

The Social and the Political
On the Basic Concepts of Political Sociology

Political Sociology
Comprehensive Examination
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1. What is a Comprehensive Examination?

Broadly construed, the comprehensive examinations are designed as professionalization and specialization activities. The Programme Manual describes the goal of the comprehensive examinations in the following way: “The comprehensives are intended to prepare the student for the dissertation, to do research and to teach in a field.” The manual further specifies that comprehensives involve “examining and synthesizing a body of theory,” they combine “breadth, depth and synthetic ability,” but they do not require “exhaustive knowledge of the field.” This objective is obtained through a reading list that is equivalent to “about 25 medium-size books, with articles counting for about one-fifth of a book.” Pursuant to the objective of breadth *and* depth, the student is required to complete the comprehensive in one of two ways: a detailed syllabus, with an accompanying lecture of about 25-30 pages *or* through a review paper of about 40 pages. While this remains the official definition of the comprehensives and a statement on their purpose, the manual is not definitive as the debate concerning comprehensives has continued throughout the current academic year, seemingly to no end. The problem, in my perspective, is the irreconcilable contradiction between the demands of *breadth* and *depth*, even *when* the caveat that the comprehensives are not intended to provide an “exhaustive knowledge of the field” is kept in mind.

The strategy pursued in this comprehensive has been to narrow the field down to a manageable size. My concern *within* political sociology has been to investigate the currently important area of research involving “the political and the social.” Such a strategy cuts diagonally through the field embracing insights from divergent sources and other disciplines: political sociology has always had an uneasy and ill-defined relationship relative to both political philosophy and political science. Accordingly, no attempt to discriminate against sources has

been made in order to preserve disciplinary purity. Consequently, the reading list includes classics of a narrowly defined political sociology as well as contemporary sources from political philosophy and political theory. While the comprehensive format is ostensibly one of a ‘review paper’, such a format has been broadly construed and has thus extended beyond a simple review in order to present an actual argument. Hence, this might be better understood as a ‘position paper’ rather than as a ‘review paper’.

2. Outline

Perhaps a boring way to write a paper – that is, excessively academic and scholastic with only occasional hints of verve – and, no doubt a boring paper to read, I find it both necessary and useful to begin with foundations; that is, to carve out a space within political sociology to pursue later work and to make my relation to other work understandable and coherent. Thus, to a large extent, this paper presents the first attempt to lay-out concepts in relation to one another, along with the sources from which they derive. If much – if not most – academic work can be objected to on the basis of making claims through implication and citation, this charge is perhaps even more poignant in the case of the current paper. For instance, the reader will find an excess of footnotes. Consequently, I must apologize in advance: the reader will find few – far too few – substantive claims here. To an extent, then, I ask the reader to approach this paper as tentative, hesitant, and partially confused. This paper presents first steps on the way towards something far more interesting.

The essay is organized in the following order. First, I discuss a preliminary understanding of political sociology, which I take to be the study of the relation of the political to the social. This requires that temporary meanings of both ‘the social’ and ‘the political’ be presented so as to provide guidance in the pages that follow. Second, drawing upon Max Weber

and Carl Schmitt, I discuss one way of articulating the relation between the social and the political. For Weber and Schmitt alike, the political is located ‘within’ the social. Here I argue that rather than presenting a theory of the ‘political’, they actually provide a theory of ‘politics’ because they are unable to account for a mechanism or force that constitutes the social; for them, the social is always-already given and the question of change is left by the wayside. Third, I turn to the ethnological studies of Pierre Clastres and Marshall Sahlins in an effort to begin the groundwork for an approach that locates the political ‘outside’ the social so as to occupy the place of the constitutive force or mechanism. Through their studies, I show that primitive societies are organized to prevent the separation of power from the social. This, in turn, brings the political into relief enabling one to move forward to a position articulating the external relation of the political to the social. Fourth, drawing upon the insights of Clastres and Sahlins, I turn to a consideration of the relation of the political to the social in modern societies. Here I draw upon the work of Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort. Following these thinkers, I claim that modern societies presuppose ‘the discovery of society’ and thus understand society to be immanent to itself. Finding the origin of society in itself, it becomes possible to conceive society without reference to a transcendent source – God, Nature, Tradition. Consequently, it becomes possible to imagine society as otherwise. Fifth, and finally, I return to the question of political sociology succumbing to the traditional demands of the genre that a paper end with a conclusion.

3. What is Political Sociology?

We could be literal and understand, as we are taught in introductory sociology, that sociology is ‘the science of sociology.’¹ The word ‘sociology’ is, literally and figuratively, a *barbarism*. Literally, as a combination of the Greek ‘logos’ and the Roman ‘societas,’ the word is what is called a *barbarism*: a word that combines a Latin and a Greek root word in a single English word. Figuratively, the ‘definition’ of sociology is tautological. ‘Sociology’ already contains within it ‘the science of society.’ The definition does not add new information, but rather restates that which is already in question. In this sense, ‘sociology’ is barbaric because it is crude. But what if we were to take the expanded meaning of sociology, ‘the science of society,’ as a starting rather than as the end of the question? The problem is that we are left with an even bigger problem: where we first inquired into the meaning of sociology, now we are inquiring into the meaning of both *science* and *society*.

For the purpose of this paper, I do not want to broach the question of science in its various manifestations: empiricism and positivism, falsification and verification, science vs. ideology, science vs. philosophy, social or human sciences vs. natural sciences, etc. Such an investigation would take us too far afield and would result in the disappearance of the actual subject under investigation. It seems best, for now, to bracket ‘science’ and pursue ‘the social’ or ‘society’.

But, this too, presets problems. “Society,” Ernesto Laclau tells us, “is impossible.”² He seems to partially agree with Margaret Thatcher’s proclamation that “there is no such thing as

¹ The definition of sociology has always been at stake in sociology and thus a source of a great deal of controversy. Consider the following: “Sociology (in the sense which this *highly ambiguous word is used here*) is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences”. Max Weber (1978) *Economy and Society*, vol. 1, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 4. Emphasis in original.

² Ernesto Laclau (1990) “The Impossibility of Society” in *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, London: Verso.

society.” Thatcher’s claim concludes, “There are individual men and women, and there are families.”³ Although one might suspect that their reasons for making these proclamations differ, further analysis suggests that this suspicion is not as clear-cut as one might assume. Laclau’s proclamation has its origin in a crisis in Marxist political theory: increasingly (Laclau is referring to the 1980s – just like Thatcher) the traditional model of the base/superstructure is being called into question through a rejection of economism and essentialism. The efficacy of the Marxist theories of ideology and society are consequently called into question because both depend upon the base/superstructure model. Society, being an object that emerges in the superstructure as a reflection of the base, is only apprehensible as a theoretical object with a real existence if it is understood in a finite and essentialist way; i.e., as a particular reflection of the base. Without the base/superstructure model, the finitude and essence of society disappears:

Against this essentialist vision we tend nowadays to accept the *infinitude of the social*, that is, the fact that any structural system is limited, that it is always surrounded by an ‘excess of meaning’ which it is unable to master and that, consequently, ‘society’ as a unitary and intelligible object which grounds its own partial processes is an impossibility.⁴

Laclau summarizes this movement in the paradox of, on the one hand, “the impossibility of fixing meaning” and, on the other hand, “the attempt to effect the ultimately impossible fixation.”⁵ Consequently, ‘the social’ can only be expressed through hegemony: that is, to act as if the social is or can be fixed as a determinable and finite object. However, the social always resists this fixation through an excess of meaning and “only exists as the vain attempt to institute

³ Cited in Alan Hunt (1999) *Governing Morals: A Social History of Moral Regulation*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 194. Hunt discusses this quotation thoroughly (192-201).

⁴ Laclau, “The Impossibility of Society,” 90.

⁵ Laclau, “The Impossibility of Society,” 90-1.

that impossible object: society.”⁶ Society has no existence outside of its mobilization in the discursive field; that is, ‘society’ is nothing but a discursive object.

Meanwhile, Thatcher asserts the inverse claim: there is no such thing as society, there are only individuals and their families. In relation to strangers, people confront one another as individuals, meanwhile, in relation to intimates, people confront one another as family.⁷ Thus, ‘publicly’, people interact as isolated, self-contained economic individuals and, ‘privately’, people confront one another as intimate moral actors.⁸ Thatcher’s claim, then, is that there is no moral agent external to and above the individual (such as the state, government or society) that owes any form of support (i.e., social or welfare programs) to any individual in particular or in general because that support is the properly moral domain of the family. Society, as an object of responsibility to its members, does not exist.⁹ There are, instead, only families and individuals.

Common to both Laclau and Thatcher is an elementary confusion at the level of definition and concept: they repeatedly equivocate, shifting between ‘society’ and ‘the social’ without regard to the possibility that these are different objects. On the one hand, Laclau wants to point to the causal complexity inherent in any particular moment and the way in which these moments culminate in history. His attack on ‘society’ is not directed at society as such, but at competitors within Marxist theory. Laclau wants to destroy any lasting fidelity to the base/superstructure model and the economism it is said to engender in order to replace it with a model that is both indeterminate and overdetermined; Laclau wants to displace the old debate

⁶ Laclau, “The Impossibility of Society,” 92.

⁷ Thatcher’s position leaves everyone but intimates as strangers: friends, associates, business partners, etc. Moral obligations are only constituted through marriage and blood relations.

⁸ In this sense, for Thatcher, all values are ‘family values’, or, in her language, ‘Victorian values.’

⁹ A rejection of Thatcher’s thesis and, thus, the assertion of solidarity – that is, relations operating ‘above’ the individual – is central to understanding recent racial (New Orleans, the *banlieues*) and economic (pensions in England, precarity in France, and immigration in the United States) unrest. These political programmes, explicitly in opposition to neo-liberalism, assert the priority of the social over the economic – this assertion also explains why these movements appear as ‘naïve’ to the ideologues of neo-liberalism.

over ‘determination in the last instance’ with a position that is open to contingency and, perhaps strangely, to the power of subjects to act. Society is the casualty of throwing out the baby, so to speak, with the bathwater. On the other hand, Thatcher wants to destroy the remnants of the welfare state, which she identifies with ‘society’. Here, she clearly associates a form of state and way of structuring an economy with common-sense demands: ‘society’ causes poverty, therefore ‘society’ owes it to the poor to assist them. In Thatcher’s vision, ‘society’ is the illegitimate object of moral demands – especially forms of assistance or welfare. Thus, when Thatcher claims ‘society does not exist,’ she means to say that the welfare state is a moral and economic disaster needing to be replaced by a neo-liberal economy and a neo-conservative moral system that places morality in the family and economy everywhere else.¹⁰ The problem remaining, however, is, for Laclau, the identification of ‘society’ with the Marxist conception of ‘*social formation*’ and, for Thatcher, the identification of ‘society’ with the welfare state. That is, Laclau is concerned with a theoretical or discursive object while Thatcher is concerned with an empirical object. Why do both Laclau and Thatcher reject ‘society’ while defending something ‘social’?¹¹ The problem extends further: Thatcher, certainly, would not claim that she was not the Prime Minister of ‘British society’ and, indeed, she likely envisioned herself as a representative of ‘society’ (in the sense of a particular class; as in ‘high society’). At the heart of this problem is an antagonism between politics and ontology: on the one hand, the problem of order, and, on the other hand, the fact that an individual is always surrounded by others and is born into a world they did not have a part in creating. Their intervention is into the way of

¹⁰ The other side of Thatcher’s anti-society claim is the belief that “Victorian values” are “timeless and eternal”.

¹¹ The unexpected consequences of action (Laclau’s contingency) and the displacement of ‘society’ by ‘economy’ remains within the horizon of the social: regardless how one attempts to theorize relations, that there are other people cannot be avoided. An individual – even Thatcher’s individual – is always among other individuals whose existence must be taken into account.

organizing and understanding this ‘being-with-others.’ ‘Society’ as such is a word standing in for this problem of political ontology.

We might be generous and suggest both Laclau and Thatcher are correct insofar as they are staking a claim within the discursive field of sociology, regardless of the truth-value of their respective propositions. The question can then be transformed: we are no longer concerned with the definition of sociology as such, but rather with the meaning of staking a claim within the sociological field. The problem, then, becomes an issue of identifying the types of statements that can be uttered within the field of sociology, such that sociology remains distinct from other comparable fields such as psychology, economics, and philosophy. In this sense, then, sociology becomes the act of claiming a stake in the sociological field. This formulation remains as tautological as the original definition. It is thus necessary to take one further step: sociology is the act of putting the social into question.

Finally, we can shift the question back to the title of the section heading: *what is political sociology?* The quick answer is as follows: if *sociology* is the putting into question of the social, then *political sociology* must be the putting question of the political in relation to the social. The longer answer unfolds over the course of this paper and would necessarily involve in a theoretical elaboration of the concept ‘political sociology.’ To an extent, this ‘quick answer’ is uncontroversial: it is impossible to conceive a political sociology that does not refer to both the social *and* the political.¹²

It is a trope within political sociology to proclaim that the field of political sociology is a failure. This self-assessment of political sociology is a defining feature of the field. Each new article and each new book proclaims a rediscovery or renewal of political sociology. One is quickly reminded of a comment made by Marx in *The German Ideology*: “Principles ousted one

¹² I think it is uncontroversial to assert the importance of the conjunction: the social *and* the political.

another, intellectual heroes overthrew each other with unheard-of rapidity, and in the three years 1842-45 more was cleared away in Germany than at other times in three centuries. All this is supposed to have taken place in the realm of pure thought.”¹³ The situation that so annoyed Marx remains rampant in political sociology. Take the following for example:

As we enter the twenty-first century, many of the conventional ways of analysing politics and power seem obsolescent. They were forged in the period when the boundaries of the nation state seemed to set the natural frame for political systems, and when geo-politics seemed inevitably to be conducted in terms of alliances and conflicts among national states. They took their model of political power from an idea of the state formed in nineteenth-century philosophical and constitutional discourse. This imagined a centralized body within any nation, a collective actor with a monopoly of force was presumed to underpin the unique capacity of the state to make general and binding laws and rules across its territory. It also seemed to imply that all other legitimate authority was implicitly or explicitly authorized by the power of the state. Such styles of thinking about political power also embodied particular ideas about the human beings who were the subjects of power. These were structured by the image of the individualized, autonomous and self-possessed political subject of right, will and agency. Political conceptions of human collectivities also tended to see them as singularities with identities which provided the basis for political interests and political actions: classes, races, orders, interest groups. Within such styles of thought, freedom was defined in essentially negative terms. Freedom was imagined as the absence of coercion or domination; it was a condition in which the essential subjective will of an individual, a group or a people could express itself and was not silenced, subordinated or enslaved by an alien power. The central problems of such analyses were: ‘Who holds power? In whose interests do they wield it? How is it legitimated? Who does it represent? To what extent does it hold sway across its territory and its population? How can it be secured or contested, or overthrown?’ State/civil society; public/private; legal/illegal; market/family; domination/emancipation; coercion/freedom: the horizons of political thought were established by this philosophical and sociological language.¹⁴

Clearly, the author, Nikolas Rose, is not particularly impressed with the state of political sociology! But, the poor reader should not fear: what always follows in this genre of destroying and mocking political sociology is a promise that political sociology – or, in Rose’s terms,

¹³ Karl Marx (1998) *The German Ideology*, Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 33.

¹⁴ Nikolas Rose (1999) *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1. While following will be rather ungenerous, I will return to Rose in a more favorable light in the final section taking up his more substantive claims.

‘political thought’ – can be renewed or ‘reframed.’ All that we must do is persevere in reading Rose’s book, for he is eager to grant admission to his brave new world:

The aim of this book is to suggest some alternative ways of thinking about our contemporary regimes of government and their histories. In doing so, I hope to introduce some new options into our current political imagination, to amplify the possibilities that are open to us in our present. Of course, in our millenarian moment, many novel theories of culture, power and ethics are being proposed. I do not intend to review or evaluate these. I take my starting point from one particular style of analysis. This has grown out of Michel Foucault’s brief writings and lectures on governmentality. In these pieces on governmentality, Foucault sketched some pathways for analysing power that were not transfixed by the image of the state or the constitutive oppositions of conventional political philosophy and political sociology.¹⁵

If we are to believe Rose – and why shouldn’t we? Afterall, he has reviewed ‘many novel theories’ and determined that there is no need to ‘evaluate these’ or relate them to the reader – all we must do is take his word that Michel Foucault, a historian and a philosopher, can save political sociology. If not Foucault himself, then at the very least Rose’s interpretation of Foucault can fulfill this task.

Rose’s bluster fails to impress. I do not deny the possibility that he has something interesting to say, but I do deny that it is possible to ‘reframe political thought’ by the mere act of sweeping away an old vocabulary and imposing a new one in its place. Such an approach, the creation out of theoretical *ex nihilo* seems largely at odds with Foucault’s own thought. Afterall, Foucault’s ‘governmentality lecture’ that Rose appears to base his political sociology upon does not unequivocally dismiss the concepts Rose is so eager to reject.¹⁶ Rather than throwing around new words and new concepts, I think it is a better strategy to begin at the

¹⁵ Rose, *Powers of Freedom*, 3.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault (1991) “Governmentality” in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (eds), Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Indeed the state and sovereignty, to pick but two concepts from Rose’s blacklist, are central to Foucault’s analysis. On the one hand, sovereignty is an essential pole in his triangulation of modernity (sovereignty-discipline-governmentality). On the other hand, the final passage of the lecture implores one to consider the ‘statization of society.’

foundations of political sociology. That is, expand the ‘quick answer’ into an elaborated ‘long answer.’

In the meantime, that is, the time between the ‘quick answer’ and the ‘long answer’, it is worthwhile to give a ‘medium answer.’ A ‘medium answer’ is not fully elaborated, but goes beyond the trite statement of a ‘quick answer.’ Thus, the ‘medium answer’ is descriptive rather than definitive. The mode, here, is one of assertion rather than one of argumentation.

In his essay, “Rereading *The Communist Manifesto*,” Claude Lefort states, “No serious investigation into the political can escape the question of the social.”¹⁷ From the perspective of political sociology, it is also necessary to invert Lefort’s maxim: *no serious investigation into the social can escape the question of the political*. The essential elements of these assertions are twofold: first, the political and the social are, to use a favorite word of Lefort’s, ‘entangled’; second, the social and political remain empty of content and undefined. While their *entanglement* is asserted, their pre-determined *specificity* is denied. Entering into an investigation with pre-determined notions of the social and the political will result in the imposition of theoretical concepts on empirical reality with the consequent discovery that, while theory is rational, the empirical, in contrast, is clearly irrational.¹⁸ Crude rationalism and crude theoreticism have never helped anyone.

Political sociology is the attempt to apprehend and intervene into the ever-changing articulation and entanglement of the social and the political; that is, the question of the social and the question of the political pre-suppose one another. Lefort’s simple formulation belies its complexity as it assumes a number of elements: if both the social and the political change

¹⁷ Claude Lefort (1988) “Rereading *The Communist Manifesto*” in *Democracy and Political Theory*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 150.

¹⁸ These comments should not be interpreted as endorsing a crude inductivism either. My claim is not that concepts emerge out of analysis. At this point, my position is formal and structural.

throughout history, how can one apprehend them as distinct objects? Have they always existed? As *concepts*, they were clearly invented or discovered, but do they have a ‘real’ existence as spheres or domains of action independent of their mobilization in discourse? Does it matter if one speaks of the ‘invention’ or the ‘discovery’ of the social or political? The issue of the historicity of the social and the political presents the first challenge. If we cannot, in the first instance, provide a trans-historical definition of the social and the political, how are we to approach an investigation into the entanglement of the two concepts if they only exist in history? If they are historical concepts, then it becomes necessary to formulate an ‘empty’ definition of each that serves as a useful starting point for an investigation, otherwise it would, technically, be impossible to distinguish these concepts from one another.¹⁹ While political sociology may attempt to intervene in the present in order to direct the future, such an intervention is only possible if one takes account of the past. Following Marx, it is correct to assert “in the social production of their lives men enter into relations that are specific, necessary and independent of their will.”²⁰ At the same time, it is necessary to remember, “What theory cannot designate is the face of the future, of the society in which the old relations of domination and exploitation will be abolished. But its refusal to make predictions by no means implies that it recognizes its own limitations, for that which cannot yet be represented is strictly predetermined in the present.”²¹ In other words, the present relation between the concepts only makes sense in relation to previous configurations between the two. This, however, does not imply an original purity to the concepts: the first articulation of the social and the political is merely the first articulation among many in history. Similarly, just as ancient sources are not to be privileged, recent sources are

¹⁹ Once again: an ‘empty definition’ is not a hypothesis to be confirmed against empirical reality.

²⁰ Karl Marx (1996) “‘Preface’ to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*” in *Later Political Writings*, Terrell Carver (ed), Oxford: Oxford UP, 159.

²¹ Lefort, “Rereading *The Communist Manifesto*,” 155.

likewise no more privileged. While we may not have fallen out of a ‘Golden Age’ of Athenian democracy, equally, we have not arrived at the telos of history with American liberal capitalism. Given the original hesitation to assert a definition of the social, the political, and their articulation, it may be preferable to begin an investigation with guiding principles. Rather than defining our objects, the principles would help us discover them.

1. The presence of a word does not indicate the presence of a concept. Similarly, the absence of a word does not indicate the absence of a concept. Thus, the word ‘social’ may be present without the concept and vice-versa. This applies to any and all word-concept relations that one will employ while ‘doing political sociology’; for instance, race, gender, class, nation, people, sovereignty, state, force, violence, power, law, etc.²² Consequently, investigations must remain cognizant of the changing use and meaning of the terms throughout history.
2. The contingent relation between word and concept creates problems of definition. Following Nietzsche, we are forced to conclude “only that which has no history is definable.”²³ Consequently, the essential concepts of political sociology, as concepts existing in history, are ultimately undefinable. But, at the same time, it is necessary to stake a claim in the contest of defining the field. In other words, an investigation cannot remain neutral towards its object and claims about the object are not created equal. Some are worse than others; some are wrong and some are right. But, once again, this does not imply the possibility of a final and absolute definition.

Where the first principle indicates a relation of absence/presence between concepts and words, the second principle indicates a relation of impossibility with respect to the definition of concepts associated with words. The former necessarily leads the latter.

The definition of a concept attached to a particular word is dependent upon its context: the meaning of ‘moral’ in Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* differs significantly from the meaning of ‘moral’ in Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morality* and both differ from the contemporary deployment of ‘moral’ in the culture wars. We cannot conclude from this that one must be right and the other two wrong, but rather the word-concept relation is not fixed and cannot be fixed: each relation is equally *valid*, but that is not to imply that each relation is

²² In effect, all of the terms in Nikolas Rose’s list – and then some.

²³ Friedrich Nietzsche (1994) *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Keith Ansell-Pearson (ed), Oxford: Oxford UP, II, 13.

equally *correct*. Opinions are equally valid, but that is not to say that all opinions are correct; that is, they do not entail claiming a stake in a field of discourse – a claim that carries consequences and a claim that can be disputed on the basis of correctness.

It is therefore necessary to introduce a certain epistemological relativism (or, more accurately, *perspectivism*) into the discussion. There is no privileged point of access to the real essence of any given concept.²⁴ It is not possible to penetrate through the surface of the word and directly access the thing-in-itself. That is to say, the ‘view from nowhere’ in some forms of moral philosophy and epistemology is exactly that: from *nowhere*.²⁵ Equally, one could approach the question from another direction: the Hegelian ‘Absolute Knowledge’ of ‘the Sage’ is as impossible as the ‘view from nowhere’.²⁶ At this point we return to Marx: “abstractions in themselves, divorced from real history, have no value whatsoever.”²⁷ A view is always from *somewhere*. It is the material location of ‘the *somewhere*’ that prevents the word-concept

²⁴ Perspectivism is often viewed as a combination of both subjectivism and nominalism. A ‘thing’ does not have a real existence until it is named, but that naming can never be an objective moment, but is rather related to the context of the naming party. In other words, this returns us to Nietzsche’s statement about definitions. *Only that which has no history is definable*. Given that all objects (at least those which are valid objects of discourse) are in history, it follows that all these objects are without ultimate and absolute definitions. That is to say that there is no possible way of representing the thing-in-itself (that is the object independent of its relations to other objects or human consciousness) in discourse. Or, alternatively, *even if* the object had an essence, that essence – or final, absolute definition – could still nonetheless not be represented in discourse. In order to speak a definition of this sort, the speaker would have to be outside history. This position allows one to remain agnostic *vis a vis* realist epistemology. If an object has an essence, we cannot know it because of our own place in history and if an object has no essence, then we can only know it in and through history because there is nothing else to know. Either way, the object, much like ourselves, can only be understood in and through history and, therefore, it has a contingent and ever-changing meaning in the absence of a final definition. Perspectivism, in this version, is epistemologically relativist, but not ontologically relativist. It is the capacity to know or to represent the object in discourse that is questioned and not its existence as such. Perspectivism does not imply solipsism.

²⁵ Thomas Nagel (1989) *The View From Nowhere*, Oxford: Oxford UP. In this book, Nagel argues that human beings have the ability to disconnect their view of the world from their subjective location within it. Thus, humans are able to apprehend the world objectively through the denial of their own implication in the world through an exercise of reason.

²⁶ Kojève describes the ‘Absolute Knowledge’ of the Hegelian ‘Sage’ in the following way: “All philosophers are in agreement about the *definition* of the Wise Man. Moreover, it is very simple and can be stated in a single sentence: that man is Wise who is capable of answering in a *comprehensible* or satisfactory manner *all* questions that can be asked of him concerning his acts, and capable of answering in such fashion that the *entirety* of his answers forms a *coherent* discourse. Or else, what amounts to the same thing: that man is Wise who is *fully* and *perfectly self-conscious*.” Alexandre Kojève (1969) *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 75-6.

²⁷ Karl Marx (1998) *The German Ideology*, 43.

relation from floating off into space.²⁸ Thus, while signifiers may ‘float,’ they do not ‘float away’; they are always tethered *somewhere*. While both contingent and relative, the word-concept relation is nonetheless grounded in material reality. That is to say, the relation is material and real in the sense that it has real effects.²⁹ How one *attempts* to define the relation has real effects on real people in real situations.

Consequently the concepts of the social and the political have no *necessary* positive content. Rather, the positive content of the concepts is generated through a perpetual conflict over the nature of the concepts themselves. In this sense, the concepts are, in W.B. Gallie’s phrase, ‘essentially contested.’ The impossibility of definitively specifying the concepts is why they are so powerful. Following Gallie, it is correct to claim that the social and the political are of the sort of concepts that “are essentially contested, concepts the proper use of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users.”³⁰ While it is impossible to specify the concepts definitively, this is not to suggest that it is *worthless* and *pointless* to do so. On the contrary, the essentially contested nature of these concepts *demand*s that they be treated as concepts commanding high stakes. Any given outcome of the contest has real effects and, therefore, it is necessary to assert a stake in the contest lest one suffer undesirable real effects.

Briefly, pointing back to Laclau and Thatcher – arguments that most certainly have real effects – I want to suggest a way of framing the social and the political that will guide the discussion to follow. The first distinction to be made is that between ‘the social’ and ‘society.’

²⁸ That is, an epistemological *and* an ontological relativism.

²⁹ ‘Real’ is used in two senses in this paper which can lead to some confusion. The sense of ‘real’ used here is existential, as in, “it *really* exists.” Later, ‘real’ is used in opposition to the symbolic and the imaginary.

³⁰ W.B. Gallie (1956-7) “Essentially Contested Concepts” in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* vol. 56, 169. Gallie’s paper uses the examples of ‘the work of art,’ ‘the Christian life,’ and ‘Democracy’ in his examples of essentially contested concepts.

The latter refers primarily to an empirical object, such as Canadian or American society, and is often used in conjunction with or in place of the state. This significantly imprecise term is roughly equivalent to another murky concept, the nation-state. In contrast, the social seems to refer to something operation at the level of ontology; that is, there is something about the social that refers to the presence or being-with of others and to the created-ness of the world. Such a description of the social says quite little beyond the recognition that individuals always find themselves among others. But, it is this ‘being-with’ that conjures up the political.³¹ The social represents the fact that there are always other people, the political represents the fact this ‘being-with’ might be a problem. The political, then, presupposes the social and represents an intervention into the social as the problem of organizing or ordering relations between subjects and objects as they move through or are present in the social. Once again, while this tentative or temporary attempt to relate the social to the political appears to make substantive claims, I think these are quite limited. Even the suggestion that the social refers to the fact that individual humans do not live in isolation and that the presence of others can be a problem says little more than Aristotle’s claim that humans are political animals – that is, animals with the added capacity for politics. At this merely formal and schematic level, the social and political remain entangled with one another devoid of much substantive and differentiating content.

4. The Political Within the Social

A first attempt to understand the central relation of political sociology – that is, the articulation or entanglement of the social and the political – would be to assert that politics is a type of action or a sphere of action that occurs within the social. This suggests that there are a number of other possible spheres or types of action such as the moral, the economic, and the

³¹ The word ‘being-with’ is borrowed from Jean-Luc Nancy (2000) *Being Singular Plural*, Stanford: Stanford UP.

aesthetic, of which the social forms the ground or is the most general form of action.

Consequently, from this perspective, one would, first, attempt to ascertain the priority of the social over the other spheres or types of action because it must follow logically that these other types of action or spheres exist within the social. Secondly, one would seek to determine the relative autonomy of one sphere or type of action from the others. Finally, one would seek to discover whether a particular sphere or form of action determines the others. That is, does one sphere tend to dominate the others; for instance, an economic determinism? Or the ways in which one sphere joins with another; for instance, an aesthetic politics or a politics of aesthetics.

In terms of thinking of the political as a form or sphere of social action, an ideal starting point would be the dialogue between Max Weber and Carl Schmitt. While both Weber and Schmitt are familiar, their dialogue has remained largely unnoticed in Anglo-American scholarship. When the subject is broached, the response is generally in the form of absolutes. Either there is continuity between the thought of Weber and Schmitt or there is not. The former results in a questioning of Weber's sympathy for fascism due only to this relationship with the 'crown jurist' or 'theorist' of the Reich. The latter results in the safe and simple compartmentalization of Weber as a moderate liberal and the equally simple compartmentalization of Schmitt as a fascist. Wolfgang Mommsen has written the most detailed overview of the reception of the Weber-Schmitt dialogue:

In other words, Wickelmann tried to prove once and for all that Max Weber and Carl Schmitt had nothing in common, and that there was no justification at all for attacking Weber's notion of constitutional government as merely technological and value-neutral. In fact Wickelmann's conclusion amounted to a well-intended reinterpretation of Weber in the light of the views prevailing in the Federal Republic at the time; in substance, however, it was simply false. [...] Carl Schmitt and Roberto Michels had both taken this course [Weber's understanding nationalism and charismatic leadership democracy] and had ended up by lending support to National Socialism and Italian fascism respectively. [...] More controversial was the question whether Carl Schmitt's theory of decisionism had to be seen as a direct consequence of Weber's formalistic theory of democracy. [...]

Jürgen Habermas, on the other hand, emphasized, to the dismay of the more orthodox of the Weber experts, that Carl Schmitt's decisionism as well as his theory of plebiscitary rule must indeed be seen as radical consequences following on from Weberian premises, even though Weber himself clearly had not intended ever to go that far.³²

The debate concerning the Weber/Schmitt dialogue continues to this date, polarized as ever. The 'discontinuity' position appears to be dominant and in favour. For instance, not long after the publication of Mommsen's essay in English, Charles Turner is still able to write of "the *alleged* continuity between his [Schmitt's] and Weber's politics."³³ By 'alleged,' Turner clearly means to say that it is *certain* there is *no* continuity. As the reader no doubt suspects, I endorse the 'continuity' position. Like Habermas, I see a theoretical continuity between Weber and Schmitt and, once again like Habermas, I do not think Weber intended for his work to go in such directions as they were taken by Schmitt, nor do I think Weber would have endorsed fascism. However, unlike many commentators, I am not prepared to dismiss Weber or Schmitt because of an association with fascism. Such dismissals are lazy and, ultimately, unhelpful.

Max Weber's *Economy and Society* has become a classic text in sociology and social theory in part because of its genius and in part because its encyclopedic breadth touches upon all parts of the discipline. The core of this work confronts the traditional opposition between structure and agency and the micro and the macro. What unites the various studies – of epistemology and ontology, law and economy, religion and rationalization – is a concern with the political. The over-riding concern is to present an alternative to utilitarian political economy and Marxism. Most especially, Weber was concerned with the *form of authority* proper to the

³² Wolfgang J. Mommsen (1989) *The Political and Social Theory of Max Weber: Collected Essays*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 190-2. The "on the other hand" to which Habermas is replying to is Raymond Aron's "Max Weber and Power Politics", presented at the same conference. The essay can be found in Otto Stammer (1971) *Max Weber and Sociology Today*, New York: Harper & Row.

³³ Charles Turner (1992) *Modernity and Politics in the Work of Max Weber*, London and New York: Routledge, 113. Emphasis added.

modern industrial state.³⁴ Carl Schmitt largely follows these Weberian categories and concerns while at the same time providing a response to and an attack on Weber's politics.³⁵

Before proceeding to the theoretical grounds for asserting a continuity between their thought, it is worth raising the question of the historical grounds. Schmitt scholars, especially those who have attempted to make a case for Schmitt's importance to English language social and political theory, have brought many factual tidbits to our attention that culminate in a strong case for the continuity thesis.³⁶ First, a passage from Joseph Bendersky's biography of Schmitt could be cited:

Schmitt's intellectual re-orientation placed him among that small minority of German scholars – including Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies, and Max Scheler – who recognized the importance of sociological and political studies. Schmitt had, in fact, participated in Weber's seminar at Munich in 1919-20, and he later published sections of *Politische Theologie* [*Political Theology*] as his contribution to a Festschrift in honor of Weber.³⁷

Bendersky provides good reason to see a general influence of Weber on Schmitt, but this does not entail a direct continuity between the two. Perhaps the most instructive evidence comes from another source. John McCormick, in a book on Schmitt, writes, "Throughout this work, however, I make constant reference to a figure who had perhaps the most profound influence on Schmitt and to whom Schmitt referred as that 'German professor of liberal provenance,' Max Weber."³⁸ Cumulatively, these, in my view, suggest strong personal/historical reasons for claiming a continuity between Weber and Schmitt.

³⁴ Peter Wagner (1990) "Science of Society Lost: On the Failure to Establish Sociology in Europe During the 'Classical' Period" in *Discourses on Society* XV, 230.

³⁵ That is, 'politics' as distinct from 'the political' – a substantive position on policy or action.

³⁶ It is interesting to note the dynamic of the 'continuity' thesis as it plays out rhetorically: if Schmitt is in continuity with Weber, then this reflects well on Schmitt and poorly on Weber. Schmitt's prestige – that is, the degree to which he should be taken seriously, his fascism notwithstanding – increases due to an association with Weber. Weber's prestige, however, decreases due to an association with Schmitt and, therefore, fascism.

³⁷ Joseph Bendersky (1983) *Carl Schmitt: Theorist for the Reich*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 35.

³⁸ John McCormick (1997) *Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism: Against Politics as Technology*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 8.

Having determined that there are strong historical reasons to assert a continuity between Weber and Schmitt, it is necessary to turn to the theoretical reasons. Much can be said about Weber's central concept of social action. This, however, is not the place to do it. The point that I want to make is that social action is a more general, and therefore encompassing, form of action to the more specific, and therefore encompassed, form of action proper to the political. In other words, 'the political' is contained *within* 'the social.' This point follows from Weber's definitions of 'action' and 'social':

We shall speak of 'action' insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to his behavior – be it overt or covert, omission or acquiescence. Action is 'social' insofar as its subjective meaning takes into account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course.³⁹

Social action, then, is the most broad form of action and therefore encompasses all other forms of action that 'take into account the behavior of others.' All other forms of action are at once social (in their generality) and particular in terms of their specific ends. Thus, economic action is the form of social action that has the profitable as its specific ends. Other forms of action can be similarly delineated: as action, it is social insofar as it takes 'the behavior of others' into account, but it is specific insofar as it has ends particular to it. The means/ends structure of the action constitutes its sphere, or the form of action.

While it is comparatively easy to delineate various specific forms of action (economic, aesthetic, moral) on account of their ends (profitable, beautiful, good), the political presents a problem because, according to Weber, it has no end specific to it. The further one reads *Economy and Society*, it becomes apparent that Weber thought it was impossible or futile to define the political for two reasons: first, while the political has *means* specific to it, namely force, it has no *ends* specific to it; second, because the means of the political constantly calls the

³⁹ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, vol. 1, 4.

political itself into question through legitimacy. It is legitimacy that separates the means of the political (force) from something beyond the political (violence). Anthony Giddens draws attention to this relationship between force and violence that always calls the political into question:

Weber not only defines the state in terms of control of the means of violence, but does the same for the 'political', which is a far wider category. A 'political' organization, according to Weber, cannot be specified in terms of the ends to which it is devoted. There cannot be a satisfactory 'substantive' definition of the political, because political organizations, including states, have been concerned with all sorts of different activities. [...] The only feature which all political groups have in common is the means they employ, namely the use of force.⁴⁰

The problem the political presents comes into closer relief: first, anything can be the end of political action; second, the means particular to political action – force – quickly becomes violence. Weber expresses this problem in at least three different formulations in *Economy and Society*, only coming to a conclusion in the problem in his lecture "Politics as a Vocation":

(1) "It is not possible to define a political organization, including the state, in terms of the end to which action is devoted. All the way from provision for subsistence to the patronage of art, there is no conceivable end which some political association has not at some time pursued. And from the protection of personal security to the administration of justice, there is none which all have recognized. Thus it is possible to define the 'political' character of an organization only in terms of the means peculiar to it, the use of force. This means is, however, in the above sense specific, and is indispensable to its character. It is even, under certain circumstances, elevated into an end in itself."⁴¹

(2) "Owing to the drastic nature of its means of control, the political association is particularly capable of arrogating to itself all the possible values toward which associational conduct might be oriented; there is probably nothing in the world which at one time or another has not been an object of social action on the part of some political association."⁴²

(3) "The political community, furthermore, is one of those communities whose action includes, at least under normal circumstances, coercion through jeopardy and destruction of life and freedom of movement applying to outsiders as well as to the members themselves. The individual is expected ultimately to face death in the group interest."⁴³

⁴⁰ Anthony Giddens (1987) *The Nation-State and Violence*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 19.

⁴¹ Weber, *Economy and Society*, vol. 1, 55.

⁴² Weber, *Economy and Society*, vol. 2, 902.

⁴³ Weber, *Economy and Society*, vol. 2, 903.

There can be no solution to the problem of ends (which can be anything) and means (which is force) from the perspective of sociology. Any solution to the problem is already political and thus implies a value judgment, which is inappropriate to a value-neutral science such as sociology. Within the theoretical system itself, the answer to the problem is reference to legitimacy, which essentially boils down to the fact that people recognize the solution to the problem as legitimate. To prevent force from becoming violence, it must be attached to or constrained by legitimacy. Stepping outside the perspective of sociology, as Weber does in his lecture “Politics as a Vocation,” demonstrates Weber’s own value-judgment, that is, his solution to the problem given from the perspective of politics. Not coincidentally, this move from sociology proper to a politics based in a sociological analysis was a decisive influence upon Carl Schmitt.

Approximately halfway through “Politics as a Vocation,” Weber declares, “The decisive means for politics is *violence*.”⁴⁴ The question does arise as to the relation between ‘force’ (the word Weber uses in *Economy and Society*) and ‘violence’ (the word he uses here). After all, if the word violence is correct, this presents an entirely new definition of the political. Fortunately for my purposes, Weber uses the words ‘force’ and ‘violence’ in the same paragraph at the start of lecture, possibly clarifying the matter:

‘Every state is founded on force,’ said Trotsky at Brest-Litovsk. That is indeed right. If no social institutions existed which knew the use of violence, then the concept of ‘state’ would be eliminated, and a condition would emerge that could be designated as ‘anarchy,’ in the specific sense of this word. Of course, force is certainly not the normal or the only means of the state – nobody says that – but force is a means specific to the state. Today the relation between the state and violence is an especially intimate one. In the past, the most varied institutions – beginning with the sib – have known the use of physical force as quite normal. Today, however, we have to say that a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a giving territory. Note that ‘territory’ is one of the characteristics of the state.

⁴⁴ Max Weber (1958) “Politics as a Vocation” in *From Max Weber*, H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds), Oxford: Oxford UP, 121. Emphasis added.

Specifically, at the present time, the right to use physical force is ascribed to other institutions or to individuals only to the extent to which the state permits it. The state is considered the sole source of the 'right' to use violence. Hence, 'politics' for us means striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power, either among states or among groups within a state.⁴⁵

The paragraph reveals a consistent elision in terms:

force → physical force → violence

The state's role is rather murky: it 'claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force' and it is 'the sole source of the 'right' to use violence.' As arbiter of right and ultimate source of violence, the state becomes the locus of competing interests in the distribution of power, which appears as the ability realize one's objectives.⁴⁶

The question, then, is as follows: are force, physical force, and violence equivalent?

What is the relation between force/violence and legitimacy? The answer, for Weber, can only be found through displacing the political into the ethical.⁴⁷ Alongside an argument that proposes 'leadership democracy,' "Politics as a Vocation" also attempts to place the political within the ethical such that the power of a 'great leader' would be constrained by a moral imperative.

Noting that action can be oriented towards either an 'ethic of ultimate ends' or towards an 'ethic of responsibility,' Weber states:

⁴⁵ Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," 78.

⁴⁶ Weber (*Economy and Society*, vol. 1, 53) distinguishes between power and domination. "Power is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests. 'Domination' is the probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons." The distinction appears to be that power is premised upon the possibility of resistance to its exercise. (Once again, Weber reveals an important contemporaneity.) In this sense, everyone is equally subject to power *qua* power, but not everyone is equally subject to power *qua* intensity. Some are more able to control the balance of probabilities than others. This is the 'legitimate' face of power. In contrast, domination refers to a situation when one party is able to command another party without reference to the will of the party being commanded. That is, domination introduces a different form of sanction that could possibly draw upon the right to exercise violence. This is the illegitimate face of power as it becomes increasingly polarized.

⁴⁷ These are extremely interesting and important questions, but I am forced to set aside the force/violence relationship for reasons of brevity. This problem is not unique to Weber, which is why it cannot be dealt with at this time. Rather, it was a dominant concern for German intellectuals of the Weimar Republic. A full answer would require entering Walter Benjamin into the debate. The relevant texts are Max Weber's "Politics as a Vocation" (lecture 1918, published 1919), Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" (1921) and Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology* (1922). And, certainly, it is significant that they are, respectively, Protestant, Jewish and Catholic.

No ethics in the world can dodge the fact that in numerous instances the attainment of ‘good’ ends is bound to the fact that one must be willing to pay the price of using morally dubious means or at least dangerous ones – and facing the possibility or even the probability of evil ramifications. From no ethics in the world can it be concluded when and to what extent the ethically good purpose ‘justifies’ the ethically dangerous means and ramifications.⁴⁸

This statement leads directly into passage already cited: ‘The decisive means for politics is violence.’ That violence is the decisive means for politics creates a problem for any attempt to resolve the contradiction between ‘ultimate ends’ and ‘responsibility’: “If one makes any concessions at all to the principle that the end justifies the means, it is not possible to bring an ethic of ultimate ends and an ethic of responsibility under one roof or to decree ethically which end should justify which means.”⁴⁹ Anyone who fails to recognize this dilemma is a “political infant.”⁵⁰ Thus, politics requires a certain sort person, a “genuine leader,” who can embrace the paradox of politics, ethics and violence.⁵¹ Weber is now prepared to deliver his conclusion:

it is immensely moving when a *mature* man – no matter whether old or young in years – is aware of a responsibility for the consequences of his conduct and really feels such responsibility with heart and soul. He then acts by following an ethic of responsibility and somewhere reaches the point where he says: ‘Here I stand; I can do no other.’ That is something genuinely human and moving. And everyone of us who is not spiritually dead must realize the possibility of finding himself at some time in that position. In so far as this is true, an ethic of ultimate ends and an ethic of responsibility are not absolute contrasts but rather supplements, which only in unison constitute a genuine man – a man who *can* have the ‘calling for politics’.⁵²

The result of such a movement is that the political is pushed into an ethical paradox caught between responsibility and ends whereby only a ‘great leader’ is able to take on the existential

⁴⁸ Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” 121.

⁴⁹ Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” 122.

⁵⁰ Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” 123.

⁵¹ Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” 125.

⁵² Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” 127. Pursuant to my comment regarding Weber’s Protestantism, Weber’s allusion of the words of the ‘mature man’ are to Martin Luther’s statement at the Diet of Worms: “Here I stand, I can do no other, God help me, Amen.” The consequences of Luther’s position are, of course, immense, thus revealing the sort of politics and, therefore, politicians, Weber envisioned. It is no coincidence that Luther figures so prominently here: Luther’s doctrine was central to Weber’s most famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

demands of resolving the paradox through the decision. Weber's endorsement of Martin Luther's stance at the Diet of Worms is revealing: the consequences of Luther's stance are enormous.

This decisionistic moment presents an ideal opportunity to turn from Weber to Carl Schmitt. In *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt immediately identifies Weber's problem: the political cannot be defined on the basis of its specific end because the political has taken and will continue to take on any end as its own. The political is antagonistic to all the other domains (economic, religious, moral, aesthetic, etc). What Schmitt means by 'antagonistic' is that the political is not reducible to any of these domains. Economic competition is not immediately political, although the economic may form the basis of a political struggle; thus, the political is autonomous from the other domains. Schmitt appears to part ways with Weber's analysis on two points. First, the political *cannot* be reduced to an *ethical* decision on the paradox of responsibility and ultimate ends; second, the political *can* be specified in terms of a specific end. For Schmitt, these two points culminate in a complete theory of the political. The first point runs as follows:

A definition of the political can be obtained only discovering and defining the specifically political categories. In contrast to the various relatively independent endeavors of human thought and action, particularly the moral, aesthetic, and economic, the political has its own criteria which express themselves in a characteristic way. The political must therefore rest on its own ultimate distinctions, to which all action with a specifically political meaning can be traced. Let us assume that in the realm of morality the final distinctions are between good and evil, in aesthetics beautiful and ugly, in economics profitable and unprofitable. The question then is whether there is also a special distinction which can serve as a simple criterion of the political and of what it consists. The nature of such a political distinction is surely different from that of those others. It is independent of them and as such can speak clearly for itself.⁵³

⁵³ Carl Schmitt (1996) *The Concept of the Political*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 25-6.

Put into such a relation, it is clear to Schmitt that each sphere of the social is determined by an irreducible antagonism that constitutes it. We are familiar with the relevant distinctions in all the spheres, with the exception of the political.⁵⁴ Schmitt, of course, furnishes us with an answer:

The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy. This provides a definition in the sense of a criterion and not as an exhaustive definition or one indicative of substantial content. Insofar as it is not derived from other criteria, the antithesis of friend and enemy corresponds to the relatively independent criteria of other antitheses: good and evil in the moral sphere, beautiful and ugly in the aesthetic sphere, and so on. In any event it is independent, not in the sense of a distinct new domain, but in that it can neither be based on any one antithesis or any combination of other antitheses, nor can it be traced to these. If the antithesis of good and evil is not simply identical with that of beautiful and ugly, profitable and unprofitable, and cannot be directly reduced to the others, then the antithesis of friend and enemy must even less be confused with or mistaken for the others. The distinction of friend and enemy denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation. It can exist theoretically and practically, without having simultaneously to draw upon all those moral, aesthetic, economic, or other distinctions. The political enemy need not be morally evil or aesthetically ugly; he need not appear as an economic competitor, and it may even be advantageous to engage with him in business transactions. But he is, nevertheless, the other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specifically intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible. These can neither be decided by a previously determined general norm nor by the judgment of a disinterested and therefore neutral third party.⁵⁵

Having claimed that the political cannot be reduced to an ethical decision and that the political is constituted by the friend/enemy antagonism, we are thus left with the questions of means and ends specific to the political and that form that the political decision takes. With respect to the

⁵⁴ At this point, I want to bring to the reader's attention that Schmitt rarely discusses the social. Schmitt lists 'antitheses' to the political (*The Concept of the Political*, 23) as follows: religious, cultural, economic, legal and scientific. There are two notable exceptions: first, the identity of the state and society in the 'total state' and, second, the 'nineteenth century' antithesis between state and civil society, or, in Schmitt's formula, "political against social." However, with respect to the former, the total state remains 'potential' and with regard to the latter, the state/civil society distinction remains in the past. The social appears only as an obsolete problem or a problem that may come in the future. The problem for Schmitt is the power of the social to neutralize the political. With the total state, it is as though everything falls into the domain of the social thus rendering the political obsolete; there are no political problems, only social problems. The friend/enemy distinction is replaced with debating partners over the best or most efficient policy. The result is similar for the distinction between civil society and state. Civil society *qua* social is insulated from the state *qua* the political. Rather than directing the friend/enemy distinction toward external collectivities, a domain is formed in civil society as a realm of freedom wherein the political is excluded. Further, as civil society against the state, the political is mutated into a self-laceration as the state is internally attacked from the non-political (in Schmitt's sense) civil society.

⁵⁵ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 26-7.

first answer, the ends of the political are autonomous from the domain itself (anything *can be* political, but not everything *is* political) while the means are not to be found in any normative theory (especially in law or morality), but rather in combat, force and violence. To this extent, Schmitt's concept of the political is identical to Weber's. The important difference emerges relative to the form of the decision: for Weber it was ethical, for Schmitt it is existential and vital. To determine the enemy is at the same time to determine who will kill and who will be killed. The political decision is a matter of life and death; that is to say, at its extreme, the political is the decision on who lives and dies:

For to the enemy concept belongs the ever present possibility of combat. All peripherals must be left aside from this term, including military details and the development of weapons technology. War is armed combat between organized political entities; civil war is armed combat within an organized unit. A self-laceration endangers the survival of the latter. The essence of a weapon is that it is a means of physically killing human beings. Just as the term enemy, the word combat, too, is to be understood in its original existential sense. It does not mean competition, nor does it mean pure intellectual controversy nor symbolic wrestlings in which, after all, every human being is somehow involved, for it is a fact that the entire life of a human being is a struggle and every human being symbolically a combatant. The friend, enemy, and combat concepts receive their real meaning precisely because they refer to the real possibility of physical killing. War follows from enmity. War is the existential negation of the enemy. It is the most extreme consequence of enmity. It does not have to be common, normal, something ideal, or desirable. But it must nevertheless remain a real possibility for as long as the concept of the enemy remains valid.⁵⁶

Schmitt, then, solves the problem confronting Weber. While violence may be the decisive means of politics, violence is not what gives politics its definition or its meaning. Legitimacy does not fit into the definition of the political. This is telegraphed in the second sentence of the book where Schmitt paraphrases Weber, leaving out one essential element: "According to modern linguistic usage, the state is the political status of an organized people in an enclosed territorial unit."⁵⁷ The claim to the *legitimate* monopoly of coercive force by the modern state is

⁵⁶ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 33.

⁵⁷ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 19.

just that remains nothing but a claim or, perhaps, a mere statement of fact. Legitimacy is not an essential feature of the modern state. Rather, the essential feature is the relation between the collectivity and territory, which necessarily implies an external relation to other collectivity/territory units. Violence, then, does not fit into the definition of the state, but into the definition of the political. Weber's inability to separate the state from the political in modernity lead him to an inability to specify the political. The political ceases to be the transition from threat of violence to the exercise of violence. Instead, the political becomes the ever-present possibility of violence.

Finally, we can turn back to the question of political sociology: how successful was Weber and Schmitt's attempt to define the terrain of political sociology? Approaching Weber and Schmitt from a different angle and degree of abstraction, we might say that Weber and Schmitt present a schema of the social. What Weber and Schmitt have provided is a transcendental and pre-phenomenological mechanism for the apprehension of the social. Transcendental in that the schema imposes form onto the social and pre-phenomenological in that the schema operates non-consciously prior to sense perception; the schema enables one to perceive the world as social and as containing or being organized by a variety of forms of action. For them, all these domains are present and defined in a particular way. These domains generate problems, which are managed through the logic of the relevant antagonism. It isn't beyond reason to compare these antagonisms to Kant's antinomies. Actual historical and empirical reality fill the schema with content. Thus, the empirical moment is secondary to the transcendental moment, but one cannot exist without the other. The problem with their position

reveals itself: the movement of the system can only appear as the exceptional and irrational.⁵⁸ Further, the constitution of the system is trapped within the system itself. The generative principle is already generated; the political is inside the social. In this sense, it is more appropriate – perhaps ironically – to suggest that ‘politics’ rather than the ‘political’ is what Weber and Schmitt have theorized.

5. Primitive Society and the Political

The previous section examined what I take to be one of the strongest theoretical positions on the relation of the social to the political. It is, however, notably deficient in one regard: by locating the political *within* the social, there is no room for a constitutive principle. For Weber and Schmitt, the social is always-already formed which leads to an inattention on their part to recognize the ‘forming’ aspects of the political. In this sense, it is possible to substitute ‘politics’ for ‘the political’ in their position. This section acts a hinge between the account presented by Weber and Schmitt and a position regarding the relation between the social and the political that I find more compelling: one that is able to account for a constitutive principle. This position does not locate the political within the social, but rather understands the political as the mechanism or force that posits and constitutes the social. Locating the political ‘outside’ the social as a constitutive force finds its theoretical development in the political theory of Cornelius Castoriadis, Claude Lefort and the ethnology of Pierre Clastres and Marshal Sahlins. This section concerns the latter two, whose investigations of ‘primitive society’ and the ‘savages’ who live in them reveal a social structure that resists the separation of power from the social; that is, that resists the separation of a ‘political organ’ from the ‘social body’. This argument is presented in order to draw out contrasts with the social and political theory of Cornelius

⁵⁸ It is worth nothing that Weber attributes revolutionary change to ‘charismatic authority.’ If that authority is to persist, it must be routinized or rationalized; that is, it must be converted into ‘traditional’ or ‘bureaucratic/rational’ authority.

Castoriadis and Claude Lefort. Drawing upon the political anthropology of Pierre Clastres and the economic anthropology of Marshall Sahlins, I want to briefly sketch an image of an alternative structure of the social and the political that is not to be found in modern societies.⁵⁹ For Clastres and Sahlins alike, in ‘primitive society,’ defined simply as a ‘society *against* the State,’ the point of the social order was to *prevent* the division of the society between the dominant and the dominated, thus preventing the separation between power and the social, and, consequently, a neutralization of the political. The primary means of achieving, on the one hand, the unity of power and the social, and, on the other hand, the neutralization of the political is through preventing the accumulation of a surplus and a strict division between power and force.⁶⁰ Primitive society, it is suggested, renders power and the social co-extensive such that all members of the society participate equally in power. As the body of society is identified with all the adult males, who are also warriors, it is made impossible for a single one of them – the chief included – to take control of the society as a whole, which would institute a division between those who give orders and those who follow orders.⁶¹ By way of contrast, a ‘society with a State,’ such as modern societies, is one structured around a constitutive division.

Prior to moving into the argument as such, a few words should be said about the attempt to fold ethnology back onto modern society. It is one thing to study ‘the other’ or to mobilize ‘the other’ in critique, but it is another thing entirely to fetishize, exoticize or orientalize the other. For my purposes, I want to preserve the critical power of comparing societies such as our

⁵⁹ Pierre Clastres (1989) *Society Against the State*, New York: Zone Books; Pierre Clastres (1994) *The Archaeology of Violence*, New York: Semiotext(e); and Marshall Sahlins (1972) *Stone Age Economics*, New York: Aldine de Gruyter. This work was taken up by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987) “1227: Treatise on Nomadology: The War Machine” in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

⁶⁰ ‘Surplus’ referring to both power and wealth.

⁶¹ As is often the case in much political theory written by men, the division between men and women is wrongly deemed to be of marginal importance.

own to their others without doing violence to those others. The line between using sources of this sort in critique and doing violence to this sources is thin.

Samuel Moyn suggests Clastres pursued an interest in primitive society in order to stop the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave that culminates in the Stalinist end of history before it ‘began’.⁶² By returning to the underdeveloped (by Hegel) and ignored (by the French Hegelians) ‘philosophy of nature,’ Clastres sought to stop the dialectic before it began through demonstrating that the Hegelian dialect was fictional. Thus Clastres’ object was simultaneously primitive and modern society. In a sense, then, Clastres took the slogan ‘socialism or barbarism’ quite literally by using primitive ‘barbarians’ to refute modern ‘socialism’.⁶³ Such a move has been dubbed ‘the ethnological imagination’.⁶⁴ This term refers to a current in social theory to draw upon the other, especially in the form of savages, barbarians and primitives, in order to mount a critique on the self. The ethnological imagination ‘creates mythical representations’ of primitive societies in order to turn them against Western societies in an effort to “defamiliarize, denaturalize, and situate their customs, beliefs, and institutional arrangements.”⁶⁵ The hope of this move is that through comparison with “radically different ways of being” that the “omnipresent tendency toward one-dimensionality” in Western societies will be shattered.⁶⁶

Whether they are positively or negatively oriented, the tropes employed to represent non-Western peoples should be recognized, in the vast majority of cases, as fictional discursive constructs that are created and projected onto actually existing societies

⁶² Samuel Moyn (2004) “Of Savagery and Civil Society: Pierre Clastres and the Transformation of French Political Thought” in *Modern Intellectual History* 1(1), 55-80.

⁶³ Barbarians are usually understood as those people who fall outside civilization. Thus, to the Greeks, non-Greeks were barbarians for the tautological reason that they were not Greeks and, to the Romans, the barbarians were the people they found living in ‘Europe’ during the imperial expansion. In this sense, barbarians are everything but ‘us’. Pushing Clastres’ case a little too far; ‘our’ barbarians are the primitives identified by Clastres. This can only be case if the ‘end of history’ is taken seriously: if everything and everyone is ‘inside’ civilization, then there is no external other who can be barbarian. In order to find an ‘outside,’ one must seek residuals and remainders, such as primitives.

⁶⁴ Fuyuki Kurasawa (2004) *The Ethnological Imagination: A Cross-Cultural Critique of Modernity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

⁶⁵ Kurasawa, *The Ethnological Imagination*, ix.

⁶⁶ Kurasawa, *The Ethnological Imagination*, xi.

without much correspondence to them. Accordingly, the ‘savage,’ the ‘primitive,’ and the ‘Oriental’ are signifiers without referents, the meaning and image they evoke having little to do with how inhabitants of those worlds understand themselves or how their socio-cultural institutions function.⁶⁷

This manoeuvre, it is hoped reveal more about the modern societies than the ‘primitive’ societies. While Kurasawa does not discuss Clastres or Sahlins at length, both firmly belong within this tradition.

Pierre Clastres’ argument begins with the observation that ‘primitive societies’ are almost always defined in an ethnocentric fashion: the definition of a ‘primitive society’ is based upon the definition of a ‘modern society’; that is, the ‘primitive’ aspect of the ‘primitive society’ is defined as a lack *vis a vis* the ‘modern society.’ The definition of the ‘modern society’ is projected as a norm ‘backwards’ in time: a contemporary ‘primitive society’ is seen as a historical remainder, a society that failed to become ‘modern’ because it expresses a lack – a lack that is tantamount to saying that the ‘primitive society’ is, by definition, not a ‘modern society’. Traditional ethnology, according to Clastres and Sahlins, refuses to study primitive societies for what they are, preferring, instead, to study them for what they are not. On this point, Clastres cites Claude Levi-Strauss:

Monotonous repetition of a very old insult: in discussing ethnocide, before it was called that, Claude Levi-Strauss reminds us in *Race et Histoire* how the Indians of the Isles wondered whether the newly arrived Spaniards were gods or men, while the whites wondered whether the indigeneous peoples were human or animal.⁶⁸

The important point, for Clastres, is the negative valuation of the Indians *vis a vis* the Spaniards. For the Spaniards, the Indians, lacking a ‘modern society’ could not be fully human. They could only be less than human; that is, they could only be animals. Throughout his essays, Clastres

⁶⁷ Kurasawa, *The Ethnological Imagination*, 23.

⁶⁸ Clastres, “Of Ethnocide” in *The Archaeology of Violence*, 45. In this essay, Clastres concedes that *all* cultures are *ethnocentric*, but only the Western cultures are *ethnocidal*. An Indian would not want to leave his culture for the West, but a Westerner, unable to integrate an alien culture into his own worldview would seek to destroy the alien culture (46).

refers to the assessment of the Tupinamba Indians made by the first Europeans to explore what was to become Brazil: “People without god, law, and king.”⁶⁹ Clastres point here is that this ‘without’ should not be read – as do ethnocidal Europeans – as a *lack*, but rather as a positive moment: ‘primitive societies’ are structured in such a way as to *prevent* these from coming into existence and therefore to prevent these things from allowing the society to be divided between the dominant and the dominated.⁷⁰ For Clastres, the study of primitive societies can be folded back onto modern societies forming the basis of a critique of modern societies without implying a particular normative position.⁷¹

A positive inversion of the traditional definition of ‘primitive societies’ begins with the definition

furnished by the most classical anthropology when it aims to determine the specific being of these societies, when it aims to indicate what makes the irreducible social formations: primitive societies are societies without a State; they are societies whose bodies do not possess separate organs of political power. Based upon the presence of absence of the State, one can initially classify these societies and divide them into two groups: societies without a State and societies with a State, primitive societies and the others.⁷²

Clastres immediately recognizes that the distinction between ‘with a State’ and ‘without a State’ is not sufficient. The threshold between ‘primitive societies’ and ‘the others’ is determined on the basis of the State, but this is not to say that all societies with a State are of the same form.

⁶⁹ Clastres, “Copernicus and the Savages” in *Society Against the State*, 15. Clastres uses other formulations when he paraphrases this thought: occasionally the word ‘faith’ is used in the place of ‘god.’ The essential point, which will be returned to in the following section, is that the symbolic structure of the ‘primitive society’ has a different organization than that of the ‘modern society.’ It isn’t that ‘primitive societies’ *lack* these things, but rather the relation between the symbolic structure and the real society is such they are invisible. For ‘primitive societies’ the symbolic and the real are, essentially, the same thing.

⁷⁰ A lack, present not in primitive societies but rather in Clastres own thought, is a convincing explanation of how savages have enough knowledge of the State in order to prevent its constitution. It seems probable that once constituted, there is no return from the State. On this paradox, Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 359), who otherwise cite Clastres approvingly, note “For on the one hand, the State rises up in a single stroke, fully formed; on the other, the counter-State societies use very specific mechanisms to ward it off, to prevent it from arising”.

⁷¹ i.e., that ‘modern societies’ should seek to become ‘societies against the State’. It is worth nothing, nonetheless, that Clastres understood himself as an anarchist; as precisely one’s whose political position is ‘against the State’.

⁷² Clastres, “Power in Primitive Societies” in *Archaeology of Violence*, 87-8. It is worth noting that ‘modern societies’ (i.e., ‘societies with a State’) are referred to as ‘the others.’

The State institutes a principle, which may be and has been taken up in many different ways.

The State is an indicator of a ‘common property’ found in all societies with a State and absent in all societies without a State; “all societies with a State are divided, in their being, into the dominating and the dominated, while societies without a State are ignorant of this division.”⁷³

This implies two claims operating on different levels: first, the State introduces a new form of social organization based upon the division between the dominant and the dominated; second, the State introduces a separation between society and power.⁷⁴ Consequently, the definition of a primitive society is that “a distinct political sphere cannot be isolated from the social sphere.”⁷⁵

The State, then, could be read as a principle that introduces division into society: on the one hand, it introduces a fundamental antagonism and, on the other hand, an organ of power separate from society.

The question thus arises: how do primitive societies prevent the emergence of the State? Or, at a more basic level, is there not a political institution in primitive societies; *viz.*, the chief? What, from the perspective of the society with a State, appears as a political institution is, within the society without a state, a neutralized institution; “the savage chief does not hold the power to command.”⁷⁶ The chieftainship has a ‘political’ character imposed upon it from without: the chieftainship solves the problem of the European horror – the chief is transformed into the absolute, despotic body of ‘law, god and king.’ Within his own society, however, the chief is not actually a despot embodying ‘law, god and king,’ but is rather in the paradoxical position of having power, but not force. The chief operates a condensation point for the totality of power

⁷³ Clastres, “Power in Primitive Societies,” 88.

⁷⁴ One is tempted to describe the first as ‘the real’ and the second as ‘the symbolic’.

⁷⁵ Clastres, “Power in Primitive Societies,” 88. This distinction reveals, perhaps, why the Spaniards could not determine if the Indians were human or animal. Philosophy, from Plato and Aristotle to the present, have defined the human in terms of an added capacity to engage in politics: man is a political animal. A society without a State, or a society without a distinct political sphere, is, by this classical definition, a society of animals.

⁷⁶ Clastres, “Power in Primitive Societies,” 89.

operating within the primitive society. The chief, occupying the position of power without force, “is responsible, essentially, for assuming society’s will to appear as a single totality, that is, for the community’s concerted, deliberate effort to affirm its specificity, its autonomy, its independence in relation to other communities.”⁷⁷ The chief, then, embodies the representation of the society to itself. The chief is society in human form.⁷⁸ Consequently, the chief cannot perform or compel actions that the society would not already do, nor can the chief desire something that society does not already desire. To that extent, the chief reflects the unconscious of the society back onto itself; the chief makes the unconscious desire of the society conscious. To speak, to act as the spokesperson of society is the chief’s ‘only duty.’ This duty is both important and powerful: the chief is compelled to mediate between ‘the real’ and ‘the symbolic’ by making the unconscious of society explicit.⁷⁹ Certainly, being the only person able to make use of this power is significant. However, like all the other functions of the chief, this power over the function is effectively neutralized: through the duty to constantly *speak*, the chief is unable to *act*. The action of the chief is neutralized by the necessity to speak. The power of the

⁷⁷ Clastres, “Power in Primitive Societies,” 89.

⁷⁸ As an aside, one notes that the death of the chief does not imply the death of the society. The chief’s body is but one body among many who happens to have the added responsibility of mediating between his society and others. That the chief’s death does not present a problem to the society is because the chief is not understood as the marker of authority and legitimacy; that is, the position of the chief is not united to the State, since the State does not exist. The institution of the State introduces the problem of continuity: with the State, the representative of society (or representation of society) and society itself are united in a way such that the death of the representative of society implies the dissolution of the society itself because authority and legitimacy dissolve with the body of the representative. Succession, as such, can only be a problem in State societies:

Of all these forms of government, the matter being mortal (so that not only monarchs, but also whole assemblies die), it is necessary for the conservation of the peace of men that, as there was order taken for an artificial man, so there be order also taken for an artificial eternity of life, without which men that are governed by an assembly should return into the condition of war in every age, and they that are governed by one man, as soon as their governor dieth. This artificial eternity is that which men call the right of *succession* (Thomas Hobbes *Leviathan*, Part II, Chapter 19).

Hobbes’ ‘artificial eternity’ is the central problem of what has since come to be known as political theology. See Ernst H. Kantorowicz (1997) *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, Princeton: Princeton UP.

⁷⁹ In the sense mentioned in footnote 65 above.

chief remains potential, never finding a moment of actualization.⁸⁰ The decision of the chief is always already the decision of the society, but the society can only know this decision through the mediation of the chief. The chief can never call for a war or a raid that the society does not already want to participate in. As such, “the primitive leader never makes a decision on his own authority (if we can call it that) and impose it on his community.”⁸¹ As the body of the will and power of the entire society, the chief is limited to issuing ‘orders’ that the society has already agreed to before they were even formulated as orders. Put another way, a chief can suggest a military adventure, but he is absolutely unable to compel anyone to join with him.

Through successfully acting on behalf of the community with respect to outsiders, the leader is able to generate prestige: “society endows him with a certain amount of confidence guaranteed by the qualities that he displays precisely in the service of his society.”⁸² Prestige is not to be confused with power. Prestige is an index of the ability to interpret the desire of the society and communicate it to other societies. Regardless of how much prestige a chief may have, he may never give a command to the society that it does not already want. Consequently, the chief cannot command the warriors as his own troops; the chief cannot attempt a coup. With respect to conflict or disagreement within the society, the chief is powerless to intervene. There is no law for the chief to interpret and there is no decision he can make to resolve disputes.⁸³ The best the chief can hope for – should he even be asked to intervene in the first place – is to settle the dispute through reference to tradition, which is the glue that binds the society together rendering it stable over time.

⁸⁰ One might compare the division between speech and action in primitive societies to their unity in modern societies, especially with respect to the right to name groups and populations and, of course, technology.

⁸¹ Clastres, “Power in Primitive Societies,” 89.

⁸² Clastres, “Power in Primitive Societies,” 89.

⁸³ Once again, the chief is left with only the ability to speak: this time, the chief can speak of tradition as it relates to the dispute, but is otherwise unable to intervene.

The chief's potential to exercise the power he embodies is effectively neutralized by his lack of force. The chief is unable to act against society or compel society to do something it does not already wish to do. While the chief embodies power, the chief does not possess force. The chief renders power present *via* his prestige, that is, his ability to interpret the desire of the society, but the society nonetheless remains in control of power. The society 'is' power and the chief merely embodies the representation of power. The position of the chieftainship is separated from power, but does this mean that primitive societies are a-political? The better question, perhaps, is how do primitive societies maintain equilibrium? The short answer is that primitive societies are structured to prevent the accumulation of surplus: insofar as 'power' is concerned, the chief is ultimately condemned, as Clastres puts it, to a 'solitary, yet prestigious and powerless death' in war. Another way to explore the mechanism of preventing accumulation is through the study of wealth.

Like the political anthropology of Pierre Clastres, the economic anthropology of Marshall Sahlins seeks to purge the discipline of its ethnocentric orientation that defines the primitive *vis a vis* the modern by a lack. Where Clastres political anthropology disputed the lack of 'god, law and king', Sahlins' economic anthropology disputes the view that primitive societies were characterized by poverty scarcity and starvation. According to traditional economic anthropology, the savage's "technical incompetence is said to enjoin continuous work just to survive, affording him neither respite nor surplus, hence not even the 'leisure' to 'build culture.'"⁸⁴ Sahlins suggests the complete opposite thesis: rather than presenting a subsistence economy, the savage finds himself in the 'original affluent society.' Referring to 'common understanding,' Sahlins takes 'affluent society' to mean "one in which all the people's material

⁸⁴ Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, 1.

wants are easily satisfied.”⁸⁵ It follows that the contemporary view of labour as an evil sitting between ‘unlimited wants’ and ‘insufficient means’ is clearly wrong. Just as the political anthropology of Clastres de-naturalizes the modern political condition, the economic anthropology of Sahlins de-naturalizes the modern economic condition. Like Clastres, Sahlins does not draw normative conclusions from his studies.

This is not to give into a Rousseauian image of a ‘noble savage’ living in an earthly paradise prior to the introduction of sin into the world. Affluence – the ability to satisfy wants – can be attained in two ways: either through producing a lot or desiring little. Primitive societies opt for the ‘Zen’ route, “a people can enjoy an unparalleled material plenty – with a low standard of living.”⁸⁶ In addition to suggesting that primitive societies are affluent, Sahlins suggests that modern societies are characterized by scarcity because they cannot satisfy all the needs of their members. Indeed, while *all* the *wants* of a minority are satisfied, the needs of a significant proportion of the population are not met. The point introduces a disjunction between the technical means of production and the ability to satisfy wants. It appears that production and satisfaction are inversely proportional to one another. Thus, ‘the market’ operates in the same way for Sahlins as ‘the State’ operates for Clastres. Citing extensive evidence, Sahlins demonstrates that rather than spending an overwhelming majority of their toiling to produce scarce means, savages, on the contrary, spend extremely little time engaging in productive activities and far more time engaged in non-productive activities such as war, which has the benefit of destroying not only material resources, but also human resources such that it is impossible to accumulate a surplus.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, 1.

⁸⁶ Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, 2.

⁸⁷ Gifts and the potlatch are, of course, another way to dispose of a surplus.

The political and the economic organization of the primitive society is structured to prevent the separation between society and power, on the one hand, and the accumulation of a material surplus on the other hand. Thus, these societies are structured to prevent the divisions instituted by the State and the market so as to preserve homogeneity and freedom – understood as the absolute equality of all the adult males. The unanswered problem remains that there is no satisfactory answer as to why these structures failed nor is there a satisfactory answer as to why the State and market are so resilient to change once instituted. At any rate, the contribution of these studies *vis a vis* modern societies is not in their normative force, but rather in their ability to present an absolute other relative to modern societies; by indicating what is *prevented*, these studies bring the political into greater relief.

6. Modern Societies and the Constitution of the Political

The previous section cleared the way to make room for an attempt to articulate the relation between the social and the political when the political is located ‘outside’ the social as a constituting force. In this regard, the significance of the previous section was double. First, it indicated how primitive societies are structured so as to prevent the institution of the State and the market; that is, how the separation of the political and the social is effectively neutralized. Second, it intimated how primitive societies locate their origin in a source external to themselves and how this originary authority is maintained; thus, on the one hand, religion and, on the other, tradition. Just as the break between ‘societies against the State’ and ‘societies with a State’ occurs in a flash, so too does the discovery of the constitutive power of the political. This section, emphasizing ‘modern’ (as opposed to non-modern and primitive societies) societies articulates the position that the political is located outside of the social. Modern societies are a particular type of societies with a State who claim to be democratic; that is, part of the project of

autonomous self-instituting societies. Drawing upon Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort in this section, I will provide a sketch of this position.

In contrast to primitive societies, which are unitary and homogenous, modern societies are divided and differentiated. Primitive societies are structured to prevent the introduction of difference through the mechanisms that prevent surplus and, when there is a surplus, to prevent its accumulation. In contrast, modern societies are formed around a ‘constitutive division’. The presence of ‘the State’ indicates that these societies are divided in a number of ways: racial, sexual, economic, ideological, etc. Further, these differences are largely recognized as problems – even if their status as a problem is to deny that they are a problem in the first place.⁸⁸ These divisions – simultaneously recognized and denied – account for another unique feature of modern societies: the existence of ideology, whose work it is to cover-over the divisions or to push these social constructed divisions back into nature. This self-understanding as a divided and differentiated society finds its fullest development in Marxist theory which condenses all binaries into the contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. This self-understanding as divided largely plays out in the imaginary: democratic theory can argue that differences be left at the door of the assembly and that while differences, valuable in themselves, should not determine hierarchy.⁸⁹ This binary division strongly contrasts with the unitary structure of primitive societies and the ternary structure of feudal societies.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Take Colin Powell’s remarks on 20/20 (September 9, 2005) following Katrina: “I don’t think it’s racism, I think it’s economic. But poverty disproportionately affects African Americans in this country. And it happened because they were poor.” The conjunction of race and poverty is nearly impossible for Powell to understand, as his ambivalent words suggest. His comment can be parsed as, “These people are poor because they are black, but they suffered because they were poor, not because they are black even though they happen to be black.”

⁸⁹ The imaginary element is, once again, most obvious in the case of Marxism which presents both a theory and a politics.

⁹⁰ The proliferation of treatises on and accusations of tyranny in the early modern period – or, to say the same thing, during absolutism – might be read as the response of a decaying feudalism to a social structure rapidly taking on a binary form. The suggestion on the part of the French nobility that ‘no nobility, no monarchy’ can be understood in these terms. Similarly, we might understand the proliferation of revolutionary demands and revolutionary projects

The point of about ‘divided societies’ should not be taken too far: strictly speaking, all non-primitive societies are ‘divided’. In terms of the constitutive division, modern societies are unique in two regards: their division is binary and this division is masked by ideology.⁹¹ Further, ideology is only a feature of modern societies and the purpose of ideology is to hide the constitutive division. Ideology is necessary in modern societies because modern societies are the only societies that do not ground themselves in a transcendent ‘Other’. Primitive societies refer to the originary authority of the ancestors as captured in tradition and feudal and absolutism societies ground themselves in the authority of God. Thus, these societies having their grounding in a divine transcendental Other. Modern societies, in contrast, can only find their grounding in themselves; modern societies are immanent to themselves. In this sense, modern societies are autonomous because they create themselves rather than locating their origin in an external heteronomous source.⁹²

A point of separation between modern and non-modern societies is that the former recognize that they are immanent to themselves, while the latter do not; non-modern societies ground themselves in an Other that fully determines the being of the society. In other words, modern societies recognize that they create themselves and that, consequently, they can be created and re-created through the agency of humans expressed in a political project. In this sense, ‘politics’ is only found in ‘modern’ societies – that is, the decisions can be made by an assembly of people working together, rather than by the dictates of tradition, the ancestors, or the

as a response to a binary structure that demands a return to a unitary structure; *vis a vis* the transition from binary-to-unitary structure, revolutionary projects and totalitarian projects are on the same page. In this sense, totalitarianism is a mutation of democracy or, to be even more cynical, totalitarianism is the truth of democracy.

⁹¹ Claude Lefort (1986) “Outline of the Genesis of Ideology in Modern Societies” in *The Political Forms of Modern Society*, Oxford: Polity Press, especially, 184. The point about binaries should not be understood as a single binary to the exclusion of all others, but rather that problems are posed as binaries and that this posing is understood to reflect reality: male/female, straight/gay, white/black, capitalism/socialism,. Each individual binary is, in a sense, always overdetermined by the others – a point that escapes Colin Powell.

⁹² This, of course, does not suggest that forces of heteronomy are not operative in modern societies; they clearly are.

gods and that consequences following from decisions are the work of people rather than the result of a ritual gone wrong. This suggests that ‘modern’ societies are not strictly limited to Western Europe during the past few hundred years, but also, of necessity, include other societies that recognized the human origin of the social – for instance, at the very least, Rome and Greece in their democratic and republican moments.⁹³ Grounding themselves in themselves, modern societies are premised on the notion that everything is open to questioning and, of course, following from questioning is the possibility that things could be otherwise:

Much more is at stake: the ultimate schemata employed in philosophy and in politics, as well as their respective positions in relation to the world, are in the two cases [Greece and Western Europe] radically different despite the fact that, as I said, the two proceed from the same movement of putting into question the established order of society.⁹⁴

Following from this questioning, according to Castoriadis, is the discovery that society cannot be founded on an extra-social basis:

The attempt to found equality as well as freedom, that is, human autonomy, on an extrasocial basis [*fondement*], is intrinsically antinomic. It even is a manifestation of heteronomy. If God, Nature, or Reason have decreed freedom (or, moreover, slavery), we always will be, in this case, submissive and enslaved to this pretended decree.⁹⁵

This discovery is, in essence, the discovery of society itself: society enters into consciousness, theory and politics as an object having regular laws of their own, which necessarily implies that these laws and regularities can be understood and harnessed, that decisions can be made in accordance with these regularities and attempts can be made to change these regularities.⁹⁶

This final step, the discovery of society, prepares the way to introduce a new conception of the political. The conception of the political follows largely from the discovery of society; “In short the discovery of society supposes that establishment of a reflexive relation that allows

⁹³ Cornelius Castoriadis (1991) “The Nature and Value of Equality” in *Politics, Philosophy, Autonomy: Essays in Political Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford UP.

⁹⁴ Castoriadis, “The Nature and Value of Equality”, 125.

⁹⁵ Castoriadis, “The Nature and Value of Equality”, 132.

⁹⁶ Another way to approach the question is to understand the ‘new’ having its source in human agency (whether intended or not) and not coming from beyond, such as in the case of a miracle.

society to engage, in a manner that is at least partially conscious, in its own ‘*auto-institution*.’⁹⁷

Taking the idea of ‘auto-institution’ as a point of departure, the political becomes the act of auto-institution. This new point of departure finds inspiration in Claude Lefort:

This observation is in itself an invitation to return to the question that once inspired political philosophy: what is the nature of the difference between forms of society? Interpreting the political means breaking with the viewpoint of political science, because political science emerges from the suppression of the question. It emerges from a desire to objectify, and it forgets that no elements, no elementary structures, no entities (classes or segments of classes), no economic or technical determinations, and no dimensions of social space exist until they have been given a form. Giving them a form implies both giving them meaning (*mise en sens*) and staging them (*mise en scène*). They are given meaning in that the social space unfolds as a space of intelligibility articulated in accordance with a specific mode of distinguishing between the real and the imaginary, the true and the false, the just and the unjust, the permissible and the forbidden, the normal and the pathological. They are staged in that this space contains within it a quasi-representation of itself as being aristocratic, monarchic, despotic, democratic or totalitarian.⁹⁸

The political, in this perspective, becomes both the instituted regime and the act of its instituting.

The political is the interplay of the instituting and the instituted insofar as it institutes a regime.

In this way, regimes can be compared with one another and a particular regime can be the object of politics.

7. What is Political Sociology? Part II

The core of the argument of this paper began with a consideration of ‘the political within the social’ as exemplified by Max Weber and Carl Schmitt. While the essence of that argument was concerned with their attempt to locate the political within the social as a form or variant of social action, significant effort was spent demonstrating – contrary to the dominant position in the secondary literature – that there was, indeed, a continuity in thought, if not in politics, between Weber and Schmitt. While seemingly secondary to the essence of the argument, it was

⁹⁷ Brian C.J. Singer (1986) *Society, Theory and the French Revolution*, Houndmills, Basingtoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 11.

⁹⁸ Claude Lefort (1988) “The Question of Democracy” in *Democracy and Political Theory*, Oxford: Polity Press, 11-2.

nonetheless necessary to proceed in such a fashion. Too often Weber is deployed as a moderate liberal corrective to the fascist politics of Schmitt; in my view, such a reading cannot be sustained. Rather than using Weber to buttress Schmitt, I suggest Weber should be read through Schmitt; what Schmitt means by 'the political' is what Weber means by 'political action'. The sole difference between their respective positions on the political is that Weber was unable or unwilling to identify the end proper to 'political action', even if he understood the means. Weber and Schmitt reach their moment of closest proximity in decisionism: it is impossible to suggest that Weber's understanding of politics was not 'decisionistic' when one considers Weber's closing remarks in his lecture, "Politics as a Vocation." Weber identifies Martin Luther as an ideal typical politician and Luther includes the consequences – operative to this day – of Luther's politics.

More central to the discussion of Weber and Schmitt is their attempt to locate the political within the social. The problem with this approach is that a constitutive force is absent in their system. Thus, society is always-already constituted and changes only insofar as the already existent constitution of the society allows. Consequently, Weber, for instance, can only appeal to the irrationality of charismatic authority and its subsequent routinization to account for change. This, in my view, is unsatisfactory because the mechanism of change is understood in a transhistorical sense and is always the same. Weber and Schmitt are unable to account for the radical difference between modern societies and other forms of society: societies, that is, that actively constitute and re-constitute themselves. The impasse with the constitutive force thus leaves one to seek an adequate account elsewhere.

This more adequate account was sought in a position that locates the political 'outside' the social as the force that constitutes and is constituted by the social. The first step in this

direction led to a consideration of the political and economic anthropology of Pierre Clastres and Marshall Sahlins respectively. I suggested that one of the benefits of their studies was that they uncover how primitive societies are structured so as to prevent the separation of the social and the political. This neutralization takes place through the prevention of the production of a surplus and, when a surplus is produced, the surplus is destroyed so as to prevent its accumulation. Consequently, the society remains 'neutral' trapped, quite literally, in the ever-present authority of tradition embodied in the chief. More concretely, rather than presenting a non- or a-political society, as captured in the phrase of the European explorers and missionaries – without 'god, law, or king' – primitive societies display a definite political structure, albeit one that is rather counter-intuitive.

The political structure of primitive societies is organized so as to limit or contain the political. That is, the political is rendered unable to express itself separately from the social because, on the one hand, it is tied to the ever-present authority of tradition and, on the other hand, the power of the most political figure, the chief, is effectively neutralized; while the chief has 'power' he lacks force. The function of the chief, then, is to interpret and make present the unconscious of society as it relates to the pursuit of war. However, the chief is doubly limited by this power: he is both unable to command warriors to battle and he is most likely condemned to a prestigious, but powerless death in battle. The chief's ability combine force and power and thus created a separate political organ is effectively neutralized: the war apparatus is separated from both power and the authority of command. The same structure is found relative to the economy: surpluses are prevented by having free time taken up in the pursuit of war and the observance of rituals and, when there is a surplus, it is destroyed or distributed before it is ever accumulated.

However, it is inevitable that the structures preventing the expression of the political will fail. When power is separated from society and takes on an existence of its own, the State comes into being. The State is not to be confused with the political; the political exists prior to State, but, with the State, the political is granted a degree of autonomy from the social. The State institutes division: it separates the unitary primitive society into binaries and trinaries. The State institutes differentiation between the dominant and the dominated. In modern societies, the State finds itself fully realized in a binary structure of society, most fully developed in Marxist theory which claims that all the contradictions and antagonisms between dominant and dominated are condensed into the wage relation: the contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat 'is' the social. However, this contradiction is effectively made invisible through the workings of ideology. In contradistinction to previous forms of society that openly recognized the differentiation of power and the domination of groups, modern society is caught between an intense binary antagonism and the need to render that antagonism invisible because modern society prides itself on being democratic: where all citizens are formally equal. The formal equality, of course, masks real inequality.

One is no doubt tempted to draw negative conclusions from the picture thus far painted of modern societies, there is, nonetheless, a silver lining. While modern societies are essentially divided and ideology works to cover this division, the possibility of transforming society nonetheless remains. Indeed, in a strong sense, only modern societies that can be the object of transformation. Upon the discovery of society, it becomes possible to imagine society as otherwise and thus the project of autonomy is born. It becomes possible to have a politics in the name of freedom because everything is open to questioning and, therefore, to change.

The paper began with a discussion of Ernesto Laclau and Margaret Thatcher, both of whom proclaimed the non-existence of society. The discussion through these two attempted to find a meaning for political sociology, which was presented as ‘the putting into question of the social *and* the political.’ While making my way to this definition, I spoke poorly of Nikolas Rose’s book, *Powers of Freedom*. While I think my comments were deserved – a Foucauldian political sociology cannot begin with a clean slate! – I nonetheless ignored Rose’s more important and substantive point: the attempt to move political analysis ‘beyond the state,’ to de-substantialize concepts in order to emphasize relations and to understand concepts via the practices they represent. For instance, rather than studying the state as a monolithic thing with an essence to be discovered, it is more productive to understand the state as a network of relations and practices mediating, on the one hand, between, for instance, ‘economy’ and ‘civil society’ and, on the other hand, the inside (‘society’) with the outside (‘others’). The state as a concept becomes destabilized from both an internal and external perspective to the extent that the conjunction between the nation and the state is ruptured.

To a great extent, this paper loosely falls into Rose’s project because it does not take the state (or any of the other concepts in Rose’s list) as a point of departure and attempts to analyze ‘political power beyond the state.’ Unlike Rose, however, I think it is a mistake to throw out all of the concepts that constitute the universe of political sociology. Rather, I think it is best to historicize concepts, remaining aware of their empirical variety and the difficulty of representing them in discourse. Thus, in my view, it is best to take the social and the political as a point of departure, working through other concepts as required. Aiming towards this objective, I end the paper with three speculative comments:

(1) The social should be understood as that which exists before and after any particular individual. It is the realm that is created by others and which I can join in its creation. The social is always a realm where I am among others.

(2) While the social, as a way of being with others, is always given, the political is not. While present in some degree in all societies, the political is only fully realized in modern democracy. It represents the reflexive attempt to order the social and is thus something that is 'folded over' the social: both inside as the space where decisions are made collectively and outside as the force that constitutes the social on the basis of those decisions. Thus, in the democratic political, the ideal is the autonomous self-instituting society.

(3) The political is to be distinguished from both politics and rule. Politics is the activity that takes place within the political while rule is the way in which decisions are enacted and enforced. Put in another way, politics is a material practice involving the clash of forces operating within the political out of which arises a decision regarding what to do and how to be. Rule, in contrast, refers to the symbolic structure of the political: who it is who makes decisions (the monarch, despot, the people, the nation, etc) and how those decisions are made (collectively, by fiat, by violence, etc). Together, rule and the political articulate as the regime; the form that society takes.

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