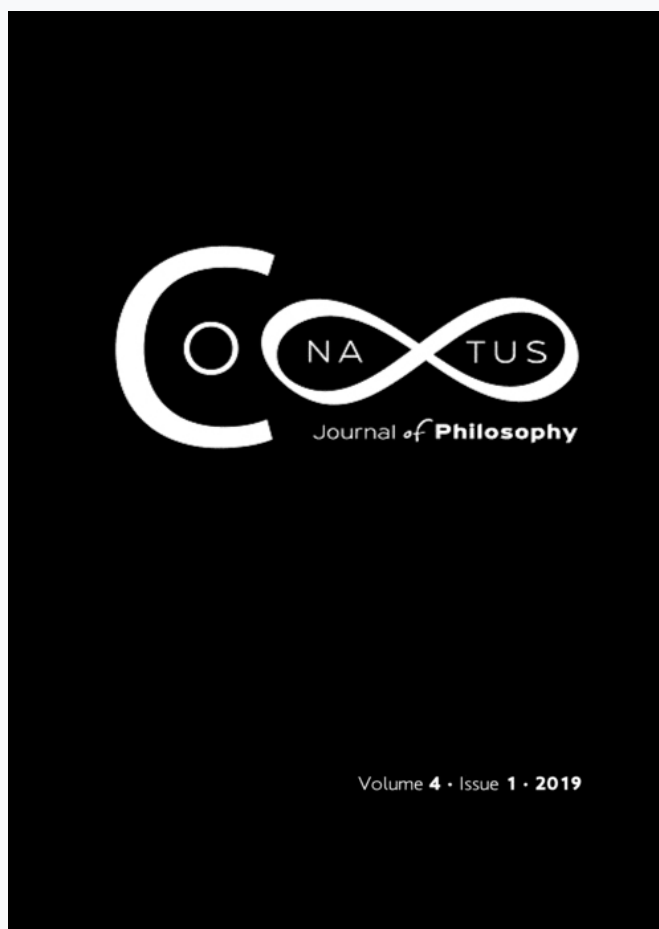


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The Concept of Political Difference in Oliver Marchart and its Relationship with the Heideggerian Concept of Ontological Difference

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Abstract

The concept of political difference addresses the distinction between politics and the political. The political refers to the ontological making possible of the various domains of society, including the domain of politics in a narrow sense. Political difference was introduced as a reaction to the theoretical controversy between foundationalism and anti-foundationalism. This reaction took the form of post-foundationalism. According to Marchart, post-foundationalism does not entirely deny the possibility of grounding. It only denies the possibility of an ultimate transcendent foundation insofar as this ontological impossibility makes possible the historical and contingent grounds in plural. The Heideggerian concept of ontological difference also undermines the possibility of an ultimate ontic ground, which establishes the presence of all other beings. If one wants to think beyond the concept of ground, one should obtain a clear understanding of Being as Being, namely one should grasp the difference between Being and beings. All the same, Heidegger tends to replace the ontic grounds of metaphysics with Being itself as a new kind of ultimate ontological foundation. Moreover, in many points of Heideggerian argumentation one can detect traces of a second alternative understanding of ontological difference, which does not belong in Heidegger's intentions and undermines the primordially of Being. This alternative understanding establishes a reciprocity between Being and beings. In our view, political difference not only is based in this second way of understanding but, at the same time, develops more decisively the mutual interdependence between Being and beings. In political difference the grounding part, namely the political, possesses both a grounding as well as a derivative character. Politics and political ground and dislocate each other in an incessant and oscillating historical procedure, which undermines any form of completion of the social.

Key-words: political difference; Marchart; ontological difference; Heidegger; quasi-transcendental contingency; post-foundationalism

I. Introduction

The concept of the *political* stands at the forefront of modern thought. The *political* is not identical to *politics*. On the contrary, it is the ontological source which makes possible the different domains of society, including the domain of *politics* in a narrow sense. There is a tension, a distinction, between *politics* and *political*. This distinction, which came to the fore for the first time by Carl Schmitt,¹ is known in modern political thought as *political difference*. Schmitt maintained that the *political* is constituted by the *distinction between the enemy and the friend*. This special distinction is contrasted with all other social distinctions and domains, including political institutions; this means that the *political* penetrates all social areas but it does not coincide with any of them.² At the same time, the *political* is both different and identical with the social as a whole. In this sense, the political is sharply distinguished from all other social domains (politics, economy, morals, religion, art etc.), but it is also considered as the basis of the social.³

We will examine *political difference* with the aid of Oliver Marchart's analysis⁴ and we will compare it with the Heideggerian concept of *ontological difference*.⁵ Our thesis is that the concept of political difference signifies an attempt of modern political thought to develop and transform ontological difference. Political difference is not a simple implementation of ontological difference in the field of political philosophy. On the contrary, it possesses both political and ontological character. Political difference signifies the completion of a tendency of philosophy of modernity, which questions the possibility of any kind of *ontic*, *transcendental* or *ontological* absolute grounding of the real. In our opinion, political difference reveals the necessary impossibility of any form of final and extra-historical grounding of the social. Even political difference itself is not excluded from this impossibility.

In Marchart's view the notion of political difference was introduced as a reaction to the theoretical conflict between foundationalism and anti-foundationalism.⁶ This reaction took the form of post-foundationalism. Regarding political theory, foundationalism advocates that social and political institu-

¹ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 26, 38.

² Ibid., 38.

³ Ibid., 38.

⁴ Oliver Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 41-42.

⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1975), 102.

⁶ Marchart, 5.

tions are grounded upon fixed and indisputable principles, which are external to politics and society.⁷ Anti-foundationalism absolutely rejects the possibility of such principles.⁸

Post-foundationalism advocates that since it is impossible for thinking to entirely surpass metaphysics, the non-foundational discourse is obliged to a certain extent to work inside the field of foundationalism.⁹ In other words, one should undermine metaphysical discourse on ultimate grounds without inverting it. Thus, post-foundationalism does not entirely deny the possibility of grounding. It only denies the possibility of an ultimate transcendent foundation, as far as this impossibility makes possible the historical and contingent grounds in plural.¹⁰ In other words, the ontological absence of an absolute foundation is a sufficient condition for the possibility of many, relative or empirical ontic grounds.¹¹ The absence of an ultimate ground does not entail the cessation of the process of grounding. On the contrary, the ground remains functional as a ground only on the basis of its absence.

II. The Heideggerian concepts of ontological difference and Ereignis as precursors of post-foundationalism and political difference

The Heideggerian concept of ontological difference undermines the idea of an ultimate ontic ground, which establishes the presence of all other beings. Metaphysics, according to Heidegger, searches for the foundation of the presence of beings due to the oblivion of the fact that what is given first of all is not any ontic ground but the Being itself as Being, namely the presencing of beings. Thus, the first and foremost we have to think is not any allegedly ontic ground of the Being of beings or in other words, *Being* misconstrued as the highest and the most universal being, but Being itself in its difference from beings.¹² Every time a metaphysical theory establishes a so called ultimate ground, it forgets that this ground, which supposedly produces the Being of beings, before its grounding activity has already been given as present, namely it is already in its *Being*. Thus, *Being* as *Being* is given ontologically before every type of ontic ground, which metaphysics construes as primal. So, in order to think beyond the concept of ground one should clearly understand Being in its difference from beings. The under-

⁷ Ibid., 11-12.

⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁹ Ibid., 13.

¹⁰ Ibid., 14-8.

¹¹ Ibid., 15-7.

¹² Martin Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 2006), 51-80.

standing of ontological difference is a precondition for surpassing metaphysics.

All the same, whereas Heidegger turns against foundationalism, which constitutes the very essence of metaphysics, he understands the concept of ground in a very narrow sense, as ontic foundation. He does not realize that *Being* itself – namely ontological difference itself – in its self-concealment becomes a peculiar, ontological this time, ground both of beings and their metaphysically misinterpreted Being.¹³

Heidegger introduced *ontological difference* for the first time in the lecture course *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*,¹⁴ where he raised the question about the distinction between *disclosedness* (*Erschlossenheit*) of *Being* and *uncoveredness* (*Entdeckt-sein* or *Entdecktheit*) of beings. This distinction is the ontological basis of the difference between Being and beings. In the somewhat earlier text *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger does not refer explicitly to the concept of *ontological difference* although he makes the distinction between the *disclosedness* both of *world* and *Dasein* on one hand and the *uncovering* (*Entdeckend-sein* or *Entdeckung*) and *uncoveredness* (*Entdeckt-sein* or *Entdecktheit*) of beings on the other.¹⁵

Heidegger in the aforementioned texts of the early stage of his thought deems the *understanding* (*Verständnis*) and *disclosedness* of *Being* to be the conditions of possibility for the *uncoveredness* of beings. Furthermore, both *disclosedness* and *uncoveredness*, as a united ontological and *noematic* whole, make possible the empirical manifestation of beings. Thus, inside ontological difference *Being* appears as the ground of the manifestation of beings.

In the same vein, in some passages of the Heideggerian texts one can trace hints of a second alternative understanding of ontological difference, which is not the intention of the German philosopher and undermines the priority of *Being* over beings. According to this divergent understanding Being and beings are in a state of mutual interdependence. This primary mutuality wards off the danger of transformation of *Being* into another, ontological this time, ultimate ground.¹⁶

As an example, in paragraph 44 of *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger refers to the concept of *disclosedness*, both of *world* and of *Dasein's Being*. In this paragraph, *disclosedness* has an ambiguous relationship with the phenomena of

¹³ Martin Heidegger, *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1976), 131/28 & 135/31; Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977), 290/219; and Heidegger, *Die Grundprobleme*, 101.

¹⁴ Heidegger, *Die Grundprobleme*, 102.

¹⁵ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 220-21 & 344-45.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 292-3/221; Heidegger, *Die Grundprobleme*, 466.

uncovering and *uncoveredness* of beings.¹⁷ In some passages, uncovering and uncoveredness of beings are grounded on the disclosedness of the world or, in other words, on the existential structure of *Being-in-the-world*.¹⁸ Nonetheless, gradually Heidegger moderates the aforementioned hierarchical grounding relationship. He stresses that the existential structure of care involves the disclosedness of *Dasein* and that with it and through it uncoveredness of beings takes place. Right after Heidegger becomes more explicit when he states that uncoveredness of *within-the-world* beings is *equiprimordial* with the Being of *Dasein* and its disclosedness.¹⁹ Besides, in *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* Heidegger states that

There exists no comportment to beings that would not understand Being. No understanding of Being is possible that would not root in a comportment toward beings.²⁰

The two interdependent phenomena in this passage are based on the temporality of *Dasein*. Here, Heidegger maintains that the understanding of Being is not possible without *Dasein's* specific ontic comportments, which make beings manifest. He juxtaposes directly the *ontic* with the *ontological* and he states that both are interdependent. Heidegger's invocation of *Dasein's temporality* does not overturn this primordial interdependence because *Dasein's* temporality, which constitutes *Dasein's* Being, in our view, is also based upon *Dasein's* pre-understanding of Being. Thus, temporality, understanding of Being and *Dasein's* specific comportments seem to be *equiprimordial*.

In the aforementioned passages, an instance of *undecidability* arises between two alternative understandings. According to the first, *disclosedness* of Being grounds the ontological phenomena of *uncovering* and *uncoveredness* of beings. Furthermore, disclosedness and uncoveredness, as a noematic whole, ground the specific empirical manifestations of beings. According to the second alternative understanding, *disclosedness*, *uncovering/uncoveredness* and empirical revealing are *equiprimordial* phenomena,

¹⁷ In very broad terms we would say that *uncovering* concerns the ontological structure of *Dasein's* revealing comportment, the intentional comporting to or the directing itself toward something [Martin Heidegger, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitbegriffs* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1979), 48], whereas *uncoveredness* refers to the intentional-ontological noema, the mode of *givenness*, of the uncovered beings themselves [Martin Heidegger, *Logik. Die Frage nach der Wahrheit* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1976), 169].

¹⁸ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 290/219.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 292-93/221.

²⁰ Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1982), 327.

namely there is no hierarchical grounding relationship between them. Certain passages confirm the first alternative understanding, while others the second.

In our view, we could apply here Derrida's deconstructive method.²¹ So we could assert that in the Heideggerian text itself on the one hand operates a dominant understanding, which complies with Heidegger's intentions and establishes a hierarchical grounding relationship between *disclosedness*, *uncoveredness* and empirical manifestation of beings, whereas, on the other hand, a secondary, alternative understanding conceals itself under the dominant one, which construes the three aforementioned phenomena as equivalent and interdependent. This second understanding operates beneath surface and in parallel to the dominant and in parts of the text it presents itself explicitly. Both alternatives are present in the text without ever being merged in a new single point of view.

As regards the relationship between *Being and beings*, the same state of *undecidability* characterizes Heidegger's later thought as well. In *Beiträge zur Philosophie* Heidegger maintains that thinking should overstep the concept of ontological difference.²² According to Heidegger, ontological difference failed to lead to an authentic understanding of Being as Being insofar, since it tacitly begins from present-at-hand beings and consequently it attempts to grasp Being itself through beings. Inevitably, the involvement of beings leads once again to the metaphysical understanding of Being as presence-at-hand and as beingness. Heidegger claims that non metaphysical thinking should leap over ontological difference in order to pose directly the question about *Being* not as Being (*Sein*) anymore but as *Beyng* (*Seyn*) and as *Event of appropriation* (*Ereignis*).²³

Beyng refers to the authentic origin and unity of difference. *Ereignis* as the peculiar *essence* (*essential swaying*) (*Wesung*) of *Beyng* appropriates itself in the manner of a continuous and a priori non presence, namely by means of a permanent withdrawal which is necessary for the *presencing* (*coming to presence*) of beings. *Ereignis* grounds beings through its continuous absence, namely through its peculiar state of not being a being. *Ereignis* grounds in the manner of *being* only a non-present ontological dispensing of *presencing* of beings. *Ereignis* is not the activity of a fundamental being which produces

²¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 229; Gerasimos Kakolyris, *An Impossible Project: Derrida's Deconstructive Reading As Double Reading: The Case of Grammatology* (PhD dissertation, University of Essex, 2001), 216-217.

²² Martin Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1989), 250-51.

²³ Heidegger, *Beiträge*, 250-51.

Beyng; it is the *givenness* of *Beyng* out of its own constantly withdrawn *essential swaying*.²⁴

In Heidegger's view the absence of ground belongs to the nature of *abyss*, namely to the nature of a groundless ground. Despite the collapse of ground itself, the function of grounding does not totally vanishes.²⁵ However, this happens only on the basis of the impossibility of ground, namely on the basis of *abyss* (*Ab-Grund*), which is the peculiar *essence* of *Ereignis*, that is to say the *essence* of the *ontological ground*, the *ground grounds as abyss*.²⁶ To the extent that ground is necessarily abyssal, abyss is present inside the ground as its *essential swaying*. The space of the absent ground is not empty in the ordinary sense of the word. Marchart explains that according to Heidegger the space of ground remains empty in the sense of not completely full, namely not able to be completed.²⁷ *Ereignis* dwells in the space of a presence that is not able to be fulfilled. The character of this peculiar emptiness or, as Derrida would say, the incessant delay of completion of *Ereignis* allows for and provides the *openness*, the *clearing* (*Lichtung*)²⁸ of *Beyng*. Marchart highlights that one should not grasp *abyss* in contradistinction to the notion of ground to the extent that the meaning of abyss includes an essential feature of ground, grounding itself.²⁹

In our view the effort of Heidegger to disconnect *Ereignis* from *ontological difference* leads once again to a state of *undecidability*. On the one hand, *Ereignis* can be conceived as a version of the necessary impossibility of an ultimate ontical ground. In this case, the notion of *Ereignis* leads to the post-foundational stance. On the other hand, one can claim that the total dissociation of *Beyng* and *Ereignis* from beings and *beingness* compels indeed the thought to tacitly hypostasize *Ereignis*, namely to conceive it as a mysterious substance, as a transcendent hyper-being, as a hyper-ground of beings.³⁰ In our view, Marchart overlooks this inherent ambiguity of Heidegger's thought. He tacitly interprets Heidegger's arguments in a *non-foundationalist* way and consequently conceives Heidegger in a univocal manner as a precursor of post-foundationalism. In this

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Zur Sache des Denkens* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klosterman, 2007), 8-9, 28; Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klosterman, 1977), 337/311-339/313.

²⁵ Marchart, 18.

²⁶ Heidegger, *Beiträge*, 29.

²⁷ Marchart, 18; Heidegger, *Beiträge*, 379.

²⁸ Heidegger, *Zur Sache*, 80-90.

²⁹ Marchart, 19.

³⁰ Thomas Sheehan, "A Paradigm Shift in Heidegger Research," *Continental Philosophy Review* 34, no. 2 (2001):189.

way, Marchart – as examined in the following chapters – fails to recognize a hidden foundationalist tendency in his own way of thought as well.

It is our opinion that ontological difference is indispensable. If one oversteps it, as Heidegger proposes in *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, then unavoidably one will tend to understand *Beyng* not as authentically different from any concept of *beingness* but as a transcendent hyper-being, a being *beyond the essence* (*epekeina tes ousias*) like Plato's *agathon*, because one's thought will be obliged to *provide Beyng*, in the manner of negative theology, with a mysterious transcendent *essence*, superior to any other being and thus with a non-understandable *ontic* character. Therefore, we maintain that Heidegger tacitly oscillates between the two aforementioned ways of understanding. Whereas Heidegger is indeed a precursor of post-foundationalism, he does not belong knowingly to it.

III. Political difference and contingency as the necessary impossibility of an ultimate grounding

Our thesis is that the notion of *political difference* expresses in a very effective manner and, at the same time, brings to a completion the second alternative understanding of *ontological difference* we have proposed above, which maintains that *Being* and *beings* are interdependent and equiprimordial. The origin and essential sway of Heideggerian *ontological difference* stands in a realm before politics to the extent that, according to late Heidegger's argumentation, what gives the difference, Ereignis, is nothing more than an ontological impossibility of presence, which stands before history,³¹ before any kind of *beingness* and therefore before political action. In Heidegger's thought *the ontological grounds the political*.

According to Marchart, Heidegger's theoretical stance can be characterized as *quasi-transcendental*. Heidegger's ontological analysis involves transcendental elements because it searches for – not any more in Kant's manner the epistemological conditions of understanding but – the ontological conditions of the truth of *Being*.³²

The above mentioned argumentation stresses the significance of *contingency* not only in Heidegger's thought but in post-foundationalism in general.³³ *Contingency* refers to the necessary impossibility of an ultimate foundation. This form of contingency is at the same time necessary because the impossibili-

³¹ Heidegger, *Zur Sache*, 49-50.

³² John Sallis, "Grounders of the Abyss," in *Companion to Heidegger's Contribution to Philosophy*, ed. Charles E. Scott, Susan Schoenbohm, Daniela Vallega-Neu, and Alejandro Vallega (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 185.

³³ Marchart, 25-9.

ty of an ultimate ground is an indispensable condition for the possibility of the many, empirical grounds. Nevertheless, if contingency, namely the absence of a final ground, which totally guarantees the process of grounding, is necessary for the constitution of any form of identity, then this contingency, as quasi-transcendental, resides in a realm before and out of history.

Furthermore, the experience of this necessary contingency, as the awareness of the crisis of the grounding reasons, can always be traced inside history. Marchart maintains that the notion of the *moment of the political*³⁴ is grounded precisely on the idea of the appearance inside history and on specific social and political conditions of this quasi-transcendental contingency, which itself resides in a realm of history.³⁵ Thus, post-foundationalism reaches a peculiar circle. The quasi-transcendental contingency is the condition of possibility of the appearance of the *moment* inside history and in this manner grounds history; yet the historical conditions make possible the emergence of the *moment* and thus the experience of the extra-historical and necessary contingency.

Consequently, *political difference* describes precisely this tension between, on the one hand, the specific social and political constitutions and, on the other hand, their inability to be completed and their impossible ontological (and by extension political) ground. Political difference is a trace of the necessary contingency, namely of the absence of ultimate political grounds. Thus, it refers to the ontological play of the *moment of the political*, which as experience emerges inside history and inside political constitutions and social systems in the form of various terms, such as *event*, *freedom*, *competition*, whereas, as quasi-transcendental contingency, which constitutes every possible identity, resides out of history. Marchart claims that modernity as a historical era is characterized precisely by the generalization of the moment of the political as the moment of the impossibility of an ultimate grounding.³⁶

IV. The problems of the concept of extra-historical contingency

In our view, the idea of a revealment inside history of an already hidden extra-historical absence of an ultimate grounding leads Marchart back to foundationalism. The absence of an ultimate ground turns into an absolute truth and thus into a peculiar, ultimate, ontological ground of history as a whole, which in effect is not different from the traditional metaphysical grounds. The impossibility of grounding tacitly loses its political character, becomes

³⁴ John Greville Agard Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment. Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975), VIII.

³⁵ Marchart, 30-31.

³⁶ Marchart, 33.

extra-political (like the Heideggerian concepts of *Ereignis* and *Seyn*), and returns to the traditional pattern which characterizes all types of metaphysical grounding.

We argue that the impossibility of grounding should not be characterized as a peculiar extra-historical foundation, not only because it depends on history, namely on the succession of the ontic grounds, in order to be what it is, an impossibility, but in effect it is identical to this succession. The impossibility of an ultimate grounding is history itself. To say that contingency is extra-historical is to say that history itself is extra-historical.³⁷ In this manner, a peculiar hierarchy inside the moment of the political comes to the fore between the grounding of extra-historical contingency on the one hand and the appearance of the moment inside history on the other hand.

In the way Marchart puts the matter, the empirical appearance of contingency inside history does not affect the peculiar *ontological status* of this contingency. The empirical, the social and the historical do not influence reversely the peculiar extra-historical *essence* (or *non-essence*) of the ontological impossibility of grounding. Thus, the hierarchical relationship between the ground and the grounded still operates. The empirical revealment of contingency and the historical conditions, which make this revealment possible, are considered simply as the *ratio cognoscendi* of the impossibility of grounding. They simply reveal contingency. They do not determine or produce it. The ontic and social elements do not indispensably permeate the ontological one. As such, the concept of political difference itself is canceled. There is not any particular reason to replace ontological difference with political difference or the traditional universal ontology as *prima philosophia* with the thought on the political as a regional ontology.³⁸ Consequently, we insist that the impossibility of an ultimate grounding is not extra-historical, since this would mean that it is extra-political as well.

What the concept of political difference could add to the Heideggerian analysis on ontological difference and *Ereignis* is a peculiar interdependence between ontological and ontic. Political difference reinforces the tendency of modern thought to go beyond foundationalism, because it manifests that even this grounding impossibility of an ultimate ground depends essentially on the ontic elements which grounds, namely it depends essentially on the changing historical and political conditions as well as social institutions through which contingency comes to the fore.

³⁷ Of course, history itself is neither something historical nor something extra-historical, for example like nature. It is the essence of every historical event; but this essence does not stand in a privileged place which exists independently and prior to any specific historical event.

³⁸ Marchart, 165-68.

In other words, necessary contingency depends on the particular political actions in a given historical situation. As a matter of fact, historical conditions and political actions are not simply the ratio cognoscendi of ontological contingency, as Marchart implies. They do not simply manifest contingency as something that pre-exists independently of its appearance in history. Historical conditions and particular political actions stand in an essential unity with contingency, or, in other words, they are to a certain degree identical with contingency. Political difference leads the distinction between grounded and ground or between ontic and ontological to a partial collapse. The ontic part of difference permeates in such a way the ontological one that any effort to totally distinguish one from the other is impossible. The *ontic part* and the *ontological part* are still able to operate as distinct notions only inside a primary and essential belonging together, in which the peculiarly grounding impossibility of an absolute ground and the historical succession of transitory grounds constitute two sides of the same coin.

V. The ontic-ontological character of political difference

Nevertheless, why one should opt for political difference instead of ontological difference? A possible answer could be that in order for the tendency of modern thought –that leads to the collapse of the permanent and extra-historical grounds– to be fulfilled, the ontological impossibility itself of such grounds, which replaces and at the same time partially plays the role of these ultimate foundations, should take a specific, intra-historical, intra-political and quasi-ontical form.

The name and essence of this ontological impossibility should involve contingency in beings and at the same time should separate contingency from beings. Thus, the term “*political difference*” gives contingency an undecidable ontic-ontological character, which is not able to be completed. One should cope with Heidegger’s tendency that totally dissociates Being from beings, because this tendency leads to a retrogression to what modern thought endeavours to leave behind, namely the ultimate ground of the social. Ontological difference as such belongs to a pure and universal, ontological level, strictly distinguished from the level of beings, from politics, technology and society. Thus, the concept of ontological difference creates the conditions for the transformation of the ontological impossibility of ground into a crypto-substantialized ultimate ground.

On the contrary, in the theoretical framework of political difference what precedes, the *political*, has at the same time both an ontological-grounding as well as an ontic-derivative character. Furthermore, what *comes next*, the sphere of politics, the society, the appearance of beings inside social space,

has simultaneously both derivative as well as grounding character. The political and the politics ground and at the same time dislocate each other in an incessant and unstable historical process, which allows no type of fulfilment of the social and thus no type of eternal and immutable ground of history.

VI. Political difference and the impossibility of completion of the social

As we have already maintained, specific human political action inside modern social institutions does not simply reveal a pre-existing and extra-historical contingency. On the contrary, political action inside specific historical conditions constitutes the very possibility of this contingency. Only inside the social and political struggles this contingency is possible. The human political acting itself is contingent, namely it is free. In its core, it is not bound to any ultimate principles or grounds. Acting itself inside specific historical conditions establishes its own relative and temporary criteria, which in their turn bound it. Thus, contingency should not be understood as an impossibility which resides somewhere out of history, or, in other words, somewhere out of human acting.

Marchart maintains that even though all political regimes in all historical eras are characterized by an ultimate groundlessness, only in democracy this contingency is neither negated nor repressed but, on the contrary, promoted as the ground of democratic political order.³⁹ All political regimes, in one way or another, have to cope with the necessary contingency of the social. Democracy differs from all other regimes only in the way it relates to this radical groundlessness. Democracy transforms the impossibility of an ultimate grounding to a peculiar *ground*, which simultaneously constitutes and dislocates itself.⁴⁰

Marchart characterizes as ethical and non-political the tendency of democratic regimes to accept ultimate groundlessness as necessary.⁴¹ In his view, this acceptance interrupts the logic of grounding and impedes political action. As long as we act, we are all foundationalists. We try to establish new grounding criteria and we do not doubt about them. To accept contingency means to question the ground and legitimacy of our actions. Thus, democratic institutions in fact are *un-political*.

Marchart's reasoning takes for granted the assumption that political action is necessarily based on temporary grounds, namely on relative and ques-

³⁹ Oliver Marchart, "Democracy and Minimal Politics: The Political Difference and its Consequences," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, no. 4, (2001): 967.

⁴⁰ Martin Saar, "What is Political Ontology," *Krisis. Journal for Contemporary Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (2012): 82.

⁴¹ Marchart, "Democracy," 968.

tionable *truths* or evaluative criteria, and that one is obliged to accept these truths in order to be able to act. At this point a crucial question arises: Do these provisional truths, namely these temporary criteria, come to the fore due to and during the acting procedure or do they precede political action? The thesis that temporary grounding truths precede action and determine it is clearly foundationalist. In our opinion, Marchart inconspicuously accepts as true the second part of the aforementioned question.

At this point, we should take into account Hanna Arendt's view that political action (*praxis*) is distinct from *poiesis* (*fabrication*)⁴² exactly because it is groundless. Political acting inside public sphere is not based on any extra-political *truths*. Even though an actor takes into consideration causes, motives, targets or outcomes, a true action is not determined by these elements.⁴³ The goal of *praxis* is *praxis* itself. *Praxis* emerges in history only when a free public sphere of *words* and *acts* comes to the fore. On the contrary, fabrication is grounded on pre-existing principles and patterns and its outcome resides in a sphere out of fabrication itself. The work of *poiesis* emerges when fabricating procedure comes to its end.

Moreover, free actions stimulate other free actions in an incessant political play inside public sphere. *Praxis* is contingent to the extent that it is groundless. In our opinion, Arendt's view is that this impossibility of grounding does not reside in an extra-historical and extra-political region and, at the same time, it neither renders action possible through temporary ontic grounds. In Arendt's thought, groundlessness is political action itself. Ontological contingency is not distinct from political action. Besides, in Arendt's view, every new entrant citizen is integrated in public sphere by acting and talking in public. In this manner, it becomes gradually apparent *who he is*, a knowledge that even the new entrant himself is not in the position to possess in advance.⁴⁴ Man is born *ex nihilo* and after his birth, he himself is his own beginning. Consequently, through words and actions every newcomer becomes part of the human world. This is a second birth,⁴⁵ through which the new citizen undertakes the simple fact of his initial, natural birth. Man, as a new beginning, is able to start something new that nobody can predict based on the knowledge of his previous acts or of the conditions that we believe that affected him.

⁴² Jacques Taminiaux, *The Thracian Maid and the Professional Thinker. Arendt and Heidegger*, trans. Michael Gendre (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 1-3, 92-94; Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 156-57, 188, 192, 196.

⁴³ Arendt, 221-230, 232-239.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 178, 181-190.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 176-177, 246-247.

Marchart, on the contrary, tends to understand political *praxis* as a peculiar *poiein* (*fabrication*); he accepts the necessity of temporary and ungrounded grounds, which precede *praxis* and play the role of the pattern of action. The provisional and temporary character of these grounds does not affect their fabricating function. Marchart introduces the concept of *minimal politics*,⁴⁶ which describes the minimal necessary preconditions of political action, namely *collectivity*, *strategy*, *conflictuality*, *organization*. Two of these requirements, strategy and organization, although they are necessary for the effectiveness of action, are intimately related to fabrication.

Generally speaking, the notion of extra-historical contingency in Marchart's thought, which precedes social institutions and specific political actions takes the place of traditional absolute grounds of the social. In this case, the social acquires a new immovable ground and a permanent identity. Besides, *praxis* is inconspicuously understood as a peculiar fabrication of the social.

Furthermore, Marchart (and Heidegger *mutatis mutandis*) could be characterized as a thinker, who underestimates or neglects the specific political and social problems in favor of an abstract notion of the political. Lois McNay maintains that every form of political ontology or theory of radical democracy leads to the problem of "*social weightlessness*." According to McNay, all versions of political ontology introduce a theoretical hierarchy between the ontological/political, which is placed at the top and the ontic/social, which is placed at the bottom.⁴⁷ In this manner, the particular political acts are understood as insignificant examples of abstract and contingent ontological possibilities, so that questions about the ways or the causes of these actions in the specific historical situation become unnecessary.⁴⁸

Additionally, McNay maintains that political ontology understands the *political* as a substantial and ahistorical concept which exceeds social reality.⁴⁹ In our view, the two aforementioned problems of political ontology concern Marchart's presentation of political difference as well. The tacit *hierarchicalization* and *substantialization* of political difference lead to a hidden foundationalism and to the depreciation of political action. In Marchart's analysis, political action does not constitute political difference every time it is acted. On the contrary, it is political difference as an extra-historical and preceding possibility that constitutes political action.

⁴⁶ Marchart, "Democracy," 971.

⁴⁷ Lois McNay, *The Misguided Search for the Political: Social Weightlessness in Radical Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 69; Tom N. Henderson, "Post-foundational Ontology and the Charge of Social Weightlessness in Radical Democratic Theory: A Response to Lois McNay's: The Misguided Search for the Political," *Brief Encounters* 1, no. 1 (2017): 3.

⁴⁸ McNay, 15; Henderson, 3.

⁴⁹ McNay, 70; Henderson, 6.

Tom Henderson in his article “Post-foundational Ontology and the Charge of Social Weightlessness in Radical Democratic Theory” supports the view that Marchart’s presentation of political difference heals the contradictions of political ontology by introducing the mutual interdependence between the political and the social.⁵⁰ Our opinion is that although this interdependence is indeed Marchart’s intention, the introduction of the concept of extra-historical and quasi-transcendental contingency undermines his initial aim. The extra-historical character of the *political* renders it a purely ontological possibility without any social or, in the final analysis, political traces. Generally speaking, we should recognize the fact that, both in Heidegger’s and Marchart’s thought, two alternative understandings operate, namely a foundationalist and a post-foundationalist.

In the matter of democracy we would maintain the view that the introduction (not the emergence) of the concept of the absent ground of the social in modernity produces the possibility (not the certainty) of the establishment of democratic institutions.⁵¹ All the same, the tacit substantialization of the supposedly extra-historical groundlessness by Marchart could lead under certain circumstances to the totalitarian aim of an authentic interpretation of the *political* in a manner similar to Heidegger’s political aim, expressed in the notorious *Rectorial Address* of 1933, for an affirmation by the German *Volk* of its own historical mission and destiny, which was nothing more than the authentic understanding of the history of *Being* through the heroic guidance of Volk’s leaders, who can bravely face the abyss (groundlessness) of *Being*.⁵²

VII. Conclusion

To sum up, we would say that the difference between our view and Marchart’s argumentation concerns four crucial points: 1. In Heidegger’s work operate two non-reconcilable ways of understanding at the same time, a foundationalist and a post-foundationalist one. Marchart gives prominence to the post-foundationalist way as the only appropriate for an authentic understanding of Heidegger’s thought. 2. The peculiar ontological foundation we described as *the impossibility of an absolute grounding* is also determined by the relative grounds it makes possible. Only on the basis of the incessant succession of the temporary historical grounds the constitution of something

⁵⁰ Henderson, 8.

⁵¹ Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 17-20; Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought*, 93, 95-96, and Marchart, “Democracy,” 67-8.

⁵² Martin Heidegger, “The Self-Assertion of the German University,” in *Philosophical and Political Writings*, ed. Manfred Stassen, trans. Karsten Harries (New York-London: Continuum, 2003), 2-11.

like an *impossibility of an ultimate grounding* as the *ground* of this succession is possible. In Marchart's thought this interdependence becomes blurred. The relative historical grounds and the social institutions of modernity play simply the role of the *ratio cognoscendi* of the necessary and prevalent extra-historical contingency. 3. The term "*quasi-transcendental contingency*" is misleading. It refers to a ground which is partly transcendental and partly empirical and ontic. In fact, contingency is determined as regards all its "*parts*," through and through, by the *empirical* and the *ontological* as well. Besides, contingency is not extra-historical because that would mean that it is extra-political too. Despite its inferred permanence and inter-temporality, to the extent that it is not only comprehensible but also possible on the basis of the historical succession of the relative grounds, contingency is determined from the very beginning by history, or, in other words, it is history itself. 4. Political difference does not precede political action. There is a mutual relationship of interdependence between political difference and specific political action.

In our opinion the Arendtian analysis of the distinction between *praxis* and *poesis* could be used as a basis for the reconciliation of the abstract concept of the *political* with the specific empirical and social conditions, problems and institutions, or, in other words, for the reconciliation of the ontological freedom of the action with the limitations and restraints of the specific social and historical conditions. A free political *praxis*, on the one hand, is groundless and independent of any absolute truth or specific cause and motivation but, on the other hand, it is held necessarily inside public sphere and always copes with specific social and political problems.

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