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Introduction: On the Absent Ground of the Social

The controversy over the concept of the political is of a more serious nature than yet another family quarrel among paradigms; it is about the relevance or irrelevance of political philosophy to our times.

Agnes Heller (1991: 336)

The following study on post-foundational political thought navigates around a curious difference, which has assumed some currency in recent continental and Anglo-American political thought: the difference between *politics* and *the political*, or, in French, between *la politique* and *le politique*, or again, in German, between *Politik* and *das Politische*. As is well known, a distinctive notion of the political was developed first in the German-speaking world, where it was Carl Schmitt who famously – infamously for some – sought to differentiate the political from other domains of the social, including the domain of politics in the narrow sense (see Chapter 2). In 2001, the notion of the ‘political’, as explicitly differentiated from ‘politics’, has even been institutionally canonized, with Pierre Rosanvallon taking up a prestigious chair for the ‘modern and contemporary history of the political’ at the Collège de France (see Rosanvallon 2003). In the German-speaking world, the two most important historical dictionaries take account of the difference between *Politik* and *das Politische* (Sellin 1978; Vollrath 1989), and in the English-speaking world a strong notion of the political as differentiated from the ‘weak’ notion of politics has become a sort of household concept for those quarters of Anglo-American political theory that are receptive to continental thought (Beardsworth 1996; Dillon 1996; Stavrakakis 1999; Arditi and Valentine 1999; Williams 2000).

Here the trade route first and foremost leads back to post-war France. It leads in particular to a constellation of theory which, for lack of a better name, could be described as 'Heideggerianism of the Left'.¹ In the present investigation this notion does not cover the group of theorists who were Heidegger's direct pupils, the 'first-generation' Heideggerians like Herbert Marcuse and Hannah Arendt, but rather those theorists in France who, with the help of Heidegger, tried to achieve two things: first, to go beyond scientism and its remnants in what was the most advanced theoretical paradigm of their time, structuralism; and second, based on an awareness of the dubious if not despicable political inclinations of Heidegger himself, to re-work and direct his thought into a more progressive direction. What evolved was a particular leftist version not only of 'post-structuralism' (a term that reduces the genealogy of left Heideggerianism to the scientific paradigm of structuralism) but of *post-foundationalism*, if by the latter we understand a constant interrogation of metaphysical figures of foundation – such as totality, universality, essence, and ground. Post-foundationalism, as will be shown in Chapter 1, must not be confused with *anti*-foundationalism or a vulgar and today somewhat out-dated 'anything goes' postmodernism, since a post-foundational approach does not attempt to erase completely such figures of the ground, but to weaken their ontological status.² The ontological weakening of ground does not lead to the assumption of the total absence of all grounds, but rather to the assumption of the impossibility of a *final* ground, which is something completely different as it implies an increased awareness of, on the one hand, contingency and, on the other, the political as the moment of partial and always, in the last instance, unsuccessful grounding.

One should not be surprised that in most 'family-members' of the post-foundational constellation, that is, in the otherwise rather diverse theories of the Heideggerian Left, one can find formulae or figures of contingency that appertain to what could be called the post-foundational topology of groundlessness. In most cases we discover, for instance, a radicalized notion of the *event* as something one encounters and which cannot be subsumed under the logic of foundation: rather, *event* denotes the dislocating and disruptive moment in which foundations crumble. *Freedom* and *historicity* will now be 'founded' precisely on the premise of the absence of a final foundation. Such endless play between ground and abyss also suggests accepting the necessity of *decision* (premised upon ontological

undecidability) and being aware of *division*, *discord*, and *antagonism*, as every decision – since it cannot be based on a stable ground, nor will it be taken in the solitary vacuum of complete groundlessness – will always be confronted with competing claims and forces. It should be obvious that these figures of contingency, which can be traced back conceptually to Heidegger's work, have thoroughly political implications, and it is one of the aims of the present investigation to bring to the fore these implications in order to allow for a 'grounding' of post-foundational thought *as political* (Chapter 7).

Yet in no way do I wish to deny that from different starting-points one can arrive at very similar conclusions. Pragmatism, for instance, can serve as a starting point for an anti-foundationalist stance, as proved by Richard Rorty's work (whose post-analytic philosophy nevertheless went through the experience of Heidegger and continental thought; see Rorty 1979, 1989). And just let us think of the perhaps more unlikely example of conservative scepticism and of a position like Michael Oakeshott's, which can easily be described as non-foundationalist and may help us to illustrate the difference between a post- or non-foundationalist stance on the one hand and a radical anti-foundationalist stance on the other. Oakeshott's famous dictum to the effect that in political activity 'men sail a boundless and bottomless sea: there is no harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination' (1991: 60) is directed against attempts at grounding politics. For this purpose, it employs the whole arsenal of non-foundationalist *topoi*: the 'bottomless' abyss serves as figure for a ground which is absent and cannot be laid or fixed to any anchorage point beyond the bounds of the sea. Politics has to accept the fact that it is an open-ended process with neither a clear beginning nor a determined end or destination. As it is grounded *on nothing*, one has to come to terms with precisely the abyss which is its ground: 'that politics are *mur für die Schwindelfreie*, that should depress only those who have lost their nerve' (60). Yet Oakeshott, and this is the point not to be missed, is not an *anti*-foundationalist, since, while the sea is boundless and bottomless, it is still structured: it is not, in other words, a *tabula rasa* but the structured terrain on which we move and where we encounter chances as well as obstacles ('the sea is both friend and enemy', 60). Political activity – ungroundable as it is – does not take place in a vacuum, but is always enfolded in sedimented layers of traditions which, conversely, are ungrounded, flexible and changeable for their

part. At no point do we encounter a solid anchorage for our activities, yet no voluntarism follows from this, as we never sail on a sea without waves.

Heideggerians of the Left may arrive at different conclusions, since from their perspective traditions are mainly power-ridden structures by which many-faceted forms of exclusion and subordination are perpetuated. We can conclude that from the absence of ground no necessary political consequence follows (for otherwise it would in fact be feasible to ground a particular political worldview – something which was excluded *ex hypothesi*). Therefore, to elaborate an explicitly leftist version of post-foundational thought is in itself a political decision (see Chapter 7). Yet what distinguishes the left Heideggerians vis-à-vis conservative sceptics like Oakeshott is not only the fact that they are on the Left, but also the fact that they, to a significant extent, build their theories upon the Heideggerian legacy. This becomes clear from the figures of contingency or groundlessness mentioned above and discussed in Chapter 1, but it also is apparent from their employment of the *political difference*: the difference between ‘politics’ and ‘the political’. So how is this difference constructed and what role does it play in post-foundational social and political thought?

Although the theoretical differentiation between ‘politics’ and ‘the political’ occurs for the first time in German political thought with Carl Schmitt, the habit of differentiating between these two concepts started in French thought as early as 1957, with the publication of Paul Ricœur’s essay ‘The Political Paradox’ (see Chapter 2), then leading to Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s work (Chapter 3), which in turn motivated other theoreticians like Claude Lefort (Chapter 4) and Alain Badiou (Chapter 5) to reformulate their own theory in terms of the political difference. Of course, in these theories there is a range of usages of the notion of the political – e.g. as logic or specific rationality, as public sphere, or as event which escapes signification altogether – which are held together not by an overall framework but by their shared ‘relation’ towards an absent ground. As figures of contingency, they come close to what the earlier Heidegger called ‘formally indicating concepts’ (*formal anzeigende Begriffe*, 1983: 428–31): in circling around the abyss of contingency and groundlessness, they provide a tropological terrain for indicating ‘formally’ what cannot be represented directly. One aim of the present investigation consists in mapping this terrain, or rather the theoretical

constellations framing the notion of the political as distinguished from politics. From our perspective it is not enough, though, to enumerate, nominalistically, the diverse usages of the notion of the political. There is something more to it. This is where what I call the ‘grounding question’³ of post-foundational political thought has to set in: we not only have to describe the development of the concept of the political, we also have to interrogate the latter’s very differentiation from politics (respectively from the social). Why does politics, as a single concept, prove to be insufficient at a certain point and therefore has to be supplemented by a further term?

It is my conviction that the political difference is the outcome of a problem or deadlock of conventional political and social theory. As far as the conceptual innovation of the political, and, in particular, the *difference* between the new concept of the political and the conventional concept of politics is concerned, political difference seems to indicate the crisis of the foundationalist paradigm (represented scientifically by such diverse species as economic determinism, behaviourism, positivism, sociology, and so on). What emerged in the fissures of foundationalism was the new horizon of post-foundational thought, through which it became possible to come to terms with the experience of what Lefort calls the ‘dissolution of the markers of certainty’ and with the impossibility for (foundationalist) theories to posit a particular marker of certainty as positive ground of the social. With regard to current political theory, the present investigation seeks to substantiate the thesis that the conceptual difference between politics and the political, *as difference*, assumes the role of an indicator or symptom of society’s absent ground. *As difference*, this difference presents nothing other than a paradigmatic split in the traditional idea of politics, where a new term (the political) had to be introduced in order to point at society’s ‘ontological’ dimension, the dimension of the institution of society, while politics was kept as the term for the ‘ontic’ practices of conventional politics (the plural, particular and, eventually, unsuccessful attempts at grounding society).

Thus, for post-foundationalist theories in which this difference is employed, the latter acquires the status of a founding difference that has to be conceived as *negativity*, by which the social (in the sense of society) is prevented from closure and from becoming identical with itself. To indicate this impossibility of final closure, the former concept of ‘politics’ becomes internally split between politics *eo ipso*

(certain forms of action, the political sub-system, etc.) and something that always escapes the efforts of political or social domestication: the political. What comes to block access to the 'pure' moment of the political (unmediated, that is, by the strategic movements of politics or by the sedimentations of the social) is, however, the *differential* nature of the political difference – implying the constant deferral of any stabilization, either on the side of politics or on the side of the political. Seen from the perspective of another theoretical trajectory, the political difference could also be explained, in a Spinozian–Lacanian sense, as the indicator of an absent cause or structural cause (a 'lost cause'), which is only present in its effects: something whose 'existence' we have to assume because of the failures and gaps within political and social signification. As in philosophical thought, where we can only infer the onto-ontological difference from the incompleteness of the ontic, in the discourse of political theory we can only infer the politico-political difference (and therefore 'the political' as the moment whose full actualization is always postponed and yet always achieved partially) from the impossibility of society, which is the same as the impossibility of providing an ultimate definition of politics.

Seen from this angle, it is obvious that the distinction between politics and the political parallels what is called in philosophy the ontological difference. This allusion to the ontological difference is not accidental, for it says something about the status of those theories. What unites all theories to be investigated is that they see themselves forced to leave the comfortable realm of positivism, behaviourism, economism, and so on, and to develop a quasi-transcendental distinction, which is not perceivable from the realm of science but only from the realm of philosophy. One could say that – from the observer position of philosophy – the ontological difference plays itself out as a radical incompatibility, an unbridgeable gap between concepts like the social, politics, policy, polity, and police on the one side and the political as event or radical antagonism on the other. The problem is, of course, that the political difference is nothing we can describe with empiricist instruments. It therefore cannot be an object of political science, it can only be 'the object' of a political theory that dares to take a philosophical point of view – without however lapsing into an unpolitical philosophism. This kind of 'philosophical' point of observation is characterized precisely by its ability to differentiate with respect to the very status of undecidability (to its quasi-transcendental

status or condition, as opposed to 'empirical' decisions taken in particular contexts), that is to say, to the *necessary* status of contingency. Conversely, one must accept that, behind the aforementioned family resemblances of left Heideggerianism, there is no unifying or underlying principle; rather, there is a lack (the absence of an ultimate ground of society), which generates versions of the political difference and produces a need to draw that line between politics and the political in the first place. In most, if not all cases we can observe a need to demarcate one's own position vis-à-vis a merely positivist, sociologist, empiricist, historicist or economicist understanding of political science.

It should be underlined that the emergence of the ontological difference in political thought proves much less spectacular than it may appear at first glance, as soon as one realizes that it defines the structure of most post-foundationalist theories – and in particular, of course, those of left Heideggerian provenance. As soon as we accept that society cannot be grounded, and never will be, in a solid foundation, essence, or centre, precisely that impossibility of foundation acquires a role which must be called (quasi-)transcendental with respect to particular attempts at founding society. Thus, the notion of foundation is split into a purely negative foundation on the one hand (the impossibility of a final ground), and the possibility of 'contingent foundations' on the other, to use a term coined by Judith Butler (1992) – that is, a plurality of hegemonic moves that seek to ground society without ever being entirely able to do so. Every foundation will therefore be a partial foundation within a field of competing foundational attempts. It is in the light of our post-foundational condition that an explanation can be given to the peculiar fact that what is called in philosophy the ontological difference is mirrored conceptually in the field of today's political theory in the form of the difference between the concept of politics and the concept of the political.

Hence, the different predicates given to the political by theorists as diverse as Schmitt, Ricœur, Wolin, Mouffe, Nancy, Badiou, Rancière and others are of secondary nature when compared to what they share: these theorists see the necessity to *split the notion of politics from within* (and, as it was mentioned above, in a way completely dissimilar to merely 'ontical' distinctions like those between politics, policy, and polity, for instance). By splitting politics from within, something essential is released. On the one hand, politics – at the ontic

level – remains a specific discursive regime, a particular social system, a certain form of action; while on the other hand – at the ontological level – the political assumes the role of something which is of an entirely different nature: the *principle* of autonomy of politics, or the *moment* of institution of society. As differentiated from politics, the notion of the political cannot be assimilated to social differences, to repetition, tradition, sedimentation, or bureaucracy. Like other figures of contingency and groundlessness, such as the event, antagonism, truth, the real, or freedom, the political dwells, as it were, on society's non-ground, which makes itself felt in the differential play of the political difference. But society's absent ground is not 'merely' absent. It (re-)appears and is supplemented by the moment which we may call, with reference to J. G. A. Pocock's 'Machiavellian moment' (1975), the *moment of the political*.

So, in a nutshell, what occurs within the moment of the political, and what can be excavated out of the work of many post-foundational political theorists as an 'underlying logic', is the following double-folded movement. On the one hand, the political, as the instituting moment of society, functions as a supplementary ground to the groundless stature of society, yet on the other hand this supplementary ground withdraws in the very 'moment' in which it institutes the social. As a result, society will always be in search for an ultimate ground, while the maximum that can be achieved will be a fleeting and contingent *grounding* by way of politics – a plurality of partial grounds. This is how the differential character of the political difference is to be understood: the political (located, as it were, on the 'ontological' side of Being-as-ground) will never be able fully to live up to its function as Ground – and yet it has to be actualized in the form of an always concrete *politics* that necessarily fails to deliver what it has promised. But politics and the political, the moment of ground and the moment of the actualization of this ground, will never meet because of the unbridgeable chasm of the difference between these terms, which in itself is but the signature of our post-foundational condition.

This book is devoted to an interrogation of this 'Machiavellian moment' of the political and of the conceptual constellation within which the political arises right at the heart of the traditional concepts of politics and of the social. Yet in a second step, this book pursues a more ambitious objective, which is to determine the very theoretical or philosophical *status* of a political thought that does not hesitate to

engage fully with all the consequences following from the 'invention' of the political difference. At this initial stage of the argument we can only indicate our suspicion that none of the political post-foundationalists discussed in this book is aware of these radical consequences. While some, like Badiou, explicitly assign the political difference only a particular lot in their theoretical architecture (in Badiou politics is only one out of four 'truth procedures', including 'love', 'art', and 'science'), others tend to underrate the radical implications entailed by their employment of the political difference. For, once it is assumed that the political acts as a grounding supplement to *all* social relations, it will not be possible to restrain its effects – and even the effects of its absence – to the traditional field of politics. All dimensions of society (including the fields of 'love', 'art', and 'science') will consequently be subjected to the constant play of grounding/ungrounding as it is conceptually captured by the political difference.

If this is agreed upon, the trading area of post-foundational political thought must be significantly expanded. It is not only that it will include the entire field of the social and of social relations as its 'object domain', it will also have to claim a status of primacy vis-à-vis all other disciplines. For if the political ontology implicit in the politico-ontological difference is concerned with the quasi-transcendental conditions of grounding/ungrounding of all social being (and all being, in this sense, is social), then it cannot any longer have the status of a regional ontology. It will turn into a general ontology which, given our post-foundational premises, will necessarily be haunted by the spectre of its own eventual impossibility, of the impossibility of what traditionally is called a 'first philosophy'. Yet such ultimate impossibility of a first philosophy, in the sense of a foundational discourse, does not absolve us from the task of philosophically reflecting upon the very dimension of grounding – even as no philosophy will ever find, or found, an ultimate ground. And yet the necessity of something of the order of a first philosophy survives in the exigency of our post-foundational condition – a condition in which the quest for grounds is not abandoned (like in the case of a simple-minded *anti*-foundationalism), but is accepted as a both impossible and indispensable enterprise. It is within the medium of such reflection on the grounding/ungrounding dimension of all social being that post-foundational political thought unfolds.

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Notes

1. The notion of the Heideggerian Left (*la gauche heideggérienne*) is taken from Dominique Janicaud and his monumental study on the reception of Heidegger's thought in France (2001: 291–300). The expression 'left Heideggerianism' has also been used, in a more critical sense, by Richard Wolin (2001), to describe Herbert Marcuse's position vis-à-vis his teacher Heidegger.
2. For a different post-foundational way of approaching such 'weak ontology' in political theory, and in particular with regard to the respective work of George Kateb, Charles Taylor, Judith Butler and William Connolly, see White (2000).
3. I differentiate, pace Heidegger (1994), between the 'guiding question' as to the notion, in our case, of the political (the question that characterizes most of the theories discussed, from Schmitt to Ricœur and onwards), and the 'grounding question' as to the very nature of the difference between politics and the political *as difference*. Yet it should be noted that the transition from the guiding question to the grounding question is not a gradual undertaking but requires what Heidegger calls a *leap*, the instantiation of 'another beginning'.

Chapter 1

The Contours of 'Left Heideggerianism': Post-Foundationalism and Necessary Contingency

The dissolution of the myth of foundation does not dissolve the phantom of its own absence.

Ernesto Laclau (1989: 81)

1.1 Anti-Foundationalism and Post-Foundationalism

In the present chapter I seek to substantiate our main thesis – according to which the political difference must be understood as symptomatically pointing at the crumbling grounds of foundationalism – by analyzing its elements step by step, starting with an account of the notion of post-foundationalism itself and of the quasi-transcendental argument by which post-foundational thought proceeds. We will then examine the Heideggerian roots of post-foundationalism (around the four concepts of event, moment, freedom, and difference), which will put us in a better position to detect the commonalities between the Heideggerians of the Left discussed in Chapters 3–6. I will then proceed to show how the ontological difference is implicated in the radical notion of contingency, which lies at the (negative) 'core' of current post-foundational thinking.

The term foundationalism can be used to define – from the viewpoint of social and political theory – those theories which assume that society and/or politics are 'grounded on principles that are (1) undeniable and immune to revision and (2) located outside society and politics' (Herzog 1985: 20). In most cases of political and social foundationalism, a principle is sought which is to ground politics