



## Space as a mode of political thinking

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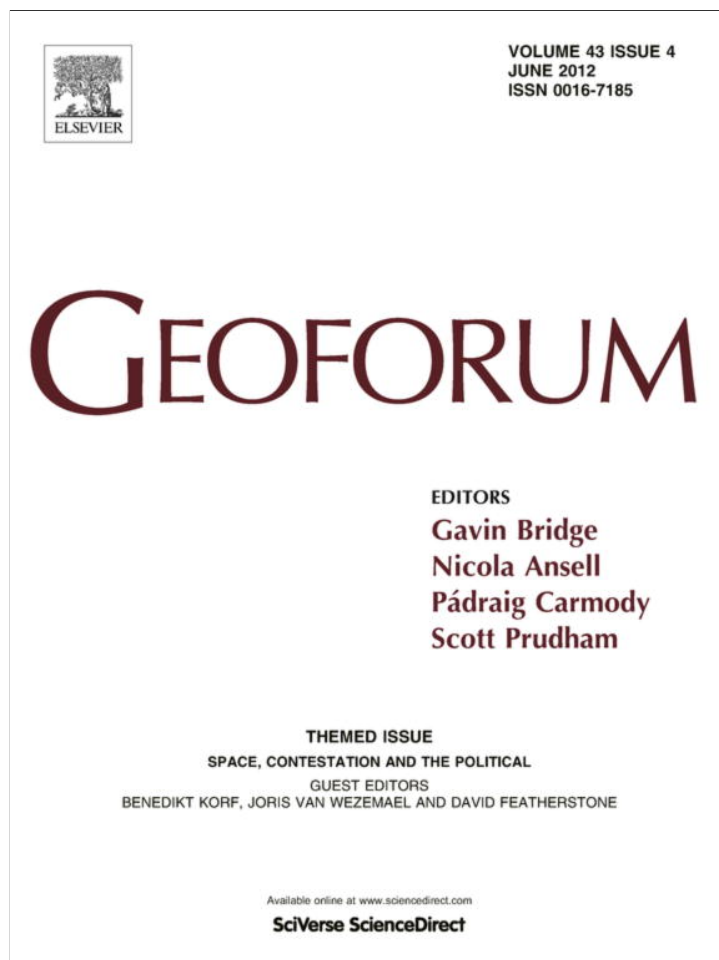
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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between space and politics through an exploration of the political theories of Arendt, Laclau, Mouffe and Rancière. It starts with an engagement with ideas about spatial metaphors and space, and argues that space may be considered as a mode of political thinking. It then provides an examination of the theories of these thinkers, paying close attention to the role space and spatiality plays in their conceptualisations of politics and the political. The article concludes with some observations on the relationship between space and politics.

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### 1. Introduction

In his 1921 dissertation entitled *Der Raum* (Space), Rudolf Carnap distinguished between three types of space – *formal*, *intuitive* and *physical* – and argued that the endless debates of the past century between mathematicians, philosophers and physicists on the nature of space failed to take into consideration this manifold of meanings. The mathematicians he studied, Russell and Couturat, were correct in their interpretations insofar as the type of space they were referring to was understood as *formal* space; that is, as a pure relational or order structure. Similarly, physicists (Riemann, Helmholtz, Einstein) and philosophers (Kant and neo-Kantians) were all correct as long as it was understood that the former group was dealing with *physical* space – as an object of empirical science – and the latter with *intuitive* space – as an object of ‘a priori intuition’ (as defined by Kant). The disputes between them had been futile – indeed, there was not much to dispute about – for each group was in fact talking about a different type of space (Friedman, 2000).

I wonder if there is not something similar in the debates around the uses of space that are animated by a concern about the ‘merely metaphorical’ use (or abuse) of space, occasionally expressed by geographers. Since the so-called ‘spatial turn’ in humanities and social sciences, the increasing ‘space talk’ in other disciplines has attracted the attention of geographers, who responded in a variety of ways. Some of these were characterised by a mixture of happy welcoming (‘they have *finally* understood the importance of space...’) and suspicion (‘...*but* they don’t seem to get this whole

idea of space’), edging towards hostility at times (‘they use space *merely* metaphorically!’).

This, for me, is not the most productive of reactions, because it replaces curiosity with expertise, underpinned by disciplinary self-confidence and a claim to ‘better’ knowledge of space (which other disciplines can at best grasp the importance of, though not quite getting what it is all about). What interests me in this article is the job ‘space talk’ does for other disciplines, in this case, political theory. Rather than accusing the thinkers I am engaging with of not ‘doing’ space or not quite understanding space beyond, perhaps, a few metaphorical references to it, I pay attention to what animates them in engaging with space talk when theorising politics. Why does space have such a strong appeal in these theories? What makes these spatial representations – metaphors of space and spatiality – necessary to the formulation of these theories of politics? What does this recourse to spatial metaphors tell us about the nature of politics as it has been conceptualised in particular ways by these thinkers? My main argument is that even when used ‘merely metaphorically’, different understandings of space and spatiality inform particular conceptualisations of politics. What this tells us is that ‘space’ is not employed merely for the sake of simplicity or convenience. It does a good deal of theoretical work, it is far from unique in its political implications; indeed, there are multiple spatialities at work in different conceptualisations of politics.

In an article on the multiple spatialities of contentious politics, Leitner et al. (2008, p. 169) argued that ‘[n]o single spatiality should be privileged since they are co-implicated in complex ways’. Their argument, admittedly, was ‘grounded in the practices of contentious politics rather than theoretical and philosophical debates’. In what follows, I shift focus from practices to theories of politics by engaging with the works of Hannah Arendt, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière. There are three reasons for

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my choice of these particular thinkers. First, they are all committed to an understanding of politics that is different and distinct from institutionalised practices of government and administration. To emphasise this, Mouffe offers the following distinction between 'the political' (*le politique*) and 'politics' (*la politique*):

By 'the political', I refer to the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in all human society, antagonism that [...] can take many different forms and can emerge in diverse social relations. 'Politics' refers to the ensemble of practices, discourses, and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and to organise human coexistence in conditions which are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of 'the political' (1995, pp. 262–263).

There is, in other words, an attempt to think about politics as a specific form of activity marked by contestation and antagonism rather than consensus and agreement.<sup>1</sup> Laclau and Mouffe make antagonism central to their conceptualisation. Arendt offers, in Honig's (1993) words, an 'agonistic' understanding of political action, and Rancière emphasises dissensus and disagreement. Following from this, the second reason I focus on these thinkers is that they all propose an understanding of politics that is ruptural and inaugurative, by which I mean politics that starts or introduces something new, perhaps unexpected, and interrupts the established order of things. This aspect is also evident in their rejection of conceiving politics around already given identities or interests.

Finally, all of these thinkers employ a rich spatial vocabulary in their particular conceptualisations of politics. Indeed one of them, Arendt, was one of the pioneers of such 'space talk' (and, as my argument goes, thinking spatially about politics), way before the so-called spatial turn of the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> Rather than asking if they use space merely metaphorically or not, I ask whether spatialisation is understood functionally in their conceptualisation of politics. I focus, therefore, on what I see as the 'specifically spatial' aspect of their conceptualisation of politics, and ask whether space is constitutive of it. This allows me to discern their central spatial assumptions and paradigms, and to consider what 'space talk' does for them. The review shows that space and spatialisation are understood functionally in their conceptualisation of politics. In other words, in each of these theories spatialisation is constitutive of politics, albeit in different ways. None of them equate space with politics in a straightforward manner, but they all, in their different ways, imply some form of generative spatial rupture in the established order of things, establishing new relations and connections. Politics inaugurates space, and spatialisation is central to politics as a constitutive part of it.

## 2. The miracle of metaphor

Part of the uneasiness with the widespread use of spatial metaphors seems to be guided by a concern that 'space' has many

<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that there are no differences between these thinkers. As we will see below, Arendt and Rancière use a different terminology rather than distinguishing between 'politics' and 'the political'. Mouffe (2005) sees Arendt's understanding of politics as deliberative, but this interpretation is contested. My interpretation of Arendt is similar to Honig's, who is critical of readers of Arendt who take her politics to imply an 'expressive politics of community, dialogue, deliberation or consensus'. Rather, she argues, Arendt provides us with 'an activist, democratic politics of contest, resistance, and amendment' (1993, p. 77).

<sup>2</sup> When Arendt's *The Human Condition* first appeared in 1958, Wolin recalls, it came, in the spirit of Arendt's political thought, as a new beginning, introducing not only a new political sensibility, but also 'a distinctive language ('political action', 'public realms', 'political space') to talk about – and think – politics' (1977, p. 92). This aspect of Arendt's writings was also noted by Howell (1993, p. 314) in one of the few geographical engagements with her work, who pointed to the 'spatial language that pervades her writings', and argued that this was 'not simply a matter of topographical metaphor'.

– rather than a clear and univocal – meanings, and its use as metaphor neglects this multiplicity of meaning. Worse still, space may serve as a seemingly 'neutral' ground for ambiguous or contested political concepts. This is what Honig (2009) called, referring to a different matter,<sup>3</sup> 'the miracle of metaphor'. These, I believe, are legitimate concerns, and I agree with Panagia (2001, p. 58) that 'a metaphor is not only the production of a meaning, but also the site of a constant forgetting'. The fact that space can be rendered so obvious – and mainly as Newtonian absolute space (Massey, 2005; Smith and Katz, 1993) – makes its use as metaphor tricky not only because this neglects others kinds of space and spatiality, but also because we risk forgetting the dynamics, dialectical processes, tensions and struggles involved in the production of space.

But this is rarely the point of those who 'abuse' spatial metaphors, and I am referring here only to those who conceptualise politics and the political by using spatial terms. In most, if not all, of these conceptualisations, there is a strong and widespread appeal to spatial terms but not so much to spatial experience. They certainly are not writing about the nature of space, yet the relationship between their conceptualisation of politics and use of spatial terms is not altogether arbitrary. The critiques of the use of space 'merely as metaphor' are all fine, but they do not help us in uncovering first, why these thinkers are using the metaphors in the ways they do, second, what kind of conceptual job space does for them. That space recurs in a central role in the political writing of these thinkers suggests something more: that space is a mode of political thinking. Space, therefore, does a different kind of work here; rather than performing miracles, it becomes a mode of thinking politics. My argument, therefore, is that the use of space in these theories is not haphazard; space is a mode of political thinking, and different spatial imaginaries inform different understandings of politics.

I am not trying to imply that all spatial metaphors are good or unproblematic. Certain spatial metaphors may indeed fail to account for the complexity and multiplicity of the world, and limit, rather than expand, political imagination (see, for example, Stavrakakis, 2007 for a critique of Agamben's spatial metaphors or imaginary, and Widder, 2000 for a critique of Laclau's). What I am trying to argue is that political thinking is informed by spatial thinking, even if the attempt is not to elucidate the nature of space or to account for spatial experience. To paraphrase Bowie (2003), the spatial metaphors on which political thought lives are not a dispensable extra.<sup>4</sup>

In their rejection of the discursive/extra-discursive, and thus, thought/reality dichotomies, Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 110) make a similar point: 'Synonymy, metonymy, metaphor are not forms of thought that add a second sense to a primary, constitutive literality of social relations; instead, they are part of the primary terrain itself in which the social is constituted'. As Winter (2001, p. 65) argues, 'metaphor is the imaginative capacity by which we relate one thing to another and, in so doing, "have" a world'. It is both a projection and an expansion: *projection* because it involves knowledge transfer from a source to a target domain<sup>5</sup>; *expansion* because the metaphor has a nonreductive function. In Winter's example, if we conceive of understanding as grasping, that neither effaces nor supplants the physical meaning of 'grasp'; rather, it expands its meaning to a cognitive operation as well as a physical one.

<sup>3</sup> Honig explores Schmitt's (1985) metaphor for the state of exception – 'the miracle' – as part of his political theology to theorise the state of exception. As we will see below, the metaphor of the miracle is also used by Hannah Arendt, but in a radically different way.

<sup>4</sup> Bowie's original phrase is the following: 'the metaphors on which philosophy lives are not a dispensable extra' (2003, p. 59).

<sup>5</sup> As implied by its Greek origin *meta pherein*, 'to carry over'.

As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explain, metaphors are not literal declarations; they are conceptual in nature. This has two important implications. First, our conceptual system is 'inherently metaphorical' which means that 'we understand the world, think, and function in metaphorical terms' (page 184). The second implication follows from the first: as devices for understanding, metaphors 'have little to do with objective reality, if there is such a thing' (page 184). Yet, 'they play a central role in the construction of social and political reality' (page 159) – indeed potentially creating social, spatial, political, economic realities for us. Therefore, metaphors are 'imaginative tools that are "true" to the extent that they successfully enable our day-to-day interactions'. Metaphors, put differently, are 'our way of having a reality' (Winter, 2001, p. 65).

If we agree that metaphors are not reductive and that they are not literal declarations, but vehicles of understanding through projection and expansion, then the use of space in political conceptualisation will be much more than a 'merely metaphorical' use of space. Here, 'what is at issue is not the truth or falsity of a metaphor but the perceptions and inferences that follow from it and the actions that are sanctioned by it' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 158). Conceiving of politics as spatial is to gain a sense of space as political rather than reducing or replacing the 'true' meaning of space.

### 3. Space that relates and separates us: Arendt

One good reason for thinking spatially about politics is that systems of domination impose orders of space (and time), and that space often appears as a means of control and domination – the tool of closure *par excellence*. A strong believer of this view of space is Laclau, who substantiates his argument with Sheldon Wolin's reading of Plato's idea of city and community:

In Plato's scheme, there was no power to share; what was shareable was the Form of the Good written into the structure of the community. The results of this line of argument were twofold: the idea of citizenship was severed from the idea of meaningful participation in the making of political decisions; and the idea of the political community, that is, a community that seeks to resolve its internal conflicts through political methods, is replaced by the idea of the virtuous community devoid of conflict and, therefore, devoid of 'politics'. Plato did not deny that each member of the community, no matter how humble his contribution, had a right to share the benefits of the community; what he did deny was that this contribution could be erected into a claim to share in political decision-making (Wolin, 2004, pp. 52–53).

For Laclau, this exemplifies how space serves to constitute the social by closure and fixation of meaning.

This communitarian schema was so *absolutely spatial* that nothing in it could be left to the discretion of a temporal intrusion – dislocation [i.e. politics]. Everything, including the number of the community's inhabitants, had to be *mastered* by a simultaneity in which *being and knowledge entered into strict correspondence* (Laclau, 1990, p. 70; emphasis added).

But Laclau fails to see that this was not the only spatial element of control. Plato's community was marked by a more fundamental division between an active ruling group and a politically passive community (a demarcation which his student Aristotle did not follow). But for the moment let us follow Laclau and admit that Plato's 'so absolutely spatial' community sought to institute an order of simultaneity where '*being and knowledge entered into strict correspondence*'. We are not talking about space here, but about utopia, for this was what Plato was devising. Utopias are not marked by multiplicities of time and space for they are representations of

an ideal and ultimate time and space, achieved once and for all. Utopia, as Rancière (1994, p. 35) puts it, 'is not the fairyland where all wishes are fulfilled. Utopia fulfils only *one* wish: the wish of seeing things and people identical to their concept' – Laclau's strict correspondence between being and knowledge. Utopia is

the power of mapping together a discursive space and a territorial space, the capacity to make each concept correspond to a point in reality and each argument coincide with an itinerary on a map... The utopian solution to the problem of democracy is spatialisation. Space is the *mimesis* of the concept (Rancière, 1994, pp. 31 and 35).<sup>6</sup>

It is, therefore, not unusual that 'being and knowledge enter into strict correspondence' in his ideal community for Plato was no friend of democracy; he was a philosopher(-king) of perfect governance without the 'threat' of politics, not a philosopher of politics. This is also why Foucault (1977, p. 198) referred to the plague-stricken town as 'the utopia of the perfectly governed city', where this strict correspondence was achieved. Plato's scheme was conceived against the indeterminacy of politics and democracy – trying to contain indeterminacy by spatial fixation and closure (and he not only kept everyone at their place through sharp spatial demarcations, but also temporal ones, stating, in Book 2 of his *Republic* that workers only had time to do their work).

What we see in Plato's ideal community, for Laclau, is an illustration of the end of politics through inertness of space. This is a particular understanding of space, an ultimate form of spatialisation, denying spatial (and temporal) variety. I think Laclau is right to observe that spatialisation here serves to fix and contain, but this does not mean that this should be generalised as a unique feature of space and spatiality. Space can be a means of control, perfect governance or domination, and Plato, in his ideal community of order and stability, sought to eliminate spontaneity and new beginnings through absolute spatialisation. But this does not imply that space inherently prevents those – for Arendt, it was precisely space that provided the possibility for spontaneity and new beginnings. She would be as critical of utopias as Rancière for the absence, as Canovan (1998, p. xviii) put it, of 'any scope for initiative, any room for plurality' within them; that is, an absence of any possibility of new beginnings, which would amount to end of politics for Arendt.

'Politics', Arendt writes, 'is based on the fact of human plurality' (2005, p. 93). Plurality in Arendt is a *space-making plurality*, understood as a political relation rather than a numerical or ontological matter. According to her, Western political thought ignored, since Plato, this plurality and distinctiveness of human beings, each equally capable of new beginnings when they act in freedom – indeed action must be free, otherwise it would not be action – and 'set something into motion' (Arendt, 1998, p. 177), a new beginning. This is the ruptural element in Arendt's politics.

For Arendt, political action is at once manifestation and medium of freedom: it is in acting with others that we display and become aware of our freedom. In the creation of such a 'realm of acting and speaking', we create a political domain (Arendt, 2006, p. 220). The name Arendt gives to this political domain is 'space of appearance'. It is 'the space where I appear to others as others appear to me' (Arendt, 1998, p. 198). The 'who' of the acting subject – her unique distinctness – is revealed to others through speech and action in a space of appearance – when acting, in other words, in the presence of others. This plurality, for Arendt, is 'the condition *sine qua non* for that space of appearance which is the public realm' (Arendt, 1998, p. 220).

<sup>6</sup> As Rancière (1989) famously argued in *The Nights of Labor*, emancipation is not utopian; it is not a completed constitution of ideal space and time, but an ongoing process.

Space, therefore, has a double function in Arendt's conceptualisation of politics: it provides a domain where issues of public concern emerge and are debated, and where individuals act in the presence of one another. Space, then, puts them into a *political relation*: 'It is the space between them that unites them, rather than some quality inside each of them' (Canovan, 1985, p. 634). What spatialisation does for Arendt is that it provides a stage for disclosure of the self in her distinctiveness and in relation to others. This means that there is more than Canovan observes: this spatialisation *at once* relates and separates – relates because it brings individuals together in this common space Arendt calls 'space of appearance', separates because it is in this space that acting and speaking individuals disclose their unique 'who-ness' as distinct from others. In this space,

plurality is not merely a numerical matter of the many identities of people who inhabit the earth or a particular geographical territory, nor is it an empirical question of the wide variety of groups to which they belong (that is, *what* people are). A political rather than ontological relation based on the ongoing constitution of the world as a public space, plurality marks the way in which subjects as members of political communities, as citizens, stand to one another (Zerilli, 2005, p. 19).

Arendt's space of appearance is an ephemeral space that can be constituted over and over again as long as we have plurality *as a political relation*. It 'comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government... Wherever people gather together, it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever' (Arendt, 1998, p. 199).<sup>7</sup>

We can interpret Arendt's spatial language as a sign of her sensibility towards the contingent and the particular. Space of appearance is 'always a *potential space*, which finds its actualisation in the actions and speeches of individuals who have come together to undertake some common project. It may arise suddenly, as in the case of revolutions, or it may develop slowly out of the efforts to change some specific piece of legislation or policy' (Passerin d'Entrèves, 1992, pp. 147–148). Some examples here may include the demonstrations against anti-immigrant legislation and for immigrant rights in the United States, the movement of undocumented immigrants (*sans papiers*) in several western European countries, *banlieue* revolts in France (although they are hardly seen as instances of politics by government officials), and of course, as we have recently witnessed, the massive mobilisations in Tunisia, Egypt, Greece and Spain.

Political action, for Arendt, inaugurates space – the space of appearance – where individuals are at once related and separated, setting into motion something new and unexpected. This spatialisation is a sensible (and perhaps symbolic, too) manifestation of the freedom of the acting subject. It is also a medium, creating an order of relations between and a domain of experience for individuals in their distinctiveness and plurality.

#### 4. Inside/outside: Laclau and Mouffe

Marchart (2007) distinguishes between two strands of political thought, the Arendtian and the Schmittian. The Arendtian one, he suggests, stresses the *associative* moment of political action, while the emphasis of the Schmittian one is on its *dissociative* moment. The former is qualified as 'associative' because of Arendt's empha-

sis on 'acting in concert' or 'acting together'. Her understanding of plurality seems to support this qualification, although it should be noted that this plurality is not meant to simply imply the coming together of people as a collective, but rather a world-building practice – plurality as a political relation, as we have seen above. For Schmitt, on the other hand, political relation is one of antagonism whereby a collectivity – that is, a political identity – is constituted through a difference that is external and antagonistic to it. What is emphasised, therefore, is a constitutive outside, the enemy, against which the political identity of the friend is constituted. This is why Marchart qualifies this strand as 'dissociative'.

Here we can observe the central spatial paradigms shared by Schmitt, Laclau and Mouffe (and arguably Agamben): exteriority and delimitation. This spatial imaginary informs Schmitt's (2007) friend/enemy distinction, which Mouffe follows in her individual work:

I have found the notion of the 'constitutive outside' particularly useful [...] because it unveils what is at stake in the constitution of identity... Once we have understood that every identity is relational and that the affirmation of a difference is a precondition for the existence of any identity, i.e. the perception of something 'other' which constitutes its 'exterior', we are, I think, in a better position to understand Schmitt's point about the ever present possibility of antagonism and to see how a social relation can become the breeding ground for antagonism (Mouffe, 2005, p. 15).

But the demarcation of two domains for the antagonistic constitution of identities is not the only role space plays in Laclau and Mouffe. In their work, spatialisation is understood functionally in two different ways: as a domain of universalisation and as constitutive of identity. Both, however, rely on the spatial paradigm of exteriority as constitutive of identity.

According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), 'political spaces' constitute the 'foundation of antagonisms' (p. 131), which is the essence of politics for them. Their notion of political space, however, does not refer simply to empirically given social entities or formations. It is a relatively defined – 'sutured', in their terminology – space that is formed by such a multiplicity of practices that it is not possible to exhaust them by a single reference to an empirically identifiable social formation. The relative closure of this space is necessary for the construction of antagonism because it is based on the idea of delimitation within a (perceived) totality. Laclau and Mouffe's political space – the foundation, as they say, of antagonisms – is what enables at once a notion of totality, and, within that totality, an interiority that can be divided into two antagonistic camps.

As may be already evident, the notion of political space does not refer to physical spaces (though there may be physical manifestations). 'The political space of the feminist struggle', for example, 'is constituted *within the ensemble of practices and discourses* which create the different forms of the subordination of women' (p. 132; emphasis added). Anti-racist struggles, similarly, constitute their political space within the ensembles of practices and discourses that generate and maintain racial discrimination. Space, therefore, becomes a conceptual tool for imagining a totality, an ensemble (of practices, of discourses, of institutions) that can be the basis for the dividing up of antagonistic camps (remember how they had defined political spaces as the *foundation* of antagonisms). It also defines the domain within which to constitute their objects or targets rather than simply focusing on a given empirical referent. It is therefore important to imagine this space of political struggle in taking into consideration the multiplicity of processes that produce the undesirable consequences against which the struggles are directed (subordination of women, racial discrimination, etc.). As such, space plays an important role also in detaching the object of

<sup>7</sup> Arendt does not, however, deny the significance of the formal public realm protected by law. Although it is 'a potential space of appearance', '[t]here is nothing in its institutionalised character that guarantees it as a site of political action or practice of freedom' (Zerilli, 2005, p. 20).

political struggle (or antagonism, or 'the enemy', p. 132) from simple empirical referents such as, regarding the examples above, 'men' or 'white people'.

Space, then, plays a seemingly paradoxical role in both defining the terrain of the struggle (through closure), but also in 'universalising' the political struggle in question by detaching its object of struggle – its 'enemy' – from simple empirical referents and connecting it to a multiplicity of discourses, practices and institutions. Note that the universalisation at issue here is not about making something normative across time and space, but about *defining* the objects of political struggles in broader, process-oriented terms rather than simply assigning an empirical given to them. Laclau and Mouffe's antagonistic camps, therefore, are not constituted around empirical dichotomies (women versus men, black versus white, homosexual versus heterosexual), but within an ensemble of discourse, practices and institutions. Space has a functional role here as long as it defines or represents an exteriority – an outside against which a political identity can be constituted (Marchart's 'dissociative' strand of the political). It plays a universalising function by defining a discursive domain of problematisation.

For Laclau and Mouffe, as with many theorists of the political, the creation of political identities is fundamental. This is a significant part of their attempt to conceive politics in non-essentialist terms, arguing that political identities are contingently constituted rather than already given. Constitutive delimitations and exclusions shape identity (which is defined against what has been excluded or exteriorised), which is the basis of politics. However, this is a mode of political thinking based on a limited spatial imaginary of inside/outside, inclusion/exclusion rather than space as a sphere of simultaneity and multiplicity – or as what Massey (1999, p. 281) called 'the sphere of co-existing multiplicity'. This is why there is no room in this mode of thinking for forms of politics based on solidarity and cooperation (see, for example, Featherstone, 2008 for a critique and alternative ways of conceptualising the making of political identities).

This spatial imaginary of exteriority and delimitation seems to me inadequate to account for more complex relations than can be captured by a simple inside/outside dichotomy. A similar critique is advanced by Widder against Laclau's conceptualisation of hegemony: 'The theory of hegemony works well within an understanding of space as an homogenous medium, an extensive terrain which constitutes and is constituted by the identities and differences which struggle to take up discrete places upon it. The theory appears much less appropriate to space as a multiplicity, in relation to which homogeneous space is but an *abstraction*, a flattened image of a more profound depth' (Widder, 2000, p. 118).<sup>8</sup>

## 5. Opening up new spaces: Rancière

We also find the idea of 'exteriority' in Rancière's conceptualisation of politics; not for the antagonistic constitution of political identities, but for distinguishing between politics proper and the governmental practices. Rancière emphasises the 'radical exteriority' of the *concept* of politics to the *concept* of police. This does not,

however, mean that the two belong to different domains of experience. Indeed, the two, as we will see, are enmeshed.

'The police' is the term Rancière uses to refer to orders of governance. Based on a principle of distribution rather than repression, the police institutes regimes of sensibility (what is visible, sayable, audible, thinkable, etc., what makes sense and what does not) that are at once symbolic and material. The name he gives to such regimes is 'the partition of the sensible' [*le partage du sensible*], which refers to 'a certain cutting out of space and time that binds together practices, forms of visibility, and patterns of intelligibility' (2009a, p. 31). Rancière uses this almost oxymoronic word – '*partage*' means both 'partition' and 'sharing' – deliberately to refer to what is put in common and shared in the community (understood broadly), and what is separated and excluded, such as the separation of the visible and invisible, possible and impossible, speech and noise. Such partitioning, for him, has policing effect: 'In *Omnes et singulatim* Foucault treats the police as an institutional device [*dispositif*] which partakes of the control of power on life and the bodies. Police, in my work, does not refer to an institution of power, but to a *principle of the partition of the sensible* within which strategies and techniques of power can be defined' (2000; emphasis added).

This definition of the police, however, raises a few questions as it makes the police sound like a dominant power that exhaustively orders our lives. Rancière (2009b, p. 380), however, is careful to note that the opposition of the police/politics 'does not cover the whole range of human relations'. For him, the opposition represents two 'forms of symbolisation' of what is common to the community, and it comes into play when the definition of what is common and what is commonly presented to the senses leads to or legitimises domination. Think about, for example, the French government's current practice of expelling Roma. There is a zealous police practice of demolishing their camps and putting them on planes. But this is part of a much broader 'police' operation that has started with President Sarkozy's declaration of a 'national war' against delinquency (concerning in particular foreigners and the Roma, as he specified) and continued with almost daily official statements ranging from delinquency statistics (misleadingly) associated with the Roma to the number of 'illegal' camps demolished, from the number of Roma expelled to new laws in preparation to facilitate their expulsion and thus fight 'illegal immigration' (although the Roma that are now being expelled to Romania and Bulgaria are EU citizens).

So the police is not a shorthand for domination in general or for total domination (i.e. totalitarianism). It is a form of symbolisation – with material manifestations – that institutes orders of time and space, hierarchies of places, and, through these, institutionalised and legitimised forms of domination. Politics is the re-configuration of such orders of symbolisation and forms of domination. It, thus, is a permanent possibility within any given order. It does not exist within a specific space of its own (associations, political parties, parliament, laws, institutions, constitutions – although these may become spaces for political subjectification), but constructs polemical spaces from within the ordered places of the police. Politics exists as a polemic on the givens of the police. The givens of a situation, from the perspective of politics, are never objective but polemical: 'Polemics has to do both with the objects to be seen and taken into account in a situation, and with the subjects likely to seize on those objects, to talk about them, to construct an argument about them and to act about them' (Rancière, 2009b, p. 193).

What underlies Rancière's conception of politics, then, is a commitment to the sheer contingency of any established order. This is accompanied by a commitment to an understanding of equality as axiomatic; that is, equality of anyone with anyone that has to be taken as a supposition and constantly verified by opening up

<sup>8</sup> Laclau's other spatial metaphor for politics, 'dislocation', also operates with a static understanding of space, as if moving pieces around rather than opening up new spaces. Dislocation, for Laclau, implies politics because it is 'pure temporality' (1990, p. 65). Here Laclau seems to be identifying politics with change ('dislocation') and change, as it is usually done, with time. As Stavrakakis (2007, p. 150) observes, 'in Laclau's work that whenever reference is made to the political it is a temporal metaphor that predominates (the political as *the moment* of the original institution of the social, as *the moment* of reactivation and antagonism, as *the event* of dislocation). At the same time, the social is conceptualised in more traditional spatial terms (in terms of surfaces of inscription and sedimentation)'. It may be noted that 'sedimentation' is a term that is as temporal as it is spatial.

scenes of demonstration and enunciation. This results in a distinctively spatial conceptualisation of politics<sup>9</sup>:

In the end, everything in politics turns on the distribution of spaces. What are these places? How do they function? Why are they there? Who can occupy them? For me, political action always acts upon the social as the litigious distribution of places and roles. It is always a matter of knowing who is qualified to say what a particular place is and what is done in it (Rancière, 2003, p. 201).

Rancière's main political concern is to 'resist the givenness of place' (Dikeç, 2007, p. 17). These places may be at once symbolic and material, designating either some form of social fixity (for example, an identity imposed upon an individual or group, deriving from occupation, social status, ethnicity, etc.), or material orderings of space, or even established ways of thinking that draw limits between the possible and impossible. Politics is about challenging such limits, orderings and fixity by opening up spaces for the verification of equality. It is about transforming a given place into a space for the verification and enactment of equality.

It is important to note that equality is not political in itself; what interests us here is the enactment of equality by constructing polemical spaces. What Rancière's politics implies is thus a certain form of insurgency: 'Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's function. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise' (Rancière, 1999, p. 30; translation modified). Politics, then, questions, resists, challenges and disrupts the established order of things by opening up spaces for the verification and enactment of equality. This is how Rancière defines the specificity of politics in order to avoid the dead end of 'everything is political'; politics is not inherent in social relations, but depends on actualisation of equality in space and time.

Here we can take the movement of *sans papiers* in France in the mid-1990s as an illustrative example. Refusing to abide by the 'regime of enforced invisibility' (Beltrán, 2009, p. 599) imposed on them, they manifested their equality in the spaces of the city (demonstrations, occupations, discussion forums) in a context that denied it to them. This was a generative spatial rupture in the established order which denied them existence. By inaugurating a space of politics, the *sans papiers* imposed themselves as equal political subjects in the 'police order' (for more on the *sans papiers* movement, see Cissé, 2007; Nicholls, 2011; for *sans papiers* as political subjects, see Dikeç, 2012; Schaap, 2011).

The central spatial paradigms of Rancière are distribution, partition and re-configuration as disruption (though not all disruption implies politics, e.g. a military coup; it has to be an *egalitarian disruption*). Spatialisation, for Rancière, does not have a single function: it is central to both the police and to politics. It is central to the former as partitioning is key to establishing hierarchical orders, and it is central to the latter because it is by opening up new spaces that such orders are disrupted. Politics, for Rancière, inaugurates space..

## 6. Conclusions

In the first issue of *Espaces et sociétés*, Lefebvre (1977, p. 345) wrote: 'I repeat that there is a politics of space, because space is political'. There was a pun in his original formulation (... *parce que l'espace est politique*); for him there is a politics of space not only because 'space is political' (*l'espace est politique*), but indeed

'space is politics' (*l'espace est politique*). This is one way of understanding the relationship between space and politics by equating space with politics, where the latter usually derives from the former's contested and conflictual nature. The critique of the use of space 'merely as metaphor' seems to be animated by a concern that this tension-ridden nature of space – as a product of social relations – will be occluded when space is used figuratively. Space is contested and it is imbued with conflict as a product of a multitude of processes and dynamics with material effects. I do not wish to deny the political significance of the contested nature of space, and I agree with Garber (2000) that people act *from* the material conditions of their spaces (for example, *banlieue* revolts, immigrant rights movements), seeking alternative distributions or organisations. They also act *in* physical spaces, and *make* spaces, both topographic and conceptual (for example, discursive or institutional spaces). These are all instances of what I have called 'space as a mode of political thinking', which I take to be significant not only for thinkers of politics, but for its actors as well (as, for example, Leitner et al., 2008 have shown in their exploration of the *practices* of contentious politics).

But while the materiality and material effects of space and spatial relations are of utmost importance, it also seems to me important to emphasise that space is neither intrinsically nor univocally 'political'. None of the theories of politics explored above equates space with politics, but space plays an important role in their conceptualisations of politics, showing what can be gained from thinking spatially – seeing connections or disconnections that cannot always be deduced rationally from the givens, seeing something new, generating new relations and openings. This may perhaps be illustrated by an example. Think of a jigsaw puzzle and a mosaic – two different modes and forms of spatialisation. In the former, pieces are spatialised by physically moving them around, but they only fit in one way. There is spatialisation, but there is no spatial variety. There is only one rational and predetermined way of giving spatial form to the ensemble of pieces. In the mosaic, however, it is possible to imagine a variety of spatialisations without even moving the pieces around. The individual pieces are in the mosaic, but the final outline that will define the spatial form one wants to imagine is not given. Depending on the outline I imagine, different pieces will be related to each other, producing different spatial forms each time. I can imagine different ways of seeing the pieces of the mosaic, establishing new connections, making different forms out (a bit like making out forms in clouds, but based more on establishing connections). There is spatialisation, and there is spatial variety, even though the pieces of the mosaic have not physically been moved around. Thinking spatially is precisely about making possible such spatial variety – establishing new relations, exhibiting new connections, imagining different forms, leaving room for still another form or pattern to be spatialised. We are, however, back in the jigsaw and its one possible spatialisation as soon as we hold that there is an inherent politics of space and that space is intrinsically and univocally political. And thinking spatially, thus defined, has important political implications. As Zerilli (2005, p. 59) wrote, the 'possibility of interrupting and altering the system of representation in which we decide the question of true or false involves the faculty of presentation or figuration, that is, the capacity to create forms or figures that are not already given in sensible experience or the order of concepts'.

What Arendt, Rancière, and Mouffe have in common is an insistence on political processes in terms of openings, and this is why I have referred to their politics as ruptural and inaugurative. What animates this conceptualisation is not space as extension or as an immutable container; such an understanding of space would fit in a model of politics as merely conducted within the framework of established institutional structures, including both the governmental practices and associations regulated by laws, etc. This,

<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed exploration of the spatial aspects of Rancière's police and politics, see Dikeç, 2005.



however, is precisely what such thinkers are criticising as reducing the political into politics (or even to 'the police', in Rancière's case; that is, to established orders of governance). What informs their conceptualisations, rather, is an understanding of space as an *effect of relations* so that new political spaces are constantly opened up; that is, new spaces are created out of actions, relations, performances and so on, rather than 'conducting politics' in the given spaces of institutions.

However, despite this general emphasis on openings animated by an understanding of space as an effect of relations, they all have different spatial paradigms; their conceptualisations emphasise – or assume – different qualities of space. Space is important for Arendt for her phenomenological approach, where the constitution of spaces of appearance for actors to see each other and to be seen is a necessary dimension of any collective form of life (Hinchman and Hinchman, 1984). What is emphasised here is space as a domain of experience. This space does not exist as an already given independent entity, but is the product of relations. For Arendt, the universal element in politics is a shared capacity for action. Political action inaugurates space – a space of encounter that at once relates and separates individuals, where the self is her distinctiveness is disclosed to both herself and the others. What follows is, as she calls it, a 'miracle': a ruptural new beginning.

For Laclau and Mouffe, space is significant as a domain of experience as well, though in a different way compared to Arendt. For them, antagonism is the essence of politics. Spatialisation delineates antagonistic camps, constituting political identities through such demarcations. Here we can think of space as the product of various boundary making practices, so that one could identify oneself through or in relation to it. The consolidated boundaries may be concrete or symbolic, rigid or porous, but they nevertheless provide a relatively stable domain of individual or collective experience, and allow identity formation through separation or relation.

Space is important for Rancière for his aesthetic approach, and what is emphasised in his conceptualisation is space as a sensible manifestation of things. Rancière's politics is concerned with how governing regimes consolidate certain orders of time and space, and how this creates forms of inequality. Politics takes place within such orders by disrupting them. For Rancière, the universal element in politics is axiomatic equality, the enactments and verifications of which inaugurate space; indeed, politics is all about creating spaces where a wrong can be addressed and equality be demonstrated; re-configuring, in other words, the distribution of the sensible by staging equality, seeking a new distribution that does not deny equality.

From this analysis, three general observations can be drawn. First, the variety of spatialities implied in these understandings of politics suggest that space is not used figuratively in a haphazard way or for the sake of convenience, but does a good deal of conceptual work in these theories. Each of these thinkers rely on different attributes of space or different forms of spatiality in their conceptualisations of politics. But it is obvious that they are writing neither about the nature of space (though a certain understanding of it is implied in these theories) nor about spatial experience. Space, in these works, is a mode of thinking politics; this is why space recurs in a central role in them. Recognising this, rather than dismissing them for using space merely metaphorically or readily adopting their 'space talk' as if they were writing about space as such, may provide significant resources for geographers interested in space and politics.

Second, space is not 'political' in a univocal sense, and it is as much about inauguration of politics as it is of its containment; it is as much about openings as it is about closings; it is as much ruptural as it is governmental. Systems of governance and domination consolidate or impose orders of space (and time). Space is political in the sense that it generates a peculiar relationship to the order of

things as a medium, it makes manifest the partitionings of the established order, and it provides a domain of experience for the constitution of political identities.

The third observation relates to change. In order for space to have political import, it has to be associated in some way with change in the established order of things, leading to new distributions, relations, connections and disconnections (which could eventually be a change for the better or worse). The different interpretations of the political significance of space usually derive from how this change will come about. For Laclau, for example, it will not come from space, because he identifies politics with change, and change, as it is usually done, with time ('dislocation' as 'pure temporality'). For Massey, space never is complete, there are always 'loose ends' – thus there is possibility for change. For Lefebvre, change will come through space because space is imbued with a multitude of often conflicting social practices involved in its very production – Soja's (1989) 'socio-spatial dialectic' – and is essential to consolidating and maintaining different modes of production – Harvey's (2007) 'spatial fix'. Examples may be multiplied, but the general point I want to make here is that any consideration of the relationship between space and politics has to come to terms with this question of change. Whether understood as a sensible manifestation of things, an order of relations, a domain of experience, an analytical tool or as a mode of thinking, space has to be associated in some way or other to change as a generative rupture in the order of things in order to have political pertinence.

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