

Towards a Political Ontology of Violence: Laclau, Nietzsche and the Ontological Difference

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Abstract This paper calls for a political ontology of violence addressing violence as a specifically political reality. Through a critical engagement with the “ontological turn” in political theory and the political ontologies of conflict and violence in Laclau and Marchart, it asks what the notion of the “ontological difference” brings to our understanding of political violence. By putting the ontological assumptions of political thought in question, this notion offers a critical alternative to the stand-off between ideal-theoretical/proceduralist and realist/empiricist approaches that dominate mainstream political theory. But it is unclear whether it has resources for a constructive ontology of antagonism of use for conceptualising political violence. The experiment is therefore to cross-fertilise these political ontologies with a processual post-Nietzschean ontology modelled on the formation of labile, living unities in relations of tension with others, such that political violence erupts when relations of tension descend into total negation.

Keywords: political violence, ontological difference, conflict, agon, Laclau, Marchart, Nietzsche

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0. Introduction

There is an urgent need to confront acts of violence as a political reality, not as extraneous to democratic politics, but a fact of political life, in order to understand them better and the directions they might take. But what *is* political violence – that is, violence as a *specifically political reality*? How is the meaning of political violence constituted through public discourse, the rhetoric, images and representations of the dominant liberal imaginaries? What falls *below* the radar of visible violence? And how to make invisible forms of political violence visible?

In democratic theory, violence is viewed as extraneous to politics, whether in Arendtian/republican, liberal or agonistic variants – as an incursion or exception in otherwise peaceful democratic relations. But this misses the way violence, albeit in wildly heterogenous acts or events, is actually endemic to democratic life and can be a specifically political intervention. The overwhelming tendency in all disciplines is to *de-politicise* violence by treating it as a subset of the generic concept of intraspecific violence, when (a) it has political conditions or consequences, or (b) it is a means to

political ends (e.g. Victoroff /Adelman 2012). But this generic approach fails to capture the specificity of political violence, violence as an articulation of political reality. We need a *political ontology of violence*.

By *political ontology* is meant not a metaphysical theory of political being, but a critical examination of the assumptions about the social and political reality informing the basic categories of political thought; for “every interpretation of political events [...] contains an ontopolitical dimension” (Connolly 1995: 1). So my question is: *What is the reality of political violence, understood as an essential category of political thought?* But political violence is not just one political category among others. In prevailing liberal democratic imaginaries violence is excluded as extraneous to democratic politics, and is de-politicised, erased or rendered invisible as political violence. So the question is: *How to think and articulate violence as endemic to really-lived democracy, as an articulation of political reality in contemporary democracies?*

My approach to these questions in this paper is to confront two distinct bodies of thought on violence. The first concerns the “ontological turn” in political theory (Nancy, Lefort, Derrida, Connolly, White, Butler, Laclau, Marchart i.a.), that is, the attempt to make the notion of the “ontological difference” (Heidegger) fruitful for critically questioning the ontological assumptions in political thought. In specific I will draw the work of Laclau and Marchart, and the way in which they recast the “ontological difference” as conflict or antagonism. But it is unclear whether their approach has resources for a constructive ontology of antagonism of use for conceptualising political violence. The experiment is therefore to cross-fertilise their political ontology with a Nietzschean or rather: post-Nietzschean¹ ontology of conflict constructed around the differential relation between the agon or *Wettkampf* and what he calls the *Vernichtungskampf* or struggle for annihilation.

Through this experiment I aim to rethink Nietzsche’s concept of the agon as a model for egalitarian politics by addressing the weak point in current agonistic theories of democracy: the violence/non-violence interface; the boundary between non-violent agonism and violent antagonism, between contestation and political violence, between Nietzsche’s *Wettkampf* and his *Vernichtungskampf*. Over the past forty years or so, the long-standing image of Nietzsche as an apolitical, individualist thinker has been challenged by a range of political thinkers, who have sought to appropriate Nietzsche’s concept of the agon for a revitalised, “agonistic” theory of democracy, pitted against mainstream liberal-deliberative theories. However, agonists have not challenged the exclusions and blind spots in liberal democratic thought and imaginaries concerning political violence: for agonists too, violent acts and struggle are extraneous to democratic politics. But could it be that the only way to politicize Nietzsche’s agon is by grounding agonal social bodies in antagonism, understood as *a relation of ontological difference*? Of one thing there can be no doubt: Nietzsche is a relational and profoundly social thinker, for whom the individual is a social product; for “what drives would we have that did not from that start bring us into a disposition [*Stellung*] towards other beings”?² At issue in the political, so Laclau and Marchart, is the constitution and

¹ By “post-Nietzschean” is meant, not a study of Nietzsche’s thought in its own terms, but an attempt to draw on certain elements or figures in his thought to address contemporary problems foreign to him.

² (6[70], KSA 9, p. 212f.). In the same note he writes: “To refer all social relations back to egoism? Good: but for me it is also true that all egoistic inner experiences [*innere Erlebnisse*] are to be referred back to our habituated inculcated dispositions towards others.” References to Nietzsche’s writings are (my translations) from the *Kritische Studienausgabe* (= KSA: G. Colli and M. Montinari (eds), dtv and de Gruyter,

destitution of social groups, and the question is what Nietzsche's thought can bring to their political ontology of social groups to make political violence more intelligible. The proposal is therefore to read the ontological difference through a Nietzschean lens, and to read Nietzsche's ontology of conflict –the *Wettkampf/Vernichtungskampf* interface in particular – through the lens of the ontological difference. As my guiding thread, I take two questions:

1. *What do we gain by thinking conflict as the “ontological difference” for our understanding of the meaning of political violence?*
2. *What do we gain by reading political ontology and the ontological difference through a Nietzschean lens?*

1. What do we gain by thinking conflict as the “ontological difference” for our understanding of the meaning of political violence?

The starting point for the ontological turn, for Nietzsche's thought and for agonistic theory is the loss of foundations in late modernity, the demise of a self-grounding, stable ground, call it God, arche, Being, the subject or... For Nietzsche, this falls under “nihilism”, which, among other things, stands for an absence, but one that is strangely present, an uncanny, *haunting absence*. Under nihilistic conditions, we can neither do without foundations nor believe or invest in any that would give us the assurance of an ultimate, stable ground; we cannot break our attachment to, our need for grounds or ideals, in which we cannot, however, believe; we remain attached to ideals that we nevertheless cannot subscribe wholeheartedly to. At stake in the political, so Marchart, are *the grounds of social being and relations*, and he translates Nietzschean nihilism into what he calls “post-foundationalism”; that is, a disposition that acknowledges the *necessity* for foundations in any social unity, and the *impossibility* of stable foundations. In his words, post-foundationalism answers the need to account for “the process of contingent, temporary, conflictual and plural grounding of all social relations” (Marchart 2018: 15). Political agonism responds to this condition, with its insistence on the contingency and contestability of all foundations and the valorisation antagonism within democratic bounds as the concomitant of pluralism. But the question agonists do not ask is: What is the ground of agonism and of the actual conflicts, confrontations and struggles in social life? (Laclau 2014: 102); phenomena that, in Marchart's words, “indicate a constitutive negativity – a paradoxical blockade or incommensurability – at the ground of all social being” (Marchart 2018: 3). Here, “ground” does not mean an *arche* or thing-in-itself (like Schopenhauer's self-lacerating will) as the cause or source of all social conflicts. This would be to ignore the ontological difference between the ground of beings and beings by positing one kind of being writ large (Schopenhauer's will), as the ground of conflicts. For Laclau-Marchart³, the ontological difference means that conflict or antagonism can only be a ground that withdraws and escapes scientific determination by concepts or empirical means, a strangely present or *haunting absence* that can only be thought. But how to think such a thing? And what difference does it make to the question of political violence?

Munich and Berlin, 1980). *Nachlass* texts follow the notation therein , e.g. 2[13] KSA 7 = note 2[13], KSA vol. 7.

³ For the most part I am following Marchart's account of Laclau, to which he for the most part subscribes, and will therefore use the compound Marchart-Laclau, unless it is clear that the subject is one or the other.

The critical force of the thought of ontological difference is to problematise positivity and full being – where existence and essence fully coincide – regarding identity and the unicity of any socio-political grouping, so that Laclau can write of “their failure to fully constitute “the system of pure Being”(Laclau in Marchart 2018: 58). The most helpful clues to Laclau’s argumentation run as follows:

[I]f the systematicity of the system is a direct result of the exclusionary limit, it is only that exclusion that grounds the system as such. [. . .] The condition, of course, for this operation to be possible is that what is beyond the frontier of exclusion is reduced to pure negativity – that is to the pure threat that what is beyond poses to the system (constituting it that way). (Laclau 1996: 38)

And, with a focus on antagonism and the question of identity:

[A]ntagonism and exclusion are constitutive of all identity. Without the limits through which a (non-dialectical) negativity is constructed, we would have an indefinite dispersion of differences whose absence of systematic limits would make any differential identity impossible. But this very function of constituting differential identities through antagonistic limits is what, at the same time, destabilizes and subverts those differences, it makes them all equivalent to each other, interchangeable with each other as far as the limit is concerned. [. . .] The system is what is required for the differential identities to be constituted, but the only thing – exclusion – which can constitute the system and thus makes possible those identities, is also what subverts them. (Laclau 1996: 52-3)

With the help of Marchart, the argument can be reconstructed as follows:

Any social body or “system” is symbolically ordered.

Following Saussure, meaning only arises within a system through differential relations between the terms.

For a system or social grouping to work, i.e. to make meaning and differential identities within it possible, it must have a limit, for otherwise differential identities would collapse in an indefinite dispersion of differences.

Such a limit requires radical negativity: a negativity that cannot be absorbed in the system as just another positive difference, for this would just raise the question of limits again.

This radical or “pure negativity” constitutes or “grounds” the system or social grouping, making differential identities within it possible, by establishing an *exclusionary limit*.

At the same time, however, it subverts the system by acting as a “pure threat” that undermines the differential relations within the system; for as a common enemy it establishes equivalences between the identities that undermine their differential relations.

In Laclau’s thought, then, “the term ‘antagonism’ denotes this double-sided moment: the moment of original *institution* as well as the moment of original *destitution* of any social order.”(Marchart 2018: 23). Antagonism is hereby placed beyond actual antagonisms and pluralism as name for the *failed unicity of the social*, the failure of social-political groupings “to fully constitute ‘the system of pure Being”(Laclau in Marchart 2018: 58).

What does this political ontology of antagonism imply for the occurrence of political violence? The argument turns on the difference between two kinds of negativity: the

negativity of differential relations *within* the system situated in the “ontic” field of beings or *Seiendes*– and the radical or “pure negativity” of antagonism which, as the constitutive-destitutive *outside* of the system, is situated at the level of Being or the “ground” of beings. The effect of the ontological difference – and the principal benefit it brings to political ontology – is to avoid concretising and objectifying negativity in an antagonistic other or enemy, deflecting it to the question of the Being of beings. Political violence erupts when this difference is not recognised and antagonism on the “ground” of beings, the pure negativity of Being, is confused with other beings in the field of the ontic: as a determinate being, an antagonistic other, an enemy (à la Schmitt / Mouffe). This describes precisely the error of Chantal Mouffe’s account of agonistic politics and the danger of her reliance on Schmitt’s friend-enemy relation, which always requires a determinate enemy.⁴ Indeed, if agonistic social bodies depend on determinate Schmittian enemies for their identity and unity, the logic of Laclau’s ontology implies that they actually *invite* political violence and destructive antagonism, rather than excluding it in favour of democratic agonism. But perhaps this is not just an error of Mouffe’s. For Laclau’s own argument seems to issue in the same tragic outcome with the idea that differential identities within a system will respond to antagonism on the ground of the system by establishing a chain of equivalences, which inevitably concretise it as a determinate other. On this account, then, political violence is the recurrent mark or stigma of a pathological, tragic politics *bound* to mistake the pure negativity of antagonism on the ground of social life with a concrete antagonistic other. But if, as I am suggesting, the failure to recognise antagonism as the “ground” or Being of social beings is built into this ontology, then it could be *not* the stigma of a failed politics, but a theoretical failure of the ontology itself. By this I mean that the way it proposes antagonism as an ontologeme, as the constitutive-destitutive ground of any social grouping that should not be confused with any actual conflicts, makes it *unrecognizable* as antagonism. In effect, it is unclear to me whether Laclau-Marchart’s political ontology succeeds in enabling us to think antagonism, and I want to suggest that Nietzsche’s thought can give us some footholds for thinking antagonism and political violence against the background of the ontological difference. With this, I turn to the second question:

2. What do we gain by reading political ontology and the ontological difference through a Nietzschean lens?

In his short, well-known text, *Homer’s Wettkampf*, Nietzsche builds his account of archaic Greek culture around a key distinction, placed under the two Eris goddesses. Under the sign of “evil Eris”, the one who promotes “strife and wicked war”, he posits the *Vernichtungskampf* (VK), the war of annihilation or hostile struggle-to-the-death; under the “good Eris”, affects like “jealousy, grudge and envy”, which “goad[.] men to deeds, not, however, the deeds of a struggle-to-the-death [*Vernichtungskampf*] but the deeds of the *contest* [*Wettkampf* (WK) or agon]” (HW KSA 1)⁵. As the terms indicate, what they share is *Kampf*: struggle, in line with the Greeks’ belief that life is inseparably bound up with antagonism. But their relation is a relation of difference: the evil Eris is evil because the VK is violent and destructive; the good Eris is good, because the WK is supremely creative and excludes violence and destruction. Yet the evil is Eris older, and it is clear that for Nietzsche the VK is in some sense the “ground” of the WK. The question is in

⁴ See Fritsch (2008); Rummens (2009); Siemens (2012).

what sense? What kind of “grounding” is involved in this relation? I will approach this question in three steps.

2.1 In the opening paragraph of *Homer's Wettkampf* (HW), Nietzsche argues that the highest and noblest powers, those unleashed by the WK, do not raise the human above nature; we are entirely nature and carry her “uncanny double-nature within us”, so that our terrifying capacities, those that drive the VK, are “the fertile soil from which alone the impulses, deeds and works” (ibid.) of the WK can grow forth. Here, violent conflict is the ground which alone makes its other, creative agonal deeds and relations possible, a ground that cannot be transcended or safely put aside, but sustains its other throughout and also determines the upper limits of what is possible, the highest and noblest that can be achieved in agonal social bodies. The VK, then, defines both the lower limits and the upper limits of agonal agency, somewhat like a pincer holding a delicate sphere of forces in fragile equilibrium. But it can also crush the sphere at any moment in a pincer movement, not only *instituting* and *sustaining* non-violent relations as their shadowy underbelly, but threatening to overwhelm and *destitute* them in eruptions of violence. This a first approximation to the VK as the constitutive-destitutive outside of agonal relations.

2.2 The next step is to describe the differential relation between the VK and the WK. The VK knows no limits. It occurs in a limitless field of excess, what Nietzsche calls *Uebermaass*, and is characterised by unlimited or unmeasured antagonism. The VK involves the *absolute* (unlimited, unmeasured) *self-empowerment* of one party through the *absolute* (unlimited, unmeasured) *negation* of the other: its absolute disempowerment, or annihilation (*Vernichtung*). The VK ends in the *conclusive victory* of annihilation for one party, because the other acts as an obstacle to its absolute self-empowerment and must therefore be eliminated. In the WK, the other has a completely different signature, a double-significance, acting as a stimulant (*Reiz*) empowering one, and as a limit (*Grenze*) on what one can do against it. Here again, we see the pincer-image, where one is the lower and upper condition of the other, only this time on the ontic plane of beings. Indeed, unlike the *Vernichtungskampf*, the agon presupposes a fragile equilibrium (*Gleichgewicht*) of more-or-less equal forces and is thoroughly reciprocal: it is, in Nietzsche's words, a regime of “reciprocal stimulation and reciprocal holding within the bounds of measure”(HW KSA 1). We can therefore say, it involves a *limited* or measured *self-empowerment* of one party through a *limited* or measured *negation* of the other, which undergoes a limited disempowerment, not the absolute disempowerment of annihilation. We can also speak of reciprocal relations of *limited affirmation* and *limited negation*: the other is good, but I can outdo it; the other is worse than me, but not worthless. As a regime of limited antagonism, the agon allows for temporary, *inconclusive victory* or mastery – the winner this year, so to speak – but not the conclusive victory of annihilation.

How, then, to describe the difference between the VK and the WK and its implications for political violence? As in Laclau-Marchart's political ontology, the difference turns on two kinds of negativity: the *limited negation* of the other within the agonal social body, and the *absolute negation* or annihilation of the other in the VK, understood as the “ground” or constitutive-destitutive outside of agonal relations (as argued in step 1). And like the thought of the ontological difference, it issues in the warning not to confuse or mistake the (limited) ontic negativity of agonal relations with the absolute negativity of their constitutive-destitutive outside. The question of agonistic politics then becomes: How to prevent the slide from the limited negation of the other in the

WK to the absolute negation of the VK? And *political violence* erupts when the limits of agonal negation collapse into the absolute negation or annihilation of the other.

But for Nietzsche there is also another kind of violence, a moral violence that ensues at the other extreme, when the difference between the VK and WK is lost through the moral negation of the VK. The Greeks, he maintains, affirmed and acknowledged the destructive impulses and passions of the VK as human, but were able to exclude their destructive force from social life by instituting limits (6[48] KSA 8). Christianity, by contrast, has sought to exclude these passions altogether by negating and condemning them as evil. But rather than succeed, this has only internalised the VK as a war of annihilation against nature, against the passions, which Nietzsche encapsulates in the expression: “il faut tuer les passions” (*Götzendämmerung: Moral als Widernatur* 1-2). At either extreme – when the WK slides into the VK or the VK is altogether excluded and denied – the result is the VK, since what is lost is the *difference* between them. Agonistic politics, therefore, requires attending to this difference and cultivating the tension between the two.

There is one moment in agonal relations that has no correlate in Laclau-Marchart’s ontology: the dynamic of reciprocal stimulation, limited affirmation or empowerment. It’s easy to see what Nietzsche means by this in the cultural-aesthetic register: agonal jealousy stimulates one party to surpass the other’s achievement and to create or act in a way that otherwise would not be possible; a move which in some way acknowledges the other’s achievement and seeks to inherit his fame (limited affirmation), but, in aspiring to surpass it, also negates it without annulling it (limited negation). But what is the ontological nature of this concept of creative competition and the affirmative moment therein? To answer this question, I propose to translate Nietzsche’s aesthetic cultural discourse into a post-Nietzschean ontological register.

In any social group, beings strive to become who they are and achieve the conclusive victory of full identity. Typically the other is perceived as an obstacle to one’s identity, an antagonistic other, a threat to be eliminated. But where we are attentive to the difference between the WK and the VK, antagonism is deflected from the other to the ground of social relations and depersonalized. The VK then works as a limit that can *never be realised* in social life, yet is inseparable from the agon as (1) an ever present threat, which (2) is also what makes agon possible. Agonal relations become possible with the acknowledgement that the *conclusive victory* of full identity is impossible and must give way to the *provisional victory* of identities that can never fully coincide with themselves – a broken acknowledgment of broken identities. In an agonal social body beings are bound together in relations of reciprocal stimulation and reciprocal limitation, empowerment-disempowerment, limited affirmation and negation. Each is the lower limit: constitutive of the other’s identity, but also the upper limit of what kinds of identity are open to it. Above all, as the other’s upper limit, each ensures that it can never coincide with itself in the conclusive victory of full identity. So each makes the other’s identity both possible and impossible.

Agonal relations are the analogue in the field of power of Laclau’s Saussurian system of difference and equivalences. Without differences – the current victors or prevailing identities to be contested – the agon cannot take off, and without comparatives or equivalences they cannot be surpassed. However, unlike Laclau’s “system”, agonal relations allow for provisional victories, the creation of temporary identities within inconclusive, conflictual processes of transformation. Each is the lower condition and

upper condition of other; each is constitutive of other, its real condition of possibility, but also a limit, a limited negation of the other's identity and agency. Things go wrong in political life when social relations, instead of limiting the other, destroy one another, when the limited negation of the other descends into un-measured, mutual annihilation (VK), or political violence.

The agonal moment of *surpassing* or *bettering* the other's deeds or work brings a *perfectionist* dynamic to social relations, which is also absent from Lacau's ontology. It is best seen if we cross the aesthetic-cultural register of the young Nietzsche with his later physiology. This is the third step in my effort to make sense of the ontological difference between the VK and the WK.

2.3 At issue in Nietzsche's turn to physiology is how to understand living beings in pluralistic, processual terms; that is, without presupposing a metaphysical principle of identity or underlying unitary ground; what he calls a "living unity" or "the really inborn incorporated working unity of all functions" (11[316] KSA 9). Against homeostatic models of unity geared towards stability or self-preservation, Nietzsche proposes an expansionist model of unity and expenditure as the principle of life, on the grounds that the former fails to address the dynamic character of life and specifically: the question of spontaneity or "the driving force" (*treibende Kraft*) (11[134] KSA 9). The key processes driving growth and expansion are *incorporation* or assimilation of the other, and *excretion* of whatever cannot be integrated into the living unity of all functions. Typically, incorporation works through a process Nietzsche calls the *Gleichmachung des Nicht-Gleichen*, that is, making what is not the same the same: the other is broken down into elements that can be made the same or similar to elements within the organism and integrated, while those that resist assimilation are excreted as useless or toxic. This is the physiological analogue of the VK, in which the other is overpowered and broken down in order to be assimilated and functionalised or rejected: absolute self-assertion through absolute negation of the other. But Nietzsche's main interests are moral and social, and he uses physiology as a "manner of speaking" (*Sprechart*) or "image-language" (*Bilderrede*) for understanding better our ways of treating others (11[127] KSA 9). The physiology of excretion, connected with the feeling of nausea (*Ekel*), translates into moral condemnation of that which resists assimilation as "evil" or "backward", "primitive" and so on (11[134] KSA 9). A gesture all-too-familiar from right-wing populist parties today. And Nietzsche also issues a warning, more relevant now than ever: that we are all prone to mistake what is hard to assimilate and take on with what is useless or toxic and needs to be rejected (*ibid.*).

But another, agonal form of assimilation is thinkable, and Nietzsche provides some clues for doing so. Under conditions of approximate equality of power, a *perfectionist* dynamic becomes possible, where each strives to take on the other's deed or work intact, to surpass it by its own standard or measure, while incorporating it in a deed or work under a new standard of evaluation of its own. Here the negation of the other is not *absolute*, but subject to a double-limitation: (1) surpassing the other by taking on the other's standard, and (2) re-evaluating and integrating it intact as one element under an entirely new standard raised against the other's standard. It is perhaps unsurprising that Nietzsche, born lover of words and trained philologist, gives us the best example of agonal assimilation in thinking, not about organisms or power-relations, but about the relation between texts. The strength of Plato's jealous attacks on Homer, he argues, must be understood as a double-movement that affirms and incorporates the standard or rule of the other and at the same time limits by containing it within an attempt to set

an entirely new standard or rule. To assimilate the other here is to incorporate its achievement within a radically new form (deed or work) that overcomes, transgresses, outshines it; that is, to do better than other by the other's standard, but to do so in a way that contests and supersedes that standard through a radically new form. Thus, Plato (1) acknowledges and affirms Homer's achievements by incorporating tracts of poetry or mythology into his works, but they are myths that aspire to be better than Homer's *by Homer's own standard*. Plato wants to take Homer's place, so that he can say: "Look, I can also do what my great rivals can; what is more, I can do it better than them". Yet (2) Plato incorporates Homer's achievements in a way that also contests and supersedes his standard, by establishing a radically *new standard of greatness* and a radically new form of education: dialectics, over poetry (and rhetoric). So he continues: "No Protagoras ever created as beautiful myths as I, no dramatist ever composed a living and gripping whole like the Symposium, nor any rhetorician speeches like mine in the Gorgias – and now I reject it all together and condemn all mimetic art! Only the contest made me into a poet, a sophist, and rhetorician!" (HW KSA 1).

Here again, the VK-WK difference turns on different forms of negation: the absolute negation of otherness through incorporation of what can be functionalised in the other and exclusion or "excretion" of whatever cannot (the physiological VK), and the limited negation of incorporation in which the integrity of the other *as* other is preserved and surpassed by its standard, while being contained and limited as an element under an entirely new standard of evaluation (Plato's WK). Clearly these make for entirely different forms of identity. On one side, the one-sided striving for absolute self-empowerment and full identity by exploiting whatever can be easily appropriated from the other and closure against whatever resists appropriation through gestures of exclusion, rejection, degradation. On the other side, a reciprocal striving to appropriate or take on what is hardest to assimilate in the other, bound up with being appropriated by the other, such that (1) in each, the identity of the other is conserved and contested by the other's standard, while (2) being located within an "inner" plurality of others under a new standard, a new attempt at identity, and (3) remaining open to the other in its striving for identity through appropriation. For Nietzsche, this dynamic cannot be realised in the register of morality with its value-oppositional and substantive notion of personhood; instead, genuine pluralism requires an *agonal episteme*, which takes the difficulty of knowing others as things to be known seriously, and is described as follows:

To allow ourselves to be possessed by things (not by persons) and from as great a range of true things as possible! What will grow from that remains to be seen: we are fruit fields for things. Images of existence ought to grow from us: and we ought to be such as this fruitfulness requires us to be: our inclinations and disinclinations are those of the field that is to bring forth such fruits. (11[21] KSA 9, p. 451)

3. Conclusion

What, then, do we gain for our understanding of political violence by drawing on Nietzsche in order to think antagonism as the ontological difference or constitutive-destitutive outside of political relations? To begin with, it brings a completely *different emphasis* to our understanding of political relations. In Laclau-Marchart's political ontology, the emphasis is entirely negative (failed unicity, non-identity, absence). Important as this is as a corrective of unquestioned ontological assumptions in political thought, it is unclear whether it can address life-needs and their ethical-political claims. In the Nietzschean processual ontology of conflict I have advanced, the metaphysical

principle of identity is displaced, not by non-identity, but by the model of “living unities”: self-organising multiplicities, bound together in dynamic relations of tension, and striving to extend themselves against other living unities, equally bent on extending themselves against others through processes of incorporation and limited negation. This makes for provisional identities engaged in processes of closure-disclosure, saying unsaying, grounding-ungrounding, identities bound to be ruptured and reinstated in conflictual relation to others. Democratic life, then, involves the formation of labile, living unities/identities through agonistic relations of reciprocal constitution and limitation, and *political violence* erupts when limited negation of the other descends into the total negation of destruction. This is the *first principle of the political ontology of violence* I am proposing.

The *second principle* turns on the dynamics of incorporation. The ontological difference, when read through the lens of the difference between the VK and the WK, is the potential for either form of incorporation of other: it is constitutive of each identity and can act either as limit (via mutual limitation: agonistic politics), or as the annulment, the annihilation of the other. In short, this difference points to the ever-present potential for destruction in political relations.

A further advantage of the VK-WK difference concerns its constitutive power. It is easy to understand how, in Laclau-Marchart’s political ontology, antagonism can be destitutive (Marchart), a threat (Laclau) to social relations and identities, but it is less clear how it can be constitutive. In Laclau’s argument, radical or “pure negativity” is needed to secure the limits that make political unity and identity possible: but why should it be thought as antagonism, and as such, how can it have constitutive potential? Nietzsche’s aesthetic-cultural discourse opens up ways to think this problem through. First, there is the *affirmative moment* in agonal relations, where the other acts as a stimulus to creative action, a provocation, a seduction. In ontological terms, this creative dynamic is the *constitutive moment* whereby a new identity is born of the contest, which in turn provokes a creative-constitutive response from the other, and so on. Then there is *affirmative appropriation of others’ acts and identities*, in which the others are limited by being contested on their own terms, but also by contained within a new, more inclusive attempt at identity. In the third place, Nietzsche’s discourse gives us a vocabulary of *affects and capacities* or *powers* for articulating and making sense of the constitutive or productive potential of antagonism. The VK is the ground that both sustains and threatens agonal relations, because it is the impulses of the evil Eris – the “abyss of a gruesome wildness of hatred and the thirst for annihilation” – which alone give rise to the affects driving the agon – jealousy, envy, ambition, grudge – and their creative powers. As the visible signature of the forces driving social antagonisms and agonistic struggle, affects make the ontological difference thinkable, and Nietzsche offers various conceptual tools for tracing the affective signature of this difference – as sublimation, transposition (*Übertragung*), refinement (*Verfeinerung*), play (*Spiel*) and mimesis, to name some. Above all, studying the affective signature of the ontological difference gives a way to make *visible invisible* forms of political violence.

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