Thinking Antagonism: Political Ontology after Laclau

Oliver Marchart
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As someone who has been urging Oliver Marchart to stretch his political ontology to its logical implications for some time now, this reviewer cannot but welcome the publication of this exciting book with sincere praise. From a profound reconstruction of the post-Marxist concept of antagonism to the articulation of a systematic 'ontology of the political' (p. 3), this book takes Ernesto Laclau's legacy to its logical conclusion, while successfully transcending some of the latter's limitations or omissions. At the same time, however, it leaves one with the impression that Marchart is perhaps too deferent to or possibly overly invested in Laclau's work in ways that threaten to compromise the radicality of his own argument. In any case, as this is a book that slaughters many sacred cows, it may equally cause outrage, admiration, astonishment, disbelief or unconditional praise, but only great books can engender such mixed reactions thanks to the wealth of provocative ideas they put forward.

Marchart's main objective in this book is to offer a political ontology – or, rather, an 'ontology of the political', as he calls it for good reasons – that may bring to full fruition some of the ideas already inherent, but not fully spelled out, in Laclau's post-Marxism. In this respect, the book goes beyond the Laclau of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and draws on some of the breakthroughs that Laclau achieved at a later stage, following Žižek's Lacanian critique, as they were outlined in his *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, his *On Populist Reason* and his posthumous collection of essays, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*. The central intuition Marchart borrows from Laclau (but also from Lefort, Mouffe, Nancy and other post-foundational thinkers) is that the political is the moment of institution/de-institution of society that, following the post-Marxist tradition, he calls antagonism. Yet, in Marchart, antagonism is inflated to become the name not only for the 'ontic' battles social actors wield in society, but primarily for the 'political nature of social being as such' (p. 3). This is a maximalist claim that Marchart defends throughout the book, initially by offering a genealogy of the idea of antagonism that harks back to the legacy of German Idealism and Marxism. The first part of the book expands on the main difference Marchart identifies between his ontological conception of antagonism and those older renditions of Marxism or some more contemporary discourses of ontology entertained (Marchart singles out here Foucault, Stiegler and Loraux for critique). In a nutshell, this amounts to claiming that, after the Heideggerian critique of metaphysical foundations, 'we' have come to recognise that antagonism does not operate solely on the ontic level of conflictuality (as 'class struggle' or ontic 'polemology' in Marchart's terminology), but it rather bears an ontological quality it shares with the Hegelian notion of radical negativity. In fact, Marchart audaciously brings together Heideggerian fundamental ontology, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and the Hegelian notion of *reflective negation* to defend a reformulation of antagonism as the inaccessible Real of political ontology, responsible both for the grounding of the social *and* for its unravelling or undermining in situations of crisis, be it either revolution, dissent or protestation

(in a sense, as both constituent *and* destituent power always mediated through ontic, hegemonic or counter-hegemonic, politics).

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

In the third part of the book, Marchart makes a claim that is even more provocative but that follows directly from the conception of antagonism-as-the-name-of-the-political he has been defending. His wager is that *thinking* itself is an inescapably militant, contentious, collective, and partisan activity, elevating itself to its true potential only when it goes beyond mere conceptuality, i.e. merely seeing itself as theory within scientific or disciplinary boundaries that sustain the various sedimented or reproductive practices of a given society. Philosophy, in other words, assumes its true dignity, so to speak, only as far as it not only reflects but also enacts or reactivates dormant possibilities within the social (according to Marchart, only when ontology becomes *prima philosophia*). Marchart's radical re-conceptualisation of antagonism thus comes full circle. Thinking, being and acting are at once penetrated by the political, perceived as the elusive dimension of radical negativity that does not come from the 'outside' but is generated by the very constitutive incompleteness of the social manifested in the politico-intellectual terrain through the restless repetition or succession of ontic conflicts.

This is a remarkable and daring achievement. Antagonism becomes the very name of the political qua radical negativity (although it is not always clear why antagonism is not, rather more convincingly, the name of the very *difference* between politics and the political, which would have perhaps saved Marchart from a lot of unnecessary criticisms). Marchart blends his sources very skilfully but also often somewhat confusedly. Heidegger and Hegel are intriguingly brought together in ways that can also be disconcerting, even for those like Marchart who reject Hegel's panlogism, since the Hegelian politics of negativity

(or, rather, the Hegelian-Kojevian synthesis that Marchart defends) sits uneasily with late Heidegger's politics of affirmative passivity. One does not have to be an Agambenian to see that Marchart's too quick dismissal of the politics of affirmative passivity as passively nihilistic, anti-political or even not really politics at all accords primacy to a very specific (Machiavellian/Gramscian) understanding of political action, even if not directly voluntarist, at least identified with success, effectivity, and mastery in an uneven social terrain riven by power asymmetries and inequalities. While Marchart may claim that his affirmation of concrete politics and his refusal to assent to a politics of abdication, to remember Blanchot's coinage, from a harsh or unfavourable social reality is authorised ontologically, his very own formalisation of antagonism may be the first victim of such a narrow perspective. To paraphrase Agamben, antagonism as radical negativity/nothingness can easily become the final veil of language (i.e. a well-hidden ultimate foundation), obstructing access to a view of political difference as a productive threshold where the political and its infinite cross-cuttings with politics are still indeterminable and thus open to multiple appropriations.

Let me be more precise. If Marchart is to remain faithful to his own rigorous 'ethics of intellectual engagement' (p. 210), he should be able to envisage a form of politics that undermines the ability of protest politics (with populism as its master signifier *par excellence*) to monopolise what politics is. That is, he should be able to also capture and so to formalise a type of politics as affirmative passivity rendering politics open to another use by 'saving' it from the very depoliticisation that a view of populism or protest politics as the absolute incarnation of the political-qua-antagonism would risk. The stakes here are high since this means that a truly radical formalisation of an ontology of the political (or, better, of political difference) qua antagonism may entail keeping the realms of thought and praxis distinct (yet not separate). Otherwise, one risks compromising thought (critique) by overcommitting to a form of militant politics (protest politics or populism as the name or minimal condition of politics), stipulated as the privileged manifestation of ontological antagonism. Marchart, of course, stresses more than once that, due to the incomplete nature of the social, any sedimentation of the political in the form of institutionalised hegemony is destined to crumble (so hegemonies are destined to be broken). Yet, a possibility he does not seriously entertain is that the blind spot of every hegemonic articulation (rhetoric, or discourse) is the suppression of its own internal other, which then authorises a paradigm of political (re)activation and militancy that rests on the (often violent or oppressive) denial of its own failure. Let me be absolutely clear here. I am not suggesting Marchart should side with Agamben, Benjamin or Schürmann as opposed to Laclau, or proclaim anarchism rather than populism or radical democracy as the name of politics. I am rather arguing that an 'obstinately rigorous' (p. 211) *political* articulation of antagonism, according to Marchart's own terms, should be able to accommodate *both* 'onto-logics': that of the political as constituent/destituent power or force of grounding/de-grounding the social *and* as a 'weak' drive, always already penetrated by the splinters of deactivation (to jointly paraphrase Benjamin and Agamben) that may open politics to a new use beyond the unending hegemony/counter-hegemony dialectic as 'a brute *factum politicum'* (p. 208).

Despite his promising formalisation of antagonism then, the legacy of Laclau may be more than a straight-jacket for Marchart. It becomes a distorting mirror that reflects the limitations of Laclau's own image of the political difference and holds back the resources – already inherent in Marchart's project – for a truly radical political stasiology (the term *stasis* holding in ontological indiscernibility both immobility and partisanship would perhaps be a better name for the political difference) faithful both to thought (imagination/critique) and to politics (or, rather, its unpredictability and indeterminacy). It is a testament to the brilliance of this book that it charts the way to such a task by stretching Laclau's legacy to its very limits. However, it shrinks from taking the final step. Inheritance is indeed a heavy burden, yet sometimes nothing serves its full assumption better than the symbolic act of 'killing the father'.

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