when it happens (Connolly 2004, 176–9; Mouffe 2014, 151; Young 2002, 56). I say such a tendency is 'surprising' because radical democracy posits that democratic public space is, in fact, *always* imbued with the problems of the asymmetry of power and domination.

To be specific, while radical democrats are not entirely oblivious to backlash, they often fail to appreciate the structural nature of backlash in a democratic society. I use the expression

[23] Admittedly, radical democrats often address backlash within their theoretical frameworks. For example, William Connolly introduces the conflicting notions of 'pluralization' and 'fundamentalization' in articulating his version of agonistic politics (1995). Connolly notes that "those generally on the receiving end of pluralizing movements are pressed to accept revised terms of self-recognition," yet acceptance is not the only option (Ibid., xii). Critical responsiveness and fundamentalism are "two contending responses to the same movements of difference." The practices of critical responsiveness "challenge the self-confidence and congealed judgments of dominant constituencies" (Ibid., xv). On the contrary, fundamentalism negates pluralization by shutting down the possibility of critical reflection on the receiving end in the face of threats to their fixed identities. Therefore, fundamentalism takes a form of reaction that aims to secure individuals' and groups' identities. It even consolidates those identities "by converting differences that jeopardize their self-certainties into abnormalities and dangers that must be chastised, punished, or corrected" (Ibid., 121). In this regard, Connolly construes fundamentalism as a movement by coining the term 'fundamentalization.' Backlash is another name for fundamentalization.

'structural' to highlight that the source of backlash lies beyond the interpersonal level and that it is not an empirically contingent phenomenon. Backlash occurs fundamentally *by virtue of democracy's determinate social formation*. It is a *constant* normalizing force in a democratic society underpinned by a determinate image of the people that *preempts* changes to the status quo (Rowley 2020; Townsend-Bell 2020; see also Piscopo and Walsh 2020, 270). By 'constant,' I mean that backlash is a component of a democratic society and that it is not exceptional or unprecedented (Rowley 2020). Backlash is highly predictable because powerful members of society want to hold onto the structures of unearned privileges, naturalized hierarchies, and rationalized inequalities at least partly generated by the determinate image of the people. Backlash, so understood, is one of the practices that the powerful do to promote their interest in society. However, I suggest that backlash is more than "[t]he resistance of *those in power* to attempts to change the status quo" (Mansbridge and Shames 2008, 625, emphasis added).[24] I would argue that backlash is *pervasive* in democratic politics because it comes from ordinary citizens habituated to and relatively benefiting from the status quo (Hawkesworth 1999; Pease 2021, 10; De Cleen and Casado 2023, 12). The basic intuition here is that citizens are often prone to defending the societal status quo against perceived threats against it regardless of their social positions and identities. This is because doing so does more than maintaining the existing structures of material and

[24] Conceptualizing backlash as a reaction of dominant or powerful political actors to the claims of 'the oppressed' or 'the marginalized' is not only a simplistic, moralized understanding of the complex social world. But, equally importantly, it is an inadequate conceptual move that deprives powerful political actors of their political agency to act proactively to promote their causes and interests against the status quo (Edström et al. 2024, 279). I do not deny the complex reality in which different individuals and groups compete and collaborate with one another to change the status quo in a way that benefits them. Nor do I assert here that backlash against disruptive political actions is the only dynamic of social change. Empirically speaking, I am addressing one particular aspect of democratic life, which, I believe, warrants more attention from democratic theorists. However, as I said earlier, the primary nature of this dissertation's intervention is theoretical, and the scope is limited to the school of thought called radical democracy. Without denying that the currently dominant groups seek to challenge the status quo to expand their dominance, which is but one aspect of a complex reality, I focus on the specific 'radical democratic' context in which society's marginal groups challenge the status quo as the object of a theoretical inquiry.

symbolic privileges of some members of society (Rowley 2020, 281–2; Sosa 2022, 199; Hooker 2017, 485). It also supplies citizens with a sense of certainty, security, and stability, which are integral to human existence (Hennes et al. 2012, 672; Jost et al. 2017a; 2017b; Jost 2019, 266).

Accordingly, backlash denotes the phenomenon in which democratic citizens, especially those who are not openly discriminatory, are unwilling or incapable of taking marginal claims seriously. Even worse, backlash involves using such challenges to build momentum to consolidate the current status quo.[25] Hence, backlash in radical democratic politics is not a mechanical reaction of the dominant group to disruptive political actions taken by the dominated. The dominated do not monopolize an agency to challenge the status quo. Likewise, citizens in democracies may participate in backlash or radical democratic actions irrespective of their social positions.

At the same time, backlash as a constant force implies its persistence in a democratic society. While scholars and pundits often associate backlash with the increasing pervasiveness of mis- and disinformation in advanced democracies (see, for example, Maresh-Fuehrer and David Gurney 2021; Farkas and Schou 2018), it is by no means a novel phenomenon (Townsend-Bell 2020; Hooker 2016). The root causes of backlash are often social prejudice and stigma attached to marginal identities formed and reproduced over time. Negative stereotyping and stigmatization both sustain and are sustained by longstanding discriminatory practices in various domains of everyday social life (e.g., education, housing, healthcare, and employment) (see Hughey 2014; Liveriero 2020, 801–2). In this regard, backlash is a political effect or expression of socioeconomic and sociocultural inequalities often historically formed between different parts of society. Those historically entrenched inequalities cause some citizens to be continuously un(der)recognized as

[25] The assumption is that even when citizens know and acknowledge the existence of inequalities, many would implicitly or explicitly invalidate democratic struggles (see Ikuta 2022).

equal interlocutors in civic life by their fellow citizens.

To sum up, radical democracy is a fertile terrain to study backlash in democratic politics. That is why the lack of such a study is a problem internal to the theories of radical democracy. If abstract communicative rationality were the absolute foundation of democratic politics, this rationality would allow citizens to engage with one another publicly with mutual respect and careful listening (Habermas 1996; see also Scudder 2020a, 181). Backlash would be an abnormal or marginal phenomenon in the public interaction of citizens at best. However, radical democrats (rightly, in my view) reject the idea of materially disembodied and historically disembedded political (inter)subjectivity as the presupposition of public interaction in democracies (Thomassen 2022).[26] Instead, they recognize the substantive nature of the democratic citizenry and the determinate social formation underpinning it. The ubiquity of backlash is a necessary implication of this worldview.

Accordingly, radical democrats should do more than anticipating that some voices will be marginalized in democratic public space due to social inequalities despite the formal equal status

[26] By formulating radical democracy in this way, I push back against McNay's (2014) criticism of radical democracy as systematically lacking the consideration of embodied social relations in its normative interventions. The thrust of McNay's criticism is that radical democracy tends to "[turn] away from thinking meaningfully about issues of inequality, domination, and exclusion" because of its fundamental reliance on 'ontology.' Ontology here designates "claims about fundamental existential features of social being," to prescribe the modality of democratic action (Ibid., 94, 69). From McNay's perspective, ontological reasoning prevents radical democrats from appreciating the obstacles to radical democratic actions rooted in the lived experiences of the marginalized and the oppressed because ontology predetermines the course of actions that does not reflect the realities of marginalization and oppression (see also Helander 2024, chapter 2, particularly 82–3). While I agree with McNay that it is important for radical democrats to be attentive to the 'phenomenology' of oppression, I think McNay is wrong to consider ontological thinking ideational, dogmatic, and hence antithetical to concrete, phenomenological thinking. On the contrary, the ontological premise of radical democracy is often abstracted from and built upon concrete references that take seriously the processes of exclusion, hierarchization, and distinction underpinning a societal order (see also Richard 2019). The ontological approach allows radical democrats to "[challenge] patterns of subordination" (Marchart 2018, 12). Accordingly, radical democratic theories' inattention to the embodied and embedded social relations that constrain radical democratic actions of the marginalized is not because of their indulgence in ontological thinking, as McNay argues. I argue and intend to show in this dissertation that such inattention is attributed to radical democrats' detachment from their ontological commitment rather than their attachment to it.

of citizens (see Bickford 1996; Young 2002, chapter 2; McNay 2012; Dobson 2014; Bassel 2017; Scudder 2020a; Drake 2021). They should make plain that any action seeking to weaken and hollow out the substantive character of the democratic citizen body will necessarily invite defensive reactions to maintain the (unequal) status quo. These reactions would come from democratic citizens accustomed to and materially and symbolically invested in the current ordering of society (Glazer and Liebow 2021, 52; Ikuta 2022). Defensive reactions are especially likely when political actions come from society's most marginalized segments, whose conditions of marginalization are reproduced and habituated through "collective practices, mechanisms, and behaviors" that involve all members of society (Bonilla-Silva 2021; Bromell 2019, 268).[27]

When radical democracy captures the ubiquity of backlash in democratic life, it contributes to contemplating the place and role of antagonism in democratic politics (See especially Chapter 3 of this dissertation). By doing so, radical democracy allows democratic theorists to think about the dynamics of democratic politics anew. However, I argue that radical democracy today largely fails to bring its unique insight into understanding the dynamics of democratic politics. Its frequent recourse to *agonism* obscures the pervasiveness and persistence of backlash in civic life. Agonism demands that citizens perceive their opponents as competitors rather than enemies. Mutual respect is crucial for agonism to work. Citizens must be able to treat one another as equal interlocutors. Radical democrats obfuscate backlash as a normal feature of democratic life by assuming agonism as the modality of democratic politics. In this context, I argue that agonism raises a theoretical

[27] By society's most marginalized segments, I mean the victims of what Toby Rollo calls 'structural domination' (2021). Rollo distinguishes structural domination from what he calls 'contingent domination' "[that] can be potentially disputed and temporarily resolved by proving a group's fulfillment of the qualifications" (Ibid., 318). The problematic implication in overcoming contingent domination is that it takes the dominated to prove they are not to be understood as other groups of the dominated who are deemed naturally disqualified. The marginalized are put in the "position of affirming some exclusions as natural while arguing that they do not belong in the category of natural exclusion" (Ibid.). Those groups that serve as the reference point for (qualified) inclusion suffer structural domination.

problem for radical democracy. In obfuscating backlash, radical democracy turns against its central idea of democracy's determinate social formation. Agonism is a 'de-radicalized' form of radical democracy in that it negates the basic premise of radical democracy. The following section explains this argument further. The goal is to clarify the object and the nature of my intervention.

Agonism, or De-radicalized Radical Democracy

My critical intervention is based on the observation that agonism in radical democracy tends to treat backlash as an empirically contingent, marginal, and deviant phenomenon in democratic politics. *Agonism* has emerged against political theory's overemphasis on reason, harmony, and consensus to revalue conflict as an integral feature of democratic politics (White 2022). What distinguishes agonism from antagonism is that agonism maintains that democratic citizens should see one another "not as enemies to be destroyed, but as adversaries whose ideas might be fought, even fiercely, but whose right to defend those ideas is not to be questioned" (Mouffe 2013, 7; Connolly 2008[1991], 142; see also Wenman 2013, 15–6). Mutual respect between citizens is the underpinning principle of agonism. A radical democratic version of agonism applies this principle in the context of social (and political) inequalities.[28] Agonism in

[28] Radical democracy is not the only strand of democratic theory that advocates agonism. The more mainstream democratic theorists also see agonism as an essential element of (what they consider) democratic politics. They argue that agonism is essential for *preserving* pluralism. Agonism accommodates the political reality of pluralism in modern democratic societies, where citizens can disagree with one another over time concerning how to live together as a community (Arato 2013; 2016; Urbinati 2014; 2019; Müller 2016; Cohen 2019a; 2019b). From this perspective, while conflicts and disagreements are essential characteristics of vibrant civic life, they must be regulated in such a way as to prevent the exclusion and marginalization of certain views and opinions toward (re-)making public decisions. The point of the mainstream agonists is to secure opportunities and access for citizens in the minority position to participate in the ongoing deliberative processes of "forming, criticizing, contesting, and changing collective decisions" (Urbinati 2014, 19). The mainstream agonists claim that, in this way, democratic citizenship is made meaningful not just for society's dominant majorities but also for all members of the polity, and so is the ideal of democratic self-government underlying democratic citizenship (Lafont 2019). Unlike agonism in radical democracy, the mainstream version of agonism tends to place the responsibility to act agonistically on speakers rather than recipients of political claims (see, for example, White 2022; cf. Honig 2019, 663). This view obfuscates backlash in democracies even further by taking for granted democratic citizens' willingness and capacity to listen to opposing views (see Hooker 2016). I develop this line of criticism in chapter 3.

radical democracy involves the normative claims of fostering epistemic sensibility towards marginal voices of society (Connolly 1995, xvi). In this regard, agonists appreciate social and political struggles that take shape at the fringes of public life as the prime site of (radical) democratic politics (Glover 2012, 88; Pedrini et al. 2013, 484). For agonists, these struggles are crucial for advancing pluralism as they "open up, expand, and extend" democratic spaces and possibilities (Tambakaki 2017, 579; see also Guidry and Sawyer 2003). Here, the key assumption of agonism is that democratic citizens (must) recognize marginal actors as equal interlocutors and take marginal voices seriously in public decision-making. Without being heard by democratic citizens, the potential for change would remain unrealized. Consequently, agonists maintain that (radical) democratic politics can thrive only when the public interaction of citizens is agonistic rather than antagonistic, where antagonism signifies refusing to listen.

Admittedly, agonism in radical democracy is a normative position claiming that public interaction in democracies *ought to be* agonistic rather than antagonistic. Agonists' call for mutual respect in democratic politics may be based on understanding backlash as an inevitable aspect of democratic life. Mutual respect is all the more important in the face of (the permanent possibility of) backlash. In this regard, it may be argued that agonistic theorists do not neglect the phenomenon of backlash and the idea of democracy's determinate social formation behind it. I argue that this is not the case. In making a normative claim about mutual respect, agonists often turn their eyes away from the intensity and ubiquity of antagonism in radical democratic politics. Such a move contradicts and undermines the critical worldview of radical democracy, where radical democratic politics in unequal and unjust democracies will ultimately be, to a certain extent, *antagonistic*. For radical democrats, an ostensibly democratic society upholds a determinate identity of the people that limits participation (Laclau 2005a, 170). As a result, if agonists acknowledge democracy's

determinate social formation, there is no good (theoretical) reason for them to assume that democratic citizens are likely to listen to marginal voices that challenge the status quo. While treating democratic citizens as conduits of radical social change (see also Roberts n.d.; Schaap 2021, 46), today's influential accounts of radical democracy largely avoid the question of what to make of backlash when conceptualizing a normative account of democratic politics.

Speaking of normativity, I have argued that failing to address this question is a theoretical lacuna in radical democracy. However, this failure also accompanies normatively problematic ramifications. Let me briefly illustrate them in the form of an assertion for now. I will substantiate them in the following chapters as I critically engage with the specific thinkers of radical democracy. First, understating the ubiquity of backlash in democratic politics obfuscates social inequalities underlying the public interactions of democratic citizens. This is because social inequalities are a primary source of backlash. Second and relatedly, the inattention to backlash drives radical democrats into the teleology of progress. Such a tendency prevents radical democrats from capturing the persistence of social inequalities in democracies. Third, failing to consider backlash as an integral part of democratic politics downplays the active role and responsibility of ordinary democratic citizens in changing an unequal status quo. Fourth, radical democrats wrongly accuse the antagonism against backlash forces in society of undermining pluralism.[29] Finally and relatedly, perceiving backlash as a marginal phenomenon in democratic politics leads radical democrats to

[29] In this dissertation, I do not define 'backlash forces' in essentialist terms. I understand backlash forces as a fluid and contextual category. As much as social inequality does not have a single axis, the category of a backlash force is not singular and fixed. Who comes under the category of backlash forces depends on particular instances of democratic struggle. Technically and purely descriptively, a wealthy Black man in the United States is part of backlash forces when he is incapable and/or unwilling to take the claims against economic domination. A poor white man perpetrates backlash when he is incapable and unwilling to sincerely engage with the claims of racial domination in America. Regardless of one's intersectional identity or their social position, when it comes to the concrete cases of social inequality, anyone can be on the side of backlash or democratic struggle. The concrete contents of backlash and backlash forces are issue-based.

defend backlash in the very name of democracy. This is because backlash is often played out in the guise of (preserving) pluralism.

Against this background, I argue that a theoretical and normative imperative of radical democracy is to situate backlash at the center of understanding the dynamics of democratic politics. Doing so will resolve the theoretical-logical contradiction between radical democracy's ontological premise about a democratic society and its currently favored normative proposal to promote pluralism (i.e., agonism). From there, radical democracy can devise more sound normative proposals to advance pluralism robustly amid and against social inequalities. In order to carry out such a task, radical democracy must be 'radicalized.' As I will show in the second and concluding chapters, today's radical democratic theories are often indistinguishable from the more mainstream democratic theories. Despite their fierce exchange of disagreements, radical democrats and their external critics today all tend to celebrate ongoing agonistic conflicts as the motor of promoting pluralism in democracies. In other words, they would all agree with the statement that "democracy thrives on indeterminacy and conflict" (Breaugh and Caivano 2024, 454).

The present situation reflects what I would describe as the 'de-radicalization' of radical democracy. Radical democratic theories are de-radicalized when they no longer subscribe to the idea of democracy's determinate social formation, which is the ontological premise of radical democracy. The theories of de-radicalized radical democracy lack conceptual vocabularies to capture an antagonistic dimension of democratic politics. Radicalizing radical democracy tackles this aspect in the existing theories of radical democracy to find a proper way to appreciate the place and role of antagonism in democratic politics.

Before moving on, I would like to touch upon methodological considerations for bringing the phenomenon of backlash to the center of theorizing (radical) democratic politics. Carrying out

the task of radicalizing radical democracy requires making explicit different standpoints from which radical democrats understand how democratic politics operates in practice. For instance, backlash would appear a marginal or deviant phenomenon at best if we perceive that democratic citizens are willing to and capable of engaging with their fellow citizens. We can take backlash seriously as the major obstacle to realizing the pluralist vision of democracy *only by decentering such a perception*. I argue that the key is to try to see democracy from the margins rather than from the center (Asenbaum 2022).[30] Doing so is to equip oneself with an 'interpretive sensibility.' The following section explains what this means further.

Seeing Democracy from the Margins: Some Reflections on Methodology

The long philosophical tradition of interpretivism has taught us that humans are "self-interpreting animals" (Taylor 1985). Individuals act on their beliefs. These beliefs are shaped and reshaped in individuals' attempts to make sense of themselves and their social world (Bevir and Blakely 2018, 20). This interpretive activity presupposes a relatively stable standpoint of an individual human agent. As Bevir and Blakely note, "there is an inescapable social background in which individuals always find themselves embedded" (Ibid., 30). It includes "communities of meaning and languages" into which individuals are born and socialized (Ibid., 31). Interpretation thus always occurs against "a larger, inherited social background," which gives human beliefs stability and regularity. Social background is "the inescapable starting point for all individual belief formation" (Ibid., 34). Interpretivists are often interested in showing how individuals, as hermeneutic agents, can creatively alter their beliefs and inherited social backgrounds by navigating and exposing themselves to different social backgrounds (Ibid., chapter 3). However,

[30] I do not think this is a virtue external to radical democracy. Radical democracy is fundamentally a critical discourse that suspects the view from the center. For an equivalence between radical democracy and standpoint theory, see Schubert (2023, 3–7).

other more critical schools of interpretivism (i.e., feminist, race, and decolonial theorists) are keen to address epistemic hierarchy between different interpretations (and thus beliefs) formed against distinct social backgrounds. Against this background, their interest lies in tackling the problem of epistemic oppression that follows (Toole 2019).

These critically-minded groups of interpretivists "[valorize] the role of reflexive, analytical thought that [is] grounded in power relations" (Collins 2017, 120; Harding 1991, 121; see also Go 2016, 161). This feature is most notable in what is known as *standpoint theory*. Standpoint theory interrogates "how power relations inflect knowledge: what systematic limitations are imposed by the social location of different classes or collectivities of knowers, and what potential they have for developing an understanding of this structured epistemic partiality" (Wylie 2003, 31). It points out how particular beliefs attain an objective and universal status by virtue of being articulated from a dominant social location despite their necessarily limited and parochial nature (Harding 1992, 499; Anderson 2000; 2010, 5). Moreover, the dominant social location is often rendered invisible as the norms and values constituting this location present themselves as natural and universal (see Toole 2022, 5). Standpoint theory challenges the notion of the unmediated universality and dominant ideologies that result from it. In doing so, it "links claims about existing structures of inequality to modes of critical reflection that can empower people to transform existing social relations" (Hawkesworth 2016, 354).

Standpoint theory provides democratic theorists with an invaluable opportunity for self-reflection. It pushes them to take seriously the fact that they are embedded in a social structure. From there, standpoint theory reminds democratic theorists that their positionalities shape their moral reasoning about (democratic) politics and even affect their selection of evidence to support such reasoning (see Rolin 2009). By unveiling beliefs that sustain democratic theorists' lopsided

conviction about democracy, the standpoint approach prevents "unwarranted exclusion or obstruction of certain epistemic agents from the practices of knowledge-production," known as *epistemic oppression* (Toole 2019, 598; Dotson 2014). Epistemic oppression obstructs democratic theorists from identifying oppressive social relations and hierarchies that are often invisible from their 'dominant' (e.g., "propertied, white, male, heterosexual, and/or non-disabled") social positions (Schlüter 2022, 139; see also Mills 2005, 117; Knight 2020, 382; Asenbaum 2022, 4). To avoid such a pitfall, democratic theorists must acknowledge that their social positions necessarily confine and direct their visions (Dotson 2014, 120; see also Bevir and Blakely 2018, 76). They should also be aware that their dominant positions in knowledge production can lead them to devalue and marginalize the contributions of disadvantaged groups to sense-making activities (Schlüter 2022, 140; Hänel and Müller 2022, 33). Accordingly, taking the standpoint of the non-dominant and disadvantaged seriously in knowledge production is essential for understanding and improving their conditions (Tanesini 2019, 337).

The lesson of standpoint theory for radical democratic theorists is clear. Radical democrats must try to approach particular instances in which marginal voices are articulated in democratic politics *from the standpoint of the marginalized* (Schubert 2023, 6).[31] Doing so is crucial for avoiding misidentifying and obfuscating the obstacles that prevent the marginalized from making themselves heard. Taking one (phenomenological) standpoint over another makes an 'ontological' difference in understanding how our social world is constituted and operates (Richard 2019). In what follows, I compare two different approaches to the situation of racial domination in the contemporary United States. I use this comparison as an example to illustrate how the

[31] This implies that, from a standpoint theory perspective, radical democrats must constantly ask themselves which voices are marginalized within the democratic public space.

emancipatory potential of mutual deliberation in a democracy appears differently from different standpoints. This exercise aims to show that failing to take the standpoint of the marginalized seriously can lead theorists to formulate unsubstantiated and irresponsible, overly triumphant normative accounts of democratic politics. The danger is that such accounts would contribute to consolidating rather than mitigating the unequal status quo of a democracy (see also Posholi 2020, 285).

First, let me consider some representative examples that formulate democracy from the epistemological center. In his influential work on constitutional democracy (2007), Jan-Werner Müller admits that "[d]eclarations of high-minded universalism will appear hypothetical at best" when we see everyday discrimination in society against immigrants and their descendants (Ibid., 88). And yet, Müller maintains that it is possible to "prevent marginalization or 'ghettoization'" by promoting integration "through mutual deliberative engagement" (Ibid., 89). As a result, "not everything that appears to affirm 'identity' is therefore primarily designed to reinforce exclusion. […] It all depends *how* it's done" (Ibid., 88, emphasis original). Similarly, while Jean Cohen aptly points out that, in the case of the United States, "settler colonialism *always entailed racial hierarchies and exclusions* privileging the status of white Christians against Native Americans and African Americans and in the postcolonial context, against migrants from allegedly alien cultures" (2019a, 16, emphasis added), Cohen immediately adds that "liberal and republican institutions can […] play a key role in democratizing projects" by "support[ing] civil society actors seeking to democratize, defend, and expand rights" (Ibid.). For Cohen (Ibid.), "[t]he history of democratization of democracy can be understood as reducing the gap [between the ideal and practice of democracy], as including the excluded and improving voices, responsiveness, and accountability." Cohen construes (constitutional) democracy in terms of gradual progress, where

the formerly marginalized and excluded are seen as incrementally gaining equal presence in the democratic public space over time. Likewise, despite his open acknowledgment of the existence of unjust political and social structures, Müller is sanguine about the possibility that democratic citizens in actually existing democracies will work toward listening to those who fall victim to systemic inequalities more carefully (2016, 72). For him, this is a matter of practice (see also Urbinati 2014, 52).

The problem that I want to address in this dissertation is, again, not so much that democratic theorists today, especially radical democrats, are unaware of the exclusion and marginalization caused by social inequalities, which are, in turn, rooted in democracy's determinate social formation (see, for example, Bächtiger et al. 2010, 47; Warren 2017, 47; Müller 2016, 60; 2021, 173). The real problem lies in their tendency to assume that democratic citizens are likely to take the efforts to challenge the status quo seriously while understating backlash as a matter of empirical contingency. This tendency becomes evident when comparing the perspectives from the epistemological center with those of margins.

The scholarship that most seriously deals with the problem of backlash is arguably the one on racial politics and systemic racism in the United States (and in Western democracies more broadly) (Hanchard 2018; Bhopal 2023). On their part, political theorists and philosophers have written extensively about how racism is stubbornly rooted in the social and political structure of American democracy or how racism constitutes the *everyday organizational life* of American citizens over time (Du Bois 2007; Baldwin 1985; Mills 1997; 1999; Olson 2004; Hayward 2013; Hooker 2016; Feola 2021; Hesse 2022). For example, Joel Olson claims that "the very structure of American citizenship is white, to the point where, for most of American history, to be a citizen was to be white and vice versa" (2004, xv). Such 'racialization of citizenship,' argues Olson,

"confers full citizenship to those who can prove themselves white and guarantees their privileged status over those deemed not-white and therefore less than citizens" (Ibid., xix; see also Mills 1997, 16). Citizenship becomes a privilege of white, where equality is understood as being shared only among racially dominant, white citizens. Hence, American citizenship is more of a social status that distinguishes full members of the polity from those who are not than a political identity signifying equal right to participate in collective self-government (Olson 2004, xx).

Juliet Hooker takes up Olson's argument to make sense of the racial backlash in the US polity (2016; 2017). Hooker examines the source of whites' racial grievance—particularly their inability to accept (both material and symbolic) loss—in the contemporary United States (and beyond). Hooker asks rhetorically, pointing at whites, "[if politics entails ruling and being ruled in turn and] if acceptance of loss is necessary for democracy, what happens when a group that is unaccustomed to loss is confronted with it" (2017, 486)? According to Hooker (Ibid., 490), the history of persistent backlash against progress toward racial equality, which is expressed, for example, in the form of state-sanctioned violence, the retrenchment of the welfare state, and the organized political movements, tells us that "white citizens [of the United States] have not coped well with loss" (see also Seamster and Ray 2018, 326). To be sure, this is not to deny the progress but to say that "progress is hampered by the increasingly prohibitive conditions placed on [Blacks'] political equality with Whites" (McKnight 2014; cf. Seamster and Ray 2018). The fundamental source of white grievance that frustrates the ideal of racial equality is the historically formed, distorted self-perception of white citizens that citizenship signifies "[whites'] asymmetrical access to institutional political power *vis-a-vis* racial 'others'" (Hooker 2017., 486). Because Blacks and other nonwhite citizens are not historically conceived as (equal) political agents or (legitimate) members of the American republic in white citizens' moral and political imaginations (see also

Roediger 2008; Hughes 2018; cf. Smith 2003), the nonwhite gains are always perceived as unfair and illegitimate, *at least for some racially dominant segment of society*.

Racial backlash is subsequently American democracy's normal state of affairs (see Thompson 2017, 462; Yancy 2018; Mondon and Winter 2020, 61–6). It manifests the fear and anxiety of (some) white citizens that "the nation is […] being taken from its rightful heirs and given to undeserving others" (Feola 2021, 531, emphasis removed). Racial backlash is also American democracy's self-protective mechanism integral to its operation as a fundamentally discriminatory system (see Rowley 2020, 282). The marginalization and exclusion (including the literal killing) of Black lives from public life sustain rather than undermine the legitimacy of the collective self-rule in American democracy. Those acts reaffirm that "[the United States] is a white man's country and the white man must rule" (Hesse 2017, 589). From this critical perspective, American citizenship is fundamentally white citizenship. Blacks are persistent minorities of American democracy *vis-à-vis* the whites insofar as their (equal) membership to the American republic is routinely questioned, devalued, and denied by the dominant whites (e.g., subject to the routinized backlash). Hence, Black citizenship in the United States is, at best, marked by permanent precarity (and thus by permanent struggle) (see Olson 2004, chapter 5; Bonilla-Silva, 2021, 521; see also Lebron 2017; Francis and Rigueur 2021).[32]

[32] One could argue that American democracy is but one particular democracy whose historical trajectory is unique to other actually existing democracies around the world. For example, Joe Feagin (2006, 2) notes that what makes the United States distinctive is that the nation "was explicitly founded on racial oppression," whose social worlds "have been created by racial oppression over several centuries." This particular historical trajectory has given rise to "the racist ideology, attitudes, emotions, habits, actions, and institutions of whites in [the American] society" (Ibid., 4). The deep historical root of racism in the United States may make it fairly easy, at least in *some* scholarly eyes, to capture the backlash phenomenon in the American context. However, an identitarian underpinning of citizenship is not the problem pertaining solely to the US polity, and race is not the only (but often compounded and intersectional) source of pervasive civic inequality in democracies. As Michael Hanchard (2018, 14) observes, democratic polities from ancient to modern involved "the governmental necessity of providing answers to the following questions: by what criteria do we choose citizens, and by what criteria shall we determine who shall not, or cannot, become a

Differences in the perspectives regarding the reality and prospect of democratic citizenship in the contemporary United States are worth highlighting. Their difference shows how taking particular standpoints generates conflicting evaluations regarding American democracy's capacity to tackle historically formed, enduring conditions of racial domination in contemporary American society. Given that radical democratic politics pertains to social and political struggles formed from the margins of public life, I think any normative theorizing of radical democratic citizenship should valorize the hermeneutic agency of the marginalized and suspect that of the privileged. Doing so can prevent radical democrats from oversimplifying or trivializing the problems that undermine the efficacy of democratic struggles and to provide a normative proposal that takes such problems seriously.

As I understand them, radical democracy is fundamentally allegiant to the approaches and lessons of standpoint theory. The problem is that the theories of radical democracy often compromise and subsume themselves to the liberal-constitutionalist framework, which is insensitive to and less interested in the power dynamics underlying the social interactions of democratic citizens. Hence, radical democracy must be 're-radicalized.' This turn involves grounding its normative theorizing of democratic life and action firmly on its basic premise that highlights the role of power in shaping and maintaining societal order. Doing so not only allows

citizen?" To give an alternative example, in South Korea, the nation otherwise known as a vibrant democracy (Mounk 2018, 255), the polity is underpinned by the historically dominant discourses of ethnic and cultural homogeneity (Watson 2010; Kim 2020), the gendered division of labor (Moon 2017), meritocracy (Hannum et al. 2019), and Christianity (Kim and Kim 2015, 274–6), among others. These discourses form enduring sources of systemic discrimination against certain groups of citizens in their everyday lives. Likewise, I think that every democratic polity has a determinate social formation constituted *in its own way*, which makes radical democratic politics a relevant notion to its distinctive sociopolitical context. Such instances include Korean minorities (*Zainichi* Koreans) in Japan (Robillard-Martel 2021), Favela residents in Brazil (Cardoso de Oliveira 2013; Savell 2015), and Muslim minorities in India (Punathil 2022).

radical democrats to redress an oft-neglected logical inconsistency in their theorizing of radical democratic citizenship, which is the main point of this dissertation. But, at the same time, the re-radicalization of radical democracy would also enable radical democrats to capture and criticize democratic theory's habituated exclusionary undertone, which manifests in epistemic arrogance that discredits or dismisses the knowledge generated from marginal standpoints.

The Plan of the Dissertation

I develop my arguments in this dissertation by mainly engaging with the political thinkers often identified as radical democrats. The first two chapters identify and examine the tendency to neglect antagonism and backlash in (theorizing) radical democratic politics in the scholarship of radical democracy. The main issue there is the lack of conceptual vocabulary to address backlash at the theoretical level. The latter half of the dissertation introduces and critically examines two different attempts to incorporate antagonism in conceptualizing radical democratic politics.

Chapter One deals with a missing analysis of antagonism in radical democratic politics in Claude Lefort's account of radical democracy. Lefort is one of the most influential thinkers and one of the foundational figures of radical democracy. Relying on poststructuralist philosophy, Lefort defines democracy (dubbed as 'modern democracy') as a distinctive form of society whose normative order (e.g., what is meaningful, right, legitimate, and so on) is subject to permanent questioning and contestation (Di Pierro 2023). In Lefort's own expression, 'the people' is the symbolic pole that grounds democracy's normative order, but its identity is and ought to be forever indeterminate (1986b, 303). By advocating indeterminacy as the core principle of democracy, Lefort brings conflict to the center of normative theorizing of democratic politics.

The focus of this chapter is on exploring how Lefort planted a seed of confusion among

radical democrats regarding the interpretation of conflict as the essence of democratic politics. I highlight that, in Lefort, democratic politics is understood in terms of an ongoing conflict, but this process is described in two different ways. On the one hand, Lefort understands conflict as an ongoing 'struggle' that takes place against (the backdrop of) social inequalities. On the other hand, Lefort takes conflict to indicate an ongoing 'competition' among citizens based on political equality. The main interpretive argument of this chapter is that in Lefort, the dynamic and confrontational 'struggle' model of democratic politics is analytically preceded by, conflated with, and ultimately subsumed under the static and idyllic 'competition' model. I substantiate this argument by showing Lefort's failure to uphold backlash as a distinctive feature of democratic politics as a struggle. What is the upshot of this argument? By treating backlash as an empirically contingent phenomenon at best, Lefort deems the agents of struggle against social inequalities as if they were enjoying political equality. However, this view obfuscates social inequality since political equality is premised on social equality. As a result, I claim that Lefort exemplifies a de-radicalized theory of radical democracy, whose aspect will be illuminated further in the third chapter while making comparison with Ernesto Laclau.

Chapter Two builds on the first chapter to examine the impact of Lefort's ambivalent legacy as a radical democratic thinker on contemporary students of radical democracy. In particular, this chapter investigates Lefort's lingering influence on the scholarship of constituent power. Constituent power stands for the supreme power and authority of 'the people' to constitute and reconstitute the foundational order of a polity (Böckenförde 2017, 171–2). Against the tendency to discredit the democratic credentials of constituent power in democratic theory, some radical democrats today uphold constituent power as a relevant notion to promote pluralism in democracies. This chapter offers an immanent critique of those attempts to salvage constituent

power as a democratic concept. The goal is not to discredit their common project of salvaging constituent power. On the contrary, I aim to facilitate it by addressing the problems internal to that project. Based on the observation that radical democrats today often rely on Lefort and his paradigm of democratic politics to renew an understanding of constituent power, I argue that the proponents of constituent power reproduce the same mistake and problem of Lefort that I addressed in the first chapter.

Specifically, I call the problem that the students of constituent power face 'the paradox of democratic empowerment.' The paradox is this: students of constituent power often posit that the people's identity is indeterminate in democracies as their *starting point* to justify the universal and permanent possibilities of enacting constituent power by citizens. The motivation behind this move is to render the enactment of constituent power compatible with pluralism. However, the positing idea of the indeterminacy of the people's identity as the renewed basis of constituent power disregards that actually existing democracies at any given moment and space are grounded on the determinate identity of a particular people. Accordingly, the new conception of constituent power ignores and obscures the fact that some voices are less likely to stand a chance to be taken up as a potentially legitimate claim than others.

Here, we witness the same problem that we have already seen in Lefort: the supporters of constituent power end up overlooking backlash as a source of continued disempowerment of the subjects of democratic struggle. This implies that the supporters of constituent power also conflate democratic struggle with democratic competition. Against this background, I argue that if constituent power were to be deployed as a democratic concept for promoting pluralism, it must resonate solely with democratic struggle rather than democratic competition. This means that theorists should abandon the idea that any member of society can potentially enact constituent

power. Instead, they should champion the agents of democratic struggle as the *genuine* subject of constituent power to have constituent power as a concept central to promoting pluralism. The indeterminate identity of the people should be conceived as an ideal rather than a presupposition of (radical) democratic politics. I assert that this is precisely Ernesto Laclau's position, which I will examine in the third chapter. Finally, this chapter inquires why contemporary students of constituent power often fail to capture backlash in their accounts of constituent power. I answer this question from a theoretical perspective. I assert that such negligence is due to the absence of conceptual vocabulary in the accounts of democratic constituent power to articulate the empirical phenomenon of backlash as a theoretical matter. This tendency leads scholars to treat backlash as an empirical contingency at best.

Chapter Three substantiates the assertions made at the end of the previous chapter. In this chapter, I claim that to develop an internally coherent account of radical democracy, a theorist must have a conceptual vocabulary to capture antagonism in democratic politics. I also argue that Ernesto Laclau's account of radical democracy best illustrates this move with the concept of *hegemony*. Hegemony indicates the phenomenon in which a particular subsection of society embodies and represents the universality of the community (Laclau 2000, 45; Gramsci 1971, 78–9). While hegemony is considered a revolutionary strategy (Laclau and Mouffe 2001), Laclau turns hegemony into the ontological logic of social formation, where hegemony is understood as "the very terrain in which a political relation is actually constituted" (Laclau 2000, 44; see also Martin 2022, 64). In this chapter, I try to make sense of Laclau's ontological turn of hegemony within the analytical framework of radicalizing radical democracy. I highlight that Laclau employs hegemony in making an immanent critique of Lefort's account of radical democracy. Hegemony in this context captures democracy's determinate social formation and the inevitability of backlash that

results from it. Laclau employs hegemony to criticize Lefort's failure to take democracy's determinate social formation seriously as a starting point to conceptualize radical democratic politics. In this regard, Laclau's ontologizing of hegemony is best understood in terms of re-radicalizing radical democracy.

Interpreting Laclau through the lens of radicalizing radical democracy helps make sense of Laclau's endorsement of antagonism as an indispensable component of a democratic struggle for promoting pluralism against a given status quo. When taking backlash seriously in radical democratic politics, it may appear that counter-antagonism is necessary to challenge and change the status quo. I articulate this view under the banner of *antagonistic pluralism*. Laclau's vision of antagonistic pluralism is best articulated in his theory of populism. For Laclau, more than a sociological phenomenon, populism is as a particular mode of constituting a political agency, that is, the people, for resignifying the normative order of a democratic society (see Panizza and Stavrakakis 2020). This chapter examines Laclau's antagonistic pluralism in relation to its external criticisms raised by the more mainstream 'anti-populist' thinkers who proclaim themselves pluralists. In doing so, I argue that critics' failure to appreciate Laclau's nuanced pluralist stance is symptomatic of their lack of conceptual vocabulary to account for backlash as a normal feature of our democratic life and to develop a conception of democratic politics that reflects this reality (this tendency is highly anticipated as those critics are often committed Lefortians). This chapter ends by critically evaluating Laclau's model of antagonistic pluralism. I argue that Laclau's attempt to radicalize radical democracy is a half success since it does not fully capture the persistence and resilience of democracy's determinate social formation and decisively fails to appreciate the possibility of uptake.

Chapter Four shows an alternative way to radicalize radical democracy in the works of

Jacques Rancière. In the same way I approached Laclau in the previous chapter, I shed light on the conceptual vocabulary in Rancière that does the critical work of illuminating backlash and incorporating it in theorizing (radical) democratic politics. In this context, I reconstruct Rancière's account of democratic politics around the notion of the 'police.' The 'police' in Rancière indicates an underlying logic of any sensory regime that pre-configures what is perceptible and what is not. However, what is crucial about the police is its normative implication. For Rancière, the sense-making activities of the police necessarily culminate in establishing the structures of inequality and hierarchy in determining what should be intelligible to us from what should not within the communitarian space. This sensory structure that buttresses any social order distinguishes legitimate discourse from incomprehensible noise and designates who is eligible to make a speech and who is not. Paired with the police is 'politics,' which indicates a logic of disruption of the perceptual configuration of the police. I argue that Rancière offers a more satisfactory version of radicalizing radical democracy than Laclau. This is because the notion of the police makes it possible to consider the persistence and resilience of democracy's determinate social formation in developing an account of radical democracy, while the notion of politics implies the possibility of uptake and change amid and against backlash.

That said, the notion of the police points to the tendency of any societal order to endure changes to the unequal status quo. This chapter draws a significant implication of the police to radical democratic politics, which I call the 'pluralist backlash.' It is a form of backlash unique to democracy. It signifies the phenomenon in which pluralism is deployed as a political rhetoric to frustrate the efforts to pluralize democracy through democratic struggles. In other words, pluralist backlash promotes anti-pluralism in the name of (preserving) pluralism. This is made possible by reducing equality to formal, political equality, thereby obfuscating social inequalities and

delegitimizing those attempts to problematize social inequalities in the very name of democracy. With his dual notions of the police and politics, Rancière illuminates the gap between formal (political) and social equality, where pluralist backlash constitutes part of the dynamics between those two notions of equality. As a result, Rancière helps us better advocate democratic politics in unequal and unjust democracies.

Chapter Five concludes this dissertation by summarizing the view developed in the previous chapters. In doing so, it highlights the contribution this dissertation makes within and beyond radical democracy. To clarify the contribution of this dissertation, I compare my approach with the existing approaches within and beyond radical democracy that make similar claims that I make in this dissertation. This is to show that while contemporary political theory is often attentive to backlash and antagonism, it tends to postulate the domain of 'pure democratic politics' devoid of antagonism. Against this background, I suggest that democratic theorists should consider the ubiquity of antagonism in our democratic life fully to avoid the pitfalls of pure democratic politics addressed throughout this dissertation.

Chapter One
Claude Lefort's Ambivalent Legacy for Radical Democracy

Introduction

Radical democrats are interested in 'pluralizing' democracy. For them, pluralizing democracy means resisting the permanent fixation and determination of the political community's collective identity (i.e., the people) and its terms of communal life (Holman et al. 2015, 19; Laclau 2001b, 12). This involves challenging the dominant communal vision of society and unsettling the formal and informal boundaries of who can speak and what can be spoken in the public realm. Radical democrats neither celebrate the mode of collective decision-making based on public deliberation in the name of democracy nor advocate the politics of inclusion as a means to deepen democracy. For radical democrats, public deliberation and inclusion occur against the background of a given democracy's determinate social formation. To realize democratic self-rule then requires wrestling with this background condition directly. That is what radical democratic politics does. It seeks to render democracy's existing social formation *indeterminate*.

Claude Lefort (1924–2010) is one of the most influential thinkers behind the formation of this idea of radical democratic politics (Nelson 2019). The French philosopher famously defined democracy as a form of society characterized by the 'empty place of power' and the 'dissolution of the markers of certainty' (1988a). Lefort's model of democracy values ongoing conflicts and disagreements as the key features of democratic politics. They render the norms and institutions that sustain the political community indeterminate. Lefort's insistence on the contestability and alterability of societal order as the core feature of a democratic society forms the backbone of

radical democratic thought. Against this background, this chapter interrogates Lefort's legacy for radical democracy to infer the cause of radical democratic theories' inattention to backlash as a matter of theoretical inquiry. I argue that such an oversight at least partly has to do with conflating two different modalities of conflict. To substantiate my argument, I propose 'struggle' and 'competition' as two different ways to interpret the meaning of conflict. Here, I illustrate these two notions briefly.

When we interpret conflict as *struggle*, we are assuming a state of inequality as the starting point for theorizing democratic politics. Democratic conflict occurs around inequality, namely, between those who seek to maintain and challenge the unequal status quo. When radical democrats value conflict for rendering the people's identity indeterminate, they are taking the notion of conflict to indicate a struggle against the monopoly of power by a particular subsection of society. This ultimately implies privileging those seeking to negate the existing inequality as the genuine democratic subject. In doing so, radical democrats champion the permanence of such a struggle in the name of democracy. And yet, we may interpret conflict as *competition*. On this conception, democratic politics would mean sharing power by competing and negotiating the terms of living together on equal ground. Equality is considered the prerequisite for conflict to emerge. This is to say that the people's identity in a democracy is already deemed indeterminate. Citizens are equal in making competing claims to the people because no one occupies the identity of the people.

This chapter shows how Lefort conflates the two different modalities of conflict in his conception of democratic politics. More importantly, while Lefort's conception of democratic politics oscillates between the two different meanings of conflict (Ingram 2006; Breckman 2013,

7), I argue that it ultimately reduces 'conflict-as-struggle' to 'conflict-as-competition.'[33] I support my argument by addressing Lefort's treatment of backlash as an empirically contingent, deviant phenomenon in democratic politics at best. This move implies that Lefort perceives democratic politics as fundamentally happening against the backdrop of (already established) equality. This is because, as I have shown in the introductory chapter, to perceive backlash as a normal feature of democratic politics, one has to presuppose an unequal relationship between conflicting parties. For someone's claim to stand a chance of being taken seriously or considered worthy of careful listening by others, that person needs to be acknowledged as an equal interlocutor by others. In my view, one of the necessary conditions of backlash is an absence of such equality, and radical democratic politics assumes this situation. Accordingly, Lefort's inattention to backlash in developing his conception of democratic politics signifies that Lefort is outside the terrain of radical democracy. Or, if Lefort is a radical democrat, he is making a contradictory move.

By placing Lefort within the liberal tradition broadly construed, I argue against the recent attempts to situate Lefort within the radical democratic tradition (Nelson 2019; Herzog 2024; Zicman de Barros 2024; Nichols 2022; Marchart 2022, 47; Di Pierro 2023, 224–5, 246). Lefort's share within radical democracy is ambivalent at best because, in Lefort, the dynamic and conflictual 'struggle' model of democratic politics is analytically preceded by, conflated with, and ultimately subsumed to the static and idyllic 'competition' model of democratic politics. The broader implication of my critical reading of Lefort is that radical democrats should not follow

[33] One might argue that this is what Lefort precisely intended. For example, some Lefort's close interlocutors recollect that Lefort ultimately wanted to uphold democracy as an institutionalized competition rather than a struggle that disrupts the institutionalized terrain of conflict (Mouffe 2014b, 266, 268; Arato 2022, 355; see also Selinger 2023). However, as I will elaborate shortly, Lefort's contemporary commentators often correctly capture that there are moments in Lefort where his normative stance leans toward understanding democracy in terms of struggle (Nelson 2019; Herzog 2024; Zicman de Barros 2024). In this chapter, I take this 'radical democratic' interpretation of Lefort seriously and argue against it.

Lefort in conflating different meanings of conflict. Nor should they subsume the idea of struggle to that of competition as Lefort does. Instead, they must understand the modality of conflict solely as a struggle in order to give their conceptions of democratic politics a radical democratic connotation. To do so would require radical democrats to incorporate backlash in conceptualizing democratic politics. Unfortunately, the following chapter will show that this is not the case. For now, I focus on Lefort.

What Kind of Society is Modern Democracy?

Claude Lefort's most significant contribution to democratic theory arguably lies in escalating conflict as the defining characteristic of (modern) democracy (see Plot 2013, 3; Di Pierro 2023, 246–7). Conflict involves "a perpetual questioning of the legitimacy of power and a constant reexamination of the assumptions of community" (Di Pierro 2023, 11; Lefort 1988a, 17–9). It is what allows democratic citizens who have different visions of society to continue to decide the terms of their communal life on their own. For Lefort, putting conflict to an end amounts to destroying democracy and turning it into what he calls "totalitarianism." Both democracy and totalitarianism champion 'the people' as the source of social unity and political legitimacy, but democracy uniquely upholds the identity of the people *indeterminate* through ongoing conflicts (1986b, 279).

Lefort's conception of democracy made a broad appeal to democratic theorists who are both unsatisfied with the liberal notion of democratic politics that revolves around preserving individuals' negative liberty but, at the same time, skeptical about the promise of total emancipation inherent in a revolutionary political project (Frank 2021, 6; see also Marchart 2007, 104–7). In trying to reconcile democracy with liberalism, particularly in the post-Revolutionary French context, Lefort valorizes indeterminacy as the normative core of democracy (Selinger 2023,

9–10). Indeterminacy indicates the political community's vibrant civic life and implies the integrity of social bond that both sustains and is sustained by an ongoing conflict. By institutionalizing conflicts and disagreements, democracy prevents a particular subsection of society from (solely) representing 'the people' and persecuting minorities and oppositions as enemies of the people (Arato 2013). This makes the identity of the political community permanently open. Any decisions made in the name of the community are always subject to disagreement, challenge, and change by its members. At the same time, this condition of indeterminacy would not culminate with the disintegration of the polity as long as citizens mutually recognize and respect an ongoing conflict itself as constituting the very feature of their communal life (Hochner 2023, 1260; see also Breckman 2013, 164).

To understand Lefort's conception of democracy properly, we need to begin by appreciating the social ontological nature of his approach (Marchart 2007, 86; Di Pierro 2023, 10). Like Plato and Aristotle, Lefort considers democracy a particular form of *society* rather than merely a form of government. By society, Lefort means that democracy is a distinctive mode of organizing reality (Accetti 2015, 123; see also Duong 2020, 36). Society is where collective 'human coexistence' is made possible through the provision of an overall schema of actions, practices, and relations. This schema, in turn, renders an 'objective' world intelligible (i.e., distinguishing what is 'right,' 'just,' 'legitimate,' 'normal,' and so on) for individuals within a communal space and thus guides their everyday interactions with others (Lefort 1988f, 218–20). When society is understood as indicating some sort of an (objective) order, we may ask: where and how does such an order come about (Cossin 2024)? Lefort answers this question by turning to a particular philosophical notion of *representation* inspired by Lacanian psychoanalysis, among other sources. For Lefort, representation does not indicate a mere reflection of something already

present as a matter of our perception and experience. In contrast, representation is about rendering the object present *via* the sign, thereby making our experience of the world possible (Singer 2013, 187; Cossin 2024, 4). Accordingly, society can only come to exist or be given its form as a coherent whole by instituting a symbolic order, that is, by making a "quasi-representation" of itself "as being aristocratic, monarchic, despotic, democratic or totalitarian" (Lefort 1988a, 12; 1988f, 219; see also Flynn 2019, 67). Lefort uses the expression of "quasi-representation" to highlight the constructed nature of a symbolic order and the operation of power behind it (Accetti 2015, 126). Power is conceived as a symbolic location that serves as the reference point by which the symbolic order of society is held together coherently (Lefort 1988f, 225). Lefort is ultimately interested in understanding a 'democratic' society's distinctive mode of self-representation by investigating its unique modality of power (1988a, 14). The French philosopher pursues his goal by comparing democracy primarily with two different forms of society: the *ancien régime* and totalitarianism.

According to Lefort (1986b, 279), modern democracy is sustained by the combination of the two 'contradictory' principles: "on the one hand, power emanates from the people; on the other, it is the power of nobody." In a democracy, power is exercised in the name of the people, and yet the people's identity is subject to ongoing contestations. Accordingly, it remains forever *indeterminate*. Those exercising power (in the people's name) can do so only temporarily and cannot embody or possess it. In this context, Lefort famously argues that, in a democracy, "[t]he locus of power becomes *an empty place*" (Lefort 1988a, 17, emphasis original). While the empty place of power pertains primarily to political authority, its implications are far-reaching. When the place of power is hollowed out, there is no absolute reference point to anchor knowledge and law. Democracy entails "the independence of thought and opinion with regard to power" (Lefort 1986a, 252), where "the true and the false, the just and the unjust, the permissible and the forbidden, the

normal and pathological" are permanently subject to debate and change (Lefort 1988a, 11). At the same time, with the separation between power and law, "[t]here is no law [in a democracy] that can be fixed, whose articles cannot be contested, whose foundations are not susceptible of being called into question (Lefort 1986c, 303)." Accordingly, the empty place of power signifies the permanent possibility of change not only in the position of power but also in the dominant norms and institutions of a political community.

To better appreciate the meaning of the empty place of power, we need to juxtapose democracy with monarchy in terms of the status of power. In his mature writings, Lefort abstracts a normative conception of democracy from the French experience, that is, based on the world-making event of the French Revolution (see, for example, 1988d, 92–3).[34] From this point of view,

[34] Because Lefort develops his conception of modern democracy based on a particular European experience of the French Revolution and yet presents it as 'the' concept of modern democracy, it may be argued that his view suffers from parochialism and Eurocentrism (see, for example, Cossin 2024). If this is the case, radical democrats who ground their theories of democracy and democratic politics on Lefort (or the French or American Revolution) are also susceptible to this same criticism (see, for example, Rancière 2001; Balibar 2016; Laclau 2005a). Radical democrats are aware of this criticism. Chantal Mouffe self-consciously notes that "the Western form of democracy as being the 'modern' one has been a powerful rhetorical weapon used for some time by liberal democratic theorists to establish its superior form of rationality and its universal validity" (2013, 36). When different parts of the world experience 'modern' democracy and, more broadly, 'modernity' in different ways, to what extent can and should we generalize Lefort's conception of modern democracy? I think Laclau has a good answer to this question. According to Laclau (1990, 188 emphasis added), "[t]hat there has been throughout the last centuries a 'Westernization' of the world through a technological, economic, and cultural revolution that started in Europe is an obvious enough fact. […] The true ethnocentrism does not lie in asserting the 'universalization' of values, techniques, scientific control of the environments, etc., is an irreversible process, but *in sustaining that this process is linked by an essential bond, immanent to the 'ethnica of the West*.'" Democratic principles such as equality, respect for human rights, freedom, and plurality may have emerged in the Western context. However, that does not mean that they must remain within the geographical boundaries of 'the West.' Nor do they lose their universalistic character outside the Western context (Marchart 2015, 190). They underlie social and political struggles to promote human dignity and well-being in non-Western societies and often form the backbone of their societal order (e.g., South Korea). What is Eurocentric is to dismiss the applicability of the democratic principles of the 'Western' origin beyond the West (Táíwò 2022).
In this context, I think it is important to distinguish the ideal and the institutional model of Western modern democracy. While democratic ideals are transferable beyond the initial context in which they were formulated, their concrete expressions may differ based on historical and cultural contexts. For example, it would be Eurocentric to claim that specific institutional arrangements and practices to realize democratic ideals in France should be uniformly implemented in the rest of the world. This would be to dismiss the unique experiences of other societies. In this regard, overcoming Eurocentrism involves "working with Eurocentric concepts and categories, subjecting them to critical scrutiny and reconstructing them in light of the experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups" (Posholi 2020, 285). Among those concepts is liberal democracy. In Chapter 3, I will show that Laclau conducts this 'decolonizing' enterprise regarding liberal democracy based on the historical experience of Latin America.

(modern) democracy is a society born against all traditional ranks and hierarchies. Its revolutionary beginning has brought about "a mutation of the symbolic order [of the *ancien régime*]" (Lefort 1988a, 16). Society's mode of self-representation changed dramatically following the decapitation of a king who embodied power in his person. Under the monarchy, a king was considered the representative of God by whose transcendental authority he served as "the guarantor and representative of the unity of the kingdom" (Ibid., 17). As "a mediator between mortals and gods," a king was deemed the living incarnation of power, within whose body condensed "the principle that generated the order of the kingdom" (Ibid.).

Against this background, the beheading of a king not only symbolized the disintegration of the society of the *ancien régime*. More fundamentally, it also signaled the demise of the *ancien régime*'s particular mode of representing the unity of society. The collapse of the *ancien régime* had generated an urgent need to construct a new social bond for individuals to avoid the perpetual state of disorder (Flynn 2005, 134). Atomized individuals needed to see themselves as members of a larger whole once again (Duong 2020, 10). Now that the notion of a king is gone, the challenge was that achieving such a task could no longer resort to the transcendental authority of God incarnated in the person of a king (Lefort 1988b, 27). And herein lies the radicalism of modern democracy.

According to Lefort, the advent of modern democracy involved displacing the figure of power (i.e., the king) *but not the place itself*; the place of power became empty (Flynn 2005, 148; Di Pierro 2023, 227). As a form of society, modern democracy still requires a symbolic pole "by which social identity and social community can be signified" so that society can "[apprehend] itself in its unity" (Lefort 1988f, 232; 1988a, 17). However, the emergence of this new form of society does not simply end with reaffirming or renewing the "religious basis of power" through

the transfer of regal sovereignty from 'the king' to 'the people' (see Kalyvas 2016, 51). According to Lefort (1988a, 18), modern democracy is unprecedented in history in that "[it] is instituted as a society without a body." A democratic society would still bear the universal reference of power, 'the people,' as the normative foundation of social coordination and cooperation. However, "[the people's] identity will constantly be open to question" (Lefort 1986c, 304). Democracy is instituted and sustained by the very emptiness of the place of power, which gives rise to ongoing conflicts around an exercise of power throughout society (see, for example, Lefort 1988b, 34). In this way, we can say that social division is constitutive of the unity of a society called democracy (Lefort 1988a, 18).

Lefort further highlights the indeterminacy of the people's identity as the core aspect of a democratic society by counterposing modern democracy with 'totalitarianism' (Howard 2023). Lefort understands totalitarianism as arising from the mutation of the symbolic order of democracy, where "the change in the status of power is its clearest expression" (Lefort 1988a, 13). Totalitarianism is characterized by the closure of democracy's empty place of power. It reanimates the idea that power is incarnated or materialized in a concrete figure representing the political community as a whole (Lefort 1986a, 285). The figure of power arises above all legal restraints and political opposition. Moreover, totalitarianism merges state and civil society so that knowledge becomes the property of power, which results in the closure of an autonomous space to criticize political power (Accetti 2015, 131; Lefort 1986a, 284). In this vein, totalitarianism is a particular form of society that constantly aspires to represent itself as "a homogenous and self-transparent society [where] social division, in all its modes, is denied, and at the same time all signs of differences of opinion, belief or mores are condemned" (Lefort 1988a, 13).

Importantly, Lefort argues that the possibility of a totalitarian turn is inherent in a

democratic society (Howard 2023, 249). This claim is worth careful consideration because we can extrapolate Lefort's normative understanding of democratic politics from it. According to Lefort (1988f, 229), modern democracy "[inaugurates] an experience in which society is constantly in search of its own foundations" in the form of ongoing "political competition and social conflict," and yet such a condition involves "the repugnance inspired by division and conflict." The totalitarian impulse within society becomes pronounced when democratic contestation or competition escalates to the point where "[t]he reference to an empty place gives way to the unbearable image of a real vacuum" (Ibid., 233; Lefort 1988a, 19). Hence, insofar as democratic power "presents itself as the power of no one, […] it runs the risk of having its symbolic function canceled out" (Lefort 1986c, 305; see also Lefort 1988a, 19). Warren Breckman's explanation helps further clarify the mechanism behind the democratic society's totalitarian turn. According to Breckman (2013a, 165), the transition to modern democracy from the *ancien régime* in Lefort is modeled on "the individual's transition from imaginary unity to symbolic division," which leaves a traumatic memory in the subject that is never fully overcome. Modern democracy inaugurates with "the traumatic loss of the substance of the body politic," whose experience persistently fuels the societal desire for unity. Accordingly, the transition to totalitarianism is always a latent possibility in a democracy, which results from "the psychical trauma that accompanied power's disembodiment" (Ibid.).

For Lefort, because totalitarianism is a permanent possibility in a democracy, democratic politics is understood as preserving and promoting democratic order against the tendency to close the empty place of power. In other words, the goal of democratic politics is to "[prevent] society from becoming petrified within its order" (Lefort 1988f, 232). Instead of trying to resolve conflicts and disagreements, democratic politics facilitates and proliferates them. In this vein, Lefort

identifies democratic politics with "a process of questioning" to keep the people's identity forever open and indeterminate (1988a, 19). The practice of questioning is, in turn, championed as "the responsibility of [democratic] citizens" (Lefort 1988b, 31). In one of his last interviews, Lefort urges that democracy should be "[a] *milieu* for conflict […] in which we have to know how to engage in contestation." Otherwise, "democracy will wither away" (2012, 13). It is tempting to situate Lefort within the tradition of radical democracy based on his emphasis on ongoing contestation being the defining marker of democratic politics. And yet, Lefort's understanding of democratic politics as ongoing contestation warrants further scrutiny because the meaning and connotation of conflict in Lefort is ambiguous. The following section examines the two different meanings of conflict advanced by Lefort and their relationship to clarify the uniqueness of radical democratic politics.

Competition or Struggle? On the Two Modalities of Democratic Politics

Contemporary commentators of Lefort often interrogate the meaning of conflict in Lefort and address the tension between its possible interpretations (Ingram 2006; Rancière 2001, thesis five). It is usually argued that the term 'conflict' bears two connotations. According to one perspective, Lefort takes conflict to indicate *competition* based on political equality between those with conflicting views or opinions. The most apparent example would be ongoing competition among political parties over the position of power, which results in the periodic renewal of public authority (see, for example, Lefort 1988b, 29). Lefort applies the logic of competition more extensively to the social domain, where the public life of democratic citizens is permanently mediated through "a debate as to what is legitimate and what is illegitimate" in various forms of associational life (Ibid., 39–41, emphasis removed; Lefort 2019, 109).

Yet, competition does not exhaust the meaning of conflict in Lefort. Conflict can also be

interpreted as a struggle that is waged against (the backdrop of) social inequalities (Lefort 2019, 114). When interpreted as a struggle, conflict aims to change 'social sensibility' by "[blurring] the conventional boundaries between the political and the non-political" (Lefort 1986a, 261; 1988b, 35). What distinguishes struggle from competition is that struggle implies 'declaring' oneself as a political equal instead of presupposing political equality. In declaring equality, individuals, first and foremost, "[call] upon [public opinion] to grant legitimacy to their claim" (Lefort 2019, 114). This act of declaring equality is thus considered the key feature of making rights claims (Lefort 1988b, 38; Di Pierro 2023, 224). Equality "cannot be regarded as a fact of nature" (Lefort 1988e, 196). Instead, it is construed in terms of "the process of the destruction of the positions occupied by citizens who dominate society, who possess power, honours and wealth" (Ibid.). Such distinctions are the sources of *social* inequality, which, in turn, gives rise to political inequality. Accordingly, democracy is fundamentally sustained by an ongoing struggle against a given state of social inequality.

James Ingram, among others, has masterfully shown the ambiguity in Lefort's use of conflict by reading Lefort through the lens of two of his most accomplished former students: Marcel Gauchet and Miguel Abensour. According to Ingram, the indeterminacy condition of democracy lends itself to two very different visions of democratic politics. On the one hand, democratic politics can be understood as preserving the indeterminacy condition by "accomodat[ing] politics-as-conflict within a legal and institutional order that stabilizes it and keeps it within certain bounds" (2006, 38). The normative imperative of democratic politics is not to trespass those limits. On the other hand, democratic politics can be conceived as an enterprise that promotes the condition of indeterminacy by championing conflict against the danger of "freezing or institutionalizing a particular arrangement of power" (Ibid.). In this case, the purpose

of democratic politics is to challenge as opposed to preserve the limits of a legal and institutional order.

This and the following section build on Ingram's contribution to uncovering the two conceptions of democratic politics in Lefort to illuminate Lefort's ambivalent legacy in radical democracy. In this section, I demonstrate lingering confusion around Lefort's understanding of democratic politics. In doing so, I clarify the tension between the two conceptions of democratic politics. Then, I examine whether and how the French philosopher seeks to reconcile his dual understanding of democratic politics. Based on this observation, the following section critically assesses Lefort's share in theorizing radical democratic politics. Unlike the commentators of Lefort who situate Lefort within the tradition of radical democracy, I argue that Lefort's legacy for radical democracy is ambivalent at best because Lefort ultimately subsumes 'struggle' as the modality of conflict to 'competition' in upholding conflict as the defining feature of democratic politics. I address Lefort's inattention to backlash in developing his conception of democratic politics to support my argument. A crucial lesson for radical democracy here is to avoid conflating the two understandings of conflict and champion struggle as *the* (primary) modality of democratic politics.

Let us first explore how Lefort portrays conflict as competition between political equals. Lefort notes, "[in a democracy,] the exercise of power remains dependent on the competition of parties and […] this competition, strictly defined, confers a sort of legitimacy to the conflicts which play out in society" (Lefort 2019, 106). The interpretation of democratic politics as competition takes the indeterminacy condition as a *given reality* of democracy. The indeterminacy of the people's identity materializes in what Lefort calls a "public space," "a space which is so constituted that everyone is encouraged to speak and to listen without being subject to the authority of another, that everyone is urged to will the power he has been given" (Lefort 1988b, 41, emphasis removed).

Subsequently, the public space is characterized by "the turmoil of exchange and conflict stimulating uncertainty and a happy diversity of convictions." The activity that marks this space is "debate," which "is supposed to have no goal other than to bring out the general interest from the array of particular interests" (Lefort 2019, 107).

Lefort's use of the term "debate" to indicate democratic politics is worthy of attention for three reasons. First, debate implies some common ground between interlocutors that is established before the debate. Debate occurs when individuals disagree with each other on a common issue or agenda. Moreover, for a debate to take place, there must be common ground upon which conflicting parties of a debate exchange their opinions (i.e., the terms of the debate). These common settings establish equivalence between the participants of a debate. Second and relatedly, having a debate assumes mutual recognition between participants in this process as equal partners. Even if there is a common issue that affects different groups of individuals, there cannot be a debate if those affected groups are unwilling to engage with one another. Engaging with one another would involve treating conflicting views and opinions as at least worthy of listening and consideration on the part of all participants. Thus, the willingness to engage with others signifies equality understood in a procedural sense. Finally, debate is ultimately a means to arrive at some resolution. It is a means to settle a conflict, even if that settlement may be temporary and open to criticism. Especially in the context of democratic politics, conciliatory gestures by conflicting parties would be necessary to preserve democracy against its own totalitarian impulse. The point is that, in a democracy, conflict is institutionalized so that no particular social or political force embodies power. The exercise of power "represents the outcome of a controlled contest with permanent rules" (Lefort 1988a, 17). Those rules are meant to facilitate ongoing debate for democratic citizens to determine the terms of community on equal grounds.

Andrew Arato stands out among Lefort's contemporary commentators who champion the interpretation of conflict as competition (2013; 2016). As Arato understands (2022, 335), "Lefort's analysis is ultimately institutional and focuses on authoritarian attempts to fill 'the empty space'." This interpretation reflects Arato's interest in explaining the normative ground on which democracy can begin and survive (Arato 2016; 2017). Lefort is the one whom Arato often turns to in trying to give that explanation. For Arato (2013, 119), the process involving the emergence and consolidation of democracy is best explained in terms of "opening up the empty space and keeping it open." The key idea about democratic politics Arato takes from Lefort is "self-limitation." Self-limitation means that, in a democracy, all social and political forces consciously repudiate the belief that any of them can embody the sovereign people (Ibid., 116). This process entails "the transformation of one conflict model, friend-enemy relations, to another, one based on political—as against fundamental—opposition" (Ibid., 119). In Arato's view (2016, 279), Lefort knows that the distinction between these two types of opposition can be made only through the institutionalization of conflict. Such institutionalization, which Arato infers from Lefort, is manifested in a *constitution*. The constitution signifies "a minimal symbolic consensus" whose goal is "to conserve social diversity rather than aiming at unity and unification" (Ibid., 280). Consequently, the image of democratic politics Arato draws from Lefort is that the indeterminacy of the people's identity is preserved over time through a procedurally mediated, conflict-ridden participatory process of collective decision-making (see also Müller 2014, 488).

However, Lefort's embracement of the 'conflict-as-competition' model of democratic politics is equivocated by Lefort's own critical engagement with Marx, especially in *Jewish Question*, and the Marx-inspired critique of (the politics of) human rights by the French Left of his time (Lefort 1986a, 420; Ingram 2006, 43). Lefort articulates his vision of democratic politics as

a struggle most explicitly while rejecting the tendency to discredit human rights as being ideological (see, for example, 1986a; 1988b). From Lefort's perspective, critics are gravely mistaken to consider human rights as merely hiding the reality of oppression from the oppressed. As Lefort notes (1986a, 248), one has to become "the prisoner of the ideological version of rights" to claim that rights are ideological. Lefort worries that an uncompromising critical view of human rights carries the danger of justifying the transition from democracy to totalitarianism under the banner of 'human emancipation' (1986a, 247).

To elaborate, Lefort concedes the critics' view that 'man' as the bearer of human rights can only be a concrete individual, historically and socially determined (1986a, 257). Lefort notes, "[m]en can be known only to the extent that they are defined within a culture, as members of an ethnic group or a nation, as citizens or subjects in a political community, or, yet again, as agents of a process of production and social reproduction. […] Man as such, without determination, is not a man" (2000, 20). At the same time, Lefort is aware that, at the factual level, rights are often subject to exploitation by a dominant group of society (e.g., the bourgeois class) "to deny others guarantees of rights" (1986a, 258). However, Lefort reproaches the critics of abstract humanism for failing to appreciate the meaning of the 'symbolic' transformation of society behind the advent of modern democracy and the rise of human rights. The true novelty of modern democracy lies at the 'symbolic' level, where power becomes an empty place. The disincorporation of power implies that, *in principle*, no particular formulation of rights at a given time and space is insulated from questioning (see also Balibar 2014, 45–8). For Lefort, the political import of (human) rights lies in their intrinsic capacity to render the meaning and content of rights themselves indeterminate (Moyn 2012, 299). Rights may be exploited by dominant groups, especially in economic relations, but they exceed the economic domain (of domination) to affirm "the independence of thought and

opinion with regard to power" that keeps society open, free, and, most importantly, *indeterminate* (Lefort 1986a, 251). Rights have the *potential* to "[activate and uphold] our self-understanding as individual citizens endowed with rights, and that teaches us to treat other individuals as respectable citizens endowed with these same rights" (Geenens 2019, 96). In this vein, Lefort understands the politics of (human) rights as an ongoing struggle that constantly transgresses and erodes the boundaries of established rights, which results in the shift in society's general perception of legitimacy (1986a, 264–5; 1988b, 40).

Many have recently attended to Lefort's more aggressive and transgressive vision of democratic politics (Ingram 2006; 2013, chapter 5; Moyn 2012; Lacroix 2013; Cohen 2013; Gündoğdu 2014; Nelson 2019; Herzog 2024; Zicman de Barros 2024; Di Pierro 2023). I find Bryan Nelson's approach particularly instructive in illuminating Lefort's understanding of democratic contestation as a struggle because, unlike many other cases, it goes beyond identifying the politics of human rights as the domain where the French philosopher's radical democratic vision is to be found (2019). Nelson's ambition is to (re)define Lefort as "a thinker against mastery" rather than "a thinker of indeterminacy" by focusing on the notion of 'savage democracy' that is often overlooked by Lefort's contemporary commentators (Nelson 2019, 845). According to Nelson (Ibid., 852, 849), Lefort employs the term savage democracy to champion an image of "democracy that resists subordination and pacification," which "[prompts] us to think democracy beyond all reference to foundation, principle or *archê*." Nelson (Ibid., 849) suggests that, when we follow Lefort to consider savage democracy as the 'essence' of democracy, we are less likely to lament democracy's 'fragility' (like Arato does). Instead, we can conceive of democracy's enduring strength and vitality as we focus on how "[conflict] transforms our institutions and relations as well as the manner in which those institutions and relations are represented and

experienced symbolically." All this is to say that democratic politics in Lefort is fundamentally characterized by the conscious acts of refusing various logics of mastery and domination buttressing existing social relations.

Is the principle of indeterminacy something to be *reaffirmed* through an ongoing competition for citizens to exercise power together, or is it a matter of *reinvention* through an ongoing struggle to redress the social and political conditions in which some citizens have a greater voice and influence than others? Can these two different modalities of democratic politics be reconciled? If so, how? As I understand, the difficulty of reconciling the two comes from their radically different assumptions about the nature of public interaction among citizens. On the one hand, the 'competition' model of democratic politics presupposes political equality and mutuality among the participants in public decision-making processes. The institutionalization of conflict implies the mutual recognition of citizens as equal interlocutors collectively deciding the terms of community. On the other hand, the 'struggle' model of democratic politics assumes what is considered an anomaly in the competition model to be normal. In a way, the struggle model inverts the competition model. In the struggle model, *de facto* political inequality and the lack of mutuality constitute the very background condition of public interaction among citizens. This is due to social inequality. In his critical reading of Hannah Arendt, Lefort argues that formally granted rights to participate equally in public deliberation, can coexist with social inequality "by which certain men succeeded in exercising a lasting authority over one or other section of the people" (1988c, 53). Here, Lefort is concerned about what contemporary democratic theorists often call *internal exclusion* (Young 2002, chapter 2; see also Balibar 2014, chapter 8).

According to Iris Young (2002, 53, emphasis added), internal exclusion refers to "the forms of exclusion that […] occur even when individuals and groups are *nominally* included in the

discussion and decision-making process."[35] Internal exclusion presupposes the formal inclusion of the victims of this particular injustice. It is about what those individuals *experience* as they participate in public deliberation. Young notes, "people may find that their claims are not taken seriously and may believe that they are not treated with equal respect. The dominant mood may find their ideas or modes of expression silly or simple and not worthy of consideration. They may find that their experiences as relevant to the issues under discussion are so different from others' in the public that their views are discounted" (Ibid., 55). For Young (1990, 97, 116), the source of internal exclusion is the gap between "the [traditional] ideal of a civic public in which citizens leave behind their particularity and differences" and the reality in which [t]he standpoint of the privileged, their particular experience and standards, is constructed as normal and neutral." As a result, while all citizens are included in public decision-making by virtue of their formal membership in a democratic polity, some are more (or less) visible and audible than others due to the imbalance of power in practice.

Lefort's remarks on the superficiality of democratic public space in various parts of his writings resonate with the idea of internal exclusion in democracies. Lefort recognizes that the existence of public space *per se* does not guarantee the genuine experience of democracy. That is, "[i]f we […] turn our gaze to individual citizens, supposed equal *de jure* and free in their political choices, we have to admit that their inequality *de facto*" (Lefort 2019, 108). This view is most clearly advanced in Lefort's commentary on Latin American democracies. There, Lefort highlights the discrepancy between the existence of the formal arena of democratic politics and the exclusion

[35] A substitute for 'internal exclusion' in the lexicon of political theory would be '(structural) domination.' Individuals who are rendered politically unintelligible lose control over their life by the denial of their social standing (Bohman 2012, 180). Structural domination occurs because members of society's non-dominant group have to adjust themselves to the pre-existing dominant socio-cultural form of life as the precondition for exercising their political agency.

and rejection of the masses and minorities from political participation in practice as a common feature of democracies in Latin America. The French philosopher notes (Ibid., 111),

> "[…] the great majority of the people have never been in a position to gain an understanding of political action. In other words, the divide has been so deep between, on the one hand, the many—the peasants, the workers and, more generally, the poor—and, on the other, the elites. […] And, in this sense, it seems to me that there was no true representation even if […] it was sometimes established in principle."

While Lefort, in the above text, somewhat problematically addresses such discrepancy in democratic politics as distinctive to the Latin American context, which is foreign to "Western democracies" (see ibid., 114), elsewhere he presents the gap between the formal and informal equality in a more general manner. For instance, Lefort claims that in a totalitarian society,

> "the official discourse does not reject [the existence of public space]. […] Free speech is not impugned; each person has the right and the duty to speak; everyone is even noisily encouraged to engage in criticism and self-criticism. It is simply that the right and the duty are to speak 'truly,' that is to say, in conformity with the desires of one's governors, with their statement of the truth at a given moment" (2000, 260).

In a similar vein, Lefort emphasizes that the nominalization of democratic public space does not strictly result from a state manipulation of the public mindset; on the contrary, it is an outcome of citizens' voluntary submission to 'public opinion.' While referring to Tocqueville's notion of soft despotism, Lefort argues that "the shared will not to obey anyone leads to enslavement from an impersonal power, which is to be feared all the more as it is invisible" (Ibid., 269–70, emphasis removed). In other words, more than an intervention by the public authority to close off democracy's empty place of power, social conformity gives rise to a determinate identity of the

people in democracies.

The determinate identity of the people that results from the pressure of social conformity indicates some state of *normalization* (Connolly 2002). Normalization entails disciplining the subject, that is, intervening and transforming an individual into an 'optimal model' established by some pre-existing standard and, in doing so, precluding her from engaging in other possible modes of thinking and acting (Foucault 2007, 58; Taylor 2009, 57). When seen through the lens of normalization, the people's determinate identity frustrates the collective self-rule of citizens not in the form of outright exclusion but through preconceptions among citizens regarding "what counts as a political action and who counts as a political agent" (Kramer 2017, 6; see also Fraser 2009, 286; Fricker 2007). For Lefort, these questions affect the quality of democratic life since democratic politics is fundamentally relational, where recognition plays a central role (see Lefort 1988a, 18; 1986a, 264). Accordingly, it is tempting to say that Lefort prioritizes struggle over competition for undoing a determinate identity of the people that engenders inequality in recognition. In fact, the French philosopher puts emphatically that democratic politics should pursue "not only the abolition of every 'fixed classification' but also the abolition of every criterion of social distinction so that power might not become [a] prisoner of […] a determinate social category" (Lefort 2000, 105; see also Müller 2007, 77). From this perspective, democracy would be marked by the *pursuit* of indeterminacy. Central to this process is negating an existing identity of the people that sets the boundary of (legitimate) political participation.

However, in the following section, I argue that Lefort is not entirely successful in upholding democratic politics as a struggle. To make this argument, I examine how the tension between the two models of democratic politics illustrated in this section unfolds in Lefort's writings. The goal is to show that the two models become analytically indistinguishable for Lefort.

Such convergence happens when Lefort tacitly assumes the general receptivity of claims made in democratic struggles. More precisely, by failing to acknowledge backlash as a distinctive background condition of democratic politics as struggle, Lefort unwittingly assumes the agents of democratic struggle as equal partners (already) participating in democratic competition. In my view, this is the thrust of Lefort's ambivalent legacy on radical democracy. Lefort champions the idea of democratic politics as a struggle only to conflate it with another influential idea of democratic politics as a competition. What is obscured in this process is the conditions of social inequality (underlying democratic competition) that Lefort himself problematizes in the name of democracy.

Backlash: A Background Condition of Democratic Politics as Struggle

The previous section illustrated the two meanings of democratic politics in Lefort. One is about participating in a competition with fellow citizens who have conflicting views and opinions concerning the communal vision of society. Another is about engaging in a struggle that disrupts and reshapes the very terms of such competition. From my perspective, Lefort considers both forms of political participation *simultaneously* constituting the integral aspects of democratic life. In fact, I would argue that Lefort does not see tension or contradiction between the two. For Lefort, the democratic public space makes room for both a competition over an exercise of power *and* a struggle to renew the discursive terrain on which the competition is held. The democratic public space can embrace new challenges to its given configurations because it is (meant to be) open and inclusive in the first place (Lefort 1988b, 29).[36] The openness and inclusivity of the democratic

[36] In this regard, Lefort would agree with Jürgen Habermas that democracy is a "tradition-building project" and a "self-correcting learning process" in which "[a]ll the later generations have the task of actualizing the still-untapped normative substances of the system of rights laid down in the original document of the constitution" (2001, 774; see also Müller 2007, 76–7; cf. Loughlin 2022, 105–8).

public space form the normative basis of its self-improvement and innovation (Lefort 2019, 107–8; Cohen 2013, 127). Hence, for Lefort, competition and struggle signify simply two different, complementary ways for a democratic society to keep its identity of the people permanently and profoundly indeterminate (Cohen 2013, 125).

However, in this section, I argue that while treating the relationship between the two forms of democratic politics as harmonious and mutually complementary, Lefort blurs the distinction between democratic struggle and democratic competition. Competition becomes the ultimate form of democratic politics for Lefort, as the French philosopher largely disregards backlash as a distinctive feature of democratic struggle. That said, the major pitfall in Lefort's account of democratic politics is that it pays little systematic attention to the antagonism emanating from the prevailing order of society against the challenges that seek to change the unequal status quo. This raises a theoretical problem for Lefort. From my reconstruction of Lefort in the previous section, Lefort understands the problems of democracy's determinate social formation and internal exclusion that shape the background conditions of democratic struggle. Then, Lefort should have expected that those conditions would give rise to backlash against democratic struggles. However, this section will demonstrate that Lefort fails to consider backlash a normal feature of radical democratic politics. As a result, in dismissing an overly pessimistic and defeatist view about democracy's self-correcting capacity, Lefort lands on the other extreme, where his belief about democracy's capacity for self-correction and innovation undergoes a quasi-teleological turn. Finally, I conclude this section with a methodological reflection, arguing that Lefort's tendency to overlook backlash in the context of democratic struggle is not an accident. Such a tendency derives from a particular mode of criticism that Lefort takes when criticizing actually existing democracies' democratic deficits.

As mentioned in the introduction, backlash is characterized by detracting, distorting, and dismissing the claims of others. Such responses manifest one's incapacity and/or unwillingness to consider their interlocutor's voice worthy of listening and consideration. In a backlash, the incapacity to listen derives from failing to perceive the speaker as an equal interlocutor. The unwillingness to listen at least partly has to do with the desire to maintain the unequal status quo. Backlash occurs when there is inequality in civic life. This means that backlash is distinctively the problem of democratic struggle, as democratic struggles emerge in and against social (and political) inequality. Backlash may occur in a democratic competition. However, when it does, it is an exception at best. This is because, conceptually speaking, democratic competition presupposes political equality. In a democratic competition, participants of this process perceive one another as equal partners. At least, this is considered a normal state. When citizens show incapacity or unwillingness to treat one another as equal interlocutors, such as in the case of 'polarization' (Svolik 2019), this state signifies that democratic politics as a competition is on the verge of collapse. The incapacity and unwillingness to listen to others are considered a deviation because it is assumed that citizens recognize one another as equal interlocutors *in the first place*. This reasoning implies that when there is no such mutual recognition, then, no meaningful conversation takes place. The context of democratic struggle instantiates such a situation. As a result, backlash should be considered a normal feature of democratic politics as a struggle.

However, Lefort's normative account of (modern) democracy, which partly champions social and political struggles against unjust inequalities and hierarchies in a democratic society, pays little attention to backlash and its implications. As I read Lefort, there is a pattern in addressing the issues of listening and backlash is democratic politics. Lefort often appreciates the significance of listening in the political process for making society more pluralistic. For instance,

the French philosopher problematizes the situation in which "individuals and groups remain impotent when it comes to spreading their claims in a real public space and getting them recognised as legitimate," as they demand their voices to be heard by their fellow citizens and the state (2019, 114). However, when Lefort speaks of the importance of uptake in democratic life, he does not treat the refusal to listen, which manifests in backlash, as a theoretical problem but an empirically contingent phenomenon at best. At times, Lefort invokes the pluralist ideal of democracy to assume the likelihood of uptake (1988b, 37). Or, more precisely, the French philosopher excuses himself from dealing with the problem of backlash altogether by stating that *he is not interested in the 'actual application' of the principle of indeterminacy* but in the normative implication of that principle (Lefort 1986a, 259; 2019, 108). So, for Lefort, no matter how "democratic institutions have constantly been used to restrict means of access to power, knowledge and the enjoyment of rights to a minority," this reality fundamentally has *nothing* to do with a democratic society being fundamentally defined in terms of indeterminacy (1988a, 19). By radically separating a theoretical inquiry of democracy from a practice of democracy instead of anchoring a theoretical inquiry on a practice, Lefort makes backlash a matter of practice at best with little theoretical and normative significance attached.

In this regard, Lefort speaks *as if* backlash does not constitute the background condition of democratic struggle and *as if* democratic citizens are willing to and capable of listening to marginalized voices. Consider the following statements. "The democratic apprehension of right implies the affirmation of speech, which […] can assert its authority in the expectation of public confirmation because it appeals to the conscience of the public" (Lefort 1988b, 37). "Provocative speech is the kind that disturbs order, whichever one that might be; it is, par excellence, unexpected speech. In making itself heard, *such speech brings people back to listen to what is not said*, to

listen to everything that, on one side or another, conventional languages cover up" (Lefort 2000, 31, emphasis added). Here, Lefort does not just affirm the new possibility of society's self-improvement with the advent of modern democracy. But, more importantly, the French philosopher also *assumes* the general receptivity of what he calls 'provocative speech,' through which "the web of political society tends to change, or appears more and more susceptible to change" (Lefort 1986a, 262).

And yet, if we consider mutual recognition of citizens as equal interlocutors the minimum condition for listening, Lefort is conflating the 'struggle' model of democratic politics with the 'competition' model. This is because Lefort largely anticipates the receptivity of social and political struggles. The conceptual conflation of democratic struggle and competition radically shifts the status of the agents of democratic struggle from the outsider to the insider of democratic competition. This shift entails significant ramifications when making normative evaluations of the process and outcome of democratic struggles. I will address them in the following chapters. Suffice it to say here that Lefort's lack of systematic attention to the phenomenon of backlash leads him to conflate democratic 'struggle' with democratic 'competition' in such a way as to reduce struggle to competition. As a result, Lefort negates the radical democratic connotation of his account of democratic politics.

Sympathetic readers of Lefort would claim that Lefort is developing a coherent radical democratic conception of democratic politics. They would argue that I am missing Lefort's point by confusing 'ought' and 'is.' Lefort is not saying that democratic citizens listen to the claims against social inequalities but that they *should* listen to those claims. Lefort's goal is to provide his audience with the normative vision of democracy that can serve as the reference point for identifying, criticizing, and correcting the imperfections of actually existing democracies (see

Lefort 2019, 108). Given such conditions of determinacy in practice, Lefort is trying to validate the efforts to mitigate the detrimental impact of the determinate people's identity on the communal life of democratic citizens in the name of democracy. In this vein, it may be argued that Lefort champions democracy's inherent normative potential for change and self-improvement *without discrediting the critical view that particular democracies have their own hegemonic identity/image of the people*, whose existence is a source of enduring exclusions, inequalities, and hierarchies (see Cohen 2013, 127). Therefore, the more productive reading of Lefort would be that, for any society to be called 'democracy' in a meaningful sense, its members *ought to* take up those claims that unsettle the existing order of things. Lefort focuses on the positive effects of democratic struggle because he wants his audience to appreciate that committed democratic citizens *should* counteract the tendency to delimit the boundary of public space by actively engaging in an ongoing conversation with the marginalized rather than resisting their call for change (see also Müller 2007, 60; Mouffe 2013, 7). That is why, I think, Lefort emphasizes the importance or even the necessity of "the awareness of rights" within society for the rights claims to be effective, that is, to be heard (1986a, 260). Consider the following statement.

> "Of course France knows inequalities, but some of these inequalities are judged unbearable as much by the forces of the right as by the forces of the left. Of course poverty and unemployment create new problems here, but there is no doubt that this situation is felt to be intolerable. […] A consciousness of community, however diffuse it may be, makes it difficult, not to say impossible, to accept the fact of the exclusion of a fraction of the population" (Lefort 2019, 115).

So, what is crucial for making the democratic experience meaningful is not just political actions taken on the part of the excluded and the marginalized to challenge the unequal status quo (see

ibid., 109). The above statement shows that Lefort recognizes the significance of the willingness and capacity of citizens to take those marginal claims against inequality seriously in order for democracy to function properly (see also Lefort 1988b, 37; 1986a, 260). Then, even if Lefort does not speak of backlash, we can at least infer Lefort's concern about backlash from his remark on the awareness of rights. Lefort would not have highlighted the importance of listening under the banner of "the awareness of rights" if he had not been aware of a backlash in democratic politics.

I understand that Lefort's analysis is focused on the normative rather than empirical level and that he is solely interested in establishing the normative ground for making critical interventions in practice. I can also concede that Lefort is not entirely oblivious that there will always be, at least to a certain extent, a pushback against democratic struggles. For instance, Lefort notes, "economic, social and cultural rights […] may cease to be guaranteed or even to be recognized; without that causing a fatal lesion" (1988b, 40). And yet, at the end of the day, Lefort wants to affirm the *permanent possibility* of initiating such struggles in a democratic society *despite the counter-tendencies to silence them* (see also Boonen 2019, 185). For Lefort, what is important is that no one can stop democratic struggles from continuously erupting as long as democracy survives. For this reason, I maintain that Lefort is ultimately optimistic about the possibility of uptake, where the marginal voices are taken on their terms and, from there, taken up by the broader democratic citizenry to reconfigure the societal order. In this vein, Lefort adds immediately to the previous statement that "the process is still reversible and the fabric of democracy can still be repaired, not simply because conditions may make it possible to improve the lot of the majority, but *precisely because the conditions that allow protests to be made are still intact*" (Ibid., emphasis added).

Despite a more nuanced reading of Lefort, I am still not satisfied with how Lefort handles

the problem of backlash in the context of ongoing democratic struggle. My complaint is that Lefort constantly avoids dealing with backlash directly by invoking the efficacy of the democratic principle of indeterminacy in bringing that principle to reality. For Lefort, the moral force of the *Déclaration* wins over the political reality of rampant inequalities, hierarchies, and exclusions. Accordingly, Lefort envisions democratic struggle *independently of backlash* at best. From the French philosopher's perspective, there will (always) be a tendency to discredit democratic struggles and even to reverse what those struggles have achieved. However, there is unwavering optimism that citizens can and will make constant efforts to pursue changes in the name of democracy. Here, Lefort's lesson is that we should basically ignore backlash and instead focus on proliferating the efforts to pluralize democracy. Such an answer is hardly satisfying, especially in the current social and political climate where backlash has been and still is a mainstream phenomenon, especially concerning historically marginalized social groups. We learn very little from Lefort about what to make of backlash practically and normatively in relation to (promoting) democratic struggle. An important question is elided from such reasoning: are we to recognize backlashers as participants in democratic decision-making when they are committed not to listen to the victims of social inequalities? I believe this question invites us to navigate the antagonistic dimension of radical democratic citizenship and the role antagonism plays in pluralizing democracy.

Let us leave aside the task of exploring the relationship between counter-antagonism and radical democratic politics for a moment. I will have that discussion mostly in the last two chapters. For now, I want to think about why Lefort ends up trivializing, if not dismissing, the problem of backlash that constitutes an integral part of democratic politics understood as a form of struggle. This question is worth asking because it helps us understand that such a tendency is not an accident.

On the contrary, it is due to Lefort's preferred mode of criticism in which Lefort makes his critical (normative) intervention in the actually existing democracies. This mode of criticism is often called 'internal criticism' (Jaeggi 2018, 179). Internal criticism measures the reality of certain practices and institutions against their ideals. It understands the object of criticism as indicating an incomplete realization of ideals in practice. Internal criticism's desired direction of the change is thus to bring the deviating practices into conformity with the ideals (Ibid., 181).[37]

Internal criticism can be useful since it "[demonstrates] contradictions between norms and practices against the background of such connections and demanding that they be remedied." However, the pitfall is that "the norms that serve as reference points are presupposed and do not first have to be established or questioned as such" (Ibid., 182). The ideal proposed in internal criticism lies beyond and, therefore, is insulated from critical inquiry. For this reason, internal criticism is marked by its inattention to whether the proposed ideal can be meaningfully realized in practice. Such inattention further implies internal criticism's lack of consideration of the real-world constraints that condition the realization of an ideal. These constraints involve "[the arrangements of] actual institutions and its agents and knowers with all their limitations" (Hänel and Müller 2022, 33). This tendency is problematic since it detracts critics' attention from real-world problems and injustices that may seriously undermine the feasibility of implementing an ideal in practice. Being inattentive to actual practices, critics who conduct internal criticism, at best, understate the resilience and seriousness of the problems in realizing an ideal, thereby unwittingly contributing to their reproduction.

In this context, Lefort's tendency to understate the problem of backlash expresses a

[37] One of Jaeggi's examples of internal criticism is precisely an attempt to reduce the gap between the ideal and reality of constitutional democracy (see Jaeggi 2018, 180).

symptom of internal criticism, which insulates an ideal itself from a critical inquiry. By adopting internal criticism, Lefort neither questions the extent to which democratic struggles are heard *against the backdrop of backlash* nor examines what it would take for democratic struggles to make themselves heard *against the backdrop of backlash*. The reason for this negligence is that backlash is considered an (unfortunate) empirically contingent phenomenon at best, which happens to be in the process of fully realizing the pluralist ideal of democracy. Internal criticism focuses on bringing an imperfect reality to an ideal by relying on the normative force of the ideal. It seeks to rectify the problems that create the gap between ideal and practice by relying on the ideal's normative power. Accordingly, what tends to be emphasized in the context of democratic struggle is the willingness and capacity of democratic citizens to listen to marginal voices. What becomes increasingly obscured is the fact that democratic citizens often do not listen.

Against this background, I suggest we abandon internal criticism in devising a normative proposal for pluralizing democracy because it trivializes obstacles and understates their importance in pursuing the goal of pluralizing democracy. Instead, we should reverse the logical order of internal criticism by establishing the actually existing conditions of democracy as a starting point to articulate a normative and practical guideline to promote pluralism (see also Anderson 2010, 6). The purpose is not to lose sight of backlash as a background condition of democratic struggle and to deal with it properly. The latter half of this dissertation is devoted to rediscovering the efforts to envisage democratic struggle realistically in radical democracy. There, I flesh out the political stakes of taking backlash seriously in conceptualizing radical democratic politics. As a preliminary work, the following chapter focuses on interrogating the impact of Lefort's approach on contemporary theories of radical democracy. On that remark, I conclude this chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter sought to illuminate Lefort's ambivalent contribution to radical democracy. Lefort simultaneously advances two different models of democratic politics, as Ingram, among others, convincingly demonstrates. Those models uphold the meaning of conflict as competition and struggle respectively. I wanted to go beyond this interpretation to argue that the French philosopher conflates the two and ultimately champions the 'competition' model of democratic politics. The focus of this chapter was to show how Lefort ultimately reduces his vision of democratic struggle to that of democratic competition. While both models uphold conflict as the normative core of democratic politics, the competition model understands conflict in terms of an ongoing institutionalized debate between democratic citizens who are deemed as equal political agents. Accordingly, democratic competition presupposes political equality and mutuality among the participants in democratic contestation. Through their ongoing participation in the democratic competition, citizens affirm that the people's identity is forever indeterminate. The struggle model of democratic politics takes the meaning of conflict very differently from the competition model. This time, political inequality and the absence of mutuality between democratic citizens constitute the background condition of democratic politics. Agents of democratic struggle participate in the polity's collective decision-making process from the position where they are not recognized as equal interlocutors. Democratic politics is understood as an ongoing process of rendering the determinate identity of the people indeterminate against the backdrop of democracy's determinate social formation.

I applaud Lefort for not limiting the meaning of democratic politics to a competition between equals. Lefort is a radical democrat in the sense that he understands democratic politics as an ongoing struggle against social inequalities. However, I argued in this chapter that his position as a radical democrat is precarious at best because, in Lefort, democratic struggle becomes

indistinguishable from democratic competition. The problem is that Lefort casually anticipates that democratic struggles will be taken seriously and listened to by their recipients in the broader democratic citizenry. In making such anticipation, Lefort treats agents of democratic struggle as (if they are) equal participants in the democratic competition. Democratic struggles emerge against (the backdrop of) political and social inequality, where the agents of democratic struggle are not recognized as equal political actors within the ostensibly 'democratic' public space. Against this background, I argued that if Lefort were to make an analytical distinction between democratic competition and struggle and, as a radical democrat, affirm democratic struggle as *the* modality of democratic politics whose goal is to promote pluralism, the French philosopher would need to appreciate backlash as forming a distinctive background condition of democratic struggle. And then, he would need to incorporate backlash in conceptualizing democratic politics.

Lefort overlooks backlash as an effect of political inequality engendered by the determinate social formation of an actually existing democracy. Because Lefort overlooks backlash as a distinctive background condition of democratic struggle, the French philosopher ends up conflating democratic struggle with democratic competition. The presupposition of political equality in the 'competition' model of democratic politics renders backlash an empirically contingent phenomenon at best. Lefort assumes that the voices of citizens suffering political inequality, once articulated, will likely be heard rather than being detracted, distorted, and dismissed by those who *de facto* enjoy political equality as status in a particular democratic society. I argued that such overconfidence in the democratic citizenry's willingness and capacity to listen to marginal voices partly reflects Lefort's epistemological limit as an ideal theorist. Being an ideal theorist implies that Lefort does not have a conceptual vocabulary to treat backlash as a theoretical problem in his account of democratic politics. In the following chapter, I investigate the traces of

Lefort’s ideal reasoning in the contemporary scholarship of radical democracy.

Chapter Two
Constituent Power and the Paradox of Democratic Empowerment

Introduction

The previous chapter introduced the two models of democratic politics and illustrated the blurring of their analytical boundaries in the writings of Claude Lefort. My reading of Lefort shows that Lefort's legacy on radical democracy is ambivalent. Lefort conceives the role of social and political struggles expansively in democratic politics. This aligns Lefort with radical democracy. However, the French philosopher frames those struggles more or less as a mode of participation that particular groups or individuals take in public decision-making to win power over their competitors. This tendency manifests in Lefort's treatment of backlash as an empirically contingent phenomenon, particularly in democratic struggle. By doing so, Lefort obscures the fact that the agents of democratic struggle are socially (and thus politically) unequal and that their struggles seek to redress those inequalities. The problem here is that Lefort sees the agents of democratic struggle *as if* they were equal interlocutors of collective decision-making or were treated as such by their fellow citizens when they are not. As a result, Lefort frustrates his own radical democratic vision of politics by insinuating the liberal-constitutionalist understanding of democratic politics into this theory. This chapter demonstrates the lingering influence of Lefort on (and beyond) contemporary radical democracy. I claim that democratic theory today, especially the scholarship of radical democracy, often repeats the same logical-theoretical mistake of Lefort that I addressed in the first chapter.

But why Lefort? What is his appeal to contemporary political theorists? Democratic

theorists today often turn to Lefort to advocate democracy's capacity for profound self-transformation. At the same time, Lefort was seen as a thinker who could theoretically justify such a transformation in the name of democracy *without recourse to antagonism* on the part of the challengers of the status quo against the prevailing order. Those who turn to Lefort for the above reasons often develop their visions of democratic politics around the notion of 'constituent power.' They are the group of political theorists whom I will engage with in this chapter. Constituent power stands for the supreme power and authority of the people to constitute and reconstitute the foundational order of a polity (Böckenförde 2017, 171–2). The study of constituent power often revolves around such themes as the identity, agency, and legitimacy of 'the people' as the normative foundation of democratic authority (Nootens 2022, 27).[38] The notion of constituent power is often considered central to radical democracy (Negri 1999; Kalyvas 2008; Wall 2012; Frank 2010; Popp-Madsen 2021, 62–5; 2023, 1183; see also Wenman 2013).[39] This is because the idea of constituent power bears profoundly transgressive and transformative connotations (Chambers 2024, 211). It moves the center of democratic politics from the 'ordinary' acts of legislation and policy-making to the 'extraordinary' moments of shaping and reshaping the terms of public life (e.g., constitution-making) (Vatter 2015, 680; Kalyvas 2000, 352).

However, despite the radical democratic connotation of constituent power, radical democrats had to reclaim the concept of constituent power. They needed to sever its connection with Carl Schmitt's notorious conception of it. Schmitt's interpretation of constituent power

[38] Contemporary students of constituent power often focus on conceptually separating constituent power from 'the people.' In this case, they develop an alternative notion to name the collective agent that wields constituent power, such as the 'multitude' (Hardt and Negri 2004; 2018; Lorey 2019). Those attempts to rename the subject of constituent power criticize the absolutist and totalitarian connotation of the people. Their goal is not to repudiate the idea of constituent power but rather to salvage it. Separating constituent power from the people is considered reinstating the creative and transformative potential inherent in the idea of constituent power.

[39] Wenman upholds constituent power as the central notion of 'agonistic' democracy rather than radical democracy. For the discussion of that distinction and how I employ it in this dissertation, see note 9.

involves affirming the unbound power of a sovereign dictator who is deemed to embody the unitary will of the people (Rubinelli 2020, chapter 3; Kelly 2013, 232). At the more abstract level, the problem boils down to the idea of *antagonism* emanating from Schmitt's conception of constituent power. For Schmitt, exercising constituent power presupposes its agent, the people. Schmitt argues that achieving the homogeneity of the people behind constituent power, in turn, involves designating and eradicating an existential enemy. As I will demonstrate shortly, the contemporary students of constituent power try to salvage constituent power by rejecting Schmitt's idea of the homogeneity of the people as the prerequisite for exercising constituent power. Instead, they either implicitly or explicitly build on Lefort to uphold the indeterminate identity of the people as the normative basis for enacting constituent power by democratic citizens. According to this view, 'the people' is a contestable political claim made from underauthorized, and especially marginalized, positions (Frank 2010; Bernal 2017). In this way, 'the people' is still a driver for radical social transformation, while it poses no threat to pluralism since it is a ubiquitous claim to be contested.

This chapter critically examines this new approach to constituent power. I argue that the contemporary students of constituent power too swiftly connect the universal capacity of democratic citizens to make their claims in the people's name with the possibility of radical social transformation. The main argument of this new account is that all and not some members of a democratic polity should be able to make 'the people' claims and contest the authoritative voice of the people. I claim that this argument ultimately obscures the fact that not all claims stand an equal chance to become dominant, at least partly due to the unequal social positions of the speakers in a given status quo. This issue is theoretically crucial for the students of constituent power working in the radical democratic tradition. These scholars often want to have constituent power

as a concept to empower the marginalized and redress social inequalities that exist at the current moment. If so, they should understand that social inequalities form the background condition of the politics of constituent power. However, affirming the universal capacity of citizens to contest the voice of *the* people neglects how social inequalities affect this process.

I name this issue 'the paradox of democratic empowerment.' The paradox is this: radical democratic theorists of constituent power posit that the people's identity is indeterminate in democracies *as their starting point* for formulating constituent power as a concept for empowering the marginalized. They do so by championing the universal and permanent possibilities of enacting constituent power by citizens in the face of the closure of democratic public space. To assume the indeterminate identity of the people implies that every claim to the people *at least stands a chance* to be heard by the broader society. However, this assumption contradicts the view that democracies at any given moment and space are already and always grounded on the determinate identity of a particular people and that this situation generates the uneven distribution of political intelligibility between different groups of citizens. What is neglected is the fact that *some voices are less likely to stand a chance to be taken up as a potentially legitimate claim than others* by democratic citizens. Here, we witness the same problem that we have seen in Lefort. The supporters of constituent power end up conflating democratic struggle with democratic competition by largely ignoring backlash as the concrete expression of antagonism emanating from the prevailing order and instead assuming the general receptivity of political claims made from the margins of society. As a result, the theoretical postulation that is meant to facilitate the empowerment of the marginalized (i.e., the indeterminate identity of the people) diverts the theorists' attention from backlash as a source of continued disempowerment of the marginalized.

I end this chapter by asserting that we need to consider counter-antagonism against

backlash as a key element of enacting constituent power to circumvent the paradox of democratic empowerment. This shift is especially salient for radical democratic thinkers. They would recognize that the background condition for exercising constituent power is fundamentally unequal. If this is the case, they should uphold the specific antagonism directed towards backlash forces in society as an integral part of their conceptions of constituent power. Only in this way can they retain constituent power's radical democratic vision. However, lacking a conceptual vocabulary to capture (the theoretical import of) backlash in the first place, the existing accounts of constituent power, including the radical democratic ones, often fail to underscore the antagonistic dimension of constituent power. Overall, this chapter provides a critical assessment of the existing studies of constituent power. This is an initial step towards introducing and examining the attempts to overcome the problems identified in this chapter. The following chapters will engage with those attempts, especially the works of Ernesto Laclau.

Criticizing Constituent Power: An Anti-Democratic Concept

Constituent power stands for the supreme power and authority of the people to constitute and reconstitute the foundational order of a polity (Böckenförde 2017, 171–2). Supporters of constituent power often understand this concept as having a normative force to countervail the increasing political inequality in constitutional democracies. From this point of view, constituent power that has initially legitimated the constitutional order of a polity neither disappears nor is absorbed by the order it created after the founding moments (Arato 2016; Wall 2015); on the contrary, constituent power "remains both below and next to the constituted powers as a force of innovation, alterity, contingency, and, most important, as a democratic presence" (Kalyvas 2018, 108; see also Thornhill 2012, 390). The survival of constituent power is attributed to the fact that "the constituted authorities [that it has initially legitimated] inevitably retain an extensive,

discretionary authority to determine the best interests of the group," under which the power of the ordinary people becomes susceptible to "institutionalized co-optation" (Loughlin 2014, 231–3). In other words, there persists a possibility or tendency for constituted power to leave out ordinary citizens from public decision-making because constituted power is a representative entity that supposedly makes public decisions on behalf of and for the people.

Against this background, constituent power "imbues it[self] with ideas of change, accountability, and internal critique" by informing and conditioning the constituted power's acts of government (Chalmers 2007, 292). 'Popular' (as opposed to 'state') sovereignty is then identified with constituent power, whose act of (re-)establishing public authorities is always superior to the act of commanding by the constituted authorities, which is implied in the notion of 'state' sovereignty (Kalyvas 2016, 62). Therefore, constituent power is best understood as a disruptive force that preserves the integrity of constitutional democracy by interrupting the operations of the instituted powers that have turned against the normative ideals of political equality and self-government they are supposed to uphold (see Colón-Ríos 2016, 898; Kalyvas 2016, 70). An exercise of constituent power refers back to a prior moment of foundation (Wenman 2013, 92; Del Lucchese 2017, 8), reaffirming the role of the people as a founder rather than a ruler (Kalyvas 2016, 67).

However, critics of constituent power worry that the supporters' valorization of the people as an agent for revitalizing democracy would eventually undermine the quality of democratic life of citizens. The reason is that constituent power presumes the determinate identity of the people as its agent, which goes against the pluralist ethos of constitutional democracy. Critics often perceive the people behind constituent power as a sociological category (see Urbinati 2019, 78). For them, it signifies a pre-legal and organic entity such as the nation (Schmitt 2008, 127). From

this perspective, those who act in concert under the banner of the people to dissolve and reconstitute the established authority are a mere subsection of society. They are the ones who threaten the stability of a constitutional democratic order by claiming that they alone represent the authentic people (Müller 2016; 2017). Hence, for critics, constituent power is an anti-democratic concept with a democratic pretense: it weaponizes the rhetoric of equality against the constitutional democratic order in which its members are the bearers of equal political rights (Scheuerman 2019).

The fundamental theoretical assumption underlying this critical view is that a constitutional democracy is founded on the mutual (hypothetical) consent of those who come together to form a political community (Dyzenhaus 2007, 138). From this perspective, the collective act of consent generates the democratic legitimacy of the constitutional order in which all members of the polity, at least theoretically, appear as free and equal (see Arendt 1977; Habermas 2001). Modern constitutional democracy is built on the promise among its members that the position of the people will forever remain open and indeterminate. Liberal-constitutionalist critics of constituent power often perceive that animating an abstract idea of the people violates this very promise. For them, it is equivalent to closing the empty place of the people, which is meant to be preserved permanently as open.

These critics often express their complaints about the contemporary uses of constituent power by referring to the earlier influential formulation of the concept by Carl Schmitt (Scheuerman 2019, 51). As many commentators have pointed out (Dyzenhaus 2012, 237–8; Vinx 2013, 108–9; Duke 2020, 356), Schmitt understands the people as the bearer and the agent of constituent power in terms of a substantive, homogenous ‘nation’ with the unitary will (Schmitt 2000, 11; 2008, 101; cf. Mouffe 2000, 40). Schmitt reduces the question of the legitimacy of legal and political institutions to the substantive identity of a political community as a whole. In doing

so, he justifies presidential dictatorship in democratic terms, where the political unity of the nation is deemed to be represented in the figure and actions of a leader (Rubinelli 2020, chapter 3). Crucial to Schmitt's formulation of the people as a unitary entity is the idea of antagonism. Antagonism denotes the 'friend-enemy' antithesis. As I will illustrate shortly, antagonism for Schmitt is the logic behind achieving the unity of the people. The people achieves a sense of unity and identity to act as a whole only through the confrontation against enemies that threaten the integrity of the people (Vinx 2013, 110).

Schmitt articulates constituent power in the context of constitution-making to indicate the ultimate foundation of power and legitimacy. According to Schmitt (2008, 76), while the constitution is the foundation of a polity's legal and political order, its normative authority "[does] not originate on its own." Instead, it is validated "by virtue of the existing political will of that which establishes [the constitution]." Schmitt subsequently claims that the bearer of this will is 'the people' (Ibid., 77–8, 140). Schmitt understands the people as a collective entity that resides outside and above constitutional order. Its role is to create a constitution through "the act of the fundamental political decision." According to Schmitt, what gives the people the constitution-making capacity is its internal unity. This notion of internal unity is considered a unique ontological basis of the people to orient itself toward actively pursuing the survival of a political community (Vinx 2019). It renders the people an ontologically distinct entity from a multitude of individuals (Schmitt 2008, 127).

To appreciate the meaning and implication of the unity of the people, we need to examine Schmitt's peculiar use of 'the nation.' Schmitt uses "the people" and "the nation" interchangeably, which indicates, in this case, more than a group in which members belong together based on their cultural or ethnic commonalities. Beyond that, a nation signifies "a bonding of men existing

politically" (Ibid.).[40] This notion of the nation implies that the unity of the people is not naturally given but is to be devised artificially. Forming the unity of the people is an existential imperative for members of a democratic political community. This is because the existence of the polity hinges on their collective authorization of the constitutional order under the banner of the people. The people's capacity to make decisions, in turn, emanates from the ontological condition of unity. According to Schmitt, this unity needs to be achieved outside of and prior to the constitutional order as that order's prerequisite. Schmitt continues that to achieve the unification of the people, members of the polity must go beyond their natural differences in status and become equal *by identifying themselves against those who are deemed outsiders* (Ibid., 258). Notably, for Schmitt (2007, 33), drawing a boundary for identifying the people goes so far as to conceive the (imagined) outsiders as enemies that pose an existential threat to the political community. Schmitt radicalizes the inside-outside distinction for identity construction. For Schmitt, the people's identity is achieved through the extreme antagonism found in the friend and enemy grouping that he considers the essence of 'the political.' Central to this process is the "elimination or eradication of heterogeneity," which leads to the internal homogeneity of the people. Schmitt considers this homogeneity to signify equality as the principle of democracy (2000, 9).

Theorists who are critical of constituent power ground their criticism upon Schmitt's construal of equality in terms of homogeneity. For critics, this move renders the notion of constituent power antithetical to the pluralistic ethos of modern constitutional democracy (Specter 2013, 466; Scheuerman 2019, 52). For Schmitt, since the substantive identity of the people underlies the polity's foundational legal and political order, the questions of who the people is and

[40] It is important to note that substantive commonalities such as common ethnicity, history, language, or religion are still relevant to the formation of 'the nation' for Schmitt as they serve as a 'common medium' to establish the political identity of the people (Rasch 2013, 321).

what it wants are considered already answered or agreed upon as long as the order of the polity exists. The identity and desire of the people are only to be found again for citizens to exercise constituent power as a collective (ultimately though a figure of a leader). In other words, enacting constituent power requires members of a particular democratic polity to collectively wield "political consciousness" to reaffirm the people's "substantive democratic similarity" (Schmitt 2008, 275). Again, for Schmitt, this process of reaffirming the homogeneity of the people involves negating the deluding voices of "enemies" that undermine the homogeneity of the people (Schmitt 2000, 27). Accordingly, as critics see it, constituent power implies the preclusion of the possibility of conflict among citizens of democracy in forming the so-called popular will. It negates the idea that all citizens, despite their differences and disagreements, are equally subject to the law laid out in the people's name. Thus, the notion of constituent power frustrates citizens' equal opportunities to participate and contribute meaningfully to the polity's public decision-making processes (see Habermas 1996, 486; Specter 2013, 437). In this context, critics often suggest that preserving the pluralistic vision of democracy requires dissolving the identity of the people entirely by relocating the authority that establishes (the legitimacy of) the democratic constitutional order within this very order (Dyzenhaus 2012, 233). This entails assuming the legal norms as the basis of the political order to facilitate citizens' equal political participation (Müller 2007, 89; Scheuerman 2019, 53).

However, contemporary supporters of constituent power are often not content with abandoning or nominalizing the idea of the people as the bearer of constituent power. According to Loughlin (2014, 223, 227), the critics of constituent power often "[avoid] saying anything about the political conditions under which constitutional authority is established" while positing constitutional legality, which is considered the constitutional order's source of authority, to be

somehow self-generated. An attempt to tackle this issue of self-generation of law without recourse to the agent of constituent power inevitably runs into the problem of infinite regress. Laws that authorize have to presuppose higher laws above them from which they derive authority, and so on (Lindahl 2007, 11). Constituent power signifies where everything begins and thus is the theoretical means to terminate the infinite regress. Moreover, contemporary supporters of constituent power maintain that the concept needs to be preserved not just for its theoretical utility but because of the normative value it conveys regarding the democratic life of citizens. From this point of view, the concept of constituent power first and foremost embodies "the fundamental democratic principle of self-government and self-determination" (Kalyvas 2005, 238). For contemporary students of constituent power, homogeneity is not the defining feature of constituent power (Arato 2016; see also Negri 1999, 11). On the contrary, it characterizes an abuse of the concept at best (Scholtes 2021, 551; Kalyvas 2018, 108). In the following section, I illustrate how contemporary supporters of constituent power seek to alter Schmitt's version of constituent power in a pluralistic fashion. I highlight that, in doing so, these scholars either implicitly or explicitly turn to Claude Lefort and posit the indeterminate identity of the people as the precondition for enacting democratic constituent power.

Saving Constituent Power: Toward a New Paradigm of the People

While contemporary students of constituent power come from different politico-ideological backgrounds and disagree on many things, they share a common imperative to rethink the concept of constituent power beyond the Schmittian framework. Much of their theoretical endeavor has been put into reformulating constituent power as a concept compatible with the pluralistic vision of democracy (Kalyvas 2008; Arato 2016; Frank 2010). From this perspective, constituent power does not have to presuppose a homogenous, determinate people as its subject.

On the contrary, the exercise of constituent power relies fundamentally on the condition in which no social or political force represents the people in democratic societies. I call this condition the people's indeterminacy condition. Enacting constituent power is considered a permanent possibility in democratic polities because the questions of who the people is and what it wants are and ought to be forever open to question. For one, the people's indeterminacy condition renders all (and not some particular) members of the newly established democracies to be the co-author of their own collective life as a community in participating in the exercise of constituent power (Arato 2016). At the same time, this same condition, which forms the foundation of the political community, underlies the reemergence of constituent power, whose goal is to keep the people's identity questions permanently open (Loughlin 2013, 234).

Claude Lefort serves as a useful reference point for contemporary students of constituent power. Lefort does not dismiss the people as a dangerous fiction insinuating totalitarian violence against minorities. In his theory of modern democracy, the French philosopher offers an innovative way to affirm the political import of the people as a democratic polity's foundational source of legitimacy. In fact, as we have seen in the previous chapter, Lefort submits democracy and totalitarianism as the opposing regime types. For Lefort, their fundamental difference lies in whether the regime upholds the identity of the people being indeterminate (democracy) or determinate (totalitarianism). From this perspective, it is a mistake to consider constitutional identity to be in and of itself exclusionary and oppressive (see especially Lefort 1986a, 245–51; 2019, 106). On the contrary, the identity of the people appears exclusionary and oppressive only by representing a particular group of individuals within society as the *only* people (see, for example, Müller 2007, 88). At this point, the difference between Schmitt and Lefort becomes clear regarding the meaning of democracy (Arato 2016, 271–81). Schmitt associates the determinate identity of

the people with democracy, whereas Lefort takes it to signify the degeneration of democracy into totalitarianism (van Asseldonk 2022, 377). For Lefort, substantiating the identity of the people signifies the perversion of constitutional identity. In this way, Lefort provides contemporary students of constituent power with a theoretical and normative justification to hold onto the language of 'the people' and employ it to promote the pluralist vision of democracy.

This section elaborates the imprint of Lefort on the recent 'democratic' articulations of constituent power. It offers a brief review of the existing literature for examining its shortcomings in the following section. Here, I highlight a particular similarity in different accounts of democratic constituent power. They posit the indeterminate identity of the people as the normative basis for justifying the *universal* capacity of democratic citizens to initiate and promote the process of enacting constituent power. Such a premise allows contemporary students of constituent power to uphold constituent power as a concept that signifies the democratic beginning (Arato 2016; 2017; Ackerman 2019), renewal (Kalyvas 2008; 2018; Loughlin 2014; Colón-Ríos 2020), and innovation (Frank 2010; 2021; Grant 2020; van Asseldonk 2022).

The first figure to examine is Andreas Kalyvas, who stands out as one of the most influential thinkers of constituent power today. Kalyvas draws significantly on Schmitt to develop his own "substantive model of radical democracy" (Kalyvas 2008, 81). Kalyvas does not indulge in Schmitt's normatively ambiguous position regarding liberalism or "parliamentarism" as an impediment for democratic self-rule in the modern world (Schmitt 2000). Kalyvas' revisionist reading of Schmitt revolves around the notion of constituent power that Schmitt develops in his magnum opus *Constitutional Theory* among other writings. There, Kalyvas rediscovers and valorizes a productive agency of the people as the key feature of constituent power (2008, 95). According to Kalyvas (Ibid.), Schmitt provides a theory of 'popular' constituent power that allows

us to appreciate the meaning of popular sovereignty in terms of "the concrete manifestation of collective autonomy and popular mobilization during those rare periods of political innovation and original constitutional making" (97). From this perspective, an exercise of constituent power instantiates a meaningful realization of the democratic ideals of "collective self-determination and self-government" (Ibid., 100). The reason is that constituent power acts against the "imperialistic tendencies" inherent in modern (constitutional) democracies to reduce the meaning of popular sovereignty entirely to the ordinary functioning of democratic institutions. For Kalyvas, these institutions are susceptible to the cooptation by organized interests and hierarchically run by political and state bureaucratic elites (Ibid., 137, 179). In this context, Kalyvas submits that the constituent power of the people, which is enacted "not within the constitutional order, but at its edges, next to it, in extra-institutional and self-organized political spaces," indicates "the [popular] sovereign's resoluteness to struggle for its survival against its eventual fossilization" (Ibid., 176, 177).

Kalyvas wants to uphold the people's irrepressible creative and innovative power as the core feature of constituent power. However, Kalyvas is also aware of the normative baggage that Schmitt's formulation of constituent power entails. One of them, Kalyvas identifies, is "[Schmitt's] failure to appreciate the political importance of public debate for the process of democratic will formation" (Ibid., 86). Especially problematic is the notion of 'acclamation' that Schmitt considers the most authentic expression of popular will (Vinx 2021, 174). Schmitt argues that the people's collective will is ultimately expressed through political leadership, where the leader acts at their discretion on behalf of the people (Schmitt 2008, 264). Acclamation is a collective and public act of agreeing or disagreeing with a leader or a proposition, whose act turns anonymous multitudes into the people as a unitary political entity (Ibid., 272). For Kalyvas, Schmitt's notion of

acclamation contradicts his valorization of constituent power as a concept to capture spontaneous and dynamic moments of democratic politics. This is because acclamation "represents a form of institutionalized, vertically oriented politics" (Kalyvas 2008, 183). In what follows, I will show the close connection between Kalyvas and Lefort. I argue that this connection exists despite the lack of Kalyvas' acknowledgment of Lefort's influence on his account of constituent power. In seeking to redress the contradiction that he finds in Schmitt, Kalyvas, like Lefort, redefines the identity of people as the agent of constituent power in terms of *indeterminacy*. That is, the indeterminate character of the people serves as the normative basis for upholding the enactment of constituent power as a permanent possibility/opportunity open for all who are in the position of being governed.

On the surface, Lefort's presence in Kalyvas' writings appears sporadic and marginal at best. Kalyvas does not refer to Lefort, even when he invokes Lefort's central thesis about modern democracy being marked by indeterminacy (see Kalyvas 2018, 109). Instead, Kalyvas employs the French philosopher in the context of introducing the bifurcation of the meaning of sovereignty with the advent of modern democracy *to describe the position he wants to discredit* (2016, 52). According to Kalyvas (Ibid.), constituent power underlies 'popular' sovereignty, and it challenges the paradigm of 'regal' sovereignty. The paradigm of regal sovereignty understands the meaning of sovereignty in terms of unlimited power to command. Kalyvas' main argument is that "the rediscovery of democracy cannot and must not be understood as a mere transfer of sovereignty from the king to the people." On the contrary, the advent of modern democracy comes with "a very different experience of sovereignty," whose core feature is the power to constitute rather than command. Notably, Kalyvas refers to Lefort as a thinker who highlights the continuity and survival of regal sovereignty. Kalyvas notes, in this view, "as an outcome of the political transfer of regal

sovereignty, democracy consists of those theological and transcendent residues that were constitutive of and foundational to the powers of the kings and their divine right to rule" (Ibid., 51; cf. Arato 2016, 275–81). While representing Lefort as a thinker who interprets the advent of modern democracy as a mere transfer of the subject of sovereignty, Kalyvas seeks to promote an alternative understanding of modern democracy as a regime symbolizing a radical rupture in the continuity of history.

However, if I am correct about Lefort's understanding of modern democracy in the previous chapter, Kalyvas' interpretation of Lefort's view on popular sovereignty is largely misleading. To recap, Lefort defines modern democracy in terms of both continuity *and* discontinuity of the *ancien régime* characterized by social distinctions and hierarchies (see also Arato 2016, 276). From this nuanced point of view, while the political community's ultimate authority moved from the king to the people with the rise of modern democracy, this process entailed a radical shift in the ontological nature of the sovereign entity. The universal reference of power still exists, but its place has become empty and indeterminate.

Like Lefort, Kalyvas wants to have the identity of the people as the agent of constituent power indeterminate. To do so, Kalyvas sets out to free the concept of constituent power from "political theology," which involves reinstating political autonomy, creativity, and equal participation as fundamental characteristics of constituent power (Kalyvas 2018, 105–8). The central tenet of political theology lies in predesignating and ultimately fixing the identity of the people (see Kalyvas 2008, 120–2). Accordingly, Kalyvas maintains that "[t]he subject of the constituent power is not prior or external to the act of constituting. Rather, it constitutes itself as it constitutes for itself" (2018, 106). Kalyvas further argues that the formation of the people behind constituent power is subject to radical contingency, whose process "is seen as an unexpected,

spontaneous instituting occurrence" (2008, 210). The view that the identity of the people can only be formed in and through action implies that a constitutional identity is fundamentally open and indeterminate. Because the people's identity in a democratic society is open and indeterminate, the identity of the people is best understood as a *domain* of competition. In this domain, different social and political forces frame themselves as speaking in the people's authoritative voice. The enactment of constituent power has its own politics since it can go toward either a progressive or regressive direction (see Kalyvas 2019a, 386). Against this background, Kalyvas understands that democracy is "characterized by a heterogeneity of manifestations" and that its "[f]ounding moments are always immersed in indeterminacy (2019b, 593; 2008, 234). From my perspective, what fundamentally enables such an understanding is the Lefortian view that the identity of a democratic people is indeterminate *in the first place*. The indeterminacy condition forms the discursive terrain on which the politics of constituent power takes place.

However, not all contemporary students of constituent power believe that the idea of sovereignty is and should be an essential element of constituent power. On the contrary, others seek to discard sovereignty altogether from the concept of constituent power because they think that, despite the aspiration to realize the democratic ideal of collective self-government, the sovereign paradigm of constituent power is ultimately undemocratic (Hardt and Negri 2018, 32–7). As Miguel Vatter aptly points out (2020, 2), such a tendency reflects the scholarly efforts to "overcome the tension between democracy and legitimacy." According to Vatter (Ibid., 3), this tension is exemplified in Schmitt: Schmitt attempts to resolve the question of popular legitimacy that underlies democratic ruling by invoking the idea of the 'sovereign' people. However, Schmitt's notion of the people is based on the monarchical principle of absolute sovereignty manifested in the embodied form of representation. Vatter captures *via* Schmitt that the invocation

of the sovereign people generates political inequality within the democratic citizenry in the form of suppressing oppositions and disagreements in the name of the people. Consequently, Schmitt's solution to the legitimacy problem entails another problem of democracy. While echoing Vatter's concern, some students of constituent power seek to "[develop] forms of political representation that unify a people *without or beyond sovereignty*" (Ibid., emphasis added). Andrew Arato is among the most prominent figures of this 'anti-sovereignist turn' of constituent power, who explicitly designates Lefort as the philosophical foundation of his conception of constituent power.

The profound influence of Lefort on Arato is hard to neglect. Unlike Kalyvas, Arato explicitly refers to Lefort and takes the people's indeterminacy condition as the starting point for articulating his vision of constituent power. Constituent power marks the democratic beginning for Arato (Arato 2013). Arato understands constituent power in terms of institutionalizing the people's indeterminacy condition at the inauguration of modern (constitutional) democracy (2016, 280). In a way, Arato counterposes constituent power with the people. Arato defines constituent power as a notion that countervails *the revolutionary tendency in society to incarnate the people*. According to Arato (2017, 265), the question of constituent power emerges at the outset of political modernity in the face of society's loss of its foundation. This situation, in turn, results from the revolutionary disintegration of (the legitimacy and legality of) the pre-existing social and political order based on hierarchy. The existential imperative for the newly emerged democratic society now becomes supplying itself with the new foundation ('the people') of legitimacy (see also Duong 2020, chapter 1). However, the challenge is to achieve this goal without frustrating the universal egalitarian vision of society (Arato 2016, 279). This context gives rise to a theoretical conundrum of how to justify the constituent power of the people as the founding force of the new democratic order given that it has "a profoundly authoritarian meaning" (based on Schmitt's

influential formulation of the concept). To resolve this question, Arato suggests the 'post-sovereign' conception of constituent power. The underlying idea is to abandon the 'revolutionary imaginary' from the concept of constituent power (2013, 115).

Arato promotes his vision of constituent power under the post-sovereign paradigm of constitution-making. For Arato (2016, 280), the constitution, or more precisely, the democratic constitution, is the mechanism that forms "implicit consensus on legitimacy" on which conflicts can be institutionalized. What makes the constitution-making process 'post-sovereign' is the rejection of the idea that any single agency, institution, or individual can embody and represent popular sovereignty ('the people'), in whose name the constitution is enacted and revised (Arato 2017, 35). According to Arato (2013, 119), the 'sovereign' constitution-making paradigm brings about the vicious cycle of "the suppression of one set of claims [of 'the people'] by the other." The root of such a vicious cycle is the sovereign paradigm's inability to realize the principle of mutuality in practice. The sovereign paradigm of constituent power does not seek to devise open, diversified, and legally-bound participation channels for constitution-making. Instead, it calls upon a single, legally-unbound sovereign entity (e.g., the constituent assembly). This entity frustrates mutuality among the (would-be) members of the polity by embodying 'the people.' The embodiment of the people takes the concrete shape of making and imposing the constitution on society through the majoritarian means of legitimation (Arato 2016, chapter 3).

Under the sovereign paradigm of constitution-making, the sovereign entity establishes itself as superior to the rest of society. It also assumes its supporters within society to have an elevated political standing *vis-à-vis* their fellow citizens. Arato believes that the process of making a democratic constitution (i.e., an exercise of constituent power) must be democratic because democracy feeds upon itself *ab initio*. The sovereign paradigm cannot resolve democracy's

legitimacy problem by negating the egalitarian vision of democracy in the context of the plurality of opinions regarding how to organize communal life. For this reason, Arato claims that the democratic constitution-making process must "reflexively thematiz[e] its own legitimacy problems […] relying on multiple values: plurality, inclusion, publicity, fairness, compromise, generosity, and legality" (Arato 2016, 11). In this way, the constitution-making process is conceived as all members of the polity are having, at least symbolically, a type of conversation in which they participate as equals. Arato champions Lefort as a precursor of the 'democratic,' post-sovereign paradigm of constituent power (2013, 119). For Arato, the idea of the people's indeterminate identity underlies the post-sovereign constitution-making process. The indeterminate identity of the people implies that everyone is (and thus no one is) the sovereign in the first place. This idea keeps the constitution-making process going despite conflicts and disagreements. Consequently, for Arato, Lefort provides a new normative basis for reconceptualizing constituent power outside and without sovereignty.

Some students of constituent power seek to expand the instances of constituent power beyond the initial foundation of democracies (Frank 2010; Vieira 2015; Celikates 2019; Bashkina 2020). For these theorists, constituent power is useful to demonstrate democracy's innate potential for self-innovation. Jason Frank is among the most influential thinkers in this strand of thought. While Frank often distinguishes his position from Lefort's, I argue that Frank's version of constituent power still resonates with the competition model of democratic politics that we can find in Lefort.

Contrary to Arato, who limits the instances of constituent power to the revolutionary context, Frank employs constituent power in the post-revolutionary context (2010, 62–3; 2021, 19). In doing so, Frank tries to capture the resurging moments in which "the underauthorized—

imposters, radicals, self-created entities—seize the mantle of authorization, changing the inherited rules of authorization in the process" (2010, 8). From Frank's perspective (Ibid.), constituent power is bound to reemerge even after the democratic beginning because the constituted order, which comes into existence by the initial enactment of constituent power, is never wholly legitimate. In other words, for Frank, there is never a truly consensual and unifying moment through which the newly established institutional order comes to fully represent the people's will (see also Colón-Ríos 2012, 115–6; Bernal 2017). Such a democratic deficit of the constituted order imprinted in the founding process of democracies becomes the source of what Frank calls the 'double inscription' of the people. According to Frank (2010, 7), the people is "at once as a source of public authority and a source of resistance to public authority" (Frank 2010, 7). Frank's employment of constituent power resonates more with the 'resistance' dimension of the people. This possibility of resisting public authority emerges from the gap "between those who are not recognized within an established field of political representation and the entirety of that field" (Ibid., 99; see Frank 2021, 188). Enacting constituent power negates the false idea of the unified people underlying the constituted order and, in doing so, *reaffirms* the idea that the people ought to be "a site of perpetual contestation" (see also Näsström 2007, 644).

I have intentionally described Frank's version of constituent power as "reaffirming" the people's indeterminacy condition. This is to highlight that the enactment of constituent power for Frank presupposes such a condition in the first place. I would argue that this view contradicts Frank's own critical understanding of a democratic society as based on the determinate social formation, or the false unification of the people. The upshot of my argument is that Frank's version of democratic constituent power is ultimately based on the competition (as opposed to the struggle) model of democratic politics. In my view, Frank unwittingly makes this move despite his efforts

to articulate democratic struggle under the banner of constituent power (see, for example, Frank 2010, chapter 7). Let me elaborate.

Frank understands the enactment of constituent power to signify the instances in which *claims* are made in the name of the people "without fully authorized grounds," whose validity "can only be retrospectively vindicated" (Ibid., 32). These instances expose "the indeterminacy of any […] authoritative claim [to represent the people]" (Ibid., 85). The underlying assumption here is that (the identity of) the people is "what is yet to come" (Ibid., 22). This assumption implies that underauthorized claims can and will *always* emerge, challenge, and potentially achieve the status of the authoritative voice of the people from various underauthorized positions *because the people's identity is fundamentally indeterminate*. If democracies had overcome the people's indeterminacy condition (and thus achieved a definitive understanding of the people, as in Schmitt's vision of modern democracy), such claims would have never emerged in the first place.

In his most recent work, Frank distinguishes his position from that of Lefort, but, in my view, the basis of this distinction is inconsequential. The distinction Frank draws between himself and Lefort exaggerates a superficial difference between Frank and other contemporary students of constituent power whom I have reviewed earlier in this section. Their fundamental commonality is that they all establish their versions of democratic constituent power based on the competition model of democratic politics advanced by Lefort. Frank criticizes Lefort for "mov[ing] too quickly from the aesthetic-political problem of manifestation to the theological problem of incarnation" (2021, 38). Under the label of 'popular manifestation,' Frank sets his purportedly unique agenda to valorize the people as "a collective actor pursuing a common set of goals" (Ibid., 25). Frank argues that Lefort considers those instances of popular manifestation merely as "undermining the political maturity and civil moderation of accepting democratic indeterminacy" by incarnating the

unified people, which is equivalent to closing the people's determinacy condition (Ibid., 38). Accordingly, in Frank's view, Lefort reduces the people to an abstract legal entity and fails to appreciate the exercise of 'popular' constituent power through the "acts of civil disobedience, street assemblies, mass protests, insurgencies, and revolutionary upheaval" (Ibid., 19).

Frank is right to capture Lefort's concern about the popular 'incarnation' of the people. However, Frank does not fully appreciate that such worry reflects Lefort's commitment toward conserving the indeterminate identity of the people as the essential character of (modern) democracy. This is a commitment that Frank (at least according to my reading of him) shares with Lefort. Frank draws a too rigid distinction between the institutional (disembodied) and extra-institutional (embodied) forms of democratic participation *when they can be considered complementary* for conserving the people's indeterminacy condition (see, for example, ibid., 242). To elaborate, Lefort would not disagree with popular manifestation, which "explicitly break[s] from the authorized procedures or norms for representing voice" (Frank 2010, 210). This is clearly shown in the French philosopher's valorization of civil society as a key democratic venue. Lefort notes (2019, 109), the channels of political representation include "unions and various other associations, minorities organized within particular communities, and even […] social movements." Hence, "institutionlised representation is situated within an ensemble of potentially very rich representative forms and […] in the absence of the latter the former risks being rendered ineffective" (Ibid., 110). Lefort would be critical of popular manifestation *only when those instances of popular manifestation involve an exclusive and exclusionary invocation of the people*. What matters is less of the form of participation than the symbolic implication of it. That is why Müller, who adopts Lefort's competition model of democratic politics, refers to Frank to validate extra-institutional invocations of the people in the name of democracy. The reason is that those instances "[seek] to

redeem previously unrealized moral claims contained in the constitution, or radically changed existing forms of political pluralism" (Müller 2017, 602). Consequently, Frank's version of democratic constituent power is based on Lefort's normative paradigm of (modern) democracy. In Frank, the democratic people's identity is deemed indeterminate insofar as all members can "contest every claim to sovereign authority over them" (Bilakovics 2013, 147).

To sum up, the contemporary scholarship of constituent power seeks to reconcile constituent power with pluralism. The survey conducted in this section shows the general tendency among scholars to adopt, *either intentionally or not*, Lefort's normative understanding of democratic politics as competition to achieve such a goal. However, does this move meaningfully render constituent power into a democratic concept? The following section navigates an oft-neglected downside of reformulating constituent power based on the competition model of democratic politics. In doing so, I introduce and explain what I call the paradox of democratic empowerment in the contemporary scholarship of constituent power.

The Pluralist Turn in the Studies of Constituent Power: A Critical Assessment

Contemporary students of constituent power often maintain that 'pluralizing' the notion of constituent power can make this concept champion the ideal of political autonomy. By 'pluralizing,' I mean that those thinkers of constituent power often postulate the indeterminate identity of the people to advocate the concept of constituent power. This theoretical postulation allows scholars to conceptualize 'the people' as a political claim that democratic citizens can make ubiquitously without qualifications. For some theorists, this is how the process of enacting constituent power begins and continues over time. Political autonomy of citizens is central to this renewed conception of constituent power. Among other things, constituent power involves continuously challenging the dominant identity of the people. This idea makes the participation of the citizens who are

marginalized/un(der)represented in the given status quo especially meaningful, or so it is argued.

This section critically evaluates the pluralist turn in the scholarship of constituent power. It does so by offering immanent critique. The question I raise is the following. Does the pluralist conception of constituent power render the concept of constituent power normatively useful to achieve the ideal of democratic self-rule, especially concerning the marginalized, as it often proclaims it does? I argue that it does not. Marginalization in politics often reflects marginalization in society based on social inequalities. I claim that contemporary students of constituent power obfuscate this connection and ignore social inequalities by postulating open possibilities for all citizens to initiate the process of enacting constituent power. In my view, this theoretical postulation downplays the fact that different groups of citizens have different capacities to contest the authoritative voice of the people. More to the point, the actual process of contesting the voice of the people may leave out certain groups from this process because they are the victims of social inequalities. In this regard, the notion of the indeterminate identity of the people is problematic because it makes those suffering and benefiting from social inequalities appear as equals *when they are not*. It also renders the claims against social inequalities as one of the plural claims contesting the people's authoritative voice *when the quality of democracy hinges on the uptake of those claims*. I further argue that the issue of failing to capture social inequalities is critical for those who support the pluralist conception of constituent power from a radical democratic perspective. This is because radical democracy makes a sustained critique of social inequalities.

From my perspective, radical democratic theorists of constituent power should recognize that democratic citizens' universal capacity to lay claims to the people cannot mean an equal chance for such claims to be *taken up* by a broader public as the potentially authoritative voice of the people. This is because radical democrats would know that some contesting claims of the

people are enunciated from epistemically disadvantaged positions against the backdrop of social inequalities. However, the radical democratic accounts of constituent power rarely discuss how social inequality is often the source of apathy, resentment, and hostility of democratic citizens against the claim-making activities of some marginalized political actors who are the victims of social inequalities. Those sentiments manifest in *backlash*. As I will show shortly, in the contemporary scholarship of constituent power, little is said about backlash in the politics of constituent power. Students of constituent power, including radical democrats, talk much about political inequality in democracies but often do not ponder its connection with social inequality and its implications regarding the issues of receptivity and uptake. Such a tendency ultimately undermines the normative potential of the new conception of constituent power to realize the ideal of political autonomy. The fundamental problem is that this conception of constituent power lacks a theoretical resource to justify the pursuit of political autonomy *in the face of backlash*.

I argue that the tendency to overlook backlash in formulating constituent power among theorists is not an accident or a mistake. On the contrary, it is a symptom of construing constituent power in terms of democratic competition rather than democratic struggle. Again, when the contemporary students of constituent power turn to Lefort to revive the concept of constituent power, they redefine constituent power around the universal possibility of laying claims to the 'people.' The point is to detach constituent power from its predetermined agent, who enjoys the monopoly over the exercise of constituent power. Again, the goal is to champion the ideal of political autonomy inherent in constituent power without frustrating the pluralist ethos of constitutional democracy. However, the danger is that such a theoretical move obscures (the intensity of) backlash against democratic actions taken at the margins of society.

Hence, we arrive at the paradox of democratic empowerment. On the one hand,

presupposing the indeterminacy condition allows the contemporary students of constituent power to affirm the political agency of the marginalized expressed beyond the formal institutional channels of political participation. On the other hand, the same presupposition obfuscates the impact of structural conditions on the possibility of uptake of the performative claims of the people made (simultaneously) from different social positions. More specifically, it does not account for the relative epistemic disadvantages of some marginalized groups for making themselves heard. Consequently, constituent power, as in its currently dominant formulation, cannot be meaningfully employed in promoting social and political struggles to realize the political autonomy of society's marginalized populations. On the contrary, the existing accounts of constituent power contribute to maintaining, if not exacerbating, the conditions of political inequality and social inequality behind it. The reason is that, by upholding the premise that the people's identity is indeterminate (when it is not), those accounts fail to capture the phenomenon of backlash in the politics of constituent power.[41]

Now, let me explain further the paradox of democratic empowerment and its problematic implications for radical democracy. For those who advocate constituent power today, the people's indeterminacy condition often implies the permanently open and universal possibilities to enact constituent power by any members of the polity (see Colón-Ríos 2012, chapter 6). One of the most recent iterations of this view is made by Maxim van Asseldonk (2022), who draws an explicit connection between Lefort's theory of modern democracy and the idea of constituent power. van

[41] As a side note, this failure carries the danger of overburdening the agents of democratic struggle with the responsibility to pluralize democracy while letting the broader public off the hook. When presupposing that people's identity is indeterminate, the public is considered 'the conduits' through which the consequences of the actions of the marginalized are transparently manifested (see Roberts n.d., 101–2). In other words, the failure to identify, let alone problematize, (the necessity of) backlash against the attempts to enact constituent power from the marginal social and political positions obscures the often deep-seated unwillingness and incapacity of democratic citizens to listen to the marginalized voices, thereby diluting the role and responsibility of the democratic citizenry in enacting constituent power from the margins of society.

Asseldonk (2022, 362) argues that there is no determinate answer to *who* the people behind constituent power is; the identity of the people is instead defined in terms of *praxis*. van Asseldonk notes, "the people does not pre-exist the emergence of constituent power," but the people and constituent power are "co-constitutive." Here, van Asseldonk (Ibid., 378) adopts Lefort's conception of modern democracy as a regime that lacks "a determinate ground in which to anchor any [legitimization by the people] definitively and determinately." Such a condition compels the democratic regime to carry out a Sisyphean journey to find its ultimate legitimizing ground. This journey would be Sisyphean by nature because every circumscription of the people "is susceptible to further questioning, politicisation and requires ongoing justification" (Ibid., 377). Because the people's identity is indeterminate in the first place, enacting constituent power to redraw the contours of the people provisionally becomes a permanent possibility open to everyone. Under such circumstances, the people is best understood as "a political claim, an act of political subjectification, not a pregiven, unified, or naturally bound empirical entity" (Frank 2010, 3). The point here is that all citizens ought to be capable of making such claims even if the authority of those claims will only be retrospectively validated (Ibid.; see also Olson 2016b).

In particular, when theorists construe constituent power as an open, universal political claim, they want the central object of the concept to be the empowerment of marginalized populations in democracies. The marginalized would be those citizens and would-be citizens who lack enough resources to represent themselves meaningfully within the institutional domain of democratic politics. As seen in the previous section, different versions of constituent power today commonly maintain that laying the authoritative claim of the people cannot and should not be monopolized by a subsection of society. On the contrary, making claims in the people's name should be understood as an activity universally available to all citizens. This is the primary

implication of the people's indeterminate identity. For contemporary students of constituent power, designating democracy's institutional arena as the only place to identify the authoritative voice of the people is to predetermine the people's identity. Doing so would mean to champion political rights of only those citizens who have enough representational resources to participate in the formal domain of democratic politics (Kalyvas 2007; Frank 2010). In this context, the contemporary theories of constituent power often aim to give voice (back) to the marginalized by expanding and pluralizing the sites of democratic politics (Celikates 2019; Grant 2020).

Notably, such instances of the marginalized enacting constituent power would count as 'democratic' (pluralistic) because they affirm the idea that "political unity [(the people)] is always contingent and in-process" against the status quo that negates the people's indeterminacy condition (Grant 2020, 27; see also Loughlin 2014, 231–2). I think this point is worth highlighting not only because it vividly shows how the indeterminacy of the people is fundamental to the currently dominant conception of constituent power; but because this point alludes to the fact that contemporary students of constituent power consider the marginalized, who are staging the people through their speeches and actions, the genuine democratic subject. For instance, in his careful interpretation of Frederick Douglass's celebrated Fourth of July address, Frank highlights how Douglass speaks in the people's name but only from the position where he does not make up the determinate identity of the people the political community upholds (2010, 215). By appropriating the whole (the people) from the place of "the part with no part in relation to the whole," Douglass "enact[s] felicitous claims to speak in the people's name, even though those claims explicitly break from the authorized procedures or norms for representing popular voice." (Ibid., 210). The sympathetic readers of Frank and the existing accounts of constituent power more broadly would argue that I am wrong to accuse the contemporary students of constituent power, including Frank,

for assuming the indeterminate identity of the people as the given fact of democracy to account for an exercise of democratic constituent power. On the contrary, pluralizing constituent power is a normative project to affirm the political agency of the marginalized *against the backdrop of a determinate social formation*. Accordingly, the indeterminate identity of the people is not a starting point but rather an end point of the theories of democratic constituent power.

To begin with, I am fully on board with the vision of radical democratic politics articulated in the pluralist conception of constituent power. I also appreciate the efforts to recognize the democratic credentials of social and political struggles of the marginalized sectors of society under the banner of constituent power. My complaint is about how this task is predominantly done in the scholarship of constituent power today. In my view, the recent iterations of constituent power cannot achieve their goal without properly treating backlash as an impediment to enacting democratic constituent power. While building on Lefort or relying on his vision of democratic politics, the existing accounts of democratic constituent power often seek to affirm the political agency of the marginalized *in terms of affirming that of all citizens*. From this perspective, marginal voices should be able to contest the authoritative voice of the people *like everyone else* in a democracy. To put it slightly differently, the capacity to invoke the people should be universal (for all democratic citizens), *so this capacity should be equally distributed to the marginalized*. I would argue that such a formulation of constituent power ultimately acts against the empowerment of the marginalized because it lacks sufficient attention to the question of *uptake*. I worry that affirming the political agency of the marginalized in terms of affirming that of all citizens renders a marginal voice as one of the plural voices in society competing for the authoritative voice of the people, which—according to Frank (2010, 32), among others—can only be retrospectively vindicated. The existing accounts of constituent power seem content with giving the marginalized

a space to speak among other members of society through which they can "effectively change the conditions and contexts through which they are heard and recognized as claims" (Ibid., 9). However, this new situation can hardly signify empowerment. Marginal voices of society are now deemed equal to dominant ones in that they all (should) stand a chance to be potentially taken up as the authoritative voice of the people. Marginal voices are now compelled to demonstrate their 'felicity' over their conflicting claims of the people.

The fundamental reason such a scenario is likely to cause the (continued) disempowerment of the marginalized against the backdrop of social inequality is that a speech made at the margins of social and political life is less likely to be heard and more likely to suffer backlash than the one made at the center. This is because the existing conditions of inequality at least partly render those actions unintelligible as political claims but instead as an expression of unruliness in the first place (Kramer 2017). And yet, the existing theories of constituent power often neglect the impact of the different levels of receptivity on the normative utility of democratic constituent power as a concept. They do not take the fact that political inequality implies epistemic disadvantage seriously. The issue of epistemic disadvantages of the marginalized in making performative claims of the people against and in the face of their competitors who enjoy epistemic advantages is hardly a matter of serious theoretical and normative intervention. This tendency is already anticipated in the lack of attention in the existing scholarship to the scenario in which different, often conflicting claims to the people are made *simultaneously* against each other.

Such oversight internally negates an important part of the goal of constituent power, which is to empower the marginalized sectors of society. As Feola rightly points out (2018), democratic actions necessarily intervene in the intersubjective world between those who initiate actions and their recipients. In other words, "agonistic reconfiguration of democratic life" is never a task

carried out exclusively by those who pursue their agenda for social and political change in their struggles but in between them and those on the receiving end of this process for potential change. Accordingly, Feola (Ibid., 92) claims that it is necessary to consider not simply how democratic actions "introduce new coordinates and possibilities of meaning" but also how they are "taken up, refused, radicalized, misread, subverted, or pursued in unforeseen directions by those who undergo these provocations" when gauging the irruptive possibilities of democratic actions. In this context, taking the dimension of uptake seriously in conceptualizing democratic constituent power is necessary to render the concept allegiant to its own goal of achieving political autonomy for those who precisely suffer from the lack of it.

Bringing Antagonism into Democratizing Constituent Power

For contemporary students of constituent power, the notion of constituent power is democratic because it affirms the ubiquitous claim-making activities of the underauthorized as an unending process. Democratic constituent power implies that "[n]o institution can claim to be settled. Constituent power is ever present, ever active, ever the final word" (Chambers 2024, 211). From this perspective, the possibility of laying claim to the people is always open to members and would-be members of society, and this makes the concept of constituent power relevant to the empowerment of those who are currently left out of collective self-rule in a democratic society. Democratic constituent power connotes that they should be able to contest the authoritative voice of the people. However, overshadowed by the celebration of the ubiquitous and open possibility of making 'the people' claim is the fact that the underauthorized claims of the people are not subject to fair consideration depending on the speakers' social positions. Namely, the victims of social inequalities often do not stand an equal chance to be heard and are subject to backlash. Why do the theorists of democratic constituent power rarely address the problem of uptake in the process

of enacting constituent power? I see such an absence as a crucial sign of their 'Lefortianism.' The universal and permanent possibility of enacting constituent power is premised on the tacit assumption that the members of the political community recognize themselves as equal in the first place and thus extend such recognition to those who are currently excluded from communal life.

This tendency is especially problematic for scholars who advocate constituent power from a radical democratic perspective. Assuming a general possibility of uptake is in tension with radical democracy's critical diagnosis of the given state of democracy as politically and, more fundamentally, socially unequal. Political inequality that is rooted in social inequality would indicate the state in which some members of the polity are un(der)recognized as equal political interlocutors. In the politics of constituent power, this would mean that some members are less likely to be considered plausible spokespeople for 'the people' than others and that their claims are less likely to be considered fairly by their fellow citizens (see also Beausoleil 2019, 121). To be sure, a determinate social formation of a democratic polity does not imply that those underauthorized claims of the people made from the margins of society will never be taken up by the broader democratic citizenry. Nor do I deny the scenario in which those claims change the mantle of the politics of constituent power (see Olson 2016a, 177–8). However, my point is that the very possibility of listening and transformation does not excuse the new theories of constituent power from entirely ignoring the problem of backlash in conceptualizing the politics of enacting constituent power.

Against this background, I would claim that constituent power cannot and should not do away with antagonism if its goal is to promote pluralism against the backdrop of social inequality, whose political effect is backlash. For example, consider how white supremacists persistently see social movements and spontaneous political protests against racial injustices as criminal events

rather than political contestations. Such a perception leads to further concealing injustices and sufferings pervading the African-American community (Kramer 2017, 176–9; Anderson 2017, 145–6). Regarding this particular case, contemporary students of constituent power may valorize Black citizens' entitlement to lay claims in the people's name (as seen in Frank's reading of Douglass's Fourth of July address) within the new framework of constituent power. However, such valorization does not by itself involve problematizing the fact that Black citizens' claim-making activities are persistently not registered by the dominant 'white America' as claim-making activity *in the first place*. At worst, championing those claim-making activities in terms of citizens' universal capacity to lay claims to the people obscures the African-American community's suffering from disproportionate political intelligibility, which is at least partly due to the given condition of social inequality.

I do not mean to understate the strategic dimension of making a performative claim of the people, as is often highlighted in the literature on democratic constituent power (Olson 2016a; Duong 2020; Frank 2010; 2021). Apart from strategic concerns, I simply want to emphasize that the willingness and capacity of democratic citizens to take performative claims of the people seriously should constitute a key theoretical concern in conceptualizing constituent power. It appears to me that this is often not the case in the burgeoning scholarship of constituent power since little is spoken about backlash, which is an active demonstration of one's unwillingness and incapacity to listen to marginal voices. In particular, I think attending to the unwillingness and incapacity of some democratic citizens to see their fellow (marginalized) citizens as equal interlocutors is necessary for radical democratic approaches to constituent power to achieve logical coherence and theoretical consistency.

Against this background, I raise the following question. Why do contemporary students of

constituent power fail to grasp backlash when they often recognize exclusion and marginalization in the democratic public space as the background condition of the politics of constituent power? What directs their attention almost solely to the performances and claim-making activities of marginalized political actors and away from different reactions to such activities, including backlash? My answer is that the currently dominant approach to constituent power fundamentally lacks the conceptual vocabulary to make theorists attentive to (the intensity of) backlash in the politics of constituent power. The tendency to understate or neglect backlash in conceptualizing constituent power is not a small problem. We cannot address this problem satisfactorily by adding a few words on the empirically contingent possibility of backlash to the existing accounts of constituent power. The problem runs deep into the conceptual and theoretical level. Without the conceptual vocabulary that allows theorists to capture backlash, any accounts of constituent power will fail to address the difficult question of what to make of counter-tendencies against the efforts to enact constituent power. Without addressing this question and considering its implications, constituent power will lose its normative purchase. Its one-sided emphasis on the universal capacity of democratic citizens to lay claim to the people will obfuscate and make invisible the difficulties that some citizens experience in having their voices heard by their fellow citizens.

Against this background, I now introduce the two model approaches in radical democracy equipped with conceptual vocabularies to deal with backlash emerging from democracy's determinate social formation. In the following chapter, I turn to Ernesto Laclau and examine his account of constituent power. There, Laclau addresses the antagonistic dimension of radical democratic politics through the conceptual vocabulary of *hegemony*. Then, I move on to Jacques Rancière in the fourth chapter. Rancière's notion of *the police* performs the similar role that hegemony plays in Laclau, as it illuminates the place of antagonism in radical democratic politics.

However, this notion allows us to think about the temporality and modality of democratic struggle differently from how Laclau does. I will address an important advantage of Rancière's approach to conceptualizing antagonism in radical democratic politics.

Chapter Three
Ernesto Laclau's Theory of Antagonistic Pluralism

Introduction

In asserting democracy's inherent capacity to progress, Lefort warns that "scorn for human rights encourages would-be revolutionaries to construct totalitarian-style regimes, or to dream of doing so" (1988b, 40). For Lefort, the totalitarian solution to existing social problems would entail the abolition of social divisions and the integration of the state and civil society. The temptation to do so emerges from a belief that human rights are merely the ideological façade of bourgeois democracy (see Lefort 1986a, 246–7). According to this belief, human rights hide the conditions of class domination within society. As shown in the first chapter, Lefort champions human rights as the driver for progressive social change. The *possibility* of such change never ceases to exist because the symbolic pole that generates the social bond in a democracy (i.e., the people) does not have a fixed content (Lefort 1986c, 303). This principle of indeterminacy allows the members of a democratic society to mobilize the language of *rights* to promote rights and disseminate new demands while resisting the tendency in which particular (groups of) members come to dominate the others (Lefort 1986a 242, 261). For Lefort, the true novelty of modern democracy lies in the introduction of indeterminacy as the basic organizing principle of society.

Against this background, Lefort expresses grave concern about a tendency he finds in his contemporaneous Left to "compress collective aspirations [for social change] in the model of an alternative society" that effaces the division among various social and political struggles in the name of a 'People-as-One' (1986a, 266; see also Selinger 2023, 10). According to Lefort (1986a),

this ‘totalitarian’ mode of pursuing social change is opportunistic at best. This is because “the struggles that are developing in various domains of civil society are assessed only in terms of the opportunities they offer” for a representative entity to fulfill its ambition for power. In other words, there is a problem of cooptation of social and political struggles by a powerful group. Accordingly, Lefort maintains that genuine social progress can and should only be pursued gradually through social and political struggles in a pluralistic fashion (Ibid., 267).

This chapter gives Lefort back his caution about taking the ‘totalitarian’ path to pursue meaningful (progressive) social changes. To be provocative, I would argue that Lefort’s theoretically unsubstantiated overconfidence in (the politics of) human rights makes him dismiss what he considers the ‘totalitarian’ method for social change as inadequate for pursuing social change. The first chapter has shown Lefort’s insistence on the emancipatory potential inherent in the politics of human rights. In doing so, the French philosopher largely fails to appreciate the theoretical implications of backlash for the politics of human rights. I have argued that Lefort’s failure to address the issue of receptivity in conceptualizing the politics of human rights is a logical blind spot in his account of radical democracy. This is because Lefort recognizes that a democratic society has a determinate social formation and that it forms the background condition of the politics of human rights. Lefort understands that a determinate social formation gives rise to social and political inequalities. However, he overlooks the fact that it would also fuel the backlash against the efforts to redress the conditions of inequality and realize the principle of indeterminacy. In other words, Lefort fails to grasp that backlash forms a distinctive dynamic of the politics of human rights. As a result, the meaning of democratic politics as a *struggle* fades away. This particular meaning of democratic politics is reduced to that of *competition*, where backlash appears as a deviant phenomenon at best since competition presupposes political equality among its

participants. In the end, Lefort obfuscates the problem of social and political inequalities that he sets out to tackle.

The previous chapter tried to show that this tendency is also present in the contemporary scholarship on constituent power. Why do Lefort and his contemporary followers fail to address backlash theoretically (and not just empirically), especially when they are well aware of democracy's determinate social formation? I argue that the source of this theoretical lacuna is the absence of conceptual vocabulary to address democracy's determinate social formation at the theoretical level. I turn to Ernesto Laclau (1935–2014) to substantiate this argument. In this chapter, I interpret Laclau as offering a version of a radicalized radical democracy.[42] Laclau's notion of *hegemony* is central to my argumentation. I highlight that the Argentinian political theorist employs hegemony at least partly to criticize and 'radicalize' Lefort's model of (radical) democracy.[43] Crudely speaking, hegemony for Laclau indicates the phenomenon in which a particular subsection of society embodies and represents the universality of the community (Laclau 2000, 45; Gramsci 1971, 78–9). While Laclau often articulates hegemony in terms of a revolutionary strategy or a political project, what is unique about Laclau's use of this notion is that he turns hegemony into *the* ontological logic of social formation. In Laclau, hegemony designates "the very terrain in which a political relation is actually constituted" (Laclau 2000, 44; 2015c, 263; see also Martin 2022, 64). When analyzing a democratic society through the lens of hegemony,

[42] For the meaning of radicalizing radical democracy, see the introductory chapter, section 'radicalizing radical democracy.'

[43] By making this chapter's analytical focus explicit, I want to highlight that my goal is not to evaluate the extent to which Laclau's conception of hegemony is allegiant to or detached from the previous (influential) usages of the term before Laclau. Nor do I aim to ponder the implications of Laclau's formulation of hegemony to the utility of the concept (cf. Arditi 2010; Mazzolini 2020; Thomas 2021; Colpani 2022). Those attempts to restore the conceptual purity or rigor of hegemony are meaningful in preventing a conceptual overstretch. However, I do not engage in such a task because my interest here is primarily to investigate what 'hegemony' *does* in Laclau's theory of radical democracy.

the identity of the people underlying the symbolic order of society no longer appears entirely empty, as in Lefort. As I will elaborate shortly, the fact that 'the people' is a hegemonic construct implies that inequality and hierarchy are built into the process of making collective decisions among democratic citizens.

Laclau's sympathetic and critical commentators have often criticized him for ontologizing hegemony (Norris 2002; Haworth 2004; Ciccariello-Maher 2020; Thomas 2021; Colpani 2022). In particular, the liberal-minded 'democrats' often find Laclau's ontological turn of hegemony idiosyncratic, unpleasant, and dangerous because of its allegedly anti-pluralistic connotation (Müller 2016, 69; Arato 2016, 283–5; Urbinati 2019a, 51–2; Cohen 2019b, 398). Ontologizing hegemony involves affirming the necessity of antagonism for changing a status quo in every politics, whether democratic or not (Marchart 2018, 17). For liberal critics of Laclau, to construe modern constitutional democracy in terms of hegemony is to deny the state of constitutional democracy (e.g., its institutions and principles) as a historical achievement distinguished from, for example, fascism (see Thomassen 2022, 994).

I take a different angle from the liberal commentators on Laclau. In this chapter, I seek to demonstrate that the notion of hegemony in Laclau plays a critical role in exposing the limits of democratic institutions and principles *in practice* and underlies a solution to change the unequal status quo. For Laclau, hegemony as the logic of social formation implies that the ideal of pluralism can never be fully realized in a given moment of a democracy. However, hegemony is also the logic that underlies an ongoing movement to make a democratic society pluralistic. It allows Laclau to justify the robust pursuit of pluralism against (the background of) social and political inequalities through positive discrimination (Laclau 2004, 297). More specifically, I claim that hegemony is the notion that allows Laclau to treat the empirical phenomenon of backlash as a

theoretical problem in formulating his normative vision of radical democratic politics.[44] This is something that Laclau's (Lefort-inspired) liberal critics decisively fail to do.

In this context, I present Laclau as a critical interlocutor of Lefort. This particular contextualization will demonstrate hegemony's critical role of addressing Lefort's failure to theorize the antagonistic dimension of radical democratic politics. Laclau would argue that such a tendency in Lefort derives from the French philosopher's inattention to the operations of antagonism underlying the formation of the symbolic order of 'modern democracy.' In this regard, I argue that Laclau's position is best described as 'antagonistic pluralism.' This stance takes seriously the antagonism that emanates from democracies' determinate social formation in conceptualizing radical democratic politics. Against this background, antagonistic pluralism suggests that counter-antagonism is necessary and normatively justified to unravel the existing social formation and thus promote pluralism. Finally, the last part of this chapter will critically examine Laclau's model of antagonistic pluralism. This chapter is to be read as a rejoinder to the not-so-trivial tendency in contemporary Anglophone academia to portray Laclau as a proto-totalitarian anti-pluralist thinker. I begin my discussion by introducing this particular interpretation because it provides an effective background for highlighting the critical role of hegemony in Laclau.

Anti-Pluralism without Apologies?

Democratic theorists today often criticize Laclau's account of democracy for being anti-

[44] Avid readers of Laclau would raise their eyebrows to this assertion because Laclau has never spoken about backlash (at least directly). However, as I will show shortly, insofar as backlash is a concrete manifestation of antagonism in a democracy, backlash occupies the central place in Laclau's project of radical democracy as a primary obstacle to social transformation. For Laclau, backlash, which implies the limits of who and what can be seen and heard as legitimate within the democratic public space, partly proves that democracy is a hegemonic construct.

pluralistic (see, for example, Arato 2016; Vergara 2020a; cf. Zicman de Barros 2024, 13). Critics tend to understand pluralism in terms of an ongoing decision-making process in which citizens freely and openly compete over the dominant vision of society. As a democratic principle, pluralism implies that even the dominant majority is obligated to treat their opponents as 'justificatory equals' to whom the dominant must justify "their favored policies […] by engaging with [the] views, values and arguments [of those in the minority position] and, by so doing, opening their own views up to the risk of being undermined by the unforced force of the better argument" (Lafont 2019, 98, emphasis removed; Forst 2019, 23). Moreover, when the dominant majority fails to persuade their opponents with "the unforced force of the better argument," the point of pluralism is to preserve space for the opposition to win the majority potentially in the future (Müller 2016). Doing so forms the condition under which citizens with conflicting views and opinions all equally participate in making autonomous political judgments over time (Urbinati 2014, 64).

Critics of Laclau claim that Laclau's account of (radical) democracy undermines this dynamic process of public decision-making by endorsing antagonism and exclusion as indispensable elements of democratic politics (Müller 2016, 69). Criticisms often target Laclau's mature writing on populism (*On Populist Reason*, hereafter *PR*), where Laclau defines the populist (construction of the) people explicitly based on a synecdochic logic (2005a, 87, 94). In *PR*, Laclau submits that 'the people' is a part of the whole ("*plebs*") that "aspires to be conceived as the only legitimate totality" ("*populus*") (Ibid., 93). According to Laclau, populism represents the crisis of society's current symbolic order. In times of crisis, unfulfilled isolated social demands are articulated together and crystallized under the banner of 'the people' as the agent of a radical social transformation. This process involves dividing the social scene into two camps: the people on the

one side and the enemy (e.g., 'the elites') on the other. For Laclau (Ibid., 86), those who cling to the status quo "cannot be a legitimate part of the community" because it is precisely the current social and political configurations that have generated the unfulfilled demands in the first place, which are the basic building block of the populist people. For this reason, Laclau notes (2019, 383), "populism has always been a primary target of criticisms by supporters of the status quo" (see also Laclau 2015c, 266; Stavrakakis et al. 2018). Hence, populism necessarily entails antagonizing and excluding those members of a polity who are against the populist project (and thus not identified as the people) as an obstacle to realizing the fullness of the community that is currently missing (Laclau 2005a., 82, 94).

While Laclau's critics often acknowledge Laclau's egalitarian motivation behind his project of radical democracy, they are disturbed by the Argentine's affirmation of antagonism and exclusion in politics in the name of democracy (see Urbinati 2019, 33). For critics, Laclau's problem is that he wants to have "the democratic effect of broadening the community of 'citizenship' […] by non-democratic means" (Arato 2016, 282). This process involves negating pluralism. Critics argue that Laclau's valorization of antagonism and exclusion as the means to realize an egalitarian vision of society is normatively untenable. The main reason is that "it translates into concentration of power on the one hand and lack of counterpower that can stop or resist despotic or abusive power on the other" (Urbinati 2014, 64). Some critics of Laclau admit that the populist force may bring some short-term gains to the previously (and currently) marginalized and excluded (Müller 2016, 69). Still, the problem is that nothing can prevent a populist force from deteriorating into authoritarianism in the long run (i.e., when it achieves governmental power) due to the closing down of the public space where oppositions are formed

(Müller 2017, 594; Shaw 2020, 191; Arato and Cohen 2021, 20).[45] At worst, Laclau's antagonistic vision of democratic politics is reminiscent of Carl Schmitt's totalitarian dismissal of parliamentary democracy as undercutting the people's will.[46]

To what extent is it accurate to call Laclau an anti-pluralist? The answer to this question may not be as straightforward as it seems, especially when Laclau often articulates his positions under the banner of 'pluralism' (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 167; Laclau 2001a; 2015c, 263). What makes Laclau claim himself to be a pluralist? An immediate answer can be found in his 'post-Marxist' writing co-authored by Chantal Mouffe, titled *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (hereafter, *HSS*) (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). Laclau and Mouffe's critical intervention in "orthodox Marxism" in the mid-80s led to lively debates and controversies within and beyond the radical circle of political theory (Sim 2022). In *HSS*, Laclau and Mouffe highlight an increasing disjuncture between Marxist theory and capitalist realities in Western societies of the mid-70s onwards. In the face of deepening tendencies of social fragmentation and diversification, Laclau and Mouffe dismiss the idea that the class structure will become simplified under capitalism. They also criticize the prediction that the increasing proletarianization of society will lead to the necessary emergence of the unified historical agent, the proletariat, to take up the task of universal transformation (2001, 14–5). Instead, building primarily on the Gramscian notion of hegemony, the two authors provide an alternative vision of social transformation. The logic of hegemony involves constructing a contingent and provisional alliance among social and political struggles

[45] At this point, Laclau and his critics talk past each other. Like his critics, Laclau admits that populism bears an authoritarian tendency insofar as its logic involves the vertical integration of particular struggles. However, Laclau understands the authoritarian turn of populism as an empirically contingent phenomenon, which signifies a deterioration of populism. For Laclau, populism-turned-authoritarianism is no longer populism. Laclau notes (2015c, 267), "[i]t is true that the privileging of the vertical axis beyond a certain point leads to authoritarian politics […] but when this happens we can no longer speak of populism." On the contrary, Laclau's critics address the authoritarian turn of populism under the banner of populism.

[46] See section 2 of chapter 2.

against different forms of subordination (Ibid., xii, 142). For Laclau and Mouffe (Ibid., 167), their paradigm of democracy is pluralistic in the sense that it rejects the working class as a universal class. They understand pluralism in terms of recognizing the multiplicity of democratic struggles as having their own principles of validity (see also Laclau 2001a, 515; Breaugh and Caivano 2024, 454).

However, as many commentators have pointed out, recognizing the plurality of subject positions, as opposed to the *a priori* unified subject of emancipation, does not necessarily render Laclau's (and Laclau and Mouffe's) paradigm of democracy pluralistic. The reason is that such a recognition of plurality does not extend beyond the boundary—however open and flexible it is—of a coalition made up of different struggles (Cohen 2019b, 399; see also Vergara 2020a, 230). Laclau's seemingly anti-pluralistic stance is more clearly identifiable when compared to Mouffe. Mouffe agrees with Laclau that antagonism plays the fundamental role of bringing about any political orders. She also thinks that the antagonistic dimension cannot be eradicated from democratic politics. However, Mouffe's core agenda is "how it is possible under those conditions [i.e., the ineradicability of antagonism] to create or maintain a pluralistic democratic order" (Mouffe 2005 [1993], 4). Under the banner of 'agonistic pluralism,' Mouffe's works focus on reconciling antagonism with the values and institutions of liberal (constitutional) democracy. Mouffe develops her model of democratic politics against what she calls the 'consensual' models of liberal democracy (2013, 7). The thrust of her criticism is that the denial and repression of antagonism in politics only leads to further escalation of it. Based on this criticism, Mouffe urges us to appreciate the value of conflicts in a democratic life. However, Mouffe's point is not that we should affirm antagonism as it is in our democratic life. On the contrary, Mouffe highlights the importance of *taming antagonism*. This involves citizens of liberal democracies treating one

another "not as enemies to be destroyed, but as adversaries whose ideas might be fought, even fiercely, but whose right to defend those ideas is not to be questioned" (Mouffe 2005, 101–2). This 'agonistic' turn of antagonism calls for the ethics of tolerance rather than an upfront exclusion of others to keep the democratic conflicts alive (Ibid., 103; Hildebrand and Séville 2019, 331).

Subsequently, while appreciating both the necessity of boundary(-drawing) in constituting the people and the tension between liberalism and democracy articulated by Schmitt, Mouffe suggests that we think of 'homogeneity' required to constitute the people in terms of 'commonality' (2000, 55). 'Commonality' is, in turn, built on "[citizens'] common recognition of a set of ethico-political values" of a given political regime. In the case of liberal democracy, these values are "equality and liberty for all" (Mouffe 2005, 70). In this regard, Mouffe claims that the people's identity in a liberal democratic context "can never be fully constituted, and it can exist only through multiple and competing forms of *identifications*" (2000, 56, emphasis original). For Mouffe (Ibid., 45), "the articulation with the liberal logic allows us constantly to challenge—through reference to 'humanity' and the polemical use of 'human rights'—the form of exclusion that are necessarily inscribed in the political practice of […] defining the 'people' which is going to rule." Here, Mouffe understands that the people's identity is subject to ongoing contestations. This move aligns her with Lefort (see also Rummens 2009; McNay 2014, 74; Cohen 2019a; Fiorespino 2022, 188; cf. Thomassen 2022, 1005).[47]

[47] Mouffe's gesture toward tolerance and pluralism is also identified in her recent conceptualization of populism. Mouffe (2018, 25) takes (left) populism to indicate a radical reformist political intervention to the 'neoliberal' status quo that aims to deepen and extend democracy by 'radicalizing' and not undermining the existing democratic institutions. From this perspective, "left populism seeks the establishment of a new hegemonic order within the constitutional liberal-democratic framework and it does not aim at a radical break with pluralist liberal democracy" (Ibid., 27; see also Vergara 2020a, 237–8). While the goal of the populist struggle is to establish a more egalitarian social order, the process of achieving this goal should be guided by "the liberal-democratic principles of legitimacy" that involve treating citizens with different perspectives no matter how they represent a vested interest in society (Mouffe 2018, 27).

Laclau diverges from Mouffe by questioning whether democratic actions should require an ethico-political commitment to liberal democracy (Wenman 2003b, 598–9; McNay 2014, 95). For Laclau (2007 [1996], 121, emphasis original), liberal democratic institutions—"parliament, elections, and divisions of power"—are "[but] one public space, not the public space." Laclau does not think of 'liberal democracy' as an indivisible whole but a contingent (historical) articulation between liberalism and democracy. Laclau often relies on Mouffe to make this point (Laclau 2005a, 167; 2015c; see Mouffe 2000). However, unlike Mouffe, Laclau is less concerned with reconciling democracy with liberalism. What Laclau tries to get at is that liberal democracy is only one particular 'institutional articulation' of democracy and that "there are other forms of democracy outside the liberal symbolic framework" (Laclau 2007 [1996], 121; 2005a, 167). In this regard, Laclau portrays the relationship between liberalism and democracy as that of tension or even antagonism. While understanding 'liberal democracy' in terms of "the equality of the citizens in a homogenous public sphere," Laclau emphasizes that 'liberal democracy' negates the democratic-egalitarian aspect of "bringing the underdog—those excluded from the process of representation—into the historical arena" (Laclau 2004, 297). For Laclau, the prime example is Latin America. Laclau notes (2015c, 268),

> "In Latin America, for instance, liberal states became dominant from the second half of the nineteenth century, but they were never really democratic, for they were the typical political expressions of local landowning oligarchies based on clientelistic mechanisms. So, the democratic aspirations of the masses, when they emerged in the twentieth century, tended to express themselves through non-liberal forms: the support of popular leaders who represented a counterbalance to a parliamentary power that was the stronghold of conservative oligarchies."

Based on the historical experience of Latin America (among other regions of the world), Laclau

proclaims himself as a proponent of democracy, even if that means achieving democracy at the cost of undermining liberalism.[48] Consider Laclau's following statement (Laclau 2007 [1996], 121).

> "Though my preference is for a liberal-democratic-socialist society, it is clear to me that if I am forced under given circumstances to choose one out of the three, my preference will always be democracy. (For instance, if in a Third World country I have to choose between, on the one hand, a corrupt and repressive liberal regime, in which elections are a farce manipulated by clientelistic gangs, with no participation of the masses; and on the other, a nationalist military regime which tends to social reform and the self-organization of the masses, my preference will be for the latter."

Hence, Laclau's self-identification as a pluralist is an enigma for his critics (see Arato 2016). The following section seeks to make sense of Laclau's seemingly irreconcilable position of being simultaneously an antagonist and a pluralist. I argue that critics' perplexity toward Laclau's endorsement of antagonism in the name of pluralism is symptomatic of their incapacity to capture the antagonistic aspect of (radical) democratic politics in practice and treat it at the theoretical level. I suggest that Laclau's conception of hegemony is precisely to criticize such a symptom and develop an alternative model of radical democratic politics that is sensitive to power. I substantiate this interpretation of Laclau and his notion of hegemony by attending to Laclau's critique of

[48] As I will illustrate in the following section, Laclau's position is more modest or at least ambivalent in *HSS*. The authors of *HSS* conceptualize radical democratic politics entirely within the Lefortian framework of 'modern democracy,' where hegemony is understood primarily as a radical strategy to deepen or promote the principle of indeterminacy in the face of the increasing diversification and fragmentation of social demands (this diversification and fragmentation of demands are, in turn, construed in terms of 'radical pluralism' that emerges from the fact of modern democracy as a society of indeterminacy) (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 167; see also Martin 2022, 71). I am not saying that the more radical position that Laclau makes much more explicitly in his solo writings is entirely absent in *HSS* with regard to Lefort's conception of modern democracy and democratic politics (see, for example, Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 187; see also Wenman 2003b for a substantive engagement with the discrepancy between Laclau and Mouffe's approach implicit in *HSS*). From my perspective, Laclau's view is mixed with that of Mouffe in *HSS*, thereby obscuring their distinctiveness (see Laclau 1990, 180).

Lefort's theory of modern democracy.

Hegemony: A Functionalist Approach

The previous section introduced critics' view of Laclau as an anti-pluralist. This section aims to make sense of Laclau's insistence on the necessity of antagonism and exclusion in democratic politics, especially in promoting the egalitarian cause by elevating the status of the 'underdog.' Hegemony is central to understanding Laclau's model of democratic politics as an antagonistic confrontation between 'us' and 'them.' For Laclau, hegemony forms the ontological playing field of (radical) democratic politics. Laclau uses the term 'administration' to indicate public interactions that happen within a given hegemonic formation (2005a, 18; see also 2004, 297; Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 135). What Laclau calls democratic politics occurs *around* (as opposed to *within*) an existing hegemony. It is about replacing the given hegemonic social and political configuration with another. From Laclau's perspective, this movement is profoundly pluralistic since instituting a new hegemonic order brings the possibilities foreclosed under a previous hegemonic order into reality. Democracy remains pluralistic insofar as there is "the constant and active production of [the empty place of power]" *against an existing hegemonic representation of the place of power at any given time within particular democracies* (Laclau 2001b, 12). Liberal-constitutionalist critics of Laclau largely fail to capture the nuance of the Argentinian philosopher's model of (radical) democratic politics. To do so, they would need to appreciate the conceptual salience of hegemony in examining Laclau's seemingly anti-pluralistic move.

The goal of this section is not solely to highlight critics' failure to appreciate the meaning and implications of hegemony in Laclau. Building on that point, I aim to reveal a systemic failure in democratic theory to incorporate backlash in conceptualizing radical democratic politics. In this context, this section makes an interpretive claim that the concept of hegemony in Laclau serves to

appreciate the theoretical import of backlash in radical democratic politics. I call my approach 'functionalist' in a loose sense. This is because I consider the concept of hegemony in Laclau an indispensable element to sustain Laclau's model of radical democracy.

Interpreting Laclau's use of hegemony in terms of backlash may strike as a peculiar interpretation of Laclau. Laclau never even used the term 'backlash' in his works. Nor did Laclau address this phenomenon at least directly or explicitly. I respond to this criticism by showing that backlash is a major implication of hegemony. In part, Laclau employs hegemony to articulate a determinate social formation as an inescapable reality of actually existing democracies. Hegemony is the theoretical basis on which Laclau justifies the use of antagonism to change the status quo. Laclau understands that in the presence of a hegemonic social formation, mutual deliberation between the hegemonic force and the counter-hegemonic force of society is impossible (see Laclau 2007 [1996], 112; 2004, 296). Hegemony for Laclau refers to the situation in which the conflict between those two parties is existential. A hegemonic struggle implies that there is no common ground between conflicting parties. Their confrontation pertains to the basic terms of communal life (Disch 2021, 130). In my view, backlash is an integral part of this conflict *deployed by society's hegemonic force to maintain the status quo*. As I will explain shortly, Laclau's terminologies of 'incommensurability' and 'radical exclusion' of the counter-hegemonic force by the hegemonic force of society at least partly indicate backlash in a concrete sense. Hence, backlash is implicit in but integral to Laclau's concept of hegemony. As a result, critics' failure to appreciate the importance of hegemony in Laclau implies their incapacity to address the empirical phenomenon of backlash in democratic politics at the level of a theory. This interpretation of hegemony is drawn from Laclau's critical engagement with Lefort.

From *HSS* to *PR*, Lefort has been one of Laclau's primary sources of reference (Laclau and

Mouffe 2001, chapter 4; 2001b; 2005a, 164–171; see also Laclau 2014b, 256). Laclau's most comprehensive engagement with Lefort is in *PR*, whose claims, in many respects, echo Laclau's 2001 article 'Democracy and the Question of Power' (hereafter, 'DQR'). I will mainly focus on these two texts to reconstruct Laclau's critique of Lefort and to show the evolution of this critique from *HSS*. Laclau's critique of Lefort is an 'immanent' one because, as we will see shortly, Laclau shares with Lefort the same vision of democracy as a form of society whose normative core is *indeterminacy* (Laclau 2004, 295). For both thinkers, democracy ought to be indeterminate if it is to be called democracy. Laclau's intervention focuses on refining Lefort's approach to realizing this precise normative vision. To carry out this task, Laclau deploys the concept of hegemony. Laclau uses this concept to highlight the antagonistic nature of radical democratic politics overshadowed by Lefort's conceptual conflation of democratic struggle with competition.

Revisiting Laclau's critique of Lefort in *HSS*, 'DQR,' and *PR* will allow us to trace the change in the meaning and implication of hegemony in Laclau. Initially, hegemony was largely understood as a left strategy to deepen the values of freedom and equality within a democratic society in the face of social fragmentation and diversification. Later, this meaning expands to indicate the ontology of (re-)instituting a social order, including democracy.[49] Antagonism appears as a salient notion in Laclau's conception of hegemony as Laclau starts emphasizing the ontological (as opposed to the strategic) character of hegemony. This tendency should not be seen

[49] Although the contemporary readers of Laclau do not neglect either aspect in Laclau (see Nielsen 2006), the scholarship on Laclau is often bifurcated between the groups that emphasize the strategic and ontological character of hegemony. Those construing hegemony as a political strategy for the Left (i.e., building movements and parties and taking power) often shy away from articulating the antagonistic aspect of Laclau's model of (radical) democracy or minimize its significance (see Mouffe 2018; Martin 2022; Devenney and Woodford 2023). I align myself with the theorists who consider antagonism the central component of Laclau's hegemony (Marchart 2018; Panizza and Stavrakakis 2021 to a lesser extent). They tend to read Laclau as a 'political ontologist' (Laclau 2004, 323), whose main interest lies in giving a theoretical explanation to the institution of a societal order, including (or especially) democracy. My contribution is partly to show the transition of the implication/nature of hegemony in Laclau while also illustrating unresolved ambiguity between hegemony-as-strategy and hegemony-as-ontology in Laclau's writings.

as a regression in Laclau's thought, which prevents Laclau from appreciating the efficacy of liberal democratic norms and institutions in deepening democracy (see, for example, Norval 2004, 160; Vergara 2020a, 240; see also Hildebrand and Séville 2019, 333). On the contrary, the ontological understanding of hegemony uniquely guides us to translate the empirical phenomenon of backlash into a theoretical problem. This move reinstates the independent domain of radical democratic politics by featuring antagonism as the distinctive element of democratic struggle.

The influence of Lefort on Laclau's works is traced back to *HSS*. In *HSS*, Laclau (with Mouffe) characterizes their work as "the deepening of the 'democratic revolution,' as the extension of the democratic struggles for equality and liberty to a wider range of social relations" (2001, xv). The democratic revolution, the French Revolution in particular, is taken from Tocqueville to "designate the end of a society of a hierarchic and inegalitarian type, ruled by a theological-political logic in which the social order had its foundation in divine will" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 155). Laclau and Mouffe highlight that the revolution "made it possible to propose the different forms of inequality as illegitimate and anti-natural, and thus make them equivalent as forms of oppression" (Ibid.). Accordingly, for Laclau and Mouffe, the novelty of democracy as a new form of society lies in "the spread of equality and liberty into increasingly wider domains and therefore act as a fermenting agent upon the different forms of struggle against subordination" (Ibid.).

It is important to note that when appreciating the meaning of the democratic revolution, the authors of *HSS* situate their intervention *entirely* within Lefort's theoretical framework. More specifically, Lefort's conception of modern democracy forms the theoretical groundwork for Laclau and Muouffe to advance a project of radical democracy (Valentine 2013, 204). Laclau and Mouffe take the conceptual distinction between democracy and totalitarianism introduced by Lefort as their starting point and define democracy in terms of an empty place of power. In a

democracy, "[t]he possibility is […] opened up for an unending process of questioning" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 187). Such an understanding of a democratic society gives rise to the project of radical democracy. The goal of radical democracy is set up to deepen equality and liberty by extending them to a broader range of social relations. Against this background, Laclau and Mouffe conceive hegemony mainly as a strategy for the Left to carry on the legacies of the democratic revolution. Hegemony consists of bringing different social and political struggles together in the face of social fragmentation to "[deepen] the democratic process" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 167, 188; Laclau 2015c, 263).[50]

Notably, in *HSS*, Laclau and Mouffe insist that this process of hegemonic struggle should not violate the spirit of the democratic revolution. Any egalitarian vision of society promoted by the Left "should consist of locating itself fully in the field of the democratic revolution and expanding the chains of equivalents between the different struggles against oppression. *The task of the Left therefore cannot be to renounce liberal-democratic ideology, but on the contrary, to deepen and expand it in the direction of a radical and plural democracy*" (Ibid., 176, emphasis original). This statement indicates that the hegemonic operation is *internal to* the functioning of liberal (modern) democracy, where the goal is to introduce a substantive (democratic-egalitarian) governing paradigm.

The path taken by Laclau and Mouffe seems to be a logical corollary of the guiding question of *HSS*: how does the Left take power "in a context dominated by the experience of

[50] As noted earlier in note 28, I do not mean that the discussion on the ontological aspect of hegemony is entirely missing in *HSS*. It exists in different pages of the text, especially in the third chapter of *HSS* (see also Wenman 2003b). However, compared to Laclau's other solo writings that I will deal with shortly, *HSS* shows a high degree of conceptual conflation between hegemony as a Left strategy for achieving power within the liberal democratic framework and hegemony as the ontological logic behind the institution of liberal democracy itself (compare, for example, Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 176 and ibid., 138–40).

fragmentation and by the indeterminacy of the articulations of between different struggles and subject positions" (Ibid., 13)? One of the primary goals of *HSS* is to criticize the Left's incapacity for action and political analysis in the context of increasing social fragmentation characterized by the rise of new social movements, multiculturalism, and deterritorialization of the nation-state and economy, among others (Ibid., 177). The motivation was primarily strategic, that is, intervening in a particular political conjuncture. Obscured in this mode of intervention is a more philosophical inquiry regarding social formation in general.[51] As I will show shortly, this philosophical inquiry expands the implication of hegemony as a political logic of instituting society's symbolic order, including especially 'modern democracy' as Lefort defines it. Therefore, by making an ontological turn of hegemony, Laclau ceases to operate *within* the Lefortian paradigm of modern democracy and repositions (or more explicitly positions) himself as a critic of this very paradigm.

Since *HSS*, Laclau has developed and refined an ontological approach to hegemony. In carrying out this task, Laclau partly engages with the same theological-political problem that Lefort dealt with in conceptualizing modern democracy. How does a democratic society achieve its internal order and cohesion in the absence of the transcendental reference of power? This question pertains to political ontology, which "[puts] into question the very concept of political institution" (Laclau 2004, 323; Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 153). As I will elaborate in the following pages, Laclau and Lefort represent different versions of 'post-foundationalism.' Post-foundationalism is a mode of thinking of society in terms of "metaphysical figures of foundation—such as totality, universality, essence, and ground" that nevertheless assumes the impossibility of a final ground (Marchart 2007, 2; Valentine 2013, 207). As post-foundationalists, both thinkers

[51] Again, the authors of *HSS* gesture toward making this philosophical inquiry, but the text ends with conceiving hegemony as a strategy.

reject the notion of the *ultimate* foundation, but they maintain that society must have some foundation that would generate the order of society. Without (constructing and maintaining) a foundation, society crumbles as it ceases to function as a system of meaning and retreats to the domain of pure power, conflict, and contingency. However, beyond sharing the 'post-foundationalist' paradigm, Laclau conceives of the modality and temporality of democratic politics radically differently than Lefort. For Laclau, struggle is the only (meaningful) modality of democratic politics.[52] Moreover, democratic politics as a struggle is necessarily hegemonic due to the very ontological nature of modern democracy as a hegemonic construct. Decisively, this process involves the 'radical exclusion' of *the Other*, which derives from the incommensurability of competing hegemonic projects. I will argue that the backlash is *implied* in hegemonic politics.

With Lefort, Laclau upholds modern democracy as a revolutionary concept characterized by the abolition of social hierarchy through which equality becomes the regime's core normative value (2005, 164). In this vein, Laclau defines modern democracy as the only type of society in which the place of power is seen as empty (2001b, 10). Moreover, by treating modern democracy as a revolutionary concept, both Laclau and Lefort construe modern democracy as a process of *instituting* a new symbolic order (Marchart 2005, 14; see also Thomassen 2022, 995). Instituting a symbolic order implies that the rise of equality as a new organizing principle of social cooperation and coordination in a democracy is not a direct outcome of the collapse of the *ancien régime*. On the contrary, this principle is the product of individuals' collective and deliberate effort to establish a new symbolic order as they come together to form a community.

Laclau diverges from Lefort in explaining the instituting process of a democratic society

[52] This view indicates that there is no qualitative distinction between democratic politics and radical democratic politics in Laclau. As mentioned earlier, the notion of competition that does not involve a hegemonic change is equivalent to 'administration' for Laclau (see Laclau 2004, 295).

in terms of hegemony. The crux of Laclau's criticism of Lefort is that Lefort ignores (the power dynamics behind) the *production* of the very emptiness of the place of power (2005a, 166; Nielsen 2006, 78). From Laclau's perspective, the empty place of power does not emerge from a vacuum. Instead, it has to be brought into reality by individuals and groups who would form a community together. Without producing the emptiness of power, there is no democracy (Ibid., 169). In this context, Laclau argues that *producing* the empty place of power requires, in advance, the construction of a collective subject that is supposed to carry out such a task, 'the people.' According to Laclau (Ibid., 166), this question of (constructing) the democratic subject is decisively missing in Lefort. Laclau continues that Lefort's oversight has led the French philosopher to miss the hegemonic nature of modern democracy, where the place of power is always 'partially embodied' (Ibid.). Very briefly, in the words of Laclau, the partial embodiment means that "particular forces […] *occupy* the empty place of power but do not identify with it" (Laclau 2001b, 7, emphasis original). The partial embodiment of the place of power in a democracy frustrates the full realization of the empty place of power. However, for Laclau, it also *justifies* the movements for *emptying* the place of power in a democracy. This is because a democratic society ought to have its place of power empty in principle (Ibid., 7; 2004, 295). In this vein, Laclau notes that democracy "requires the constant and active production of that emptiness [against a status quo]" (2001b, 12). I would argue that one of the key implications of democracy's 'partial embodiment' of an empty place of power is backlash.

I want to begin my discussion by introducing the philosophical roots of Laclau's criticism of Lefort. Laclau's critique relies on a set of poststructuralist assumptions (Laclau 1990, 207–8).[53]

[53] Laclau recollects in one of his interviews that his turn to poststructuralism is reflected upon his "practical experiences as a political activist in Buenos Aires" (Laclau 1990, 200; 2015c, 258).

Laclau considers social identities as differences *vis-à-vis* others. The identification, in turn, requires a system of differences, a signifying totality without which there will be an infinite relation of differences. In this condition, no identity can ultimately be constituted (Laclau 2007 [1996], 37). This infinite relation of differences marks the condition of what Laclau calls 'radical plurality.' To have a system of meaning where identities come to exist with their respective meanings requires *a constitutive act of delimitation*. Laclau calls this act of delimitation 'radical exclusion' (Ibid., 32). Radial exclusion involves designating 'the *Other*' of radical heterogeneity incommensurable with the rest. Doing so gives the system a universal character based on the common negative identification among all differences within the delimited boundary on the opposite side of the *Other*. In this regard, any system of meaning "merely exists as an *effort* to carry out that constitution [of a system of meaning]" (Laclau 1990, 214). This 'effort' is about forming a common identity based on designating and excluding what cannot be part of the system.

The notion of radical exclusion goes hand in hand with hegemony. Where radical exclusion must be carried out to establish a system of meaning, it must presuppose the subject that can carry out this process. Hegemony pertains to the construction of this subject (Laclau 2015c, 263). Hegemony indicates the phenomenon in which a difference comes to represent the system of meaning as a whole without entirely losing its particular character (Laclau 2007 [1996], 43). Radical exclusion is carried out in the name of the particular difference that assumes the hegemonic role, thereby generating a stable system of meaning in its name. The hegemonic operation is attributed to 'the unevenness of the social.' By this term, Laclau means the inequality in power among differences to perform the totalizing role (Ibid.). Some are more likely to carry out the task of signifying a new order because power is already concentrated on them. As a result, hegemony is understood as the only way to construct unity out of diversity when power is unevenly distributed

among particularities that are conjoined against *the Other*.

Now, let us move on to examining how Laclau employs hegemony (and radical exclusion implied in it) to criticize Lefort. Laclau's criticism targets the idealistic aspects of Lefort's model of instituting modern democracy as a form of society. In this regard, Laclau's criticism of Lefort does not reject Lefort's model altogether. On the contrary, Laclau seeks to fulfill Lefort's normative vision of modern democracy as an indeterminate society by reworking Lefort's original formulation of modern democracy (see Laclau 2004, 295; Nielsen 2006, 84). Laclau's primary object of criticism is the contractarian idea of mutual consent underlying the institution of democracy's empty place of power.[54] From Laclau's perspective (Laclau 2005a, 170), Lefort is wrong to understand that "pure emptiness has replaced the immortal body of the King." Laclau sees that implicit in Lefort's transition narrative is an idea of mutual consent among particular struggles. Mutual consent denotes that, in the absence of a stable societal order, social and political forces abandon their particular objectives (to borrow Arato's expression, proclaiming that 'none of us is the popular sovereign') to erect a new order of society. Laclau claims that "[such an] outcome depends only on the balance of power between antagonistic groups" (2007 [1996], 32).[55] For Laclau, "the attempt at building communitarian spaces out of a plurality of collective wills can never adopt the form of a contract" (2015a, 154). There cannot be mutual consent in a meaningful sense when those groups participating in the alleged 'negotiation' with their particular objectives have unequal power to pressure their counterparts. Against this background, Laclau maintains that the relationship between particularities can only be one of *potential war* (2007 [1996], 32). This is

[54] This 'Habermasian' reading of Lefort is particularly salient in Arato's works (2013; 2016). I will examine this reading of Lefort later in this section.

[55] Laclau finds an extreme version of this scenario in Hobbes, where the presumed condition of evenly distributed power among individuals in the state of nature results in "the covenant which surrenders total power to the Leviathan," whose action is taken collectively to avoid the continued absence of order (Laclau 2007 [1996], 54; Laclau 2001b, 7).

because they want their own demands to be prioritized over those of others, and some have more power to realize such an aspiration than others. As a result, Laclau claims that negotiation is ultimately about "making somebody change her opinion *without any ultimate rational foundation*" (Laclau 2007 [1996], 112, emphasis added; see also Laclau 2004, 291). Hence, "there is no persuasion that does not include a moment of force" (Laclau 1999, 95).

For Laclau, when mutual consent is an impossible notion, hegemony is the path toward instituting the new symbolic order of modern democracy. Laclau argues that in the face of social disintegration of the *ancien régime*, what would technically happen is the vertical integration of conflicting particularistic struggles onto the most prominent one among them (2005a, 166). This particular struggle becomes 'hegemonic' by operating as the name for signifying a universality that transcends itself. The hegemonic subject signifies the new order itself by presenting its victory as the victory of the entire community (Laclau 2000, 50; 2007 [1996], 44). Accordingly, *contra* Lefort, Laclau maintains that "it is simply not true that pure emptiness has replaced the immortal body of the King. […] the logic of embodiment continues to operate under democratic conditions" (2005a, 170). Every symbolic order is 'partially embodied' by the hegemonic subject under whose name the order has been brought about, and the process of instituting democracy is not an exception to this logic (Laclau 2014a, 173).

An important normative implication of the partial embodiment concerning democracy for Laclau is the *preclusion* of some citizens from contesting the identity of the people even when their membership status is formally acknowledged. As a crystallization of the existing power relation (Laclau 2007 [1996], 46; 2000, 54; 1990, 33), the hegemonic formation of modern democracy generates "symbolic limits to determine who can occupy the place of power" *in the first place* (Laclau 2005a, 166). That is why "the discussion of emptiness cannot remain at the

level of a place unaffected by those who occupy it" (Ibid., 170). Following Lefort, we may say that the identity of the people in democracies is subject to an ongoing process of change and renewal. However, when we take Laclau's critical approach, we can recognize that the (meaningful) participation in this process is *limited to* those already identified with the particular people currently underlying the democratic public space (see also Thomassen 2022, 1000).

The problem here is that of democracy's determinate social formation. The hegemonic process of instituting democracy comes with the figure of the '(good) citizen' identified with a particular identity (Laclau 2004, 297). For Laclau (see 2007 [1996], 34; 2004, 296) (and I think this is what situates Laclau firmly in the tradition of radical democracy), actually existing democracies presuppose a homogenous society where concrete social agents incarnate the universalist values of freedom and equality. The consequence is that citizenship rights are exercised *discriminately* in practice based on individuals' qualities and capacities to identify themselves with a particular figure of the '(good) citizen' in a given polity (Moreira 2022, 252). The image of this figure is, in turn, a source of structural domination of those members of society who are deemed to lack arbitrary qualities constituting a '(good) citizen' (Khan 2022, 134–6). That is, with this image, "the arbitrary power of social relations, processes, norms and practices […] place some individuals and groups in subservient positions" (Ibid., 136). In the context of a hegemonic social formation, exercising democratic citizenship becomes, in effect, an *entitlement*.[56]

[56] Laclau's theoretical construct is not some Kantian thought experiment but, on the contrary, an abstraction firmly based on a critical observation of the concrete reality in which the Argentinian philosopher was embedded (see Laclau 1990, 177–8, 200; see also Mendonça 2014, 60–2). The contextual approach to Laclau's thought can prevent his commentators from denouncing Laclau as a pseudo-totalitarian thinker (see, for example, Norris 2006, 115). Laclau spent his formative years in Argentina, whose 'semi-colonial' geopolitical position within the global imperial order provided the young Marxist a critical perspective of (European) political modernity, most representatively marked by the advent of liberal democracy (i.e., constitutional democracy) (See also Acha (2020) for the enduring relevance and

Therefore, the concept of hegemony in Laclau *theoretically* accounts for the gap between the empty place of power as a judicial, formal condition of modern (liberal-constitutional) democracy and the actual realization of this ideal in practice (Laclau 2005a, 169). Laclau's grievance toward Lefort is *not* that the French philosopher does not know that this gap exists in actually existing democracies. *Rather*, Lefort's real problem from Laclau's perspective is that *there is no theoretical treatment of this gap in Lefort despite Lefort's recognition of it in practice* (Ibid.). For Laclau, speaking of hegemony means treating the discrepancy between formal equality and informal inequality in democracies as a theoretical problem in conceptualizing democratic politics.[57] Accordingly, hegemony is the central notion in Laclau that 'radicalizes' Lefort's model

influence of Laclau's formative years in Argentina on his later intellectual trajectory. Acha's work focuses on addressing Laclau's troubled relationship with Marxism from a critical perspective). Laclau suggests that in Argentina (and Latin America in general), liberal democracy was originally the ideology of the 'landowning oligarchy' whose motivation for adopting the liberal democratic system was to fully incorporate the country's economy into the world market by "creat[ing] the conditions of political stability and institutional continuity necessary for economic activity to develop" (1977, 178). Unlike Europe, where "the liberal state arose largely in the struggle against feudal particularism," in Latin America, "they were complementary" (Ibid.). Accordingly, in Laclau's view, liberal democracy in the Argentinian (and Latin American) context was instituted as a political regime sustained by 'landowning oligarchic hegemony' that effectively excluded the masses from the political domain. Unlike Lefort, who championed a democratic society's gradual progress in terms of the expansion of political (and social) rights while dismissing pushback against such an effort as marginal at best, Laclau was keen to capture the enduring legacies of the oligarchic rule in the guise of liberal democracy and the initial exclusion of the masses from the formal institutional political arena. Laclau was especially concerned about the two interconnected political developments in Latin American countries, that is, "military dictatorships and the destruction of the continent's economics by neoliberalism," which further attributed to "a crisis of institutions as channels for satisfying social demands" (2019, 383).

[57] In this regard, it would be a mistake to consider the nature of Laclau's theory of populism as formal in that it does not provide a normative criterion (or criteria) to distinguish the 'good' populism from the 'bad' one (Balibar 2013, 190). The formal reading of Laclau is prevalent among Laclau's contemporary commentators (see, for example, Stavrakakis 2004, 262; Mueller 2019, 1029; Jäger and Borriello 2020, 752; Vergara 2020a, 231). For instance, while appreciating Laclau's theoretical efforts to conceptualize the people as a discursive construct rather than a homogenous nation, Paulina Ochoa Espejo maintains that even if Laclau's theory of populism "could help us explain how collective identities emerge, it does not help us solve the normative problem at hand: *When should we embrace a popular movement*" (Espejo 2015, 73; see also Busk 2020, 76; Acha 2020, 204)? From this perspective, populism oscillates between a corrective and a threat to democracy at best (Kaltwasser 2012; see also Norris 2002, 563). Such a criticism is not entirely invalid since Laclau (2014b, 256; see also Laclau 2005, 10, 131–2) himself admits in one of his last interviews that "[d]emocratic demands can quite obviously be articulated to different political projects which are not democratic at all." However, the 'formalist' reading of Laclau undermines the normative force Laclau's proposal of populism bears toward the unequal status quo perpetuated by the immanent logic of constitutional democracy. Accordingly, reading Laclau as providing a formal theory of populism understates that Laclau's populism is fundamentally oriented toward reinstating equality by tackling the existing hierarchy of citizenship (see also Biglieri and Cadahia 2021, 15, 36).

of radical democracy. It makes Laclau develop a coherent theoretical account of radical democratic politics that is allegiant to his critical view of an actually existing democracy. By pinning down the gap between formal equality and informal inequality as a constitutive aspect of modern democracy, the concept of hegemony compels Laclau to think of the modality (and temporality) of radical democratic politics *against the background of such discrepancy*. Therefore, hegemony is the key notion for Laclau to answer "[how] to build up a democratic society *in a context of deep inequality*" (Laclau 2004, 297 emphasis added). Then, the next question is: what does exactly radical democratic politics look like when seeing it through the lens of hegemony?

Most notably, for Laclau, radical democratic politics is a struggle against inequalities rather than a competition of differences. In responding to his critics, Laclau echoes Lefort's claim that what makes democracy 'radical' is "the institutionalization of uncertainty" (2004, 295). However, Laclau immediately adds that we can interpret the meaning of the institutionalization of uncertainty in two different ways. First, "[uncertainty] is conceived as an uncertainty concerning the decisions taken by *given* historical actors" (Ibid., emphasis original). In this definition, uncertainty is institutionalized in the sense that *already established* political actors with different views and opinions compete with one another in making collective decisions over time. Uncertainty lies in the fact that those decisions are not predetermined and are subject to mutual deliberation among participants in that process. However, according to Laclau, the institutionalization of uncertainty can also mean something more profound. In this case, uncertainty signifies that the social and political arrangements in which the competition of already established political actors occurs are never fixed and are subject to permanent change. Radical democratic politics takes the form of the struggle of those who are currently excluded from the political arena to reconfigure the very terrain of political competition. In Laclau's own words, "[d]emocracy is only radical if it involves an

effort to give a political voice to the underdog" (Ibid.). Importantly, for democracy to be defined in terms of uncertainty, the negation of inequality should be an ongoing process (Nielsen 2006, 85; Kempf 2021). Otherwise, democratic politics would degenerate into authoritarianism (Laclau 2015c, 267; Laclau 2005a, 208 in Kempf 2021, 293).

The difference between the two politics of uncertainty can be expressed in terms of hegemony. The competition of differences happens *within* the hegemonic social formation, while the struggle against inequalities revolves *around* it. Hegemony in Laclau implies that although a democratic society is defined in terms of the indeterminacy of the people, in reality, it always upholds a determinate image of a particular people. This image is inscribed in the regime's public space and hierarchically structures the way citizens interact with one another within this domain (Ibid., 168; see also Laclau 2007 [1996], 33). Accordingly, equality exists only among hegemonic actors. They are equal "in a homogeneous public sphere," where they follow a set of procedural rules to settle disagreements among themselves (Laclau 2004, 297). However, there cannot be a meaningful conversation between those who successfully and securely identify themselves with(in) society's hegemonic formation and those who do not. This is because the relationship between them is that of inequality (Ibid., 296). In this case, equality is a goal rather than a presupposition. Accordingly, the politics of uncertainty "consists in bringing […] those excluded from the process of [hegemonic] representation […] into the historical arena" (Ibid., 297). This process takes the form of a counter-hegemonic struggle since the existing hegemonic formation is the source of inequality.

In construing radical democratic politics as a counter-hegemonic struggle, Laclau brings antagonism into explaining the unique dynamics of radical democratic politics (see 2005a, 81–2; 125). For Laclau, antagonism is an indispensable part of a counter-hegemonic struggle because the

struggle emerges from the social locations that are 'radically excluded' from the existing hegemonic order. Radical exclusion connotes 'irrepresentability' within the democratic public space. Irrepresentable actors, by definition, seek to transform the current hegemonic configurations of the public space *from outside*, that is, the position antagonized by hegemonic actors. I would argue that, for this reason, the actions that seek to undermine the existing hegemony would invite backlash from the hegemonic actors who do not perceive the radical challenges (and challengers) to the unequal status quo as legitimate.[58] In this context, Laclau's endorsement of exclusion and antagonism does not render him an anti-pluralist. On the contrary, Lalcau's valorization of antagonism in radical democratic politics is a mark of his fidelity to pluralism. This is because, in Laclau's paradigm of radical democracy, the antagonism of the counter-hegemonic forces countervails that of backlashers who seek to maintain the unequal status quo (see also Kempf 2021, 291; cf. Moreira 2020, 273). Against this background, I would describe Laclau's position as 'antagonistic pluralism.' Lalcau would argue that antagonism does not contradict pluralism insofar as it is waged against social and political forces that seek to preserve the unequal status quo. In this case, antagonism is always the counter-antagonism against the one emanating from the existing hegemonic order (in the form of backlash).

To conclude, what does Laclau achieve by bringing antagonism to the center of theorizing (radical) democratic politics? From the perspective of radical democracy, I would say that an important virtue of Laclau's approach is that it provides a logically coherent account of radical democratic politics. Laclau's account of radical democracy does not lose track of the implications

[58] Laclau does not mention backlash in his writings, let alone address it as a consequence of democracy's hegemonic formation. However, the point I make here is that the idea of backlash is implicit in the concept of hegemony. I am not alone in making this interpretation. Recent developments in the Laclau scholarship include analyzing anti-populism as a form of backlash whose stance is hegemonically constructed (in a Laclauian sense) to maintain the status quo (Stavrakakis et al. 2018; Stavrakakis 2018; see also Kováts 2018). However, even the recent works do not explicitly articulate anti-populism in terms of backlash. My contribution is partly to make that connection clear.

of social and political inequalities for the efforts to redress them. As shown in the previous chapters, this is something Lefort and his contemporary followers often fail to do in their accounts of radical democracy. For Laclau, what characterizes democratic politics is not only that it aims to tackle social and political inequalities in democratic societies at a given time and place. But, through the notion of hegemony, Laclau also takes seriously the fact that those inequalities are the very conditions in which democratic politics takes place. In other words, Laclau understands that those inequalities shape the dynamics of democratic politics and theorizes democratic politics based on this understanding. This is how Laclau captures the antagonistic dimension unique to (radical) democratic politics. Radical democratic politics involves the deployment of antagonism precisely to counter the antagonism of those who seek to maintain the unequal status quo. Against this background, erasing antagonism altogether from conceptualizing radical democratic politics, as Lefort-inspired radical democrats often do (see Chapter 2), only leads to reducing the meaning of democratic politics as a struggle against inequalities to a competition of differences. If this happens, we are no longer on the terrain of radical democracy.

What Criticisms of Laclau Tells Us about Critics

Before evaluating Laclau's model of antagonistic pluralism, how might we understand the criticism waged against Laclau for advancing anti-pluralism? Here, I want to turn the tables on Laclau's critics by reading their criticisms against Laclau symptomatically. I would argue that their criticisms of Laclau reveal the absence of conceptual vocabulary like hegemony that can theoretically account for the antagonistic aspects of (radical) democratic politics. Against Laclau, critics often suggest that we need to pluralize the public space of democracy further and make it more open and inclusive so that it can better "facilitate and perpetuate interaction between people, and to proliferate the opportunities for interaction" (Ferguson 2012, 118). The imperative is to

form an environment where all citizens can meaningfully participate in public decision-making (Arato and Cohen 2021, 218; Urbinati 2019, 72). Laclau's critics argue that we should not follow Laclau to assume that "everything else [other than populism] will amount to mere administration or cooptation into existing political and social arrangements" (Müller 2016, 69). Critics admit that representative democracy can "illegitimately exclude some sectors of the population" and involve the problems of "being insufficiently responsive, accountable, or procedurally/institutionally democratic." However, they often maintain that such shortcomings do not undermine the regime's *fundamentally open and inclusive character*. This is because the processes and institutions of democracy can always allow the excluded social actors to "democratize, defend, and expand [their] rights" (Cohen 2019a, 16). Accordingly, for Laclau's critics, deepening (as opposed to undermining) pluralism in the public decision-making process by making space for opposition and including the excluded voices within democratic public space is the proper way to pluralize democracy as an outcome. In short, critics believe that pluralism can only feed upon pluralism.

From the Laclauian perspective, critics overlook the fact that democracy is a form of society whose normative order (i.e., the partition of what is right, legitimate, true, and so on) does not emerge from a vacuum but must be instituted or signified. Laclau's commentators who uphold democracy as fundamentally open and inclusive make an ontological assumption that the identity of the people buttressing democracy's normative order is indeterminate *in the first place*. As we have seen earlier, Laclau's philosophical project, ontologically speaking, "consist[s] in asserting the centrality of the political moment in the constitution of the social and, as a result, in highlighting the constitutive character […] of the category of *antagonism*" (Laclau 2010, 233). Laclau is a critical thinker whose thesis is that the public space in a democratic society is *originally constituted by and permanently marked by (either explicit or implicit) antagonism and exclusion*

(Marchart 2005, 5; Biglieri and Cadahia 2021, 5). Instead of examining Laclau's rationale behind his ontological claim about (modern) democracy, the critical commentators of Laclau often evaluate the Argentinian philosopher based on their own ontological assumption (Laclau 2015c, 266). By doing so, not only do they fail to appreciate Laclau's important insights into (radical) democratic politics, but they also miss an opportunity to critically evaluate the plausibility of their own ontological claims about democracy and democratic politics.

Let me illustrate a representative case of such failure. Andrew Arato is among the fiercest and most consistent critics of Laclau. According to Arato (2016; 2019; Arato and Cohen 2021), Laclau's egalitarian vision of society is destined to be frustrated in the process of realizing it by the method Laclau favors, that is, *populism*. Arato does not deny the legitimacy of the popular indignation that underlies the populist movements within many constitutional democracies today. The regime's inevitable gap between representatives and represented, which has traditionally been the source of disappointments and frustrations among democratic citizens, is rapidly growing. The elected officials are becoming increasingly incapable of responding to popular needs and demands (Arato 2019, 1108). At the same time, Arato admits that the recent cases of democratic transition, in part, failed to bring the principle of popular sovereignty into fruition, leaving problematic legacies such as inequality, corruption, and the lack of political forces that meaningfully convey the public's democratic aspiration (Ibid., 1109).

However, Arato does not take Laclau's path to uphold populism as the solution to the unequal status quo (Ibid., 1113). This is because populism has its own democratic deficits even when it makes democratic claims (e.g., reinstating popular sovereignty). From Arato's perspective, populism's core features include the valorization of a part as (representing) the whole, the construction of an antagonistic frontier between 'us' and 'them,' and the strong identification with

a leader. Together, they render populist forces genuinely intolerant to opposition and disagreement. Therefore, what Arato sees underneath populism is an authoritarian temptation, the path that leads to the frustration of the ideal of equality, freedom, and solidarity that populist movements initially sought to achieve (cf. Žižek 2006, 559).

In this context, Arato pits populism against his preferred solution of reinvigorating civil society. This solution is meant to pluralize avenues for voice, action, and participation (Arato and Cohen 2021, 188). While admitting that populism emerges from civil society, Arato distinguishes populism and civil society on the ground that "modern civil society is by its nature plural, and populist initiatives are anti-pluralistic" (2019, 1108). Civil society is "the institutional space of plurality, of disagreement, and of conflict as well as of consensus, compromise, and reconciliation" rather than the domain to produce an artificial unity against disagreements and conflicts (Arato and Cohen 2021, 190; Cohen and Arato 1992). In short, civil society is the primary domain of mutual deliberation of free and equal citizens to realize the pluralistic vision of society. For Arato (2019, 1113), to conceive of civil society in terms of constructing an artificial unity, as in the case of (Laclau's) populism, is to "completely surrender […] the idea of rationality and genuine societal improvement."

However, at least in his critique of populism, Arato offers no justification for why we should *not* surrender (or at least suspect) the idea of rationality and genuine societal improvement. At best, for Arato (see, for example, Cohen and Arato 1992, 20–3), there is no reason *not* to believe in (what is, in fact, an ideologically charged) idea of open-mindedness and social progress. After all, Arato *believes* that "liberal democracy is by its nature an unfinished and incomplete project" (Arato and Cohen 2021, 1). Accordingly, civil society appears for Arato as the domain of rationality and societal improvement because Arato presupposes that liberal (constitutional)

democracy, which is dubbed as 'modern democracy' in Lefort, is an unfinished and incomplete project (Arato 2016, 289). In this case, Arato's particular ontological view of modern democracy *predetermines* his understanding of the regime's public space and its emancipatory potential.

Against this background, Arato conceives of the real-life imperfections of contemporary democracies as a matter of empirical contingency and neglects their systemic nature (see also Vergara 2020b; Skadhauge 2023, 774). As mentioned earlier, Arato is keenly aware of inequalities, corruption, and the ineffectiveness of formal representative systems in today's democratic societies. However, the fact that Arato deems those problems as an empirically contingent phenomenon means that, unlike Laclau, he does not ponder their implications in theorizing the nature of the public interaction among democratic citizens. For Laclau, inequalities, corruption, and the malfunctioning of democratic institutions point to the limitation of mutual deliberation for redressing those problems. Laclau's notion of hegemony indicates that civil society is already and always embedded in social relations shaped by inequalities, corruption, and the malfunctioning of democratic institutions. This means that civil society is not pluralistic in the first place and that mutual deliberation to address democratic deficits is at least logically an impossible notion. From the Laclauian perspective, Arato's problem is that he insulates civil society from the problems that he identifies in a democratic society. This idealization of civil society, in turn, entails obfuscating the intensity of the imbalance of power and antagonism between different groups of citizens that work in favor of the status quo-oriented group.

I would argue that the source of idealization in Arato lies in the absence of conceptual vocabulary that would allow Arato to formulate a normative proposal for deepening democracy *against the backdrop of inequalities*. Such an aspect of Arato is characteristically shown through his incapacity to understand the meaning of Laclau's partial embodiment of democracy's empty

place of power. Arato criticizes Laclau for "abandon[ing] Lefort's definition of democracy as the emptiness of the place of power and the process of institutionally securing its emptiness" (2016, 282). Arato continues that, for Laclau, "[t]he political space can be and even must be filled, at least 'partially' (*whatever this means*)" (Ibid., 283, emphasis added). Here, Arato fails to comprehend the meaning of the partial embodiment, which is a crucial notion for Laclau to address the systemic impact of social and political inequalities on the public life of citizens. I read this failure as a symptom of Arato's lack of theoretical and conceptual resources to incorporate exclusions, inequalities, and hierarchies that deeply penetrate the public life of democratic citizens into theory building.

To sum up, this and the previous section have sought to appreciate Laclau's account of democratic politics as a version of radicalized radical democracy. I have tried to show that Laclau does what Lefort and the contemporary students of constituent power are supposed to do to preserve their radical democratic vision of democratic politics. That is, bringing antagonism to the center of conceptualizing (radical) democratic politics by appreciating the impacts of social inequalities on the public interactions of democratic citizens. For Laclau (1990, 187), democratic politics is, first and foremost, a negative enterprise of "an unlimited questioning […] of the type of validity attributable to any organization and any value." Lefort would not disagree with this statement. However, what is unique about Laclau is that he understands the modality of the negative enterprise of questioning solely in terms of struggle rather than competition. Laclau does so by setting social (and political) inequalities as the subject of conflict and upholding antagonism as a key element that forms the distinctive dynamics of democratic politics as a struggle. From my perspective, that is what Laclau (partly) does when construing (radical) democratic politics in terms of hegemony.

In criticizing Lefort's account of modern democracy and democratic politics, Laclau employs hegemony to illustrate the particular logic of embodiment in a democratic society that Lefort fails to capture in defining modern democracy in terms of indeterminacy. While Laclau follows Lefort to understand democracy as an indeterminate society, Laclau addresses the mismatch between the principle of indeterminacy and the determinate social formation that frustrates this principle in practice *at the level of theory*. For Laclau, such a gap is constitutive of any existing democracy since the process of instituting a democratic order is fundamentally that of a power struggle. Laclau describes this process in terms of hegemony. It privileges a certain group of actors (and their goals) as the reference point of universality while setting up the boundary against the Other. This 'hegemonic' operation underlying the institution of democratic order brings about social inequalities. Everyone is equal by virtue of their formal citizenship. However, some are 'more equal' than others due to the hegemonic ordering of society. Against this background, Laclau understands the purpose of (radical) democratic politics as negating the existing social inequalities through counter-hegemonic struggle. For Laclau, radical democratic politics does not take the form of a competition of different views and opinions. The issue at stake is not difference but inequality. Moreover, radical democratic politics necessarily entails antagonism from both sides of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces because there is no common ground between them to have a 'mutual deliberation.'

I have read hegemony in Laclau as the concept that does the central work in radicalizing Laclau's model of radical democracy. Hegemony explains radical exclusion in the 'liberal democratic' public space and suggests the modality of democratic action to negate the existing condition of radical exclusion. In the meantime, while hegemony allows Laclau to develop a coherent theory of radical democracy, it frames the nature of radical exclusion and the modality

and temporality of democratic action in a particular way. For Laclau, (radical) democratic politics is about replacing the existing hegemonic identity of the people with another. In lieu of conclusion, the following section illustrates three related setbacks of this conception of democratic politics. Based on this critical assessment, the next chapter will introduce and examine an alternative way of radicalizing radical democracy.

In Lieu of Conclusion: A Critical Assessment of Laclau's Antagonistic Pluralism

Despite hegemony's role in radicalizing radical democracy, it confines the way we think of the nature of radical exclusion and the normative solution to promote pluralism against the status quo. In this section, I argue that conceiving democracy's determinate social formation in terms of hegemony involves some crucial epistemological limitations. Those limitations involve failing to capture the persistence of the gap between formal equality and informal inequality in democracies and to appreciate the role of more mundane democratic actions. Relatedly, hegemony for Laclau implies that the possibility for social transformation *from within* the existing hegemonic formation is entirely closed. For Laclau, the possibility of change comes only from those who are excluded from the hegemonic order. Hegemony in Laclau implies that democratic politics does not emerge until there are enough who are dissatisfied with the existing hegemonic order. This view may be true in some cases, especially concerning those citizens who have much to lose materially and symbolically by the hegemonic shift. However, limiting the pool of democratic actors is implausible because it makes the path toward social transformation too demanding. In what follows, I will discuss each issue in turn.

First, hegemony in Laclau does not fully account for the persistence and resilience of the existing inequalities. Underlying Laclau's ontological conception of hegemony is the lingering strategic concern to unite social forces with disparate objects and sustain that unity to elicit *regime*

change (Cavooris 2017, 243; Acha 2020, 190). Accordingly, hegemony in Laclau is often identified with a political force occupying state power. Democratic politics (as a counter-hegemonic struggle) is understood subsequently as taking state power or generating a substantive change in the existing governing paradigm of those in power. Populism for Laclau is conceived in this manner. Social grievances or demands not satisfied by the government are collectively expressed toward and against the ruling power under the banner of the people to form a new government. Laclau admits that some hegemonic orders are more stable than others (2005, 170). However, when any existing hegemonic order is confronted with a successful counter-hegemonic struggle, it will be *replaced* with a new hegemony. The point is that, from the perspective of hegemony, whenever the negation of existing radical exclusion happens, *it leaves no remnant of the past behind*. A hegemonic transformation will necessarily engender new radical exclusion. However, the previous one will cease to exist with the institution of a new hegemony.

While the concept of hegemony makes it possible to address the empirical phenomenon of radical exclusion theoretically, it falls short of capturing the persistence and resilience of the existing social and political inequalities. As Samuele Mazzolini aptly points out (2020, 776), "[Laclau's] theory of populism presupposes an entirely smooth plane whereby the successful intervention of a populist practice always and necessarily displaces the previous social formation and installs a new one entirely coherent with itself." Following this line of criticism, we can say that occupying political power does not necessarily entail the subversion of social power as the more fundamental source of given social and political inequalities (see also Borriello and Jäger 2021, 303). Even when the dominant members of society lose their political power, their defeat often does not immediately and directly translate into the dispossession of the material and symbolic power that they enjoy in the broader social domains. This is especially likely when that

power is historically consolidated to make the given state of inequality systemic.

Furthermore, by construing democratic politics as a matter of replacing state power, Laclau obfuscates how society's traditionally dominant members continue to wield their influence on sabotaging the stabilization of a new hegemonic formation. Their continued influence is explainable in two respects. The first has to do with populism's self-negating character. Populism as a counter-hegemonic project cannot stand on its own but relies on the presence of its antagonistic *Other*. The antagonistic *Other* is "necessary in order [for a populist force] to create a [new] single space of representation" (Laclau 2004, 319). This is because the antagonistic *Other* makes the constitution of the chain of equivalence among the particularistic struggles possible. Once populism topples the preexisting power that has occupied the place of the 'enemy,' the populist leadership becomes susceptible to internal disagreements between particularistic struggles that initially comprise the counter-hegemonic coalition. While a successful hegemonic transformation would mean that the social or political forces that represent the previous hegemony no longer pose a dire threat to populism in power, the enemy's weakened presence in the political scene would signal the disintegration of the populist force.[59] In this regard, populism cannot stop interpellating its enemy (even) when it comes into power insofar as it wants to remain in power without falling apart, which is necessary for the populist regime to promote its agendas (see also Müller 2016, 42).

However, there is good reason not to assume that an external threat is entirely fictional.

[59] Laclau is not entirely unaware of this paradoxical aspect of populism when he analyzes the rise and fall of Peronism in the 60s and 70s. Laclau recalls that Peronism was only successful in the face of repression by the anti-Peronist governments, which led Perón himself to exile. Social grievances merged under the name of Perón, whose absence rendered his name the source of symbolic unity among disparate actors with "totally incompatible political principles." The fall of Peronism ensued following Perón's return to Argentina after the landslide victory of Peronism. Factions within the coalition were pronounced, culminating in the new regime's rapid de-institutionalization (Laclau 2005, 214–21). However, Laclau does not make explicit the point about the relationship between populism and its antagonistic Other in his illustration of Peronism in power specifically.

Previously dominant groups often make continuous efforts to regain their political power. They often legitimize their efforts in the very name of democracy. Populism emerges within the modern political imaginary in which equality already functions formally as the fundamental principle of social coordination (see Arditi 2015, 102). Populism appears to violate the formal political equality of all citizens. Such instances are especially pronounced in (but not limited to) Latin American countries. There, traditional elites and the dominant part of society often accuse the populist victors representing the traditionally excluded groups of being illegitimate usurpers of democracy (see de la Torre 2015, 354; Tushnet and Bugarič 2022, 68; see also Stavrakakis et al. 2018). I will address this phenomenon where 'democracy' is employed to frustrate democratic struggle more systematically in the following chapter. For now, suffice it to say that the concept of hegemony gives rise to a simplistic understanding of the temporality of radical democratic politics that does not sufficiently consider the social and historical entrenchedness of social and political inequalities in practice.[60]

[60] As a marginal note, I want to point out a side issue related to Laclau's inattention to the social and historical entrenchedness of social and political inequalities. I discuss this issue in the margins partly because it is theoretically important but does not fit into the overall flow of my argumentation. In *PR*, Laclau suggests the notion of 'heterogeneity' to explain the temporal logic of populism. Heterogeneity indicates those demands left behind in forming social division as "they cannot be represented in any structural location within the two antagonistic camps" (Laclau 2005a, 148). Simply put, heterogeneous demands "[do] not have access to a general space of representation" (Ibid., 139). Heterogeneous demands do not have their place in the current counter-hegemonic struggle (because they do not constitute the 'chain of equivalence'). Those demands are the key to understanding Laclau's populism as an ongoing project of self-regeneration and innovation. The existence of heterogeneity implies that any populist project is necessarily incomplete in that it cannot incorporate all currently unfulfilled demands in society. In this context, heterogeneity reminds us that the constitution of the people and the societal order (that is, society's space of representation) established upon it are ultimately contingent (on their foundation) and always open to change (Thomassen 2019b, 51). The realm of heterogeneity is the site of an ongoing populist formation whose task involves unsettling and reconfiguring the existing antagonistic frontier (Laclau 2005a, 154). The populist regime's failure and incapacity to respond to unfulfilled demands of society (within and without the populist coalition) would initiate another cycle of a populist formation. However, the problem is that, even if granted that we cannot say *a priori* which identity is going to play the hegemonic role, the extent to which the marginalized subjects within and without the current populist coalition will be the locus of another populist formation is highly uncertain, given the social and historical entrenchedness of radical exclusion (McKean 2016; cf. Thomassen 2019a, 338). A more likely scenario is that newly emerging unfulfilled demands under the populist government are gathered around the society's vested interest. A possible outcome is likely to be the rise of right-wing populism in the guise of restoring constitutional democracy. This outcome merely reflects—as Laclau would acknowledge—the asymmetry of power within society.

Finally, a related problem is that hegemony's incapacity to capture the persistence and resilience of the existing social and political inequalities leads to the valorization of a grand-scale political struggle as the only modality of democratic politics. This tendency involves undermining the role of particularistic struggles, such as SADD's rush-hour subway action (see Introduction), in mitigating the integrity of a given determinate social formation *over time*. Under the framework of hegemony, Laclau is skeptical of the scenario in which particularistic social and political struggles gradually alleviate social and political inequalities. This is because Laclau understands that "[the] demands [expressed through particularistic struggles] cannot be articulated into any wider hegemonic operation to reform the system [of exclusions dictated by the dominant groups]" (2007 [1996], 44; cf. Disch 2021, 129). Laclau argues that when different social and political struggles try to fulfill their goals independently from one another, they are doomed to reaffirm the status quo. For Laclau, this is the case even when those struggles succeed in promoting their particular agendas. Laclau admits that a separate struggle is a viable option for a social group to pursue its own goal (2007 [1996], 49). However, insofar as the "system of exclusions dictated by the dominant groups" remains intact, any social group that is involved in the struggle to "defend [its] right to difference" on its own "condemns itself to a perpetually marginalized and ghettoized existence" (Ibid.). 'Pure particularism' is "the death of politics." The marginalized location that the social group occupies within the existing configuration of power would not change by the mere achievement of recognition within the hegemonic order (Laclau 2005a, 155).

For Laclau, the victories of individual social and political struggles do not accumulate to

When the preexisting image of the people looms behind the formation of a new counter-hegemonic bloc, a traditional dominant group that occupies that image is most likely to be the one that represents the whole and stands for the universal (see also Zerilli 2004, 101–2). The end of this scenario is the return to business as usual, which was often the case of aspirational populist experiments in recent years in Europe and elsewhere (see Bortun 2023).

induce bigger changes together or separately. Nor do they mitigate the integrity of the given hegemonic order. On the contrary, the fulfillment of independent agendas of particular struggles represents the vitality of an existing hegemonic order. In Laclau's view, the fact that particular demands are met individually within the given hegemonic order indicates that this order has enough resources and capacity to deal with them. In this context, Laclau anticipates that the more stable the order is, the less likely the coalition for a joint struggle is formed (Ibid., 197). The concept of hegemony implies that the construction of 'the people' among the broad range of social forces with unfulfilled demands is the only way to achieve meaningful social change. Accordingly, the fulfillment of the agendas of particular social and political struggles is considered a mere sign of cooptation. For Laclau, the integrity of the (given) hegemonic order is unraveled in a single stroke through exercising the people's power, or it never comes undone. Consequently, through the lens of hegemony, Laclau sees the relationship between particularistic and general/hegemonic struggles as antithetical.

Laclau cannot grasp the dynamics of social transformation fully with the strict distinction between a particular and hegemonic struggle. The framework of hegemony does not allow Laclau to appreciate how social and political struggles can gain prominence and play the hegemonic role at a decisive moment by making victories over time. This process would involve not just backlash but also an increase in awareness of such struggles, which can stimulate support from those who may not be the direct victims of radical exclusion but still sympathize with the cause of those struggles. A good example would be a historical struggle against racial injustices in the United States (Francis and Wright-Rigueur 2021). As I have shown in the introductory chapter, for many scholars, American society has historically been and continues to be marked by a wide range of social and political institutions permeated with racial inequalities. However, this bleak reality

should not overshadow the fact that the struggles against racial injustices have strenuously challenged and undermined the historically formed structures of white supremacy. Those struggles have been carried out amid and against the recurrent and persistent backlash (see, for example, Luttrell 2019, chapter 3). More to the point, in recent years, the struggles against police violence against Black civilians and white supremacy in American society have achieved national and global profiles and become the focal point of articulating various aspirations for social justice (Hesse 2022). At the same time, these struggles have been largely successful in mobilizing white citizens who would otherwise enjoy the unearned privileges of being white within the white supremacist hegemonic formation (Ibid., 565; Myers 2022, 136).

Recent struggles against racial injustices in America show an important limitation in Laclau's 'hegemonic' model of antagonistic pluralism. This model does not successfully capture the initiatives and movements for social transformation emerging and evolving *from within* the liberal democratic public space. For this reason, I understand Laclau to be on the other extreme of Lefort. By framing his intervention around hegemony, Laclau significantly underestimates democratic citizens' capacity and willingness to listen to the radically excluded voices articulated through particular struggles (Arato 2019, 1113). In Laclau's 'populist' vision of social change, the agents of social change can only be the currently excluded. Hegemony entails a simplistic worldview where democratic politics occurs along the antagonistic line between the hegemonic and non-hegemonic groups. Among other problems, this view makes democratic politics too demanding and ineffective. Democratic politics would be too demanding because people would not join the democratic struggle unless they are the direct stakeholders of it. At the same time, democratic politics would be ineffective since the agents of democratic struggle would have no incentive to reach out to citizens for their support.

The epistemological limitations of hegemony make Laclau's approach to radicalize radical democracy a half success. Laclau's antagonistic pluralism theoretically addresses the phenomenon of radical exclusion through the concept of hegemony. This is something that Lefort and the radical democratic theorists of constituent power fail to do. In that regard, Laclau should be given credit for illuminating the antagonistic dimension of radical democratic politics and defining democratic politics solely in terms of struggle. Accordingly, Laclau's account of hegemony proves to be one way to achieve internal coherence in radical democracy. However, Laclau misses some important aspects of radical exclusion and simplifies the modality and temporality of democratic politics. The following chapter turns to Jacques Rancière to introduce another concept to carry out the radicalization of radical democracy. By reconstructing Rancière's thought around the concept of the 'police,' I will show that with Rancière, we can understand the temporal logic of democratic politics not as replacing one image of the people with another but as negating the existing people's image/identity over time. I will try to prove that this understanding of radical democratic politics addresses the problem of social inequalities in democracies more adequately than Laclau's.

Chapter Four
Promoting Pluralism against the 'Pluralist' Backlash: A Lesson of Jacques Rancière

Introduction

The previous chapter examined Ernesto Laclau's 'antagonistic' account of radical democracy. In this account, Laclau employs the notion of hegemony to explain simultaneously the internal exclusion of citizens from communal life and their struggles to overcome the status quo. A crucial implication of hegemony is that the struggle against internal exclusion as a counter-hegemonic struggle will be antagonistic. This is because of two intersecting reasons. First, hegemony implies that there is no mutual ground for potential agreement between conflicting parties. The hegemonic formation of society limits the field of political intelligibility. Citizens within the existing hegemonic order cannot recognize the agents of democratic struggle as equal interlocutors in the first place.[61] But, on a deeper level, the problem is not simply the lack of awareness of the actors of democratic struggle as equal interlocutors. The implicit assumption of hegemony is that the hegemonic group will actively defend the hegemonic order, even if its members acknowledge inequality (see also Ikuta 2022). For Laclau, hegemony implies unequal relations of power and privilege in society. Insofar as a counter-hegemonic struggle aims at the fundamental transformation of those relationships, the hegemonic group will try to sabotage and frustrate such a struggle. Laclau thus brings backlash to the center of theorizing radical democratic

[61] While Laclau does not think that the principles of freedom and inequality championed by a constitutional democratic regime are entirely nominal, Laclau is ultimately skeptical of the inherent moral force of those principles to elicit democratic changes. Instead, those principles are effective only when they are *politically* rendered to serve as an 'empty signifier' for a counter-hegemonic struggle (Laclau 2005a, 96, 171).

politics without directly mentioning it. As a result, the hegemonic actors' incapacity and unwillingness to engage with the counter-hegemonic forces make the process of social transformation antagonistic.

In his antagonistic account of radical democracy, Laclau argues that undermining the determinate identity of the people in a democracy involves mobilizing a collective force that can undo the existing people's identity in a single stroke. This view, I claim, pays insufficient attention to the persistence and resilience of the people's identity inscribed in the social fabric of a particular democracy. Laclau ends up upholding an overly dramatic and spectacular view of democratic politics. By doing so, his model obfuscates socially and historically entrenched forms of inequality, exclusion, and hierarchy that endure over time. Against this background, I turn to Jacques Rancière (1940–present). I read Rancière as suggesting an alternative model of antagonistic pluralism. With Rancière, we can understand radical democratic politics as an ongoing temporally extended and spatially pluralized process of *negating* the existing identity of the people. To highlight the distinctiveness of Rancière's logic of social change, I juxtapose Rancière with Lefort and Laclau. Rancière does not think of radical democratic politics in terms of *renegotiating* the people's identity through public dialogue among equals (as in Lefort). Nor does Rancière suggest *replacing* the people's identity altogether with another through a collective force of the excluded (as in Laclau). Instead, Rancière provides a less celebratory and more realistic view in which radical democratic politics occurs as an arduous process of negating the determinate identity of the people that constantly militates against its demise. While not dismissing the antagonistic dimension of democratic struggle, Rancière's model does not entirely give up on democratic citizens' willingness and capacity to self-reflect and "[unlearn] defective social norms and practices" when confronted with democratic struggles (see Lu 2023, 153).

This chapter reconstructs Rancière's version of radical democracy around his notion of the 'police.' I understand the police as the conceptual device for Rancière to capture the discrepancy between formal equality and informal inequality in democratic societies and articulate its implications in conceptualizing radical democratic politics. Accordingly, in terms of its function, Rancière's police is equivalent to Laclau's hegemony. However, this chapter will show the relative advantage of the police over hegemony as a notion to carry out the project of radicalizing radical democracy. This is mainly because the police better accounts for the persistence and resilience of a determinate social formation. Rancière understands the 'police' as an underlying logic of any sensory regime that pre-configures what is perceptible and what is not. Paired with the police is 'politics,' which indicates a logic of disruption of the perceptual configuration of the police. The scholarship on Rancière has often focused on the notion of politics to draw insights and implications about democratic politics from Rancière's political thought. Instead of following this path, I focus on the notion of the police. In doing so, I will illuminate a crucial mechanism by which the determinate identity of the people in a democracy persists over time. I call this mechanism the 'pluralist backlash.' Pluralist backlash designates the phenomenon unique to a democratic polity. In a pluralist backlash, the backlash forces mobilize 'pluralism' as a political rhetoric to delegitimize democratic struggle by accusing the agents of democratic struggle of undermining pluralism.[62] The notion of the police allows Rancière to produce an internally coherent theoretical account of radical democracy that can appreciate the discrepancy between formal equality and informal inequality. Hence, Rancière provides an important reference point for radicalizing radical democracy.

[62] Regarding my usage of the term 'backlash forces,' see note 29.

The 'Police' and 'Politics': The Two Senses of Conflict in Rancière

This section has two purposes. First, it introduces and explains the key concepts of Rancière. Second, by clarifying the meanings of Rancière's core concepts, I seek to illustrate how Rancière defines democratic politics and understands its goal. With Rancière's conceptual vocabularies, we can identify what democratic politics does and does not stand for. Rancière shows effectively the difficulty of distinguishing democratic politics from what it is not. Like Lefort, Rancière understands democratic politics in terms of conflict. However, unlike Lefort, Rancière explicitly outlines competition and struggle as two different modalities of conflict and defines democratic politics solely in terms of struggle. According to Rancière (1999, 72), a political community can use conflict as a means to legitimize and distribute power. It interpellates its members as equal participants to contest an ordering of society (Ibid., 70). Conflict is institutionalized in such a way as to "lead the community harmoniously through discord itself" (Rancière 2021 [1995], 95). Rancière does not identify democratic politics with this type of conflict. For Rancière, democratic politics is a type of conflict that exposes and tackles an inegalitarian logic implicit in the ordering of society.

The central notion that does the critical work in Rancière is the 'police' (*la police*). In Rancière, the 'police' roughly translates as the 'sensible' order of power, domination, and government. Rancière construes the social world as a field of intelligibility constituted by the division between what can and cannot be apprehended by the senses (Chambers 2010, 63). The basic idea of the police derives from the fact that our social world requires a prior distribution of the sensory realm. Without this prior distribution, we cannot make sense of our mutually shared social and political reality (Chambers 2012, 70). In this context, the police points to the plain fact that we need to recognize the existence of other people and comprehend their words to coexist

with them at the minimum (see Panagia 2009, 3). It is "a mode of symbolizing the common [sensible] order" (Rancière 2016, 150). The police "defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task" (Rancière 1999, 29). What Rancière calls the police is thus about processing the sensory information (i.e., vision and sound) to live with others in society. In Rancière's own words, it is about the 'distribution of the sensible' (*le partage du sensible*).

What is crucial about the police is its normative implication. For Rancière, the sense-making activities of the police necessarily culminate in establishing the hierarchical structures of intelligibility. The sensory structure that buttresses any social order distinguishes legitimate discourse from incomprehensible noise. It also designates who is eligible to make a speech and who is not. In other words, the police is "[a] symbolization of hierarchy" within the perceptive universe of being, saying, and seeing (Rancière 2011, 7). The divisive nature of the police is already implied in the notion of the 'distribution of the sensible.' The word 'distribution' (*partage*) conveys the dual meanings of 'sharing' and 'dividing' at once—to form a shared space requires drawing boundaries (Rancière 2001, thesis 7; Panagia 2010, 96). Rancière claims that the police order is an inevitable and inescapable reality of any existing political community (1999, 29; 2016, 150). Establishing and maintaining the common order requires the preliminary work of setting up the boundaries and definitions of who and what is visible, sayable, and audible within the public domain. Hence, exclusion and hierarchy are constitutive of the formation of a common identity (Rancière 1999, 9, 22).

Then, there is 'politics' (*la politique*). Rancière presents politics as the antithesis of the police (2001, thesis 7). Politics in Rancière operates at the level of the sensible. According to Rancière (1999, 30), politics "undoes the perceptible divisions of the police order." Politics

undermines the given configuration of the sensible by "demonstrat[ing] the sheer contingency of [it]" (Ibid.; 2011, 3). Rancière argues that the hierarchical order of the police is ultimately contingent because individuals within that order, no matter which position they occupy, must comprehend each other to accept the given hierarchical order and its operation in the first place (Ibid., 16). In other words, "all inequality functions with the cooperation of the unequal" (Rancière 2016, 112). The hidden truth of the police order is that the unequal relationships within this order are based on "a prior equality in the form of the capacity to understand" (Woodford 2016, 22). In this context, Rancière construes politics as an encounter of the conflicting logics of the police and equality (1999, 30). Politics is a struggle that "dismisses all the forms of necessity and legitimization based on a pre-disposition to the exercise of power and a preliminary distribution of positions based on it" (Rancière 2009a, 120). This struggle seeks to reinstate equality, which is "the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being" (Rancière 1999, 30).

Through the notions of the police and politics, Rancière seeks to shift the meaning of democratic politics from a competition among equals to a struggle against inequality and to illuminate their relationship. Rancière draws on the police to criticize the understanding of democratic politics as citizens' equal participation in public life (2004a; see also 2011, 2–3). The two connotations of 'sharing' and 'dividing' attached to the notion of the police allude to the necessary entanglement of equality and inequality in the communal life of democratic citizens. For Rancière, democracy's public realm assumes a common field of understanding between citizens as equal interlocutors. This means that its participants share the preconception of actors, objects, and venues of public interaction (Rancière 2001, thesis 8). From the perspective of the police, the public realm of democracy is being brought about by partitioning what is sensible and what is not (Rancière 2004a, 298; 2011, 3). Not only does this process engender an upfront exclusion of what

is not sensible within the public domain, but it also introduces informal inequality in the public life of citizens (Rancière 1999, 116; 2010, 57). In terms of public decision-making, inequality manifests itself in the form of a 'hierarchy of worth' between different actors, agendas, and modes of deliberation (Arditi 2019, 59; Panagia 2018, 7; Feola 2018, 79–80). Therefore, Rancière submits that inequality is constitutive of the 'democratic' public space where citizens are supposedly equal interlocutors who mutually decide the terms of the political community.[63] Rancière often calls this constitutive inequality 'social' inequality (2021 [1995], 48; 2016, 125; see also Woodford 2016, 74).[64]

According to Rancière's usage of the term, social inequality is not economic inequality or the type of inequality that purportedly belongs to the private (as opposed to the public) domain (Rancière 2021 [1995], 48; 2004a, 303). For Rancière, social inequality is about '*missed* understanding' (*mésentente*) (Panagia 2018, 70). It pertains to a particular speech situation, where between the interlocutors X and Y, "X cannot comprehend that the sounds uttered by Y form words and chains of words similar to X's own" (Rancière 1999, xii). The uttered sound of Y is registered by X not as speech (that expresses a competing view) but simply as incomprehensible noise. Rancière attributes X's incapacity to comprehend Y's utterance to X's failure to recognize Y as an equal speaking being (May 2010, 74). X deems Y as incapable of engaging in speech, a condition

[63] Rancière employs the term 'consensus' (or 'consensual') democracy to indicate the police ordering of actually existing democracies (1999, 95). Consensus democracy is underpinned by "[an] agreement between individuals and social groups who have understood that knowing what is possible and negotiating between partners are a way for each party to obtain the optimal share that the objective givens of the situation allow them to hope for" (Ibid., 102). For Rancière's justification for the terminological variation of consensus democracy, see Rancière 2016, 149–50.

[64] In Rancière, 'the social' designates the contested terrain in which the dialectic between the police and politics unfolds. Rancière construes 'the social' in terms of the intertwinement and encounter of the conflicting logics of the police and politics, which makes it "the place of constant conflict" (1999, 91; 2001, thesis 10; 2016, 125; 2021 [1995], 48; see also Deranty 2003). Rancière notes (1999, 91), "in the modern era, the social […] has firstly been the police name for the distribution of groups and functions. Conversely, it has been the name in which mechanisms of political subjectification have come to contest the naturalness of such groups and functions by having the part of those who have no part counted." The social is "a disputed object of [radical democratic] politics" (Rancière 2001, thesis 10).

that deauthorizes any claims Y makes even when Y is not barred from the public space (Rancière 1999, 102, 116; Feola 2014, 507). The issue here is not exactly that X's words hold more weight than Y's. Instead, the problem is that Y's words are not subject to fair consideration in relation to X's. Social inequality is naturalized and rationalized inequality that pre-designates who gets to speak and whose voice (actually) counts.

Under the banner of politics, Rancière then redefines democratic politics as a struggle against social inequality (2010, 54). For Rancière (2021 [1995], 103), "[d]emocracy is neither compromise between interests nor the formation of a common will." Democratic politics only exists as "a rupture in the logic of *arche*" (Rancière 2001, thesis 4). Its purpose is solely to expose and tackle the inegalitarian logic that underlies the governance of the political community (Rancière 2009a, 116).[65] In Rancière's own words (2004b, 5), democratic politics is "a forcing […] of a quarrel that challenges the incorporated, perceptible evidence of an inegalitarian logic [underlying a speech situation]." Democratic politics raises such questions as why subject X is deemed unqualified to discuss (certain) common affairs of the political community, why agenda Y is considered inappropriate to be discussed as a common affair, and why method Z is deemed inadequate to deliver and communicate public demands. These questions are, in turn, meant to disrupt on the part of those members of society who are deemed unfit to make public appearances the distribution of entitlement and propriety as a source of domination (Ibid.; Rancière 1999, 100).

[65] As a side note, Rancière employs the notion of 'parapolitics' to undermine the understanding of democratic politics as competition and reinstate the meaning of democratic politics as a struggle. Parapolitics, whose archetype is found in Aristotle, "[identifies] political activity with the police order, but does so from the point of view of the specificity of politics" (Rancière 1999, 70). While affirming conflict as the essence of (democratic) politics, parapolitics ultimately negates politics by confining it within the institutional framework. In Aristotle, "The demos, through which the specificity of politics occurs, becomes one of the parties to a political conflict that is identified with conflict over the occupation of 'offices, the *arkhaï* of the city" (Ibid., 72). Parapolitics turns the meaning of the demos from a disruptive event to a party of conflict. In doing so, it ultimately renders conflict as a matter of management and, from there, politics as a question of power and command (Bosteels 2010, 87; McNay 2014, 141).

Accordingly, what provokes and facilitates democratic politics is the state of inequality rather than equality, which manifests itself in the pre-designation of 'proper' roles, places, and functions to the different segments of society (Rancière 1999, 33).

Importantly, in Rancière, democratic politics as politics *par excellence* does not aim to institute some egalitarian social order (Devenney and Woodford 2023, 62). Rancière submits that any order is, by definition, a police order (1999, 31). Rancière notes that "[t]here is a worse and a better police" and that "[t]he police can procure all sorts of good, and one kind of police may be infinitely preferable to another." The point is that whether hierarchy and inequality are less evident and intense in one police order than in another does not change the fact that both instances are fundamentally hierarchical and inegalitarian. Rancière emphasizes that the police order does not have an outside, and politics does not have an independent domain outside the police order (2011, 4–6; Woodford 2016, 47). Politics is "always bound up with" and "acts on" the order of the police (Rancière 1999, 31). Their connection is so close that "politics is almost everywhere and in every time interlocked, if not confused, with police" (Ibid., 33; 2009, 118). The point is that politics is *always part of* the police order, disrupting the police order from within (Chambers 2012, 59; Mackin 2016, 461). This is why Rancière often construes politics as 'dis-identification' (1999, 36–7). Politics as dis-identification is premised on some constituted identity of a community and undermines its substantive character (Rancière 2009a, 116). Therefore, politics for Rancière is always a negative enterprise (Devenney and Woodford 2023). The fact that politics is always a negative enterprise implies that there is no 'pure' politics (Chambers 2012). Politics has no ground and cannot be self-grounding—politics "disappears as soon as one begins to allocate parts and shares" (Arditi 2019, 66; Rancière 2001, thesis 1; see also Devenney and Woodford 2023, 63). For Rancière, politics involves nothing more than "changing, transforming, and improving our police

orders" solely as "an exception to all [police] logics of domination" (Chambers 2012, 86; Rancière 2001, thesis 5). In this regard, democratic politics for Rancière is an ongoing process of creating (the scenes of) equality in the midst of inequality (Rancière 2011, 5; see also Inston 2017, 16).

Then, logically speaking, democratic politics as a struggle against inequality is permanently *possible* since inequality is constitutive of any existing social order (Rancière 2016, 147). As long as inequality is the permanent condition that marks the police order, politics is destined to reemerge from the police order (Ibid., 112, 125; Arditi 2019, 60–1; cf. Woodford 2016, 48). And yet, Rancière's account of (democratic) politics is known for lacking a discussion on practical concerns regarding the emergence of politics (see, for example, Devenney and Woodford 2023; Laclau 2005, 246–7; Hallward 2009, 155; Çıdam 2021, 145; see also Feola 2018, 88). The question remains as to what actualizes the possibility of politics. For Rancière's critics, this question leads to a skeptical anticipation that "it is difficult to dismiss the possibility that *there might not be any politics at all*" (Tambakaki 2009, 108, emphasis added; McNay 2014, 157), especially when the integrity of the police order remains intact (Labelle 2001, 94). Accordingly, it is worth asking whether Rancière appreciates how politics is "continuously shaped, constrained, and at times frustrated by the dominant frameworks, institutions, and norms [of the police order] that reinforce inequality" to evaluate the overall plausibility of Rancière's account of democratic politics (Gündoğdu 2017, 194). So, what lesson does Rancière offer us about actualizing the possibility of politics?

More than anything, Rancière provides important insight into the emergence of politics through the notion of the police. By understanding a democratic society as a police order, it is possible to grasp what prevents politics from happening and what undermines its effect in a democracy. Knowing what constrains the emergence of politics is as important as knowing what

enables it. By identifying obstacles, we can avoid or negate them. As mentioned earlier, Rancière defines 'politics' and 'police' as inseparable notions. But, Rancière goes further to claim that they are "mutually reinforcing in their existence" (2021 [1995], 84). Not only does democratic politics emerge against the existing police order, but the police order also never stops militating against the emergence of democratic politics (see Rancière 1999, 39; 2016, 114). In other words, the police order sustains and reinforces itself by consistently preventing politics from happening (Rancière 2001, thesis 8). What we can learn from Rancière is how this self-augmenting process is carried out and, more specifically, how it frustrates the fomentation and eruption of political moments. As a result, through Rancière, we can identify obstacles in promoting democratic struggles and learn how to deal with them. In this context, the following section illustrates a salient but oft-neglected mechanism of backlash unique to a democratic society through the lens of the police.

On the 'Pluralist' Backlash

In the previous section, I tried to show that Rancière reinstates the meaning of democratic politics as a struggle against inequality through the notions of the police and politics. In doing so, I also tried to illustrate how Rancière's conception of democratic politics is tied to the one that understands democratic politics as a competition among equals. This section examines how these two conceptions of democratic politics intersect in practice. My focus is on the police. A major implication of the police is that democratic struggles are not just motivated by inequalities but are conditioned by them.[66] For this reason, in reading Rancière, we can investigate how inequalities

[66] Rancière's commentators have criticized Rancière for not paying enough attention to how inequalities condition and constrain democratic struggle (see, for example, Gündoğdu 2017; McNay 2014; Sparks 2016). I agree with them to the extent that this issue is not intrinsic to Rancière's account of radical democracy. From my reading of Rancière, the police is precisely the notion that accounts for the conditioning and constraining factors of democratic struggle. Rancière could have done more in elaborating the notion of the police. However, I also think that Rancière's commentators could have interrogated and expanded the implications of the police, which is what I intend to do in this section. A related criticism is that Rancière does not take the issue of uptake seriously. For example, Michael

shape the dynamics of democratic politics. Especially illuminating and yet undertheorized is what I call the 'pluralist backlash.' Pluralist backlash appropriates the normative language of pluralism to promote anti-pluralism (see Lewin 2021; Feola 2022, 1020). It causes social exclusion and antagonism by denouncing the individuals and groups that seek to redress entrenched inequalities for lacking mutual toleration and willingness to embrace disagreement. I argue that appreciating a democratic society as a police order helps capture the phenomenon of pluralist backlash and incorporate it into theorizing radical democratic politics. By construing competition based on the formal equality of citizens as a mode of government that constitutes the police order of democracy, Rancière helps critically understand the stakes of invoking the idea of pluralism in the face of democratic struggle.

In the pluralist backlash, political entrepreneurs and their supporters use the discourse of pluralism to silence the voices that challenge the dominant norms, practices, and institutions of particular democracies. Those who participate in the pluralist backlash invoke the idea of

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Feola argues that Rancière's model of radical democratic politics "persistently leaves unasked how such [radical] interventions are taken up, engaged, or refused within these agonistic reconfigurations of democratic life" (2018, 88). Feola objects that Rancière assumes that uptake is likely while neglecting "a politics of reception" (see also Schaap 2021, 41). Democratic struggles for Rancière establish "an obligation to hear" marginal voices articulated through those struggles (Feola 2018, 88). However, as Feola rightly notes, uncovering and tackling inequalities are "never one-sided." Feola criticizes Rancière for neglecting "how these irruptive claims are received within a framework of meaning in which they previously had no intelligible place" (Ibid., 89). This question is especially challenging when society as a field of political intervention is "organized by hegemonic discourses of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nation, empire, class, caste, and ability" (Sparks 2016, 429). This situation makes enacting politics at times a much more difficult and demanding task for some citizens than others (see Bromell 2019, 268; see also McNay 2014, 157; May 2008, 74). Admittedly, there are moments in which Rancière seems to take the possibility of uptake for granted. For example, In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière challenges the opposition of acting and viewing and, by doing so, reconsiders the position of spectators as "active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs" (2009b, 4). From Rancière's perspective, spectators participate by refashioning the performance in their own ways. After establishing the notion of active spectatorship, Rancière generalizes the experience of active spectatorship to the state of "our normal situation." Rancière notes, "[w]e also learn and teach, act and know, as spectators who all the time link what we see to what we have seen and said, done and dreamed" (Ibid., 17; see also Woodford 2016, 44). Rancière assumes human agents' general capacity for self-reflection and self-interpretation (see also Rancière 1991, 13). Again, I agree with the criticisms of Rancière concerning the issue of uptake as long as they are addressing a logical inconsistency internal to Rancière's account of radical democracy. Rancière can technically explain how the existing conditions of inequality affect the possibility of uptake through the notion of the police. Consequently, what is much needed in the secondary literature of Rancière is a more attentive analysis of the police.

democracy as a mode of collective decision-making in which their voices matter, *too*.[67] The point is to frame their stance to maintain the unequal status quo as a legitimate opposition while turning the claim against social inequality into a competing claim at best. I say at best because the pluralist backlash goes so far as to deny the democratic credentials of the struggles against social inequality in the name of pluralism. A typical argument of backlashers is that the agents of democratic struggle do not treat dissenters as political equals deserving of mutual respect (see also Hooker 2016, 460).[68] While asserting the lack of mutual respect in public deliberation, the backlash forces present themselves as simultaneously the victims of discrimination and the guardians of democracy seeking to preserve pluralism. 'Pluralism' is, in turn, mobilized to justify and rationalize antagonistic reactions against democratic struggles in the name of democracy.

Rancière helps illuminate pluralist backlash by theorizing a competition of differences among equals as the police and a struggle against inequality as politics. By doing so, Rancière establishes the connection between those two modalities of public interaction. Where the struggle emerges against the established terms of the competition, those terms resist change through efforts to undermine the struggle in the very name of the competition. Hence, pluralist backlash is a distinctive way in which a democratic society constitutes itself as a police order and preserves itself by frustrating democratic politics as a struggle against social inequality. In this context, a

[67] Pluralist backlash can also take a cultural form (and yet have political consequences). In analyzing New Right discourses in contemporary Europe and North America, Michael Feola demonstrates that recent New Right literature appropriates the language of 'diversity' to promote nativism and ethnocentrism (2022). The 'right to difference' argument goes, "because distinct cultures are the ground through which distinct forms of life are possible, any meaningful human diversity requires the preservation of their locality, difference, and situatedness" (Ibid., 1017).

[68] In this regard, we can say that pluralist backlash matters, especially because it further marginalizes the victims of social and political inequalities who struggle for equality. Their lack of material and symbolic resources to express their voices in the institutional political arena often compels them to stage disagreements and demand mutual respect from fellow citizens in the form of disruptive actions (as in SADD's rush-hour subway action). However, such actions already appear rule-violating, unreasonable, and selfish in the eyes of many citizens. As a result, pluralist backlash exacerbates the tendency to dismiss the democratic credentials of disruptive actions and obfuscates inequalities that those actions try to expose and tackle.

democratic society is characterized by the antagonistic confrontation between those who try to expose social inequality and those who try to cover it. This confrontation is fundamentally antagonistic in the sense that there is no mutual ground for agreement between the two camps. What is at stake is whether social inequality exists or not. In Rancière (1999, 101), a democratic society appears as a discursive terrain in which such confrontation occurs around the notion of 'democracy.' Rancière provides a normative language to uphold the meaning of democracy as a struggle against inequality (2006, 62). But, at the same time, the French philosopher also makes an important argument that to insist on the notion of democratic politics as a competition among equals in the face of a struggle against inequality is an act of police, a backlash that maintains the unequal status quo of a particular democratic polity.

Let me unpack this argument by first illustrating what makes a democratic society as a police order and its seemingly egalitarian mode of collective decision-making a police mechanism for Rancière.[69] As for Laclau, Rancière's starting point is Lefort's conception of democracy as an indeterminate society. Rancière follows Lefort in associating democracy with the structural void of power (2001, thesis 5), construing it as "an insubstantial community of individuals engaged in the ongoing creation of equality" (Rancière 2021 [1995], 84). Accordingly, for both Rancière and Lefort, democratic politics revolves around the indeterminacy of the people's identity. Rancière

[69] Both Rancière and his commentators often employ 'police' to foster a critical understanding of the current political conjuncture (i.e., 'neoliberalism'). According to this narrative, in our current political conjuncture, the meaning of democracy is reduced to the management of citizens' conflict of interests by the state apparatus, whose goal is "for each party to obtain the optimal share that the objective givens of the situation allow them to hope for" (Rancière 1999, 102, 112; 2010, 57; Chambers 2011, 25; Bassett 2014, 892; Holloway 2018, 629; see also Mouffe 2018, 13). Rancière describes such a tendency of depoliticization as 'post-democracy,' where 'democracy' signifies "the challenging of governments' claims to embody the sole principle of public life and in so doing be able to circumscribe the understanding and extension of public life" (1999, 102; 2006, 62). However, Rancière also notes, "'post-democracy' […] does not designate a period of history after the 'end of democracy'; it designates the logic governing a set of discourses and practices which turn democracy into its contrary [in general]" (2009a, 116; 2016, 149). In this context, while the idea of the police informs how the current state of 'democratic' life is arranged, I will employ the police to understand the nature of democracy itself.

and Lefort share a "[common] intention to […] highlight that division and conflict are the essence of democratic life" (Herzog 2024, 326). According to Annabel Herzog (Ibid., 337), the two thinkers appreciate democracy as an ongoing movement "in which the people creates and transforms itself and its values, norms and needs through struggle." While Herzog's view is not entirely wrong, it is nonetheless inaccurate. Rancière criticizes Lefort for understanding the people's indeterminate identity as the fundamental condition of democracy (see Rancière 1999, 100; cf. Lefort 1988e, 196). In Rancière's reading of Lefort (Rancière 2001, thesis 5; see also Rancière 1999, 114; Rockhill 2016, 167), Lefort maintains that "[d]emocracy […] begins with the murder of the king; in other words, with a collapse of the symbolic[,] thereby producing a disincorporated social presence."

As shown in the first chapter, Rancière's description of Lefort's position is accurate, even if Lefort acknowledges that democracies may not live up to their pluralist ideal. For Lefort, the determinacy condition signifies totalitarianism as opposed to (modern) democracy, which makes the condition of determinacy an empirical contingency or a deviation in a democratic society. Rancière departs from Lefort by blurring the distinction in Lefort between democracy and totalitarianism (see also Lievens 2014, 6). Rancière maintains that democracy cannot but be permanently defined by the determinate image/identity of a particular people. For Rancière (2006, 11), totalitarianism is characterized by the "[suppression of] the duality of State and society." In a totalitarian society, "individuals' rights and constitutional forms of collective expression: free elections, and the freedom of expression and association" are denied as a State "[extends] the sphere of its exercise to the totality of collective life." But then, Rancière claims that the convergence between State and society is also the defining feature of (modern constitutional) democracy (Ibid., 64). What is Rancière's argument behind such a critical observation of

democracy when democracy explicitly enshrines "individuals' rights and constitutional forms of collective expression," unlike totalitarianism?

Rancière echoes Tocqueville (and Lefort) by emphasizing that a political community is sustained not only by laws but also by 'morals.' This is also the case for a modern (constitutional) democracy. Rancière notes, "[o]n the one hand, the modern republic is identified with the reign of a law emanating from a popular will which includes the excess of the demos. But, on the other hand, *including this excess requires a regulating principle*: the republic must have not only laws but republican morals too" (Ibid., emphasis added). As a regulating principle for inclusion, these morals reflect the political community's dominant way of life and subsequently "incessantly [privatize]" the public domain through reinforcing the determinate image/identity of the people as a social background of political life (Ibid., 58, 62; see also Bosteels 2010, 84). Accordingly, while democracy is an all-encompassing system that formally denies discrimination and exclusion, it insinuates a new form of exclusion (i.e., internal exclusion) within the democratic citizenry (Rancière 1999, 115–6; Labelle 2001, 93).[70] Political intelligibility is unevenly distributed among democratic citizens depending on their quality and capacity to identify themselves with the existing

[70] Admittedly, Rancière is not entirely consistent and always clear about the nature of the problem that he seeks to address in his democratic theory. As Gabriel Rockhill (2016, note 31 in 187) observes, there are some parts in Rancière's writings that the goal of politics is articulated in terms of achieving inclusion and gaining recognition within the (existing) public sphere, while Rancière also frames his intervention in terms of reconfiguring the public sphere *per se* by problematizing 'internal' exclusion, which is another name for domination (see, for example, Rancière 1999, 114–6; 2006, 58–61). This analytical ambiguity, in turn, obscures the radical character of Rancière's intervention. For example, Seth Mayer (2019, 24) interprets the idea of disagreement in Rancière more or less as "raucous political actions [which are] part of a process of democratic consensus formation," which is equally accounted for in Habermas (cf. Çıdam 2021, 136). In this reading of Rancière, the goal of political actions is to facilitate mutual deliberation (Russell and Montin 2015). Similarly, Timothy Huzar draws a connection between Arendt and Rancière while understanding Rancière's notion of politics "as the making visible of forms of existence that were previously of no account" (2021, 13). In these cases, politics is taken to signify inclusion: political disagreement is to include the excluded in public dialogue. However, the following paragraphs will show that Rancière is primarily concerned with the problem of structural domination (i.e., internal exclusion) engendered by society's distribution of the sensible, which underlies ostensibly equal citizens' political communication, when he talks about democracy. The upshot is that Rancière's politics is not about setting up an agonistic stage of mutual deliberation but about exposing the impossibility of mutual deliberation.

people's image/identity (Devenney 2020, 126; see also Schaap 2021, 40). In this vein, Rancière construes democracy as "a regime of homogeneity between State institutions and societal mores" (Rancière 2006, 64). Homogeneity between State institutions and societal mores renders those laws and institutions that are supposed to sustain the duality of State and society obsolete in practice (Ibid., 68).

Rancière asserts that social inequality underlying a democratic polity is constantly and actively being naturalized and made invisible by "the consensual practice of effacing the forms of democratic action," which is carried out "in the [very] name of democracy" (1999, 101). As such, the police order of democracy preempts and responds to democratic struggle. Then, the question is: how is this process carried out? We can infer from Rancière a distinctive modality of backlash by which a democratic society copes with the emergence of democratic actions and mitigates their impact on the existing police ordering of society. That is, in a democratic society, backlash often relies on the idea of equal political rights to conceal and obfuscate social inequality. More specifically, it invokes the plurality of views, opinions, and voices to belittle claims against social inequalities as a mere expression of differences that are subject to disagreement. As illustrated earlier, I call this phenomenon the 'pluralist backlash.' Pluralist backlash is distinctive to a democratic society because democracy ostensibly champions its members indiscriminately as political equals (see Rancière 2006, 62; 2010, 57). Through the conceptual lens of the police, Rancière captures the phenomenon of pluralist backlash and avoids confusing pluralist backlash with an exercise of democratic citizenship.

A telling example is the *#AllLivesMatter* reaction (hereafter #ALM) to the Black Lives Matter movement (hereafter BLM) in the contemporary United States. #ALM has emerged as a rejoinder to BLM. As a social movement, BLM aims to "eradicate white supremacy and build

local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes" (Black Lives Matter n.d.). #ALM's affiliates understand the 'all lives matter' slogan as the more universally inclusive alternative to BLM for promoting solidarity beyond identity lines and pursuing more livable conditions for all members of society and not just for Black citizens (see Edgar and Johnson 2018, 38). #ALM supporters believe that BLM unfairly privileges the worth of Black lives while devaluing the lives of non-Black members of the polity. For them, BLM means that black lives matter but not *vice versa*. In their view, BLM is hence exclusionary, divisive, and racist (see Smith 2023).

Confronting such accusations, supporters of BLM often opt to claim that what BLM stands for is not that only black lives matter, but they matter, *too* (Anderson 2017, 139).[71] From this perspective, #ALM manifests the ideology of color-blindness prevalent in today's American society that "negates the historical and current-day realities whereby African American lives are not deemed as equally valuable" (Orbe 2015, 95; Yancy and Butler, 2015). However, while partly acknowledging the explanatory force of color-blindness to the popularity of #ALM, Ashley Atkins eloquently captures a critical blind spot in those BLM sympathizers' attempt to describe BLM as an inclusive movement signifying Black lives *also* matter (2018, 9). For Atkins, interpreting BLM as 'Black lives matter, too' as much as white (and non-Black) lives matter is ultimately to

[71] Such a view resonates with a broader tendency in democratic theory to equate inclusion with empowerment, where the imperative to affirm the political rights and agency of the marginalized is framed in terms of affirming that of all citizens. Especially illuminating is the anti-populism scholarship. For example, Müller (2017) notes that not all occasions of enunciating 'the people' pose a threat to democracy—the claims for inclusion and empowerment of the formerly marginalized are often made in the people's name. For Müller (Ibid., 602), what distinguishes the 'democratic' invocation of the people from the 'populist' one is the former's inclusive orientation. Müller notes, "those fighting for inclusion have rarely claimed "We and only we are the people"; on the contrary, they have usually claimed "We are *also* the people" (with attendant claims of "we also represent the people")". Müller's emphasis on the principle of mutuality expressed in the statement "we are also the people" implies that the democratic invocation of the people on the part of the marginalized requires affirming at the same time that "you are also the people (and not just us)" and thus ultimately that "all of us are the people."

subordinate BLM to a color-blind ideology upon which #ALM is grounded and operates. One of Atkins' primary arguments is that, in affirming the value of non-Black lives, the inclusive interpretation of BLM overshadows BLM's original (and more radical) intention to articulate the need to affirm the worth of Black lives by "expos[ing] a white system of values as a locus of domination." Atkins invites her audience to consider "why 'Black lives matter' should be thought to raise the question of the value of white lives" in the first place (Ibid., 4). For Atkins (Ibid., 9), this is because "there is (already) a racialized system of value in place, a white system of value, that excludes in virtue of being a locus of domination" (see also Paul 2019, 10). 'Black lives matter, *too*' is problematic because it obscures and leaves intact the existing racialized system of value that devalues Black lives and further obfuscates and reinforces this system by seeking inclusion in it. Accordingly, BLM being interpreted as 'Black lives matter, *too*' solidifies the status quo of white dominance, where Black citizens continuously suffer the inequalities and injustices *concerning their racial identity* (i.e., the social inequality of race).

By approaching a democratic society through the lens of the police, it is possible to grasp how the universalistic claims of equal citizenship are used in the face of the struggles against social inequality to undermine them. Underneath the pretension of universalism is a partisan stance to preserve the existing conditions of social inequality. Against this tendency, a democratic struggle must appear partisan to avoid falling into the trap of obscuring social inequality and to assume a universalistic character. The rationale is that there is no democratic imperative for the agents of democratic struggle to treat those who seek to maintain the unequal status quo as equal interlocutors. What is universalistic in the context of inequalities is solely the act of redressing them. This is precisely what the agents of democratic struggle seek to achieve and what the backlashers seek to prevent from happening both in the name of democracy. Such confrontation

implies an antagonistic relationship between those two groups. For Rancière, democratic politics is antagonistic in the sense that there is no mutual ground of potential agreement between the backlash forces and the agents of democratic struggle (Rancière 2016, 150; Devenney and Woodford 2023, 68). Their encounter is "a clash between two partitions of the sensible" (Rancière 2001, thesis 8). Hence, "[t]he parties in confrontation do not make up any whole capable of definitively righting the wrong" (Rancière 2021 [1995], 103). Instead, it is the agents of democratic struggle as 'the part of those who have no part' (*le compte des incomptés*) that solely constitutes the genuine democratic subject, *the people* (Rancière 2001, thesis 5).

As a result, Rancière offers a theory of radicalized radical democracy that illuminates the antagonistic dimension of radical democratic politics. Rancière makes plain that radical democratic politics is antagonistic because it occurs against the backdrop of inequality. Moreover, Rancière provides unique insight into how antagonism against the struggles that seek to promote pluralism unfolds in the guise of pluralism. The key is to understand a democratic society as a police order. Through this understanding, Rancière brings to our attention social inequality underlying the public life of democratic citizens. But, perhaps more importantly, the French philosopher also appreciates how the existing conditions of social inequality in a democracy are maintained and reproduced, especially when they are challenged.

By construing a democratic society in terms of the police, Rancière helps us think of how the society's underlying idea that all citizens enjoy political rights irrespective of their particular social positions and identities constitutes a police mechanism against democratic struggles. That is, in a democracy, backlash can and often does take the form of empty universalism that champions the equal opportunity of citizens to participate in public decision-making. It undermines democratic struggle by rendering its claim against a particular social inequality as a mere opinion

and valorizing the denial of that social inequality as a legitimate opposition. These are part of the process of dismissing the democratic legitimacy of the struggle against social inequality as its agents refuse to perceive the backlashers as equal interlocutors. However, from Rancière's perspective, the antagonism against the backlash forces is only a reaction to the one against the agents of democratic struggle by the backlash forces. Antagonism is thus unavoidable and central to democratic politics when democratic politics to tackle inequality happens against the backdrop of it. This should be the kernel of radical democracy, which Rancière articulates through the notion of the police.

Contesting the Temporal Logic of Radical Democratic Politics: Beyond Laclau

In the previous section, I tried to show how Rancière brings inequality to the center of theorizing democratic politics by treating it not just as the problem to tackle but as the context in which democratic politics takes place. This interpretation of Rancière is made possible by focusing on his notion of the police and thinking of politics in relation to the police. Through the notion of the police, Rancière sheds light on the antagonistic dimension of democratic politics as a struggle, which often slips out of sight because of backlashers' pluralistic pretension. In this section, I address how Rancière complements Laclau's version of antagonistic pluralism. By doing so, I aim to highlight a relative conceptual utility of the police over hegemony in offering a more sustained criticism of inequality in a democratic society. The key lies in how Rancière, unlike Laclau, envisages the temporal logic of radical democratic politics in an extended time frame. The notion of the police informs that democratic struggles do not just arise under the conditions of inequality *but that those conditions are persistent and resilient*. Accordingly, Rancière's version of antagonistic pluralism eschews a simplistic answer to the problem of social inequality that perceives the negation of social inequality culminates with taking over state power. There is no

such triumphant overtone in Rancière. Instead, (radical) democratic politics is construed as an ongoing struggle for marginalizing the social and political forces that seek to maintain the preexisting conditions of inequality in a particular democratic society from public life. Consequently, Rancière offers an account of radical democracy that thoroughly navigates how inequality shapes the dynamics of radical democratic politics.

To highlight the relative strength of Rancière in accounting for the impacts of inequality on radical democratic politics over Laclau, let me first clarify their commonalities. Both Rancière and Laclau conceptualize democratic politics around the issue of social inequality. Social inequality marks what Rancière calls 'the fundamental wrong' that constitutes the political community. The wrong is fundamental in the sense that it is constitutive of the formation of a common order of society. In this regard, Rancière notes (1999, 22), "the social order is symbolized by dooming the majority of speaking beings to the night of silence or to the animal noise of voices expressing pleasure or pain." Based on this understanding of a social order, Rancière asserts that "[i]t is in the name of the wrong done [to] them by the other parties that the people identify with the whole of the community" (Ibid., 9). In this context, Laclau correctly reads Rancière's people as "a part that functions as a whole," whose definition resonates with his own (2005a, 245; cf. Devenney and Woodford 2023, 62). Laclau is also correct to identify that "the unevenness inherent in the hegemonic operation is [for Rancière] an uncountable that disrupts the very principle of counting" (2005a, 245).

For both Rancière and Laclau, social inequality is the source of domination in the given status quo which is a cause of backlash when democratic struggles challenge and attempt to undermine the 'naturalness' and 'legitimacy' of domination. By taking backlash seriously as the background condition of democratic struggle, both thinkers affirm the political agency of those

struggling against social inequalities from the margins (as in Lefort). But beyond that, both Laclau and Rancière uphold the agents of democratic struggle as the genuine democratic subject. Through their concepts of hegemony and police, Laclau and Rancière commonly recognize that antagonism and exclusion are integral to pluralizing democracy (cf. Devenney and Woodford 2023, 63). Such a process involves "impos[ing] a rational obligation on the other to recognize [the agents of democratic struggles]" (Rancière 2021 [1995], 49).

Admittedly, the paradox of democratic struggle is that the order being brought about through successful democratic struggles will necessarily have a limit, which makes the newly established order fundamentally anti-pluralistic (i.e., hegemonic). Establishing an egalitarian social order is not the primary interest of Rancière, or at least is radically less so than Laclau. However, despite his "general aversion to institutional politics" (Myers 2016, 47; Devenney and Woodford 2023, 60), Rancière acknowledges that democratic struggles carry within themselves some egalitarian vision (or aspiration, to say the least) of society and re-symbolize the common order of the political community.[72] Rancière notes (2016, 120), "[p]olitical subjectivization is a symbolic operation to do with an established identity" that is the process of 'dis-identification.' But then, Rancière immediately adds, "there can be no dis-identification without an identity, and

[72] In this regard, I am against the tendency to consider Rancière as a theorist of the 'event.' As Jason Frank describes (2015, 258), the so-called "eventual reading" of Rancière portrays Rancière as providing a normative account of democratic politics that validates the democratic credentials of formless, extra-institutional, collective political actions (see, for example, May 2010, 77–9). The eventual reading of Rancière tends to focus on politics (as opposed to the police) in drawing theoretical and normative implications from Rancière's writings Woodford 2016, 23. For instance, Peter Hallward (2009, 142) describes Rancière's politics as "the contingent dramatization of a disruptive equality." It is not entirely incorrect that politics for Rancière is "a question of aesthetics" and "a matter of appearances" that involves "the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience" (Rancière 1999, 35). Politics is reduced to the moment of disruption in which those who are rendered invisible and inaudible by the logic of the police constitute themselves as fully-fledged members of the polity by acting as if they were already seen and heard (Rancière 1992, 60). While the eventual reading of Rancière is not entirely baseless, it often confines politics to extraordinary moments of disruption. Such a reading of Rancière betrays the French philosopher's ambition to envision a temporality of democratic politics through the interaction between 'police' and 'politics.'

there is no going over to the other side *without the possibility of symbolizing a certain number of common features based on a group of people sharing the same community life*" (Ibid., emphasis added). In this passage, negating the existing common identity is connected to signifying a new normative order of society. That is why "[s]ubjectivization […] is the *symbolic* [rather than merely diabolic] operation that separates a community from its identity" (Ibid., emphasis added). As Clare Woodford rightly points out (2017, 32), there must be some content in Rancière's politics since "it is necessary for the appropriation to stage a persuasive challenge to the dominant order such that it appears to offer a viable alternative to current ways of being, saying or doing." In this regard, "[politics] creates its own distribution of the sensible" (Arditi 2019, 65; cf. Norval 2012; 818).

Rancière acknowledges the tension between his emphasis on democratic politics as a rupture in the police order of senses and his understanding of democratic politics as having an aspect of "working to resymbolize being together based on community life" (2016, 120). However, the crucial upshot for Rancière is that this newly signified common order, no matter how egalitarian it appears on the surface, is *not* the final instance of an egalitarian society. In fact, as I have highlighted in the previous sections, there is no such thing as the ultimate egalitarian society that can be achieved from democratic struggle for Rancière. Every order is necessarily a police order bearing the substantive identity of the people (Rancière 2023, 31). For this reason, equality cannot be permanently institutionalized. In Rancière's own words, "[n]o matter how many individuals become emancipated, society can never be emancipated" (Rancière 2021 [1995], 84). The permanence of democratic politics reflects this tragic nature of our social reality (see Wenman 2013, 35). In this context, equality can only exist in and through democratic struggles against a given unequal status quo. Such a view echoes Laclau who conceives radical democratic politics as an ongoing project.

However, despite Laclau and Rancière's common understanding of democratic politics as an ongoing struggle against inequality, Rancière envisages the temporal logic of democratic politics differently from Laclau. Two considerations that are absent in Laclau but present in Rancière make the difference. One is the resilience of the existing identity of the people and social inequalities engendered by it. Another is the belief in the efficacy of the constitutional texts for fighting against inequalities, which, in turn, relies on the human capacity and willingness for critical self-reflection. I would argue that for Rancière, these two tendencies form the political dynamic of gradual, non-linear progress. In this process, some citizens will join the cause of democratic struggles against social inequalities while others will resist those struggles. I believe that understanding the temporality of radical democratic politics in terms of gradual, non-linear progress is a more realistic view of social change. At the same time, this view is allegiant to the critical understanding of a democracy as having a determinate identity of the people ingrained in the social fabric of the political community.

In the previous chapter, I argued that Laclau considers successful democratic politics to be an absolute negation of and a radical separation from the preexisting conditions of social inequality that a democratic struggle tackles. I claimed that this view understates the fact that the conditions of social inequality in democratic societies are often historically formed and consolidated. The upshot is that they are not eradicated in a single stroke by taking over state power. Understanding a democratic society in terms of hegemony and democratic politics as a counter-hegemonic struggle carries the danger of obfuscating the persistence and resilience of social inequalities. It fails to capture how society's traditionally dominant members continue to wield their influence on sabotaging the stabilization of a new hegemony. In this regard, Laclau does not fully appreciate that backlash is waged against not only the *emergence* of democratic struggle but also against the

outcome it generates. This is to say that there is still room for 'radicalization' in Laclau's account of radical democracy. It needs to take inequality more seriously as a context in which radical democratic politics unfolds. An important part of this effort is, I argue, to appreciate the persistence and resilience of the given conditions of inequality in particular democracies. Laclau's hegemony is an inadequate notion to carry out this task.

Rancière brings to attention the enduring nature of inequality in democracies by construing a democratic society and its existing societal order in terms of the police. As I highlighted in the previous sections, part of what Rancière articulates in the notion of the police is how any given order of the political community continues to militate against disruption to protect, maintain, and reinstate the status quo. The police logic is already and always at work. As Rancière puts it (2001, thesis 8), the police says, "[m]ove along! There is nothing to see here!" The police logic involves both preempting and responding to the eruption of political moments (see Rancière 2021 [1995], 90). From this perspective, the dynamics of democratic politics are permanently formed by the dual movement of conflicting forces: one establishing, maintaining, and restoring an order of (naturalized) hierarchy and domination and the other negating and mitigating the integrity of that order. Consequently, Rancière's account of radical democracy upholds the idea of democratic struggle as an ongoing process of "living out the relation between equality and inequality, of living it and at the same time displacing it" (Rancière 2021 [1995], 48; 2016, 64; 2012, 80; see also Frank 2015, 259). This implies that the existing conditions of inequality cannot be redressed through an 'event' (e.g., an electoral victory or a mass protest). Rancière's position would be that we should understand events as constituting the long-term process of negating the inequalities that mark the past and present of the political community.

Rancière provides a more internally coherent account of radical democracy than Laclau by

taking the resilience of social inequality seriously. But, at the same time, Rancière's view on social inequality complements Laclau's model by distinguishing the claims against social inequality with the form of backlash in the guise of challenging social inequality. What often hinders democratic struggle is so-called 'reverse discrimination.' As explained earlier, reverse discrimination is a self-portrayal of the traditionally dominant members of society as victims of social inequality. The notion of hegemony in Laclau cannot make sense of reverse discrimination because the hegemonic transformation implies the complete reversal of the power relationship between the preexisting and emerging hegemonic groups. If anything, the traditionally dominant group would be the real victim of social inequality engendered by a new hegemonic social formation. But then, logically speaking, Laclau is put into a normatively ambiguous position to affirm the traditionally dominant members of society as the agents of democratic struggle. In fact, this is not a hypothetical scenario. As Benjamin De Cleen and Juan Alberto Ruiz Casado have shown in their examination of contemporary populism (2023), relatively privileged social groups often portray themselves as an 'underdog' and instrumentalize populist politics to undermine the efforts to redress inequality and to strengthen their dominant position in society. Hegemony does not provide Laclau with a normative framework to distinguish democratic struggle from the reactionary movement in the guise of democratic struggle. Meanwhile, Rancière's notion of the police can shed light on the qualitative difference between the two. This is because the police implies continuity in the conditions of inequality and their interplay with the efforts to undermine them.

Now, let me turn to navigating another aspect concerning how Rancière treats the issue of inequality more thoroughly than Laclau in theorizing radical democratic politics. Through the notion of the police, Rancière avoids the celebratory view of radical democratic politics that reduces the negation of inequality to the moment of rupture in the political landscape. Instead, in

Rancière, radical democratic politics consists of more mundane efforts to negate the existing conditions of inequality over time. Rancière understands democratic struggle as a process of self-augmentation through reiteration. Particular instances of democratic struggle "refer back to an earlier coming together of egalitarian event" (2021 [1995], 90). Hence, as Kevin Inston aptly puts it (2017, 16), "while acts of equality are singular, being performed in a particular time and space by subjects who are constituted through that performance, they also need to be recognized as part of the continual process of creating equality." The perception that negating social inequality cannot be done in a single stroke leads Rancière to think of democratic struggle more expansively than Laclau. In doing so, Rancière allows us to appreciate the emancipatory potentials in particular instances of democratic struggle. But, how does Rancière uphold the possibility of the emergence of democratic struggles within the police order of democracy that constantly prevents such struggles from emerging? Furthermore, how do those struggles effectively bring enduring changes to the given unequal status quo when the police order of a democracy continuously works toward restoring its preexisting formation?

For Rancière, the key to answering these questions lies in the founding texts of modern constitutional democracy that stipulate equality as a fundamental principle of the political community. Rancière stresses the efficacy of the "inscriptions of the community as free and equal" in the founding texts of democracy. Democratic politics involves "build[ing] such and such a case for the verification of the power of the inscription" (Rancière 2004a, 303). Accordingly, for Rancière (2021 [1995], 50), the universal human rights enshrined in those texts are not empty, decorative rights. On the contrary, they are an effective medium through which the substantive understanding of 'the public' that the political community implicitly or explicitly upholds is contested and redefined. Constitutional texts are the presupposition of equality that allows

individuals to verify it in practice and, by doing so, expose "[the] sheer contingency of any [given] order" (Rancière 1999, 17). They permanently and universally provide the normative ground for citizens to challenge social inequalities and make themselves heard from underauthorized positions (see also Frank 2010, 23).

One might question whether Rancière's argument about democratic struggle fundamentally differs from that of Lefort. If so, does Rancière also trivialize backlash as an empirically contingent phenomenon and instead assume the likelihood of uptake? For instance, in advocating democratic struggle in terms of "impos[ing] a rational obligation on the other to recognize [the agents of democratic struggle]," Rancière claims "[t]hat the other more often than not evades such obligation changes the problem in no essential way" (2021 [1995], 50). I understand that Rancière is at least partly referring to backlash when he says, "evad[ing] such obligation [to listen]." Rancière continues that "[t]hose who say on general grounds that others cannot understand them, that there is no common language, lose any basis for rights of their own to be recognized. By contrast, those who act as though the other can always understand their arguments increase their own strength" (Ibid.). In this passage, Rancière speaks to and against the skeptics, like Laclau, who do not believe in the possibility of uptake. As someone who does not have a conceptual vocabulary to make sense of backlash at the level of theory, Lefort would make the same statement. Then, to what extent can we say that Rancière takes inequality seriously in theorizing radical democratic politics if he assumes uptake? Moreover, does Rancière not contradict himself by assuming uptake since his notion of the police implies what is precisely the opposite?

I would argue that taking inequality seriously as the background condition of democratic struggle cannot mean upholding the absolute impossibility of uptake, which is the case for Laclau.

The idea of a counter-hegemonic struggle in Laclau is premised on the assumption that only the direct sufferers of social inequality are the actors of democratic struggle. For Laclau, radical democratic politics is reserved only for those whose demands are unmet in the given status quo. The fact that Laclau portrays democratic struggle in such a confined way implies that he largely dismisses the willingness and capacity of democratic citizens who are not directly affected by a particular social inequality in hand to join the cause of democratic struggle. In the way Laclau envisions radical democratic politics, ordinary citizens, among which is a group of individuals who would benefit from the continuation of the unequal status quo, are either out of the picture unless directly suffering social inequality or associated with society's status-quo-oriented forces. This is understandable when we think of the connotation of hegemony, which involves the spontaneous consent of the dominated. Hence, what it means to take inequality seriously as a background of radical democratic politics for Laclau is to foreclose the possibility of uptake by the broader democratic citizenry.

However, assuming the impossibility of uptake is to dismiss human faculty for critical self-reflection (see Rancière 2009b). Admittedly, the conditions of inequality will always make such an activity difficult. An important part of Laclau's (and Rancière's) work is to highlight how inequality in a democratic society is and continues to be naturalized and rationalized so that citizens become unaware of or indifferent to it. However, logically speaking, that does not mean that democratic citizens who are habituated by the given state of inequality will necessarily all become the defenders of the status quo when the inequality underlying their public life is challenged. Instead, the exposure of inequality compels individuals to at least consider whether inequality actually exists. Once individuals register the claims about inequality, they cannot but process those claims to conclude whether they are valid or not. This happens indiscriminately to

backlashers and listeners. Hence, backlash is only one reaction to a democratic struggle.

However, I want to emphasize once again that, for Rancière, democratic politics cannot eliminate antagonism. The element of antagonism in democratic politics allows us to uphold democratic politics distinctively as a struggle. In my reading of Rancière, despite his unwavering belief in a genuine human capacity and willingness for listening and critical self-reflection, Rancière regards antagonism as an integral component of radical democratic politics. Unlike Lefort, Rancière understands the pervasiveness and persistence of backlash, which has led him to develop the notion of the police. The notion of the police holds back Rancière from treating backlash as an empirical contingency. Antagonism would be necessary to promote pluralism in actually existing democracies because some citizens will persistently refuse to give up their attachment to the existing police order. And yet, unlike Laclau, Rancière cautions not to push this intuition to the point where it leads him to deny human being's inherent capacity for self-reflection. As a result, Rancière still takes inequality seriously as the context of democratic struggle. His affirmation of the possibility of uptake does not represent a logical incoherence of his theory.

Against this background, we may say that Rancière articulates a distinctive version of antagonistic pluralism that goes beyond the Laclauian framework and yet does not fall back on the Lefortian vision of democratic politics as competition. Rancière understands neither uptake nor backlash as the sole response to democratic struggle. Rancière's account of radical democratic politics takes both phenomena equally seriously in formulating its complex temporal logic. Underlying this view is the police-politics dialectic. On the one hand, the police logic of a democracy is at constant work to frustrate the formation and emergence of politics and minimize its impact on the given status quo when it emerges. On the other hand, politics as a disruption of the police order of democracy is bound to happen thanks to the inscription of equality in the

constitutional texts. As a result, Rancière understands radical democratic politics as an ongoing process of negating the existing identity of the people inscribed in the social fabric of particular democracies. This process would be marked by gradually marginalizing backlash forces from public life.

Conclusion

Radicalizing radical democracy is an agenda to take the implications of the determinate identity of the people seriously in conceptualizing radical democratic politics. In Rancière, this agenda manifests in considering the persistence and pervasiveness of backlash as the background condition of democratic struggle. Rancière's version of radical democratic politics lacks a triumphant overtone. This aspect distinguishes Rancière from Lefort and Laclau. Lefort's approach is fundamentally triumphant because it uncritically assumes that claims made at the margins of society against social inequalities will be taken seriously by democratic citizens. We can infer this assumption from the lack of conceptual vocabulary in Lefort to address the phenomenon of backlash. In other words, Lefort obfuscates backlash and trivializes its theoretical import in conceptualizing radical democratic politics. Meanwhile, Laclau's account of radical democracy is equally triumphant in its own way. Unlike Lefort, Laclau provides an internally coherent narrative of radical democracy that takes social inequality seriously in theorizing radical democratic politics. Central to this enterprise is the concept of hegemony. Hegemony implies that a meaningful exercise of democratic citizenship can only take the form of grand-scale democratic struggle, which, when successful, leads to the replacement of an existing people's identity with another. However, in addition to shutting down the possibility of uptake, this view overlooks the resilience of the preexisting normative order and risks obfuscating and reproducing inequalities that endure over time.

Rancière's version of radical democratic politics is without an ambition to undo a determinate social formation at once. Nor does it assume that democratic citizens will generally listen to marginal voices when those voices are articulated in the people's name. Instead, Rancière understands democratic struggle as an arduous process that involves exposing social inequalities underlying the given societal order of a democracy and compelling democratic citizens to join the process of negating those inequalities through disruptive political actions. All these are done over time amid and against backlash. In this chapter, I argued that Rancière advances a radicalized version of radical democracy. Rancière's approach takes seriously the discrepancy between formal equality and informal inequality in actually existing democracies as the starting point of building a normative account of radical democratic politics. It also thoroughly considers the implications of such discrepancy. As a result, Rancière presents backlash as a normal feature of the public interaction of citizens in democracies. But beyond that, the French philosopher addresses a particular type of backlash exercised in the name of democracy (i.e., pluralist backlash).

This chapter tried to show that the police is the conceptual vocabulary that enables Rancière to capture the persistence and resilience of democracy's determinate social formation. The basic idea of the police derives from the social-ontological fact that there has to be a prior distribution of the sensory realm for human beings to make sense of their mutually shared social reality. A democratic society is no exception to the police logic insofar as it is a form of community. Democracy, like its non-democratic counterpart, constructs its communal space by delimiting what is visible, sayable, and audible to its constituents. From this perspective, any actually existing democracies bear their own determinate identity of the people that define from the outset who can (meaningfully) participate in public deliberation and what can be delivered as a public matter (Rancière 1999, 102). Political intelligibility is unevenly distributed among democratic citizens

depending on their quality and capacity to identify themselves with the existing people's identity (Devenney 2020, 126).

Importantly, for Rancière, not only does democratic politics emerge against an actually existing democracy's given police order, but the police order of a democracy also never stops militating against democratic politics for its survival and reproduction (see Rancière 1999, 39, 101; 2016, 114). Emerging from this police-politics dialectic operating in a democracy is the 'pluralist backlash.' In a pluralist backlash, 'pluralism' is mobilized against democratic struggle that seeks to promote pluralism. Because the police order of a democracy persists and undermines challenges against it, (radical) democratic politics can only be understood as the ongoing effort to produce and reproduce a change over time rather than an instant change *per se* (cf. McNay 2014, 133). In Rancière's own words (2010, 54), because pushback against democratic struggles to maintain and strengthen the unequal status quo will always be present, "the power of the people must be re-enacted ceaselessly [to] challenge the police distribution of [a given sensible order]."

Unlike Lefort and Laclau, Rancière understands democratic politics as a long, arduous process, where democratic action cannot be reduced to a spectacular event (cf. McNay 2014, 164). This chapter tried to show that this reading is possible if we focus on the notion of the police and reconstruct Rancière's political thought around it. Approaching Rancière from this perspective allows us to appreciate the critical value of Rancière's works in light of the de-radicalization of radical democracy. Rancière offers an account of radicalized radical democracy that illuminates some of the major difficulties in promoting pluralism in democratic societies. The following chapter concludes this dissertation by considering the unique contributions that radical democracy can bring to a broader community of democratic theory through its own re-radicalization.

Conclusion
Radicalizing Radical Democracy for Democratic Theory

This concluding chapter discusses the major implications of radicalizing radical democracy for democratic theory. The goal is to highlight radical democracy's important but often neglected contribution to the broader field of democratic theory. Radical democracy's primary lesson lies in its valorization of conflict as a key feature of democratic politics (Tønder and Thomassen 2005, 4; Lloyd and Little 2009, 3). Such emphasis on conflict derives from a critical understanding of liberal-constitutional democracy that there is an immanent (or a constitutive) gap between the ideals of freedom and equality and the reality in which they unfold. An actually existing democracy cannot avoid conflict because of this gap. However, not only is conflict unavoidable, but it is also desirable. This is because conflict tackles the discrepancy between the ideal and practice inherent to it.

More specifically, democracy promises its members to live together as free and equal by allowing citizens to decide the terms and visions of their communal life. Pluralism realizes such a vision of self-government in a temporal horizon. While there will always be some dominant way of communal life at a given moment, in a democracy it is never insulated from opposition and is thus forever subject to change. Democratic politics is a means to achieve the indeterminacy of the polity's collective identity in a temporal horizon. Theories of radical democracy help us better understand the dynamics of change. Radical democrats work toward revitalizing democratic politics by paying close attention to extra-institutional, disruptive political actions and renewing the meanings and boundaries of political participation.

This dissertation's intervention in the scholarship of radical democracy aimed to address a significant asymmetry within the scholarship. Radical democrats emphasize the value of conflict. And yet, they have given insufficient attention to the implications of democracy's constitutive exclusion that initially gives rise to conflict. The costs of such an oversight include 1) reducing the meaning of democratic politics as a struggle against inequality to a competition among presumed equals, 2) trivializing the backlash against democratic struggles as an empirically contingent phenomenon, and 3) obfuscating the tendencies in democracies in which backlash is carried out in the very name of democracy. These issues result from radical democracy's failure to be allegiant to its critical philosophical-theoretical underpinning, namely, the radical contingency of societal order and constitutive exclusion. That said, those issues do not designate limitations of radical democracy. They should be regarded as the outcomes of radical democracy's detachment from its fundamental premises. I labeled this phenomenon as the 'de-radicalization' of radical democracy.

De-radicalized radical democracy would still valorize conflict as the essence of democratic politics. However, it overlooks the implications of unequal reality for the very meaning of conflict. As a result, de-radicalized radical democracy understands conflict as competition rather than struggle. It tends to emphasize mutual respect and the plurality of voices for carrying out mutual deliberation among citizens (Connolly 1995; Young 2001). Even when it upholds democracy in some majoritarian sense, it still considers rejecting opponents' political agency as anti-democratic (Mouffe 2000; 2018; Vergara 2020a).

In fact, these are the key characteristics of more mainstream schools of democratic theory beyond radical democracy. Many democratic theorists today consider conflict an essential feature of democratic politics, even when their vision of democratic politics revolves around reaching an agreement (Saffon and Urbinati 2013, 442). They value conflict by understanding the scope and

manner of political participation expansively. Moreover, regarding the question of who should participate, few democratic theorists today would disagree that the boundary of the people ought to be fluid rather than static over time and space. According to this view, the boundary of political actors participating in the collective decision-making of the political community should be subject to ongoing contestation. It should be given new answers over time based on the criterion of which the populations within a given territorial state "[are] capable of living together as political equals" (Miller 2020, 7). This normative criterion implies that "particular boundaries can and must be legitimized as the outcome of democratic procedures that [even] include those whom the [existing] boundary picks out as outsiders" (Abizadeh 2012, 881; see also Cohen 1999, 263; 2019a, 16; Habermas 1996, 514; 2001, 774; Leydet 2023). Conflict becomes the essential feature of democratic politics since democratic politics ought to "proliferate the opportunities for interaction" to preserve the indeterminacy of the people's identity (Ferguson 2012, 118). Against this background, democratic theory today emphasizes mutuality as a key component of democratic life. Mutuality denotes that all those involved in the public decision-making process should have an equal opportunity for participation. The idea of equal participation is manifested in a horizontal duty of citizens to recognize one another as partners whose contributions are worthy of fair consideration regardless of the asymmetries of power, capacities, and resources between them (Müller 2017, 602; Arato and Cohen 2021, 190). In this way, the boundary of the people and the content of the terms of communal life can meaningfully become subject to change.

As a result, radical democracy has become indistinguishable from more mainstream democratic theory that emphasizes the value of conflict in democratic politics. Radical democrats today often eschew speaking directly of antagonism and its place in (radical) democratic politics. They dismiss antagonism in favor of 'agonism' while thinking that they do justice to antagonism.

Agonism signifies "a confrontation among adversaries," where an adversary designates the one "whose existence is perceived as legitimate" (Mouffe 2014, 150). Different models of agonistic democracy highlight the importance of disruptive, extra-institutional political actions for opening up the spaces of political contestation to pluralize democracy (Wenman 2013). The underlying assumption is that the recipients of those struggles are willing to and capable of listening to agonistic claims and taking them seriously. Thus, the mainstreaming of radical democracy dilutes some of radical democracy's most valuable and unique contributions to the broader field of democratic theory. Those contributions boil down to radical democracy's capacity to illuminate the antagonistic dimension of democratic politics.

When a democratic society is *constitutively* marked by internal exclusion by which material and symbolic advantages and disadvantages are distributed unequally between different (groups of) citizens, any attempts to challenge and change the unequal status quo will necessarily accompany a pushback against such attempts. Insofar as radical democrats claim internal exclusion as being constitutive, they must consider this condition the starting point of their theorization of democratic politics. I sought to advance this insight under the banner of radicalizing radical democracy. Radicalizing radical democracy allows us to see antagonism as a normal feature of democratic politics and conceive of counter-antagonism as indispensable for promoting pluralism in democracies.

I criticized the tendency among radical democrats to neglect pervasive and persistent backlash as the distinctive character of radical democratic politics. I tried to frame such an oversight as a theoretical lacuna in radical democracy. When the 'agonistic' confrontation will always occur against the backdrop of the determinate identity of the people, how can 'agonistic' radical democrats expect that democratic struggles that seek to undermine that identity will be

taken seriously by democratic citizens? What about their material investment and emotional attachment to the given order? How do those factors affect the dynamics of radical democratic politics? For the most part, the existing scholarship of radical democracy remains silent on these sets of questions.

Accordingly, in this dissertation, I questioned the assumption of uptake pervasive in radical democracy and focused on the phenomenon of backlash and its implications for radical democratic politics. This dissertation made the following points in order. Radical democrats often do not take backlash seriously in envisaging the dynamics of radical democratic politics. This tendency is deeply rooted in the tradition of radical democracy (Chapter 1). Because radical democrats often understate backlash in radical democratic politics, they fail to capture the centrality of antagonism in the project of pluralizing democracy (Chapter 2). Because radical democrats fail to appreciate the role of antagonism in pluralizing democracy, they wrongly regard a theoretical attempt to promote pluralism through deploying antagonism as anti-pluralistic and anti-democratic (Chapter 3). Finally, because radical democrats do not examine *how* antagonism can be deployed to promote pluralism, they preclude themselves from contemplating different ways to uphold the normative and practical import of antagonism for pluralizing democracy (Chapter 4). After all, this dissertation is an invitation for radical democratic theorists to rethink radical democracy's contribution to the broader field of democratic theory regarding promoting pluralism in democracies. It is insufficient for radical democracy to urge democratic theory to appreciate the democratic credentials of disruptive, extra-institutional political actions for realizing democracy's pluralist ideal. When backlash is at stake, we should consider how antagonism can be meaningfully employed against backlash forces to further the democratic cause.

But is it true that radical democracy has forsaken antagonism from its lexicon? More

broadly speaking, do democratic theorists completely reject the necessity of antagonism in carrying out democratic life, as I have claimed so far? Before answering these questions, let me recapitulate the key arguments of each chapter to highlight my contributions to interpreting Lefort, Laclau, and Rancière. In a nutshell, I described Lefort, Laclau, and Rancière as promoting different understandings of the temporal logic of radical democratic politics, which emerges against the backdrop of the determinate identity of the people. These thinkers conceive radical democratic politics in terms of an ongoing process. As radical democrats, they commonly assume the people as the symbolic pole that sustains a democratic society's social bond and its normative order (i.e., the symbolic arrangement of what is meaningful, right, legitimate, and so on) (Marchart 2007). Lefort, Laclau, and Rancière also share the view that any actually existing democracy has a determinate identity of the people inscribed in its social norms and institutions. Hence, for these thinkers, democratic politics is understood as an ongoing process of rendering the existing identity of the people *indeterminate* (Espejo 2011). However, I wanted to point out the differences among Lefort, Laclau, and Rancière concerning *what it precisely means to render the existing people's identity indeterminate over time*. For each thinker, radical democratic politics indicates either an ongoing process of (a) *renegotiating* an existing people's identity (Lefort), (b) *replacing* an existing people's identity with another (Laclau), or (c) *negating* an existing people's identity (Rancière).

The first chapter tried to demonstrate that Lefort is more of a liberal than a radical democrat. This is because the French philosopher understands democratic politics in terms of competition rather than struggle. In Lefort, the democratic struggle against social inequality is conflated with and reduced to democratic competition between presumably political equals. For this reason, Lefort is best understood as a liberal thinker who upholds democratic politics as a form of

institutionalized competition. By making this claim, I hoped to contribute to the ongoing debate on the radicality of Lefort's political thought. In my reading of Lefort, the purpose of social and political struggles is for the marginalized to enter the public deliberation process and compete their views with other citizens. Lefort submits that this process is likely to lead to meaningful changes in and of the existing terms of communal life. The crux of my criticism of Lefort was that while Lefort correctly recognizes that political equality can coincide with social inequality, he does not consider the implication of this gap concerning the dynamics of radical democratic politics. Lefort uncritically assumes the general possibility of uptake by overlooking *backlash*. Lefort should have considered the backlash a natural consequence of democracy's determinate social formation. Backlash materializes the unwillingness and incapacity of democratic citizens to take marginal voices seriously. For me, backlash is the decisive marker that distinguishes democratic struggle and democratic competition. Backlash occurs because one party in a dialogue does not recognize another as an equal interlocutor. For this reason, backlash is a marginal or deviant phenomenon in democratic competition at best. Democratic competition (ostensibly) takes place between equals. By construing backlash as a marginal phenomenon in democratic politics, Lefort nominalizes the distinction he establishes between democratic struggle and democratic competition. As a result, I wanted to emphasize that opening up new spaces of political contestation is radically insufficient for democratic struggles to promote pluralism in democracies. The second chapter showed the enduring influence of Lefort on contemporary radical democrats.

In the third chapter, I turned to Laclau to seek a critical response to Lefort's formulation of radical democratic politics. I shed new light on Laclau's political thought by reconstructing his position around backlash. Admittedly, Laclau does not invoke backlash when articulating his vision of radical democracy. However, I wanted to show that situating backlash as the major

problem for Laclau gives a vantage point to uncover a profoundly pluralistic connotation of Laclau's political thought that both his critics and sympathizers often fail to capture. This approach makes a novel contribution to the secondary literature on Laclau. Laclau situates himself on the opposite side of Lefort when he assumes that the democratic citizenry will not recognize the marginalized as political equals. Laclau rejects the idea that pluralism can be realized through motivating and boosting political contestation. Instead, for Laclau, the only way to realize pluralism is to reinstitute the society's normative order through the collective force of the marginalized (Laclau 2007 [1996], 49). Significantly, the rhetorical medium of 'the people' mobilized to carry out this process embodies and animates antagonism against backlash forces standing in the way of pluralizing democracy (see Laclau 2005a, 85–6). This is the crux of Laclau's theory of populism that his critics often miss. Laclau takes populism to indicate an ongoing process of replacing one identity of the people with another. Such temporality derives from the fact that no articulation of the people can represent all marginalized voices in society. Thus, any articulation of the people leaves the space open for an alternative articulation of the people (Thomassen 2019).

Laclau makes a move that Lefort *should have made* in conceptualizing radical democratic politics if Lefort had taken the reality of democracy's determinate social formation seriously. This move involves advocating antagonism against backlash forces in society as essential for promoting pluralism. For Laclau, backlash is too substantial to be simply put aside as an empirical contingent phenomenon. For Laclau, backlash is a concrete expression of antagonism against the marginalized, whose source is the people's determinate identity buttressing democracy's given normative order.

It is commendable that Laclau uses the people to not merely affirm the political agency of the marginalized but affirm it *over and against society's backlash forces*. However, Laclau's

account of 'radicalized' radical democracy falls short of making the people conducive to realizing democracy's pluralist ethos. Laclau employs the people only to designate a grand-scale democratic struggle conjoined by distinct struggles against the status quo. Laclau envisages this grand-scale struggle to undo the existing identity of the people when successful. However, this view obscures the resilience of an existing people's identity. A crucial problem of Laclau's account of radical democracy is that Laclau conceives the temporality of the democratic political process too simplistically. For Laclau, this process is constituted by a series of 'events' that replace one identity of the people with another. Laclau's notion of the people connotes that only a grand-scale political transformation can promote pluralism by undoing the existing hegemonic order altogether. Accordingly, it fails to appreciate how antagonism can meaningfully unfold in particular social and political struggles to promote pluralism over time amid and against *persistent* backlash. In this context, I turned to Rancière.

The fourth chapter situated Rancière between Lefort and Laclau. Rancière provides an account of 'radicalized' radical democracy that takes the possibility of uptake and backlash equally seriously. This makes Rancière's account more theoretically rich, descriptively apt, and strategically advantageous than the ones offered by Lefort and Laclau. Rancière sheds light on the plural social and political struggles against specific manifestations of social inequality. Those struggles are understood as an ongoing effort to mitigate the integrity of the determinate identity of the people from different directions. By focusing on Rancière's notion of the police, I tried to show how we can grasp a particular type of backlash that emanates from the persistence of democracy's hegemonic social formation. From Rancière's perspective, a democratic society is understood as a domain or a field marked by the clash between the conflicting logic of the police and politics. Democratic politics is constantly played out within the dynamics formed between

political equality that naturalizes social inequality (i.e., 'police') and social equality that disrupts the order signified by political equality (i.e., 'politics') (see also Chambers 2012, 73). For this reason, pursuing pluralism takes the form of gradual, non-linear progress in and against society's existing normative order.

By understanding the temporal logic of radical democratic politics in Rancière in that way, I wanted to demonstrate that Rancière reconciles the two opposing views represented by Lefort and Laclau. Like Laclau, Rancière brings to the fore social inequality engendered by the determinate identity of the people. However, Rancière goes further by showing that this identity of the people is resilient. However, Rancière does not see democracy as a mere system of domination. On the contrary, *à la* Lefort, Rancière understands that the distinctiveness of democracy lies in its potential to progress over time. Despite the underlying police logic of (consensual) democracy, democratic struggles will emerge and bring changes to the unequal status quo because the principle of equality is enshrined in the constitutional texts, which serve as the normative foundation of democratic struggle. Moreover, from Rancière's perspective, human beings fundamentally possess a self-critical and self-reflective capacity to listen to the claims against inequalities made in democratic struggles. This assumption is not entirely ill-founded since actually existing democratic societies have progressed in valuing individuals as equal and free beings despite the persistence of injustices inflicted upon marginalized populations within particular democratic polities. And, precisely because injustices are persistent, antagonism in radical democratic politics is indispensable.

Antagonism is integral to pursuing the pluralization of democracy because backlash persistently marks the key characteristic of democratic politics. Given Rancière's emphasis on the police, implicit in Rancière's definition of the people as "the supplement that disconnects the

population from itself, by suspending the various logics of legitimate domination" is the absolute moral authority of 'the supplement' as the genuine democratic subject (2001, thesis 5). This moral authority is achieved over and against social and political forces that suppress the rise of 'the supplement' often in the very name of democracy. Now, this discussion of antagonism provides a good transition to the question that I raised a few pages earlier regarding the state of antagonism in democratic theory.

Backlash and Antagonism in Democratic Theory: From Margin to Center

The main contribution of this dissertation lies in urging radical democrats and democratic theorists to take inequality much more seriously than they often do in theorizing democratic politics. By 'much more,' I do not mean that the issue at stake is just a matter of degree. On the contrary, the expression 'much more' here implies a call for an epistemological turn that involves considering inequality not just as an object of political intervention but as a context in which the political intervention to tackle inequality takes place. This rethinking is a theoretical imperative for radical democracy in particular. Radical democrats construe actually existing democracies as always failing to live up to the ideal of democracy because they will always have a determinate identity of the people. Then, radical democrats should expect any attempts to negate the existing identity of the people will be, to a certain extent, resisted by democratic citizens who are accustomed to and invested in the status quo. Radical democratic politics is always already tainted by antagonism, namely, the antagonism against the agents of democratic struggle, expressed in the form of backlash. However, the scholarship of radical democracy today makes little room for antagonism. Antagonism has given its conceptual priority to 'agonism.'

A leading theorist of 'agonistic' democracy and the representative figure of left-Schmittianism, Chantal Mouffe provides a good entry point to substantiate my assertion. As I have

illustrated in the third chapter, Mouffe acknowledges that "[p]olitical life will never be able to dispense with antagonism for it concerns public action and the formation of collective identities" (2014, 150). Mouffe launches an overarching criticism against her contemporaneous liberals, communitarians, and deliberative democrats, where she claims that they fail to "perceive the constitutive role of antagonism in social life" (2005, 2). Against this background, Mouffe sets her primary agenda as envisaging "how it is possible *under those conditions* [where the political is necessary and a world without antagonism is impossible] to create and maintain a pluralistic democratic order" (Ibid., 4). Mouffe answers that we should tame antagonism and turn it into agonism. And yet, antagonism has not entirely disappeared in Mouffe's vision of democratic politics. Mouffe qualifies her position by stating that "[t]he category of enemy does not disappear, however, for it remains pertinent with regard to those who, because they reject the very basis of pluralist democracy, cannot form part of the agonistic struggle" (2014, 151). Here, Mouffe advocates the necessity and justifiability of antagonism against society's backlash forces, namely, those citizens who are unwilling to and incapable of listening to agonistic claims, for advancing pluralism in democracies.

My position is fundamentally different from Mouffe's. Mouffe perceives antagonism as belonging to the realm beyond or outside radical democratic politics, whereas I see it as central to it.[73] Implied in Mouffe's conceptual distinction between antagonism and agonism is a 'spatial'

[73] Mouffe's move toward assigning the place for antagonism outside democratic politics positions herself alongside liberal 'militant democrats' who advocate the use of non-democratic means to save democracy. In the existing scholarship of radical democracy and, more broadly, democratic theory, democratically justified antagonism and intolerance are often articulated under the banner of 'militant democracy' (See Malkopoulou and Kirshner 2019). Militant democracy refers to the idea that democracy should be able to defend itself against political actors harming and threatening its order by enabling the state to use "pre-emptive, prima facie illiberal measures" to prevent those actors from subverting or destroying the democratic order from within (Müller 2012, 1254). I find the accounts of militant democracy problematic because they have a general tendency to assume that backlash forces are marginal and deviant in democratic societies. They portray as if the broader democratic citizen body are not participating in backlash.

distinction between the two. For Mouffe (2005, 21), antagonism emerges insofar as there are no "agonistic legitimate political channels for dissenting voices [to] exist." In other words, antagonistic conflicts represent the outside of an agonistic public sphere. As Lorenzo Buti has correctly pointed out, agonistic democrats, including Mouffe, "tend to focus on the possibilities of politicization and the facilitation of *symmetrical* political pluralism" (2023, 5, emphasis added). For Buti (Ibid., 2), agonistic democrats often understand (radical) democratic politics as signifying an ongoing process in which "different identities, viewpoints or positions are constitutively opposed to one another without the possibility of a final reconciliation." Within this process, "two (or more) positions are recognized as representing equally legitimate positions on the political scene" (Ibid.). Buti's criticism against agonistic democrats is that they fail to grasp the reality in which "agonistic contest [is] always marked by asymmetrical power relations, where some degree of domination or oppression is involved." I agree with Buti that agonistic democracy carries the danger of "becoming an empty celebration of diversity without any purchase on political reality" (Ibid., 6). As mentioned earlier, agonistic democracy obfuscates the phenomenon of persistent backlash as an expression of the enduring antagonism against the marginalized.

The contemporary political theory scene is witnessing the rise of theories that take non-ideal conditions seriously in making normative proposals about democratic politics (Rossi 2019). As Jeffrey Green rightly points out (2016), democratic politics does not merely involve the rules and procedures that embody abstract universalist ideals and values. It also consists of the phenomenological dimension in which citizens experience an organizational life of democracy apart from how its governance structures are designed and intended to function. Buti's critique of agonistic democracy for misrepresenting democratic public space is just one example that addresses such a gap. Hans Asenbaum similarly claims from a radical democratic perspective that

while agonistic democrats "aim at realizing freedom and equality as core values of democracy" by establishing new participatory spaces, they overlook the fact that "societal inequalities […] carry over into participatory processes" (2021, 87).

Deliberative democrats, on their part, become increasingly aware of deeply entrenched social inequalities being the background condition of public deliberation (Warren 2017; Scudder 2020; cf. Lafont 2022, 53). Anna Drake is among the most self-reflective deliberative democrats who criticize deliberative democracy's tendency to overlook the operation of asymmetrical power in shaping the deliberative processes (2021). For Drake (Ibid., 4), such a tendency exemplifies deliberative democratic theory's treatment of activism as a means to "confront exclusions, include marginalized people, draw attention to gaps in dominant perspectives, and encourage democratic uptake." In other words, activism allows the excluded and the marginalized to participate in deliberative processes. Drake criticizes this perspective, which she calls the 'inclusion framework,' for "fail[ing] to recognize the deep structural problems that activists must overcome to participate as equals" (Ibid., 6). Because it misses the fact that "the background systems against which [deliberations] take place devalue and oppress people, [the inclusion framework] simply perpetuates devaluation and the inability to participate as equals" (Ibid.). Against this background, Drake reminds her audience of the fact that "[public deliberations] unfold against a background of systemic oppression," marked by "[t]he pervasiveness of racism, sexism, colonialism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and many other injustices" (Ibid., 10, 12). Drake also rightly points out that "activism requires a receptive audience; this, however, is difficult to secure in societies with structural and systemic problems and deep-rooted power imbalances" (Ibid., 17). What often results from activism is thus backlash rather than uptake (Ibid., 18).

Despite their critical analysis of the reality in which democratic politics unfolds, this new

generation of democratic theorists still espouses a pure domain of democratic politics devoid of antagonism. In this pure domain of democratic politics, individuals are somehow insulated from the detrimental impact of social inequalities on their perceptions of others. In other words, individuals within this space are deemed willing to and capable of listening to the claims made by the agents of democratic struggles and accepting their challenges to the given (unequal) status quo. The image of citizens who are unwilling to and incapable of recognizing the agents of democratic struggles as equals is absent in their accounts of (radical) democratic politics. At best, such citizens designate the limit of (radical) democratic politics.

For example, after persuasively laying out the non-ideal conditions of public deliberation that prevent equal participation of citizens, Drake seeks to find a way to make the deliberative process of public decision-making more democratic by "[challenging] deep-rooted inequalities and oppression" (Ibid.) Drake suggests that we understand the primary goal of activism as "open[ing] up additional deliberative and democratic space" where "activists [can permanently engage] deliberative democrats in an ongoing, substantive dialogue" (Ibid., 176, 201). Drake substantiates the identity of whom she calls 'deliberate democrat' by contrasting it with that of "people who clearly violate basic principles of deliberative democracy" (Ibid., 226). In this formulation, the group of individuals with whom activists interact is posited as 'deliberate democrats,' who, by definition, are willing to and capable of listening to their interlocutors. But where do 'deliberate democrats' come from when democratic public space is tainted by structural injustices that make it extremely difficult for individuals to practice the principles of deliberative democracy? Equally importantly, what makes Drake easily dismiss "people who clearly violate basic principles of deliberative democracy" outside deliberative processes when democratic public space, given Drake's emphasis on the pervasiveness of structural injustices, would be a fraught terrain that

fosters a public personality that downplays and rejects activism? Drake seems to run into the same problem that Mouffe makes in dealing with backlash and antagonism. For both Drake and Mouffe, backlash forces are deemed to occupy the margins of public life. Democratic politics is conceived as a realm insulated from antagonism.

Buti's 'radical democratic' solution to the limits of agonistic democracy demonstrates the same symptom of pure democratic politics devoid of antagonism. While relying on Balibar, Buti introduces a model of radical democracy that, he believes, takes "the power asymmetries embedded in social relations" seriously under the label of 'insurgent democracy' (2023, 8). According to Buti (Ibid.), insurgent democracy is, first and foremost, characterized by "an affirmation of the capacity for insurrection [against domination]." Insurrection entails "question[ing] the limits, modalities and even the neutrality of the political scene itself." By "challeng[ing] illegitimate dominations," "insurgent actors push an existing constitution towards expanding the spaces of equaliberty." But, Buti never articulates the modality of 'questioning' and 'challenging' the given unequal status quo. Buti is right to point out that "insurgencies will themselves also often be branded as illegitimate political practices, as their exact object is to transform the balance of power that underlies the existing political arrangements" (Ibid., 9). I have been calling this phenomenon backlash. Buti does not contemplate what this situation implies for insurgent democracy. But, backlash necessitates (counter-)antagonism on the part of insurgent actors to promote pluralism in democracies. Buti does not speak of antagonism as a necessary feature of radical democratic politics. Such expressions as 'questioning' and 'challenging' are hollow without explicitly affirming antagonism as the modality of questioning and challenging the status quo. The reason is that there is no way insurgent actors could meaningfully 'challenge' the existing conditions of inequality and domination without antagonizing those social and political

forces that actively seek to maintain the status quo.

Democratic theory must stop reproducing the vision of pure democratic politics. Instead, it has to anchor its normative theorizing of democratic life on the realities of suffering, inequality, and injustice. Only in this way can democratic theory meaningfully contribute to promoting freedom and equality. As I have shown above, democratic theory is moving in this direction. In this dissertation, I tried to show the inherent potential of radical democracy to lead the realist turn of democratic theory. However, for radical democracy to perform such a role, it must first dispel the false vision of pure democratic politics within itself.

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