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## Theorizing an Online Politics: How the Internet is Reconfiguring Political Space, Subjectivity, Participation, and Conflict

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Philosophy  
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THEORIZING AN ONLINE POLITICS: HOW THE INTERNET IS  
RECONFIGURING POLITICAL SPACE, SUBJECTIVITY, PARTICIPATION,  
AND CONFLICT

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Trevor Garrison Smith

Graduate Program in Theory & Criticism

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada

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## Abstract

This work considers how politics can be reinvigorated through the use of the internet. The argument consists of two parts, the first of which develops a theoretical understanding of politics, meant to differentiate it from the anti-political status quo, which draws on the theories of participatory and agonistic democracy. It then precedes to develop and adapt this understanding of politics to the context of the internet. This is done by breaking politics up into four terrains of contestation which can be configured to be more or less political.

Politics requires, first of all, a common place to gather. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's theory of the political realm, I argue that such a political realm could flourish online, as the internet can be used to create a common space that is accessible to all. What it means to be political in this political realm, is approached by drawing on the theories of political subjectivity advanced by Slavoj Žižek and Jacques Rancière. Subjectivity is posited as an empty universal against the identifying impulse of anti-politics. I argue that the internet enhances our ability to become political subjects, as it can enable us to hide our private identities which so often are used by the state to classify us as objects incapable of taking part in politics.

What the political subjects do in the political realm consists of participation in speech and action and engaging in conflict. Taking Arendt's participatory politics as a starting point, I argue that the ability to participate in political debate and decision making is essential for political freedom. This form of freedom can flourish online where the problems of scale and size, which have traditionally been used to argue that representative government is the only viable form of democracy, are less of an issue. Drawing on Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism, I posit the embrace of conflict and disagreement as what calls politics into existence. Ultimately I argue that the internet enhances plurality, which allows us to come into contact with a wider range of views, which enables more civil disagreements to play out.

## Keywords

Participatory politics, internet, online, Arendt, Rancière, Žižek, Mouffe, agonistic pluralism, political realm, public sphere, subjectivity, participation, conflict, dissent, Occupy Wall Street, Arab Spring, Anonymous, hacktivism, pseudonymity.

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## Chapter 1 — Introduction

### 1.1 Protest, Politics, and Anti-Politics

Beginning in December 2010 there was a remarkable wave of political protest that eventually toppled four long-standing dictatorships. This movement, labelled the Arab Spring by the media, would inspire the Occupy movement which began in the United States and spread throughout Canada and many other parts of the world in 2011. These two movements are significant as they were outbreaks of people organizing and acting politically outside the realm of the state or administrative government. They point to a desire for alternatives to these forms of government, but there is a lingering hostility toward politics itself, prompting questions of what exactly politics entails. Given that such movements rarely reach the level of influence that these two achieved, they provide interesting examples which can help us question what it means to be political and where politics takes place. Is politics something which can be understood on its own terms, or can it be equated with the state, the exercise of authority, or the administration of economics or ethics? Questions of what is political and what is not political, as well as what is anti-political, can be broached in light of these movements which highlight both the successes and failures of recent attempts to reinvigorate politics. Beyond these questions, these movements are different from previous high-profile political outbursts in the level of integration with recent developments in information and communications technologies, most notably the internet. These movements provoke questions not only about how politics can operate outside the state, but also how new modes of technology provoke new forms of political practice and demand a re-theorization of how politics has traditionally been understood.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On Occupy, see for example: John Buell, "Occupy Wall Street's Democratic Challenge," *Theory & Event* 14, no. 4 (2011); Kevin M. DeLuca, Sean Lawson, and Ye Sun, "Occupy Wall Street on the Public Screens of Social Media: The Many Framings of the Birth of a Protest Movement," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 5, no. 4 (2012): 483–509; Federico Campagna and Emanuele Campiglio, eds., *What We Are Fighting For: A Radical Collective Manifesto* (London: Pluto Press, 2012); Jeffrey C Alexander, *Performative Revolution in Egypt: An Essay in Cultural Power* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011); Philip N. Howard and Muzammil M. Hussain, *Democracy's Fourth Wave?: Digital Media and the Arab Spring* (Oxford University Press, 2013); Vasileios Karagiannopoulos, "The Role of the Internet in Political Struggles: Some Conclusions from Iran and Egypt," *New Political Science* 34, no. 2 (2012): 151–71.

The Arab Spring was remarkable because to outside observers it seemed to come out of nowhere. Tunisia and Egypt were countries with long standing single party governments with technocratic aspirations in which left-wing oppositional groups had been eradicated during the Cold War, leaving only religious groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, as the only apparent alternative to the status quo.<sup>2</sup> This is the first aspect of how the Arab Spring was a thoroughly political act. It seemingly came from nowhere to bring in sweeping changes. Politics at its core is not the art of the possible, as the quote attributed to Otto Von Bismarck would have it, but the opposite, politics is “the art of the impossible” as it enables the birth of the new out of what may seem to be a rigid and unchangeable status quo.<sup>3</sup> Six months before the events of the Arab Spring, anyone predicting that popular protests completely unrelated to Islamism would sweep across the region overthrowing longstanding dictatorships would have elicited looks of disbelief to say the least. The same could be said about Occupy Wall Street in the United States, which arose against the context of the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. The original grassroots response to the financial crisis came from the right-wing Tea Party movement, which was demanding a further entrenchment of the neoliberal economic policies of deregulation and financialization that led to the crisis in the first place, while the left seemed at a complete loss.<sup>4</sup> Then seemingly out of nowhere, the Occupy movement arose and managed to make economic inequality a point of public discussion amid a global push for austerity.

The exceptionality of political movements stems at least partially from the difficulty of performing the elementary political gesture of universalizing the particular, which translates a single instance or event of inequality into a catalyst for a larger movement dedicated to equality in general. In Tunisia the public suicide of a fruit vendor in protest of police harassment became a stand-in for every manner of complaint against the regime and thus spearheaded a broad movement that quickly transcended the

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Fisk, *The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East* (London: Fourth Estate, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Václav Havel, *The Art of the Impossible: Politics as Morality in Practice: Speeches and Writings, 1990-1996* (Fromm International, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> See in particular chapter 6 of Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (Verso Books, 2013).

particular concerns of street vendors or police corruption. As Jeffrey C. Alexander argues, the Egyptian activists encouraged this kind of universality as they portrayed themselves as a cross-section of the whole of Egyptian society without any one identity, instead defining themselves simply as the people united against the regime of President Hosni Mubarak.<sup>5</sup> The activists of the Occupy movement accomplished a similar feat by positing themselves as the 99% who were opposing the 1% wealthy elite. As Wendy Brown points out, the movement successfully cut across identity issues which have traditionally defined American politics, and took on a more universal character.<sup>6</sup> These movements occupied spaces without being the expression of a specific group, identity, or particularity, but simply posited themselves as ‘the people’.<sup>7</sup> The goal of these movements was to bring about change on a level that was relevant to all, rather than simply advocating for justice for a specific group.

While the energy of these movements captured worldwide attention for their capacity to spur change, utilize new technologies, and spring up out of the blue, they were also frustrating in their aftermath as they fizzled out and failed to bring forth a truly different practice and thinking of politics that is always the promise of such movements. The promise of newness in these movements, which Hannah Arendt called the political capacity of natality, captures our attention precisely because in today’s post-political environment there are so few avenues for people to engage with each other to bring about something which is politically new.<sup>8</sup> The excitement and frustration people felt with regard to these movements related to the hope that the deadlock of post-political representative democracy could be broken and something new could emerge.<sup>9</sup>

In the post-communist era, there is no overarching alternative to which political uprisings gravitate toward. Theoretical frameworks for engaged political systems such as the forms of participatory and council democracy that rose to prominence in the 1950s

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<sup>5</sup> Alexander, *Performative Revolution in Egypt*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Wendy Brown, “Occupy Wall Street: Return of a Repressed Res-Publica,” *Theory & Event* 14, no. 4 (2011).

<sup>7</sup> Nikos Papastergiadis and Charles Esche, “Assemblies in Art and Politics: An Interview with Jacques Rancière,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 0, no. 0 (2013): 1–15.

<sup>8</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 9.

<sup>9</sup> For an elaboration of the idea we now live in a post-political society see: Chantal Mouffe, *On The Political* (London: Routledge, 2005), 1.

and 1960s are today seen as good ideas which are unfortunately unworkable due to the realities of globalization.<sup>10</sup> Francis Fukuyama's thesis that representative liberal capitalist democracy represents the highest and final form of political development was theoretically much maligned, but seems to continually reassert itself in practice as protest movements fail to not only produce alternative arrangements, but seem to have serious trouble even conceptualizing how an engaged politics would work on a scale beyond a few people.<sup>11</sup> Commenting in the context of the protests surrounding the European debt crisis of 2011, Franco Bifo Berardi points out that

never in our life have we faced a situation so charged with revolutionary opportunities. Never in our life have we been so impotent. Never have intellectuals and militants been so silent, so unable to find a way to show a new possible direction.<sup>12</sup>

Existing governmental forms seem so pervasive today that even in today's popular entertainment culture some sort of apocalypse seems to be a necessary precursor for imagining a world with a different political arrangement. If it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine how we might move beyond the current institutional framework, what does this tell us about how politics is popularly perceived?<sup>13</sup>

Politics is increasingly viewed as something bad or problematic which is often conceptualized as something to be done away with altogether, or as a necessary evil that needs to be simply tolerated. The fact that the word politics is increasingly a synonym for various sorts of underhanded behaviour and that to "label an activity or process 'political' is, it seems, invariably to deride and distance oneself from it," demonstrates the poor reputation politics currently suffers.<sup>14</sup> Citing polling data from the post-Cold War period, Hay goes on to point out that people increasingly believe that democracy is the best form of government, but at the same time are less likely to believe it is a good system of

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<sup>10</sup> Emily Hauptmann, "Can Less Be More? Leftist Deliberative Democrats' Critique of Participatory Democracy," *Polity* 33, no. 3 (2001): 397.

<sup>11</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Franco Bifo Berardi, *After the Future*, ed. Gary Genosko and Nicholas Thoburn (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2011), 175.

<sup>13</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Future City," *New Left Review*, II, no. 21 (June 2003): 65–79.

<sup>14</sup> Colin Hay, *Why We Hate Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 5.

government.<sup>15</sup> This increasing distaste for representative democracy coupled with the idea that it is the best available form of government is symptomatic of the lack of ability to conceptualize new ways of performing politics. It seems as though people are increasingly giving up on the very idea of politics, which then feeds into the inability to conceptualize political alternatives to the status quo as people seek exits from the political rather than new ideas for how it might work.

Even among political activists involved in the protests in North Africa and the Occupy movement, there was a strong anti-political undercurrent which worked to undermine the potentially transformative impact of these movements. In the case of Egypt many activists attempted to emphasize the idea that the revolution was not about politics but instead about dignity and freedom, as if the way to exercise dignity and freedom was not precisely through the political actions the activists were engaging in!<sup>16</sup> The continued attempt to deny the categorization of “political” by activists both in the Arab Spring and Occupy movements is part of the reason why these movements had trouble envisioning alternatives. If politics is something they were opposing with their demonstrations, then what happens if their movement is successful and the current regime is toppled? This problem became clear in Egypt as elections simply resulted in replacing a non-elected repressive regime with an elected repressive regime, eventually leading back to an equally heavy handed military government. In the case of Occupy, there was a persistent anti-political sentiment which was best demonstrated by the focus on creating harmonic mini-communities and the use of a consensus-based decision making model which demonstrated an inward looking tendency of withdrawal from larger society. Gude argues that this anti-political sentiment is precisely why Occupy failed to generate the sweeping changes it sought, as activists simply wanted to sidestep politics altogether by trying to do away with conflict and not bother considering how to build an alternative to what they were protesting.<sup>17</sup> In this sense the oft-repeated comment

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander, *Performative Revolution in Egypt*, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Shawn Gude, “Occupy Anti-Politics,” *Jacobin Magazine*, November 13, 2012, <http://jacobinmag.com/2012/11/occupy-anti-politics/>.

that Occupy was a left-wing version of the Tea Party was more accurate than intended, with both movements positioning politics as something to oppose and get away from.

Against this backdrop of excitement and disappointment with these political outbursts a number of key questions can be projected. The first of which must be to ask what do we mean by politics? Does politics have its own specific content, or is it merely a function or means of something else, such as economics or ethics? Part of the confusion over what politics entails stems from the fact that politics itself is a contested notion. In many cases politics is simply used as another name for the state, but this is deeply problematic as it implies that non-state activities cannot be political, as well as implying that the state cannot act non-politically or even anti-politically. A second source of confusion over what politics entails stems from the common sentiment that everything is political. In its academic form, this notion stems from a Foucauldian view of power relations penetrating every aspect of contemporary life. Any form of interaction not conducted between absolute equals is viewed as political, which reduces the specificity of politics into meaningless every day interactions. When one receives mail from a mail carrier, is this really an instance of politics because the mail carrier has the authority derived from the state to deliver mail while the recipient does not? As Jacques Rancière argues, the claims to everything being political betray the reality that today almost nothing is political, as we have lost the specificity of politics to the exercise of state authority.<sup>18</sup> If politics is equated with the exercise of authority and unequal power relations, then it is no wonder that there is a strong anti-political current even among political activists.

## 1.2 The Need to Reinvigorate Politics

To respond to these questions about the specificity and intent of politics in a positive way, which casts politics as a good in itself rather than a problem to overcome, the theoretical approach of Hannah Arendt will be relied upon. Arendt's political theory is attractive precisely because she views politics as beneficial in its own right, and not a

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<sup>18</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement : Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 32.

mere means to some other end. If the existing post-political deadlock is to be broken, activists in movements such as Occupy and the Arab Spring need to seek to reinvigorate politics, rather than escape it. In addition to drawing on Arendt's theoretical framework for an empowering rather than oppressing understanding of politics, there is a growing group of contemporary thinkers who are seeking to reclaim politics as a specific and serious activity. I will place these contemporary theorists in a supporting role to the central figure of Arendt.

While it can be difficult to lump groups of diverse theorists together, thinkers such as Jacques Rancière, Slavoj Žižek, Chantal Mouffe, and interpreters of Alain Badiou such as Sergei Prozorov have been actively attempting to reclaim politics as precisely what is needed to bring change.<sup>19</sup> This group of thinkers actively position themselves against the reduction of politics to state-based administration common among mainstream liberal and conservative thinkers as well as against the postmodern left who dissolve the specificity of politics into the critique of differential power relations. Politics as the state or politics as differential power relations ends up creating deeply anti-political attitudes. For the neoliberal, politics as state administration oppresses the free market and individual, and for the postmodern leftist, politics is an unequal power relation which generates the oppression of minorities. In both cases, politics is positioned as a problem to be overcome.

While Rancière, Žižek, and Mouffe are important contemporary figures because they are shifting the conversation toward viewing politics as something worthwhile, the work of Arendt on this measure stands above them all and often seems just as, if not more, relevant to contemporary issues than the work of those alive today. After writing *On the Origins of Totalitarianism*, a book with a pessimistic undertone that sees totalitarian impulses seeping into all forms of government, Arendt witnessed the events of the Hungarian uprising against Soviet rule in 1956 which spurred her to write *The*

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<sup>19</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*; Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2008); Mouffe, *On The Political*; Sergei Prozorov, *Theory of the Political Subject: Void Universalism II* (London: Routledge, 2014); Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker (London: Verso, 2011).

*Human Condition* and *The Promise of Politics*.<sup>20</sup> These two books are primarily concerned with the value of politics and its ability to create something new in order to break from even the most oppressive anti-political situation. Against the backdrop of today's general hostility to politics, Arendt stands out as a staunch defender of politics in a way that demands contemporary attention.

Arendt's reception in contemporary scholarship is varied and complex, reflective of her own varied and complex thought. While there is a body of scholarship that focuses on her defense of politics,<sup>21</sup> Arendt is often invoked in ways that are antithetical to her commitment to politics. As Kalyvas points out, there is a

trend in Arendt scholarship that is gradually moving away from the political qualities of her writings. Today she is read more as a philosopher and a moral thinker rather than as a political theorist concerned predominantly with the secular realm of appearances.<sup>22</sup>

The recent edited collection on Arendt's thought for the occasion of her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday *Thinking in Dark Times* demonstrates this trend.<sup>23</sup> The bulk of the essays in the book treat Arendt's thought outside of and even in some cases against her explicitly political concerns. Theorists such as Seyla Benhabib interpret Arendt as an advocate of consensus rather than as the staunch defender of agonistic politics she actually was.<sup>24</sup> Such interpretations spread and have led prominent proponents of agonistic politics, such as Chantal Mouffe, to engage in polemics against Arendt as a supposed supporter of eliminating political conflict.<sup>25</sup> Badiou relies on the work of Myriam Revault d'Allonnes for his interpretation of Arendt, which leads him to the rather far flung conclusion that

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<sup>20</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973); Arendt, *The Human Condition*; Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Exemplary works of this nature include: Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); Andreas Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary: Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Dana R. Villa, "Postmodernism and the Public Sphere," *American Political Science Review* 86, no. 3 (1992): 712–21.

<sup>22</sup> Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, 188.

<sup>23</sup> Roger Berkowitz, Jeffrey Katz, and Thomas Keenan, eds., *Thinking in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Routledge, 1992).

<sup>25</sup> Mouffe, *On The Political*, 9.



Arendt sought to eliminate politics in the name of ethics.<sup>26</sup> Žižek and Rancière also engage with Arendt only with respect to her definition of totalitarianism and concept of human rights, again underscoring this trend where Arendt is recast as a moral philosopher, despite her continued insistence that she was not a philosopher but in fact a political theorist.<sup>27</sup> These depictions of Arendt as hostile to the project of recovering politics by this group of political theorists are all the more remarkable because of how much they share with Arendt's core project of asserting the value of politics. In reading these contemporary thinkers as an extension of Arendt's thoughts about the promise of politics, I am seeking to reassert Arendt's proper position as a political thinker and demonstrate her sometimes obscured influence on these thinkers, while also using these contemporary thinkers to make up for some of her limitations.

### 1.3 Only the Internet Can Save Us Now?

The framework of a reinvigorated and empowering politics derived from the above theorists is not entirely novel and suffers from the common problem of how to actually implement theoretical ideas. Attempting to reinvigorate politics and move to a different model of political organization has always been fraught with difficulties and often these theoretical frameworks for a better form of politics are written off as practically unworkable, even if theoretically attractive. It is at this juncture at which the internet does present something new which can open up political possibilities which were previously thought to be closed. The internet is already transforming all aspects of life, and is starting to have a political impact. The political movements of Occupy, Arab Spring, and Anonymous are already pointing the way to how the internet can enable new forms of political space and political being, but the true potential (and danger) of the internet lies ahead. It is not a technological tool with a fixed essence, but something much more open whose present and future is being shaped by human activity.

The internet will be presented as a response to the second part of the problem of politics, which is the question of how to implement alternative theoretical visions. Even if

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<sup>26</sup> Badiou, *Metapolitics*, 11.

<sup>27</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (Picador, 2010); Jacques Rancière, "Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2 (2004): 297–310.

protest movements and theorists are able to come up with alternative visions of politics, the problem of implementing a form of politics which enables meaningful participation has continuously been dismissed as practically unworkable in all but micro-communities. The familiar response to alternative visions of politics which are empowering rather than alienating, which rest on participation rather than representation, and which embrace conflictual debate and deliberation rather than structures of hierarchical command is that they sound nice on paper but simply cannot work in practice due to the scale of modern political entities. This argument seems to have become amplified in the era of globalization, where problems such as climate change increasingly require a global scope of politics which makes these alternative visions which require small scale groupings seem even more of a relic of the past.

The advent of globalization in its various forms has led to a decline in democracy, as truly global issues such as the environment, economics, and trade have become the sites of secret negotiations by heads of states which leave the people who elected them completely in the dark. While much of the discussion surrounding globalization focuses on these sorts of international meetings involving elites which push people to the side, the primary driver of globalization in all fields has been technology. The internet in particular has completely changed everything about how people communicate with each other in a way that can have radical consequences for how politics is conducted, making the age of globalization rife with possibilities for politics and not just an era of declining democracy. The internet is not simply a new form of communications media but is a new form of space which is remarkable for its plasticity. New spaces can be created and radically overhauled while old spaces disappear or fall out of use in a way that makes offline space seem incredibly rigid by contrast. Today, one can make a publicly accessible space dedicated to any purpose without having to physically occupy a piece of land, which first requires changing its previous purpose. Websites as public spaces are created from nothing and exist as a kind of parallel space that is today always with us at the same time we are somewhere else in offline space. The way people can interact online represents something unique in human history. Never before could anonymous strangers on the other side of the world get together to discuss something without knowing anything about the other person.

The internet is generating a wave of participatory culture in which people increasingly expect not to be merely passive recipients but have the ability to participate directly, form communities around, or have influence in the creation process of everything from bicycles to video games.<sup>28</sup> The ability to find groups of people with similar interests (or complaints) as yourself on the internet is unprecedented, leading to the globalization and interconnection of more people. This enhanced ability to create new spaces which are inherently interactive have tremendous political potential that has yet to be tapped. The internet stands today as the most definitive answer to the question of how to put theories of participatory and engaged politics into practice because of its vast potential to connect people in an interactive medium. Given that even in situations of actual revolution, as was the case in Egypt in Tunisia, there was still an inability to implement something different, the internet in many ways seems to be the only viable avenue where implementing alternatives is even imaginable.

#### 1.4 Digitizing the Political, Politicizing the Digital

Despite the immense possibility of the internet, there tends to be a persistent resistance to it among political theorists. This resistance can come in the shape of simply ignoring the impact of the internet or it can come from direct hostility towards it. A general trend among academic political commentators who theorized the Arab Spring and Occupy in explicitly political terms is that they fail to understand the dramatic impact of the internet or simply dismiss it as yet another handy tool of protest. Most often though, political theorists simply fail to mention or analyze the role the internet played in developing these political movements at all. The lack of appreciation of the technological aspect of these movements not only provides a limited theoretical understanding of them, but also misses the opportunity to engage political theory with a relatively new phenomenon which is quickly becoming ubiquitous. Political theorists need to seriously engage with the internet in order to fully appreciate both its pitfalls and potential for a reinvigorated form of politics. At the same time, those who do take the internet as a serious site of politics, tend to more concerned with empirical rather than theoretical issues.

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<sup>28</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (NYU Press, 2006).

The journal *Constellations*, which has an international focus on critical and democratic theory, has published a number of articles related to the Arab Spring, including a special section in the June 2013 issue which included nine articles on the Arab Spring. While many of these articles provide a serious take on the political aspect of the Arab Spring, there is very little discussion of technology. Challand, for example, presents an insightful analysis of the Arab Spring with respect to political subjectivity but misses the opportunity to discuss issues surrounding online and offline subjectivity and how the internet played a role in fostering the kind of political subjectivity he mentions.<sup>29</sup> In a similar vein, Tripp's excellent analysis of the Arab Spring in terms of performative power and use of theatrical metaphors lacked a crucial discussion of how the actors were able to use the internet to project and extend their political stage beyond the immediate confines of Tahrir Square.<sup>30</sup>

The one article out of nine that does mention the role of the internet is quite problematic. While Salvatore does focus on the internet, he claims that the role of technology has been overblown and what really mattered for the protests was the creation of "a new language of publicness" which was able to bring together diverse elements of Egyptian society.<sup>31</sup> Salvatore argues that the internet was merely a communications tool, much like handing out flyers, and thus was useful in as much as it was able to mobilize people on the web "to conquer real public space."<sup>32</sup> In this analysis the internet is just a means of spreading a message, like a radio or telephone. He goes on to critique what he calls the "fantasy of Facebook revolt" and argues that what really mattered were the bodies on the streets who were engaging in the public sphere.<sup>33</sup> While the bodies in the streets were obviously critical to the protest, he downplays the fact that these bodies were there because they were organized online, had discussed the issues that drove them into the streets online, and had connected with other activists online. Tufekci and Wilson for

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<sup>29</sup> Benoît Challand, "Citizenship against the Grain: Locating the Spirit of the Arab Uprisings in Times of Counterrevolution," *Constellations* 20, no. 2 (2013): 169–87.

<sup>30</sup> Charles Tripp, "Performing the Public: Theatres of Power in the Middle East," *Constellations* 20, no. 2 (2013): 254–74.

<sup>31</sup> Armando Salvatore, "New Media, the 'Arab Spring,' and the Metamorphosis of the Public Sphere: Beyond Western Assumptions on Collective Agency and Democratic Politics," *Constellations* 20, no. 2 (2013): 220.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

instance found in a survey of protesters in Tahrir Square that internet and social media use was a significant factor in how early in the timeline of events people joined the protests. They also found that half of those who they surveyed at the physical protest site stated that after they left the protest site they would go online for the purpose of continuing their protest activities, either by sending around photos and accounts of the day's activities or discussing the protests with others.<sup>34</sup> But for Salvatore and many other communications theorists, the internet is not a multi-dimensional space, it is a flat tool for transmitting messages, thus there can be no concept of an online public or political realm.

Writing in the influential online magazine *Jadaliyya*, Burris makes a similar claim about the internet simply being nothing more than a communications tool, claiming that “the old was traded in for the new, flyers and pamphlets replaced by texting and YouTube videos, the bullhorn by the blog.”<sup>35</sup> He then goes on to rightfully criticize some internet enthusiasts as stating that these technologies were the sole cause of these revolutions, but he goes too far in the other direction by writing the internet off as simply a communications tool. In a more balanced critique of technological determinism, Karagiannopoulos argues that while the internet clearly did not cause the protests in Egypt, the internet still played an essential part in bringing people together so that they could go out and protest on the street. Even in Karagiannopoulos's more balanced approach, however, the internet remains as solely a supplement to traditional offline politics.<sup>36</sup> What is needed is more consideration of how the internet can radically change how we think about and do politics, rather than engaging in theorizing that neuters the transformative capacity of the internet by making it subservient to dated and unworkable offline models of politics.

In a special issue of the journal *Theory & Event* dedicated to the Occupy movement, the role of the internet was mentioned only in passing and as something seemingly unimportant. Wendy Brown for instance remarks on how the Occupy

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<sup>34</sup> Zeynep Tufekci and Christopher Wilson, “Social Media and the Decision to Participate in Political Protest: Observations From Tahrir Square,” *Journal of Communication* 62, no. 2 (2012): 363–79.

<sup>35</sup> Greg Burris, “Lawrence of E-Rabia: Facebook and the New Arab Revolt,” *Jadaliyya*, October 17, 2011, [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/2884/lawrence-of-e-rabia\\_facebook-and-the-new-arab-revo](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/2884/lawrence-of-e-rabia_facebook-and-the-new-arab-revo).

<sup>36</sup> Karagiannopoulos, “The Role of the Internet in Political Struggles.”

movement was able to move beyond talk of mere interests and instead towards justice, and how its slogan of the 99% against the 1% resonated with the American public. She cites opinion polls pointing out that 62% of Americans were sympathetic towards the Occupy movement and that even a third of the mega-rich 1% were sympathetic.<sup>37</sup> What she neglects to mention, however, is the role of the internet in allowing activists to promote their causes without having to rely on negative framings typical of the mainstream media. As DeLuca et al argue, the proliferation of online discussion and reports of Occupy were able to counteract the initial mainstream media narrative of the movement as frivolous and stillborn.<sup>38</sup>

While Brown points out that Occupy was able to overcome traditional identity issues in favour of a broad based agenda for economic justice, she fails to explain why, and it is precisely here that the role of the internet and online subjectivity should be raised. Much of the organizing and discussion surrounding the events of Occupy happened online, where people are not easily identifiable. The mainstream media struggled with this lack of identity as well, as they had difficulty trying to place Occupy and simply repeated the injunction to know what their demands were.<sup>39</sup> Online subjectivity, with its anonymity, is disruptive of the process of depoliticization which involves identification as a means of desubjectifying. Thus Occupy was not easily identified and dismissed as labour unions, environmentalists, anarchists, or any other specific group, as the theme of the 99% continued to retain traction. Introducing the internet and its unique mode of political subjectivity as an explanatory factor helps to better understand the success of Occupy as a more universal political movement.

These sorts of issues related to debates about the internet, which should be critical to discussions surrounding Occupy, are noticeably missing from all the articles published in this special issue of *Theory & Event*, which brought together many well-known

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<sup>37</sup> Brown, "Occupy Wall Street."

<sup>38</sup> DeLuca, Lawson, and Sun, "Occupy Wall Street on the Public Screens of Social Media."

<sup>39</sup> For example, Pareene reports that Fox News channel focused on the protesters as "dirty and gross" with commentators saying this took away from their message, a message that was then questioned as to what it was actually supposed to be, see Alex Pareene, "I Watched Two Days of Fox News Coverage of OWS," *Salon*, November 16, 2011, [http://www.salon.com/2011/11/16/i\\_watched\\_two\\_days\\_of\\_fox\\_news\\_coverage\\_of\\_ows/](http://www.salon.com/2011/11/16/i_watched_two_days_of_fox_news_coverage_of_ows/).

political theorists for comment. In addition to this journal issue, two book length works on Occupy fail to appreciate and analyze the depths and impact of the internet on not just the movement itself but on the future of any kind of participatory political alternative to the status quo. The more journalistic *Occupy Nation* mentions the role of technology only in passing, and the more academic *What We Are Fighting For: A Radical Collective Manifesto* hardly mentions it at all, despite chapters delving into seemingly every other aspect of what a radical political alternative might look like.<sup>40</sup> What these examples point to is the lack of imagination and theoretical reflection on the internet even among theorists who are interested in understanding contemporary movements whose heavy integration with the internet is already pointing to new directions of political practice.

The lack of engagement with the internet or general skepticism toward it is also prominent among the group of theorists whom I draw on to sketch a picture of a web-enabled understanding of politics. This loose collection of theorists are significant, as I pointed to earlier, in that they argue politics is valuable in itself outside of instrumental concerns, and that their theories of politics seem to be amenable to an understanding of politics that embraces the online component. Yet none of these theorists who are still alive have much to say about the internet, even though their work seems so prone to such theorizations.

Jacques Rancière has contributed to a renewed impetus to theorize politics in contrast to state-based anti-politics and has written on a wide variety of topics in political and aesthetic theory, but discussions of the internet in either context remain absent. The only place Rancière seemingly mentions the capacity of the internet is in a 2006 interview with *Eurozine*, where he equates the internet with a large library that anyone can walk into and surf around learning about diverse subjects in an egalitarian manner.<sup>41</sup> The internet in many ways would seem to offer a proliferation of avenues for Rancière to explore, not just in terms of his pedagogy as he relates it to in the interview, but in terms of politics and aesthetics as well. Even within the context of that one interview, the topic

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<sup>40</sup> Todd Gitlin, *Occupy Nation: The Roots, the Spirit, and the Promise of Occupy Wall Street* (New York: itbooks, 2012); Campagna and Campiglio, *What We Are Fighting For: A Radical Collective Manifesto*.

<sup>41</sup> Truls Lie and Jacques Rancière, "Our Police Order: What Can Be Said, Seen, and Done," *Eurozine*, August 11, 2006, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2006-08-11-lieranciere-en.html>.

is quickly changed to film and television from the internet, which Rancière goes on to speak about in depth. Based on these comments he seems to understand the equalitarian potential of the internet, but seems to find contemporary film a more interesting topic, thus leaving an application of his ideas in terms of the internet to others.

Alain Badiou also has little time for the internet or questions of technology. In a 2002 lecture at the European Graduate School an audience member asked him to comment on his theories in regard to the emerging technologies, likely referring to the internet. Badiou responded by claiming that “technology is not a real concept, it's a journalistic debate. It's not a serious question.”<sup>42</sup> Badiou then went on to briefly elaborate that technology is not a truth-process as it does not bring forth anything new, and “is always a continuation, an application, a repetition.”<sup>43</sup> Regardless of whether technology introduces new truths, clearly it is not something that is wholly subordinate to other concerns as Badiou would have it. Instead of simply dismissing the internet as derivative of politics, a fuller understanding of how technology and politics interact is needed to explain some of the peculiarities of the recent political movements mentioned here.

For Chantal Mouffe, one of the most influential theorists of agonistic politics, the internet is not a topic she is eager to discuss, despite the fact that the internet would seem to be a realm which facilitates the pluralistic clash of ideas which Mouffe advocates. In a 2010 interview with *Barcelona Metropolis*, she is asked about the internet and she responds at first by pointing to the internet as a neutral territory which is not inherently agonistic or consensual, but then goes on to say that people generally use the internet to reinforce their own views, causing them to isolate themselves and never confront other opinions. She goes on to state that she prefers a face-to-face form of contact because this somehow leads to more contact with people who have different ideas.<sup>44</sup> Instead of dismissing the internet based on a rather questionable idea of what people use it for, political theorists need to be exploring its capabilities and potentials. Work should be

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<sup>42</sup> Alain Badiou, “On the Truth-Process,” *European Graduate School*, August 2002, <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/alain-badiou/articles/on-the-truth-process/>.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Enrique Díaz Álvarez and Chantal Mouffe, “Interview with Chantal Mouffe: Pluralism Is Linked to the Acceptance of Conflict,” *Barcelona Metropolis*, 2010, <http://w2.bcn.cat/bcnmetropolis/arxiu/en/page238b.html?id=21&ui=438>.



done to figure out how to make online political sites that attract a plurality of opinions rather than simply saying that people do not use it for this purpose.

Unlike with Rancière, Badiou, and Mouffe, for whom serious digging is required to find even the briefest statement about the internet, Slavoj Žižek has commented on the internet on many occasions and formats, from newspaper articles to book chapters. While Žižek clearly finds the internet to be a topic worth discussing, he remains politically suspicious of it. In 1997's *Plague of Fantasies* he argues that on the internet we do not know who we are really interacting with, and thus building political solidarity remains illusory.<sup>45</sup> He repeats a similar point in a 2006 article for the *Guardian* newspaper, in which he critiques the shifting nature of online identity, claiming that online interaction papers over material disparities such as wealth or social position. This lack of knowledge of who one is “actually” talking to online can lead to murderous violence according to Žižek, as the lack of recognition of who we are talking to will lead to an objectification of the actual person.<sup>46</sup> If these dangers that Žižek points to are legitimate, then the more interesting question is how political activists are adapting to deal with these issues and how this might affect how politics is understood. Attempts to dismiss the internet seem more like attempts to avoid understanding its interaction with politics, and make it more difficult to explain the Arab Spring, or hacktivist movements such as Anonymous, in terms of the theory of such political thinkers.

In addition to these theorists who are still alive and thus have had plenty of opportunity to comment on the impact of the internet in relation to technology, there is the figure of Arendt who certainly did not ignore the impact of modern technology. In many ways Arendt had a more nuanced theory of technology than others influenced by Heidegger, but she remained skeptical of its impact on politics. Rather than attribute any kind of essential nature to technology, Arendt asks us to evaluate technologies based on whether they help bring people together into a common world where politics is possible,

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<sup>45</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), 139.

<sup>46</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Is This Digital Democracy, or a New Tyranny of Cyberspace?,” *The Guardian*, January 2, 2007, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/dec/30/comment.media>.

or if they alienate people from each other thus destroying the commonality necessary to engage in politics.<sup>47</sup>

In her considerations of space technology, in particular the launching of Sputnik, Arendt is concerned that technology was fostering an anti-political rationality. World alienation was already a problem, as mass society in the modern age and religion in the middle ages had previously diminished the power of the public and common world, but with space technology world alienation could be taken to a new level in which human beings could now become alienated not just from each other but from the actual planet itself. Arendt's concern with space technology, which she traces back to the telescope, is that it may enable us to find the Archimedean point that would not just completely remove us from the world, but generate enough force to destroy all political power and the common world it creates.<sup>48</sup> The advancement of such technology worried Arendt because in separating people it reduces the possibility of political speech, and increasingly privileges the non-political language of mathematical signs.<sup>49</sup> If technology is able to affect our speech to the point where we no longer communicate as human beings about every day human affairs but only through the language of physics notation and formulas, then technology will have destroyed the world and politics will no longer be possible. While Arendt found the technologies of her day problematic, applying her own criteria to the internet leads to less pessimism as the internet certainly has the capacity to bring people together in speech and action and create a common world, as has been demonstrated by the revolutions in North Africa and the Occupy movement's reliance on the web.

Against the statements of many of these political theorists who form the basis of my understanding of politics, I will then argue that their theories are especially well suited to be interpreted in digital terms. Arendt's political realm as a web of relations rather than a physical place for bodies seems especially well suited to be theorized in terms of the internet. Žižek and Rancière's political subject as involving a withdrawal

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<sup>47</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 5.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 257–268.

<sup>49</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 274.

from identity describes the process of online political subjectivation nicely, despite Žižek's own statements to the contrary. The internet is increasingly being theorized in terms of participation in areas outside of politics, thus making political participation a natural next step. The internet enables the old democratic dream of mass participation for the first time since the small city-states of antiquity. Despite Mouffe's fears about the internet lacking conflict, online political discussion forums are today far and away the best place to find lively and disagreeable debate on political issues, making such forums ripe to be theorized in terms of Mouffe's agonistic politics.

In relying on these thinkers for the theoretical basis of my project, I am also seeking to reinterpret their ideas to be more relevant in an increasingly digitized environment, which political theory needs to take more seriously. If the internet is abandoned by serious political thinkers as not having any political relevance, then a great opportunity to reimagine and reinvigorate politics will be lost. As the reach and impact of new technologies becomes more pervasive, these theorists are increasingly being seen as presenting old ideas which are unworkable in a digital age. Alternatives to the status quo which want nothing to do with technology or have nothing to say about it come across as anachronistic. In developing a vision of online politics informed by these thinkers, I intend to salvage the validity of their thought by showing how it applies to contemporary and future digital issues, as well as demonstrating how political theory still has relevance in imagining alternate arrangements of society against the increasing currency of technocratic solutions.

## 1.5 Understanding Politics through the Four Terrains of Contestation

By drawing on this group of theorists who are united through the high esteem to which they hold politics, I will develop the argument that a renewed sense of politics is what is needed in order for these recent protest movements to begin to have success in not only capturing the public's imagination but developing workable alternatives to the status quo. In order to develop an idea of what politics practically consists of, I develop the argument that there are four terrains of contestation between politics and anti-politics, consisting of

the political realm, subjectivity, participation, and conflict. These four terrains provide the evaluative criteria in order to determine how political a given situation is. Each of these terrains can be configured in more or less political ways, and my argument will focus on explicating how reinvigorating politics means pushing each of these terrains in a more political direction. At the same time, these terrains can be reshaped when placed online in ways that can foster radically new political configurations, while at the same time states and corporations are actively engaging the internet to reinforce depoliticized configurations of these four terrains.

Arendt and the other theorists mentioned above are often taken to task for defending highly abstract notions of the political without looking into the specific content of politics. By focusing on the four terrains of contestation, I seek to avoid this charge by placing the theory of politics directly alongside specific fields of political articulation. By arguing in favour of the value of politics while pointing to clear terrains where the tug of war between politicization and depoliticization is fought I hope to both recover politics as something worth fighting for by activists seeking to challenge the status quo, while doing so in a way that is grounded and points to specific sites of engagement that can be the focus of actions demanding more politics.

The goal of each chapter will be to show how configuring that terrain to be more political is superior to it being less political and how the internet can make this happen. Beginning with the terrain of the political realm, the question of where politics happens will be addressed. The question of where politics can occur is perhaps the most visible tension between politics and anti-politics. Given that politics by its nature involves other people, there must be spaces where people can go to meet up with others for political purposes. If politics is to retain its specificity and not be dissolved into everyday power relations, there must be specific sites designated as political. Questions of who can enter such sites arise, as well as their nature. I argue that politics requires a free space open to all and that the activities that are possible within a political realm must be meaningful and not simply a Habermasian public sphere, which I position as a weak alternative to an Arendtian political realm. When one wishes to engage politically but no such space exists, exclusion and alienation are the result. The value of having an open and accessible

political realm is that it provides a common political referent. The explicit aim of an anti-political configuration of the political realm is to keep it as an elite and exclusive space closed to public access so that the agenda of governance can more easily be controlled and managed.

Considering the terrain of public space in the online context, the work of Habermasian influenced theorists such as Castells, Dahlberg, and Papacharissi, argue that the internet can be a public sphere while more left-wing critics such as Jodi Dean argue that the internet has already been captured by a new regime of capitalism.<sup>50</sup> I insert myself into this debate by arguing that the concept of the public sphere these thinkers start from, either positively or critically, is deeply flawed and that reasserting an Arendtian political realm is a much more interesting discussion in terms of the impact of the internet. The web presents a unique possibility to establish a political realm in a space that is open, accessible, and durable. If politics is to be anything other than elites representing alienated people, the ability to overcome traditional constraints of time and space is essential, thus necessitating the use of the internet for the creation of new political realms.

The second terrain, subjectivity, relates to those who enter the political realm and asks what it means to be someone who acts politically. Subjectivity can be configured in ways that allow people to “be” political and thus interact with others politically on an equal playing field, or it can become the means for anti-political disqualification. I present political subjectivity as an empty universal, which makes being political inherently wrapped up with being among one’s equals. The goal of the political realm is to produce a space where political subjects interact with each other on an equal basis, even if outside of politics these people are subject to gross inequalities. This argument in favour of political subjectivity as a form of manufactured equality runs counter to anti-political arguments from the right, which argue politics is a matter of possessing

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<sup>50</sup> Manuel Castells, “The New Public Sphere: Global Civil Society, Communication Networks, and Global Governance,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (2008): 78–93; Lincoln Dahlberg, “Computer-Mediated Communication and The Public Sphere: A Critical Analysis,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 7, no. 1 (October 1, 2001); Zizi Papacharissi, “The Virtual Sphere: The Internet as a Public Sphere,” *New Media & Society* 4, no. 1 (February 1, 2002): 9–27; Jodi Dean, “Why the Net Is Not a Public Sphere,” *Constellations* 10, no. 1 (2003): 95–112.

qualifications, and from those on the left who argue that politics is a matter of inherent inequalities. When people enter the political realm as political subjects, they expect to be treated equally and have their speech and action considered and judged in the same manner as everyone else. Arguments about politics being a matter of inherent inequalities or differences (whether these are viewed positively or negatively) erase the productive character of political subjectivity as generative of equality in favour of the reproduction of anti-political inequality.

On the terrain of online subjectivity the debates have been much less nuanced and two sides critical of political subjectivity have emerged in a false contest against each other. On the one side are those who dismiss the importance of human actors in politics and declare political progress to be an expression of advancing technology. Cohen and Dickinson have advanced this position in mainstream media outlets, while Gray and Hughes take such a techno-centric approach largely devoid of politics in their book-length works.<sup>51</sup> On the other side are those who argue that online subjectivity cannot be trusted because it is anonymous or somehow inauthentic, thus making real political engagements seem less real.<sup>52</sup> Against these positions I assert the importance of human agency as subjectivity and the ability the internet provides to manufacture a space of equality where offline identities, which are the source of prejudice, can be more easily set aside. Online political subjects can operate according to the ideal of pseudonymity and thus shield themselves from the anti-political tactic of having their identities used as a means to disqualify their political speech.

What these political subjects do in the political realm brings about questions surrounding the terrain of participation. How much political participation is necessary for a political realm to be considered meaningful and for a political subject to be satisfied?

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<sup>51</sup> Roger Cohen, "Facebook and Arab Dignity," *The New York Times*, January 24, 2011, sec. Opinion, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/25/opinion/25iht-edcohen25.html>; Elizabeth Dickinson, "The First WikiLeaks Revolution?," *Foreign Policy Blogs*, January 13, 2011, [http://wikileaks.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/01/13/wikileaks\\_and\\_the\\_tunisia\\_protests](http://wikileaks.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/01/13/wikileaks_and_the_tunisia_protests); Chris Hables Gray, *Cyborg Citizen: Politics in the Posthuman Age* (New York: Routledge, 2001); James H. Hughes, *Citizen Cyborg: Why Democratic Societies Must Respond To The Redesigned Human Of The Future* (Cambridge: Westview Press, 2004).

<sup>52</sup> Žižek, "Is This Digital Democracy, or a New Tyranny of Cyberspace?"; John Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect," *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 7, no. 3 (2004): 321–26.

Anti-political arguments position participation as a kind of necessary burden and reduce it to an activity one performs dutifully every few years. On the contrary, I argue that participation means the ability to have an active role in public affairs in terms of both debate and decision making. Maximizing the ability to participate enhances political capacity and is superior to the alternative which posits representation as a substitute for participation.

On the issue of online participation there is an overwhelming body of scholarship on the concept of e-government, in which the internet is used to enhance the delivery of public services to citizens, but I argue that this concept of government remains a top-down disempowering assertion of authority which is anti-political.<sup>53</sup> I position my intervention with respect to how the internet can help revive notions of participatory democracy and make it realistically viable in a way that even theorists of participatory democracy, such as Benjamin Barber, fail to fully understand.<sup>54</sup> The terrain of participation is already being dramatically reshaped by the internet as it promotes interactivity, but as of yet the spread of interactive culture to politics has been slow. The ability to take part in debates and decisions online can make political participation vastly easier and open participation up to everyone, rather than just professional politicians.

Finally the terrain of conflict is positioned as the fundamental driver for the need for politics in the first place. Without conflict and disagreement over which course of action to take on any given decision, there of course would be no need for politics. Everyone would simply agree on what needed to be done and an administrator acting on that consensus would simply enact those decisions. Politics, however, involves a plurality of different actors, meaning that everyone looks at an issue from a different perspective which naturally generates conflict. Politics exists to find a way to non-violently make

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<sup>53</sup> Karen Layne and Jungwoo Lee, "Developing Fully Functional E-Government: A Four Stage Model," *Government Information Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (2001): 122–36; Adriano Pistoia, Marc Elsaber, and Philipp Nitzsche, "Development of an Evaluation Tool for Participative E-Government Services: A Case Study of Electronic Participatory Budgeting Projects in Germany," *Administration and Public Management Review*, no. 18 (2012): 6–25.

<sup>54</sup> Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Benjamin R. Barber, "Which Technology for Which Democracy? Which Democracy for Which Technology?," *International Journal of Communications Law and Policy* 6, no. 8 (2001).

decisions on contested matters where there is no one true objective solution in a way that allows everyone to express their dissenting point of view. If conflict is positioned as a problem to overcome in the name of generating consensus, as anti-political arguments put it, then this amounts to an argument against politics itself. While it may be superficially appealing to posit an ideal situation where everyone might be able to agree with a course of action, such appeals to consensus radically attack the ability to disagree and express dissent, which for many people is the driving factor for wanting to get politically involved in the first place. The assertion and acceptance of conflict is preferable to consensus precisely because conflict is required to both have politics in the first place and to live in a pluralistic society.

With respect to the nature of how conflict operates online, the internet's impact is perhaps the most mixed and hardest to judge. Davis argues that the internet intensifies conflict to the point that it becomes nothing but trolling and having a reasonable political debate is impossible.<sup>55</sup> On a similar register, Smith makes the case for online discussion forums as nothing but a playground for bullies, which end up pushing out real political discussion.<sup>56</sup> On the other side of this debate are those who argue that the internet enables feedback bubbles and echo chambers making it so that our experience online can be so customized that we never encounter conflicting opinions.<sup>57</sup> All of these extremes are certainly present online and need to be accounted for in constructing an online space dedicated to politics. Taken as a whole though, the ability to more easily spread dissenting opinions as well as directly debate and engage with those whom one disagrees with are the strong points of a conflictual web. A measured approach needs to be taken where the realities of trolling and cyberbullying, as well as closed communities and censorship, are balanced out by the need for dissent and disagreement in political circles.

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<sup>55</sup> Richard Davis, *The Web of Politics: The Internet's Impact on the American Political System* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>56</sup> Joan Smith, "E-Democracy or a Forum for Bullies?," *The Independent*, August 7, 2011, <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/joan-smith/joan-smith-edemocracy-or-a-forum-for-bullies-2333180.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Cass R. Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think* (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 2012).



## 1.6 Theorizing an Online Politics

In the chapters that follow I will develop the argument that Arendt and the group of contemporary thinkers mentioned earlier can provide a theoretical ground for understanding a technologically enabled politics. By developing the four terrains of contestation, I make explicit what is meant by politics and how these terrains are being shaped by the internet and how political activists can shape the internet to make these terrains more amenable to the reinvigoration of politics. It is my contention that by situating politics online, in the sense of building an online political realm which is populated by subjects who participate in conflict-driven debates, discussions, and decisions, the theories of participatory, egalitarian, and agonistic democracy can be practically implemented online in a way that can reinvigorate the very notion of politics. If the existing post-political deadlock is to be broken, it requires more than elaborating or popularizing the theories of contemporary political thinkers, but a means of implementing these theories in a fashion that is realistic and possible. My primary aim is to demonstrate how the internet can enable repoliticization of the four terrains of contestation between politics and anti-politics. In a time when the political realm is considered an exclusive space divorced from everyday life, we can build an online political realm that is readily accessible at all times. In the face of the state's continuing operations to place people in identity boxes which mark them as unqualified to take part in politics, we can enter online spaces which disrupt identity and qualification in a radical way. When participation in public affairs is deemed too complicated or impossible for the average person, we can go online and engage and participate in unofficial forms of politics at the same time as millions of other people. When consensus has become a reigning idyll and dissent is seen not as the basis of politics but something disruptive of it, the internet provides outlets for the expression and organization of such dissent and conflicting opinions. Considered together, the internet must be theorized as not simply something helpful or useful for a reinvigorated politics, but as the very vector of the reinvigoration of politics.

In order to make this argument, the next chapter will deal with the terrain of the political realm, and what having a political realm entails and how placing it online can be

beneficial. Against anti-political attempts to deny the need for any defined political space and against the weaker arguments in favour of a public sphere, I position the political realm as necessary for the commonality of politics. In order to be political, we need a protected space to exercise our political freedom in a positive sense. By placing such a political realm online, as chapter three argues, it both enables easy access to such a realm and generates debates about the political status of the body. I argue that politics is not a collection of mute bodies but a network of relationships based on the ideas and actions of people, so that what matters is not physical proximity but the capacity to engage with others in such a way to allow the debate and action essential to politics to flourish. The chapter goes on to contrast the anti-political social realm with the political realm in terms of various websites and seeks to distinguish between hardware and software layers online, thus presenting a case against essentialist arguments that the internet as a whole is this or that way.

Having presented how a political realm should operate, I then move to the question of what it means to be political within such a space. Chapter four takes as its starting point the renewed interest in theorizing political subjectivity as universal and places it in contrast to anti-political attempts to assert a positive identity as part of a social whole as a way of negating the universal negativity of the political subject. Given that such theories of subjectivity do not posit a set of universal values that an individual must adhere to in order to become a political subject but in fact aim for a stripping away of all such properties to ensure universality is empty, the way people interact in online political discussion forums naturally lends itself to this political subjectivization process. While many have taken issue with the idea of a disembodied online political subjectivity, I argue that such disembodiment and pseudonymity are the greatest strengths of the online political subject. Such a discussion of online subjectivity leads to questions about Arendt's concept of subjectivity as revealing oneself in the context of the harsh light of the public sphere might operate in an online context.

Having presented how to become a political subject within a political realm, chapter five is concerned with the activities of these subjects in the political realm. My argument is that participation is one of the most basic requirements for politics, as the

ability to speak and be heard and to take part in action is essential for any attractive understanding of politics. Anti-political strategies seek to deflect participation away from the political realm or minimize it to extreme infrequency such as through voting for representatives. Participation in society is framed anti-politically as having a job and paying taxes, which promotes a form of political passivity in favour of economic activity. The internet presents a challenge to these anti-political models by making political participation extremely accessible, and thus undermining the classic argument against participatory democracy that there is not enough time or space for any but a select few to take part in politics. At the same time, however, the participatory aspect of the web is already being heavily harnessed for economic participation thus making the terrain of participation, especially online, already quite contested.

The sixth chapter will engage with the terrain of conflict, which arises when political subjects participate in speech and action inside a political realm. I argue that conflict is an inevitable outcome of the basic fact of human plurality and that it is the basic driver of politics. Conflict is valuable and inevitable, and having a political outlet for conflict is necessary in order to prevent it from escalating into violence. In this manner politics is a kind of “talking cure” for conflict that allows people to voice their disagreements and try to persuade others of their opinion without having to resort to violent force. The internet presents an interesting dilemma for theorists of agonistic politics, as on the one hand it can facilitate political conflict as it is much easier to not only find people with other points of view but to disagree with them without any fear of the disagreement turning violent, while, on the other hand the internet can facilitate forms of non-political conflict by making rude behaviour towards other people easier to get away with. Thus questions arise about whether the internet allows anyone to become Socrates questioning the views of everyone else and making society better by causing people to think about their own beliefs, or whether it turns everyone into the Socrates as seen by his accusers who was simply a social nuisance engaged in a primitive form of trolling which seeks to cause annoyance and conflict without a higher purpose.

## Chapter 2 — The Political Realm

### 2.1 Introduction

The question of where politics can take place, is in many ways, the core problem of conceptualizing an internet enabled politics. Yet, before we can question whether politics can be located online, there are questions and disputes over where it can be located offline. Under the conditions of modern government, and within popular and mainstream political science, the location of politics is generally considered to be the exclusive domain of legislative or executive authority. Those who make up such an exclusive understanding of the political realm are there because they meet a qualification, either of being elected or appointed. Before we can even begin to question whether politics might be able to be placed online, the question of whether or not politics can occur outside of these limited and exclusive institutions of official government must be considered. The first task consists in asking what exactly the political realm consists of, and asking how it might function outside of the official spaces of governmental authority. The answer consists of conceiving of a political realm as an open space of freedom and appearance for all. While there have been many conceptualizations of such a political realm, and I take Hannah Arendt's depiction as a theoretical basis, the implementation of full-fledged political realms of this nature have either fallen far short of the theory or have lived extremely brief lives. The internet, however, presents a new hope for a robust political realm as it involves a new kind of space that is less prone to both forceful dismissals by those who wish to constrain politics, and lacks the physical obstacles that have challenged previous attempts to build an offline political realm.

The significance of the problem of the political realm, or rather lack of one, is perhaps best demonstrated by how the Occupy movement and the activists in Tunisia and Egypt attempted to create their own spaces of political circulation. These spaces were meant to not just communicate a message of opposition to the government, but to enable and put into practice an alternative arrangement which to some degrees was meant to establish a political realm open to all. The fact that the most common and effective means of protesting the state comes from establishing alternative political spaces speaks to the

frustration that people feel from being structurally excluded from the official realm of government proceedings. These movements are particularly interesting examples precisely because they used the internet to expand their temporary political realms beyond the site of physical protests and out into the global cyberspace. It then became possible to enter the political space of these protests without actually physically being in New York, Cairo, or Tunis, demonstrating the potential of the internet as a site of politics to truly open up the political realm to anyone who wishes to take part.

The importance of the political realm relates to its publicity, as politics is an inherently collective affair. Without a recognized place to go to engage with other people and perform politics, any attempt to act politically becomes futile and isolated. If one wishes to have a political impact, performing isolated actions that affect no one else simply fail to be of any political relevance. The need to theorize a political realm runs against the idea that everything is political, an idea which would attempt to imbue isolated personal acts with political significance. As Jodi Dean points out, ethical acts restricted to the scope of the personal have no political impact, and as she succinctly puts it, “Goldman-Sachs doesn’t care if you raise chickens in your backyard.”<sup>58</sup> Making a difference politically requires engaging with other people, and the general problem today is that no such common place for politics exists, with the official spaces extremely exclusive and limited to politicians, and the unofficial spaces fragmented and lacking in publicity.

Given the importance of having a public place in which to engage in politics, the next two chapters make the argument that a robust political realm, inspired by the work of Arendt, is amenable to being placed online, and, as such, the political realm as both an idea and practice can be rejuvenated. Online space can enable a more open political realm, as it need not be constrained by the traditional impediments of physical space and time, and thus can challenge arguments which seek to limit access to the political realm for allegedly practical reasons. The internet as a space is inherently everywhere, especially with the continued proliferation of wireless and cellular networks, which can

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<sup>58</sup> *The Communist Horizon with Jodi Dean*, 2011, <http://vimeo.com/27327373>.

make it practically available in a way that is impossible with offline space. Arendt's theorization of the political realm as a web of relations, as a realm of "whos" rather than "whats," and as not requiring a fixed physical space are interpreted as providing a theoretical justification for performing politics online.

When it comes to placing notions of a strong political realm online, there is very little scholarly literature that approaches this issue from a theoretical point of view. While Saco's 2002 book *Cybering Democracy* makes an admirable attempt to theorize online space in terms of Arendt's idea of the political realm, it is in many ways an outlier.<sup>59</sup> In fact, the bulk of scholarship that draws on Arendt or argues for a robust political realm tends to be somewhat skeptical of the internet, as evidenced by the comments of Benjamin Barber in relation to the internet and the work of Darin Barney who uses Arendt to argue against a technological political realm.<sup>60</sup> The majority of the scholarship on the potential of the internet as a site for politics focuses on Habermasian influenced concepts of a public sphere, which are prominent among communications theorists who see the internet less as a space for political action and more of a medium of communicating political views, opinions, and results. Scholars of deliberative democracy have taken an early interest in the internet, with Dahlberg, Papacharissi, Bohman, and Castells advocating the use of the web to rekindle the idea of public deliberation on political matters.<sup>61</sup> While the appreciation of the potential of the internet among this group of theorists is commendable, the idea of a deliberative public sphere which they advance is somewhat weak compared to the active and engaged political realm which I advocate. In this sense this group of theorists represent both a source for interesting research on online politics and a recurring foe against which I continually position my ideas, not just in this chapter but in later ones as well.

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<sup>59</sup> Diana Saco, *Cybering Democracy: Public Space And The Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

<sup>60</sup> Barber, "Which Technology for Which Democracy?"; Darin Barney, "Invasion of Publicity: Digital Networks and the Privatization of the Public Sphere," in *New Perspectives on the Public-Private Divide*, ed. Law Commission of Canada (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003), 94–122.

<sup>61</sup> Dahlberg, "Computer-Mediated Communication and The Public Sphere"; Papacharissi, "The Virtual Sphere"; James Bohman, "Expanding Dialogue: The Internet, the Public Sphere and Prospects for Transnational Democracy," *The Sociological Review* 52, no. s1 (2004): 131–55; Castells, "The New Public Sphere."

In order to make the case for an online political realm, I first make a theoretical argument in favour of the concept of a strong political realm and place it in contrast to weaker versions of the public sphere as promoted by the advocates of deliberative democracy. I argue that the political realm must be seen as a space of positive freedom, and that conceptions of politics that cast it as merely a legal protection for negative liberties fail to provide any actual place in which to engage in political activities. The political realm is also a space of appearance, a place where individuals can reveal themselves publicly and leave a lasting impact, an idea that becomes complicated when applied to the internet. In the context of the public realm as a web of relations, I next propose a three layer model to depict the political realm as not simply a physical space but as made up of a physical base, a set of rules or regulations that ensure the space is constructed as political, and on top and most importantly, a layer of people who enter the space to engage politically. In the following sections I then look into the issues of the permanence and durability of the political realm, by looking at the debate between Arendt, who argues that the political realm must be durable and permanent in order to remember great deeds and for politics to have a lasting effect, and Jacques Rancière, who argues that political realms are always temporary and protest-oriented. I conclude the first the chapter by looking at Arendt's concept of the social realm as an anti-political replacement for both the political realm and the private realm, and arguing that the social is the dominant form of contemporary life.

In chapter three I consider how the political realm as theorized in the second chapter would operate online. I examine what advantages might be found by placing the political realm online and what potential pitfalls it may encounter from its digitization. The three layers of the political realm are transformed to the hardware, software, and wetware of the internet, finding that the physical hardware of the internet is less of a determining factor for political space as it was offline, and that the software layer online is much more malleable than its offline equivalent of a constitution. I then look at issues of durability and commonality online, as the digitization of politics is seen by some as making politics more transitory and less solid, while others argue that the internet is too fragmented and isolated to develop the needed publicity to make it into a proper political realm. After addressing these arguments, I look at two dominant ways the internet gets

theorized as an extension of the social realm, leading to arguments that it is unsuitable for a robust political realm. Finally, in the context of recent activist movements, the role of social networks is investigated as a possible seed for future online political realms. Such social networking sites are ultimately found to be lacking due to their primary purpose as social, which causes too many problems for their use as political networks.

## 2.2 Why A Political Realm?

The desire to act politically requires the presence of other people in order to be activated. The political realm, as a general concept, is the place where people go to meet with others who wish to engage in the activity of politics. Although this notion of the political realm as the place where politics occurs may sound simplistic or even tautological, it challenges recent claims that “everything is political,” which downplay not only the uniqueness of political action, but also the necessity for a specifically defined political space.<sup>62</sup> Yet, this claim that everything is “political” threatens to dissolve politics into the mundane routine of everyday life.<sup>63</sup> Without access to a political realm, people are unable to engage with each other, and political action becomes impossible. Politics is not about routine and normalcy but is linked to the creation of the new. Political action, as Arendt describes it, is boundless and breaks down barriers.<sup>64</sup> Politics is linked to Arendt’s concept of natality, which is the ability to create something new which was previously politically unthinkable. Politics as the ability to create something new, rather than as rote administration or statecraft, is increasingly being theorized if not in explicitly Arendtian terms, then at least in the spirit she describes it.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Everyone from Rush Limbaugh on the right, to This magazine (this.org) on the left claim everything is political. Academically this line of argumentation is pervasive among those influenced by Foucault who see power relations as an expression of politics. See: “Everything Is Political! - The Rush Limbaugh Show,” *Rush Limbaugh*, accessed January 25, 2015, [http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2014/08/05/everything\\_is\\_political](http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2014/08/05/everything_is_political); Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 213.

<sup>63</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 32.

<sup>64</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 190.

<sup>65</sup> The theorists of “the Event” such as Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek link politics to the creation of something new in the same manner as Arendt. Andreas Kalyvas also points to the exceptionality of politics in terms of not just Arendt but Carl Schmitt and Max Weber. See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans.



The establishment of a political realm can both create stability and enhance the capacity for change. Having a common stage for political speech and action can “multiply the occasions to win ‘immortal fame,’ that is, to multiply the chances for everybody to distinguish himself, to show in deed and word who he was in his unique distinctness.”<sup>66</sup> One can distinguish oneself through a great deed that ushers in significant changes, or simply through the expression of one’s own opinions in public debate. The ability to reveal ourselves as unique is a function of the plurality of politics which makes the political realm inherently agonistic, as it provides a space to play out conflict in a non-violent manner. In distinguishing ourselves, we reveal who we are, and thus the political realm is also a space of appearance where we reveal our unique perspective to others, meaning a political realm is needed to disclose our subjectivity to the world. The political realm is also a space of freedom where unique subjects can exercise their positive freedom (as opposed to the passivity of negative liberty), which makes the political realm the site of participation. Without a place to exercise the freedom to participate and appear politically, politics itself becomes displaced, as it is inherently a collective affair and cannot be performed by isolated individuals.

The primary need for a political realm lies in its commonality. Action in the political sense involves other people, as to live outside of politics requires one to be either a beast or a god, as Aristotle put it.<sup>67</sup> The content of politics is the affairs of people living together; an isolated person has no need for politics, because no conflicts of opinion on the best course of action will arise. The political realm, however, is a world of human creation and does not arise naturally just because people live in close proximity. In this sense politics is not “natural,” as it does not simply occur automatically, but requires conscious effort to build a realm where decisions can ideally be debated equally by all. Structures of force which rely on the logic of command and obey, or those which are modelled on the relation of the stronger to the weaker are not political and are not necessarily even human.<sup>68</sup> Hierarchies of natural ability or the force of the stronger are

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Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2007); Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*; Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*.

<sup>66</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 197.

<sup>67</sup> Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 25.

<sup>68</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 22–23.

found throughout the animal world, but the construction of a world of equality is a political and specifically human invention.

Against the naturalistic attempts to ground politics in the structure of the family, Arendt emphasizes that the political realm provides a second public life beyond one's private family life.<sup>69</sup> This is a point that both Arendt and Jacques Rancière emphasize, in that the political realm in ancient Athens arose precisely from the reforms of Cleisthenes which abolished the organized units based on kinship that had formed the pre-democracy basis of Athenian government.<sup>70</sup> Arendt's focus on the political realm as an artificial construction of human activity is supported by Rancière's insistence that the political realm must be invented by abolishing the natural divisions of family, tribe, or wealth in favour of wholly artificial divisions drawn by the people.<sup>71</sup> Rancière even goes so far as to argue that this is the defining characteristic of political democracy: that it "consists above all in the act of revoking the law of birth and that of wealth; in affirming the pure contingency whereby individuals and populations come to find themselves in this or that place; in the attempt to build a common world on the basis of that sole contingency."<sup>72</sup>

The artificially constructed common world of the political realm depends on the plurality of perspectives offered by those who take part. In both Arendt and Rancière's conceptions, there is no natural ground for anyone to claim rulership, thus decisions on public affairs should remain open to anyone and everyone. The commonality of the political realm is what guarantees the reality of the world, as despite the plurality of different opinions, they are all focused on a common object.<sup>73</sup> In this sense, the political realm brings people together, but also separates them. When people come together to engage in politics the content of their speech and action relates to the objects held in common between them. Arendt describes the political realm as akin to a table: it provides a common object which people gather around, but also provides a means of separation so

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Chronicles of Consensual Times*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), 6.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 58.

that the people are not directly exposed to each other.<sup>74</sup> In a similar manner, Rancière describes political being-together as a being-between, in that political action can happen within the political realm, not only among those who view the same object from a different perspective, but also between worlds. Those who are denied access to the political realm can come together to open a dispute about the commonality of the political realm itself.<sup>75</sup> Given that such a concept of the political realm does not rely on the foundational beliefs of god, superiority of birth, or money as the measure of all things, there is no objective measure to appeal to in order to decide political matters. Politics exists precisely because no objective measure can be appealed to in order to make decisions. The constant offering of different opinions on controversial matters for which there is no obvious single solution is what continues to guarantee the reality of the public realm, a reality which cannot exist in private and requires other people for confirmation.<sup>76</sup>

By having a collective place where people can go to publicly present their view of the world to others, the political realm is common but also individualizing. To show who one really is by presenting one's unique perspective on the world allows the political actor to distinguish him or herself as a unique individual.<sup>77</sup> Without the political realm as a space of appearance which provides a space to excel and prove oneself as different from others, we are thrown into a faceless mass.<sup>78</sup> Too often the desire to distinguish oneself turns into a futile attempt to accumulate wealth when the political realm is lacking, often with harmful consequences for the public good as economic inequality becomes valorized. To distinguish oneself as a unique individual requires a realm of equals, as hierarchical structures exclude the majority from appearing politically, forcing them into the shadows.

The political realm as a space where people can distinguish themselves means that it is a space of conflict and dissensus, not only between each other and their conflicting opinions but on a structural level, in terms of who gets to enter the political realm, what

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>75</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 137.

<sup>76</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 57.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 49.

their status is, and what topics can be discussed. In this sense, Rancière's notion of politics as disrupting the harmony of hierarchically assigned places complements Arendt's concept of the political sphere.<sup>79</sup> The political realm is never strictly separate or disconnected from the private or social spheres, as the political realm will never be pure in the sense that it has no exclusions. Issues and actors will inevitably need to initiate political acts to overcome unjust barriers that prevent entrance into the political realm. Arendt's desire to keep politics pure and clearly separate from the other realms of life has the tendency to depopulate "the political stage by sweeping aside its always-ambiguous actors."<sup>80</sup> While Rancière overstates his case against Arendt by arguing that her desire for political purity results in her concept of the political realm being nothing more than the exercise of state power, Arendt's concern is directed more toward what happens inside the political realm than toward those who may need to act politically to overcome unnecessary barriers. In her treatment of the poor with regards to the French Revolution for example, she argues that the problem of poverty is simply non-political, and could not be solved by the political "process of decision and persuasion."<sup>81</sup> As Bonnie Honig points out, Arendt argues that the boundless nature of political action often surprised its actors, opening the possibility that contemporary struggles related to who might be included within the political realm might have surprised Arendt as well.<sup>82</sup>

By opening the boundaries of the political realm to dispute and dissensus, I do not mean to challenge the distinctness of the necessity for politics to have its own space, but only to express dissatisfaction with Arendt's more limited notion of the political realm, which would, for example, exclude economics as a political concern. In addition to a common political realm where actors can distinguish themselves as unique individuals in the Arendtian sense, there can be ad hoc political realms which open up sites of dissensus in the Rancièrian sense. Rancière's political realm arises in the gap between formal declarations of rights and the polemic about their verification, and thus the political realm for Rancière is a space of verifying and exercising the freedoms guaranteed by

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<sup>79</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 28.

<sup>80</sup> Rancière, "Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?," 301–302.

<sup>81</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 81.

<sup>82</sup> Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, 119.

constitutional frameworks.<sup>83</sup> While, for Arendt, the political actor is already among his or her peers and distinguishes him or herself with great speeches and deeds undertaken with and against others, for Rancière the political actor distinguishes him or herself as a unique individual by testing the ability to act as an Arendtian actor. If that ability cannot be properly exercised, a dispute is opened which allows individuals to perform great deeds in the form of testing and practicing a right which is formally guaranteed but not being applied. In this sense, someone such as Rosa Parks would be the quintessential Rancièrian political actor who distinguishes herself by testing and enacting equality. Both of these aspects are essential to a proper conception of the political realm, and despite the disagreement between Rancière and Arendt, I will continue to hold their concepts of the political realm as complementary, as one requires the other to properly function.

The political realm as a site of dissensus and agonistic contest between individuals attempting to distinguish themselves puts it at odds with the more conventional and popular account of the public sphere developed by Jurgen Habermas. Although Habermas draws some inspiration from Arendt, his version of the public sphere posits it as a layer between the state and the private realm where individuals come together to form consensus views, which are meant to rationalize the workings of the government.<sup>84</sup> From Arendt, Habermas takes the idea of the political realm as being about the power of speech and action rather than the instrumental application of force, but Habermas downplays the agonistic element in Arendt's account of the political realm.<sup>85</sup> As a result, Habermas focuses on consensus, which paints the public sphere as less of a political realm, and more of a means of legitimizing representative government by arguing that if the public has a means to deliberate and come to a consensus, representatives will have to act in the public interest. Setting aside problems with the idea of consensus (which will be dealt with in the chapter on conflict), this version of the public sphere eliminates its essential political characteristics as being a space of dispute, decision, appearance, and freedom. Instead the public realm is reduced to a

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<sup>83</sup> Rancière, "Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?," 307.

<sup>84</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Beacon Press, 1985).

<sup>85</sup> Villa, "Postmodernism and the Public Sphere.," 713.

communicative tool through which people relay their moods and interests to the authorities, leaving politics proper still out of the reach of the overwhelming majority.

In an attempt to rescue Habermas from himself, Nancy Fraser argues that rather than having one big consensual public sphere, we should instead allow for multiple subaltern publics. Her goal is to allow minority groups to gather together who otherwise might be pushed outside of the public realm altogether through the imposition of consensus.<sup>86</sup> On the surface there is nothing wrong with multiple public spheres, as different groups may set up different sites of protest outside of an official public sphere for example, but if a political realm is going to be anything more than simply a tool to communicate the desires of various publics to the rulers, it needs to be common and universal. Without a single universal political realm, multiple public spheres would lose their agonistic and pluralist aspect and devolve into interest or identity groups engaged in interest lobbying. Fraser's concept of multiple public spheres only works so long as these remain devices of communication, as multiple overlapping political realms arriving at decisions and acting on issues at the same time would only be redundant, as these competing spheres would eventually come into conflict with each other, establishing a common realm of dispute anyway.

Thanks in part to the popularity of Habermas's account of the public sphere and Habermasian inspired deliberative democracy, the idea of a public political realm has not been without its critics. Especially among postmodernists such as Foucault, Lyotard, and Deleuze, the idea of the public realm has been painted as an attempt to revive an archaic notion, and is positioned as suffering from all the typical deficiencies of Enlightenment political thought against which postmodernism reacts. As Dana Villa points out, however, most of these critiques are aimed more toward Habermas's public sphere and that Arendt's concept of the political realm is actually sympathetic to many of these critiques.<sup>87</sup> Lyotard, for instance, sees Habermas's goal of forming a rational general will as normalizing and destructive of plurality, a concern voiced numerous times by Arendt

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<sup>86</sup> Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 67.

<sup>87</sup> Villa, "Postmodernism and the Public Sphere."

in her critique of consensus formation as flattening out of action into routine behaviour which denies the basic human condition of plurality.<sup>88</sup> A political realm in no way needs to be, or ever should be, a matter of forming general wills, but in Lyotard's critique of the concept he ends up going too far the other way, throwing out the commonality and universality that is necessarily part of the political realm, and thus destroys politics from the other end.<sup>89</sup> An Arendtian political realm, with corrections from Rancière, provides a middle ground in which politics is both plural and involves unique individuals, while at the same time maintains a common world where unique individuals act in concert and discuss the world of things that lay between them. This version of the political realm eliminates both the anti-political impulse to reduce politics to rigid governance, as well as the anti-political attempt to deny that people with different backgrounds and opinions can communicate politically.

### 2.3 The Political Realm as a Space of Freedom

Most modern political thought and practice in the liberal tradition tends to treat freedom as something private and individual, leading to government being seen as a realm not of politics but of necessary coercion from which individuals need freedom from. This anti-political attitude is the root of much of the common perception that politics is a realm of oppression, dirty tricks, and underhanded activity whose scope must be limited in order for individuals to be free. Hobbes is the origin of much of this tradition, in that he reverses the ancient conception of freedom being located in the public political realm and replaces it with a conception of negative liberty in the private realm which is ensured by an all-powerful government able to keep everyone "in awe" and thus establish a Weberian monopoly on the use of force.<sup>90</sup> Locke then takes Hobbes's model and argues that private liberty requires not just protection against others, but protection against the government itself and in the process throws out any concept of positive freedom in favour of negative liberty.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 718.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 719.

<sup>90</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 32.

<sup>91</sup> John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government, And; A Letter Concerning Toleration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

What these liberal conceptions of negative liberty miss is the necessity of having a free space to exercise and test the positive and political aspects of freedom. As Jean-Luc Nancy argues in interpreting Arendt, before freedom can be considered an internal disposition it requires an outward “free space of movements and meetings” in the political sense.<sup>92</sup> The issue of freedom of speech provides an example of how treating freedom solely in terms of negative liberties has problematic political consequences. Freedom of speech as a negative liberty simply means that one can make any comment one wishes without having to worry about possible legal repercussions or government censorship. Having the legal right to free speech, however, does not mean that one has the ability to actually use that speech for what it was intended for, namely political purposes. If no one hears what one has to say, as is often the case when we lack a proper common political realm, then one’s speech is meaningless and inconsequential. Since politics is inherently collective, speaking publicly without having anyone listen is not very different from someone who lives in North Korea going out into an isolated forest and telling a squirrel how much he or she dislikes Kim Jong-Un. What is needed is a political realm where people gather so that the right to speak can be exercised and practiced in a positive sense. This is one of the key aspects of a political realm that makes the idea so meaningful: providing a space to exercise freedom in the positive sense.

Positive freedom is unlike negative liberty in that one cannot simply hold freedom, like one can hold a right. Negative liberties are guarantees against others doing something to you, and thus require no action on your part. Freedom by contrast is associated with activity and thus has an ontological character. Thus when Arendt describes the political realm as the space of freedom, it is the place where people can go to exercise freedom and thus *be* free.<sup>93</sup> By contrast, the negative liberty of the private realm is not the same as being free in the positive sense, as negative liberties do not need to be practiced and exercised. The private realm is thus the realm of life itself, which is privative of freedom, yet at the same time is a space of liberty. So while it can seem like Arendt sometimes paints the private realm in a poor light, it is utterly necessary for a

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<sup>92</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*, Meridian (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1993), 74.

<sup>93</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 30.



political realm as it is the space that guarantees our negative liberties and thus provides safety against the unpredictability and boundless nature of the political realm. What the liberal tradition ignores is that positive freedom and negative liberty must go together, for liberty without freedom is depoliticized bare life, and freedom without liberty can place one's private life in jeopardy.

The political realm as a space of freedom also means that it is a space of equality. In so far as the political realm must always involve a plurality of actors, then freedom is shared, making it "equal to equality."<sup>94</sup> The political realm as one of shared freedom is a space where participants lack the qualification or authority to rule others, and at the same time others lack the authority or qualification to rule over them.<sup>95</sup> But this notion of the political as a realm of freedom has come under critique from, most notably, Foucault and his interpreters as it is argued that the pervasiveness of power relations means that there can be no truly uncoerced realm of free speech and action.<sup>96</sup> As Villa argues, however, Foucault's account of the rise of disciplinary power in the modern age and the state's increasing concern with population and the visibility of bodies mirrors Arendt's depiction of the rise of the social as undermining both the public and the private.<sup>97</sup> Rancière as well links his concept of the police, which is the anti-political order of state and capital, to Foucault's concept of biopower, but, like with Arendt, Rancière reserves the possibility for outbreaks of politics to generate political realms and disrupt the disciplinary order of biopower.<sup>98</sup> So long as it is recognized that the political realm will always be subject to the sorts of intrusions of anti-political inequality that Foucault analyzes, then the political realm need not be dismissed entirely if a self-reflexive attitude can be maintained. Equality and freedom must be continually practiced and tested to stave off such intrusions.

A further question about the status of freedom in the political realm is raised by Fraser who questions the link between economic and political freedom and equality.

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<sup>94</sup> Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*, 71.

<sup>95</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 32.

<sup>96</sup> Villa, "Postmodernism and the Public Sphere.," 712.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 718.

<sup>98</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), 93.

Commenting on Habermas's concept of the public realm, she argues that he simply brackets away issues of economic inequality and unfreedom even though those differences could affect the status of the speech situation, as someone from a lower class may feel the need to unnecessarily defer to someone from the upper class, or that people from lower classes may lack the proper access to the public realm in the first place.<sup>99</sup> These are concerns which apply to the more robust concept of the political realm being advanced here, and are a common point of critique against Arendt who saw the problem of economic inequality as a thoroughly non-political issue. While the first response to Fraser's problematic would be to point to the internet as a technical solution, as will be argued later, there is also something of a chicken and egg problem here. Fraser states that some degree of economic equality is necessary in order to have a proper political realm, but how does one achieve more economic equality if not through political action? In this sense one could just as easily argue that economic equality requires some measure of political freedom to begin with, as politically oppressed people certainly are not going to be able to win economic advances without some measure of political power to begin with. On this issue Arendt's decoupling of political and economic equality is severely problematic, as the two elements tend to be intertwined as more of one sets the stage for more of the other, but, unlike Fraser's claim, it is not evident that either economic or political freedom is a prerequisite for the other, as they tend to operate in tandem.

## 2.4 The Political Realm as a Space of Appearance

One of the key differences between an Arendtian influenced political realm and a Habermasian influenced public sphere is that the political realm is not merely about the generation of consensus and legitimization but is a space where individuals can reveal themselves as unique subjects. Although Habermas wants to argue against notions of instrumental rationality, his public sphere still has somewhat of an instrumental character in that its purpose is rationalizing the workings of the government through providing a space where the public can develop opinions meant to inform the government, thus leaving them feeling that the government is legitimate in that it listens to their

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<sup>99</sup> Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 65.

concerns.<sup>100</sup> By contrast, the political realm has more of a process character in which the performance of politics is an end in itself. In this way, the ability for people to enter the public realm and differentiate themselves from others through political speech and action makes having a political realm necessary in itself, regardless of the outcome of such speech and action.

Politics as a space of appearance is much like the performing arts in that it requires publicity. A theatrical performance witnessed by no one leaves no impact on the world, in the same way as someone giving a political speech which no one hears has no effect. The political realm is both collectivizing and individualizing, it brings people together into a common world but then allows each individual to display themselves as unique.<sup>101</sup> Although the world of the political realm is held in common, each of us looks at it from our own subjective position, and thus speech and action are used to reveal ourselves to others and also distinguish us from them. As Arendt notes, what appears in public is not our “mere bodily existence” as physical objects, but our unique opinions and perspectives.<sup>102</sup> While the disclosure of the political subject relates to the world of objects that are held in common, these common objects or political issues form a political realm only insofar as they act as mediators of human action. When an issue such as the distribution of wealth and the influence of financial corporations on the government becomes a political issue, such as during the Occupy Wall Street movement, what matters for the creation of a political realm is that these were issues which brought people together (and separated them in disagreement) in political speech and action. The actual location of Wall Street or Zuccotti Park did not create the political realm, but the actions of the people who shared these places as sites of political concern and contention did.

The political realm is a kind of “in-betweenness” which is intangible but “no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common.”<sup>103</sup> The political realm need not be an actual location where people can literally show their physical bodies, such as a parliament or a protest site, but instead is a web of relations which

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<sup>100</sup> Juergen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas Mccarthy (Beacon Press, 1975), 99–101.

<sup>101</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 52.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

is no less bound to the objective world of things than speech is to the existence of a living body, but the relationship is not like that of a façade or, in Marxian terminology, of an essentially superfluous superstructure affixed to the useful structure of the building itself.<sup>104</sup>

Even though the space of appearance allows us to reveal ourselves in speech and action through the creation of stories, relationships, and changes to the structure of society, the political realm as an intangible connection between people is as real as any other aspect of society. The intangibility of the political realm as a web of relationships means it is not tied to any specific location, and thus the common complaint that protesters need to run for office if they want to engage in politics has no grounding, as clearly a protest can become a temporary political realm in its construction of a web of relationships.

The political realm as a space of appearance can often take on a transitory quality as it comes into being through the speech and action of people and, as a result, can disappear with the dispersal of a people gathered collectively or with the halting of their action.<sup>105</sup> In this sense the political realm is a socially produced space in the way described by Henri Lefebvre, as it is only ever the product of human action.<sup>106</sup> The establishment of official spaces of politics are then no guarantee that politics will in fact occur within those spaces, as is evident in so much of the administrative aspect of modern government which often take on an anti-political quality. Economist Alan S. Blinder is perhaps the most honest representative of this position as he openly argues in favour of depoliticizing parliaments and congresses in favour of more decision making authority for independent technocratic and economically oriented bodies.<sup>107</sup> For Blinder the goal is to maintain official political spaces, but then completely strip them of any capacity to do anything political by adopting the model of the independent central bank for more and more aspects of public policy decisions.

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>106</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000).

<sup>107</sup> Alan S. Blinder, "Is Government Too Political?," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (1997): 115.

The political realm as a space of appearance means it most often takes the form as a disruption, or as a redistribution of the sensible as Rancière puts it.<sup>108</sup> To appear and reveal oneself as a unique subject means that the political realm as a space of appearance is a space “to render visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals.”<sup>109</sup> In Rancière’s twist on the political as appearance, it becomes a place where people can demonstrate and test their equality, to show not only who they uniquely are by publicly arguing their positions, but to show that they are in fact capable of speaking politically in the first place. Rancière once again provides a useful addition to Arendt’s politics of appearance, as Rancière emphasizes the political nature of the attempts of the excluded to appear as political beings in the first place. While Arendt often takes exclusions as a simple fact,<sup>110</sup> Rancière argues that “politics is about the very existence of a common sphere, the rules of functioning of that sphere, the count of the objects that belong to it and the subjects who are able to deal with it. Politics is about the configuration of the space of politics”.<sup>111</sup> Before one can reveal oneself as an individual and thus distinguish oneself from others by presenting one’s unique opinions publicly, one must be able to win the ability to appear and be heard in the first place.

## 2.5 The Web of Relations and the Three Layer Model of the Political Realm

What sustains the reality and interconnectedness of the political realm is not bodies assembled in a single place but the web of relations that is generated by political speech and action. The political realm is generated from people coming together to speak and act politically so that “its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no

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<sup>108</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, trans. Steve Corcoran (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2009), 24.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>110</sup> See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 199. Here she states that those traditionally excluded from the political realm, such as the slave, foreigner, and barbarian in antiquity, the labourer and craftsman in the middle ages, and the jobholder and businessman today, simply do not live in the world of politics, and although they may be capable of political speech, she provides no substantial theoretical account of how it might be a political act to overcome such exclusions from politics.

<sup>111</sup> Jacques Rancière, “The Method of Equality: An Answer to Some Questions,” in *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. Gabriel Rockhill and Philip Watts (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 284.

matter where they happen to be.”<sup>112</sup> Zuccotti Park became a political realm because people used it as a meeting space to come together in political speech and action, even though normally it is a rather bland concrete park with no political purpose. At the same time, an officially designated political space in which people do not come together in speech and action is not automatically political because it has been labelled as such. As Benhabib argues, an Arendtian political realm “is not a space in any topographical or institutional sense: a town hall or a city square where people do not ‘act in concert’ is not a public space in this Arendtian sense.”<sup>113</sup> The web of relations formed by people acting together politically has the power to create political spaces.

Having a determined location where people can meet, as was the case with Tahrir Square for the Egyptian activists during the Arab Spring or Zuccotti Park for Occupy Wall Street, enables the concentration of energy needed for politics. While this location need not be a literal physical location, as web sites function in a similar manner, it does create boundaries so we know where to go to be political.<sup>114</sup> Emphasizing the unpredictability and boundlessness of political action, Arendt also argues in favour of the importance of constitutions as providing the framework to establish a positive space of freedom in the form of a political realm.<sup>115</sup> The political realm can be described as having three layers, with the action of the people on the top being the most important, followed by a framework below of either formal law (such as in a constitution) or informal rules (which often determine how decisions are made during a protest), and finally at the bottom layer a location where people go to act politically.

While Arendt emphasizes that the bottom two layers are not part of the action of politics, they can be considered as constitutive of the political realm itself. Before politics can happen, “a definite space had to be secured and a structure built where all subsequent actions could take place, the space being the public realm of the *polis* and its structure the law”.<sup>116</sup> Thus the bottom two layers have a pre-political nature, but are still part of the

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<sup>112</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 198.

<sup>113</sup> Seyla Benhabib, “Feminist Theory and Hannah Arendt’s Concept of Public Space,” *History of the Human Sciences* 6, no. 2 (May 1, 1993): 102.

<sup>114</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 190.

<sup>115</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 227.

<sup>116</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 195.

structure of the actual political realm. As Christian Volk points out, the law has the quality of structuring the process of politics in a way that should facilitate the formation of political relationships.<sup>117</sup> Politics needs a human artifice to house it, as without this common political realm, “human affairs would be as floating, as futile and vain, as the wanderings of nomad tribes.”<sup>118</sup> Even though Arendt is keen to emphasize that the political realm is not a physical location but the organization of people acting together, as demonstrated by her comment that it was not Athens but the Athenians who were the *polis*, political action does need a common space, otherwise it devolves into the futile attempts to engage in politics alone.<sup>119</sup> By describing the political realm as having three layers, it becomes apparent that a defined space, rules, and the activity of people are all necessary. A space with no people cannot be political, just as a people with no place to act politically will not be able to sustain their activity. At the same time, frameworks of rules are required to keep politics bounded and ensure equality and freedom are maintained.

## 2.6 Immortality and the Political Realm

The two base layers, which consist of a location and a framework of rules for conducting politics, are not political in themselves but attempt to provide some stability, commonality, and permanence to the realm of the political. Since the web of relations established by collective action that constitutes the reality of the political realm is often temporary and transitory, these two lower layers can help make politics more permanent and its effects more durable. As a space of appearance where people can distinguish and reveal who they really are, the political realm serves as a space where people can not only be recognized in their lifetime but into the future as well. The publicness of the political realm was meant to protect against the futility of individual life in which one simply lives and dies without the ability to leave some lasting trace of one’s existence on the world.<sup>120</sup> The desire to leave behind a trace of one’s life amounts to an attempt to manufacture

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<sup>117</sup> Christian Volk, “From Nomos to Lex: Hannah Arendt on Law, Politics, and Order,” *Leiden Journal of International Law* 23, no. 04 (2010): 759–79.

<sup>118</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 204.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

some degree of immortality, which was to be guaranteed by the permanence of the collective memory of the public realm. The political realm is the means by which people can satisfy the desire to have their uniqueness recognized by others and to leave some lasting trace on the world, things which are extremely difficult to do away from the presence of others. By creating a permanent and durable public space for politics, political speech and action would become deeds which affected everyone's common existence, and thus become real, memorable, and lasting.

Given the intangibility of political action and the web of relations they form which constitute the most important layer of the political realm, there has been a tendency for political spaces to be transitory, prompting the question of durability. Temporary political spaces, such as Tahrir Square or Zuccotti Park, tend to pop up sporadically but then fade out just as surprisingly as they came into existence. The outburst of political power that overthrew the Egyptian dictator in 2011 and generated intense spaces of politics both online and out in the street already seem to be actions from a distant time as an election resulted in a win for Islamists who were subsequently removed by the military. The same sort of fading of political energy occurred near the end of the surge of protests from 1999 to 2001 surrounding the issue of the globalization of neoliberal economics. While the protests in various cities around the world against the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund generated intense but temporary political realms, they eventually lost their energy as activists tried and failed to conceive of ways to transform their activism from a situation of transitive reaction to one of more permanent pro-action.

These problems of how to transform vibrant but temporary political spaces into something more lasting are not new, as they have been problems for every outbreak of oppositional politics and every revolution throughout history. According to Arendt, the goal of revolution is to establish a new constitution which provides a lasting framework of how politics is to be conducted. The problem is that there is a tendency in the establishment of new constitutional orders to throw out any kind of concept of a positive right to politics in favour of a framework of negative liberties which ends up reducing politics to parliamentary democracy, destroying its radical capabilities. As some critics



have argued, this reversion to minimally political parliamentary democracy is the inevitable outcome of Arendt's constitutionalism, even if she herself found parliamentary democracy problematic.<sup>121</sup> This lack of political space open to the people was the fundamental problem of the American constitution which Arendt otherwise admired and which continues to be a problem in countries such as Egypt where an old regime was overthrown and replaced with another form of governance which still negated the political space of the people which had circulated during the revolution.<sup>122</sup>

In contrast to Arendt, for Rancière the tension between the political realm as a contingent construction of the people and the necessity of permanence to give political action lasting effect and continuity is less of a problem. Rancière essentially agrees with Arendt's argument about the political need for a world based on common sense which emphasizes a shared appearance and visibility, but differs in terms of the temporality of political space. In Rancière's view, politics primarily concerns attempts to rearrange and redistribute this sensible world, thus making politics inherently aesthetic.<sup>123</sup> In terms of the political realm, what Rancière is saying is that politics is primarily concerned with rearranging and disrupting established spaces, and, as such, politics takes on a character of continuous aesthetic reordering and, therefore, tends to have a reactive character. Politics is like remodelling a house, and involves moving furniture around and even tearing down walls and adding additions, but in Rancière's analysis, the house is always owned by the anti-political established order, and the political activists doing the remodelling are akin to renters acting without the landlord's permission. The Arendtian question of how to create political spaces that are not simply a matter of rearranging the master's house but which actually carve out a piece of that house to establish a newly ordered permanent political realm is one which Rancière is not interested in, and this is a major weakness; the same weakness that has plagued political activists and revolutionaries alike for centuries.

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<sup>121</sup> Nick Hewlett, *Badiou, Balibar, Rancière: Re-Thinking Emancipation* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 49.

<sup>122</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 230.

<sup>123</sup> Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, 25.

While I share Rancière's skepticism of transformative utopian projects which only seek to eliminate politics by positing the end of all conflict and disagreement, there is no reason to be similarly skeptical of attempts to establish a more permanent common space which is understood as political and can be a focal point for dissensus rather than utopian forms of consensus. While the WTO and IMF protests of 1999 to 2001 certainly carved out political spaces in a Rancièrian manner by transforming international meetings of technocrats into a space of dissensus and disagreement, these activists eventually burned out on the model of chasing around international finance meetings and, unable to find a focal point for their newly activated political energies at home, the movement itself faded away. While these activists certainly had other and wider interests outside of opposing the WTO or IMF, they had trouble finding a place for their activism outside of the temporary spaces of protest. The question was constantly asked within activist circles of how to carry over the momentum and energy generated during a protest into an ongoing movement for political change. After activists travelled home from a site of protest, whether it was Seattle in 1999 or Quebec City in 2001, there was a sense of frustration due to the lack of outlet to exercise their political energies and desire to get involved.

Viewing the political realm as a transitory and temporary phenomenon which occasionally and spontaneously arises to effect a redistribution of the sensible is fundamentally unsatisfying, even if it does result in positive changes. The protests in Seattle were successful in that they transformed the WTO from an obscure international organization into a matter of public debate and arguably pushed later developments in which the WTO became more sensitive to environmental and ethical concerns.<sup>124</sup> The protests in Quebec City against the Free Trade Area of the Americas were successful in raising vast public awareness and certainly contributed to the agreement being scrapped. Yet even as these movements had a measure of success in bringing change, they still suffered from what Arendt calls the "lost treasure of revolutionary periods", in which activists became empowered as individuals by participating in intense political activity

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<sup>124</sup> Michael M. Weinstein and Steve Charnovitz, "The Greening of the WTO," *Foreign Affairs*, December 2001, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/57426/michael-m-weinstein-and-steve-charnovitz/the-greening-of-the-wto>.

only to later become melancholic once the space for politics had faded away.<sup>125</sup> There is a feeling that something profound is lost when temporary sites of politics disappear. In critiquing Rancière's definition of politics as redistribution and rearranging without transcending the given order, Žižek argues that he remains within Lacan's discourse of the hysteric. While the hysteric is constantly questioning and challenging the authority of the master, and thus is politically subversive, the hysteric remains within the limits of the master's authority and does not actually seek to transcend that authority.<sup>126</sup> Hewlett levels a similar critique at Rancière, arguing that since Rancière sees politics as always a reaction against the status quo and can never become it, the failure of radical politics is built into its very definition and no sustained political democracy is possible.<sup>127</sup>

Herein lays the paradox of the political realm: as a creation of the energy and vitality of people engaging in politics it tends to be temporary, as attempting to solidify this produced space into something more permanent has a tendency to ossify it into an empty institution devoid of the energy of the people. The bottom two layers of an actual place and constitution become what people call politics, and consequently the action of the people is lost. So either we can accept Rancière's argument that the anti-political police logic is the dominant norm, and politics is an exceptional occurrence of dissensus which generates temporary heterotopias of alternate orderings which then lead to rearrangements of policed space, or we can embrace the circular paradox and try to establish some sort of political realm which has the character of institutional permanence while being fully aware of the tendency for the bottom two layers to constrict and drain away the energy of the people.

While there is no way to resolve the paradox completely, as permanent space will always tend to ossify and become rigid as political energies cannot always be maintained, viewing new political spaces as always open to contestation can be useful in dealing with the paradox. We should aim to create political space with a lasting permanence but also be open to the fact that this political space is not final and may very well depoliticize,

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<sup>125</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 4.

<sup>126</sup> Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 286.

<sup>127</sup> Hewlett, *Badiou, Balibar, Rancière*, 105–111.

necessitating constant re-orderings and redistributions. While the walls of the *polis* did not define Athenian politics, they did help the Athenians who were the content of politics know where to go to be political. To avoid the problem of these walls getting thicker and thicker with time, the boundlessness of political action should be emphasized, along with a self-reflexive attitude in which the boundaries of political space are just as much a matter of political dispute as other non-boundary related issues that are usually deemed to be the content of politics. A more permanent political realm must always be subject to Rancièrian dissensus and reordering in an attempt to stave off the incremental creep of rigidity.

## 2.7 The Social Realm

In arguing what a political realm entails and why it is needed, the implication is that such a realm does not easily or obviously exist. As alluded to with reference to the protest movements, examples of political realms have tended not to be durable or permanent but sporadically and unexpectedly come into being against the normal state of affairs in which there is very little that could be considered a political realm in the sense described above. Arendt has a name for this situation which characterizes life in the modern liberal democratic state: the social realm. In the modern era there is no longer much of a distinction between public and private, and instead we have the realm of the social where public and private “constantly flow into each other like waves”.<sup>128</sup> In the modern social realm, which devours both the political realm and the private realm, there is an inversion effect at play. Everything that was once considered public, such as politics, is now deemed private, and everything which was once considered private is now displayed publicly. The results of this inversion are especially striking when considering the internet, where governments presume they can spy on the private activities of everyone yet call those who publicize government secrets “traitors”.<sup>129</sup> The key difference between the public and private realms, as opposed to the social realm, is the status of publicity and privacy. The separation of the two realms means that some things should not be a matter

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<sup>128</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 33.

<sup>129</sup> Jonathan Turley, “Edward Snowden: Whistleblower or Traitor?,” *Al-Jazeera*, June 9, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/06/edward-snowden-whistleblower-tra-20146955611522671.html>.

of public discussion and should be kept private, while others, in particular politics, cannot exist privately and require a broad sense of publicity. Before moving on to discussing the internet fully, I will briefly interrogate the idea of the social in order to fully elaborate how it most accurately describes the current state of online space in the next chapter.

In a situation where the social realm has swallowed up the political realm, the possibility for political action as a means to both distinguish oneself, engage with one's equals, and be free, is greatly diminished. The social excludes action in favour of behaviour, which normalizes people and equates individuals with their status, rank, or categorized identity within society.<sup>130</sup> In the social realm, action becomes a statistical deviation through which large numbers eliminate the meaning and significance of rare deeds. In politics, it is the statistical outliers consisting of great deeds which are most interesting and relevant, whereas in statistical economics such outliers are thrown out as irrelevant in favour of analyzing the everyday behaviour of consumers and taxpayers.<sup>131</sup> Especially in the neoliberal era, even elected officials for the most part attempt to avoid any kind of grand acts in favour of the everyday activity of administration where the highest goal is balancing the national budget rather than performing some great deed that will immortalize them.

Given that the closing off of the political realm is a common theme in thinkers as diverse as Arendt, Rancière, and Foucault, the anti-political character of the social realm has a tendency to take on many different forms and employ different methods. Rancière categorizes these forms of social anti-politics into three regime types: archipolitics, parapolitics, and metapolitics. Archipolitics involves positing a community in which everyone is assigned a specific place in order to ensure a harmonic society in which politics is exclusively the domain of those who are assigned to that position.<sup>132</sup> Political space takes on a character of being a limited and exclusive container, in which only those assigned to a given place are allowed within it. Plato's myth of the three metals being mixed into each class of people demonstrates the archipolitical conception of the social

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<sup>130</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 40–41.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>132</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 65.

realm, as the assigning of roles, statuses, and places is meant to be taken as natural. Those mixed with gold are assigned to the place of philosophy and rulership, those mixed with silver become the guardians of the city, and those mixed with iron and bronze become the farmers, craftsmen, and merchants.<sup>133</sup> Plato develops this myth in order to naturalize and depoliticize the spatial arrangement of his city, thus if a farmer were to stray from the space of farming and attempt to enter the space of rulership, that farmer would be sewing disorder and committing a crime against nature. Plato's entire archipolitical spatial strategy relies on the virtue of *sophrosyne*: the art of minding one's own business.<sup>134</sup> The archipolitical spatial strategy involves keeping people within their assigned place and rests on the presumption that people cannot take on multiple roles at the same time, and to attempt to do so is inherently disruptive.<sup>135</sup> Echoes of archipolitical rejections of political activity are evident when protesters are labelled as disruptive nuisances and told to get a job, with the implication being that they are straying out of their assigned place in society and thus causing unnecessary discord.

Today, however, the primary anti-political regime type is parapolitics, which is based on displacing political conflict onto the contest over the occupation of offices as in representative democracy.<sup>136</sup> In this sense rulership is still based on the model of force as an acting on people from a distance, rather than the power of the people coming together to act collectively, but there is now a rotation of people through those offices so that as Aristotle put it, there is an alternation of "being ruled and ruling in turn."<sup>137</sup> There is still a strict separation between the space of public affairs and the space of other activities, but with parapolitics, people are not confined to given spaces but can enter the decision space when it is their turn. The egalitarian presumption of parapolitics is that anyone can be a ruler due to the alternation of the rulers and the ruled, which obscures its spatial strategy of making the space of rulership distant and very small. This is evident in Aristotle who states that the best form of democracy is one where the bulk of the people are farmers.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Plato, *The Republic*: 415a-d.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid: 443d.

<sup>135</sup> Plato's critique of *mimesis* underscores this point, see *The Republic*: 596-608

<sup>136</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 72.

<sup>137</sup> Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985): Book 6, Chapter 2.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 186.

Unlike in a city, farmers are spread across the land and are distant from the centre of authority, making it difficult for them to enter a political realm, even if they have the theoretical right to do so. As Rancière puts it, parapolitics “is thus realized as the distribution of bodies over a territory that keeps them apart from each other, leaving the central space of politics to the ‘better off’ alone.”<sup>139</sup> Parapolitics relies on the spatial strategy of allowing citizens to theoretically occupy a limited official political realm by allowing anyone to be elected to that space, but in practice makes the occupation of offices available only to a select few who have the time and money to run.

In the modern state, which encompasses large areas of territory and huge populations, the parapolitical argument on spatial distance is often cited as the primary reason for representative government over any other form that is more inclusive and participatory. Tocqueville sums up this parapolitical attitude well when he claims that the viability of American democracy was a result of that country’s wide open spaces with few inhabitants.<sup>140</sup> This notion of a rural farming democracy with people living too far away to meet and engage in politics at first glance would seem to be in stark contrast to urbanized modern capitalism. Even Marx and Engels praise capitalism for having “greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and [having] thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life.”<sup>141</sup> This kind of agglomeration of people into cities, driven by industrialization, was believed by Marx and Engels to set the stage for communism since it brought people together and allowed for the possibility of forming political connections. Instead, however, people were pushed together into societal masses in which we trip over each other without being able to distinguish ourselves from anyone else.

Marxist metapolitics devalues the political realm into mere superstructure and as something to be done away with by the progressive march of history. As Rancière argues, “metapolitics is the discourse on the falseness of politics” in which “politics is the lie about a reality that is called society.”<sup>142</sup> If the social is the truth that politics seeks to

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<sup>139</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 94.

<sup>140</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 224.

<sup>142</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 82–83.

distort through ideology, then the specificity of politics is eliminated in favour of the natural life process and once again public and private are inverted and flow into each other, and a properly political realm is lost. The gap between the formal declaration of equality and the lived experience of inequality are, in metapolitical terms, interpreted as evidence of the falseness of politics. Whereas for politics proper, the internal division of the people and the gaps between formal rights and practiced wrongs become the basis for continued collective action.<sup>143</sup> Like with archipolitics, there is a desire to purge the agonistic element inherent in politics by eliminating the realm for politics altogether in favour of a conception of the social realm where not only is the specificity of politics lost in favour of wide scale impositions of consensus and economic administration, but our privacy is sacrificed as well.

While usually the focus is on the social realm eroding the political realm, it eats up the private realm as well. In doing so, our private place where we can hide from others, away from the harsh light of the public is taken away, which in turn makes public life shallower.<sup>144</sup> This can be seen even with something as trivial as Hollywood celebrities, as when they are constantly filmed by paparazzi their official public appearances seem hollow and uninteresting. The weight of celebrity depends on not being seen, so that public appearances of celebrity are actually more meaningful. This is especially true for politics, as for most people there are times when they simply want to do something else away from their public political commitments. This is the problem of modern politicians who, in the social realm, are not afforded privacy as their private endeavours are often more of a public concern than their actual activities in parliament.

In many ways homelessness is the primary characteristic of the social realm. There is both no place to go that is truly public and political, and yet also no place that is truly hidden from the gaze of the social, especially in the era of the internet in which every mundane detail of our lives is shared on social networks or is the possible object of government spying. As Benhabib notes, the private realm should function as a shelter for the body, so that when we do enter the political realm, our private person, identity, or

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>144</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 71.



body are not threatened as a result of our public opinions.<sup>145</sup> This does not mean that in the political realm one must pretend to be neutral or ignore the fact that our private experiences shape our political views, but simply that one's private life and our body need protection from the public so that one's political opinions do not harm one's private life away from the public realm. In the social realm, private identities are flung into the public and the result has been an influx of identity-based movements which at best argued for inclusion into the social realm and at worse have attempted to exclude other identities from the social whole. In this sense, the rise of depoliticized multiculturalism and xenophobic outbreaks of violence which focus on private cultural, religious, or ethnic identities are both symptoms of the social realm's attack on privacy. The loss of privacy that accompanies the lack of political space in the social realm is nowhere more apparent than on the internet where the problem of the social is becoming more and more evident. While the social realm has become dominant both offline and online, the capacity to create new political spaces is not lost. As the examples from Egypt, Tunisia, and Occupy demonstrate, activists are increasingly turning to the internet to create political realms that have the capacity to resist both the ossification of official state politics and to some extent even the creep of the social realm.

## 2.8 Conclusion

The first criteria for evaluating how political a given situation is must be the terrain of contestation over the nature of the political realm. Given that politics always occurs among other people, those who desire to take part politically must have a designated space where they can go to engage with others who seek to act politically as well. This space need not be official, such as a parliament, but instead can arise wherever people gather to act politically, such as at a protest. Within a political realm, freedom and equality are constructed, tested, and exercised. Political freedom and equality are not natural, but only come about through the collective action of people willing to fight for them. By having a collective political realm, individuals can be recognized by others as unique and can be remembered for having performed political acts. When the political

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<sup>145</sup> Benhabib, "Feminist Theory and Hannah Arendt's Concept of Public Space," 108.

realm does not meet these criteria, then the given situation is less political than it could be. If a political realm does not exist, or is so constrained that hardly anyone has access to it, then the situation is hardly political at all. Anti-politics works to deny the creation of new political spaces, through the ever present push by the police logic to clear away protesters able to carve out even the most marginal political spaces, and through official rules to ensure that official political spaces remain inaccessible to the broader public.

The next chapter will take this idea of the political realm as a space of appearance, a place to exercise freedom, and as a place to construct equality, and place it in an online context. Of particular importance will be adopting the three layer model of the political realm to a virtual space, as this opens up a whole host of opportunities. The paradox of the durability of the political realm will be revisited, as will the prominence of the social realm on the internet.

## Chapter 3 — The Possibility and Potential of an Online Political Realm

### 3.1 Introduction

Having outlined the criteria for a political realm, I turn now to the issue of how to put it into practice using the internet. While I argued in the previous chapter for a conception of the political realm that created equality and enabled people to exercise their freedom to participate in politics, a common approach to the question of an online political realm is to ask whether or not it could be a public sphere in the Habermasian sense, which as I argued previously, is too weak of a conception of political space to enable a more robust form of politics.<sup>146</sup> Representative of this position is Manuel Castells's argument that since the public sphere is primarily communicative in nature, the internet's ability to enhance mass communication and deliberation is enabling a new and enhanced public sphere that is now even transcending national boundaries.<sup>147</sup> Those who argue against the idea of the internet as a public sphere also overwhelmingly start with a Habermasian approach. Jodi Dean argues that a Habermasian notion of a consensual public sphere is simply inapplicable to the internet and that doing so results in an ideological argument in favour of what she calls "communicative capitalism," which places the public sphere at the mercy of the infrastructure of a new form of digital globalized capital.<sup>148</sup> Castells' vision of a networked global public sphere is merely communicational and fails to provide a political alternative to the status quo of representative government, and in writing off the internet as a political realm (including Arendt's version), Dean undermines her own argument in favour of networked neodemocracy by throwing out the vital concepts of equality and transparency which are essential to the publicity of politics which she could have found in an Arendtian version of the political realm.<sup>149</sup> But what

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<sup>146</sup> Papacharissi, "The Virtual Sphere"; Mark Poster, "CyberDemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere," 1995, <http://www.hnet.uci.edu/mposter/writings/democ.html>; Lincoln Dahlberg, "Extending the Public Sphere through Cyberspace: The Case of Minnesota E-Democracy," *First Monday* 6, no. 3 (2001), <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/838>; Salvatore, "New Media, the 'Arab Spring,' and the Metamorphosis of the Public Sphere."

<sup>147</sup> Castells, "The New Public Sphere."

<sup>148</sup> Dean, "Why the Net Is Not a Public Sphere."

<sup>149</sup> Castells, "The New Public Sphere," 91; Dean, "Why the Net Is Not a Public Sphere," 109.

about a more robust form of the public sphere derived from Arendt that was presented in the previous chapter?

While both sides of the Habermasian public sphere debate with respect to the internet have their merits and problems, certain websites currently do function as a kind of public space, albeit not necessarily in the way either side of the debate expects. Online discussion sites rarely generate consensus that informs policy makers, while at the same time it can hardly be reduced to the infrastructure of communicate capitalism. The fact that political discussion is not time limited online makes furthering disagreements easier, while anonymity makes expressing unpopular opinions more common. Contrary to the Habermasian critics of an online public realm, the lack of opportunity for consensus online is actually a feature that can make building an online political realm easier.<sup>150</sup> We can go online and talk about politics, but the inadequacies of the existing system are replicated online in terms of alienating people from the actual system of government.<sup>151</sup> Thus the real question should not be about whether or not the internet currently is a political realm but about the capacity for websites to be created which could become one. In the rest of this chapter I argue that the internet certainly has this potential and possibility to revive the idea of the political realm, while at the same time emphasizing that this goal must be actively fought for and in no way will it simply be an outcome of technological advance.

In considering the possibilities of the internet, it will become apparent that online space may actually serve to create a superior version of the political realm due to the ease through which the constraints which limit offline space may be overcome. Online space operates in a way that can facilitate more inclusion and participation by moving beyond the model of meeting in person in a limited space with a limited amount of time. Having an online political realm can also make politics both more pervasive and less time consuming, as one can visit a political website for five minutes at a time or for as many hours as one wants. The openness of such potential online political spaces means that

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<sup>150</sup> Elisabeth Chaves, "The Internet as Global Platform? Grounding the Magically Levitating Public Sphere," *New Political Science* 32, no. 1 (2010): 37–40.

<sup>151</sup> Papacharissi, "The Virtual Sphere," 13.

new configurations of how politics is conducted can be created, as the old argument that limitations on space and time necessitate electing representatives are no longer relevant in the online realm. Placing the political realm online has the potential to reshape who can participate in politics and in what way.

### 3.2 The Space of Appearance and the Physical Body

What seems to be the biggest problem for postulating the possibility of an online political realm is the issue of appearance. A common argument against online politics is that we cannot really know who we are dealing with, which leads to issues of trust, accountability, legitimacy, and solidarity.<sup>152</sup> This line of argument leads to the question of what exactly appears publicly when one enters the political realm? For a large number of political theorists, including ones drawing on an Arendtian framework of the political realm, what appears and is revealed in public is the body, and thus the idea of an online political realm is simply a non-starter. Most of these arguments, however, rest on a superficial reading of Arendt which ends up depoliticizing the political realm into a function of the social, a move against which Arendt specifically warned.

In developing a theory of a strong political realm inspired by Arendt, Simon Springer argues that, because political speech and action require public visibility, “individuals must physically come together to occupy a common space.”<sup>153</sup> He goes on to argue that the political realm “is ideally a medium that allows for embodied self-representation.”<sup>154</sup> He explicitly rules out the possibility of an online political realm, saying it can only function in a Habermasian sense as a communications medium because action in the Arendtian sense requires public visibility, which, according to Springer, means that it must be physically embodied.<sup>155</sup> The problem with this line of argument is that what is revealed by political action is not the body, as it is not hidden to begin with.

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<sup>152</sup> Žižek for instance makes the argument that without seeing others, we cannot build solidarity and are more likely to treat others as objects, see: Žižek, “Is This Digital Democracy, or a New Tyranny of Cyberspace?”

<sup>153</sup> Simon Springer, “Public Space as Emancipation: Meditations on Anarchism, Radical Democracy, Neoliberalism and Violence,” *Antipode* 43, no. 2 (March 2011): 538.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 546.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 528.

Action and opinions, however, need to be revealed because they are not inherently visible, and the manner through which political action is revealed is through the circulation of speech and stories in public. Arendt speaks of the political realm as a web of relations which are generated through action, making it non-material, in that it is not a web of literal physical bodies, but a web of connections, relationships, and stories. A web of physical bodies has no specifically political character to it, and is associated more with the family, cultural, racial, or tribal unit, in which what connects people is literally their bodies. Again, it was the abolition of familial and tribal ties in the reforms of Cleisthenes that brought about democracy in the first place and allowed people to enter a public sphere not as mere physical objects, but as individuals.

Despite this inherently disembodied aspect of the political realm, there is a contemporary unease with the idea of the body as unimportant for politics. Given the relatively recent struggles against exclusions from the public realm because of one's racialized or sexualized body, it can seem as if the body is the very site of politics today. As Andrea Slane points out, the body is also deeply embedded in contemporary notions of democratic citizenship, which rely on the idea of one body granting one vote.<sup>156</sup> To be a citizen today is not to be a political actor or participant, but to be an officially recognized body within a given geographic boundary. The fact that citizenship is determined not by political participation but by being a body within a given space unnecessarily elevates the body in political importance. The entire premise of representative government also relies on the idea of political space as a collection of bodies in an exclusive space. Arguments about the need for representation are usually premised on the idea that we cannot fit everyone's bodies into one political space, and thus we must send a select few to perform politics on the behalf of the rest.

What the contemporary importance of the body points to, is the inversion of public and private that happens in the social realm, which is today the governing norm. The vast body of literature on biopolitics and the associated management of populations and bodies in given spaces are expressions of an anti-political thrust meant to lock people

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<sup>156</sup> Andrea Slane, "Democracy, Social Space, and the Internet," *University of Toronto Law Journal* 57, no. 1 (2007): 88.

into their bodies as discriminatory and classificatory identities, thus disqualifying people from the political realm on account of the body. As I will argue in the next chapter, what a properly political form of subjectivity seeks to do is disidentify the body as a means of political (dis)qualification. Thus when Mary Dietz writes that Arendt's concept of action is the "collective power of embodied persons made political", she is positing the appearance of the body publicly as political, when this is the entire argument Arendt makes against the social as being destructive of politics.<sup>157</sup> While Dietz is arguing that Arendt is not the anti-feminist she has been made out to be because she argues for a non-gendered political realm, Arendt's argument is not that bodies of any gender can appear politically but rather that bodies are not what appear politically and thus the political realm is not gendered because it has no interest in bodies. As Diana Saco points out, contrary to Dietz's reading, Arendt explicitly opposes identity politics in favour of a public of "whos" and not "whats", and that too much emphasis on the body simply generates points of exclusion and discrimination, especially for people with bodily disabilities or those in minority positions.<sup>158</sup>

What really matters for the political realm in terms of appearing and visibility is the ability to make one's opinions heard and for collective actions to have lasting impact. The presence of the body is not necessary for any of this, as what distinguishes us from others politically is not our bodies or faces, but our words and deeds, along with the stories created by the actions in which we engage.<sup>159</sup> What matters for the construction of a political realm which allows us to appear is how well it is able to publicize speech and action in order for the uniqueness of individual subjects to be widely recognized. The arguments and opinions of individual people can more easily circulate in writing than in literal speech, and as such, an online space that serves as a political realm can enable more people to participate in a meaningful way that allows their opinions and ideas to become visible. By contrast, to speak audibly with others drastically limits one's potential audience based not just on geography and time, but also based on who might actually be

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<sup>157</sup> Mary G. Dietz, "Hannah Arendt and Feminist Politics," in *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, ed. Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 249.

<sup>158</sup> Saco, *Cybering Democracy*, 56.

<sup>159</sup> Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, 80.

willing to listen. By untying political speech from bodies, the political realm has the potential to radically expand its scope in the same way that the printing press extended the potential readership of literature.

The arguments in favour of embodied political action would have to go so far as to discount any form of written communication as non-political, thus banishing not only the bulk of political theory from having any actual political relevance but also excluding the long history of political pamphleteering as non-political. If political action must be embodied, then the scope of political communication is drastically narrowed to the point where any claims to publicity tend to be lost as embodied speech and action can only reach a very limited audience without some sort of technological extension that would inherently disembody the actors. In this way, even offline political realms are never truly embodied unless they consist of only a handful of people who have no interest in communicating publicly. A political realm which is not public, however, is no longer political if it cannot serve as a space of appearance, equality, and freedom. As was argued previously, politics cannot take place in isolation without turning into the anti-political exercise of coercive force.

A second line of argument against the internet as a space where people can appear politically has less to do with bodies and instead makes an argument that the internet lacks publicity. Brook and Broal claim that computer-mediated interactions are less rich and then go on to argue that they lack the required collectivity and publicity to be political since using the internet places an individual alone in front of a screen.<sup>160</sup> The idea that one can be alone while interacting with others seems like an odd claim, and it is doubtful they would make this same claim with regard to talking on the telephone, which could also be claimed to be simply sitting alone with a piece of plastic held to one's head. Such claims expose a deeper problem where people unexperienced with online communications think that they are alone and thus ignore the impact of their actions on the other people they are interacting with. Just because we are not in the physical

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<sup>160</sup> James Brook and Iain Boal, *Resisting the Virtual Life: The Culture and Politics of Information* (City Lights, 1995).



presence of others when using a computer, does not mean are alone, as the ability to connect and interact with others is the driving force of the popularity of the internet.

What Brook and Broal continually allude to in their arguments is their belief that face to face communication is simply superior to computer mediated communication. This belief is a common prejudice among critics of the internet. Darin Barney, for example, argues that the internet is private in nature as it allows people to hide and obscure their identity while still being able to interact socially, thus giving it an anti-political character, because no one ever has to reveal who they truly are.<sup>161</sup> Chris Gray argues that online communication is frankly unsettling and even upsetting because of the lack of awareness of who the other person “really is”.<sup>162</sup> There is an assumption at work that either the face defines exactly who we are and without its visibility we are nothing, or that what we reveal ourselves to be online simply cannot be trusted. Other than the fairly obvious counter argument that clearly we can know more about who someone like Nietzsche was by reading his books than by looking at pictures of his face, there is a fundamental lack of understanding of how political communication functions at play in these claims.

As James Bohman argues, the claims to the superiority of face to face communication rely on the presumption that political interaction is one to one.<sup>163</sup> To talk face to face with someone is to engage in a conversation with at best a few other people, but the entire point of a political realm as public is to enable such speech to reach a wide audience so that one’s uniqueness can appear to all. Face to face is probably a superior means of *social* interaction, as when one is interacting with a friend, family member, or love interest, facial expressions and visual cues can be extremely helpful. None of these cues, however, are relevant to political communication which is by its nature many to many rather than one to one. As Bohman goes on to point out, political speech is always directed at an indefinite and even anonymous audience simply called the public, which expects a response from any or many random persons in that public.<sup>164</sup> Politics prior to

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<sup>161</sup> Barney, “Invasion of Publicity: Digital Networks and the Privatization of the Public Sphere,” 112.

<sup>162</sup> Gray, *Cyborg Citizen*, 132–133.

<sup>163</sup> Bohman, “Expanding Dialogue,” 133.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

the internet was never face to face in the first place, and has always relied on some form of technological innovation to transmit speech from one to many and many to one, whether it was the natural architecture of the Pnyx hill in Athens that served as an amphitheatre to carry the speech of one to the many, or the bullhorn or the printing press. The key innovation of the internet is that it not only serves as an artificial means to augment speech but can also serve as the infrastructure for a version of the political realm which can drastically enhance the potential visibility of speech and action by providing a common space that is much less exclusive and more publicly available than offline equivalents such as a parliament or even a protest.

### 3.3 Ironipolitics and the Internet as Serious Space

Given that when we interact online our bodies are usually not immediately visible, online space is a new experience of interaction which does mark it as different from traditional forms of offline space. It is on this register that the internet often troubles people as its difference can be seen as either threatening, or as a new target for anti-political attitudes that can win favour when it seems like the argument against politics is aimed at a new technology instead of the concept of a political realm itself. It is on this issue that many critics of the potential of online political space are eager to point out that online activities are either less real, not serious enough, or fundamentally disconnected from offline political space to have any serious political potential.<sup>165</sup> Salvatore, for instance, speaks of activists in Egypt moving from online organization to the “real world,” as if the internet is some sort of lucid solipsistic dream where nothing is real and that the other people we interact with are simply imaginary.<sup>166</sup> The distinction between physical and virtual is not to be confused with a distinction between real and fake, as we would not claim that our bodies are real while our minds are fake. Just as an offline political realm has three layers and cannot be reduced to its physical elements of walls or borders, online political space comes about from the interactions of people and cannot be reduced to the physical hardware and moving bits which constitute the physical infrastructure of the internet.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2011).

<sup>166</sup> Salvatore, “New Media, the ‘Arab Spring,’ and the Metamorphosis of the Public Sphere,” 222.

<sup>167</sup> Saco, *Cybering Democracy*, 26–27.

The attempt to cast online space as disconnected, unreal, or not serious is an explicitly anti-political spatial strategy that has more to do with opposing politics than critiquing new forms of technology. Following Rancière's typology of anti-political regimes, the attempts to devalue the seriousness of politics by demanding that it be approached with ironic distance could form a fourth type of anti-political regime, which could be called ironipolitics. Ironipolitics is rooted in the belief that the attempt to politically implement grand ideological visions or narratives (such as establishing a political realm) leads to totalitarian cruelty. Thus any political engagements must be primarily grounded in an ethical concern for the difference of the Other, which results in a kind of relativism in which one's own beliefs are not to be taken too seriously for fear they might instigate a conflict with another's beliefs, setting up the possibility for a political disagreement or dispute. Such political disagreements are seen as problematic, because decisions may favour one side over another, and thus instigate a totalitarian elimination of difference.

One of the primary theorists of ironipolitics is Richard Rorty, whose underlying concern is avoiding a repeat of totalitarian cruelty, which he views as stemming from too much politics, rather than from the radical negation of politics which it actually was. Rorty proposes a privatization of self-creation which amounts to depoliticizing public political space by transferring any desire to self-create collectively and publicly to the private realm. Politics then becomes a matter of irony, something not to be taken seriously, because any attempts to advocate for one's own "final vocabulary" over someone else's could escalate into a conflict that might generate cruelty and totalitarianism. Rorty advocates a hollowed out public space that amounts to nothing more than a playful musing among private citizens who do not take their own political opinions seriously, thus depoliticizing any public space which could become political.<sup>168</sup> As Barker puts it, Rorty's fear of totalitarianism in the rear-view mirror rules out the institutionalization of ideologies such as Stalinist communism and religious fundamentalism, but it equally excludes participatory democracy, a thicker sense of

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<sup>168</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 84.

community, and social equality as serious political ideals.<sup>169</sup> For Rorty, we self-create and live full lives only in the individualistic private sphere, as any kind of collective action in the public sphere ends up looking like a kind of proto-totalitarianism. Put in Arendtian terms, what Rorty is actually up to is fully embracing the social realm's swallowing of the public and private.

For advocates of ironipolitics, politics itself is not a serious activity, and the internet even less so. A common ironipolitical claim is that everyone on the internet is simply pretending to be someone else; therefore the internet is more of a playground than a space for politics.<sup>170</sup> The internet is viewed as a realm of "mere appearance" not to be taken too seriously, even though politics is entirely about issues of appearance, from Arendt's arguments about politics as a space where people can reveal themselves to each other as unique individuals, to Rancière's argument that politics is fundamentally about how the sensible is distributed. The ironipolitical attitude in this respect is a rehash of Plato's cave, where political space online (and offline for that matter) is viewed as a realm of false illusions masking the hidden truth. The argument that the internet is not a serious place for politics would seem to imply the opposite of the ironipolitical attitude in that the implication is that politics is actually serious and thus must be conducted only in serious offline space. This, however, is part of the ironipolitical deferral, which Derrida's concept of democracy to come illustrates. Derrida's "democracy to come" is what he calls "a weapon aimed at the enemies of democracy" who use the word democracy to describe the present situation despite it still lacking full equality, freedom, and rights for all.<sup>171</sup> Derrida goes on to point out that the "to come" part of his phrase "democracy to come" implies that democracy is both a promise and something that will never exist.<sup>172</sup> While Derrida means to use this idea of "democracy to come" as a way of critiquing existing states who call themselves democratic but could certainly do better, it has the effect of providing a critique of political action as well. Existing political struggles must be treated ironically as something that will not actually bring democracy, thus stripping

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<sup>169</sup> Derek W.M. Barker, *Tragedy and Citizenship: Conflict, Reconciliation, and Democracy from Haemon to Hegel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 100.

<sup>170</sup> Gray, *Cyborg Citizen*, 133.

<sup>171</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005), 86.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

away the passionate attachment that is necessary to drive political action. Under this rubric, the internet cannot usher in a substantial political realm (as it is always to come), and thus the possibility of an online political realm is to be approached ironically.

In an attempt to remedy the ironipolitical attitude that the internet is fake, not serious enough, or that it constitutes a radically disconnected world with no relevance to offline space, Nathan Jurgenson presents the idea of augmented revolution to provide a model of online and offline space as thoroughly interconnected.<sup>173</sup> While I share Jurgenson's desire to posit online and offline as connected, he still essentially subordinates the online aspect to being merely a supplement to the offline space. While this model might apply to the Arab Spring and Occupy, where the offline actions were most visible while online was more of a site of organization and speech, his model fails to account for the specificity of a political movement such as Anonymous which used offline protests merely as an affirmative supplement to their real actions which took place online. Anonymous also provides an interesting example of the conflict between those who wish to treat the internet as a serious political space and engage in political action which extends and asserts equality, and those who wish to view the internet as a kind of radically disconnected playground where what is done online has no offline consequences.

Anonymous began on the message board 4chan and was, at first, thoroughly non-serious in its stance toward the internet. Anonymous believed the internet was not a serious place, that it had no connection to the "real world", and that there were no offline consequences for online actions. As such, they engaged primarily in message board raids, chat room flooding, disruptions of social games and other behaviour which was motivated by their desire for "lulz" (internet slang for laughs).<sup>174</sup> As part of their general desire to view the internet as a source of amusement, in 2008 a video was posted on 4chan of actor Tom Cruise discussing his love of Scientology. The video was meant only

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<sup>173</sup> Nathan Jurgenson, "When Atoms Meet Bits: Social Media, the Mobile Web and Augmented Revolution," *Future Internet* 4, no. 4 (January 23, 2012): 86.

<sup>174</sup> For historical background on Anonymous see: Brian Knappenberger, *We Are Legion: The Story of the Hacktivists* (Luminant Media, 2012); Gabriella Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous* (London: Verso, 2014).

for people within Scientology, and the over the top performance and statements of Cruise ended up as a source of amusement that made the Church of Scientology an object of ridicule, not just on the somewhat obscure 4chan boards but across the internet as more popular and mainstream websites reposted the video after seeing it on 4chan. As a result, Scientology instigated legal action to have the video removed, drawing the ire of Anonymous who initially viewed this action as an attempt to infringe not on their political rights but as an attack on their ability to have fun and laugh at people.

As Scientology's legal campaign grew, Anonymous started to take root and organize a response to Scientology which began to take on a more serious political character, as some Anons (the name for a member of Anonymous) encouraged the group to view Scientology's actions as a fundamental attack on online freedom of expression. Anonymous initiated Project Chanology with a video declaring war on Scientology, which was followed up by attacks on the Scientology website, pranks directed toward prominent members, and manipulating Google search results so that the Scientology website would be the top result on searches for "dangerous cult". Anonymous, however, did not fully take on a political character until they organized street protests in various cities in the United States, Australia, Canada, and Europe outside of Scientology Churches. As various activists associated with Anonymous attest to in interviews, before the street protests there was still a sense that Anonymous was not really a movement and may not have been more than a few people.<sup>175</sup> When tens of thousands of people showed up to protests around the world, it was like this was confirmation that Anonymous actually did exist as a real entity.

The interesting thing to note here was that the bridging of offline and online space, which resulted in the politicization of Anonymous and reversal of its ironipolitical stance toward the internet, did not operate in the same way as the other internet-enabled movements. Anonymous essentially showed up offline and confirmed to itself that this was a real movement, then went back online to focus on hacktivism. For the Arab Spring and Occupy, the protests were organized online and then became a matter of engaging in

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<sup>175</sup> Knappenberger, *We Are Legion: The Story of the Hacktivists*.

political actions offline. After their Scientology protests, Anonymous went on to provide technical support and services to activists in the Arab Spring and Occupy, and engaged in a number of hacking attempts in support of WikiLeaks, the Palestinians, and various other political causes.<sup>176</sup> During the Tunisian uprising for example, Anonymous hacked the webpage of Tunisian Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi and developed software to subvert government censorship.<sup>177</sup> Anonymous would go on to attempt a denial of service attack on the New York Stock Exchange's servers to coincide with the Occupy Wall Street protests, engage in attacks on websites related to the Israeli military after their heavy handed operations in Gaza in 2012, and even work to expose a police cover up of a rape by football players in Steubenville, Ohio.<sup>178</sup> What these actions demonstrate is that online political space itself is increasingly becoming more and more a site of political action and not simply a realm where activists can debate issues and organize offline protests as in Jurgenson's augmented revolution model.

After Project Chanology, many Anons embraced Anonymous's newfound interest in serious political matters, while others argued that they were turning their back on fun and that the internet should continue to be treated in an ironipolitical fashion. The ironipolitical faction of Anonymous engaged in a number of hacking operations after 2008 which were meant to be purely for fun, and worked to discredit Anonymous as a political movement. The most high profile hack was the 2008 defacement of the Epilepsy Foundation's webpage in which a flashing image meant to provoke a seizure replaced the actual webpage. Given the anonymous nature of the movement, this action generated immense amounts of internal strife as those associated with Project Chanology who were attempting to make Anonymous into a hacktivist movement rather than merely high-tech pranksters were strongly opposed to such mean-spirited and counterproductive actions. Given the decentralized and anonymous nature of the movement, however, this pro-political faction had no proper way of distancing itself from this attack or even expelling those who carried it out in the name of Anonymous.<sup>179</sup> As time has passed and

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<sup>176</sup> Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy*.

<sup>177</sup> Quinn Norton, "2011: The Year Anonymous Took On Cops, Dictators and Existential Dread," *Wired*, January 11, 2012, <http://www.wired.com/2012/01/anonymous-dicators-existential-dread/>.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> Knappenberger, *We Are Legion: The Story of the Hacktivists*.

Anonymous has become more active in supporting other protest movements, the number of these troll attacks has dramatically decreased, especially as numerous Anonymous members were arrested and jailed in relation to these actions. The combination of the success of Anonymous's political actions and the realization that even non-serious hacking meant for laughs was landing Anons in jail has led to the decline in the ironipolitical attitude in which the internet is viewed as a radically disconnected non-serious space with no offline consequences. As the internet continues to become less of a novelty, soon ironipolitical dismissals of online space will sound as unreasonable as dismissing a phone call as "not real life" because it is not embodied or because it is technologically mediated.

### 3.4 Hardware, Software, Wetware

Extending the three layer model of the political realm to the internet can enable a more robust model of the online political realm that can enable it to be treated more seriously by demonstrating how it is directly analogous to pre-internet political realms. The physical space, or as Arendt called it, the walls of the *polis*, that simply provide the physical location for people to gather in common is equivalent to the physical infrastructure of the internet. Similar to pre-internet conceptions of the political realm, the fibre optic cables, switches, and routers that form the physical hardware layer of the internet no more determine whether the internet can be a political realm than the walls of the ancient *polis*. The second layer of the constitution or framework of rules and boundaries is equivalent to the software layer of the internet. Like a constitution, the software layer has something of a pre-political character as someone needs to make a website and program how it works before it can become part of the political realm. Software, like constitutions, are rule based mechanisms meant to provide shape to a shared space. The top layer of the pre-internet political realm, namely the people, could in computer terms be called the wetware.<sup>180</sup> Like in pre-internet space, the people or wetware are clearly the most important element, as politics cannot exist without people and the internet would be uninteresting if no one used it. While each layer depends on the

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<sup>180</sup> Saco, *Cybering Democracy*, 107.



one below it, the entire structure is determined by the people at the top who rely on the lower layers merely to collect them into a common space so that they can engage with each other politically. Thus as Barney points out, when Arendt describes the *polis* as not a physical location but as the space between people living together for the purpose of political speech and action, she could have been describing the world wide web.<sup>181</sup>

By pointing to the online political realm as having the same three layer model as pre-internet conceptions of the political realm, it helps to uncover arguments which seemingly critique the technology of the internet as unsuitable for politics, but are really critiques of the suitability of politics itself. Morozov for instance, makes the argument that people mostly use the internet for thoroughly non-political purposes and spend most of their time online looking at pictures of cats or pornography, and that therefore the internet as a whole is not suitable for politics.<sup>182</sup> Morozov completely discounts the possibility of anything like the Arab Spring emerging from the internet, because he sees it as a space hopelessly lost to trivial pursuits.<sup>183</sup> The fact that most people use the internet for shopping and entertainment does not make it a distraction from serious political engagement any more than the fact that most people use offline space for the same reasons make offline space a distraction from politics.

Chaves argues that because of the potential for state or corporate abuse at the hardware layer of DNS routing, the internet cannot serve as a political realm.<sup>184</sup> She makes the mistake of attributing existing political configurations of internet backbone management to the very essence of the technology. Such arguments come across as inherently defeatist, as few would argue that because offline space is generally configured in anti-political ways we should abandon the terrain altogether. Creating alternatives to the status quo requires vision of what could be, rather than simply evaluating what is and concluding that the status quo is not what we want it to be. A similar argument is made by Robert McChesney who also conflates the hardware and software layers, leading to the argument that the pervasiveness of advertising online

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<sup>181</sup> Barney, "Invasion of Publicity: Digital Networks and the Privatization of the Public Sphere," 108.

<sup>182</sup> Morozov, *The Net Delusion*, 57.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 201–203.

<sup>184</sup> Chaves, "The Internet as Global Platform?," 31–34.

makes the internet a problematic space for political engagement.<sup>185</sup> The fact that most websites are commercial in purpose simply mirrors the fact that today almost all offline space is commercial and filled with advertisements. While these are problems to be aware of and potential sites for online activism, they do not amount to an argument against the possibility of a political realm unless one accepts that the pervasiveness of neoliberal capitalism in offline space makes alternative economic arrangements impossible as well.

What these arguments do is take examples from the software layer and confuse them with the hardware layer, thus the internet as a physical infrastructure is given an unalterable essence of being an entertainment or commercial delivery mechanism based on the current configuration of many websites at the software layer. But this is a wider argument against politics in general disguised as a critique of technology, as one could easily say that most people spend their free time in offline space going to shopping malls and driving on highways, therefore offline space is unsuitable for politics because most people do not use it for that purpose. It was precisely this anti-political attitude that Occupy sought to challenge by taking over non-political spaces and declaring them as sites of political contestation.

The top and middle layers which mark a space as political and provide the framework for a political realm cannot be reduced to the physical layer without rigidifying structures to the point where a protest or any other political act out of the ordinary would be disqualified as political in the first place. What matters when considering the internet is really the nature of web sites and how people use them, as in the pre-internet political realm, the physical aspect is simply there. The internet without the software layer of the world wide web, email, or online games would be an extremely dull place, as its vitality is derived from what people do with it. The malleability of the software layer is what gives the world wide web one of its primary advantages for creating an online political realm. The pre-internet political realms have a tendency to make the software layer of frameworks, constitutions, and informal rules invisible to the point where they get identified with and reduced to the hardware layer, thus giving the

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<sup>185</sup> Robert W. McChesney, *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism Is Turning the Internet Against Democracy* (New Press, 2013), 102.

appearance that such rules and frameworks are literally set in stone, as politics is associated with the physical structures of the hardware layer, such as a parliament building. On the internet, web sites are more transparently malleable. They were created by people and can be easily changed by people. Lawrence Lessig argues that software code is the law of cyberspace and that its constitutional architecture is continually being built by software developers.<sup>186</sup> As Lessig goes on to argue, websites are not simply found and assumed to have rules written in stone in the manner of an offline constitution, but the software design is much more transparently a choice made by people, which can be easily changed or rewritten entirely to create a new set of code which regulates a new website. When a website serves as the middle layer of a framework for the political realm, politics can take on a more dynamic character. It could then be more apparent that politics consists of the actions and relationships formed by those in the political realm, rather than confusing politics with the space it takes place in.

### 3.5 The Durability and Commonality of a Potential Online World

One of the most important elements of a political realm is its commonality and collective nature. The internet facilitates new forms of communication that mitigate the importance of distance as a practical obstacle to the creation of a common political world. It is on this point that Benjamin Barber's warnings that the internet may have negative effects for politics rely on a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the internet. He gives the example of students in one of his lectures who send instant messages back and forth to each other without even looking at each other, despite the fact they are sitting within eyeshot. He argues this is alienating and generates a sense of solitude and loneliness.<sup>187</sup> In fact what is happening is the opposite of what Barber thinks: these students are remaining in constant close communication even at a time when they should be paying attention to his lecture, and are thus finding new ways to remain connected. The pervasiveness of online communication has reached a point where the most common popular trope is no longer about the isolated individual sitting alone in front of a screen cut off from society, but simply social fatigue, as people start to want to have time to themselves where they

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<sup>186</sup> Lawrence Lessig, *Code: Version 2.0* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 6.

<sup>187</sup> Barber, "Which Technology for Which Democracy?," 7.

are not constantly answering emails, instant messages, Facebook chats, tweets, and text messages. With the early concerns about the internet being isolating and alienating giving way to over-communication, the bigger question is whether all this communication can bring people together to create a common political realm or whether it will simply fragment the world into small bubbles of hypercommunication where people no longer feel the need to engage with the larger public because they can establish such pervasive connections within their social network.<sup>188</sup>

Mirroring Fraser's idea of multiple publics, Bohman argues that the internet is a public of publics with a distributed structure rather than a centralized one, with the implication that it does not matter if there is a single website that everyone goes to for political debate.<sup>189</sup> While there certainly can be a multitude of publics, those publics only become a political realm when they come into contact and conflict with each other. In this sense, only temporary political realms could sporadically pop up when different publics came into conflict, but as was argued earlier, there is something wholly unsatisfying about politics as a temporary phenomenon. If the only established place to argue our position and demand change is within a subpublic that we are already a part of and which tends to agree with our position, then such speech is politically useless. The fragmentation of existing political discussion sites into subsites based on a common viewpoint is extremely common and also politically destructive. The ease through which new sites can be created online is a double-edged sword that makes it both easier to create common realms open to all, and to leave the common world and create one's own little realm where no opposing viewpoints can be heard. Due to the malleability of the software layer, the internet can promote both immense commonality and has the potential to create a political world which actually encompasses the physical Earth, while at the same time can also facilitate fragmentation. As has been emphasized previously, the key is the wetware layer, as people determine how the internet is used, rather than the technology determining what is politically possible.

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<sup>188</sup> Papacharissi, "The Virtual Sphere," 18.

<sup>189</sup> Bohman, "Expanding Dialogue," 140.

The malleability of the internet and the importance of human agency remains a tough sell, however, especially on this issue of commonality and fragmentation. Barney argues that the internet destroys the common world of things, built in an Arendtian sense through work, in favour of fleeting consumability.<sup>190</sup> But the internet is clearly part of this world of things that form the common world and thus are the objects of dispute among those who look at them from different perspectives. The hardware layer of the internet is a literal physical thing, and the software layer enables anyone with even relatively basic computer skills to create a visible object in the form of a website and to display it publicly. These are tangible objects which can enable commonality around which relationships can be built. The importance of these objects lays in the way that they both bring us together and separate us. Any website that enables political debate does exactly this, as it provides a common forum for everyone to argue their own position in a way that a shopping mall, for instance, does not.

Furthering his attempt to use Arendt to critique the internet's suitability to be a common world, Barney points to Arendt's argument that the fabricated world must be more stable and enduring than the individuals within it, thus guaranteeing that their political deeds will have lasting effect and be remembered.<sup>191</sup> Barney believes that the internet lacks this durability because of its supposedly fluid and transient nature. While websites certainly come and go, Barney ignores the fact that the internet also enables forms of extreme memory and permanence. Everything online gets copied and backed up as it circulates publicly, making it extremely difficult to get rid of something embarrassing once it gets put online.<sup>192</sup> This phenomenon has even spurred a number of recent court rulings where Google has been ordered to remove links to certain material that violates someone's "right to be forgotten."<sup>193</sup> The internet cannot be both completely consumable and without any memory, and at the same time so extremely permanent that courts have to order the censorship of search results to allow people to hide their past. In fact, one of the ultimate technological fantasies that shows up in everything from Ray

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<sup>190</sup> Barney, "Invasion of Publicity: Digital Networks and the Privatization of the Public Sphere," 110.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>192</sup> Jeffrey Rosen, "The Right to Be Forgotten," *Stanford Law Review Online* 64, no. 88 (2012): 88–92.

<sup>193</sup> Mark Gollom, "Google Looms as 'Censor-in-Chief' after 'right to Be Forgotten' Ruling," *CBC News*, May 14, 2014, <http://www.cbc.ca/1.2641714>.

Kurzweil's predictions to television shows such as *Caprica* and films such as *Transcendence*, is the ability to harness the data storage and computing capacity of the internet to upload someone's consciousness so they can achieve literal immortality. Against this background, it is clear that the internet is continuing to grow into a massive collective memory for humanity, and thus can enable the kind of durability a political realm requires in order to ensure that the uniqueness of people's speech and action is remembered.

### 3.6 Panoptic Surveillance and Anonymous Cowardice as two paradigms of the Social

Often the political potential of online space is discussed in terms of two radically different contrasts, both being negative and in complete contradiction to the other. In the first instance, online space is posited as completely surveilled and simply an extension of the Foucauldian paradigm of biopower onto the internet. In this depiction of online space there is no room for politics. The internet is depicted as already captured and controlled by the government, who have turned it into a massive virtual panopticon. Morozov argues that the internet is naturally panoptic and that it is therefore a dream come true for authoritarian states and governments wanting to spy on their citizens. The conclusion Morozov draws from this is that the internet is wholly unsuited for political activism.<sup>194</sup> Given the constant revelations about governments using the internet to spy on people, as well as the pervasiveness of publicly shared information online, there is some truth to this analysis, but it in no way constitutes the essence of the internet, as the competing narrative is just as pervasive and also has some degree of truth to it.

The other model which attempts to describe the nature of the internet is one of radical anonymity in which everyone is depicted as an anonymous coward hiding in the shadows, making online space not suitable for the very public speech and action of politics.<sup>195</sup> While the total surveillance model treats the internet as too public, this model

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<sup>194</sup> Morozov, *The Net Delusion*, 145–146.

<sup>195</sup> For an overview of this type of argument see: Robert F. Carey and Jacquelyn Burkell, "Revisiting the Four Horsemen of the Infocalypse: Representations of Anonymity and the Internet in Canadian Newspapers," *First Monday* 12, no. 8 (2007).

views it as too private. The fact that these two competing models of online space are prominent both in the academic and popular literature at the same time, despite being in clear contradiction, points to Arendt's concept of the social as a better explanation of online space. The public and private flow into each other online to create an indiscernible single sphere in which public and private are inverted and then absorbed into the social. The interesting thing about Anonymous as a movement is that it seems to understand that the social model of privatizing the public and publicizing the private is the primary way in which cyberspace tends to operate, mirroring offline space, and that their actions often involve attempts to reassert the public and the private against the social.

While Anonymous' actions are hard to categorize on the whole, due to their often contradictory nature arising out of the fact that anyone can claim to have hacked a website in the name of Anonymous, by analyzing some of their more high profile actions a pattern can be established in which it has a tendency toward attempting to undermine the online production of the social realm. In response to Visa, MasterCard, and PayPal refusing to allow donations through their services to WikiLeaks, Anonymous attempted a distributed denial of service attack (DDoS) on those company's websites. This action created the strange optics of an anonymous group engaging in hacktivism in support of an organization trying to promote transparency. In this case it was operating in support of the idea that government should be public rather than private, but they have also engaged in major operations meant to defend personal privacy. After the FBI shut down the file hosting website Megaupload, Anonymous responded by stating that this was an attack on people's privacy and freedom. It engaged in large-scale DDoS attacks on the website of the FBI, as well as on the sites of the copyright organizations MPAA and RIAA.<sup>196</sup> Anonymous's actions against homophobia, such as targeting the Ugandan Prime Minister's website in response to a bill which punished homosexuality with the death penalty and actions targeting the Westboro Baptist Church underscore Anonymous's desire to ensure that someone's sexual orientation not be a matter of public persecution

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<sup>196</sup> "Internet Strikes Back: Anonymous' Operation Megaupload Explained," January 20, 2012, <http://rt.com/usa/anonymous-barrettbrown-sopa-megaupload-241/>.

but should be considered a private concern.<sup>197</sup> At the same time, Anonymous was essential in exposing a cover-up by the local authorities of a rape by members of a high school football team in Steubenville Ohio, which eventually led to the prosecution of the perpetrators. A pattern emerges in which Anonymous is attempting to assert that the social web is unacceptable and that government should be public while individual privacy should be protected. Anonymous is fundamentally anti-social as many critics contend, however this should be taken not as an insult but as what makes the movement an effective political force.

The actions of Anonymous demonstrate the poverty of the analyses provided by both those claiming that the internet is an anonymous and therefore unaccountable space unsuitable for political action and those who attempt to apply an old-fashioned Foucauldian framework of surveillance and anti-political biopower to online space. As Saco points out, while everyone else in the 60s and 70s was worried about computers being mechanisms of centralized control and instrumental rationality, it was the early hackers who began to embrace computers as having liberatory potential.<sup>198</sup> Hactivist groups, such as Anonymous today and Cult of the Dead Cow in the 1980s and 90s, may eventually come to be seen as the founders of online political space.<sup>199</sup> The strength of the hacktivist approach to online political space is that it recognizes online space is contested and that for it to become political or for it to maintain our privacy, it must be actively shaped as such. Considering that the advent of online space is presenting a number of technological challenges to the status quo, political groups must actively embrace these issues in order to catalyze their political potential. If they fail to do so, there is the risk that the state and capital will adapt and incorporate these technologies. Issues such as state borders, citizenship, piracy, and cryptography introduce conflicts which generate change, thus when online space is dismissed as the realm of anonymous

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<sup>197</sup> "Uganda Government Websites Hacked In Defense Of LGBT Rights, Gay Pride," *The Huffington Post*, August 16, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/08/16/uganda-government-websites-hacked-anonymous-gay-rights\\_n\\_1789623.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/08/16/uganda-government-websites-hacked-anonymous-gay-rights_n_1789623.html); Will Oremus, "Anonymous Hacks Westboro Church Over Plans To Picket Sandy Hook Funerals. Bad Idea.," *Slate*, December 17, 2012, [http://www.slate.com/blogs/future\\_tense/2012/12/17/anonymous\\_hacks\\_westboro\\_baptist\\_church\\_over\\_sandy\\_hook\\_picket\\_is\\_there.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/future_tense/2012/12/17/anonymous_hacks_westboro_baptist_church_over_sandy_hook_picket_is_there.html).

<sup>198</sup> Saco, *Cybering Democracy*, 122.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.



cowards or as simply a mechanism of state surveillance, the potential to shape the terrain of the internet in political ways is simply surrendered to those seeking to impose anti-political configurations.

Despite all the talk of NSA surveillance and notions that everything we do online is tracked by either government or corporations, the government remains somewhat fearful of online space. Online activities which are illegal still face disproportionately large prison sentences compared with the equivalent offline crime. For example one of the non-anonymous members of Anonymous, Barrett Brown, is facing 100 years in prison for three separate incidents: threatening an FBI officer in a YouTube video, concealing evidence, and pasting a link in a chat room to documents stolen from companies (obtained by Anonymous in hacking operations) that the American government employs to spy on political activists.<sup>200</sup> Out of these crimes, threatening an FBI officer is obviously the most serious, but related cases of threats to an FBI agent resulted in a dentist receiving an 18 month sentence and a man in Texas who threatened to blow up an FBI building receiving a 42 month sentence.<sup>201</sup> Another hacktivist associated with Anonymous, Jeremy Hammond, faces a life sentence for his role in obtaining the documents that Brown linked to and which Hammond posted to WikiLeaks. Other leakers of secret government documents, such as whistleblowers Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, face similar charges with Snowden wanted for espionage and facing a possible 30 year jail sentence and Manning already sentenced to 35 years. What these examples demonstrate is not just the social nature of governments which now believe they have a right to operate in secret rather than in public, but the threat they perceive from activists who are using the internet to expose the actions of the government to the bright light of the public sphere. The active role taken by these leakers and hacktivists is essential as they are promoting a different model of space for the internet, one which has both public and private elements and thus can constitute a political realm, against the all-consuming encroachment of the anti-political social model.

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<sup>200</sup> Patrick McGuire, "Why Is Barrett Brown Facing 100 Years in Prison?," *VICE*, January 2013, [http://www.vice.com/en\\_ca/read/why-is-barrett-brown-facing-100-years-in-jail](http://www.vice.com/en_ca/read/why-is-barrett-brown-facing-100-years-in-jail).

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

### 3.7 Social Networks or Political Networks?

During the recent protest movements, Facebook and Twitter rose to prominence as websites that were used heavily by activists. In the case of Egypt, a Facebook page called “We are all Khaled Said” became a key political space which provided people with not only uncensored news but the chance to discuss and debate issues with each other and to make the connections which would translate into concerted street protests which eventually brought down the government. The Facebook page was created by an Egyptian Google executive to honour Khaled Said, who was tortured to death by Egyptian police after he recorded a video which he posted online of Egyptian police pocketing the spoils of a drug bust.<sup>202</sup> The internet was crucial for both exposing police corruption and translating this one instance of police brutality into a wider complaint against the regime. As was noted in the first chapter, much was made of the fact that activists were using social networks, so the question arises as to whether or not these social networks, such as Facebook or Twitter, can be the basis of a new form of online political realm. These spaces can be subject to Rancièrian temporary reorderings, but as a model of a more permanent political space, their primary nature as *social* networks precludes them from being a basis for more permanent forms of online political space.<sup>203</sup>

Arendt’s depiction of the common world of political space arising from human activity as a “web of relationships” is interesting in the context of social networks.<sup>204</sup> Arendt’s web of relationships seems to fit nicely with the currently popular social network model which allows people to form links with others and then circulate stories about themselves and others among their connected friends and followers. However, just as politics does not automatically arise any time people live together, the existence of a technological means to create a world wide web of relationships does not mean such a web will be political. In the case of social networks, these are primarily, as the name suggests, social and not political. The difference between social, public, and private is an aspect of Arendt’s political theory that continues to retain importance. As pointed to

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<sup>202</sup> Theodor Tudoroiu, “Social Media and Revolutionary Waves: The Case of the Arab Spring,” *New Political Science* 36, no. 3 (2014): 352.

<sup>203</sup> Rancièrè, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, 24–25.

<sup>204</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 182–184.

above, debates about the nature of the internet tend to focus on either the internet being too public or too private, as evidenced by debates about whether what one posts on Facebook is public or private and in the debate surrounding government monitoring of online activity. From an Arendtian point of view, these debates miss the point, as the old divide between public and private no longer exists as they have fallen together into the social.<sup>205</sup>

The social realm destroys not just political space, but attacks the existence of the private realm as well. The necessity of a private space outside the light of the public is especially important for children, who “require the security of concealment in order to mature undisturbed.”<sup>206</sup> Social networking sites are precisely social spaces in that they operate in a manner in which the private life process of a person is put in public view. Even with security settings that may prevent public access, most people are less than discriminating when it comes to who they add as “friends”, and thus a site like Facebook takes on a character as less of a private space where friends share, and more of a publicizing of the private. Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg makes this ideology of the social explicit in his arguments that the world is becoming more “public” and less private and thus the incremental loss of privacy on Facebook simply matches the public zeitgeist.<sup>207</sup> Social networking sites can intensify the publication of the private as personal details placed online can then circulate and become unduly public. Dean argues that this form of undue publicity is the “ideology of technoculture” in that when one signs up for Facebook one knows very well one is handing over a demographic profile which will be used to sell advertising, but one simply does it anyway.<sup>208</sup> The problem, however, is not with publicity per se, as Dean would have it, but with the social inversions of public and private that people begrudgingly put up with, either as a result of a lack of computer literacy which leads to lax privacy settings, or simply as the price they have to pay in order to be able to connect with friends on sites such as Facebook.<sup>209</sup> The ideology

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>206</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 185.

<sup>207</sup> Marshall Kirkpatrick, “Why Facebook Is Wrong: Privacy Is Still Important,” *ReadWrite*, January 11, 2010, [http://readwrite.com/2010/01/11/why\\_facebook\\_is\\_wrong\\_about\\_privacy](http://readwrite.com/2010/01/11/why_facebook_is_wrong_about_privacy).

<sup>208</sup> Dean, “Why the Net Is Not a Public Sphere,” 101.

<sup>209</sup> Zizi Papacharissi, “Privacy as a Luxury Commodity,” *First Monday* 15, no. 8 (2010).

of social networks operates more along the lines of Arendt's concept of the social, which should not be surrendered as the nature of online interaction but fought in the manner of Anonymous in order to restore privacy and create a political realm. This is a point which Schwarz glosses over in her otherwise excellent Arendtian critique of social networks: despite the problems with social networks, they constitute but one algorithmic form that online interaction can take, and thus finding problems with social networks as a political model does not in any way diminish the capacity to build a political realm online in another form.<sup>210</sup> What is needed is a sorting out of privacy and publicity so that they apply to appropriate activities.

The tendency of the social to destroy both public and private space make online social spaces problematic as models for politics, despite the structure they share with the political web of relationships. Any form of online political space which is going to strive for any sense of permanence must aim to keep the space political and fight off the counter-attack of the social. When a Facebook page is set up for a political purpose, there is an underlying tendency for the space to revert back toward Facebook's original social nature. The people in the group will often add each other as friends, meaning more and more of an overlap can occur between political and social as people begin to use what was intended as a political page, to share personal announcements with the group, which causes a blurring into the social. Such groups then have a tendency to devolve into social communities where a strict group consensus forms and political disagreement is then viewed as a form of anti-social behaviour and the space depoliticizes. Contrary to Malcolm Gladwell's assertion that social networking sites do not lead to political activism (a claim he naively made prior to the Arab Spring and Occupy) because they do not enable the strong ties needed to engage in serious politics, the problem with such social networks is that the ties they establish become too personal and, beyond the initial surge of enthusiasm for a political action, fail to establish a lasting political realm because they tend toward the social and depoliticize.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Elke Schwarz, "@hannah\_arendt: An Arendtian Critique of Online Social Networks," *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 43, no. 1 (2014): 165–86.

<sup>211</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, "Small Change," *The New Yorker*, September 27, 2010, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/small-change-3>.

While the anti-political tendency toward socializing a political space is particularly problematic on social networking sites such as Facebook where the user's primary reason for visiting is social and not political, the encroachment of the social is problematic in any form of political space. In the relative early days of widespread internet adoption in the mid to late 1990s, public chat room services offered by AOL and Yahoo provided political rooms where users could discuss political issues. The interesting aspect of these early chat services was that they were unmoderated and uncensored, and simply had broad topics which brought together people with a variety of opinions and backgrounds. When these services became increasingly difficult to use as they were not updated as technology changed leading to unfixed security flaws, many of the users of these political-based rooms switched to other services which were more user-centric. In the case of the Yahoo political rooms which I frequented, its dissolution as a common space due to technical issues led to people from those rooms creating their own chat and message board sites in which only those whom they had become friends with were invited. The effect of this loss of common political space led to a proliferation of social spaces populated by people who mostly agreed with each other, leaving them with little to discuss politically, thus establishing a community consensus in which political disagreement became labelled as disruptive. What this example demonstrates is that while the internet is rife with political possibility precisely because it is so easy to set up new political spaces, there is a serious danger that these spaces become social if they are not common and accessible to all.

The creation of an online political realm must work in the manner in which Arendt described the walls of the Athenian *polis*, they did not determine that a space was political, as that came from the actions of the people, but the walls did indicate a common space where people could go to engage in political action. Dean's critique of online political activity as too dispersed and ultimately as talking with no one listening speaks to this problem of a lack of common political space on the internet, but the fact that such a common space does not currently exist does not mean it cannot exist.<sup>212</sup> The problem of

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<sup>212</sup> Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

online social space not being political is not a limitation of technology but is simply a reflection of the predominant model of offline social space not being political either. But unlike with offline space, online space is much easier to create, shape, and grow. Facebook grew as a social space from the scope of one university campus to being completely global in a matter of a few years. While the social network model is problematic because of its social character, new models of online political space must be created and globalized. Instead of a social network which is primarily centred on people's individual profile pages which are then linked to others as friends or followers, a political web model might instead be focused on political issues which would then link people together in discussion, debate, and decision over a given issue. People would follow topics and issues instead of each other, thus making the political web into a subjectifying rather than identifying mechanism.

### 3.8 Conclusion

An Arendtian conception of the political realm, with allowances for Rancièrian reorderings, provides a model of a public sphere that sets the stage for people to become political subjects, participate in political debate and decision making, and play out their disagreements and conflicts publicly. By placing the political realm online, the entire structure of representative government can come into question as spaces can be created that negate the need to send a limited number of representatives to a limited physical space. The internet has elements of both extreme publicity and extreme privacy, which mark it as social in character. To fend off the depoliticizing influence of the social, activists must focus on ensuring that the privacy of individuals is protected online, while continuing to push for the creation of political spaces which are open, transparent, and accessible.

If space is socially produced, then political space can be produced online. In this manner an online political realm can be superior to traditional pre-internet conceptions of a political realm because it can be more inclusive and participatory, facilitate more robust forms of political subjectivity, and ease the ability to assert conflict in the form of disagreement and dissent. These three aspects of politics will be dealt with in the

following chapters and will provide the content for what happens within the online political realm.

## Chapter 4 — Subjectivity

### 4.1 Introduction

The question of subjectivity is inherently linked to the question of the political realm. In order to have a political realm, there must be people who enter that realm for the purpose of engaging in politics. This chapter deals with this question of who the subject of politics might be. Is the subject of politics the citizen, as Balibar advocates, or, as Derrida argues, have we moved past the idea of subjectivity altogether?<sup>213</sup> The citizen comes across as a relic of a previous age, as politics has increasingly come to deal with global issues it is no longer limited in scope to citizens of a state engaging with other citizens of that state. Today issues such as climate change transcend national borders and problems related to migrant workers involve political action from those who are explicitly not citizens. However, rather than abandon political subjectivity altogether or try to refit it into outmoded clothes, what is needed is a version of the political subject that is compatible with the internet age, in which the political realm may be wholly unrelated to states, borders, or identities.

As the protest movements of Occupy, the Arab Spring, and even Anonymous demonstrate, there is increasingly a push toward forms of political subjectivity that are both universal and without specific qualifications. This renewal of subjectivity is significant because oppositional movements after the decline of communism have tended to be identity based and thus lacked the properly political universal dimension that would make these protests relevant to everyone. Compared to even the alterglobalization protests, which presented itself as a coalition of separate issues and identities, these contemporary movements posited a more robust form of political subjectivity that was not amenable to capture and reformatting by the anti-political regimes of state and economy. The concept of the political subject as an empty universal is gaining ground not just practically but theoretically as well.

The political subject as an empty universal is significant, as it puts the emphasis on the people as the centre of politics. By conceptualizing the political subject in such a way, it

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<sup>213</sup> Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy, eds., *Who Comes After the Subject?* (New York: Routledge, 1991).



becomes open to all and politics becomes relevant to all. An identity based movement is only relevant to those within the identity, a citizen-based politics is only relevant to those who hold legal status within a specific state, and a subject based on Enlightenment ideals has too many positive qualifications which have led to unjust exclusions in the past. The political subject as universal means that the subject's speech and action is relevant to all and is addressed to the public, while its emptiness enables plurality, as there are no specific qualifications or positive attributes that someone must have in order to become a subject. Such a conception of the political subject is especially interesting in an online political realm where bodies, identities, and status qualifications tend to be obscured, making online political interactions naturally suited to an empty universal form of the political subject.

This new form of political subjectivity as practiced by Occupy, the Arab Spring, and Anonymous and as theorized by Žižek, Rancière, and Badiou is uniquely suited to a politics that is situated online. While I will draw on Žižek, Rancière, and Prozorov's extrapolation of Badiou, these thinkers have either little to say about the potential their theories could have in terms of the internet, or are simply opposed to such theorizations. Their own statements, especially in the case of Žižek, often lead to outright contradictions which demonstrate a lack of familiarity with the technological aspects of the internet more than anything. In addition to arguing that these theorists can provide a base for theorizing an online political subject, often over their own objections, I also run up against a number of theorists who attempt to argue that political subjectivity cannot operate online because of its disembodied nature. Gies, Gray, and Donath in particular make arguments about politics being inherently wrapped up with bodily identity which lead them to discount the idea of online subjectivity altogether.<sup>214</sup>

A growing body of work on biopolitics would seem to support the importance of the body for political subjectivity, but, as Rancière points out with respect to Foucault's biopower, what Foucault is describing is not politics but the suppression of politics.<sup>215</sup> Whether biopolitics

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<sup>214</sup> Lieve Gies, "How Material Are Cyberbodies? Broadband Internet and Embodied Subjectivity," *Crime, Media, Culture* 4, no. 3 (December 1, 2008): 311–30; Gray, *Cyborg Citizen*; Judith S. Donath, "Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community," in *Communities in Cyberspace*, ed. Peter Kollock and Marc Smith (London: Routledge, 1999), 27–58.

<sup>215</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus*, 93.

is conceived negatively as a power over life, as with Agamben,<sup>216</sup> or positively as a potential source of political mobilization, as with Hard & Negri,<sup>217</sup> it fails to not only explain the process of political subjectivation online, but also offline, as in the case of the above mentioned protest movements. As Arendt was keen to point out, entering the political realm and becoming a subject is meant to be a liberating experience which enables one to no longer be identified by their private attachments, be it religion, culture, or body, allowing one to enter a realm of constructed equality. In this sense, forms of online subjectivity remind us of a way to escape the anti-political regime which remains concerned with managing, as Foucault described it, territories and populations.<sup>218</sup> It is precisely because governments continue to operate on biopolitical grounds that there are such frequent clashes and disputes with respect to the online world. How does a government concerned with managing populations and bodies within a given geographic territory deal with a space that fundamentally does not respect geographical boundaries and enables individuals to obscure their private identities? Online subjectivity in its bodilessness provides a way to resist the dominant anti-political paradigm of biopolitics and thus should be embraced for its disruptively political potential.

This chapter begins by placing the idea of the universal political subject in historical contrast to the Enlightenment subject, which remains defective due to its positive qualifications. The process of becoming a political subject is then outlined, starting with Žižek's account of subjectivity as first involving a withdrawal from identity. Once the political subject has cast off particularities that make it unable to address the universal, it can then engage with the universal of politics, in which matters of concern are matters that affect the whole community. Using examples from Occupy and the Arab Spring, it is demonstrated how these movements engaged with a form of universal empty subjectivity that made them thoroughly political, in that they sought to challenge the existing distribution of the sensible, to use Rancière's terminology, rather than simply trying to integrate themselves into it without structurally changing anything.

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<sup>216</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Meridian (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>217</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

<sup>218</sup> Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

By contrasting political subjectivation to anti-political identification, I then argue that political subjectivity's universal and empty aspects enable the equality needed to speak politically, as well as providing the freedom to act and move politically within the political realm. By contrast, the forces of anti-politics seek to identify people, put them in their place, and prevent them from crossing boundaries or cutting through borders. When we consider the political subject in an online context, it becomes even more powerful against the anti-political forces of identification because the best online political discussion sites work by inherently pseudonymizing users, forcing them to withdraw from identity and engage with others based on their opinions and ideas, rather than on the grounds of identity, status, or class. Anti-political attempts at identifying and disqualifying someone's political speech online are much more difficult, as it can be almost impossible to determine where someone's place is, or where they belong. Disidentified and pseudonymous online political subjectivity easily cuts through the discriminatory framework of identity, so long as online subjects are careful to protect their privacy.

While I advocate for pseudonymous online political subjectivity, which protects the private offline identity of users, a large body of thought argues that such a form of disembodied subjectivity is dangerous. These arguments range from confusing offline politics and anti-politics to the point where they demand that one must be placed, identified, and thus disqualified in order to be a "political" subject, to arguments which confuse the hardware, software, and wetware layers of the internet, leading to statements about the internet in general that actually only apply to certain websites. Following Arendt, I argue that what must appear publicly in politics is not a person's body, but the contents of their mind. What matters for politics is not that we can see whether a political subject is tall or short, man or woman, but what their opinions on political issues are and what they plan to do about these opinions.

The obscuring of identity and body that can happen online often provokes questions of anonymity and pseudonymity. Critics of online political subjectivity may be willing to accept that we need not see someone's body in order to listen to their words, but then the question of anonymity comes up. How can political speech reveal unique individuals if it is detached from bodily identities? Furthermore, does this strict separation of public and private identities lead to unaccountability or other forms of poor behaviour? In considering these arguments I make the

case that the majority of interactions on political websites are not truly anonymous but are pseudonymous, as they tend to be attached to a consistent username around which stories can be developed which enable that person to display publicly who they truly are, without threatening their private identity or making it into a matter of proclaimed privilege or disqualification. Given these various considerations, it can be easier to go through the subjectivation process in the context of an online political realm, as it can enable the courage that is necessary to take the risk of speaking and acting politically by providing a shield for one's private identity.

## 4.2 Political Subjectivity and the Emptiness of the Universal

On the surface there are similarities between the theory of the political subject I will advance here and the Enlightenment liberal subject, or simply the citizen, on account of the emphasis on the universality of political subjectivity. The alleged universality of the modern liberal subject, however, has come under attack from all quarters. As Vincent Descombes argues, an attack on the illusion of subjectivity seemed to have been the primary preoccupation of French philosophy in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with both post-structuralists and Heideggerians seeking to banish the spectre of Enlightenment subjectivity.<sup>219</sup> Feminism has pointed out that the modern liberal political subject was assumed to be a male, postcolonial studies has taught us that this subject also was assumed to be white, and queer studies points out that it was assumed to be heterosexual as well. The modern liberal subject has been widely exposed as not universal but a particular identity which has attempted to elevate its particularity to a hegemonic status through imperial impositions.

These are all valid critiques, but the reaction to the false universality of the modern liberal subject has been to assert a plethora of particularities against it and emphasize difference over universal equality.<sup>220</sup> Political subjectivity is thrown out in favour of multiple or shifting identities which assert their own particularity against another particularity which falsely claims to be universal. If, however, the universality of the modern subject is exposed to be nothing more than one particularity attempting to impose itself on all others, and is to be rejected as its various

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<sup>219</sup> Vincent Descombes, "A Propos of the 'critique of the Subject' and of the Critique of This Critique," *Topoi* 7, no. 2 (1988): 123–124.

<sup>220</sup> Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman, *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

critics argue, the assertion of other particularities is not a proper solution. As Prozorov points out, “is not the problem with universalism precisely that the allegedly universal was *in fact* particular?”<sup>221</sup> The proliferation of identity politics, multiculturalism, and poststructuralist theories of shifting and multiple identity are not a solution to the problem of the false universalism of the modern liberal subject because they fail to solve the problem of fake universalism that they rightfully questioned in the first place.

The root of the problem with the modern liberal political subject was that it attempted to ground its universality on foundationalist principles. There would be appeals to God, nature, or history as an attempt to justify filling in the universal with a specific particular. Such attempts to ground the political community on solid foundations of an unquestionable and authoritative basis, however, end up destroying plurality as those who do not agree with the grounding principles are simply cast out of politics. As was argued in the previous chapter, the political realm is a human creation that must be built, and thus it has no natural grounding. As Arendt points out with respect to the American Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson perhaps had an inkling of the wholly constructed and contingent nature of the political realm when he wrote “we hold these truths to be self-evident”, a clear contradiction as self-evident truth need not be “held”, which implies the truths of American politics are actually a human construction.<sup>222</sup> In this sense, what holds the political realm together is not that the individual subjects have rationally come together to decide that based on a set of natural truths this is the way the community must be governed, but instead through a recognition that the universal is groundless and therefore empty.

The universality of the political subject stems from its emptiness, or, what we have in common is *nothing*. Unlike the theorists of consensus or particularized identity who argue that conflict leads to violence or totalitarian erasures of difference, having nothing in common does not eliminate the potential for politics, but instead calls it into existence. In an Arendtian sense, we build the common world simply to give ourselves an agonistic space to test out our subjective opinions against those of others and to provide a political means to decide common matters which have no objective answers. A politics which embraces the ability for each to try to

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<sup>221</sup> Sergei Prozorov, *Theory of the Political Subject: Void Universalism II* (London: Routledge, 2013), xvii.

<sup>222</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 185.

persuade the rest is a direct substitute for violent force, which imposes a single solution from above. If the common world demanded the commonality of subjects, then universality would be impossible precisely because to be the same as others demands that difference be excluded and subjective plurality be erased. The Occupy movement serves as an excellent example of such empty universal subjectivity as it could not be reduced to a singular identity or situation, and thus was able to manifest itself in over 100 different countries.

Becoming a political subject means elevating oneself out of the particulars of identity and into the realm of universal concern, where one can express one's own opinion and respond to others, marking one as a unique individual. The emptiness of the universal makes it accessible to anyone who wishes to direct themselves toward the whole. It is on this measure that the theorists of liberal multiculturalism, most prominently Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth, conflate political subjectivity with a particular identity.<sup>223</sup> Their arguments fail to have political consequence because they look inwards rather than outwards, which leads to a denial of individuality as there is no means for an individual to express their own subjective position and reveal themselves to everyone else as a unique individual. Particular identities are what make us like everyone else, in that to be identified as a Muslim, Korean, or lesbian is to be placed and categorized as not a unique individual but as part of a general group where all members have the same properties. Political subjectivity moves outside of these particularities in that the political subject reveals him or herself to be someone unique who is part of that unidentifiable part of society which commonly takes the name of "the people". The logic of the anti-political state is one of identification, in which there can be no empty universal position that floats above the hierarchy of ordered and identified parts and thus no critical debate about issues that affect everyone. Subjectivity is an important terrain of contestation between politics and anti-politics as the identification mechanism of keeping everyone in their assigned place is an attempt to foreclose the emergence of political subjects and shut down the possibility of politics itself.

### 4.3 The Withdrawal from Identity

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<sup>223</sup> Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996).

Against the recent push to do away with the political subject altogether, exemplified by 1991's *Who Comes After the Subject*,<sup>224</sup> there has been a drive to reassert the importance of political subjectivity in its universal form by a group of contemporary theorists ranging from those who took their starting point with Althusser then turned against him (Rancière, Badiou, Laclau and Mouffe), to others more influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis (Žižek, Zupančič, Stavrakakis). While Arendt had no engagement with Althusser and certainly had little interest in psychoanalysis, her focus on free and equal subjects striving for immortality within a political realm which functions as a universal world without positive properties puts her thinking in line with many of these thinkers, despite their often harsh critiques of her thought.

A common source among these contemporary theorists of the empty universal is Hegel, and in particular Alexandre Kojève's interpretation of Hegel which revitalized French philosophy after the First World War. In Kojève's interpretation, the Hegelian subject is driven by the desire to be recognized by others. Desire implies the presence of an absence in the form of a lack, which leads the human subject to "negate given being" and thus attempt to change the world in an attempt to satisfy the desire that is driven by the lack, which is a lack of recognition.<sup>225</sup> Action in a political sense has a negative and subtractive character before it can have a bigger political impact. If one is simply satisfied with what is, then one does not act. Since the goal of these actions is recognition, political subjectivity is necessarily universal, as to be recognized by one person or even a thousand people is not satisfying if one can still face the discrimination and disempowerment of a lack of recognition from others. Now Arendt is not a Hegelian, but she explains the function of political subjectivity in much the same way. She argues that what drives people to enter the political realm and become political subjects is the desire to leave some lasting trace on the world, and thus achieve a form of immortality. The great performative deeds of speech and action which characterize politics can achieve immortality for the subject only in so far as these deeds become universally known, leading the subject-actor to become universally recognized.

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<sup>224</sup> Cadava, Connor, and Nancy, *Who Comes After the Subject?*.

<sup>225</sup> Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. James H. Nichols Jr., Agora Paperback Editions (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1980), 38.

But in order to be able to distinguish oneself amongst one's equals in word and deed as Arendt describes, first one must be recognized on a basic level as an equal capable of engaging in political speech in the first place. It is in this sense that Kojève describes recognition as an overcoming of oppression. For Rancière, it is this kind of striving to overcome wrong that drives people toward political subjectivation, rather than an Arendtian sense of striving to leave a trace and be remembered.<sup>226</sup> When one realizes there is something wrong in the world, it motivates one to act, which requires that one must first step out of one's assigned place and role within society. This means taking a risk to try to enact a change in the world which brings about more equality. The political subjectivation process that seeks to bring about freedom and equality in the Rancièrian sense is then a necessary prerequisite to acting as a subject in the Arendtian sense, although the two forms of subjectivation are usually linked, as correcting a wrong brings about a universal change in the world, thus winning the actors immortal fame in the process. Both of these motivations to become a political subject based on recognition act as a corrective to Kojève's belief that once everyone was universally recognized, and thus free and equal, there would be no more politics. Even if it were possible to purge all positive identifications and (dis)qualifications from the political realm, something which is likely impossible, there would still be the action of equals striving to distinguish themselves which would drive people to enter the political realm.

Taking his starting point from Kojève's claim that all political action begins with negation, in many ways Žižek's *The Ticklish Subject* is an interesting synthesis of much of the contemporary political theory which seeks to reassert the importance of the political subject and in particular its universality. Encompassing insights from Rancière, Badiou, Laclau, and Mouffe, as read through his Hegelian-Lacanian perspective, Žižek posits subjectivity as a three step process. First there is a withdrawal from the world, followed by a plunge into madness, eventually allowing an emergence from madness to create a symbolic universe.<sup>227</sup> To put this process of subjectivation in political terms, it means that to become a subject one must first withdraw from one's particular place in society, strip away all identification and classification

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<sup>226</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 39.

<sup>227</sup> Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 36–38.



and thus negate given-being in Kojève's terminology, which will then allow one to come back into the shared and universal world of politics. As Žižek puts it,

you become 'something' (you are counted as a subject) only after going through the zero-point, after being deprived of all the 'pathological' (in the Kantian sense of empirical, contingent) features that support your identity, and thus are reduced to 'nothing'—'a Nothingness counted as Something'<sup>228</sup>

In other words to become a political subject, or to reveal oneself as someone with political substance ("something"), one must leave behind the particularities of identity that are used by the anti-political order to categorize, place, count, and ultimately dismiss one as incapable of political speech. By negating one's given-being, or identity-place in the world, and embracing one's lack, one can then emerge to perform acts of universal significance that can both lead to recognition and change the world. If one is satisfied by one's particular place in the world, or one's own identity, one will not have the desire to act politically. The lack that drives the desire to act will be filled, and the goal of such individuals will simply involve replicating the status quo rather than taking the risk to disrupt their own satisfaction and bring about political change.

In virtually every protest movement that arises, there is a concerted attempt by the apparatuses of anti-politics to identify the protesters in order to categorize and dismiss them as simply concerned with their own identity interests with nothing relevant to say to everyone else. In the Arab Spring there were continuous attempts to identify protesters as foreign disrupters who should not be listened to,<sup>229</sup> and in the context of Occupy the protesters were labelled and dismissed as everything from hostile to America and thus not to be trusted, to disingenuous pawns of the labour movement trying to distract the public from the failings of President Obama.<sup>230</sup> Such attempts to uncover a hidden particularity are meant to reveal the activists as self-interested parties with nothing to say to the wider public. A prime example would be the 2013 protests in New Brunswick against exploratory drilling for shale gas, commonly called fracking. While these protests began as a grassroots coalition between environmentalists, people in rural areas concerned about water quality, and aboriginal groups, the media was quick to

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>229</sup> Jeffrey Fleishman and Paul Richter, "Egypt Raids Foreign Organizations' Offices in Crackdown," *Los Angeles Times*, December 29, 2011, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/dec/29/world/la-fg-egypt-ngo-raids-20111230>.

<sup>230</sup> Bernie Becker, "Cain, Gingrich Blast Occupy Wall Street Demonstrators," Text, *The Hill*, (October 9, 2011), <http://thehill.com/video/in-the-news/186391-cain-gingrich-blast-occupy-wall-street-protests>.

identify and dismiss the protesters as merely an aboriginal complaint about land use, thus papering over the water safety issue. Such a framing was meant to convince the average Canadian that these protests were of no wider consequence since aboriginals are a small minority and a land claim dispute does not affect the vast majority of Canadians. If the protests were instead framed as about access to clean water and the potential for water pollution associated with side effects of the fracking process, then this might have been an issue of universal significance which the average person could have sympathized with. In order to become political subjects, individuals must transcend their supporting private identities so that they can access the universal and speak to it without being dismissed as partisans of a particular identity that has no commonality with the rest of the people.

The key difference between this idea of subjectivity as a stripping away of particulars and the old Enlightenment political subject of universal reason revolves around the difference between adding and subtracting. Žižek likes to tell a joke to elaborate on his conception of subjectivity about a worker who leaves a factory every day with an empty wheelbarrow who the bosses believe is stealing from them. The bosses check the wheelbarrow every day but cannot figure out what he is stealing because the wheelbarrow is always empty. But Žižek says this is precisely the point of subjectivity, that it is empty, as the worker is stealing the wheelbarrows themselves.<sup>231</sup> This is what the old Enlightenment idea of political subjectivity misses; the fact that subjectivity is empty and without specific properties is exactly what makes it universal, not the ability to rationally come to a consensus on a set of values that must be universally true and agreed on by all. To become a political subject involves emptying our wheelbarrows, not making sure everyone has the same things in their wheelbarrows. While everyone having nothing can be truly universal, a situation in which everyone's wheelbarrows are filled exactly the same way is virtually impossible. It is also why the anti-political order seems to be disproportionately threatened by protests that advocate not for any one specific identity-cause, but operate in a manner so that anyone can project whatever complaint they have onto the protest and thus join in. The vexation of many commentators about what Occupy really was about relates to this empty universality and the difficulty in trying to categorize, count, and place these people who were making a general argument about corporate greed and government complacency, and not

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<sup>231</sup> Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 132.

making a specific identity claim about a certain group needing to be given a place within the whole. Identity claims are inherently static, as they seek to keep people in their place, while political subjectivity posits an empty universality free from classification and open to all who are willing to cast aside static placements and move among those who have no place or qualification.

Rancière calls this empty form of universal subjectivity the part with no part, or more simply the people. The people are not a specific people, just an empty name that stands for the universal nature, and at the same time, plurality of opinion contained within the people. Rancière emphasizes the difference between the modern political subject which uses reason to arrive at a shared set of values and his empty subjectivity by arguing that political subjectivation, and thus politics itself, arises not from ties between individuals and the bonds of community but from the opposite: politics arises out of a miscount of the parts of society.<sup>232</sup> Against the social contract theories which argue that political subjectivity arises from individuals coming together to place their interests in common, political subjects come into being precisely when those who disagree with the existing ordering of parts assert their own existence.<sup>233</sup> In this sense, the political subject is inherently conflictual but also needs no common interests or traits. To come together and place interests in common relies on the idea that such individuals all have an agreement on what the common interest is, and thus government becomes a juridical process of social administration. The benefit of the empty subject is that such a subject need not join in some impossible and mythical original consensus, preserving the plurality of opinion that is the basis of politics itself.

At the same time, the part with no part as universal and empty does not simply mean that it is open to competing hegemonic projects which seek to fill the universal void with their own particular project, as Laclau argues.<sup>234</sup> In so far as the lack which characterizes the empty universal gets filled with some positive project of hegemonic rulership, this amounts to the assertion of the police logic and the temporary defeat of politics. Rancière's suspicion of hegemonic projects, including socialism or communism, leads him toward an oppositional stance which is able to maintain a form of true universality which remains empty and without specific requirements. As Prozorov puts it, "Rancière's true universality is whatever does *not* fall under

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<sup>232</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 6.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>234</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

Laclau's fake universality."<sup>235</sup> Rancière leaves little possibility for politics to be "official", but with an Arendtian notion of politics which is fundamentally opposed to sovereignty, the sheer empty universality of politics can be preserved at least in principle, as politics would never be socialist or capitalist or fascist, but simply a procedure to debate, decide, and act on public affairs.<sup>236</sup>

#### 4.4 The Scandal of Plurality

The plurality of political subjects has long been viewed as problematic by philosophers who have sought to develop constrained systems whose aim is rigid stability. From Plato right up to modern theories of consensus and communitarianism, the internal division of the people, what Arendt calls the basic fact of human plurality which stems from the fact that every person is different,<sup>237</sup> has been viewed as a scandal to overcome instead of the "primary condition for the exercise of politics."<sup>238</sup> Subjectivity in a political sense is, of course, subjective. Everyone is different, yet politics is not simply a personal or private affair but is conducted publicly and has universal significance. As Arendt explains it, the very reality of the common world of politics is derived from the fact that people look at it from different perspectives and that there is no objective measurement or tool which can be applied in order to decide public affairs.<sup>239</sup> The commonality of the world of human affairs stems from the diversity of subjects who share their perspectives with others in a way in which, even though each subject has a different perspective, each person is looking and talking about things and events that are of universal significance. The only way to preserve the plurality of subjectivity is by leaving the universal empty. To fill the universal is to introduce reasons to disqualify people as political subjects, and thus undermine its plurality.

While the Arab Spring's chants referencing the people or Occupy's slogan invoking the 99% are excellent examples of a political subjectivity enabling internal plurality, there is still a remnant of thought that claims to be oppositional or even leftist that would prefer a plurality of

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<sup>235</sup> Prozorov, *Theory of the Political Subject*, 26.

<sup>236</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 163.

<sup>237</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7–8.

<sup>238</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 87.

<sup>239</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 57.

identities to a plurality of different opinions as the basis of political subjectivity. While identity politics is losing much of the popular currency it once had, as evidenced by these new protest movements, theoretically there is still a strong current of thought in which the critique of the Enlightenment-era modern political subject amounts to the assertion of identity against subjectivity. In Jeffrey Popke's attempt to come up with an explicitly post-structuralist form of subjectivity he ends up directly conflating subjectivity with identity and, thus, unwittingly becomes an ally of anti-politics by asserting the existence of multiple identities at the cost of any form of universal subjectivity.<sup>240</sup> Deleuze and Guattari's nomadic subject can be criticized in the same manner, as their ideal subject would be a migrant worker with no job security constantly moving around desperately trying to find work.<sup>241</sup> Such individuals are radically particularized and destabilized to the point where not only are they fundamentally dissatisfied with their own position and would certainly not wish to elevate it as a model for anyone, but they are also completely outside of politics, as they are cast as purely economic actors who are thoroughly excluded from any kind of universal political action that might change their situation. The nomadic schizo-subject has more in common with Agamben's *homo sacer*, who is reduced to bare life and becomes the object of radically depoliticized biopower, than any form of political subjectivity that might present a challenge to the status quo.<sup>242</sup> The stripping of identity and becoming nothing which kicks off the subjectivization process is not to be confused with a stripping away of the ability to act politically and be reduced to a pure object of identity. Agamben's *homo sacer*, or those in the concentration camps of the Holocaust, were reduced to pure identity and thus were the radical negation of political subjectivity as the State made it unable to set aside their identity that precluded them from becoming unique political subjects and marked them as objects to be acted on.

Many of these attempts to politicize identity as a substitute for political subjectivity have ended up backfiring or have led to unintended consequences. The leftist politicization of sexuality for example then turns into its opposite: the sexualization of politics.<sup>243</sup> The private lives of public figures, which for the most part have little impact on their jobs, have now become

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<sup>240</sup> E. Jeffrey Popke, "Poststructuralist Ethics: Subjectivity, Responsibility and the Space of Community," *Progress in Human Geography* 27, no. 3 (June 1, 2003): 298–316.

<sup>241</sup> Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 264–265.

<sup>242</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*.

<sup>243</sup> Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 84.

the object of public scrutiny to the point where it is easier to remove a politician from office who has an affair than one who pursues regressive anti-feminist policies. While issues of social inequality can become the catalysts for political action, a point I will deal with later in the chapter, advocating in favour of one's own identity has an isolating and world-destroying effect which prevents "the people" from forming as an empty part, and cuts off the individual's access to this empty universal. As Žižek argues in response to Wendy Brown,<sup>244</sup> there is something fundamentally liberating about experiencing one's own culture as contingent, something that philosophers from Descartes, with his self-doubt, to Spinoza, who lived between and outside both Christian and Jewish culture, to Nietzsche's renunciation of his Germanness and rather spurious claim to being Polish, have understood.<sup>245</sup> To move beyond the identity one is born into allows one to address the world as a whole and as an equal to everyone else within the world, rather than as a prejudiced advocate of a specific place or identity. In politics this means engaging in speech and action in order to reveal oneself as a unique individual, something which fails to happen if people let their particular identity speak for them.

If the idea of universal political subjectivity is thrown out in favour of a multiplicity of identities, then politics itself is thrown out, as identities do not need political speech to be revealed. When movements to overcome exclusion based on identity change their position from negating the oppressive effects of identity to promoting identity as a positive qualification, then these movements end up reinscribing positive properties as a qualification for political being. The problem of Enlightenment subjectivity, with its positive properties, is then only reproduced by advocating in favour of minority identities that were traditionally overlooked. A politics of identity eliminates individual uniqueness, and thus subjectivity itself, reinforcing the anti-political status quo in which the state polices populations. Plurality is impossible when group identity becomes the determination of one's political status. Even though many advocates of identity as a substitution for subjectivity speak in favour of plurality, this becomes merely a plurality of identities which leaves no room for individuals to freely reveal their own unique subjectivity and consequently escape from the prejudicial effects of identity.

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<sup>244</sup> Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>245</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Tolerance as an Ideological Category," *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 4 (2008): 660–82.

## 4.5 Protest and Subjectivity

Žižek's argument that the subject's withdrawal and stripping of identity is linked to madness has political implications as well. He argues that the terror and upheaval of revolutions relates to this stripping of previous identities and allows a new order to arise.<sup>246</sup> While revolutions and protests need not relieve the terror in the same manner of the French Revolution, they do tend to have similar processes that could be linked to the madness that accompanies a withdrawal of all identity. In particular the black bloc protest technique, which first gained public notoriety in the 1999 Seattle WTO protests and has recently been adapted by Egyptian activists protesting the Muslim Brotherhood,<sup>247</sup> operates as a physical expression of the subjectivizing process of withdrawal and stripping away of identity. In a black bloc, the protesters all wear similar black clothes and masks as a means to obscure their own individual identities and express a kind of collective solidarity with the other protesters. The fact that the black bloc technique is often associated with more aggressive protest methods, such as direct confrontations with police and property damage, mark it as both a stripping of identity and a kind of descent into necessary madness in order to eventually emerge to create a new universal order. In Egypt, black bloc protesters were explicitly stripping themselves of Muslim identity and targeted the offices of the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist Freedom and Justice Party with arson attacks with the goal of secularizing the government and making it responsive to the people in general, rather than just a certain portion of the people who identify as Muslims.

The protest technique of obscuring identity is an essential aspect of the subjectivation process. To put on a mask is not simply to prevent identification and possible arrest by the police, but is to strip oneself of the particular elements that sustain a private identity which is the object of classification, administration, and policing by the anti-political state and economic system. Laws against concealing identity in a protest and media criticism of protesters as hiding when they wear masks is a deeply anti-political ploy to cut off the subjectivization process at its very beginning. If individuals can remain objects of identification, then their speech can be classified and dismissed as politically irrelevant to the whole, and that threatening universality,

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<sup>246</sup> Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 108.

<sup>247</sup> Jesse Rosenfeld, "Egypt's Black Bloc Surges in Popularity," *The Toronto Star*, February 24, 2013, [http://www.thestar.com/news/world/2013/02/24/egypts\\_black\\_bloc\\_surges\\_in\\_popularity.html](http://www.thestar.com/news/world/2013/02/24/egypts_black_bloc_surges_in_popularity.html).

known as the people, can be prevented from forming. Interesting parallels also arise here with regard to the debate about online anonymity, which put in the context of identity-concealing protests, clearly becomes an issue not of technology but of the difference between political and anti-political approaches. As I will argue in the next section, once one has stripped oneself of identity and essentially become anonymous, one can then emerge as a member of the people and reveal oneself to be a unique individual capable of political speech which addresses not simply one's own position in life, but matters pertaining to the universal world of politics.

#### 4.6 The Emergence of the Universal

After the subject withdraws and strips away particular identities, the next step is emerging as a member of the universal people. An act becomes political at the point when it is able to finish the subject-formation process and elevate a specific claim into a universal stand-in for any and all wrongs. When a particular demand or problem becomes a standing metaphor onto which everyone can project one's own individual demands and problems it becomes universalized and thus politicized.<sup>248</sup> A protest or complaint must move from being about something particular, which only applies to a small segment of the population, into something that serves to represent all complaints and problems with the existing order, thus moving from the realm of the social to the political. Politics is:

the art of the local and singular construction of cases of universality. Such construction is only possible as long as the singularity of the wrong...is distinguished from the particularization of right attributed to collectivities according to their identity.<sup>249</sup>

What this means is that for a protest or complaint to be properly political, it must be addressed the whole and be able to serve as a metaphor for all instances of injustice. If the protest or complaint remains focused on incorporating an identity group into the whole, then it remains within the realm of the social. If a protest requires a certain identity to take part, then it fails to be political as it remains within the realm of social particularity.

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<sup>248</sup> Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 243.

<sup>249</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 139.



“The people” who populate the political world have no positive identifications or qualifications such as virtue or wealth, just the empty indicator of freedom.<sup>250</sup> As Rancière puts it:

Whoever has no part—the poor of ancient times, the third estate, the modern proletariat—cannot in fact have any part other than all or nothing...it is through the existence of this part of those who have no part, of this nothing that is all, that the community exists as a *political* community—that is, as divided by a fundamental dispute, by a dispute to do with the counting of the community’s parts even more than of their “rights”. [emphasis added]<sup>251</sup>

The fact that becoming a political subject does not require one to have a certain set of beliefs, qualifications, or a specific identity means that subjectivity strips away such things and one becomes part of those with no part. The part with no part has no identity and thus is not assigned a place in the hierarchically constructed order, yet it remains in existence floating alongside the established order. The lack of identity or qualifications means that it can claim to be the whole community--“the people”--precisely because it does not require any positive qualification. The political subject as the part with no part differs in this sense from both the Enlightenment subject, which had a single set of positive qualifications and identity traits which were falsely claimed to be universal, and the postmodern subject which is based on a multitude of different sets of positive identity qualifications.

An example of the subject-formation process which operated according to the logic of taking a particular and universalizing it into a metaphor for all complaints against the regime occurred during the Arab Spring. In Tunisia the initial catalyst for the protests and revolution came from a fruit vendor who, after facing police harassment and silence from authorities after he tried to complain, set himself on fire in a dramatic act of desperate suicide. This fruit vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, had a specific complaint against a particular wrong, but the protests which later arose were not focused on the specific situation of fruit vendors and their mistreatment by police and the authorities. Instead Bouazizi became a metaphorical stand-in on to which everyone was able to project their various problems and complaints with the Tunisian regime. His treatment was elevated to a universal with which everyone could identify with, to the point

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 9.

where (untrue) rumours were even spread that he possessed a university degree in computer science but due to the government's corruption and lack of economic prospects was forced to sell fruit instead. In this way he became an emblem for the lower class, the middle class, and even those wealthier Tunisians who identified with him as a business owner frustrated by corruption and harassment from the authorities. The same type of metaphorical elevation happened in Egypt where one of the primary websites used by activists was called "We Are all Khaled Said", invoking the idea that the mistreatment of one was the mistreatment of all. The success of the Arab Spring relied precisely on this inherently political move of elevating a particular wrong into an empty universal canvass onto which the people could project whatever complaints they had. One could imagine that, if the protests remained firmly about the particular situation of Tunisia's fruit vendors, the government could have easily either dismissed the protests as irrelevant to the wider Tunisian population or made some token move to marginally alleviate their situation and assert the rights of fruit vendors and thus appease the protesters, preventing the mass demonstrations that followed.

Given the recent history of North Africa and the Middle East, in which Islamism seemed to be the only organized form of popular resistance to the left-over dictatorships of the days of anti-colonial Arab nationalism, the stripping of specific identity to form a people is all the more striking. Perhaps the most widely used slogan during the Arab Spring was "Ash-sha'b yurīd isqāt an-nizām" which translates to "the people wants to bring down the regime."<sup>252</sup> As Uriel Abulof points out, the inclusion of the term "the people" is of utmost importance because

in the two long centuries since Napoleon landed in Alexandria, the moral foundation of modern politics--popular sovereignty--has been absent from the Arab Middle East. The Arab people became the object for colonizers, dictators and imams, with their call to submission and arms. Never a subject for thought and action, the people lacked political agency, powerless to forge a collective moral self, let alone a nation to demand self-determination: the right to tell right from wrong in the public sphere.<sup>253</sup>

By making the slogan specifically state that "the people" want to bring down the regime, and not simply "down with the regime," is to declare the existence of a form of universal subjectivity. Furthermore, such a subjectivity had gone through the process of withdrawal and stripped itself

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<sup>252</sup> Uriel Abulof, "What Is the Arab Third Estate?," *Huffington Post*, March 10, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/uriel-abulof/what-is-the-arab-third-es\\_b\\_832628.html?](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/uriel-abulof/what-is-the-arab-third-es_b_832628.html?)

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*

of particular aspects. Many reports cite the ease with which Coptics and Muslims put aside religious differences to work together against the regime and how middle class professionals fought street battles hand in hand with the poor, as their various reasons for protesting the Egyptian dictatorship united them regardless of their private backgrounds.<sup>254</sup>

This form of universal subjectivity differs from the way the Syrian Islamists view themselves in the civil war that sprang out of the Arab Spring protests in that country. They transformed the slogan of “the people wants to bring down the regime” to “al-Ummah turīd khilāfah islāmiyyah” which translates to “the Ummah wants an Islamic caliphate”.<sup>255</sup> For the Syrian Islamists, it is not an empty universal people who want something but the ummah, which has a connotation of a specifically identified group: a nation of Muslims.<sup>256</sup> Furthermore, they do not simply want the fall of the regime of President Bashir al-Assad but they specifically want an Islamic Caliphate, which is a form of government for and by a particular identity in which others would be excluded. While the Syrian uprising has its roots in the Arab Spring, the transformation of the slogan demonstrates that the war in Syria is now of a fundamentally different character than of the Arab Spring. The subjective emergence of an empty universal known simply as “the people,” which was part of the reason the Arab Spring was such a unique event in the first place has been lost to the championing of particular identities. By universalizing a particular, the universal comes into effect not through subjects obtaining some supposedly neutral position but through recognizing and elevating to universality a particular that is out of joint or structurally excluded from the whole.<sup>257</sup>

The uniting factor of this universality comes from the fact that each subject recognizes the inadequacy of any particular identity and thus throws his or her lot in with “the people” who do not have a set of specific values to which one must adhere in order to become one of them.<sup>258</sup> To be a part of the people who wants to bring down the regime meant being united with the other people as part of a collective, yet at the same time the people make no identity demands of the

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<sup>254</sup> Alexander, *Performative Revolution in Egypt*, 8.

<sup>255</sup> Wael Sawah, “Has the Syrian Revolution Been Hijacked by Islamists?,” *The Syrian Observer*, August 16, 2013, <http://syrianobserver.com/EN/Features/25503>.

<sup>256</sup> Christopher Phillips, “Syria’s Bloody Arab Spring,” *After the Arab Spring: Power Shift in the Middle East? LSE IDEAS Special Report*, May 2012, [http://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/publications/reports/pdf/sr011/final\\_lse\\_ideas\\_\\_syriasbloodyarabspring\\_phillips.pdf](http://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/publications/reports/pdf/sr011/final_lse_ideas__syriasbloodyarabspring_phillips.pdf).

<sup>257</sup> Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 269–270.

<sup>258</sup> Žižek, “Tolerance as an Ideological Category,” 673.

subjects, unlike the Syrian Islamists who demand a particular identity as a condition of participation. While subjects withdraw from identity, they do not lose their subjective and pluralistic opinions. In fact, it is precisely the stripping away of identity that allows each subject to be both universal and unique. For the Syrian Islamists, to identify as a Muslim and be part of their group means to also adhere to a set of dogmatic principles and values which are not open to debate, thus erasing plurality.<sup>259</sup> Thus to maintain identity is to allow oneself to become just like everyone else, while the stripping away of identity allows the subject to reveal him or herself as a unique individual, allowing plurality to flourish. Consequently, when Judith Butler critiques the universal as a site of violent erasure, Žižek points out that this is not a critique of the universal but precisely its benefit.<sup>260</sup> The universal as a site of erasure enables one to move beyond the static group constraints of cultural, bodily, or religious identification.

The universal as a site of violently erasing identity was the primary political move in ancient Athens which allowed for the development of democracy in the first place. In the reforms of Cleisthenes, *ethnos* was replaced by *demos*, where the *ethnos* is particular identity and the *demos* is universal political subjectivity. Unfortunately, however, *ethnos* is becoming more prominent today as wars break out over religious difference and multicultural society is predicated on assigning each identity a particular place so that there is no universal part with no part, but only a collection of well-ordered ethnic parts which come together to form a consensual whole with no polemical remainder. Even worse is the assumption that such ethnic identities are natural and inescapable, when in reality they are arbitrary to the point of bizarre. Many of the supposedly inheritable ethnic identities today which people claim are passed from parent to child are not even grounded in bodily traits or genetics, but in beliefs such as religion or nationality, so that the only way to discover someone's allegedly natural identity is to have them tell you. Rancière links this strange elevation of beliefs to the level of ethnic identity to the seemingly random categorization of animals in an ancient Chinese encyclopedia which is cited in a story by Jorge Luis Borges.<sup>261</sup> Does the division of people into ethnicities such as Muslim, female,

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<sup>259</sup> Fernande van Tets, "Isis Takes Iraq's Largest Christian Town as Residents Told – 'Leave, Convert or Die,'" *The Independent*, August 7, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-takes-iraqs-largest-christian-town-of-qaraqosh-9653789.html>.

<sup>260</sup> Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 272.

<sup>261</sup> Rancière, *Chronicles of Consensual Times*, 4.

atheist, or immigrant not appear just as odd as dividing animals into categories such as those who belong to the Emperor, those who have just broken a pitcher, or those who act like madmen?

Too often these forms of naturalized identity are then used to disqualify the possibility for political subjectivation. As Prozorov argues,

such familiar claims that e.g. equality is an impossibility in Islamic society or that Russian culture is hostile to freedom would be utterly irrelevant even if they were true, since world politics is not determined by any particular culture or tradition but is rather made possible by a subtraction from it.<sup>262</sup>

Such naturalization of cultural identity is inherently anti-political as it attempts to erase the ability to act. As we have seen in everything from the revolts in Tunisia and Egypt to the activism of the band Pussy Riot in Russia, political action and the generation of political subjects is always possible everywhere, as the ability to say no is universal and requires no positive identifications. Thus when cultural relativists claim that one cannot criticize oppression or inequality in other cultures because of different practices, they are taking a strong stance against the possibility for political subjects to emerge within those cultures who can make a declaration that there is a wrong that must be negated, resulting in an anti-political attitude that ends up siding with the authorities and against political activists.

What the institutions of anti-politics attempt to do through a process of identifying such seemingly strange and arbitrary naturalized groups is to prevent “the possibility of a ‘metaphoric’ elevation of particular wrong into a stand-in for the universal ‘wrong’.”<sup>263</sup> This is done by deploying experts, social workers, and a discourse of tolerance to catalogue and identify the specifics of the situation in order to provide some recourse. The possibility of subjectivation and politicization are then precluded, yet the solutions provided are never quite satisfying and the possibility of destructive violence when the political is foreclosed always remains latent.<sup>264</sup> In this sense, the assertion of a multiplicity of identities and a focus on cultural difference reinforces the dominant anti-political ideology of globalized capitalism, which happily adapts to the particularities of each culture, as this is more profitable than attempting to Americanize the

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<sup>262</sup> Prozorov, *Theory of the Political Subject*, 38.

<sup>263</sup> Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 243.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

world. This critique of identification as an ordering of parts leads to Rancière's arguments about political subjectivity and police identification.

#### 4.7 Anti-Political Identification versus Political Subjectivation

Seeing as subjectivity is a terrain of contestation between politics and anti-politics, a more precise elaboration of how identity is used by anti-politics to foreclose subjectivity is needed, and on this I will draw on Rancière and place him in contrast to Althusser and Foucault. Part of the recent impetus for rejecting notions of political subjectivity comes from the influential accounts of Althusser and Foucault who treat the political subject not as a free actor but as someone who is subjected to the state. For Althusser, the subject is interpellated by ideology, and thus "the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection".<sup>265</sup> Foucault and the theorists of governmentality, such as Nikolas Rose, extend the Althusserian idea so that subjects are produced by the application of biopower through the management of populations in prisons, clinics, schools, and virtually all aspect of life.<sup>266</sup> Again, subjects are subjected and produced by the government in order to assent to its structure. This is not subjectivity but identity, and it relates not to politics but to what Rancière calls policing. A proper form of subjectivity is not a positive placing in a specific world, as in Althusser and Foucault, but a subtraction from it which enables access to the empty universal world. The problem with Althusserian or Foucauldian accounts of subjectivity as identification is how to break out of this subjection and act politically, a question that Foucault did turn to in later in life, but a question which Rancière is much better equipped to deal with.

In Rancière's terminology, politics is bound up with the police, where politics introduces dissensus and disagreement and the role of the police is maintaining the existing consensual distribution of the sensible. Policing the status quo consists of keeping all the multiple identities that make up the social whole in their assigned places. The primary move of the anti-political police is to deny the existence of the part with no part.<sup>267</sup> The idea that the whole of the community might be more than the sum of its parts, that individuals may transcend the

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<sup>265</sup> Louis Althusser, *On Ideology*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2008), 56.

<sup>266</sup> Rose, *Powers of Freedom*.

<sup>267</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 14.

boundaries of their given social, economic, or political position is intolerable, as it opens up access to the universal realm of politics to anyone. The key innovation of democracy is that politics is not simply a job, or a specific role in society only open to those who are qualified, but that politics is universally relevant, as its debates and decisions affect everyone. Politics requires no specific qualification or identity to take part, and thus the part with no part are those who have no qualification, assigned place, or specific identity. The part with no part stake this lack of qualification to be precisely what gives them the right to take part in public politics. It is precisely this subjectivation process which removes assigned places and allows access to the universal that anti-politics seeks to foreclose by asserting and policing identity and status.

While politics has been traditionally thought of as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, power is organized, places and roles are distributed, and various systems are designed to legitimize these distributions are devised, these functions are properly anti-political.<sup>268</sup> Anti-politics distributes bodies into places, and then designs systems to ensure that those bodies stay where they are put. A body is placed based on its properties which constitute an identity, rather than on the subjectivity of the unique person who inhabits the body.<sup>269</sup> Thus “to put someone in his/her place” is a prime expression of anti-politics, as it involves discovering someone’s identity and using it to dismiss a person’s claim to speak to the universal of politics. Political activity threatens the anti-political counting of parts and distributing of places by allowing individuals to move out of their assigned place and access the political realm. So long as one has access to a political space which is universal in its lack of required identity or qualifications to take part, one can become a political subject and be more than whatever occupation, identity, or social position such a person is assigned to by the police. The universality of politics and the shifting places of political subjects is viewed as a threat to both the stability of the anti-political order and the elite-based mode of government that radically alienates the vast majority from taking part in politics.

Like Žižek, Rancière makes an explicit link between political subjectivity and Cartesian subjectivity. The Cartesian subject’s being is derived from its capacity to think, not from the identity of its body, social position, or economic value. In this sense “any subjectification is a

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 27.

disidentification, removal from the naturalness of a place, the opening up of a subject space where anyone can be counted since it is the space where those of no account are counted”.<sup>270</sup> Rancière provides the example of the revolutionary Auguste Blanqui who was put on trial in 1832. The judge asked his profession and he simply replied “proletarian”, to which the judge responded by claiming that is not a profession, which allowed Blanqui to make the political claim that it is the profession of millions of people who live off their labour but are denied political rights.<sup>271</sup> The judge is following the anti-political logic of identification, trying to identify Blanqui and thus put him in his place as someone unqualified to take a political stand. Blanqui on the other hand refuses to fall for the attempt at identification and instead simply posits himself as a member of an identity-less collectivity that lacks any specific properties but is open to anyone who claims their rights are being infringed upon by the current state of French government. The vexation experienced by the judge at the declaration of proletarian as profession relates to the fact that within politics subjects do not have consistent bodies. They are, as Rancière calls them, “fluctuating performers”.<sup>272</sup>

Anti-political society can be thought of as an aggregation and collection of identities, in which there is no real “majority”, just a lot of minorities who, once collated, form the whole. The subjectivation process, which involves a stripping away of these assigned identities, is an emancipation from the state of being a minority.<sup>273</sup> It is on this account that defense of identity as political yet again fails to be politically transformative and ends up having the anti-political effect of keeping people in their places and cutting them off from political action. The goal of political feminism for example must be to declassify and de-identify gender as a political (dis)qualification. Those who attempt to assert the primacy of gender, even when meaning well, by arguing in favour of electoral schemes which, for example, might provide a quota that guarantees women will have half the seats in parliament, simply reduce a woman to her gender identity. Any political argument about gender equality is then reduced to a matter of the distribution and policing of the parts, thus foreclosing the emancipation from gender identity and

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>273</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2011), 42.



the move from member of identity group to political subject capable of revealing herself as a unique individual who is not defined by her body or identity.

The subjectivation process of declassification, disidentification, and emergence from a state of minority also speaks to the method of politics in its oppositional form. In so far as the subject-formation process is political, it operates in a manner that seeks to affirm universal equality rather than uncover more and more inequalities. Continuing to use feminism as an example, the case of Jeanne Deroin is exemplary in demonstrating how the political subjectivation process seeks to affirm universal equality and thus declassify identity as a qualification or class that hinders political involvement. In 1849 Deroin presented herself as a candidate for the national election, even though at the time it was illegal for a woman to take a seat in French parliament.<sup>274</sup> She ran on the presumption that the universal equality guaranteed to all in the French Constitution was not merely a lie meant to cover over the fact that equality was only for a specific gender identity. Her action began with the assumption of equality and set about to put that formal statement of equality to the test, knowing full well she was demonstrating a contradiction between what the constitution said, and what was reality.<sup>275</sup> In this sense, she sought to emancipate herself from the minority position of “woman” by revealing herself as a unique individual with her own opinions that made her worthy of taking part in the universal discourse of politics through her act of running for office. Subjectivity is not merely a demand on the other, but a proof to oneself that one is not limited by social, economic, cultural, or bodily identity and that one is a unique individual capable of engaging with others as a political subject.<sup>276</sup> In this sense Deroin proved to herself, and everyone else, that through her campaign she was the equal of the men running, and that therefore the wrong existed not in the declaration of universal equality, but in the fact that this equality was not being put into practice.

This political method of affirming and asserting equality is in direct contrast to the method of arguing that the contradiction between the formal equality of the constitution and what is experienced proves that the claim to formal universal equality a lie. The latter method, which has unfortunately been adopted by much of the Left as part of the general sentiment against

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<sup>274</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 41.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>276</sup> Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 2007), 48.

universal subjectivity, plays into the hands of the anti-political order by affirming difference and inequality. If statements of universal equality are simply ideological lies, and the job of the Left is to expose those lies, then there is no political action to be undertaken but simply a demand that the forces of anti-politics be more efficient at parcelling up society based on identity. What uncovering more and more inequalities as a political method amounts to, is a demand for more surveillance, control, and policing.<sup>277</sup> The part with no part, which is the basis of political subjectivity, is denied as a possibility and the job of the activist becomes uncovering new forms of inequality rather than generating more equality. It is on this register that the suspicion of universality in favour of particular identity that has become fashionable on the Left makes it an unwitting ally of the anti-politics of everything from Christian fundamentalists to marketing campaigns which rely on selling niche products to specific identity groups.<sup>278</sup>

In so far as the subject moves beyond identity, I do not wish to simply dismiss identity issues as politically irrelevant. At the same time, the empty subject does not lose private identity altogether, but merely keeps it private so as to be able to speak universally without such private attachments becoming grounds for disqualification. As was noted earlier, the emergence of the universal quite often stems from taking a particular injustice as a metaphorical stand-in for all injustices. Identity issues can be elevated to be metaphorical stand-ins, so long as those of the specific identity in question are willing to allow their particular issue to move beyond their own particular concerns. The early days of the gay rights movement provides a good example as one of the most prominent slogans was “gay rights are human rights”, which explicitly attempted to use the wrongs against gays and lesbians as a stand-in for any person who was being denied basic human rights. In this sense, many identity issues are properly political in so far as they aim for depoliticizing identity. While a political movement for depoliticization may sound contradictory, there is also the paradoxical sounding anti-political move toward politicization. Same-sex marriage and abortion are two examples of issues which should not be political matters, as they are matters of basic individual rights and not of public concern. The movement to depoliticize and, thus, keep these issues a matter of private choice is thoroughly political in so far as it involves attempting to politically declassify women and gays as identity groups to be

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<sup>277</sup> Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, 7.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, 8–9.

publicly acted on. By contrast, when conservative groups try to make these issues a matter of public concern, they often portray their moves as simply a matter of invoking a political debate, but making identity into a matter of public concern is, as I have argued throughout this chapter, a fundamental move of anti-politics meant to deny political subjectivity so that people can be treated as homogenous groups to be parcelled and policed. If politics is thought of as a stage, then in addition to the speech and action of those on it, politics also involves the boundary work of debating who gets to be on the stage in the first place, as well as deciding what should and should not be performed on the stage.

#### 4.8 Political Subjectivity Online

In the previous chapter I argued that a political realm can be created on the internet, as political space was a product of the actions and movements of people and thus not reducible to hardware. The experience of activists in the Arab Spring, Occupy, and Anonymous movements testify to the creation of online political space, which raises the question of online political subjectivity. Does operating in an online political space change, alter, or reorient the political subjectivation process described in the first part of this chapter? What I argue is that the act of entering an online political realm, even if it is just a discussion forum for politics, automatically pushes people into the subjectivation process by stripping away their offline identity and throwing them into the universal void of the internet. In this manner, the siting of politics in an online political realm can be a tremendous aid for overcoming the many obstacles that prevent people from activating their own political subjectivity.

If the first step of becoming a political subject is to strip away all forms of contingent particular identity, going online to discuss politics operates in the same manner. Imagine a scenario in which one finds a political discussion site on the internet for the first time. After choosing a username, one joins in a debate by posting one's first comment. This person enters the discussion as someone who is completely unidentifiable and completely without properties that others can recognize. The other people using the site see only a username and the comment that was posted, meaning that the first time user has no identifiable particularities on which to be judged or dismissed. Those who seek to engage with this first time commenter can only respond to what the comment said, as they know nothing of their identity, class, status, or bodily traits

such as sex or skin colour. The simple act of going online and entering into a pseudonymous space automatically strips away identities, as your body and social background are invisible to the other commenters as a source of prejudice. The very nature of such online interactions forces a subjectivation process, because nothing is visible except the story that is revealed through our online speech. Online interactions within a website dedicated to political discussion are the ultimate form of Cartesian subjectivity, as what we think and share with others is what defines us to the others, not the sight of our bodies. Political disqualification based on prejudice is radically subverted as there is simply no grounds on which to pre-judge someone and thus disqualify him or her before he or she even have a chance to speak. Attempts to disqualify someone as incapable of political speech in an online context then must always allow for at least some form of initial speech and revealing of subjectivity. By contrast, in offline space one can see someone's body before they ever speak. Thus, prejudicial dismissals based on physical appearance can become the grounds for disqualifying someone's political speech before one can even make an initial statement.

Without prejudice to rely on as a means of disqualifying someone from political speech, anti-political mechanisms based on disqualifying speech based on identity are disrupted. By hiding these prejudices and protecting private identity through adopting a pseudonym, the anti-political identification process is already rendered less effective. People have already been admitted into the political realm and attempts to dismiss their capacity to speak politically must come after the fact. While pseudonymity may not entirely protect private identities from attacks meant to disqualify one's speech based on identity, as these identities may become apparent in the context of longer discussions or may be purposely revealed by the speaker, at least the effect of prejudice is severely limited. The fact that such attempts at disqualification must come after one has already spoken as a political subject within a political realm marks a significant advantage for online political speech over offline, as identificatory disqualification after one has already entered the political realm as a political subject remain difficult online if one is careful to keep their private identity hidden.

In existing online political forums, one inevitably encounters someone who disagrees with what one says, but has no counter-argument and, instead, tries to shut down the debate by using the anti-political method of attempting to identify, classify, and thus "put you in your

place”, a place where one is not qualified to speak politically. Such attempts can be easily frustrated online by refusing to identify one’s particular characteristics. The attempt at classificatory dismissal fails, as the person attempting the dismissal does not know where exactly the other’s place is and thus does not know how to politically disqualify the other’s speech. This works in stark contrast to an in-person political debate, where bodies are visible and prejudices surrounding skin colour, sex, economic class, or cultural identity are much easier to spot and use as classificatory ammunition, either through direct appearance or through some basic research into that person’s private background, as public and private personas are usually directly connected in offline politics. The act of going online can be emancipatory in itself, as a person’s offline minority status can be obscured, allowing individuals to easily emerge from their minority positions which are used to disqualify them from taking part in offline politics. When one’s identity is the source of prejudice, to keep it hidden online makes revealing oneself as a unique individual with unique thoughts and opinions much easier.

Stromer-Galley and Wichowski point to the experience of many women in early political chat rooms who found that not mentioning their sex allowed them to take part in discussions without having to worry about harassment or disparaging comments painting them as unfit to participate.<sup>279</sup> The same authors also found that those who are reluctant to discuss political matters offline, outside of their immediate circle of friends or family, were more willing to engage in political discussion with strangers online.<sup>280</sup> The fact that people have to hide something like their sex, skin colour, or sexual orientation, because they are ammunition for anti-political attempts to disqualify their speech, demonstrates the pervasiveness of anti-political attitudes. While simply hiding the point of discrimination will not end discrimination, it does force it to become less personalized to the point of preventing someone from participating in a discussion. The forced subjectivity of pseudonymous interaction can enable a more egalitarian form of political discussion, as most people will simply assume that everyone else is like them, until they are provided proof to the contrary. In this sense, if one goes to the various country-specific Reddit discussion forums with an ambiguous username and simply jumps into the conversation, everyone else will simply assume one is from that country until provided with

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<sup>279</sup> Jennifer Stromer-Galley and Alexis Wichowski, “Political Discussion Online,” in *The Handbook of Internet Studies*, ed. Mia Consalvo and Charles Ess (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 174.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

evidence to the contrary. So long as a user does not volunteer this identity information, there tend to be few discriminatory barriers to entry to such pseudonymous forums.

The erasure of identity that is experienced when entering an online political discussion site does not, of course, mean that we lose our private identities altogether, but only that when speaking politically we speak universally as someone with something to say to the all, rather than as an undifferentiated member of an identity whose concerns are only related to that specific group. By leaving these identifications in the private realm they fail to serve as disqualifiers of political subjectivity. The withdrawal from identity that happens automatically when entering online pseudonymous political spaces is not about full-on eliminating our private identities but as experiencing them as wholly contingent, something which has been the basis of political subjectivity since Cleisthenes. In this sense, revealing one's identity online can be a form of proving that this identity actually has no power to disqualify. When online discussions about racism arise, someone may identify as a member of the target group for the sole purpose of pointing out how that identity is completely contingent, as here they are speaking as a universal subject against forms of racism and discrimination. By speaking as a political subject, it is proven that traditional identities which have been used to disqualify political speech are as irrelevant to political speech as identities or quirks which have not been used to disqualify and identify. Demonstrating the irrelevance of such identities causes them to lose their authority to disqualify, and puts them in the same category as having a private identity as a stamp collector or being left handed: categories which have no relevance to one's ability to speak politically and make universally relevant arguments.

Online political subjectivity as an empty universal must also be considered in terms of the terrain of contestation between political subjectivity and anti-political identity. As with all the four terrains which make up the understanding of politics advanced here, the terrain is configured as a sliding scale where less qualifications to become a subject make it more political. When considering such subjects in an online context, empirical qualifications related to access and ability to use the internet remain a problem. While the digital divide is becoming less about relative wealth and more about quality of internet access due to issues surrounding state censorship and net neutrality, disqualifications still exist that can prevent those who wish to

engage online with others from doing so.<sup>281</sup> At the same time, the universality of such subjects face barriers in terms of language. In the context of an online forum, the very lack of ability to prejudge someone because identity is hidden, can turn into a disqualification itself. Someone who joins such a forum for the first time may face obstacles for being unknown and having no commenting history. Although the internet can help overcome empirical obstacles to subjectivization related to prejudice, it also introduces new obstacles and points of qualification which must be sites of political dispute in themselves. The goal of each terrain is to make it more political, while realizing that perfection or purity is likely an impossibility.

While some people may enter the online political realm and seek to fight off their own subjectivity and reproduce their identity online, at least in an online context their identity does not precede them. Someone who is part of an identity group who finds that group oppressive and totalizing has the option of hiding that identity online, something which is not as easy offline. Political emancipation means emerging from a minority and becoming part of the part with no part, whose only qualification is that it has no qualifications whatsoever. Thus when the advocates of online bodily identification argue that online activity quickly reproduces offline identity, as one is often asked about private characteristics in the course of an online political debate,<sup>282</sup> they miss the point that these are anti-political mechanisms which are meant to disqualify and oppress. Gies tries to argue that these common tactics demonstrate that we find talking to disidentified and disembodied actors as uncomfortable, but this is an attempt to naturalize a depoliticized discourse that only makes sense outside of political discussions. One only cares who one is talking to in a social context, a political statement is, by its nature, public and thus addressed toward everyone. It matters little toward whom political speech is directed, given that it is meant to be public. The lack of identity or body of those we engage with in a political context simply does not matter unless we want to look for ways to attempt to place, categorize, and identify our interlocutors as unqualified to take part in political discussion and thus deny their own subjectivity and right to participate.

#### 4.9 The Madness of Disembodied Online Interaction

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<sup>281</sup> Manuel Castells, "The Popular Uprisings in the Arab World Perhaps Constitute the Most Important Internet-Led and Facilitated Change," *Open University of Catalonia*, February 2011, [http://www.uoc.edu/portal/en/sala-de-premsa/actualitat/entrevistes/2011/manuel\\_castells.html](http://www.uoc.edu/portal/en/sala-de-premsa/actualitat/entrevistes/2011/manuel_castells.html).

<sup>282</sup> Gies, "How Material Are Cyberbodies?"

Žižek relates the subject-formation process to a descent into madness before one emerges as a universal subject, and for those who are used to having their particular identities bestow privilege, interacting online can seem like madness. The suspicion that people seem to have toward expressions of identity by others online is an entirely positive trait, as it helps reinforce the egalitarian stripping away of identity, especially when someone proclaims an identity that is meant to mark one as privileged. Even if someone really was a millionaire, no one online will believe the claim, and thus any kind of political argument relying on the authority of class will simply fall flat. To the millionaire who is used to privilege, especially if he or she is also used to privilege in their face to face interactions from not just economic class but from gender and skin colour as well, arguing about politics on the internet would very much seem like pure madness. No one respects his or her identity and privilege claims, forcing the person claiming identity privilege into a form of equality in which his or her thoughts and opinions must stand on their own ground. In this context, the complaints made by some about the loss of identity online as unsettling and problematic expose underlying hostilities to the egalitarian nature of political subjectivity. Gray, for instance, is very insistent that online interactions are creepy and unsettling because he does not know the true identity of who he is talking to and they do not know his true identity. He then concludes that because of this lack of identity, the internet is therefore unsuited for political discussion.<sup>283</sup> The internet only seems like madness if one's particular identity grants offline privilege, but for an egalitarian politics such madness is politically necessary.

Oddly enough, the uncertainty surrounding the true identity with whom we interact online seems like a problem for Žižek. He has commented about the potential for violent objectification of other people when we interact online due to not knowing their true identity.<sup>284</sup> If, however, we return to Žižek's wheelbarrow joke, in which the wheelbarrow of subjectivity needs to be emptied of identity before it can be filled up with substantial political content, here we have Žižek claiming that in order to build political solidarity online we need to know what identity was in the wheelbarrow before it was emptied out at the start of the subjectivation process. The problem of treating people like objects and thus invoking the spectre of violence is not some kind of inherent aspect of online interaction, but, as Žižek himself explains outside of

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<sup>283</sup> Gray, *Cyborg Citizen*, 132.

<sup>284</sup> Žižek, "Is This Digital Democracy, or a New Tyranny of Cyberspace?"



the context of the internet, is a result of the anti-political identification process which places people into objective groups to be acted on, which denies their subjective individuality. The act of going online empties our wheelbarrows out for us, making becoming a subject in the Žižekian sense all the more easier, despite Žižek's own seeming unease with the technology which leads him into contradictory statements.

Similar to Žižek's argument, Turkle claims that interacting online is depersonalizing and therefore degrading.<sup>285</sup> Not only is this untrue in general, as each webspaces is different, but in a political context depersonalization is beneficial. In any political discussion the goal should be to evaluate the statements and arguments being made on their own merits, independently of the identity of the person making the statements. The idea that the body needs to be visibly present in order to prevent ethical degradation relies on the idea that bodies are not sites of Foucauldian biopower but instead usher in ethical respect. By contrast, identity and the body are most often sites of oppression which are overcome through political speech and action. If the body bestowed ethical status, there would be no debates about the rights of those who are politically disenfranchised, because as pure bodies they should be afforded the highest ethical status according to Turkle's argument. The ethical situation of stateless peoples demonstrates how this argument is problematic, as such people are objects of sovereign authority which are reduced to a status of bare life.<sup>286</sup> Even more striking is the case of animals, who lacking any sort of ability to transcend their bodies and assert themselves through political speech, are the extreme objects of ethical degradation, demonstrating that a lack of ethical respect resulting in objectification is a huge problem for those who cannot hide their bodily identities.

#### 4.10 Online Movements and the Expression of Universal Subjectivity

Enacting political subjectivity online can facilitate the emergence of the universal people which has no particular properties. A good example is the hacker movement Anonymous, which operates as an empty universal in which there is no qualification or identity required in order to become part of it. In fact, the lack of qualifications, even when it comes to computer programming skills, has led the American Department of Homeland Security to release a public

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<sup>285</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

<sup>286</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 126–134.

statement claiming that Anonymous has only “rudimentary” hacking skills, calling them “script kiddies”, an insult used by programmers to imply someone can only use pre-made applications and cannot actually program themselves.<sup>287</sup> These attempts to paint Anonymous as unskilled or lacking in qualifications entirely misses the point, as Anonymous prides itself on being open to anyone and not being an elite group of programmers with exceptional computer skills, as with some other hacking groups. In many ways this is what makes Anonymous so significant in terms of hacker culture, in that it is perhaps the first group to move beyond the petty elitism of hacker skills and actually become political by embracing openness. To become part of the empty universal that is Anonymous, one must first become anonymous by stripping away one’s particular identity. After which, one can then emerge to join with others to take part in a universal movement which requires no qualifications. The fact that anyone with internet access can download Anonymous’s distributed denial of service attack tool and use it to be part of a wider online protest demonstrates the way the internet can facilitate such universal movements which require no qualification, classification, or identity. This lack of qualification and identity within Anonymous is also what makes governments so afraid of it, as it is extremely hard to identify, classify, and therefore dismiss as merely a partisan advocate of some particular identity with no political relevance to the whole.

The same sort of process at work with Anonymous, in which the internet facilitates both an overcoming of individual particularities and the creation of empty universals, was at work with the Occupy movement as well. Wendy Brown rightfully points out that Occupy Wall Street was significant in that it rallied the 99% together based on claims surrounding public justice rather than private injury (as with the Tea Party for example).<sup>288</sup> What Brown does not highlight is the fact that the Occupy movement had a significant online component as well, which facilitated the disidentification process, allowing Occupy to be more than a collection of American, private taxpayers. Instead, it was able to grow into a universal movement that had something to say about the state of the economy and government that was relevant to everyone not just within the United States, but across the world. Despite this universalistic thrust within

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<sup>287</sup> Stephen C. Webster, “DHS Calls Anonymous Hackers Untalented ‘script Kiddies,’ Warns of Future Attacks,” *The Raw Story*, (August 4, 2011), <http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2011/08/04/dhs-calls-anonymous-hackers-untalented-script-kiddies-warns-of-future-attacks/>.

<sup>288</sup> Brown, “Occupy Wall Street.”

Occupy, as Brown points out, the media still sought out personal stories of “hardship or calamity” in order to try to personalize, identify, classify, and thus dismiss the universal political relevance of any given subject’s speech as a particular complaint not relevant to anyone but that specific individual.<sup>289</sup>

The internet can be immensely helpful in activating political subjectivity, especially as it inherently undoes geographical, cultural, and bodily identifications which the state tends to rely on in order to classify and disqualify individuals from political speech. As Stone points out,

disembodied subjectivity messes with whereness. In cyberspace you are everywhere and somewhere and nowhere, but almost never here in the positivist sense. In the less-virtual environments of everyday life, governmental and regulatory structures work to increase the definition of whereness.<sup>290</sup>

At the same time, however, the internet’s openness, in the form of the malleability of the software layer, means that it can be adopted for anti-political purposes to reaffirm identity against subjectivity. Dean argues that the internet is characterized by the sovereign reign of “subjectless flows of communication” which become the infrastructure for a new model of capitalism based on information exchange.<sup>291</sup> On this register, she speaks about how certain websites are becoming more and more tailored to individual users, to the point where a news site might not show any news that a user might find upsetting or disagreeable, thus undermining universality and actually isolating people in their particularities.<sup>292</sup> What these examples point to is not an argument against the internet as a realm of subjectivity but its open and contested nature. In the same way that in-person public communication can be part of a political subject-formation process or that it can be part of an identification and particularizing process, the internet’s software layer cannot be reduced to its hardware. No doubt more identification and particularizing methods will be developed for online use in order to make the internet seem less and less of a public realm fit for the formation of political subjects, but these are precisely the types of things which should be, and are, the topic of political debates and actions which legitimately can lead to political subjectivity arising online. The fact the internet might be used

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> Allucquere Rosanne Stone, “Split Subjects, Not Atoms; Or, How I Fell in Love with My Prosthesis,” *Configurations* 2, no. 1 (1994): 180.

<sup>291</sup> Dean, “Why the Net Is Not a Public Sphere,” 104.

<sup>292</sup> Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, 45.

for anti-political purposes now is no reason to dismiss it so long as it still has the potential to be used for political purposes. The rest of this chapter will look at two recurring objections to online subjectivity which deserve a more in-depth treatment, namely the objections surrounding the anonymity and disembodied nature of online political subjectivity.

#### 4.11 Disembodied Online Subjects

While I have argued that stripping away particular identities, especially those rooted in biology, is necessary for the subject-formation process, a line of argument constantly arises when speaking about online interactions that states that because these interactions with other people are not embodied they are therefore not real or at least less valuable or authentic. Face to face communication is claimed to be superior and even necessary for political interaction for a number of rather flimsy reasons which I dealt with in the previous chapter. Many of these arguments in favour of embodied subjectivity begin with the assumption that “in the physical world there is an inherent unity to the self, for the body provides a compelling and convenient definition of identity. The norm is: one body, one identity.”<sup>293</sup> The body is then claimed to be a “stabilizing anchor”, and thus when it is obscured online, we can lose our sense of self.<sup>294</sup> This assumption leads to two camps critical of online disembodiment: on one side are those who accept online subjectivity as disembodied and then go on to argue this disqualifies it from being authentically political, and on the other are those who attempt to salvage the possibility of online politics by claiming that online subjectivity is actually embodied after all. But given that political subjectivation involves subtracting oneself from positive identifications, including those that have been built up around the body (either as something oppressive or as a positive culture) both of these camps fail to properly appreciate how a disembodied and de-identified online experience can be extremely beneficial for the formation of political subjects and the sustainability of an online political realm.

Representative of the critics of online disembodiment are Brook and Boal, who claim that embodied face-to-face interactions “are inherently richer than mediated interactions.”<sup>295</sup> Statements like this are problematic, because not only is it not obvious that such interactions are

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<sup>293</sup> Donath, “Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community,” 27.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

<sup>295</sup> Brook and Boal, *Resisting the Virtual Life*.

“richer,” but there is an implicit claim that embodied interaction is not mediated. Such claims rely on a romanticized idea of social interaction in which looking into someone’s eyes during a conversation creates a magical neural link which allows access to the other’s true thoughts. In reality all interactions are mediated, and face to face interactions are mediated by social customs, the space in which such interaction takes place in, as well as the relationship, status, and position of those interacting.<sup>296</sup> The fact that interaction is mediated is not an issue in itself but how it is mediated. If the interaction is mediated by the fact that one person is of a lower economic class or perceived social status than the other, this can be problematic and cause one person to unnecessarily defer to the other. Mediations like this are politically problematic whether they occur in-person or through a computer. Furthermore, the claim that in-person interaction is richer relies on the presumption of a certain personality type, as those with more extroverted personalities find in person interaction easier, while those with more introverted personalities can have a hard time expressing themselves in person and do better when they are provided with the time to think that is afforded by computer-mediated conversation.<sup>297</sup> For many people computer mediated interaction feels richer because it is easier to communicate, especially for those with physical disabilities,<sup>298</sup> demonstrating that claims about an “inherent richness” to face to face interaction, especially when speaking of political interaction, rely on a set of anti-technological and personality type biases.

A further critique of disembodied interaction comes from Gray who claims that, because citizenship is based on bodies within geographical boundaries, to be disembodied is to not be a citizen and thus have no stake in politics.<sup>299</sup> Gray’s statement that citizenship is embodied simply demonstrates how citizenship has been depoliticized into a matter of where one is born, rather than as a matter of taking part in politics. The goal of political subjectivation is precisely to make one into more than one’s body in order to allow one’s unique individuality to shine through, something that has nothing to do with birth or naturalization-based citizenship. Gray would also go so far as to disqualify the hacktivism of movements like Anonymous as thoroughly non-

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<sup>296</sup> Claude Elwood Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1949).

<sup>297</sup> Yair Amichai-Hamburger, Galit Wainapel, and Shaul Fox, ““On the Internet No One Knows I’m an Introvert’: Extroversion, Neuroticism, and Internet Interaction,” *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 5, no. 2 (2002): 125–28.

<sup>298</sup> See for example Natilene Bowker and Keith Tuffin, “Disability Discourses for Online Identities,” *Disability & Society* 17, no. 3 (2002): 327–44.

<sup>299</sup> Gray, *Cyborg Citizen*, 29.

political because they are not embodied.<sup>300</sup> By this same line of reasoning, politics cannot be conducted over the phone and the entire concept of representative government that Gray is a strong advocate of, is illegitimate, because it rests on the presumption that a person's opinions can be separated from their physical bodies and represented by someone else.

The key to understanding online disembodied subjectivity is that when we use the internet to discuss politics, we are primarily interacting with other people and not with a computer, smartphone, or other web-enabled device. Critics of the idea of online disembodiment, such as Paul Dourish, make the mistake of extrapolating embodied interaction with the physical objects of technology to social relations themselves.<sup>301</sup> For human computer interaction researchers, such as Dourish, the embodied relation with our interface device is of prime importance, but the fact that we use a mouse or a keyboard to discuss politics with others online does not make those interactions embodied. The embodied relation with the computer takes place in the private sphere outside, and before, what is happening on the screen.<sup>302</sup> In the context of a political discussion site, others experience our own subjectivity as thoroughly disembodied, as all that is presented is a username and written thoughts. The fact that we use our bodies to type on a keyboard while sitting in front of a computer or thumb at a mobile phone while walking down the street does not make the relation between those who are participating in the online political discussion embodied.

While anyone who has been bumped into by someone walking down the street with their head down, completely absorbed in what he or she is doing on their phone can attest to how mobile computing devices are doing anything but increasing embodied presence, Jason Farman makes the argument that such devices enable an interface between virtual and physical spaces which does in fact promote embodiment.<sup>303</sup> While much of Farman's analysis of mobile interfaces is interesting, he draws the wrong conclusion, in that such devices enhance our ability to escape the body. The panic of being lost is an example of pure embodiment, as our mental map of where we are fails and we are forced to rely on immediate physical surroundings which

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<sup>300</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>301</sup> Paul Dourish, *Where the Action Is: The Foundations of Embodied Interaction* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), 18–19.

<sup>302</sup> Saco, *Cybering Democracy*, 133.

<sup>303</sup> Jason Farman, *Mobile Interface Theory: Embodied Space and Locative Media* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

are unfamiliar. The ability to pull out a phone with GPS and see where we are does not increase our embodiment in physical space but enhances our disembodied sense of where we are and where we are going on our abstract mental map, which can be represented as the little dot that shows our exact location on a map displayed on a phone.

Politically speaking, the heavy use of mobile phones during the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt enabled precisely the mobile interface effect that Farman describes, but in a way that enabled the political subjectivation process in a disembodied manner. A protester sending real time updates to Twitter enabled a connection with the wider online audience which could reveal that protester as a unique individual with a unique story, rather than as just another member of a faceless mass of protesting bodies. Mobile computing is interesting politically in that it can enable one to remain active in two spaces at once, rather than merely enhancing or augmenting one's experience in physical space. One can then be riding the train to work, a part of one's every day routine and thoroughly unpolitical, while at the same time be using one's phone to access an online political realm, allowing one to be a political subject even when one's body is busy with thoroughly non-political matters. By separating political participation from physical presence, politics can become more accessible, more pervasive, and easier to engage in. A politics of only bodies in seats or streets is one which introduces needless limitations on the ability to become a political subject.

Political subjectivity is about making the mind visible through the process of revealing subjectivity, a task that requires speech (whether that speech is oral, written, or electronically transmitted through fibre optic cables) and the construction of stories in order for it to be revealed. The focus on embodiment, as was pointed to in the last chapter, is overtly anti-political, as the body does not tell a story. It simply exists in its thereness, and to make political judgements based on the body is to deny individuals their uniqueness. Saco makes a useful contrast between political and anti-political forms of visibility by comparing Arendt and Foucault. For Arendt, what must become visible is the content of the person's mind, and this is liberating and intensely political, while for Foucault what becomes visible is the body as it becomes the object of surveillance and governmentality.<sup>304</sup> In this sense, Foucault provides a

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<sup>304</sup> Saco, *Cybering Democracy*, 132.

depiction of the anti-political process of identification in which individuals are treated as bodies to be classified, counted, categorized, and treated as objects that are part of a population to be acted on. Online subjectivity is politically beneficial precisely because it can allow us to escape the anti-political regime of the management and surveillance of bodies in walled territories.

The arguments relating to whether the internet is either embodied or disembodied tend to overwhelmingly commit the error of looking at one example from the software layer and then claiming that this example represents the essence of the hardware. Gies, for example, tries to argue that, with the proliferation of broadband internet and its capacity to enable forms of communication such as video and voice, the old text-based internet is left behind, meaning that the internet is now and will increasingly become embodied.<sup>305</sup> The political consequences are then that the disembodied subjectivity argued for here becomes as difficult online as it is offline. Gies's argument is problematic because he is referring to the internet as a whole. Like the arguments of virtually every cybertheorist, from Turkle to Dean and from Stone to Gray, Gies fails to appreciate the complexity of cyberspace and the radically different forms of interaction which are determined not by the hardware, but by the type of website. On a website like Chatroulette, which is a video chat service which connects users at random, the relation with others is pure embodiment in that most users either decide to hit next to talk to someone else or initiate a conversation, based on the first few seconds of viewing the other user's video and therefore body. By contrast, a text-based discussion site such as Reddit with its large forums with millions of users dedicated to world news, global politics, and the politics of various countries, the relationship between users is radically disembodied, as there are strict rules against revealing personal information. Clearly these two sites present radically different online experiences, as one is primarily text based and the other is primarily video based. To claim that the internet in general, meaning its hardware layer, inherently only produces one of these experiences is simply wrong.

The rise and fall of chat rooms as one of the most popular webspaces is illustrative of this point about different websites having different modes of interaction, some of which are beneficial to the generation of political subjectivity, some of which are not. In the early period of

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<sup>305</sup> Gies, "How Material Are Cyberbodies?," 321.



the internet, the email and text-based Usenet was the most popular site of political discussion. With advances in technology, chat rooms quickly caught on as they allowed users to talk to each other in real time, supplanting the popularity of Usenet.<sup>306</sup> But with the spread of broadband connections, increasingly these chat rooms added voice and then video options, enabling more embodied interactions. It was precisely at this point, however, that chat rooms fell out of popular favour as, in my experience, those who used chat rooms for social purposes migrated to social networks which hosted a wider range of features which incorporated chat into them, and the more politically oriented users migrated back to text-based forums that emulated the Usenet format with its primacy of text. In the case of the Yahoo political chat rooms which I frequented, the embodiment provided by voice and video chat fundamentally changed the nature of these chat rooms from many to many examples of anarchic equality to more of a broadcast model where the user who was currently transmitting speech or video would capture everyone's attention, with the result being a degradation in interaction as the communication format was transformed into a series of disconnected embodied monologues. What this example demonstrates, especially in light of the continued popularity of text-based forums such as Reddit, is that not only does political subjectivization thrive in disembodied environments, but that the internet's software layer remains malleable and that the hardware layer does not dictate the software layer.

Counter to the intention of many of the critics of disembodied online subjectivity, their defense of embodied subjectivity is often exactly what they claim is problematic about disembodied subjectivity. Typical of this position are Beasley and Bacchi, who set out to theorize an embodied model of citizenship that combines feminist scholarship on both citizenship and bodies.<sup>307</sup> They argue that the universal disembodied citizen of the Enlightenment was exclusionary, as it was actually the elevation of one form of particular identity into a position of hegemony. Their conclusion, however, is to come up with a plethora of different types of embodied citizen subjects, from feminist citizens to disabled citizens. This additive notion fails to generate political subjects, as it simply adds identity groups into the social

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<sup>306</sup> Jim Hu, "AOL Shutting down Newsgroups," *CNET*, January 25, 2005, [http://news.cnet.com/AOL-shutting-down-newsgroups/2100-1032\\_3-5550036.html](http://news.cnet.com/AOL-shutting-down-newsgroups/2100-1032_3-5550036.html).

<sup>307</sup> Chris Beasley and Carol Bacchi, "Citizen Bodies: Embodying Citizens – a Feminist Analysis," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 2, no. 3 (2000): 337–58.

whole, creating more points of exclusion, identification, and disqualification. If women were left out of the old male subject-citizen, the creation of a specifically female subject-citizen does not erase this exclusion but raises the possibility for new exclusions, especially given how Beasley and Bacchi define the body as the marker of such types of citizenship. What then qualifies as a women's body to be a female-subject-citizen? Rather than introducing new qualifications meant to include more groups of people as possible political subjects, the proper solution, as was argued in the first part of this chapter, is simply to negate any form of qualification whatsoever by positing subjectivity as an empty universal. With the help of the internet, those with different bodies can be treated equally precisely by obscuring the importance of the body. Beasley and Bacchi specifically point to the creation of forms of citizenship for people with bodily disabilities, but why bother with different classes of citizenship when one egalitarian version can be theorized which negates the body as a disqualifier altogether?<sup>308</sup> Some of the biggest advocates for an online disembodied form of subjectivity are precisely people with disabilities, as they are able to interact with others online in a disembodied fashion in which their bodily status as disabled is irrelevant.<sup>309</sup>

Contrary to advocates of embodied subjectivity, especially in the case of Beasley and Bacchi, the body is not the site of politics but of its radical negation. By confusing politics with its anti-political opposite, an embodied form of subjectivity simply locks the oppressed into their objective positions, preventing them from emancipating themselves from their identity or body and becoming a political subject. The internet provides the opportunity to allow our speech to reveal who we really are, rather than being stereotyped by our bodies or other forms of non-political group identity. Even if these sources of discrimination may become apparent to others through our online speech, the fact that we must speak with others before these identities have the chance to introduce points of disqualification and discrimination is a major advantage over offline embodied subjectivity.

#### 4.12 Anonymity and the Harsh Light of the Public Sphere

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<sup>308</sup> Ibid., 349.

<sup>309</sup> Saco, *Cybering Democracy*, 56.

A corollary of the disembodied nature of online political subjectivity is its seeming anonymity. The most common method of recognizing people in the offline world is through their bodies. Thus if subjectivity reveals us as unique individuals, the argument goes that we need a face to attach to the stories revealed by political speech and action in order for it to be remembered and have impact. The idea of a body as identifier is problematic for a number of reasons, especially if we consider identical twins who cannot be bodily distinguished. If one twin accomplishes some great feat we do not simply ignore it or forget it because there is another person who looks exactly like them. As Arendt argues, what is really needed to accompany political subjectivity is a name rather than a body, as speech is attached to a “who” rather than a “what”.<sup>310</sup> But even if it is accepted that a body is not needed to be revealed in the subjectivation process, the question of internet anonymity remains: how can one reveal oneself while at the same time being anonymous?

For outspoken critics of the internet, such as Hubert Dreyfus, the supposed anonymity and disembodied nature of not just online political discussion, but the internet in general, is posited as an insurmountable obstacle to the revealing of an online political subjectivity.<sup>311</sup> While Dreyfus is another in a long list of thinkers who confuse the hardware and software layers, leading to proclamations about the internet as a whole, as if all websites were exactly alike, his bigger problem is attempting to link anonymity to a lack of commitment. He argues that online anonymous interactions simply lack the passion necessary for politics due to anonymity and even claims that on the internet “nothing matters enough that one would be willing to die for it.”<sup>312</sup> Against the background of the internet-integrated revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt which resulted in many deaths of protesters who were passionately engaged in a political cause they were willing to die for, this claim holds little weight, especially when linked to the question of anonymity. As I argue in the chapter on conflict, the ability to protect one’s private identity online by engaging politically through a pseudonym can enhance conflictual political engagement as the lack of repercussions in one’s private life leads to people being more willing to express dissent and unpopular opinions. Furthermore, groups such as Anonymous engage in hacking operations online at great risk to their own freedom, as cybercrime continues to be

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<sup>310</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 181.

<sup>311</sup> Hubert L. Dreyfus, *On the Internet* (London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

disproportionately punished.<sup>313</sup> Dreyfus also argues that the internet's anonymity empowers "anonymous experts" to provide their opinions on anything from a position of "nowhere" thus creating a levelling effect which erases all relevance and significance.<sup>314</sup> Such hyperbole simply uses the novelty of the technology as a means to launch into an attack on politics itself. The real problem with online anonymity for Dreyfus is that of the political subject as an empty universal whose only qualification to participate politically is that they have no qualification.

Returning to the bigger question of how one might reveal oneself as a unique subject in the context of online anonymity, which seems to introduce a contradiction, requires returning to the process of subjectivity and how it operates. The first step is the stripping of identity, which makes the subject anonymous. However, the process does not end here, as many critics would seem to imply. Stripping away particularities allows the subject to emerge on a universal level and speak as an individual rather than as an object. In this sense, very little online speech and interaction is truly anonymous, as people's speech is associated with a consistent name. Even the hacktivist movement Anonymous is not truly anonymous, as it operates under a collective pseudonym which maintains a name allowing a political story surrounding their actions to emerge. If the movement was truly anonymous, no one other than those directly involved would have any idea who was performing the various online actions and any kind of political impact would be lost, as there would be no public story to be told. When people go online and strip away their identities, they are only briefly anonymous, as once they start to engage with others they begin to reveal a subjective political narrative that is attached to a pseudonym. When one signs up with a discussion site or chat room, one creates a new name to associate their speech with, a name that comes to be associated with various opinions and actions.

The construction of online subjectivity through the use of pseudonyms helps maintain a public voice which, at the same time, protects private identity. Pseudonymous speech and action has a long history, and is not simply an issue of online interaction. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, female authors often used pseudonyms in order to ensure their works would be evaluated based on their

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<sup>313</sup> Mark Murfin, "Aaron's Law: Bringing Sensibility to the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act," *Southern Illinois University Law Journal* 38, no. 3 (2014): 469–90; Hanni Fakhoury, "The U.S. Crackdown on Hackers Is Our New War on Drugs," *Wired*, January 23, 2014, <http://www.wired.com/2014/01/using-computer-drug-war-decade-dangerous-excessive-punishment-consequences/>.

<sup>314</sup> Dreyfus, *On the Internet*, 78–79.

merit and not on the gender of the authors.<sup>315</sup> In periods of upheaval activists would often adopt pseudonyms to protect their own private identities. Prior to the communist revolution in Russia in 1917, Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov and Lev Davidovich Bronshtein adopted the pseudonyms of Lenin and Trotsky to initially protect their private identities. Pseudonyms were pervasive during the French resistance to Nazi occupation (Colonel Remy, Vercors), as well as during the American Revolution and its aftermath, with examples of the pseudonym Publius used for the publication of *The Federalist Papers* and Thomas Paine, who published a number of pamphlets under the pseudonym “Common Sense”. To protect themselves from state persecution for blasphemy, atheist critics of Islam have adopted pseudonyms when publishing books and writing online.<sup>316</sup> When dissent threatens the security of one’s body, then the ability to speak politically requires mechanisms to hide bodily identity. Pseudonymity helps ensure that a wide range of views can be expressed publicly by protecting those with outsider opinions from the tyranny of the majority and from state repression. The ability to obscure one’s offline and private identity when speaking politically online makes politics safer and more inclusive, as it takes a great deal of courage to enter the public sphere and reveal oneself to the world. Arendt argues that courage is the primary political virtue precisely because it is not easy to reveal oneself if what is being revealed is disagreeable to what the majority thinks.<sup>317</sup> Online politics can reduce the risk to the body, and make political participation more accessible by disconnecting one’s public persona from their private life. Doing so enables people to speak politically with less fear of negative ramifications for one’s employment, safety, or social relations. For this reason, Facebook and other social networking sites which tend to insist on real names are poorly suited to become the seeds of an online political realm, while more pseudonymous sites like Reddit, which lack the identifying aspects of having a profile with pictures and personal information, do present such a nascent model of online political subjectivity.

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<sup>315</sup> See Alexis Easley, “Authorship, Gender and Identity: George Eliot in the 1850s,” *Women’s Writing* 3, no. 2 (1996): 145–60, for a discussion of how Mary Ann Evans adopted the pseudonym George Eliot in order to “resist culturally imposed notions of gendered writing”(p. 145).

<sup>316</sup> See for example the pseudonymously written Ibn Warraq, *Why I Am Not a Muslim* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1995); and “No God, Not Even Allah,” *The Economist*, November 24, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/news/international/21567059-ex-muslim-atheists-are-becoming-more-outspoken-tolerance-still-rare-no-god-not> for background on pseudonymous ex-Muslim bloggers.

<sup>317</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 36.

Political and pseudonymous cyberspaces challenge the entire concept of a unitary and true identity in their ability to split the public persona of political subjectivity from the private persona.<sup>318</sup> This ability to be two people at once disrupts the anti-political method of identification, surveillance, counting, and putting in place. Whether the anti-political state operates based on Plato's *sophrosyne*, in which people must mind their own business and stay in their assigned place, or through a panoptic situation, as described by Foucault, which operates by making bodies visible, the ability to create a second life which is split away from the body and its associated classifications enables political speech and undermines anti-political devices. When it is argued that online pseudonymity simply provides a cover for immoral and illegal behaviour (not dissimilar to Plato's story about the ring of Gyges), the point of pseudonymity and its political implications is missed.<sup>319</sup> Someone's political speech, whether online or offline, reveals who one is more than one's bodily identity, and thus when people act crude and boorish online they are revealing who they truly are, not becoming someone else because they think they can get away with anything in online space. At the same time, so long as they act under pseudonyms, their poor behaviour will follow them online and reveal them to everyone as a crude and boorish individual. While online anonymity can certainly enable crime,<sup>320</sup> this is not an argument against online space per se, as all crime must be anonymous regardless of what kind of space it takes place within. No one robs a bank wearing a shirt that displays one's name and address.

The story that reveals us as unique subjects is not consciously created by us, even though it arises out of our political speech and action. It is always hidden to us as it is dependent on how other people interpret and perceive it. The stories that are generated through our online political interactions are not the creation of an identity from scratch, as, try as we might to come across in a certain way, the political subject that we reveal has an unconscious character. Thus, online political subjectivity is not about crafting a new identity but about revealing our innermost thoughts to others which constitute us as unique individuals. The increased ability to express our own views within the context of a larger movement, such as within Occupy, is a positive

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<sup>318</sup> Saco, *Cybering Democracy*, 130.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>320</sup> Kim-Kwang Raymond Choo and Russell G. Smith, "Criminal Exploitation of Online Systems by Organised Crime Groups," *Asian Journal of Criminology* 3, no. 1 (2008): 37–59.

improvement over the totalizing movements of the past. Whether in the form of communist parties requiring a certain ideological adherence or the identity social movements which erased subjectivity in favour of identity, individuals were subsumed into a mass movement leaving little room for individuals to reveal their own uniqueness.

As Bennet and Segerberg point out, the internet enables an individual to present one's own opinion to the world within the context of a political movement through the various aspects of online interaction, whereas in the past someone marching in a labour rally might simply become a faceless communist subsumed by the overall ideology with no space to express one's own perspective.<sup>321</sup> Prozorov provides an example of this sort of enabling of individual subjectivity within a wider protest movement in the form of a picture of someone in Alaska that circulated on the internet during the Occupy protests. He points to this picture of a person wrapped up in winter clothes and barely visible in the arctic tundra with a sign saying "Occupy the tundra!" as the ideal expression of the political subject in its empty universal form in the age of the internet.<sup>322</sup> Through the power of the internet, she was able to both adopt the Occupy movement to her own context, and still participate in a mass movement despite the physical distance to the nearest protest. The internet enabled her to take part in a protest and express a form of political subjectivity in which identity did not matter and qualifications to take part were erased. Without the internet, this political statement which both addressed the universal and revealed this one person's own subjective position, would have been an intensely private affair and would have made no political impact.

#### 4.13 Conclusion

The political subject formation process involves stripping away identity in order to enable the formation of an empty universal in which political participation requires no status qualifications. What political subjects have in common is literally nothing, which keeps the subject formation process open and available to all. While identity concerns plague offline politics, such private concerns can more easily be set aside online where such identities are less obvious when subjects adopt pseudonyms and make an effort to keep these identities concealed. Online subjectivity and

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<sup>321</sup> W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, "The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics," *Information, Communication & Society* 15, no. 5 (2012): 739–68.

<sup>322</sup> Prozorov, *Theory of the Political Subject*, xx-xxii.

its seemingly initial anonymity are then conducive to political subjectivity, as it lets one easily begin the process of revealing oneself to others as a unique individual. The initial anonymity, quickly replaced by pseudonymity, obscures the body and prevents the various bodily prejudices such as racism or sexism from disqualifying someone's speech before one ever has a chance to speak. This, in turn, allows their speech to start from a clean slate, allowing the subject's opinions to speak for themselves, while at the same time protecting the publicly revealed political subject's body and private identity from attacks and discrimination based on these revealed political opinions. As I will argue in the next two chapters, this political subject operating within an online political realm can vastly improve political participation and the pluralistic conflict of opinions that form the content of political debate. The manner in which online subjectivity facilitates political subjectivity means that not only can it not be claimed that politics online is inferior or less real, but that an online politics may provide a number of key advantages over offline politics. With the case of political subjectivity, accomplishing it online makes the process easier, which can help enable reinvigorating the practice of the political.



## Chapter 5 — Participation

### 5.1 Introduction

In the last three chapters the concept of the political realm was established, which then led to theorizing the nature of the political subjects who enter it. The next two chapters will deal with the critical question of what these political subjects in an online political realm actually do. This chapter will address the broader concept of political participation and what it entails, both at the theoretical level and how it would operate online, while the next chapter will deal with the conflict generated by such participation. While, on the surface, participation may seem like a relatively uncontroversial issue, as it is the basis of the concept of democracy, deeper questions lurk below this surface related to who gets to participate and in what capacity. The dominant system of representative democracy seeks to constrain public participation to peripheral matters related to selecting who gets sent to the legislature, which leaves the public outside of the political realm by denying their participation in political debates and decisions. While theories of more engaged forms of democratic participation have circulated as a theoretical alternative, there has long been a dominant feeling that such schemes are unworkable except in small communities with a very limited number of possible participants.<sup>323</sup> Given that the internet has the capacity to break down constraints on time and space that are usually cited as the primary obstacles to more participatory forms of democracy, this chapter argues that the internet demands a theoretical rethink of what forms of political participation may now be practically possible.

The protest movements of Occupy and the Arab Spring, like most protest movements before them, demonstrate the continued significance of participation as a terrain of conflict between politics and anti-politics, as these movements operated on a model of mass participation in which anyone could simply join the protests and act in a political manner. While the idea of mass participation in politics is not unique to protest movements, as elections rely on the same principle, the protest movements do operate on a model of participation that is more meaningful than simply casting a ballot. Even though protests can often be as infrequent as elections, they

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<sup>323</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, trans. G. D. H. Cole, Dover Thrift Editions (New York: Dover Publications, 2003), 45; Charles de Secondat baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia C. Miller, and Harold S. Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 124.

demonstrate a latent possibility and desire for a more meaningful form of participation. It is this desire to participate in the affairs of politics, to be able to enter the political realm and to reveal oneself as a unique individual, which has driven much protest in the past. Yet, it is a desire that never seems to be sustained. The Arab Spring successfully topples dictators but dissipates into military and Islamist-led governments. Occupy fades away, leaving its participants having made a crucial point but no more able to participate in public affairs. It is at this point that the significance of the internet for political participation cannot be underestimated. If the political realm need not be a physical space, then the dispersion of a protest does not have to mean the end of the opportunity to participate in an alternative political space, and an election need not be the only time citizens are given the chance to have input into how the government operates.

Online political participation, however, has the potential to take many forms, and what possible form it could or should take is one of the most contested debates in the scholarship on web politics. This literature is dominated by the advocates of e-government, who seek to make representative democracy more efficient by enabling government services to be more readily accessible via the internet. Layne and Lee make the case for governments to essentially adopt an e-commerce model, with the ultimate goal of government websites enabling “one stop shopping for citizens.”<sup>324</sup> Citizens are cast as passive taxpayers who simply are at the receiving end of government, with no real ability to actually participate. Similarly, Reddick’s evaluation of citizen interactions with e-government rests on assumptions that successful e-government enables both information dissemination and transactions (such as paying taxes) online, both of which again presume the citizen to be a passive recipient, rather than an active participant.<sup>325</sup> Even in the literature that looks at electoral campaigns and the internet, the focus is on how politicians and political parties can use online tools to send their message to voters, again positioning voters as consumers to be marketed to, rather than active participants.<sup>326</sup>

By contrast, the growing body of literature around deliberative democracy that began to emerge in the 1980s has been relatively quick to embrace the internet as a means to enable forms

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<sup>324</sup> Layne and Lee, “Developing Fully Functional E-Government,” 124.

<sup>325</sup> Christopher G. Reddick, “Citizen Interaction with E-Government: From the Streets to Servers?,” *Government Information Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (2005): 38–57.

<sup>326</sup> Randolph Kluver et al., eds., *The Internet and National Elections: A Comparative Study of Web Campaigning* (Routledge, 2014); Andrew Paul Williams and John C. Tedesco, eds., *The Internet Election: Perspectives on the Web in Campaign 2004* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

of deliberative participation that go beyond ideas of internet users as passive recipients of government. Castells, Dahlberg, and Papacharissi have argued that deliberative public spheres can operate online in a way that can provide a forum in which political subjects are able to deliberate with each other.<sup>327</sup> Against the deliberative democrats, however, I seek to return to the model of participatory democracy advanced by Arendt that was popular in the 1950s and 1960s, but lost its currency in the 1980s as it came to be seen as unworkable, with deliberative democracy becoming more prominent as it was seen as a more viable alternative. I seek to reopen the debate between deliberative and participatory democracy in the light of the development of the internet, which I argue provides the opportunity to reposition participatory democracy as practically workable. I argue that deliberative democracy has become less of a realistic alternative to representative democracy in the internet era, and more of a means of reinforcing existing representative structures.

While deliberative and participatory democrats might both agree that the internet can enable more political participation, there are many critics who position the internet as a dangerous diversion from political participation. Enthusiasts of the participatory culture of the internet, such as Henry Jenkins, argue that the increased impetus on online participation in areas as diverse as online video games and user-driven content generation websites such as YouTube or Facebook, will lead to a push for increased participation in political matters.<sup>328</sup> A growing body of literature, however, is more skeptical of the participatory political potential of the web. Morozov argues, in a manner reminiscent of the Frankfurt School's critiques of popular culture, that the internet is little more than a way to engage in trivial forms of entertainment and has no capacity to be used for any progressive political projects.<sup>329</sup> Jodi Dean argues that the participatory culture of the internet is a new phase of capitalism that she describes as communicative in nature. She makes the case that the ability to communicate politically by posting a blog entry about one's political opinions or making a Facebook status update about one's stance on a political issue only serve to capture and reformat the political energies and desires of potential subjects by redirecting them away from meaningful collective movements

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<sup>327</sup> Manuel Castells, "Communication, Power and Counter-Power in the Network Society," *International Journal of Communication* 1, no. 1 (2007): 238–66; Dahlberg, "Computer-Mediated Communication and The Public Sphere"; Papacharissi, "The Virtual Sphere."

<sup>328</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*.

<sup>329</sup> Morozov, *The Net Delusion*.

and into isolated expressions of talking into a void.<sup>330</sup> These complaints lead to questions about the internet in general and whether it can be so simply categorized and dismissed, despite its plethora of radically different websites, uses, and functions. I seek to position my argument against the background of these three positions which see the internet either as unsuitable for participation, only useful for deliberation, or only as an endpoint from which people can receive government services.

In order to develop the idea that the internet can enhance the opportunities for political participation, I first make the case for why representative government's mechanisms for participation are inadequate and actually seek to minimize participation to the lowest publicly acceptable level, rather than start from the premise of participation as the basis of democracy. I then address the problems with theories of deliberative and direct democracy and make the case that political participation is like being an actor on a stage who speaks and acts publicly. This means participation involves both deliberation and decision, as one without the other is inadequate and leads to either uninformed decisions or debates that serve only to inform those vested with the actual authority to make decisions, rather than empowering political subjects. If political participation can be described using the metaphor of acting on a stage, then this provokes questions of the audience and what its status is. Traditionally, audiences have been seen as passive spectators outside the realm of action, but, drawing on Rancière's theory of the emancipated spectator, I argue that the audience need not be looked upon negatively, as all speech necessarily requires listeners. Listening and thinking about what others have to say involves judgement, which Arendt describes as the most important faculty of the mind for political matters.

Having established a general idea of what political participation should entail, I then turn to the online context and re-address the above interpretations of participation in light of the internet. I argue for a return to participatory democracy, as the internet enables it to overcome its traditional obstacles of not having enough space to fit everyone into a single place and not having enough time to allow everyone to speak. I then turn to two critical evaluations of the possibility of more online political participation from two opposed perspectives. The elitist

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<sup>330</sup> Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*.

argument argues that an online politics would enable too much participation from the uninformed, resulting in a general decline in the quality of political discussion. This decline in quality is theorized as turning people off politics and leading to demands for a return to representative systems. On the flip side, I then evaluate the populist argument which claims that opening up political participation to everyone via the internet would simply enable the creation of a new elite, as those with expert knowledge or with the required free time would come to dominate such online forums pushing out the average person from any meaningful participation. While each of these arguments are rooted in actual experiences of existing nascent online discussion forums, I argue that they both ultimately overstate their case and reveal deeper anti-political biases that predate the technology of the internet.

## 5.2 Critiquing Representation

Unlike the word politics, the word democracy has an overall positive connotation to it. As Hay points out, politics has come to have the meaning of government by deception and conjures up negative feelings, while democracy is becoming more accepted as the best form of government.<sup>331</sup> Any meaningful definition of democracy that is to include all of its diverse and often radically divergent forms must centre on the idea that it involves some form of citizen participation, whether in the form of voting in elections, discussing issues in a public sphere, or direct participation in decision making. In this manner, the idea of participation itself is not opposed by anti-politics, as democracy is increasingly viewed as the only legitimate form of government. The shape which participation takes, however, does stake out participation as a major terrain of contestation between politics and anti-politics. Representative democracy, which has become the global standard for legitimate government, is predicated on reducing mass participation to a very minimum level, so that participation is pushed to the periphery either in the form of voting or other activities related to elections, or in the occasional outburst of a protest. The opportunities to participate remain few and far between.

The problems with representative government are not new, but its hegemonic ideological position as the only legitimate form of government in popular discourse have made these problems fade into the background, as alternatives are deemed either impractical or undesirable.

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<sup>331</sup> Hay, *Why We Hate Politics*, 8–32.

Even Thomas Jefferson, writing in the early days of representative democracy, feared that it might turn into “elective despotism,” as the American constitution excluded the American people from entering the political realm.<sup>332</sup> Jefferson feared this exclusion of all but the representatives would lead the American people to lose interest in public affairs, transforming the representatives into rulers, and making politicians into wolves who act not at the behest of those who elected them but according to their own interests.<sup>333</sup> In many ways, Jefferson’s fears have come to pass, as “Marx’s once-scandalous thesis that governments are simple business agents for international capital is today obvious fact on which ‘liberals’ and ‘socialists’ agree.”<sup>334</sup> As Rancière goes on to argue, managing the economy is how governments claim legitimacy, when this used to be considered a secret to obscure.<sup>335</sup> Politicians not actually doing a proper job of representing the interests of those who elected them is, however, more of a problem with how representative democracy functions in a practical sense, but there are much deeper theoretical problems with it.

The claim that democracy empowers the people so that governments act not on the model of coercive force, such as in monarchy or despotism, but are organs of the people holds true, essentially, only on election day. The ability to participate in choosing those who will go on to have exclusive access to the space in which decisions get made is better than not having this choice but still alienates virtually all citizens from the political realm. In this manner, the ability to choose one’s boss is better than not having that ability, but it is clearly inferior to being able to participate in the decision making process and, thus, not being subject to the decisions of others. Representative government diminishes political space and provides no realm where people can be seen in political action.<sup>336</sup> This radical alienation from participating in the debates and decisions that affect everyone leads to a reassertion of the difference between those who are ruled and those who rule, which the anti-monarchic revolutions in France and the United States had sought to undo.<sup>337</sup> The ability to participate in politics is pushed outside of the realm of

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<sup>332</sup> Cited in Arendt, *On Revolution*, 230.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid.

<sup>334</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 113.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid.

<sup>336</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 229.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

decision and, at best, the people can debate and protest amongst themselves, but the decision making authority rests solely in the hands of the elected officials.

Since direct participation is considered practically impossible by advocates of representative democracy, the best a person can hope for is to be represented, but what does it mean to be represented? If individuals are unique subjects, with unique opinions, how can one person represent a plural group of political subjects, all of whom have different and possibly conflicting opinions? Groups cannot form opinions because this would require everyone in the group to think exactly alike, something which is impossible and undesirable. Furthermore, a group cannot argue or debate, as this is only possible among individuals. What gets represented instead, are the moods and interests of a group.<sup>338</sup> As Arendt explains, voters then make their choice according to their private lives and personal interests and act to try to influence the elected official to act in accordance with one's own interests, while at the same time every other person is attempting to do the same. In this manner, Arendt likens voting to "the reckless coercion with which a blackmailer forces his victim into obedience", which in no way resembles the political "power that arises out of joint action and joint deliberation."<sup>339</sup> Representation becomes, at best, the aggregation of moods and interests, and, at worst, the means by which the few are able to legitimize their control of the public policy agenda.

Even as early as 1963, when Arendt wrote *On Revolution*, she speaks of "Madison Avenue methods" being introduced into elections which transformed them into a relation between buyer and seller, thus subsuming the political process into capitalist consumerism.<sup>340</sup> Elections have increasingly become less and less about policy differences and more about marketing an image or brand to voters. With the rise of the Third Way and the general neoliberal consensus, political parties have increasingly made election campaigns about the personal suitability of candidates, rather than about giving voters a choice between opposed policy directions. Even voting, the one official act of participation that is lauded as bestowing democratic legitimacy, is then depoliticized as it becomes harder to use one's vote to express a political choice. Representative government acts as a hollowed out body without organs, in

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<sup>338</sup> Ibid., 260–261.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid., 268.

which everyone claims fidelity to the idea that the people should participate in government, but the actual avenues to do so are extremely limited and without real substance.<sup>341</sup> By pushing people outside of the political body by constraining political space, the organs of political participation can still be claimed to be functional, but are made unavailable to the vast majority.

Rancière calls the anti-political mechanisms of representative democracy parapolitics, in that it seeks to not outwardly eliminate participation and conflict but merely displace them into other non-political realms.<sup>342</sup> Parapolitical representative democracy “consists in redirecting the feverish energy activated on the public stage toward other ends, in sending it on a search for material prosperity, private happiness, and social bonds.”<sup>343</sup> Notions of the public good are rendered subservient to private wealth, and the people’s representatives become primarily concerned with promoting private prosperity. Public citizens are then replaced with a collection of self-interested private individuals only interested in their own wealth collection, a situation in which politics is replaced with “collective housekeeping.”<sup>344</sup> When the system is designed to valorize economic participation and positions political participation as an unproductive distraction from economic activity, it is hardly any wonder why official political participation rates are dropping.

The literature that seeks to find reasons why voter turnout numbers are at all-time lows and why the average person seems disinterested in government fails to realize that these “problems” are directly generated by the nature of representative government itself, and not simply a problem of personal attitudes. Hay calls this a demand side approach to the problem, as it assumes there must be something wrong with citizens, rather than the system itself.<sup>345</sup> Putnam puts most of the blame for declining voter participation on a loss of a sense of civic duty which relates to what he calls an overall decline in social capital.<sup>346</sup> Norris points to the general increase in education and sophistication of the average voter as leading to what she calls “critical

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<sup>341</sup> Thomas Jefferson worried that “the abstract political system of democracy lacked concrete organs,” making this body without organs much more problematic than how Deleuze and Guattari posit their body without organs. Cited in *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>342</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 72.

<sup>343</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2009), 8.

<sup>344</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 28.

<sup>345</sup> Hay, *Why We Hate Politics*, 39.

<sup>346</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).



citizens” who are less likely to vote because of this critical disposition.<sup>347</sup> Franklin argues that voting is a habit, and that the general decline in voter participation rates began when the voting age was lowered to 18. He goes on to argue that this younger demographic were less socially engaged and thus less likely to vote anyway, which led to the habit of not voting.<sup>348</sup> In each of these arguments about why people are less likely to engage, there is almost no consideration of structural and systemic factors, as all of the analysis is aimed at explaining individual behaviour patterns. Democracy is cast as the ideal which politics subverts, when in reality the current mode of representative democracy is undermining politics itself.<sup>349</sup>

### 5.3 Beyond Representation: Political Participation and the Metaphor of the Stage

The fundamental problem with representative democracy is that it excludes the people from participating in both debate and decision on any given issue. There are examples, however, such as in Switzerland and some individual American states, in which the people can vote directly in a referendum and thus can participate directly in a decision. This form of direct or plebiscite democracy is posited as a common alternative to representation but has serious flaws.<sup>350</sup> The main problem is that these opportunities to make decisions are provided without proper provisions for debate. Thus a question is posed to people who are not given a proper opportunity to discuss and debate it with others which would force them to consider a variety of perspectives which leads to creating an informed opinion. In this sense, referendums often serve to support the authority of the government and undermine change, especially if the referendum is framed as a yes or no question where the options are simply status quo or some form of change.

Uninformed people who are simply presented a question on which they are expected to make a decision will have an inherent bias against change when they do not understand what the change will mean.<sup>351</sup> At the same time, referenda can be captured by a small motivated group when the

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<sup>347</sup> Pippa Norris, *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>348</sup> Mark N. Franklin, *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies Since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>349</sup> Hay, *Why We Hate Politics*, 153.

<sup>350</sup> Shaun Bowler and Todd Donovan, *Demanding Choices: Opinion, Voting, and Direct Democracy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); Thomas E. Cronin, *Direct Democracy: The Politics of Initiative, Referendum, and Recall* (Bloomington: iUniverse, 1999).

<sup>351</sup> Lawrence LeDuc, “Electoral Reform and Direct Democracy in Canada: When Citizens Become Involved,” *West European Politics* 34, no. 3 (2011): 551–67.

issue is not compelling enough to ensure high voter turnouts. There can also be problems related to issues of minority rights.<sup>352</sup> The classic example is women's suffrage, which was delayed in Switzerland by referenda until it was finally passed in 1971. A more recent example would be the 2008 California Proposition 8 ballot initiative which re-banned same-sex marriage.

If direct democracy is problematic because it results in decisions without debate, then deliberative democracy, as outlined by numerous academics including Gutmann and Thompson,<sup>353</sup> Habermas,<sup>354</sup> and Benhabib,<sup>355</sup> seems like a more reasonable model of democracy as it focuses on debate and deliberation. While positions vary within the broad umbrella of deliberative democratic theory, the common focus is that there should be a robust public sphere where people can go to deliberate on public affairs and thus create a more informed public opinion. People will ideally not be making rash decisions which can be easily manipulated by elites or the government, as their participation comes in the form of discussing and deliberating. The major problem with deliberative democracy, especially in the version presented by Gutmann and Thompson, is that it tends to still leave decision making in the hands of elected representatives. These representatives are supposed to act based on the informed public opinion generated through the deliberative process, but this is a crucial gap which leaves open the very real possibility that the representatives will simply ignore public opinion, as decision making authority ultimately rests with the representatives and not the public deliberators. The public sphere remains something entirely outside of the official realm of state politics, and all the participation in deliberation becomes more informative than decisive. Habermas positions deliberative democracy as a middle ground between liberal democracy (defined as the collation of private interests) and what he calls republican democracy, which is exemplified by Arendt's political theory. Even for Habermas deliberative democracy is positioned as weaker than an Arendtian participatory democracy and, thus, explicitly limits the participatory role of the citizen to the point where they are excluded from decisions.<sup>356</sup>

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<sup>352</sup> Barbara S. Gamble, "Putting Civil Rights to a Popular Vote," *American Journal of Political Science* 41, no. 1 (1997): 245–69.

<sup>353</sup> Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>354</sup> Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1*.

<sup>355</sup> Benhabib, *Situating the Self*.

<sup>356</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Three Normative Models of Democracy," *Constellations* 1, no. 1 (1994): 7.

Participation in politics must include both the means to participate in the opinion forming mechanisms of debate and deliberation as well as participating in the decision making process. Action without talk and talk without action are both problematic. Thus deliberative democracy and direct democracy are both inadequate on their own, as a properly participatory politics needs mechanisms to facilitate all means of politics, including speech, action, listening, and protest. When speaking of political participation theatrical metaphors are often invoked, from Arendt's claim that politics is "virtuosity of performance" to Rancière's references to *mise en scène* and the staging of politics.<sup>357</sup> In this sense, a complete picture of political participation involves the actors on the stage who undertake debate and decision, the audience who listens and judges what happens on stage, and all of the off-stage drama that surrounds conflicts over who gets to be on the stage and what their role is.

The most elementary aspect of political participation is the ability to speak one's mind in a meaningful way that is taken seriously and listened to by others. Anti-political prejudice treats the people as a troublesome animal, capable of expressing pain and pleasure but not of engaging in meaningful speech that can express opinions.<sup>358</sup> Political science becomes the art of taming the beast of public sentiment, an art that remains relevant even when people are able to elect representatives and are guaranteed the right to freedom of speech. Thus before one can even express an opinion on a political issue, speech becomes a terrain of contestation between politics and anti-politics at the level of who is considered capable of speech, and who is simply making the noises of pleasure or pain. Before an actor can speak to the audience, a stage must be constructed which provides the opportunity for speech. Anti-politics denies such stages are necessary because the masses do not speak, they only signal vague preferences which representatives and economic experts can appease through top down policy decisions. No country exemplifies this attitude today better than China, where the single party system of government legitimizes itself by arguing that it is satisfying the population economically and thus any claims by the people for political speech would only disrupt the economic development process. Rancière points out that in the past governments would deny speech to the masses based on the Platonic claim that the people were the stomach who needed to be guided by the head of

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<sup>357</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 152; Rancière, *Disagreement*, 55.

<sup>358</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 22.

elite government, but today the governing head “is unable to distinguish itself from the stomach,” and political speech and opinion is seen as unseemly even for politicians whose job has now become economic administration.<sup>359</sup>

To set up a stage where people can speak and listen to each other rests on the starting assumption that everyone is equal, making the division of society into ordered parts a subject of dispute. Such a statement seems rather benign but underscores the radically different method of politics and anti-politics. Most forms of anti-politics, even ones with benevolent or progressive intent, are distributive in nature and, at best, seek to achieve equality as an outcome. This method paints the individual as a passive recipient who can be satisfied by being handed his or her allocated share. Such individuals can then be acted on as objects of administrative management, parcelled into populations and identity groups who might need more or less. Even the most progressive forms of distributive approaches to government remain anti-political, in that there remains no avenue for the people to construct a stage where they can become actors who are capable of speaking with others on an equal footing. The fact that each individual has a unique opinion, given the basic fact of human plurality, makes a stage for people to express these opinions publicly necessary. To presume that politics can be reduced to distributing and counting shares is to deny plurality and subjectivity.

When politics begins with the presumption of equality, it enables political actors to participate in verifying and testing this presumed equality. This means that political action will seek to assert and extend this presumed equality against any and all material instances of inequality. Arendt associates the movement of participating in political action with freedom, in that she argues freedom appears only with the performance of politics, in the same manner that the drama of a play only appears with its performance.<sup>360</sup> Politics consists in speaking, acting, listening, and creating relationships and associations, activities which leave behind no direct material trace, unlike say an artist who creates a painting. In this sense politics is like other performing arts which require a public space populated by others in order for the art to appear and the virtuosity of the performers to be revealed.<sup>361</sup> Public political space serves as a theatre

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<sup>359</sup> Rancière, *Chronicles of Consensual Times*, 3.

<sup>360</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 151.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

where people can act, which allows freedom, in the form of political participation, to appear and be exercised.

The freedom of participating in political action relates to the capacity to begin something new. If nothing ever changes, then there is no freedom and thus no capacity to act. Žižek argues that the political act not only changes the symbolic space, but also disturbs the underlying fantasy.<sup>362</sup> In this sense, political action cannot merely be the administrative and legislative activities of modern parliaments, but must allow for the possibility of something truly new and previously unthinkable to come to pass. Žižek's conception of political action fits with Arendt's argument that natality is the central category of the political, as political action is the exercise of freedom, and as such is the capacity to begin something new.<sup>363</sup> This newness can seem utterly improbable or even unthinkable before the political event, with the Arab Spring being an example, and in this sense the natality of political action can change our underlying assumptions about the world.

Political participation as the exercise of freedom and the capacity to initiate the new and unexpected means it is a risky endeavour, which is part of the reason that philosophers have long schemed to control and constrain politics. Given that politics is always conducted among others, to exercise one's freedom to set something new into motion is to take a risk because the beginner can never know what the result will be, due to the intervention of other actors. Given the plurality of people involved in any political act, the shape any action takes gets twisted and turned by numerous people and groups, often leading to outcomes completely contrary to what was originally intended.<sup>364</sup> While the people in Egypt were successful in uniting to take down the dictatorship, what came after was unpredictable and, for a good many of these activists, entirely unwanted. The emergence of the military and Islamist groups after the successful removal of Hosni Mubarak speaks to the risk and unpredictable nature of political action. Many conservative commentators warned of these possible outcomes and declared that it was better to stick with Mubarak as dictator than take the risk of removing him, expressing a fundamentally anti-political

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<sup>362</sup> Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 238.

<sup>363</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 9.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

outlook.<sup>365</sup> All political action must embrace the risk and unpredictability of collective action, because the only alternative is to close off the space of freedom and natality in favour of a controlled and static regime which eliminates politics entirely.

If freedom and change are to be possible, the desire to substitute making for acting in the public sphere must be resisted. Arendt states that “this attempt to replace acting with making is manifest in the whole body of argument against ‘democracy,’ which, the more consistently and better reasoned it is, will turn into an argument against the essentials of politics.”<sup>366</sup> In place of collective political action, which presumes the equality of actors and operates by exercising freedom, the model of public affairs based on that of not the actor, dancer, or other performing artist, but of the craftsperson is proposed.<sup>367</sup> Politics is reduced to constructing blueprints which are meant to be constructed exactly according to design. Such a model of anti-politics replaces the riskiness of political action with a command and obey structure of rulership, eliminating both equality and freedom from the public realm. Today we have accepted this model of rulership and consider it to be legitimate when the rulers are elected, but, as Arendt was always keen to repeat, political freedom means the freedom to participate in politics, or it means nothing at all.<sup>368</sup> To be an actor on the participatory stage of politics means that one is able to debate with equals and to participate in the decisions that affect the wellbeing of the political entity. Choosing one’s rulers or executing their designs is hardly a substitute for meaningful participation. Deliberative democracy and direct democracy both fail as participatory alternatives to representation as they do not allow the citizen to participate fully as both decision maker and deliberator, leaving real power outside of the reach of the citizens.

## 5.4 The Actor and the Audience

The previous section has emphasized participation in the form of speech and action and has emphasized the role of the actor on the political stage, but to continue the theatrical metaphor, in order to stage an action, there must be people watching in the audience. Political speech is

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<sup>365</sup> See for example: Jack Cafferty, “Was the Arab Spring Worth It?,” *CNN News: Cafferty File*, September 12, 2012, <http://caffertyfile.blogs.cnn.com/2012/09/12/was-the-arab-spring-worth-it/>.

<sup>366</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 220.

<sup>367</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>368</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 210.

meaningless if no one hears it, and political action leaves no lasting impact if it is removed from the public eye. A form of politics which is participatory in nature and operates in a similar manner to a theatre can then be said to suffer from the paradox of the theatre. An audience is needed in order to witness the action, while at the same time this audience has tended to be viewed in a negative light, as spectating has traditionally been associated with passivity and inaction, and thus considered to be the opposite of participation.<sup>369</sup> What then is the status of those who watch, in the context of a politics that puts such a heavy emphasis on participation and uses theatrical metaphors?

The separation of those who act and those who spectate has led to two significant political responses, albeit both somewhat communitarian in nature. The first response is the most radical, as it rests on simply eliminating the political stage altogether in order to prevent the internal division of the people into those who act and those who spectate. In Plato's critique of poetry, the theatre is a site of illusion and passivity which internally divides the community, sewing disharmony and contradiction.<sup>370</sup> In the *Timaeus*, Plato presents his alternative to the divided theatrical model of politics by presenting a model of community based on the orderly movements of the planets. In this sense Plato eliminates the political stage where some act freely and some spectate in favour of a

choreographic community, where no one remains a static spectator, where everyone must move in accordance with the community rhythm fixed by mathematical proportion, even if that requires getting old people reluctant to take part in the community dance drunk.<sup>371</sup>

This choreographic model has been evident in various totalitarian regimes, from North Korea's mass games, in which over 100,000 people take part in a choreographed gymnastics routine to the hypnotic marching in unison of military parades. By emphasizing collective movement in unison, the harmony of the community can be asserted and there is no room for either the freedom of political movement that goes against the grain or the ability for the spectator to critically reflect on the action she or he witnesses.

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<sup>369</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 2.

<sup>370</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, 603–606.

<sup>371</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 5.

Swinging the other way are those who wish to reinvent the political stage altogether, rather than abolish it along the lines of Plato's choreographed mass movement. In this sense, there is an attempt to pull everyone into the action of the political drama, thus saving the ideal of the political stage from the problem of the spectator. At its most basic level, this attitude is apparent in the demands for people to vote in elections. The argument goes that if one does not participate in the voting process, then one essentially gives up all claims to active citizenship and must accept radical passivity. The popular version of this sentiment is the common saying that "if you don't vote, you don't get to complain," which is paradoxical in itself as it splits the political speech of affirmation and dissent into two separate parts. Central to this argument is the idea that, by voting for a politician, the spectators become part of the process and, thus, are drawn into it as participants, removing the critical distance that may lead to questioning the entire process itself. Even in a representative democracy where participation is constrained to choosing a ruler every couple of years, there is a public demand that the separation between spectator and actor be abolished. In a situation which thrives on public passivity, the dominant ideology is that by going out and voting, the government that is chosen is legitimately made up of the people, and is thus an organ of its wishes and desires. The ideology of representative democracy can then claim there are no rulers and ruled, and no division between spectators and actors.

The demand for audience participation acts as a demand to suspend critical faculties, as when a band that the audience is clearly not enjoying makes a point of trying to exhort the audience members to dance or get involved in the performance. It comes across as an insecure form of trying to prevent judgement. The attempt to eliminate spectators and their critical distance is evident as well in communitarian attempts to posit community as an organizing principle. To become part of the community and remove oneself from one's critical distance from it functions as an attempt to remove the possibility of an outside that can criticize, or as Rancière calls it, a part with no part. Instead of either of these communitarian attempts to abolish the division between spectator and actor, political emancipation can operate in the manner of an emancipated theatre, where, rather than trying to eliminate the spectators, the boundaries between those who look and those who act can be traversed.<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>372</sup> Ibid., 19.



The problem with the supposed paradox of the spectator lies in the idea that listening and watching are passive and, therefore, not only the opposite of action but that acting and watching are mutually exclusive. In reality, listening is part of the acting and speaking process, and the difference between them is not as evident or even existent as the critics of the passive audience think. Part of being a good speaker is being a good listener, and to be a good actor one must take into consideration those with whom one is acting in concert. As Derek Barker argues, this is the fundamental lesson of Sophocles' *Antigone*. Speech and action in isolation are disastrous, and being a good citizen means being willing to listen to and engage with others.<sup>373</sup> Creon and Antigone both speak and act without listening to the other, while Haemon listens to both and grows into a mature citizen. Political speech as a series of disconnected monologues fails to have any impact in the same way as attempting to start a revolution or protest in isolation from other people is irrelevant. The collective and performative nature of politics demands that not just other actors be included, but spectators as well. Spectators who observe, draw connections, make judgements and develop their own interpretations from what they have seen.

The spectator, far from being removed from political participation, is the one who engages in the most critical political faculty of all, namely judgement.<sup>374</sup> The political spectator is like the theatrical spectator, not someone sitting passive and agape before a spectacle who needs to be motivated into action. Given that action is less common, watching should be conceived of as our normal condition of being.<sup>375</sup> We watch, we draw connections, and we judge. Given that so much of politics depends on the clash of different opinions and the presentation of unique perspectives, the role of judging is all the more important. Every political decision involves the presentation of multiple choices without any objectively true solution which could be discovered through scientific principles. Politics is like one's taste in music or film. It comes down to a matter of subjective judgements. In this sense, the judgemental audience is at least as important a form of political participation as the speeches and actions which happen on the stage of action. A participatory politics open to everyone means that an actor must sit down and listen as a spectator, and that there must be no barrier that prevents anyone in the audience from standing up and getting onto the stage. The separation of spectator and actor are

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<sup>373</sup> Barker, *Tragedy and Citizenship*, 38.

<sup>374</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego: Hartcourt, 1981), 192–193.

<sup>375</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 17.

preserved, but there is no rigid barrier preventing people from crossing from audience to actor and actor to audience. In this manner, what must be eliminated is not the stage or the audience but the barrier that prevents free movement between the two positions.

## 5.5 Participation in an Online Context

While theoretical arguments can be made in favour of the virtues of a more engaged mode of political participation, the practice has always fallen short of the ideal, partly because of the seeming unworkability of most forms of participatory politics. Models of participatory democracy that refer back to the ancient Athenian example are deemed hopelessly utopian and completely unworkable in the context of today's vastly larger pool of citizens. This argument has become commonplace in dismissing the practicality of participatory politics, even among theorists who are otherwise sympathetic.<sup>376</sup> The protests of the Arab Spring seemed to hit a similar impasse, as once the unelected dictatorships were overthrown, representative democracy seemed to be the only practical alternative. Even Arendt scholars routinely dismiss her arguments in favour of council democracy as unworkable or utopian.<sup>377</sup> Despite my enthusiasm for a more participatory politics, these critiques of participatory democracy's practicality are hard to escape. The idea of meeting in councils only seems practical at the micro-level of neighbourhood associations, but anything beyond that small scale would result in insurmountable obstacles in terms of physical distance, space, and time. A form of politics where only ultra-local issues are at stake, however, fails to provide the means for people to engage with the issues they care about. Especially in the context of increasing globalization, restricting one's political energies to micro-local issues seems like a failed attempt to return to some romanticized version of the pre-industrial past.

The lack of clearly workable alternatives to representative democracy has led theorists such as Rancière to simply posit politics as bound up with anti-politics, making political participation only about dissent and protest.<sup>378</sup> While these elements must be included in any

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<sup>376</sup> Saco, *Cybering Democracy*, 35.

<sup>377</sup> See for example: Margaret Canovan, "The Contradictions of Hannah Arendt's Political Thought," *Political Theory* 6, no. 1 (February 1, 1978): 8; Bhikhu C. Parekh, *Hannah Arendt and the Search for a New Political Philosophy* (London: Macmillan Press, 1981), 171.

<sup>378</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 31.

kind of theory of political participation, to dismiss the ability to take part in decision making is to seriously circumscribe what politics means and what counts as political action. Rather than resort to positing politics as purely oppositional, a new vision of practical participatory politics is necessary, and it is precisely on this point where the internet has the capacity to reinvigorate these debates. As was argued in the chapter on the political realm, concerns of physical distance and time in an online context are not the overwhelming constraints they are in offline space, which allows us to move beyond the primary and most valid criticism of participatory democracy.

Most accounts of how the internet can be beneficial for politics focus on one of three aspects that position the internet in a supporting role. For advocates of representative democracy the internet becomes another form of communications tool in which candidates use social media and set up websites in order to try to attract more votes. Typical of this approach is the edited volume *The Internet Election*, which analyzes the 2004 United States Presidential election. The internet is treated in terms of its ability to organize supporters and make fundraising efforts more broad based and generally treats the internet as revolutionizing the campaigning process but completely peripheral to the functioning of government.<sup>379</sup> Even in the context of a comparative study of the internet and national elections done in 2014, there is no mention of using the internet to allow people to actually vote, thus keeping the internet at a safe distance from even the selection of representatives.<sup>380</sup> The second method positions the internet as the possible site of a more engaged civic sphere in the Habermasian sense, in which people can deliberate on political issues, and the consensus that results from these deliberations are then meant to guide the decisions of elected leaders. While the deliberative position with respect to the internet is an improvement on the representative position which places the internet on the periphery, deliberative democrats such as Castells, Dahlberg, and Papacharissi tend to see the internet as a place for a renewed sense of Habermas's bourgeois public sphere, which although it provides more avenues for participating in debate and discussion, it still keeps the internet at arm's length from the actual mechanisms of government.<sup>381</sup> The third model positions the internet as an

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<sup>379</sup> Williams and Tedesco, *The Internet Election*.

<sup>380</sup> Kluver et al., *The Internet and National Elections*.

<sup>381</sup> Castells, "Communication, Power and Counter-Power in the Network Society"; Papacharissi, "The Virtual Sphere"; Lincoln Dahlberg and Eugenia Siapera, "Introduction: Tracing Radical Democracy and the Internet," in

uncontrolled space of dissent which can formulate the creation of protest movements and help strengthen alternative voices by not needing to rely on traditional forms of corporate-controlled mass media to reach a broad audience.<sup>382</sup> Like with the other two models of web-enabled democracy, this one again positions the internet as a useful tool that operates outside of the structures of government. While embracing aspects of these models can be useful in formulating a more engaged politics, they essentially skirt the potentially radical impact the internet could have for reinvigorating participatory politics.

Instead of positing the internet as a communications tool, alternative space, or useful supplement, the real potential lies in placing the infrastructure of politics online. Instead of accepting the idea that the government and the people must be completely separate entities, the participatory model positions the people as the government in a properly democratic sense. If, however, the stage of politics was not limited to a physical space where only a very select few can actually participate and the audience has little opportunity for input, then the elimination of the gulf between government and citizens could be possible. The only viable means of implementing participatory politics is by placing the stage online. In this sense the internet would alter everything about how politics is conducted, rather than being a mere supplement. People would debate and argue with others online, not just as a means of aggregating interests or creating public sentiments which representatives would act on, but enabling decisions to be made on issues raised directly by the people, not in address to a separate ruling entity but to their fellow citizens.

Placing the political stage online facilitates participation in politics in a number of ways. If one of the most basic elements of political participation is the ability to speak, this capacity becomes much easier online. As was outlined in the chapter on subjectivity, speaking online provides a form of cover for one's personal life, so that the risk of public engagement can be reduced and the likelihood of having speech dismissed on the basis of what someone is, rather than on what they have to say can be reduced. Online speech, in so far as it is actually writing, can facilitate a deeper debate that moves beyond the "Madison Avenue" methods of electoral

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*Radical Democracy and the Internet: Interrogating Theory and Practice*, ed. Lincoln Dahlberg and Eugenia Siapera (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>382</sup> Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner, "New Media and Internet Activism: From the 'Battle of Seattle' to Blogging," *New Media & Society* 6, no. 1 (2004): 87–95; Howard and Hussain, *Democracy's Fourth Wave?*.

campaigns by generating a more substantive focus on the actual issues facing the public.<sup>383</sup> While it is true that the internet can also allow people to publicly state whatever vapid sentiment happens to flutter into their heads, setting up the technology to weed out such comments is not difficult and would obviously be considered when constructing such an online space. Overall the level of political discourse would likely elevate. Currently we have to listen to and consider every thoughtless statement of an elected politician simply because they are the people with decision making authority, while in a more egalitarian online context vapidness is much easier to ignore and tends to be socially punished. Public speech with no content does not stir controversy or provoke debate unless the one issuing such statements is in a position of authority.

Zelda Bronstein points to how taking part in political debate online is not just more convenient but is also emotionally easier.<sup>384</sup> Citing Walter Ong's work on orality, she points to how online debate is easier on the nerves because it lacks the element of "everyone looking at you at once" that is the case with offline political speech. She also points to Ong's work on how intonation in speech can spur emotions and how certain personalities can dominate others. Offline speeches to an audience are also given from a standing position, which is associated with combativeness and is an aggressive posture, compared to debating online which is done from a weakened seated position.<sup>385</sup> While increasing ease of access, accessibility, and reducing the emotional strain of political participation are, as I have argued, positive benefits of online participation, Bronstein goes on to argue that these conveniences make political participation too easy and that ease of use cheapens the importance of political participation.<sup>386</sup> This argument is related to the elitist argument that will be dealt with later on in this chapter but also relates to a common complaint about slacktivism cheapening issues into clicking a like button or signing an e-petition. Why, however, should political participation be inherently exhausting, emotionally taxing, and all around difficult unless the goal is to constrain participation to only an aristocratic few, whether they be dedicated activists or elected politicians? Bronstein then goes on to argue, citing Turkle's tired argument, that participating online isolates individuals and weakens ties between people.<sup>387</sup> Bronstein's ideal of participation seems to involve small vanguards of

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<sup>383</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 268.

<sup>384</sup> Zelda Bronstein, "Politics' Fatal Therapeutic Turn," *Dissent* 58, no. 3 (2011): 72.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

dedicated activists rather than broad based movements or the ability for anyone and everyone to easily take part in the political process. In this sense, Bronstein's organizational structure for activists simply mimics the structure of government that she seeks to oppose.

The strength of online participation is precisely the ease of access that critics such as Bronstein do not like. It is simply easier, practically, to allow vast numbers of people to make public statements at the same time, and much easier to read and consider vast numbers of comments posted online than in any offline alternative. Talking verbally and listening aurally are much more consuming of one's attention in the way that reading and writing are not, meaning that an online participatory politics would simply be less time-consuming in general, which would facilitate more participation. Writing and reading also have the advantage over talking and listening of being able to allow for more time to consider what one is writing, and to consider what one is reading. In this sense it can moderate the impact of the angry person with the loud voice demanding to be heard. One can imagine a public assembly where those who yell the loudest become impossible to ignore, while those with calm and reasonable arguments do not get a chance to speak. By placing such speech online and transforming it into written thoughts, the volume of speech becomes much less important than the content. Writing in all capitals in an attempt to convey anger simply does not have the same effect, and is more likely to lead to ridicule than immediate or urgent consideration of what is being hastily conveyed.

Participating in politics online can also help lower the boundary between spectator and actor. In-person debates take the form of one person speaking and everyone else listening, which has the effect of clearly separating the spectator from the actor. In an online context, however, there need not be an unsurmountable wall of separation between speakers and listeners, because when reading people's comments one can also comment and reply at the same time. There is no need to take turns in a rigidly delineated manner between only spectating and only acting. Spectators can more easily be empowered to engage in judgement, as mechanisms can be set up where, upon reading a comment, a reader can click an agree or disagree button to register their judgement without having to write out a comment outlining their own position. Given that most people in online forums are "lurkers," or people who often read but do not post to discussion forums, to be able to share their judgement publicly without having to type out a comment is

empowering.<sup>388</sup> Spectators can become the drivers of what issues are important in this way, as their quiet judgements will drive what issues get noticed and discussed. This is significant because in an offline context it is usually only the actors who are willing to speak who drive the conversation, as there is very little recourse for the spectator to push the conversation or debate in another direction. Online participation can then greatly empower the spectator and, thus, make the content of politics more reflective of what the average citizen is concerned with, rather than being reflective only of what the most outspoken citizens wish to discuss.

It is important to blur the line between spectator and actor without actually abolishing it. Some critics of participatory websites point to the fact that almost all content that is created on a site such as Wikipedia for instance, is performed by a very select few, and most people simply read the articles without ever editing them.<sup>389</sup> Rather than trying to salvage the participatory aspect by claiming that we need to change how we conceive of equality, as Polletta argues, we simply need to realize that spectatorship is not “worse” than participation but tied to it. The fact that not everyone edits Wikipedia does not make it less participatory or make it into some kind of new structure of exclusionary elitism as some critics have claimed.<sup>390</sup> If everyone was forced to write or edit a Wikipedia article in order to read one, not only would readership vastly decline, but the quality of content posted would also decline. Spectatorship and action go hand in hand and require the other. The fact that some may not feel the need to act most of the time is not a problem, especially in an online context where spectators can be emancipated in the way described by Rancière.<sup>391</sup>

By placing the activities of politics related to its communicative and decision making aspects online, a whole host of new forms of participation open up. There are a plethora of possibilities of how such a political stage could operate, as well as many possible different implementations that could come about. Many existing websites provide nascent possibilities which could serve as inspiration for the creation of an online political infrastructure. While social

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<sup>388</sup> Blair Nonnecke and Jennifer Preece, “Shedding Light on Lurkers in Online Communities,” *Ethnographic Studies in Real and Virtual Environments: Inhabited Information Spaces and Connected Communities* 24, no. 26 (1999): 123–28.

<sup>389</sup> Francesca Polletta, “Participatory Democracy in the New Millennium,” *Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews* 42, no. 1 (2013): 43.

<sup>390</sup> Aniket Kittur et al., “Power of the Few vs. Wisdom of the Crowd: Wikipedia and the Rise of the Bourgeoisie,” in *CHI '07: Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 2007.

<sup>391</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*.

media sites are problematic because of their social nature, one could imagine networks of people connected not by social ties but around political issues. Instead of becoming friends with another person, one could join an issue, immediately linking with other potential actors who could be rallied to transform debates into actions that rearrange the world. Discussion forums such as Reddit, which are driven by users submitting links which can be upvoted or downvoted based on how interesting they are, could serve as a model for deciding which issues were of higher priority within a political community. The discussion aspect of sites like Reddit could also serve as the basis for debate on popular issues, as it allows people to respond directly to others and upvote or downvote individual comments.

While Reddit's aim with the upvote and downvote system was to weed out and hide irrelevant comments, in more politically oriented subforums, this system breaks. Unpopular opinions get downvoted as a form of disagreement, which is politically problematic as the Reddit comment algorithm automatically hides comments with a negative voting score. In a properly political forum unpopular opinions need the same visibility as popular ones. Different methods and algorithms would have to be developed which send not just the most popular opinions to the top, but also the most unpopular, the most controversial, and the ones which provoked the most replies. There are many examples of nascent possibilities that could be transformed to facilitate politics, but too many critics of online participation simply look at the flaws, such as Reddit's downvote system hiding unpopular political opinions, and then deem the internet as a whole unsuitable to politics.<sup>392</sup> What is needed is some creative thinking about how the internet could be used as a political stage, rather than dismissing it based on certain flawed websites which were not meant to be used for political purposes in the first place.

Critics of "slacktivism", such as Jodi Dean and Stuart Thomas, focus on the simplicity of online petitions or liking causes on social media sites as the extent and horizon of online participation and then go on to deem these to be a distraction from political action in the "real world".<sup>393</sup> These critiques fail because they involve the implicit claim that the internet simply

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<sup>392</sup> Such critics tend to ignore the question of what could be created on the internet, while focusing on demonstrating how current uses of the internet are less than political, see for example: Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*; Chaves, "The Internet as Global Platform?"; McChesney, *Digital Disconnect*; Morozov, *The Net Delusion*.

<sup>393</sup> Stuart Thomas, "Hey Avatard: Screw Your Twibbons, Find a Real Cause," *Memeburn*, May 9, 2012, <http://memeburn.com/2012/05/hey-avatard-screw-your-twibbons-start-doing-something/>; Michael Arria, "Beyond



cannot function as political space, and that therefore any kind of participation online must necessarily be trivial. What is the difference, however, between claiming that clicking an online petition does not really change anything and the argument that participating in a street protest does not really change anything? Both rely on an antiquated notion of official political spaces, which was critiqued in the second chapter, which views given spaces as having fixed essences which cannot be reconfigured. The idea that the internet as space could be produced in a different manner by the participation of people is simply not even considered, in the same way that conservative critics of street protest claim that those activists are wasting their time because nothing can change through this method.

By contrast there is a growing body of scholarship which argues that even trivial online political participation can open the door to more substantial forms of political participation, both online and offline. Christensen finds that online engagement in political activities tended to increase the desire for subjects to participate offline, and that there is no evidence to suggest that slacktivism is replacing more substantial forms of political participation.<sup>394</sup> In a thorough study of online and offline political behaviour in the UK, Gibson et al. found that being older, wealthier, male, and white were strong predictors of offline political activity, but that these same groups were not strong predictors of online political activity, demonstrating the internet's capacity to overcome traditional barriers to participation.<sup>395</sup> A study by Vissers and Stolle of students at McGill found that political activity online and offline was positively correlated and that those who engaged in Facebook slacktivism were no less likely to participate in other forms of more substantial political engagement.<sup>396</sup>

Moving beyond concerns of clicktivism or slacktivism, Dean goes on to argue that the internet does provide new avenues for participation but that these avenues have already been

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Clicktivism: Jodi Dean on the Limits of Technology in the Occupy Movement," *Vice: Motherboard*, November 2012, <http://motherboard.vice.com/blog/beyond-clicktivism-jodi-dean-on-the-limits-of-technology-in-the-occupy-movement>.

<sup>394</sup> Henrik Serup Christensen, "Political Activities on the Internet: Slacktivism; or Political Participation by Other Means?," *First Monday* 16, no. 2 (2011).

<sup>395</sup> Rachel K. Gibson, Wainer Lusoli, and Stephen Ward, "Online Participation in the UK: Testing a 'Contextualised' Model of Internet Effects," *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations* 7, no. 4 (2005): 561–83.

<sup>396</sup> Sara Vissers and Dietlind Stolle, "Spill-Over Effects Between Facebook and On/Offline Political Participation? Evidence from a Two-Wave Panel Study," *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 11, no. 3 (2014): 259–75.

captured by anti-political forces.<sup>397</sup> The most interesting sites on the internet are now driven by user-generated content, as without the participation of users, sites like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, or Reddit would sit completely empty of any content. According to Dean, the sites which rely on participation have two anti-political effects. First, they direct people's participatory impulse away from politics and channel it into other means, and second they create an "intense circulation of content" in which everyone registers an opinion that no one listens to, thus undermining the agonistic and deliberative aspects necessary for politics.<sup>398</sup> Specifically, Dean cites the example of people having political blogs where they can publicly state their opinions on any given issue whenever they want. The problem, however, is that very few people will read it, and thus people end up feeling like they have participated without their participation being meaningful. Under no circumstances would blogging be considered a model for a new online political realm, and thus Dean's critique, although valid, is hardly a condemnation of online political participation as a whole as she draws her examples from one small element of online activity.

There are plenty of examples of legitimately political uses of the internet today, including Anonymous, the Arab Spring, and the Occupy movement. The real problem with critiquing how people currently use the internet, and then taking this to be a critique of the medium itself, is that it closes off the potential of what the internet could be and how it could be used in the future. The fact that the internet could serve as the infrastructure of a radically engaged participatory politics is not in any way negated by the fact that it may currently and continue to serve as the infrastructure of a new form of anti-political "communicative capitalism" or as a way for governments to spy on citizens. If this argument was applied to offline space, then all transformative political action would have to be disqualified on the grounds that offline space is somehow inherently anti-political and immutable. The internet is not a monolith and multiple experiences and configurations of its space easily coexist on different websites. While most critiques of online political participation as slacktivism tend to lack theoretical depth,<sup>399</sup> there are two versions of an argument against participatory politics in general which can be interpreted in terms of online participation which merit further consideration.

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<sup>397</sup> Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, 17.

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>399</sup> Morozov is particularly guilty in this respect, see: Morozov, *The Net Delusion*.

## 5.6 The Elitist Argument against Participation: Too Much Quantity Degrades Quality

Beyond the space and time argument, which the internet renders invalid, the most serious argument against participatory politics has to do with the quality and quantity of the participation. This argument takes two forms; the elitist version argues that the quantity of participation will overwhelm the quality while the populist argument argues that the quality of participation will overwhelm the quantity. Both versions would seem to be amplified when considering online participation, however, as I will show, online participation can more than compensate for any increase in negative aspects to which these two critiques point. This section will deal with the elitist version of the quality versus quantity argument, while the next section will look at the populist version of it.

In its most simple form, the elitist argument states that by allowing anyone and everyone to participate politically it will lead to poor decisions and the consideration of uninformed and unreasonable opinions. The ultimate fear is that the unwashed masses will degrade politics into some sort of vulgar talk show where people scream their prejudices at each other and nothing serious can happen. The elitist argument is persistent in the history of political philosophy, as it begins with Plato's philosopher kings and is even raised against representative democracy by the likes of John Stuart Mill who argued that the educated elite should be given two votes in elections to compensate for the enfranchisement of the working class.<sup>400</sup> Remnants of this suspicion toward the political intelligence of the average person persist in institutions such as the Canadian Senate and British House of Lords, which were originally meant to operate as a check on any potential "democratic excess" that might occur as a result of allowing regular people to choose their own representatives for the House of Commons.

The elitist argument becomes amplified in the online context, as there is a persistent view that allowing just anyone to publicly comment on a news story, for example, simply leads to a series of vacuous and pointless comments. Often the toxicity of online commenting is blamed on anonymity and the so-called "internet disinhibition effect,"<sup>401</sup> but there is no reason to believe

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<sup>400</sup> Dale Miller, *Classic Thinkers: John Stuart Mill* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2010), 182.

<sup>401</sup> Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect."

that someone would only make a ridiculous comment online when he or she would otherwise never make the same comment when discussing the same news article with friends. Anonymity does not cause people to act immaturely but allows them to reveal what they really think without worry of social consequences. Anonymity breeds honesty, whereas social pressures may lead individuals to make insincere political comments in the name of fitting into one's social context. Online commentary on political issues tends to cover a wider spectrum of beliefs, including ones that are generally not socially acceptable, not because anonymity makes people act differently, but because it enables honesty.

A second aspect to the perception that online discussion is of lower quality relates to its publicity. Usually the revealing of opinions, including ones which are ignorant or prejudiced, are kept to a small group of people due to the lack of a public political stage. The difference between talking about politics online and among a small group of people is not a matter of anonymity but is a matter of how many people can see the comments. The founder of Gawker, one of the larger websites which focus on allowing users to comment on posted articles, argues that the site may move toward a model where only a select few pre-approved readers will be allowed to comment on any given story, in an attempt to improve the quality of comments on the site.<sup>402</sup> The real issue, however, of why people are either so willing to engage in toxic behaviour, post pointless comments, or proudly proclaim their ignorance publicly is not merely a matter of the functioning of the internet but poses the question of why are these people so uninformed and poorly behaved in the first place? The argument for the internet disinhibition effect rests on the assumption that in offline space the same people who act boorish online would be capable of serious and reasonable political debate. In contrast to Suler's initial argument, psychological research is increasingly demonstrating that people who behave badly online tend to also behave badly offline.<sup>403</sup> In this sense, the internet does not turn people into miscreants; it simply makes people's normal behaviour more visible to a wider audience.

The elitist argument looks at some of the worst examples of poor behaviour and uninformed political discourse online and then draws the conclusion that most people are

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<sup>402</sup> Doug Gross, "Have Online Comment Sections Become 'a Joke'?", *CNN*, March 15, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/03/11/tech/web/online-comments-sxsw/>.

<sup>403</sup> Erin E. Buckels, Paul D. Trapnell, and Delroy L. Paulhus, "Trolls Just Want to Have Fun," *Personality and Individual Differences* 67 (2014): 97–102.

incapable of serious political activity or at least that the majority lack the education necessary to take part politically. This argument, however, confuses cause and effect. In a system where the vast majority are alienated from participation there is no motivation to become informed and knowledgeable about either the political system or any given daily issue. Politicians debate and decide on these issues, not the average person. Thus, when comments are solicited from the public on news stories for example, is it really surprising that a good deal of them come off as ignorant or vapid? If people were given a real opportunity to participate, the motivation to get informed becomes strong, especially if one's opinions will be tested in debate by others who are highly knowledgeable and educated on the topic.

The idea that participation spurs people to become more informed seems to fly in the face of the claims that internet commenting is the bottom of the barrel when it comes to serious discourse. Especially among journalists there is a common theme that enabling mass participation through the internet simply brings out the worst in people.<sup>404</sup> The quality of commenting, however, depends on which sites are analyzed and the algorithmic structure of the commenting system. In a brief comparison of newspaper comments to comments on Reddit of a single controversial news story (Canada pulling out of the Kyoto Accord) an obvious difference in the quality of comments can be witnessed. Comments on CBC, the National Post, and Sun News Network were of significantly lower quality than those posted on Reddit. In conducting this comparison, poor quality comments were defined as falling into one of three categories. The first category consisted of comments that simply agreed or disagreed in a way that did not lead to discussion. The second category were comments which were pointless, off topic, or reposts. The third category consisted of offensively racist, sexist, or homophobic comments, as well as personal insults which did not advance an argument. Using this metric, it was found that on the same news story across multiple sources, 45% of comments on CBC were of poor quality, 65% on the National Post, and 55% on Sun News Network. These same stories posted to Reddit generated an overall much higher level of discussion and discourse from people who both agreed with the government's decision and opposed it. The story posted on /r/Canada contained 12% poor quality comments and on /r/worldnews contained 36% poor quality comments.<sup>405</sup>

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<sup>404</sup> Smith, "E-Democracy or a Forum for Bullies?"

<sup>405</sup> For full data see appendix 1.

The vast majority of news sites whose primary medium is offline, operate on a flat commenting model in which the original story is posted with an unconnected list of unrelated comments responding directly to the original article. In the case of my comparison study, many users of the newspaper sites would attempt to address the comments of other users, but because the comments were displayed in a flat list, there was next to no discussion, as such attempts at direct response became lost in the structure of the comments. This problem of flat commenting was especially problematic on the CBC website, while the Sun News website only allowed replies one level deep. In the case of CBC, replies to other comments were not connected to the original. For Sun News, the one level reply structure only increased confusion, as it made it appear as if people's comments were replies to others, when in reality they were attempting to reply to someone else. By contrast, the nested tree structure of Reddit enabled users to actually have back and forth debates and discussions which were easy for readers to follow. The situation of the newspaper comments is precisely what Jodi Dean critiques as talk without listening, as on such sites there is no formation of relationships (either friendly or adversarial) among users, because they do not talk to each other. Most comments on the news sites were directly aimed at the article or even addressed to the Prime Minister, rather than fellow commenters. In this sense the newspaper commenting sections mirror the structure of government and citizen, where the government makes the decisions and the best the citizen can do is yell in protest at them. The structure of authority is maintained where the commenters are alienated, and take on the role of yelling into an unresponsive void. The journalist (or the person who posted the story off a news wire service) rarely responds to comments on an article, just as the government rarely engages in debate with individual citizens. With this structure it is no wonder that newspaper comment sections seem to bring out the worst in people and fail to generate any interesting discussion.

The other fundamental problem with the structure of most newspaper comments sections, contributing to their poor quality, is the lack of interaction and debate between users. When someone says something toxic, there is no real way to engage with or challenge that person directly. Comment replies get lost in the flat list, or if there is some nested structure, the original commenter rarely sees it. If one can get away with saying anything without challenge, then this will naturally lead to more vacuous and toxic comments. On sites which are structured toward commenting and not simply talking at the original article, such as Reddit, there is a much higher level of discourse. In the comparison of comments on Kyoto, the two Reddit discussions

generated 3% and 2.3% of comments which were in the third category outlined above of either being offensive or insulting. All of these types of comments had a comment score of zero or less, meaning they were filtered to the bottom of the list of comments, due to being downvoted by other users. By comparison, CBC had 2.5% of these comments, the National Post 17.6% and Sun News 23%. While the numbers for CBC are likely low due to moderation (many of the off topic comments were complaints about moderators removing their previous comments), the numbers were very high on the National Post and Sun News sites. While this might be expected for Sun News, given its ideological reputation, these types of low quality comments were directed at and came from viewpoints that spanned the political spectrum. Given the lack of structure which enables interaction on that site, such comments went socially unpunished. On Reddit you cannot help but notice when people think your comment is of low quality, due to the fact each comment gets a score from voting and replies are sent directly to you as messages. Posting a low quality comment on a newspaper website, by contrast, will not lead to any awareness that it might be of poor quality.

In addition, Sun News uses a real name policy where all comments must be linked to a Facebook account, meaning that the most toxic discussion site was the only one with no pseudonymity. In fact, since it was trivially easy to simply click a commenter's name and get to their Facebook page, some of the insults were unnecessarily personal and went beyond simply posting an insult as a means of disagreeing with an opinion. Anonymity then did not lead to disinhibition as Suler claims, but in reality the ability to quickly access personal information enables a toxic atmosphere where users are more prone to insults which attempt to disqualify the ability to participate based on knowledge of a user's identity. Real names policies and linking comments to a person's offline identity does not create more accountability which leads to higher quality comments but, in fact, simply provides more ammunition for character attacks which can become more personalized and thus more hurtful. By contrast, Reddit's structure promotes engagement among users which explains the lower level of third category comments. In this sense, the disinhibition effect which leads to the posting of poor quality comments is not a result of internet anonymity but a result of being able to talk without reply. When everything one says is subject to critical response, one becomes more careful in what one says, and there is a strong motivation to do a little research to make sure one's statements have some kind of factual backing. Seeing that one's comment has received hundreds of downvotes and generated tens of

critical replies demonstrating how one is wrong is embarrassing and provides social impetus to do better next time by becoming more informed on the issue.

The problem with poor quality comments is not structurally related to the internet or too much participation but in fact is directly related to the lack of participation. To continue with the metaphor of the theatre, can one expect a good performance out of an actor who has never had any practice acting, never had any education as an actor, and has never been on stage before? Clearly not, but the elitist argument essentially attempts to naturalize the lack of opportunity into a lack of natural ability. This argument is analogous to claiming that people in Botswana are simply not naturally talented hockey players, despite the fact that virtually no one in Botswana plays the sport or has the opportunity to do so. How do we know that given the opportunity to play and practice the sport, as well as train with excellent coaches, that people from Botswana may not become excellent hockey players?

Contrary to the elitist fear that mass participation will degrade political discourse, making participation more open and accessible could very well empower common sense. The current system enables lobbying by interest groups, and if they are motivated enough or have enough money, they can easily sway policy in their favour even if their demands run contrary to the public interest or even common sense. Industry lobbying of government would be muted in a more participatory political system. It would be more difficult for a lobbyist to persuade the public to do things that go against its interest, as compared to convincing a few politicians. There is also the issue of small but motivated groups who rely on the lack of engagement by the public to get measures passed. A good example are the conspiracy-oriented anti-fluoride movement and anti-wind farm movements in Ontario.<sup>406</sup> Both groups rely on arguments that are scientifically unsupported and which, when faced with broader public scrutiny, tend to be ridiculed as pseudoscience. When anti-fluoride groups show up to every city council meeting and demand that their issue be discussed, it can make it seem like that issue is disproportionately important to the public. Very few people have the motivation to show up at a public meeting to counter the claims of anti-wind farm or anti-fluoride activists because, to most people, defending common

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<sup>406</sup> Manisha Krishnan, "Are Anti-Fluoridation Activists Coming to Your Town?," *Maclean's*, February 9, 2013, <http://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/something-in-the-water/>; Chip Martin, "Anti-Wind Turbine Activists Block Southwestern Ontario Highway," *Toronto Sun*, October 19, 2013, <http://www.torontosun.com/2013/10/19/anti-wind-turbine-activists-block-southwestern-ontario-highway>.



sense is hardly something that inspires political passion. The lack of visible opposition, however, is what allows these measures to get passed. In a participatory system such issues would face much broader public rebuke and be quickly pushed aside in favour of more serious considerations. The ease of posting a rebuttal online can elevate political discourse and minimize the effect of those who rely on not being publicly challenged to push their issue.

Once one accepts that the elite argument against mass participation is unfounded, an inevitable corollary is the question about having the time to decide and debate every minute detail of every issue and proposal. This question seems to derive from the attitude that voting in elections is a civic duty. Thus, in a participatory democracy, there would be a duty to participate in every possible debate and decision. There would, however, be little incentive or need to be involved in every issue. People would naturally only gravitate toward participating in issues that mattered to them, and in fact it would amount to interference to try to join the decision on every issue. It is always better to not participate than to participate blindly, and there will be a measure of self-selection on any given political issue. At the same time, if someone simply was not interested in politics that person would be free to let others make the decisions, allowing the pursuit of wealth accumulation or whatever else one might prefer to political participation. Participation could take on a number of different roles, ranging from complete uninvolvedness, to voting on final proposals, to debating the crafting of proposals, to discussing issues which the political body should be addressing. The fact that participation would be a matter of self-selection leads into the flip-side of the quantity versus quality argument: namely, that these self-chosen people will form a new elite which would undermine widescale participation.

## 5.7 The Populist Argument against Participation: Too Much Quality Degrades Quantity

The populist argument against participation states that if too much emphasis is placed on the quality of political discourse and participation, the citizens who self-select to participate will form a new elite which will push out most people and, thus, not actually increase participation at all. Hindman makes this argument with relation to blogs, arguing that the internet does not democratize the media but simply transfers power to another form of elite, thus reproducing a

structure of elite driven politics online.<sup>407</sup> The problem with an elite-driven politics is not, however, simply a matter of how many are participating. The real problem with an elite-based politics derives from the fact that becoming a member of the elite few able to participate is not a matter of self-selection.<sup>408</sup> Non-participation in the context of a self-selected elite would be a personal choice, making it fundamentally different from representative democracy in which the exclusion from participation is not up to the individual. The ability to self-exclude from politics also ensures that the negative liberty of being free from politics is upheld.<sup>409</sup> Thus, even if a small number of citizens end up as the major participators, it would still be more participatory, because it would allow those who most want to participate to do so, and allow those with no interest in politics to go about their private business without demands that voting is a civic duty and the associated guilt trips.

Having only a small number of self-chosen participants is not problematic, because anyone can choose to become part of that small group of participants, there are no barriers to enter the public realm like there are under representative systems. If one does not like how a participatory self-selected elite is doing things, then one can simply join it in order to try to change how things are done. Ironically this tends to be the argument used in favour of representative democracy, in which if one does not like the government, one simply needs to run for office and join it. Of course, winning office is an extremely difficult task, as it relies on being selected by others and is not simply a personal choice as it would be in a participatory democracy. On another level, even if a self-selected elite is not such a bad thing, the probability of this occurring should be questioned as well. While research on preliminary online participatory experiments shows that very few people participated, such experiments were also relatively limited in scope.<sup>410</sup> As the ability to influence public decisions grew, the number of people interested in participating would in all likelihood grow as well. The number of participants, however, is not a measure of legitimacy in a participatory system because

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<sup>407</sup> Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 102.

<sup>408</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 271.

<sup>409</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>410</sup> Jo Saglie and Signy Irene Vabo, "Size and E-Democracy: Online Participation in Norwegian Local Politics," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 32, no. 4 (2009): 382–401; Dahlberg, "Extending the Public Sphere through Cyberspace."

participation is not closed off and, thus, the self-chosen participants do not need to try to legitimize their authority with an appeal to broad support, such as in a representative system.

The use of the internet can vastly simplify participation and, thus, make participation more accessible. One no longer needs to have a household full of slaves in order to be afforded the time to enter the public arena, as in ancient Athens. The increased proliferation and penetration of the internet through not just computers but mobile phones makes participation easy and accessible. Even someone who works long hours could receive cell phone alerts about issues he or she was following, which would keep people informed without having to travel somewhere and dedicate a specific period of time to political activities. At the same time, cheap mobile devices with internet connectivity are rapidly spreading across the developing world while public libraries with internet terminals can facilitate access to the political realm by even the most marginalized sectors of the population. In fact, there may even be a reverse bias in political participation in which those with time-consuming professional jobs, who are today the most likely to become politicians due to their wealth, actually participate less because their occupations take up so much of their time. The tendency for a participatory politics to be dominated by educated professionals or business elites would be offset by those able to dedicate more time to political matters.

Another way of dealing with the populist argument that politics would simply be taken over by a new elite relates to the notion of public happiness and the experience of freedom which comes from political activity. Currently, politics is treated as a kind of burden that usually wealthy people must grudgingly enter into, in order to preserve their ability to accumulate private wealth. This attitude is the modern version of Plato's argument that the philosopher must trudge back into the cave and rule the city in order to make it safe for philosophy, which was then modified by Locke into the burden of property owners to ensure their property is kept safe. Participatory politics emphasizes the public element of public affairs and affirms participating in the decisions and debates of one's community as empowering. Rather than viewing participation as an annoying burden necessary to promote private wealth, political participation should be reoriented as a means to facilitate public happiness. It is the loss of the concept of public happiness as participation in politics that Arendt is most critical of when it comes to the modern revolutions which she otherwise admired. She finishes *On Revolution* by paraphrasing Sophocles

and arguing that “it was the *polis*, the space of men’s free deeds and living words, which could endow life with splendour” and thus make life’s burden bearable.<sup>411</sup> Given the opportunity to actually participate, many people would discover the joys of political participation, which would have the dual effect of making those who self-choose to engage in politics be primarily concerned with the public good over private advantage, as well as be less likely to form into a rigid elite with a common background, economic status, or education simply because self-empowerment is something universally desirable.

One final aspect of the quantity versus quality argument which should be considered is a hybrid version of the elite and populist argument developed by Mark Warren, a prominent advocate of deliberative democracy. Warren argues that modern society is simply much too complex to allow for citizen participation, as people would simply be in way over their heads when it comes to working out the complex issues that face contemporary societies. He argues that participatory politics would in fact turn into a technocratic situation where only specialists could participate in any meaningful way, thus alienating the vast majority. He proposes to fix this problem through a deliberative model in which citizens have spaces outside of the formal institutions of the state to form opinions.<sup>412</sup> If society is so complex that only experts can engage in proper political action, then why do we have elections to choose our political leaders today? Deliberative democracy generally places a layer between the state and the people, and, by engaging in this civil society, the public can develop informed and rational opinions which are supposed to guide the decisions of politicians. If the public, however, are limited to more general discussions of the issues because of their complexity, what guarantee is there that an elected government will have any more expertise than the general population? Very rarely are experts in their fields elected to parliaments. So what happens when the elected politicians fail to acknowledge the complexity of contemporary society because they themselves lack expertise? Is it better to hope that elected politicians will listen to scientists on matters such as the causes of climate change, or is it better to let those scientists participate directly?

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<sup>411</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 273.

<sup>412</sup> Mark E. Warren, “What Should We Expect From More Democracy?: Radically Democratic Responses to Politics,” *Political Theory* 24, no. 2 (1996): 241–70.

The problem with the complexity argument is that it assumes expertise from existing politicians or, at least, assumes that they will defer to experts on matters of fact and will defer to civil society on matters of opinion. Neither of these assumptions holds under representative democracy, and deliberative democracy is at best a mild modification of it. There is overwhelming scientific consensus that human activity is causing climate change, and yet little is being done to address climate change even in countries where public opinion matches scientific fact. By allowing experts in their fields to directly participate in politics, they can help inform and shape the debate on complex issues that require specialized knowledge. If today's political issues are more complex, then, if anything, this is an argument to get more people involved. The likelihood of a small group of elected politicians making informed decisions outside their realm of speciality (or contrary to their private business interests) is much less likely than in a situation where participants (including specialists) were self-chosen. In addition, there is no reason to believe that citizens would necessarily need to participate in every single detail of crafting policy or be engaged in every aspect of a public project. If a political body decided that a bridge needed to be built, it obviously would not be debating and voting on every last detail of its construction and architecture and would leave that up to engineers and technical experts. Everyone would not need to be an expert in everything, just as today's politicians are not.

## 5.8 Conclusion

The recent surge in protests across the world demonstrates that there is a latent frustration with governments that fail to provide avenues of meaningful participation. As the internet increases the ability for people to participate in all aspects of life, from media and entertainment to politics, the old argument that there is not enough time and space for participatory politics is losing its lustre. By placing the infrastructure of politics online, participation on a wide scale is fully realizable and can provide citizens with the opportunity to exercise their freedom to speak and act politically. Politics is performative in nature, and can be likened to a theatrical performance, as it requires spectators to witness and remember the action. These spectators are not merely passive onlookers, but engage in critical judgement of what they see. Representative democracy tends to cast out the spectators and transform them into easily swayed consumers. An online participatory politics would soften the barrier between spectator and actor as the role of the spectator would be magnified through the ease of registering judgements.

If participatory politics can be likened to a theatrical performance, then it has the most in common with a tragedy. The desire to participate usually stems from disagreement and conflicting opinions. Individuals want to offer their opinions, because they are unique and different from others, which brings them into conflict with their peers. The next chapter will develop the idea that politics, like a tragedy, is about participating in conflicts and disagreements on political issues, rather than trying to develop a society where all conflict is reconciled. The continued existence of conflict is necessary if politics is to remain participatory. If all conflict disappeared then what would political actors have left to do?

## Chapter 6 — Conflict

### 6.1 Introduction

The significance of political conflict cannot be understated, as it is the defining reason why politics exists. The desire to disagree is the very core of politics, as it drives people to participate and become subjects who seek to enter the political realm. Politics arises precisely because there are no singular truths in public affairs, leading to disagreement among a plurality of conflicting opinions. By drawing on the theory of agonistic pluralism, politics is positioned as the debate between conflicting opinions and provides the means to make decisions on public affairs against the backdrop of a lack of certainty over which course of action might be best.<sup>413</sup> Despite this status as the basis of all politics, political conflict and disagreement are all too often viewed as problems to be overcome by politics, rather than as what gives politics its reason to exist. Considering politics in an online context also introduces unique problems for the status of political conflict. Some argue placing politics online enables people to exist in bubbles which filter out opposing views, thus making the conflict of opinions necessary for an agonistic politics impossible.<sup>414</sup> On the other hand, others argue that the internet amplifies conflict to the point that politics becomes impossible, as people become more interested in attacking and humiliating their opponents than in critical debate.<sup>415</sup> Both of these sides have merit, but, as with the other examples where the internet's political suitability is attacked from two radically opposed ends, a middle ground opens up which can enable the internet to enhance the expression of dissent.

The problem with viewing political conflict and disagreement as something destructive, rather than as the constructive basis of politics, continues to be apparent in the reaction to the Occupy, Arab Spring, and Anonymous movements. Criticism of these movements often stems from an anti-political attitude that seeks to deny the legitimacy of disagreement. In this sense, conflict is the least ambiguous of the four terrains of contestation between politics and anti-

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<sup>413</sup> Mouffe, *On The Political*; Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2009); Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*; Bonnie Honig, "Between Decision and Deliberation: Political Paradox in Democratic Theory," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 1 (2007): 1–17.

<sup>414</sup> Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0*; Díaz Álvarez and Mouffe, "Interview with Chantal Mouffe: Pluralism Is Linked to the Acceptance of Conflict"; Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*.

<sup>415</sup> Davis, *The Web of Politics*.

politics, in that conflict is viewed anti-politically as a problem to eliminate rather than to minimize or to which to restrict access. When considering conflict and disagreement in an online context, especially with a controversial movement such as Anonymous, the discourse is often driven by this anti-political desire to eliminate conflict, which can take the guise of a critique of technology, even if the real target is actually dissent.

If conflict and disagreement are prerequisites for politics, I argue in this chapter that putting politics online can help enable disagreement and dissent, as the shield of anonymity and the depersonalized nature of online political discussion helps promote vigorous conflictual debate and decreases the risks associated with public dissent. At the same time, there are dangers that must be mitigated, such as uncivil behaviour, trolling, and the echo chamber effect. In order to develop the argument in favour of conflict, I draw on Arendt and Rancière as well as theorists who advocate for agonistic politics, most prominently Bonnie Honig and Chantal Mouffe. These thinkers are unique in that they recognize that conflict, and the passionate attachment to causes which it generates, are what drive people to participate in politics in the first place. Without conflict there can be no politics in the sense described in the preceding chapters.

The agonistic approach also rubs against theories of deliberative democracy, with their ideal of rational communication and deliberation leading to an overcoming of conflict and an embrace of consensus. Gutmann and Thompson are problematic in this respect, as is Habermas, who views consensual democracy as a means to overcome conflictual politics. The embrace of agonistic politics and the attempt to situate it online is related to the work of anthropologists such as Gabriella Coleman, who has done extensive work on the nature of trolling and, in particular, the history of Anonymous as a political movement.<sup>416</sup> Also of relevance is psychological research into how agonistic behaviour can turn antagonistic in an online context.<sup>417</sup> The literature and debates about online behaviour tend not to focus on directly political contexts, and thus, studies that focus on non-political websites are often of little use, as political disagreement and the resulting conflict is of a fundamentally different nature than personal conflicts on Facebook, for example. As such, I look to the results of my own comparison of comments on political

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<sup>416</sup> E. Gabriella Coleman, "Anonymous: From the Lulz to Collective Action," *The New Everyday*, April 6, 2011, <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/tne/pieces/anonymous-lulz-collective-action>.

<sup>417</sup> Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus, "Trolls Just Want to Have Fun"; Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect."



discussion sites discussed in the last chapter, in order to argue that increased conflict can actually lead to more substantial and even more civil online interactions.

In considering the nature and role of conflict within an online context, I look at two major critiques of the internet that depict it in a radically opposite manner. Both conclude that the internet is an unsuitable habitat for politics because it is either completely lacking in conflict or simply has too much of it. The internet cannot be both an echo chamber where people only hear what they want to hear, while at the same time being so antagonistic that all conflict becomes personal. Similar to the depictions of the internet as either dangerously anonymous or completely surveilled, the internet as a whole eludes such overarching depictions as each website presents a different experience that cannot be reduced to the workings of the hardware of the internet. Finally, the role of trolling in relation to political conflict is considered. Are trolls merely a disruptive nuisance or can they be considered legitimate conflictual political actors? Ironically, the desire to prevent trolling can often become just as disruptive as actual trolling, leading to demands for censorship and labelling all disagreement as trolling. In this sense, the issue of trolling must be approached delicately within the context of online political realms.

## 6.2 Agonism and Antagonism

Returning to the picture developed in the previous chapters, politics so far consists of a plurality of unique subjects participating in meaningful speech and action inside of a political realm. Given that these subjects are unique, it is inevitable that political participation will be driven by disagreement. The procedure of politics is a means to sort out disputes, which is a common point of agreement among advocates of representative democracy, deliberative democracy, and the participatory agonistic democracy being advanced here. Politics is predicated on using speech to talk through these disputes and arrive at a decision, rather than using violent force to impose a decision.<sup>418</sup> The nature of these disputes is, however, highly contested. Representative democracy advocates an economic model of interest aggregation, in which voters express preferences via competitive elections, enabling these representatives to then make the decisions. Disputes on issues are displaced into a competition for offices among parties, a model Joseph

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<sup>418</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 26.

Schumpeter accurately labelled as “competitive elitism”.<sup>419</sup> Deliberative democrats, such as Habermas and Rawls, posit disagreement as an institutional flaw which can be solved by better institutions. Disputes are merely a matter of temporary miscommunication which, through rational deliberation, can be solved in a way such that all parties involved can be satisfied with the outcome.

Against these two approaches, agonistic pluralism seeks to assert the ineradicability of political disagreement and conflict, and celebrates it as what gives politics its reason for being. The agonistic approach has its roots in thinkers as diverse as Machiavelli, Nietzsche, and Arendt, and finds contemporary expression in the work of Chantal Mouffe, Bonnie Honig, and to some extent Jacques Rancière. Agonistic pluralism recognizes that plurality brings conflict and that the best way to deal with such conflicts is to allow them to find political expression. The goal of politics is to treat those who disagree as political adversaries to be persuaded through political speech, rather than as enemies to be eliminated.<sup>420</sup> Politics is not a matter of antagonistic friends and enemies, as Carl Schmitt would have it, but of agonistic adversaries. Agonistic adversaries do not patronizingly tolerate the position of others or simply ignore those who disagree, but instead actively critique and debate each other.

Agonistic pluralism presents a middle ground on the status of disagreement and conflict. By taming antagonism into a political contest it prevents the extremes of both Schmittian ultrapolitics, which posits violence as constantly present, and the conflict-eliminating assertion of consensus found in deliberative democracy. Both extremes are anti-political as dissent is radically expelled. For Schmitt, the enemy cannot be debated or persuaded because they are foreign and lack a common ground. Politics is between states for Schmitt, and enemies are those who must be driven back inside their own borders.<sup>421</sup> For deliberative democrats such as Habermas, the answer to the extreme forms of antagonism pointed to by Schmitt is the radical negation of conflict. Essentially accepting Schmitt’s definition of politics as an antagonistic conflict between friends and enemies, Habermas argues that those who question the possibility of

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<sup>419</sup> Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (Taylor & Francis, 1994).

<sup>420</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 103.

<sup>421</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 36.

consensus undermine the possibility of democracy in the name of politics.<sup>422</sup> Democracy is posited as a way to overcome politics by arriving at a consensus situation through rational deliberation, and, thus, it is not substantially different from the position of representative democracy, which seeks to aggregate the different interests present in society into a harmonic whole.

Against both of these extreme positions on conflict, the goal of democracy should not be to eliminate “we/they distinctions” altogether, but to make it so that these political distinctions are compatible with pluralism.<sup>423</sup> In this way, Mouffe and the other agonistic theorists present a middle ground on conflict which retains the value of political disagreement against both the consensual attempt to generate total agreement through communicative rationality and the violent negation of conflict through the use of force which is always present in the Schmittian conception of politics. Consensus and violence, however, tend to operate not as extreme opposite poles, but instead circle into each other. When there is no political way to express dissent, violence can become an option. At the same time, the violent suppression of conflict is always an imposition of conflict-negating consensus.

An agonistic form of politics which embraces disagreement means that the persistence of conflict is a benefit to this approach, rather than a drawback as the deliberative democrats argue.<sup>424</sup> Politics is fundamentally about making decisions on conflicting courses of action, in which there is no objective or rationally discoverable ideal solution.<sup>425</sup> By ensuring that the political realm is a site of agonistic contest and disagreement, political outlets are provided which channel antagonisms into non-violent political agonisms. Lacking a political outlet for such disagreements, conflict can become antagonistic and turn into a matter of moral absolutes or a conflict between identities rather than ideas.<sup>426</sup> Rather than political adversaries who need to be persuaded through speech, those who disagree get cast as morally evil or radically other in which they become enemies to be destroyed.<sup>427</sup> When people lack the outlet to articulate their

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<sup>422</sup> Jurgen Habermas, “Reply to Symposium Participants,” *Cardozo Law Review* 17, no. 4–5 (March 1996): 1559–1644.

<sup>423</sup> Mouffe, *On The Political*, 14.

<sup>424</sup> Eva Erman, “What Is Wrong with Agonistic Pluralism? Reflections on Conflict in Democratic Theory,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 35, no. 9 (2009): 1039–62.

<sup>425</sup> Mouffe, *On The Political*, 110.

<sup>426</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 104.

<sup>427</sup> Mouffe, *On The Political*, 15.

dissent politically because of the imposition of consensus, then those political disagreements will find expression in another form. Put in Lacanian terms, when the symbolic of political speech is foreclosed, the disagreement will return in the real, in the guise of racism, sexism, or extremist religious movements.<sup>428</sup>

The upsurge in xenophobic far right wing political parties in Europe and the upswing in fundamentalist religious movements across the world are examples of how conflicts which lack a means to be articulated politically can turn into violent antagonisms.<sup>429</sup> One of the most striking examples is the rise of the British National Party in the context of the morphing of the British Labour Party into New Labour under Tony Blair. While Labour traditionally represented the economic interests of the predominantly white working class, the abandonment of social democratic principles and the adoption of neoliberalism by New Labour fundamentally alienated a large section of the working class. Lacking a social democratic discourse which critiqued the more excessive aspects of neoliberal capitalism, sections of the British working class felt politically abandoned and turned to the only other societal critique of their lower economic position that was being publicly presented: that of the British National Party. The BNP presented the argument that the white working class was poor because of immigrants destroying the social fabric of Great Britain, thus channeling a critique of political economy into essentialist racial antagonism. The same phenomena could be seen across the Middle East prior to the Arab Spring movement. Lacking any political critiques of neoliberal capitalism in the post-Cold War era, the only opposition came from Islamist groups who were able to transmute political and economic discontent into an argument about the moral decay of secular society and the need to re-embrace religion.<sup>430</sup>

The rise of these extremist groups is directly related to the lack of political outlet for people to express their discontent and open up a conflict. If people feel there is something wrong but are unable to express this sentiment in political terms because political conflict is closed off due to the imposition of consensus, it is no wonder that people will support any sort of group willing to present a conflict, even if it is on racist or fundamentalist grounds. This is part of the

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<sup>428</sup> Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 237.

<sup>429</sup> Mouffe, *On The Political*, 66–72; Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 250–257.

<sup>430</sup> Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World*, A New Press People's History (New York: New Press, 2007), 260–275.

appeal of these extremist groups. They break the mainstream consensus and call for clear cut decisions to be made which will generate winners and losers.<sup>431</sup> Rather than presenting a vague and technocratic approach where core issues are not up for debate, these groups are willing to open a conflict and take a clear position. Their extreme positions are not political, however, as they tend to be merely an expression of Schmittian internal consensus, in which opening a conflict with an external enemy for the purposes of pushing them out is meant to bring about an internal harmony which restores consensus.

While extremist groups are the more problematic expression of the lack of ability to translate social antagonisms into political agonisms, the same issue occurs within representative government. Since it has become a popular cliché to claim that politics, referring to representative government, has become too divisive and conflictual, how does this fit within the framework of agonistic pluralism which presents representative government as anti-political? The bulk of what people do not like about politicians, and which they label as conflict, is not a vigorous clash of ideas but bickering over trivial differences motivated by party affiliation. This form of partisan-driven conflict without any real disagreement or debate of real issues is the very definition of consensus, the “state of the world in which everyone converges in veritable worship of the little difference, in which strong passions and great ideals yield to the adjustments of narcissistic satisfactions.”<sup>432</sup> The primary example of this sort of consensual system where irrelevancies are elevated to the status of alleged great divides is the United States, which in the popular and some academic literature, is posited as deeply divided between Republicans and Democrats with fundamentally different visions for the country. In reality the two parties are virtually identical in policy and there is next to no debate on big ideas. The illusion of political conflict, which is derived from having two teams both wanting to win but not having any significant ideological differences, is extremely powerful at papering over the actual lack of serious debate and political conflict, as people get swept up in cheering for their team.

In this sense, the conflict that derives from individuals and parties competing for office who essentially agree can be much more bitter and divisive than actual political conflict. If one cannot criticize the opinions and views of one’s political opponent, because they are for the most

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<sup>431</sup> Rancière, *Chronicles of Consensual Times*, 89.

<sup>432</sup> Rancière, *Chronicles of Consensual Times*, vii.

part very similar to one's own, the only other avenue is an attack on character. The more elections and party politics move toward a consensual neoliberal position, the more elections have become personal and bitter. The wish to overcome the pettiness of personal attacks and dirty tricks takes on a consensual guise, with calls to overcome conflict. The assertion of legitimate disagreement and conflict-driven debate over actual ideas would, in fact, be much more productive in overcoming this problem. The people who see electoral democracy as too divisive and filled with petty insults should advocate not for yet more consensus which caused the problem in the first place, but for the expression of real conflict, so that politics can have substance, alleviating the need to devolve into character assassination. In addition to misidentifying the nature of political conflict and confusing it with personal insult, the advocates of consensus fail to take into consideration the many positive effects that political conflict generates. Disagreement need not be an unfortunate reality that we begrudgingly deal with through debate and political decision, but can lead to personal empowerment and a wider consideration for others. The ability to engage in a conflict of opinions does not degrade politics into petty insults but, as we will see, can actually increase the overall level of civility.

### 6.3 Consensus as Exclusion

The problem with the deliberative democracy approach is that it fails to recognize that consensus and plurality are incompatible. All consensus on political matters is always the expression of a hegemony and thus generates exclusion. When applied, consensual decision making does not work by including all possible perspectives but by radically eliminating them. It becomes a means for denying dissent altogether rather than generating consensual compromises. The consensual elimination of conflict has two responses to persistent dissent: forcing everyone into the consensual whole or radically excluding dissenters. The first method follows Rousseau and argues that dissenters must be forcefully compelled to agree, or be “forced to be free” as he puts it.<sup>433</sup> Dissent and the conflict it generates are positioned as obstacles to political freedom in this sense, rather than the proper exercise of it, causing this brand of consensus to veer toward totalitarianism. It becomes not enough for even an overwhelming majority to agree on a proposal, but every single person must make a declaration of public agreement. The door to a

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<sup>433</sup> Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, 11.

police state which is concerned with monitoring how people think is kicked wide open in this scenario.

Even at the relatively smaller scale of activist movements, such as Occupy Wall Street or the alterglobalization movement, issues of dissent and coercion in relation to consensus-based decision making procedures are apparent. In many of the smaller organizational meetings associated with these movements there becomes an overwhelming social pressure to simply give in to the consensus opinion and not state one's own disagreements. If someone has an irreconcilable disagreement against the majority, they act to simply block the process from moving forward since they must be made to agree in order for the decision to be considered resolved.<sup>434</sup> This provides a motivation to simply feign agreement for the sake of moving things along, which naturally leads to later resentment and is likely part of the reason why activist groups so often shatter and splinter into new factions in such dramatic fashion. If proposals were the subject of a vote after a debate which played out all the disagreements, a decision could be made which preserved the ability for those who disagreed to express and maintain their disagreement, while still moving on to making a decision if the majority agreed.<sup>435</sup> Potentially even worse, dissenters against a consensus may be asked to simply "stand aside" on the issue under consideration in order to move things along, but this "nullifies the dissenter as a political being. It resolves the problem of dissent essentially by removing the dissenter from the political sphere and eliminating the dissenting view from the forum of ideas."<sup>436</sup> Without a mechanism to vote, disagreement is radically quashed and there becomes an overwhelming social pressure from the other members of the group to simply go along with the herd and not be obstructionist. The ability to register individual dissent while assenting to the wishes of the majority is much healthier for group cohesion than forcing people to publicly state consent to things they fundamentally disagree with or kicking them out of the group altogether.

While forcing people to agree to proposals they do not actually accept is extremely problematic, the other option is to disqualify people as political subjects for disagreeing. This is

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<sup>434</sup> These observations come from my experience in the alterglobalization movement. A similar experience is recounted by Bookchin in the context of the 1970s antinuclear movement, see Murray Bookchin, *Social Anarchism Or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 1995), 14–15.

<sup>435</sup> Janet Biehl and Murray Bookchin, *The Politics of Social Ecology: Libertarian Municipalism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1998), 60–61.

<sup>436</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

the reality of consensus, namely, that it is always based on an exclusion.<sup>437</sup> The consensus system rests on the idea that the whole is whole and the nothing is nothing and that there cannot be any part with no part leftover which can open up a disagreement.<sup>438</sup> When dissent persists after the deliberation process is over, it becomes essentialized into something that can only be dealt with through radical exclusion in order to maintain the illusion of consensus. Part of the problem for deliberative democrats is an unwillingness to acknowledge that all deliberations, no matter how inclusive, always must end in a decision which excludes other possibilities.

Deliberative democrats try to dodge the responsibility of decision through claims that the end result can be a matter of consensus acceptable to all interested and rational parties.<sup>439</sup> Politics will always have winners and losers, as no single outcome can ever please everyone due to the reality of plurality. Making claims that such decisions can be matters of broad consent will only push individuals away from the political process, as their dissent goes unacknowledged, which could push them towards violence. In the case of activist groups which utilize consensus-based decision making procedures, internal divisions will appear and the group dynamic can become toxic. Ironically, the embrace of conflict can enable better group cohesion as internal debates are considered healthy, not grounds for expulsion or self-censure.

The agonistic pluralism approach recognizes that political conflict is part of a perpetual process, and that attempts to design institutions meant to be consensual simply result in closure.<sup>440</sup> When politics is closed off exclusions become solidified, as there is no political means to introduce disputes and conflicts related to who is able to take part in politics. One such example is provided by Susan Moller Okin, who in a feminist critique of Rawls, questions who exactly would be included in the original position that Rawls argues will enable the design of just institutions. In Rawls's original version of his argument, it was only heads of households who would enter the original position and rationally figure out the best society behind the veil of ignorance, which as Okin argues, means there was a real possibility that the status of women and children would be ignored or not given full consideration, as those behind the veil would never end up in any position in society other than as a head of household.<sup>441</sup>

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<sup>437</sup> Mouffe, *On The Political*, 11.

<sup>438</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 124.

<sup>439</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 105.

<sup>440</sup> Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, 15.

<sup>441</sup> Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, And The Family* (Basic Books, 2008).



Even if Rawls's scheme is expanded to include the whole family, what about animals who lack the rational argumentation abilities needed to enter into the original position and advocate for their own treatment? The original position relies on the idea that no one would be treated unjustly because anyone behind the veil of ignorance may land in any possible position in society. If, however, no one can turn into a dog or a cow outside of the veil of ignorance, the entire device fails to account for a serious ethical issue which is more and more becoming subject to political action and dispute. To dismiss the possibility of ethical treatment of animals, or even something such as artificial intelligence, as outside the concern of those in the original position recreates the same problem that led Rawls to originally exclude women and, once upon a time, led to the exclusion of racial minorities and the poor from consideration as political subjects.

In many ways, the advocates of consensus fail to grasp the nature of political universality, as they believe the universal is a set of values which everyone can agree to be true, when the proper nature of the universal in politics is its emptiness and thus possibility for plurality. As was argued in the chapter on subjectivity, positive universality is an unfortunate hangover from the Enlightenment which has been thoroughly critiqued for generating exclusions. Agonistic pluralism, however, fits with the form of negative universality in which politics is universal in its lack of qualifications needed to take part. A plurality of views can thrive as a result of the universal having no positive properties or qualifications associated with it. The empty universal is always a site of conflict because it remains open and is therefore subject to dispute and conflict. Any political decision that results in one side winning over the others is never able to permanently fill the void of universality, for to do so would close off the political space from dissent and effectively deny plurality. When it is presumed that the void of the political universal can be permanently filled with a set of values or institutions arrived at through rational consensus, politics becomes impossible and progress and change is closed off. The emptiness of the universal facilitates progressive change on issues such as animal or robot rights which may be off the radar now but could become hotly contested issues in the future, in the same way that gay rights were once not on the radar as a possible site of dispute, but have since become one.

## 6.4 Passion and Rationality

The basis for the idea of consensus within the deliberative democratic framework comes from the assumption of rationality. In a Habermasian “ideal speech situation,” consensus outcomes that can be generally accepted by all interested parties are guaranteed by both the ability to engage in uncoerced speech and the assumed rationality of those deliberating.<sup>442</sup> While Habermas certainly recognizes that such ideal situations may not always be realizable, calling the ideal speech situation a “regulative ideal,” the general practicality of rational consensus must still be questioned.<sup>443</sup> By treating political issues as rationally solvable and subject to consensus, deliberation becomes more about unmasking ideologies so that people can set aside what is blinding them from the objective answer. However, even if it were possible to get everyone in a deliberation to be rational, why would rational individuals necessary agree on any political decision? Agonistic pluralism recognizes that people who share a common world will still engage in conflicts in which there is no rational resolution. Deliberative democracy positions itself against the antagonistic extreme which argues that those who disagree have no common world and thus there can be no grounds for deliberation, but what is left out is the middle position of agonism.<sup>444</sup> Disagreement stems from plurality, and providing a common realm in which plural subjects can talk politics is not a means to consensus.

By positing deliberation in terms of ideals, either in the Habermasian sense described above, or in Rawls’s formulation of the original position, there is a sense that by making people equal, they become the same. With Rawls especially, conflict is seen as stemming from major institutional injustices such as economic or social inequality. Through imagining ourselves in an “original position” behind a “veil of ignorance”, Rawls argues we can rationally come to a set of consensus institutions.<sup>445</sup> The assumption is that differences in political opinion stem from institutional inequality, and that once those differences are stripped away, people are all basically the same. Rational disagreement, which is accepted as a fact stemming from plurality in the agonistic approach, is assumed away. Not only does the assumption of rationality and equality

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<sup>442</sup> Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1*, 25–26.

<sup>443</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*, trans. Ciaran P. Cronin (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1994), 51.

<sup>444</sup> Mouffe, *On The Political*, 20.

<sup>445</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 37–46.

leading to consensus eliminate the potential for real political conflict, but it also assumes away a large part of politics. The Rancièrian politics of fighting to be recognized as politically capable in the first place is set aside. If anti-politics operates through policing the boundaries to ensure that those who are deemed unqualified to speak remain in their place, politics in Rancière's formulation involves fighting for the ability to speak politically. Before there can be a deliberation on any political issue, there is "the dispute over the existence of the dispute and the parties confronting each other in it."<sup>446</sup> When the nature of the dispute itself is not considered to be a political dispute itself, as when Habermas and Rawls posit ideal situations of rationality, then the danger is that those who persist in the metadispute are cast out as irrational or morally backwards.<sup>447</sup>

Even though increasing public participation is meant to be a strength of deliberative democracy, Habermas argues that it is the rationally acceptable results of deliberation, rather than its mechanisms for participation, which are the source of legitimacy.<sup>448</sup> If outcomes of political disputes can be a matter of rational consensus, then why is participation in the deliberation process even needed? If it is assumed that legitimacy stems from rationality and that political problems can be solved in a way agreeable to all involved, then minimizing the empirical obstacles to ideal rationality would increase legitimacy. Human participation in deliberative democracy becomes its greatest flaw. To achieve a more legitimate form of deliberative democracy, an algorithm could be designed which would take a broad range of complex inputs representing the interests and situations of all people involved in any political dispute, and then produce a rationally acceptable consensus solution to the problem. Such an algorithm, programmed on a sufficiently powerful computer, would eliminate the empirical obstacles of human bias and practical irrationality that impede the ideal speech situation. If rationally consensual positions are possible, then using a computer program would streamline and speed up the rather inefficient deliberation process. So long as the algorithm is designed in such a way, perhaps using Rawls's original position and veil of ignorance devices, that it is a matter of rational consensus, its results would be more legitimate than humans deliberating. In an

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<sup>446</sup> Rancière, *Disagreement*, 55.

<sup>447</sup> Mouffe, *On The Political*, 84–85.

<sup>448</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*, trans. Max Pensky (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2001), 121.

ideal sense, deliberative democracy would replace all human participation, and in fact politics as a whole, with sufficiently advanced computer programs. Such an outcome is in stark contrast to the agonistic approach advanced here, which seeks to use computers to enhance human participation.

In contrast to the deliberative approach, legitimacy in the version of politics that I am advocating, stems from both the lack of barriers to participate politically and the acceptance of conflict. In deliberative democracy, there are still elected representatives with final decision making power, but they are expected to simply act on the consensus arrived at within the deliberative layer of civil society. Irreconcilable conflicts of opinion on decisions are positioned as a threat to the legitimacy of the system, as, if all do not agree, then consensus is impossible and the system is called into question. Given that eliminating such conflicts is practically impossible, the real question asks what level of conflict is politically legitimate. Agonistic pluralism generates legitimacy by providing an arena in which individuals can disagree, and thus the ability to engage in political conflict is what provides the political realm with its legitimacy.<sup>449</sup> Conflict only becomes illegitimate if it spills outside of the realm of debate and persuasion and into the realm of coercive force. Such antagonistic conflict is illegitimate because it threatens the existence of politics itself. By failing to differentiate agonistic and antagonistic forms of conflict, deliberative democracy's stance against conflict is anti-political.

The demand for rationality in politics, represented by this robotic ideal of eliminating humans from the decision making process altogether, is related to the desire to purge passions from politics. It may be beneficial that computer programs could replace humans in a deliberative democratic system because in a politics that demands rigid rationality there would be little motivation for people to participate. An emphasis on consensus and rationality, as in deliberative democracy, prevents the passionate attachment to a cause that spurs so much political participation.<sup>450</sup> People are motivated to get involved in politics not through the prospect of setting aside individual opinions and attempting to arrive at a rational consensus, but through taking a side in a dispute and arguing that one's own opinion is correct. By producing "conflictual representations of the world," an agonistic politics can mobilize people to participate

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<sup>449</sup> Mouffe, *On The Political*, 20.

<sup>450</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 103–104.

by channeling their passions into agonistic political causes, rather than antagonistic conflicts over identity, religion, or culture.<sup>451</sup>

While the deliberative democrats seek to strip politics of its passion in the name of rationality, the advocates of ironipolitics wish to purge passion in the name of making politics safer. The common reference point for many of these thinkers, Lyotard and Rorty especially, is the Holocaust. All passionate political commitments are viewed through the lens of the past and proto-totalitarian impulses are discovered everywhere. Thus, Rorty constantly reminds us not to take our opinions too seriously because passionate attachment to a cause is what led to the Nazis and the Holocaust.<sup>452</sup> Lyotard similarly recasts the promise of future emancipation as a past lie that resulted in “infinite crime” whose only response is a process of “endless mourning.”<sup>453</sup> Purging political passion in the name of preventing totalitarian catastrophe also purges passionate commitment to progressive causes that can make the world a better place. The result of these demands to look back, are an inability to move forward. Only by embracing agonistic conflict is progress possible.

## 6.6 Plurality

While deliberative democratic consensus at the level of civil society does not offer an alternative to representative democracy but merely a few minor changes meant to improve it, the deliberative idea can also be applied at the micro-level of individual decisions and, in this sense, does take on something of an alternative model to that status quo. The association of voting and majoritarian decision making within representative democracy has led many activists, most recently those within the Occupy movement, to adopt a consensus based decision making model, under the idea that it is more inclusive than simple majority votes. Under this model, after deliberating on a given issue, a consensus needs to be reached in order for it be considered resolved. The idea is that, by considering all the concerns of those involved, rather than simply having them vote on the proposal, everyone’s concerns will be addressed and the final decision will be fully inclusive and supported by everyone. On the surface, this model seems to be more inclusive and egalitarian than a conflict-embracing debate and vote model, especially to minority

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<sup>451</sup> Mouffe, *On The Political*, 25.

<sup>452</sup> Barker, *Tragedy and Citizenship*, 100–101.

<sup>453</sup> Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, 130.

voices, as their concerns would need to be incorporated in order to generate consensus. The problem with this model, however, is that, despite good intentions, it ends up annihilating the minority voices it alleges to be especially mindful of, and ends up being a more coercive form of social control than even the representative status quo.

Practically speaking, the generation of consensus is simply unrealistic, as it is impossible to get everyone to agree on any given issue due the basic fact of plurality. Everyone is different and has different points of view. To claim to be able to incorporate all these conflicting opinions into a solution that would appeal to everyone is unrealistic. The role of politics should not be to try to eliminate the divisions that cause these conflicts, but to draw the line between the conflicting sides in a way that is compatible with the preservation of plurality.<sup>454</sup> Consensus requires the elimination of pluralism, as only a homogenous population could ever resolve conflicts in a manner that was rationally acceptable to all.<sup>455</sup> Arguing that plurality is compatible with consensus because plurality is maintained in the private realm is to avoid the issue. Plurality in a political sense means a plurality of different political opinions and viewpoints, which will never be able to rationally come to a consensus.

The impracticality of arriving at a consensus decision is further complicated by issues of scale. The more people there are to be included in the deliberation, the harder it gets to reconcile divergent opinions, to the point where consensus-based decision making could not possibly extend beyond the scope of a handful of people. So, while the internet can help overcome the issues of scale traditionally associated with participatory politics, it would actually be counterproductive for a consensus model, as more participants decrease the possibility of consensus. The only way to arrive at a consensus on any significant scale would be to deny human plurality and either posit everyone as essentially the same, or to paint all political issues as uncontroversial and having only one objectively correct answer which can be arrived at through computerized calculations.

Underestimating the significance of plurality as a source of disagreement undermines the idea that consensus is more inclusive to minority voices, as without a plurality of opinions there

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<sup>454</sup> Mouffe, *On The Political*, 14.

<sup>455</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 49.

can be no minorities to begin with. If everyone is essentially the same, and disagreements will not arise stemming from differences in perspective and experience, then the idea of consensus in politics would not even be necessary. No politics would be needed as the sameness of everyone would mean that no decision would be controversial and, instead of decision making, there would simply be an enacting of the consensus view. Politics as a decision making layer would be unnecessary, as the bureaucracy could simply act directly on the consensual will of the people. The entire reason politics is necessary is because it provides a mechanism to make decisions on controversial issues on which people have differing positions. Eliminate the differing positions and the whole reason to have politics in the first place disappears.

Contrary to the inclusive intention of consensual thought, the persistence of conflict enables a wider array of voices and perspectives to be heard. As Barker argues, the ability to publicly present disagreement and engage in conflict enables the outsider to speak and forces the majority to consider its own status in relation to that of the outsider, thus expanding its sympathetic boundaries.<sup>456</sup> Rather than the outsider being an ethical victim who is to be acted on by the majority so that they are no longer outside or disagreeable to the community, the outsider must be empowered to open up a conflict with the majority through the expression of dissent. In presenting this conflict with the social whole, the outsider is able to address the whole as an equal. The very ability to present a conflict in this manner is a demonstration of equality which can undermine any claims that the outsider's exclusion is legitimate in a way that treating the excluded person as a passive victim to be acted on cannot.

## 6.7 Reconciliation and the Political Death Drive

Part of the drive behind the various anti-political theories which seek to eliminate conflict is a desire to arrive at a final reconciliation and simply be done with vexing political questions altogether. Politics and conflict are linked to risk, and the goal of these theories is to design institutions that create stability in order to allow people to engage in their private lives free from the entanglements of politics.<sup>457</sup> As Honig goes on to argue, Rawls's political theory of reconciliation is appealing because it "promises to satisfy a deep yearning, a yearning for peace

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<sup>456</sup> Barker, *Tragedy and Citizenship*, 38.

<sup>457</sup> Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, 2.

and quiet, for the privacy of withdrawal so many liberals have sought throughout the history of liberal thinking.<sup>458</sup> What is missing here is the idea that politics is empowering and satisfies the need to distinguish ourselves as unique subjects by freely engaging with others. If politics is assumed from the start to be a burden, then naturally doing away with it altogether would seem to be the ideal solution.

Along with the desire to be left alone to engage in private pursuits, the desire to reconcile conflict once and for all finds expression in the wish to do away with the uncertainty that stems from political conflict. Plurality is linked to natality, as each new person who comes into the world is unique and different, which spurs conflict and political uncertainty.<sup>459</sup> In order to eliminate uncertainty, and thus the risk that goes along with plural actors acting in concert, the reconciliatory projects of both Rawls and Habermas need to imagine a situation where plurality is done away with. Even when posited as a self-regulating ideal, reconciliatory political projects become a “self-refuting ideal”, as their realization would be their disintegration.<sup>460</sup> To conceive of a politics of reconciliation, free of political conflict and uncertainty, is to conceive of a politics without politics. Political participation in a reconciliatory system is nonsensical: if there are no conflicts and nothing to debate because the institutions are so well designed, there is nothing political left to do. In order to ensure that politics remains dynamic and is a means to bring about change, the idea that there could be a time when society is so well ordered that dissent simply would not arise must be abandoned. Without conflict and dissent, there is nothing but stagnation.

Asserting the persistence of conflict can be troubling to some, as it can seem like politics is nothing but arguing without any advancement toward a goal. Since no final reconciliation of conflict can be possible because creating such a perfect society would require the elimination of plurality, the goal of political action should be to focus on individual issues. On this register, political conflict works in a similar manner to Freud’s concept of the death drive. In Lacan’s interpretation, we always circle around the cause of our desire without ever actually obtaining it, as to obtain it is to terminate the desire that drove us to pursue it in the first place.<sup>461</sup> In political

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<sup>458</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>459</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7–9.

<sup>460</sup> Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 32.

<sup>461</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: Book XI*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981).



terms, an ultimate reconciliation of all conflict, expressed in the termination of the desire to act politically and open a dispute, is to give over to the death drive and thus die. While we will inevitably derive some pleasure and satisfaction from the conflicts we win (Lacan's *jouissance*), to try to achieve the satisfaction of eliminating all conflict negates the entire process, in the same way as a drug user overdosing and dying negates his or her ability to derive satisfaction from the temporary high of the drug. Political conflict must be approached in the same way Freud recommends navigating between the pleasure principle and the death drive. In *Civilization and its Discontents* he argues that “the programme of becoming happy, which the pleasure principle imposes on us, cannot be fulfilled; yet we must not—indeed, we cannot—give up on our efforts to bring it nearer to fulfilment by some means or other.”<sup>462</sup> This should be the method of political activists, always trying to bring about a better future, while recognizing that no final reconciliation or perfected society is possible.

The empowering aspect of politics that derives from revealing oneself as a unique subject by participating politically is contingent on the perpetual existence of an agonistic political sphere. The desire to appear publicly and have one's opinions heard is motivated by disagreement, and, as such, without the ability to express dissent and engage in political conflict the ability to participate and to reveal oneself as a unique political subject is lost. In a truly consensual system there is little motivation to actually participate, as adding yet another public “yes!” to the overwhelming chorus of yesses makes no impact and does not reveal an individual as a unique subject but as a faceless member of the herd. It is precisely the ability to say something different and, thus initiate a conflict that provides political subjectivity and participation with their empowering characteristics. Far from being a necessary evil, conflict provides the outlet through which subjects distinguish themselves and empowers people to participate in the freedom of political action. To give up the ability to take part in this political process in the name of final reconciliations, is to allow politics to die.

## 6.8 Conflict in an Online Context: Echo Chambers and “Flame Wars”

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<sup>462</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization, Society and Religion: Group Psychology, Civilization and Its Discontents and Other Works*, ed. Albert Dickson, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 271.

If conflict is not only necessary for politics, in that it provides the entire reason for its existence, as well as having a productive role in fostering plurality and subject formation, the next question, then, is how such an agonistic politics would play out in the online context that I have been arguing is necessary to revitalize a more robust form of politics. Two opposing arguments are generally presented to dismiss the suitability of online politics with respect to conflict. Both of these arguments confuse the software and hardware layers and, thus, extrapolate the experience of one group of users on a specific website to argue that the internet has a certain essence that makes it inherently incompatible with conflictual politics. The first branch of this argument argues that the ability to customize and personalize one's experience on the internet turns it into an echo chamber where people are able to isolate themselves from conflicting views and only visit sites and talk to people who already agree with them. The second argument about online conflict states that, because of the anonymity of the internet, no one is accountable and everyone behaves poorly, thus escalating conflict to the level where having a political debate is impossible because every disagreement turns into an insult-trading "flame war". Both of these arguments are grounded in real experiences, and many people do use the internet in these manners, but as is demonstrated by the fact that these two arguments about the nature of the internet are in direct contradiction, the internet remains a space which can be produced in a number of ways, some of which are productive to politics, some of which are not.

One of the more prominent versions of the echo chamber argument was put forth by American legal scholar Cass Sunstein in his 2001 and 2009 books *Republic.com* and *Republic.com 2.0*. Sunstein argues that the personalization technology of the internet, from Google News to personalized book recommendations on Amazon, work to create a kind of insulated bubble around people, where everything is customized to their tastes and they end up not seeing anything that might challenge their point of view.<sup>463</sup> Customization can act as an almost accidental tool that simply ends up reinforcing a user's already established beliefs, thereby undermining the pluralistic clash of opinions needed for a healthy democratic politics. Sunstein goes on to point to examples from terrorist groups and conspiracy theorists using websites as gathering places where their own views gain reinforcement from like-minded people. While some people certainly do use the internet for these purposes, customization and

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<sup>463</sup> Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0*, 3–6.

personalization can also have the opposite effect. The political dissenter whose views are never expressed in the mass media can find common ground among others and then translate that experience of dissent into a greater challenge against mainstream society. The origins of the Arab Spring, Occupy movement, and even the alterglobalization movement all began from small groups of activists linking up with a wider like-minded group of people through the internet. Combine these example with Anonymous' enacting of dissensus directly online, and, in many cases, the seeking out of like-minded people leads to opening up new avenues of conflict and dissent as a collectivity has more power to push forward an opposing viewpoint than a single person.

Even more suspect is the assumption, made not only by Sunstein but various scholars doing work on online community, that people will predominantly seek out discussion groups online which reinforce their own opinions. Wojcieszak states that it is simply "widely known" that people will seek discussion in order to reinforce their own views and then goes on to argue that the chatrooms and message boards are particularly problematic in this respect.<sup>464</sup> While many such closed groups certainly proliferate across the internet, it is by no means a settled notion that people prefer discussion with like-minded people. A brief look at Reddit, the largest such message board on the internet, demonstrates this. The forum /r/Politics, which is dedicated to American politics in general and which has frequent and often bitter conflicts of opinion across the political spectrum currently has around 3 million subscribers. By contrast subforums dedicated to specific positions which would encompass those discussed on the more general American politics forum are much less popular. Democrats has a mere 11,000 subscribers, Liberal 19,000, Progressives 34,000, Conservative 35,000, Republican 14,000, and Libertarian 115,000. The numbers for Canadian-related political discussion are even more dramatic, as subreddits dedicated to individual parties and views have in the order of hundreds of subscribers, while the more general /r/Canada has close to 150,000 subscribers and /r/CanadaPolitics has 14,000. If people were truly looking to avoid conflict and simply have their own views reinforced, then one would expect the ideologically homogenous subreddits to be much more popular than the general forums which contain frequent clashes of a variety of different opinions.

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<sup>464</sup> Magdalena Wojcieszak, "Don't Talk to Me': Effects of Ideologically Homogeneous Online Groups and Politically Dissimilar Offline Ties on Extremism," *New Media & Society* 12, no. 4 (2010): 638.

Despite these counter examples, Sunstein's point about customization technology is not really new, as political dissenters have been publishing their own newspapers and pamphlets, trying to break people out of the mass media echo chamber for as long as mass media has existed. The more interesting problem of conflict happens within the internal dynamics of groups dedicated to a specific viewpoint or cause. In many cases chat rooms, social network groups, and discussion forums simply replicate existing group structures where there is some kind of explicit or implicit structure of authority. In an online context, people who join an activist group, for example, but who consistently go against the prevailing opinion may simply be banned or blocked from participating or even viewing the website, in the same manner people can get kicked out of political parties or blocked from attending organizational meetings. While the internet makes it easier to facilitate such groups, it also makes it easier to simply ban a person and never have to deal with him or her again, something that is problematic for advocates of agonistic politics. Political groups which favour internal consensus-based decision making models, such as Occupy Wall Street, would have a much easier time banning people from the movement's online spaces than it would from a physical protest.

Issues like these are more dangerous to the expression of diverse views and the existence of plurality because they can enable censorship, not because of accidental over-customization at the software level, but by actually putting too much authority into the hands of the human element. The best online political discussion forums are ones which are either moderated socially via their algorithmic design or ones in which human moderators have extremely limited authority and a very set role. In systems where there must always be a present moderator, especially where politics is discussed, the temptation to censor disagreement is simply too high for most people to resist. Recent moderator scandals on Reddit demonstrate this problem. In 2014, the moderators of /r/politics were found to be deleting stories from sources they deemed to lack journalistic standards. Posting news or opinion pieces from sites such as Salon, Reason, and MotherJones were subject to automatic removal.<sup>465</sup> During this time, the moderators of /r/technology were found to be removing all stories related to Edward Snowden, the NSA spying scandal, and

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<sup>465</sup> David Auerbach, "Does Reddit Have a Transparency Problem?," *Slate*, October 9, 2014, [http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2014/10/reddit\\_scandals\\_does\\_the\\_site\\_have\\_a\\_transparency\\_problem.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2014/10/reddit_scandals_does_the_site_have_a_transparency_problem.html).

anything related to discussions on net neutrality.<sup>466</sup> Users of these forums revolted, and the top level Reddit administrators banned the moderators responsible for the censorship. The smaller the community, however, the less recourse there is to deal with abusive moderation. Reddit is caught in something of a contradiction as they still use human moderators, while at the same time their social ranking system is meant to democratically moderate submissions to the site.

Discussion and debate forums where there are no human moderators or where their presence is kept to a bare minimum are much more open to the expression of conflicting viewpoints because of the lack of censorship or appeals to the authority of the moderator to remove certain content. Instead, people have to confront uncomfortable and conflicting opinions head on, and attempt to persuade and debate rather than censor and banish. Investing authority in a small group of people to moderate discussion is anti-democratic, as there is usually little recourse against abuse. Many discussion sites, including many on Reddit, operate more as miniature kingdoms which enable moderators to exert their control over others. The problem of attempting to eliminate plurality from online forums is squarely an issue with how people are using and producing these spaces, and not an inherent flaw within the technology. Designing better discussion sites and promoting more egalitarian political structures online will solve many problems related to censorship as destructive of plurality.

A more nuanced version of the echo chamber effect is pointed to by Pariser, who argues that the internet can cut people off from opposing views not because it enables people to join insular communities and customize away opposing views but because some of the biggest websites are automatically filtering away content we may not like behind the scenes.<sup>467</sup> One of the best examples of such behind the scenes filtering is the order of search results on Google. The same search will show results in a different order depending on whether one is logged into one's Google account or not, and depending on which localization of Google one is using. Facebook is another target of Pariser's critique, as their timeline is filtered and ordered in such a way that may hide news stories that a conservative friend posts if one fills out the detailed profile and lists liberal as one's political viewpoint. While such filtering can be problematic, as Pariser

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<sup>466</sup> Fernando Alfonso, "Meet the Reddit Power User Who Helped Bring down R/technology," *The Daily Dot*, April 22, 2014, <http://www.dailydot.com/politics/reddit-maxwellhill-moderator-technology-flaw/>.

<sup>467</sup> Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*.

explains, in the context of using the internet as a conflictual political realm there is no reason to replicate such a structure in a non-transparent manner on a political discussion site. While one may get fewer opposing views when looking at their social networks or searching for information, these are somewhat peripheral issues which demand algorithmic awareness, rather than arguments against the capacity to have a conflictual online political realm. If people rarely encounter opposing views outside of their political involvement, then this means that a conflictual online political realm is even more important, as it would be a place that would purposely expose people to contrasting opinions and different points of view.

Another version of the echo chamber argument is presented by Mouffe, who, although she acknowledges that the internet remains open and is not inherently consensual or conflictual, still maintains that most people simply use the internet to reinforce their own views and that the only way to truly confront opposing ideas and opinions is in person.<sup>468</sup> Of course, if people go looking for opinion reinforcement online, why would they not do the same offline? Other than that somewhat obvious contradiction, it is precisely the ability to enhance the number of opportunities to encounter difference that works as one of the internet's main agonistic strengths. Contrary to Mouffe's claim that we find more conflicting views in offline space, the internet actually provides ease of entry into a proliferation of different worlds and can create spaces of actual political debate which contain a plurality of different viewpoints. If someone wants to debate some particular issue and see what other people think about it, where do they go in offline space to do so? There are no designated and widely accessible spaces for political discussion where a plurality of people can be found. Official sites of politics are restricted in access, universities are not accessible to the average person wanting to discuss the issue of the day, and it is unreasonable to expect random people in public spaces to be willing to discuss politics. By contrast, there are widely recognized spaces on the internet which are devoted to political discussion that one can enter at will and find others willing to discuss these issues. As a wide scale and sustained political realm where agonistic pluralism is actually practical, the possibilities outside of the internet are extremely limited in scope, to the point that they could never serve as a political alternative to the status quo.

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<sup>468</sup> Díaz Álvarez and Mouffe, "Interview with Chantal Mouffe: Pluralism Is Linked to the Acceptance of Conflict."

In addition to the availability of conflictual spaces online, the face to face element that Mouffe advocates actually hinders disagreement because in person communication is often biased by the desire to get along. It is much easier to disagree with an anonymous argument online than it is to disagree and debate political issues with your friends or coworkers. Often people take disagreement personally, and a clash of opinions can alienate friends and acquaintances hurting one's social position. Political speech and action is risky and requires courage. The shield of anonymity has been, and continues to be, essential to the expression of dissenting points of view. If politics is to maintain its agonistic edge and not devolve into anti-political consensus, then making it easier to take part by shielding one's private life from one's public statements is necessary. If one cannot make dissenting statements without social ramifications, then the freedom to participate and reveal oneself as a unique subject will be lost in a sea of conformity dictated by the tyranny of the majority.

The response to Mouffe's position outlined above leads to the argument on the other end of the spectrum, which is that the internet is actually too rife with conflict, to the point where political discussion will get washed away in the anonymous and unaccountable "flame wars" that will inevitably erupt every time anyone disagrees. This line of argument states that because the shield of anonymity enables courage, people are not afraid to act uncivilized and, thus, instead of political debate, conflict turns into the trading of personal insults. This view is advanced by Richard Davis, who argues that the nature of online discussion promotes "vigorous attack and humiliation" and, as such, leads to most discussion turning into belligerent flaming which turns off people who want to actually discuss ideas and political issues.<sup>469</sup> Davis goes on to argue that the prominence of flaming or insults in place of actual discussion is driven by anonymity and its associated lack of accountability. The internet is positioned as a kind of Hobbesian state of nature where the lack of authority stemming from the allegedly unaccountable nature of online anonymity leads to a nasty and brutish existence which is wholly unsuitable to civilized political disagreement. While I have dealt with the argument against anonymity previously and found it to have little theoretical weight, recent studies have shown that knowing the identity of the other person has little impact on the potential for flaming, as having one's views directly challenged

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<sup>469</sup> Davis, *The Web of Politics*, 163.

was cited as the primary factor leading to flaming.<sup>470</sup> While attempts to simply link anonymity to incivility fail to explain much, the issue of political disagreement becoming uncivilized and leading to flame wars is a common occurrence online which deserves further attention. Transforming antagonism into political agonism is the goal of agonistic pluralism, thus the creation of antagonism out of political agonism online is an interesting case to consider.

Some advocates of deliberative democracy, with its goal of developing rational consensus, have similarly argued that online discussion is simply too conflictual or “nasty” and that democratic politics is hindered when it is placed online.<sup>471</sup> Such arguments frame democratic deliberation as a sterile and unemotional affair, which is not only an unrealistic ideal but also an undesirable one. By contrast, the conflictual status of politics naturally stirs people’s emotions, as people become passionately attached to causes and sides in a conflict. Sometimes these passions may overflow, leading to conflict that turns personal and harms political debate. While such breakdowns in politeness as a result of passion are not helpful, they are also not the catastrophe they are made out to be by deliberative critics of the internet or those seeking to paint the internet as a site of moral panic. The fact that people who are passionate about an issue may get frustrated and throw out some insults in the course of a political discussion is not the end of the world, and, at least in an online context, can be ignored by the rest of the participants in favour of focusing on more substantial conversations. While such disruptions can be off-putting or annoying, they are not capable of imposing a certain viewpoint through force, and can be contained without threatening the political process itself.

Too much emphasis is placed on these passionate overflows by many critics interested in claiming that online politics is impossible.<sup>472</sup> The spectre of the dreaded flame war is raised, in which all pretense to political discussion is dropped and the involved parties end up drowning out those trying to engage in actual issues by posting a constant stream of insults. Is this, however, an accurate characterization of online debate which condemns the entire medium as politically unsuitable? While there is certainly a fair bit of insult trading in online political

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<sup>470</sup> Myiah J. Hutchens, Vincent J. Cicchirillo, and Jay D. Hmielowski, “How Could You Think That?!?!: Understanding Intentions to Engage in Political Flaming,” *New Media & Society*, February 12, 2014, 9.

<sup>471</sup> Ashley A. Anderson et al., “The ‘Nasty Effect’: Online Incivility and Risk Perceptions of Emerging Technologies,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 19, no. 3 (2014): 373–87.

<sup>472</sup> See for example: Smith, “E-Democracy or a Forum for Bullies?”



debates, it is actually not that disruptive and the majority are able to engage in conflictual yet civil disagreements.

In Papacharissi's analysis of political themed Usenet discussion groups, she found that, while these discussions had a tendency to become impolite as arguments got heated (swearing, insults, sarcasm, etc.), they tended to remain civil.<sup>473</sup> Civility was defined as not threatening other individuals, respecting their basic rights, and not making comments which would be deemed offensive to social groups, such as racist or sexist comments.<sup>474</sup> As she goes on to argue, the examples of uncivil comments and behaviour which were impeccably polite were much more disturbing. She pointed to one discussion in particular, where discussants were calm and polite to each other but were promoting white supremacy and arguing that large groups of people should be denied their basic human rights.<sup>475</sup> In this sense, so long as heated discussions do not turn racist, sexist, homophobic or engage in other forms of bigoted insults but remain isolated to impoliteness toward another discussant they can be tolerated and ignored by the majority without threatening the civility of political debate altogether. In my own comparison of comments on political discussion sites, I found that sites which promoted interaction between users were overall more substantial in content and less hostile in tone.<sup>476</sup> When one can post uncivil comments in a manner which goes unchallenged, there is a likelihood that behaviour will continue, whereas getting challenged in the form of direct replies or other social punishments, as in Reddit downvotes, can influence users to avoid such behaviour, in order to maintain a positive reputation.

The focus of debates on the suitability of online political conflict should be on whether or not they are civil rather than simply polite. Civility is accepting of conflict and passionate disagreement but seeks to limit the extremes of violence and attacks on basic rights in order to create a public space where people can be free to speak their mind without their identity or person coming under discriminatory attack.<sup>477</sup> Following Balibar on this point, we need not view

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<sup>473</sup> Zizi Papacharissi, "Democracy Online: Civility, Politeness, and the Democratic Potential of Online Political Discussion Groups," *New Media & Society* 6, no. 2 (2004): 259–83.

<sup>474</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>476</sup> See Appendix 1 for data.

<sup>477</sup> Etienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, trans. Christine Jones, James Swenson, and Chris Turner (London: Verso Books, 2011), 30.

the plurality of conflictual subjects as intrinsically prone to violence or incivility that must be tamed with a strong top-down government in the manner of Hobbes. Political civility, by contrast, can be democratic and bottom up in that it is derived from “joining” the political realm, rather than having membership in it.<sup>478</sup> By actively joining the political realm, as opposed to simply being born into it, there is a sense that one is partly responsible for its upkeep and existence, which can generate a bottom-up form of civility, which as Balibar explains, has driven the state to become more civil and less cruel.<sup>479</sup>

The demand for politeness in political debate often amounts to a demand not to disagree, for in polite company one does not raise controversial political issues. Thus politics need not be polite, it only needs to be civil, because an obsession with politeness can lead to censorship and constrained expression. Again this idea of civility and politeness speaks to how such a political forum is organized and moderated. When the role of moderators is enforcing politeness, there can be serious consequences for people who are passionately presenting an argument. Such passionate debates can quickly become censored, as the “tone” of the participants may be deemed impolite and lead to removal. Bringing up certain controversial ideas may also be deemed as impolite because the majority or moderators may not want to discuss them. Going to a forum dedicated to a specific viewpoint and presenting critiques of that viewpoint is often deemed impolite, resulting in censorship in the name of maintaining the established consensus.

Since passionate conflicts of opinion are interesting and mobilize people to get politically involved, they should be encouraged. The internet’s proclivity as a medium to produce more avenues for conflict makes it well suited for an agonistic conception of politics. The advocates of politeness often seem willing to tolerate incivility, which is truly destructive to political discourse, in the name of politeness. Those who argue that online political debate is too impolite and that the internet is unsuitable to politics are not any different from those who argue that protests which have confrontations with the police are impolite and thus are not suitable avenues for politics. The argument from politeness is part of a wider anti-political argument against any form of political conflict, and its application to the internet is simply its most recent manifestation. If we accept a little bit of impoliteness now and then as the cost of ensuring

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<sup>478</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid., 33.

passionate mobilization, then the primary concern is whether online debate remains civil, which for the most part, can be easily accomplished. There is, however, a rather notorious complication for online political conflict that can disrupt and derail entire forums and debates: the figure of the troll.

## 6.9 Trolls, Gadflies, and Political Conflict

A seemingly unique aspect of online political discussion is the phenomenon of the troll. The troll is a complicated figure but is generally viewed as someone who enters a discussion for the sole purpose of disrupting it. Politically speaking, trolling occupies a liminal position, as the expression of legitimate dissent is often considered disruptive and gets labelled as trolling, which can muddle the entire idea of what trolling is and whether it actually is harmful to political debate or not. What exactly trolling consists of is a contested notion and various definitions exist, which vary based on context. Donath defines trolling as related to identity deception and uses examples from social forums where an individual takes on a false persona in order to upset the other users.<sup>480</sup> While adopting an insincere identity is certainly an aspect of trolling, within a political context, trolls tend to be more flexible. Donath's definition is problematic for the case of a political troll who maintains a consistent username and presence, but will say anything necessary to annoy others. For the political troll, being flexible is more important than creating a false identity. A troll interested in disrupting a political discussion and provoking emotional responses does not need to maintain a consistent false identity, or even any identity at all, as the troll will argue whatever position that he or she feels will annoy the target of the trolling the most. The same troll will take radical left-wing positions when arguing with a conservative, and then take radical right-wing positions when arguing with a leftist.

Bergstrom further complicates the idea of trolling as identity deception in her report on a Reddit user who was ostracized for trolling, but claimed his trolling was not meant to deceive people but was a work of interactive fiction.<sup>481</sup> In the situation described by Bergstrom, the user saw himself as playing a character, while allowing others to believe that this character was actually his real identity. Identity deception which is not meant to be disruptive would be less of

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<sup>480</sup> Donath, "Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community," 42.

<sup>481</sup> Kelly Bergstrom, "'Don't Feed the Troll': Shutting down Debate about Community Expectations on Reddit.com," *First Monday* 16, no. 8 (2011).

a problem on politically-oriented discussion sites, as the user's real identity is less important than the arguments they were presenting. While it may be strange, and even unlikely, to adopt a character and consistently play it within a political context, there is no reason to believe that such deception would be disruptive. A big part of trolling, as Coleman points out, is creating a spectacle.<sup>482</sup> Such spectacles tend to be disruptive of political discussion, but a single person playing a consistent character that no one knows is a fake identity is less likely to become a spectacle in a political context as compared to a social setting. Combining some aspects of the deception and spectacle definitions, I define a political troll as someone who enters an online political forum with the sole intent of provoking emotional responses from people by saying whatever is necessary to generate a reaction, resulting in actual political discussion becoming sidetracked. A troll is essentially someone who seeks to transform political agonism back into social antagonism, therefore threatening the sustainability of political discourse.

A troll, by definition, is not a conflictual political actor because the troll does not seek to reveal him or herself as a unique political subject motivated by the desire to share his or her opinions with others. In this sense, provocation is not necessarily trolling, as the intent may be political, where for a troll the intent is personal amusement. When a leftist visits a discussion forum predominantly inhabited by conservatives for the sole purpose of picking arguments, that leftist is not a troll because the intent to provoke is derived from the wish to engage in political debate as a result of sincerely held opinions. Dahlberg's definition of trolls as disruptive infiltrators is also too broad, as in this example the leftist would be disrupting the consensual proceedings of the conservative forum.<sup>483</sup> From a deliberative point of view, persistent disruptions and dissent with the purpose of blocking the achievement of rational consensus can get labelled trolling, even if such disruptions are the expression of sincerely held beliefs. From an agonistic point of view, such expressions of dissent would be considered legitimate political expression.

A troll cannot simply be a political opponent or a person who is generally impolite in the context of a political debate. Someone who might be quick to anger and has a tendency to

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<sup>482</sup> E. Gabriella Coleman, "Phreaks, Hackers, and Trolls: The Politics of Transgression and Spectacle," in *The Social Media Reader*, ed. Michael Mandiberg (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 99–119.

<sup>483</sup> Dahlberg, "Computer-Mediated Communication and The Public Sphere."

become impolite is not a troll, so long as the impoliteness and anger stem from sincerely held beliefs and the person is not trying to shut down the conversation altogether. The annoyance people feel when they realize they have been tricked into engaging in a discussion with someone who legitimately does not care and was simply trying to provoke a reaction feeds the negative attitude toward trolling and can lead to muddled definitions, where a troll becomes anyone who positions themselves against the majority. In this sense, to accuse someone of trolling and insincerity can become an anti-political method of shutting down legitimate debate itself. Labelling an opponent a troll and then appealing to others to not engage with or not to “feed the troll” can play on negative associations of trolling to effectively expel someone from a discussion in an unwarranted manner.<sup>484</sup> Calling someone a troll, with the purpose of preventing that person from participating in a debate is disruptive, and can be a form of trolling itself.

While engaging in pointless arguments with someone who is simply trying to provoke you for personal amusement can be extremely frustrating and devalue the seriousness of political debate, the almost universal condemnation of trolling needs to be more closely examined in the context of political conflict. In this sense, we can ask if trolling has any redeeming value, and the answer may not obviously be no. In some cases the troll is willing to put forward controversial views that, even if not actually supported by the troll, can give participants practice in arguing against extreme positions which rarely get expressed. The troll can also force subjects to examine their own viewpoints and help them find problems in their own opinions. It may be more useful to consider trolling not in absolute terms, but on a gradient from disruptively anti-political to relatively mild expressions of insincerity.

Holmes attempts to link such milder forms of online trolling to Rancière’s concept of dissensus, but does so through an analysis of a group whose position is thoroughly ironipolitical, in that their goal is essentially to keep the internet from becoming a site of serious political practice.<sup>485</sup> What Holmes takes as a repartitioning of the online sensible is actually the attempt to enforce, through trolling, the prevailing anti-political norm of online space as a playground and, thus, entirely non-political. According to Holmes’s interpretation, the offline equivalent to what

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<sup>484</sup> Bergstrom, “Don’t Feed the Troll.”

<sup>485</sup> Steve Holmes, “Politics Is Serious Business: Jacques Rancière, Griefing, and the Re-Partitioning of the (Non)Sensical,” *The Fibreculture Journal*, no. 22 (2013): 152–70.

he thinks an online troll is doing would be the police breaking up a protest and setting things back to normal. The dispersion of a serious protest is not a redistribution of the sensible but its end, as the temporary political disruption of a space is returned to its normal function. To interpret trolling in terms of Rancière's notion of politics as a distribution of the sensible, one might imagine a troll, who in the course of attempting to disrupt a political forum for his or her own amusement, ends up accidentally enhancing the level of discourse and seriousness of debate among the other participants. In the same way a work of art need not be explicitly political to have political consequences, a troll may lead people to sharpen their arguments and rethink their own positions, leading them to take politics more seriously as a way of frustrating trolling attempts.

According to the definition of trolling advanced here, Socrates seems to have been the original troll. While advancing no position or opinion of his own, Socrates went around Athens provoking the citizens by demonstrating that those who thought they were wise were actually not.<sup>486</sup> The people of Athens clearly considered Socrates a troll. They denounced him for not putting forward any of his own opinions and only criticizing those of others. They claimed he was simply interested in causing a disturbance, and it could be argued that his supposed quest from the Delphic Oracle was simply Socrates's attempt to justify the pleasure he derived from annoying the Athenian elite. Socrates, however, saw his role as a gadfly whose annoying bites woke up the sluggish beast of Athenian public opinion, and for this Socrates claims he is doing a public service.<sup>487</sup> Arendt argues that Socrates's *Apology* is one of the great examples of persuasive political speech in that Socrates saw a public role for the philosopher that differentiated him from Plato's hostility to politics.<sup>488</sup> Taken in this light, Socrates was less a troll than public critic who did not claim to have all the answers but, by asking questions, improved the level of political discourse in the *polis*. Socrates, if he was a troll, was a politically productive one as he sought to improve the opinions of the citizens for their own benefit, making this form of trolling rather mild and certainly not disruptive for the sustainability of political debate.

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<sup>486</sup> Plato, *Four Texts on Socrates: Plato's Euthyphro, Apology, and Crito, and Aristophanes' Clouds*, trans. Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 21c.

<sup>487</sup> *Ibid.*, 31a.

<sup>488</sup> Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 7.

Even a gadfly which bites for its own benefit can have positive results, as such, the reaction to trolling must be contingent upon whether it has political or anti-political outcomes. If trolling turns into bullying or gets so disruptive that, rather than improving the opinions of people by forcing them to deal with uncomfortable questions, it makes people unwilling or unable to feel they can comfortably express their views, then it takes on an anti-political character and should not be tolerated. Milder Socratic-type trolling, however, may be allowed to persist so long as it stays mild. The methods of dealing with trolls are controversial, as, if left to moderators, personal bias can cloud who exactly is a troll or not, and, if left to public vote then the potential for more trial of Socrates situations is rife.<sup>489</sup> In many cases the best response is one of collective action against the pleasure the troll derives from their comments. This can work by ignoring known trolls, attempting to counter-provoke a troll, or simply responding to a suspected troll calmly and rationally by keeping one's emotions in check.

While trolling can be extremely disruptive, especially when it takes on an uncivil tone, in many ways mild forms of trolling can be a kind of a political maturation process for adolescents and even movements as a whole. The young person who comes to an online discussion forum, not really having formed many opinions but curious about these public exchanges, may engage in trolling for their personal amusement, only to be drawn into actual debates by accident which can facilitate the opinion formation process and get that individual interested and involved in politics. Adolescent trolling can also operate as a kind of testing of opinions and practice making arguments, where the troll can try putting on a variety of different political hats in the course of trying to annoy people, only to find that one of those hats might fit quite well, leading the troll to abandon annoying people and actually start advocating for a cause and attempting to persuade others of his or her own opinions. In many ways, this trolling as maturation process was fully evidenced by the transformation of Anonymous from a form of organized collective trolling motivated by the desire to have some fun at other people's expense to a full on mature political movement.<sup>490</sup> The participants in Anonymous came to realize that their actions can have consequences and that, if they wanted to maintain the internet as a space of freedom where one could have fun, they needed to treat it as a real space and fight for it politically.

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<sup>489</sup> For an overview of these various strategies and their effectiveness see: Susan Herring et al., "Searching for Safety Online: Managing 'Trolling' in a Feminist Forum," *The Information Society* 18, no. 5 (2002): 371–84.

<sup>490</sup> Coleman, "Anonymous: From the Lulz to Collective Action."

## 6.10 Conclusion

Since conflict is essential for politics, as without disagreement and dissent politics would simply wither away into technocratic administration with no need for public debate or decision-making, the key question for an online politics is whether or not online political spaces can help foster productive forms of conflict. The answer is complicated, as different websites can produce different interactions which depend on how people want to use these spaces and the algorithmic structures which push their behaviour in certain directions. The internet has the potential to help foster more contentious political debate and disagreement as it is able to connect more people from a plurality of viewpoints and make it easier to disagree and dissent through the shield of anonymity. The argument made by those critical of online politics that the internet is simply a forum for bullies and trolls to engage in personal attacks that they can get away with, due to anonymity, fails to recognize the real nature of conflict. People are more likely to say uncivil and hateful things when they cannot be challenged or contested, meaning that political discussion sites tend to have a much higher level of discourse than general one-way commenting sections such as on newspaper websites. The ability to challenge and disagree is essential for civil political discourse, as the ability to critique and debate those who make harmful comments can have a civilizing effect which can keep the topic focused on political matters. The internet as a medium can produce more impolite and heated exchanges, due to the potential duration of such encounters, but this is a small price to pay for having a space to actually disagree and debate political matters in the first place.



## Conclusion — Steps toward the Digitization of Politics

Using the internet for political purposes, whatever they may be, is no longer a new phenomenon. As we have seen, the internet was indispensable for the Arab Spring protests, while the Occupy movement was able to harness the internet not just to get its message out, but to globalize itself and enable its themes to become part of the popular conversation. Meanwhile, the activists of Anonymous grew it into a full-fledged political movement, and treat the internet as their primary site of engagement. The internet is also increasingly becoming a site of political dispute itself, as issues of net neutrality, privacy, and government spying are increasingly the topics of both government and public concern. While these are interesting developments in their own right, my main concern throughout has been with how politics might be reinvigorated and transformed into something more participatory and agonistic by placing it online. The goal was to outline a form of internet-enabled politics that would inspire engagement and empowerment, rather than cynicism and alienation.

By placing the common stage of politics online, old boundaries are erased and new possibilities emerge. Representation as the default position of realistic democracy no longer makes sense, as the asynchronous communication that is enabled by the internet allows both many more to take part and to do so at times and durations of their choosing. By having a common space on the internet accessible to all, people can have a place in which the exchange of political opinions can reveal who they truly are. With the opportunity to participate in debates and decisions on political matters, there is an opportunity for people to exercise the freedom to be political, rather than to be merely managed as bodies in a population. The common stage of online politics is one of conflict, where the passionate disagreement between adversaries can be expressed. Each of these terrains, both in their online and offline expressions, can be configured in ways which make them more or less political. By focusing on these terrains of contestation, I have sought to ground my understanding of politics in these concrete practices in order to ensure that the reader is not left wondering what exactly politics involves. Doing so was also meant to clear up confusion over uses of the word politics which describe configurations of a terrain which are thoroughly anti-political.

As has been my argument throughout, the internet as a technology provides an opportunity for change which must be shaped by human activity. The internet will not automatically reinvigorate politics, nor is it entirely unsuited for political matters. Activists need to create political space online, as well as to defend and expand the openness of existing nascent spaces. While new online political realms will no doubt come about organically and take on unanticipated forms, there are existing spaces which I have used as examples of how some of the functions of such a political space could operate. In the academic scholarship, there is currently too much focus on social networking, given both its relative novelty and its heavy use by recent activist movements. The social nature of social networking makes it unsuitable to serve as anything but a communications tool, and future scholarship on online politics must look deeper. Pseudonymous discussion forums are where the true potential lies, and I have continually pointed to Reddit for practical examples of how online political discussion could operate.

The front page of Reddit collects and displays the most popular submissions from all the subforums the user has subscribed to. An online political structure could work in the same manner, with each regional level having its own forums, and allowing for the creation of forums dedicated to specific issues. In this sense, if someone was only interested in issues related to climate change as well as what was happening within their city and neighbourhood, they could subscribe to these three forums and not have to wade through discussions related to other issues or other regional levels which they were not interested in. At the same time, if this person saw that there was a major proposal related to climate change being discussed at a regional level different than what they were usually interested in, they could easily access that regional forum to discuss the issue they were interested in without needing to be subscribed to it or be a member of that higher level forum.

Each regional level, which could go from the neighbourhood level all the way up to the global scale, could have multiple forums with different purposes. There could be a general discussion forum through which people could raise issues for discussion and which might warrant further action. Such a forum would be more about responding to and discussing current events. A second level of forum would take issues which gained the most attention in the general discussion forum and invite proposals for action which could be debated. To move to the decision making forums, there could be a meta-vote attached to the issue in the discussion forum

which would allow certain issues to be nominated for action if they reached a certain vote threshold. In the debate forum, the most prominent proposals and opinions would be re-presented for the purpose of being shaped into choices to vote on, and after a set period of time a set of options based on the discussion would be chosen. Developing the debate into options to vote on could be performed either by elected moderators or could be chosen based on the comments marked as potential proposals which received the highest proportion of agree to disagree votes. Winning proposals could then be moved to a third implementation forum, where the specifics of winning proposals could be discussed. This section might deal with issues of cost, budgeting, and specific policy implementation and be directed by civil servants with a speciality in the area, ensuring that proposals were properly costed and within the operating budget.

A layered structure would also provide many options in terms of how much influence human moderators would have. Algorithms could be written in order to choose which issues were advanced to the decision forum and how to choose which options in votes. Alternatively, elected moderators could perform these tasks as well as bring forth cyclical issues, such as budgets, which would need to be periodically brought into the decision forum whether the issue was popular or not. While an algorithmic approach could eliminate the problems of moderator bias, having human moderators elevating issues could also ensure that important but less popular issues were acted on. The matter of dealing with trolls and comments that become uncivil is more difficult, as detecting such behaviours with algorithms is extremely difficult. At the same time, such behaviour often walks a fine line and is prone to interpretation. The goal should be to generate a bottom-up form of civility by empowering participants and giving them a real stake in what happens so as to make them feel responsible for keeping discussions civil. By contrast, people feel little responsibility for the quality of discussion on a website on which they feel like an intruder or on which they have little stake in its continued existence. Above all, civility must be a personal responsibility, however, for those who lack such feelings of responsibility, mechanisms can be created to flag and alert people of uncivil behaviour. In addition to the ability to agree or disagree with a button press, the ability to simply click an uncivil button to make the commenter aware that others feel they are overstepping the bounds of civility could be used as well, with persistent reports being escalated to moderator action. Matters such as these would have to be a matter of trial and error experimentation and some combination of the two approaches would likely work best. The structure of current systems of governance are generally

too rigid for fear that the elected authorities will overstep their reach, but an online politics which replaces the authority of individuals with the power of groups could be more open to experimentation and tweaking of the structure to make it more effective.

With a multi-layered approach, people could easily choose to what degree they wished to participate without getting bogged down in aspects of the political process they simply did not care about. Such a structure demonstrates the strengths of the understanding of politics which I have advocated in the previous chapters. By having a single online space which is recognized as political and with real decision making power, the biggest exclusionary obstacle to political engagement would be overcome. People would go to this space to test their opinions in debate and reveal themselves to be unique individuals by sharing their perspective on the common world with others. The various layers would provide multiple avenues and degrees of participation, allowing citizens to do anything from raise issues to participate in crafting policy. The agonistic spirit of online debate would be promoted through different mechanisms which could be used to express agreement and disagreement, in order to ensure that real options would be presented for votes and that no one's dissenting position would be steamrolled by consensual wholes or tyrannical majorities.

Even with the above as a kind of rough draft vision of how an online layered politics might operate, the big question, perhaps even bigger than the question of what alternatives would look like, is how to get from here to there. With electoral politics increasingly becoming more administrative and narrow in choice and the old idea of forming a vanguard party and seizing power through armed revolution simply out of the question in today's context, the question of how to go about bringing any sort of major change remains puzzling. It is on this register, that the four terrains of contestation between politics and anti-politics once again become informative. If each terrain can be configured to be more or less political, then the idea of an alternative to the status quo has actionable steps. In addition, each of the elements of the four terrains can be more or less digitized. By focusing on ways to expand both the politicization and digitization of each terrain, a progressive reinvigoration of politics is possible. Such progress may be uneven, as digitization does not necessarily result in politicization and vice versa, the terrains of contestation can provide activists with both a point of focus for individual action and a wider vision.

The political realm as a common space for political speech and action presents many avenues for action. Existing websites with large political forums should seek to become more than unofficial discussion spaces and start to take on the guise of shadow governments. By politicizing an existing digital space and turning it into more of a common site where everyone could go to discuss political issues, a political realm that functioned as a common world could be established online. Governmental spaces can be sites of digitization as well. Legislative debates and decisions should be broadcast online, and governments should be encouraged to set up digital means to get feedback from citizens. A member of parliament, for instance could be encouraged to hold online meetings where people could bring up and discuss issues, eventually leading to the transformation of representatives into delegates beholden to the decisions of the constituents.

Participation in unofficial discussion forums can be politicized by enabling people to not just take part in discussions and debates, but allowing community votes and decisions which could influence official decision makers. Adopting such structures could make a whole host of organizations more political and democratic, eliminating the need for leaders and officials. Unions, community organizations, and political parties would be better served adopting digital participation methods in order to ensure their various debate and decision making procedures were more accountable and encouraged political participation. Voting in elections should be available online more widely, as it could encourage more direct citizen participation in other aspects of government.

Digitizing and politicizing conflict and subjectivity involve resisting anti-political framings. Consensus and identity are too often taken by activists as goals to celebrate, rather than as anti-political obstacles to overcome. By opening identity up to agonistic criticism, and by problematizing the assumption of consensus with the assertion of a plurality of different people, depoliticization from within can be fought. Although digitization can make managing conflict more difficult, especially if identity is reproduced online, the internet can shape both of these terrains in a way that is suitable to a reinvigorated politics. If disagreement becomes normal because a plurality of different subjectivities are encountered online, then disagreement and conflict can be treated less as hostile encounters with others but as an opportunity to test one's views against an adversary.

Even though, taken altogether, the vision of an online politics presented here amounts to a radical alternative to the status quo which would fundamentally change how public affairs is conducted, the focus on the four terrains as a sliding scale of politicization and depoliticization enables a framework for incremental improvement. To reinvigorate politics by making it more participatory and conflictual seems to be a daunting proposition today, but the internet is opening up the potential for a political space and political subject formation process that simply is unavailable elsewhere. Without an embrace of the online world, the prospect for politics is extremely dim. The continuing potential to shape the software layer of the internet in political ways represents a rare opportunity that advocates of agonistic, participatory, and radical politics need to embrace as quite possibly the only way to realistically implement alternative visions of politics. Just as the internet remains plastic, activists such as those from the Arab Spring, Occupy, and Anonymous movements, must continue to adapt and evolve their alternative vision, rather than simply refusing to put forth alternatives, as is the case with Rancière, or simply trying to repeat history, as with Badiou and Žižek's attempt to repackage communism.<sup>491</sup> The internet provides a rare opportunity to reinvigorate politics which is otherwise practically impossible. Abandoning the internet as unsuitable to politics amounts to abandoning politics altogether, and allowing yet another victory for the anti-political status quo.

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<sup>491</sup> Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek, eds., *The Idea of Communism* (London: Verso, 2010).

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## Appendix 1 – Comment Comparison across Newspapers and Reddit

Comments were classified as poor if they fit within one of these three criteria:

a) Comments expressing a simple agree or disagree with no argument or explanation that could be debated.

Examples: “Thank you! It's nice to have a sensible federal government for once.”

“I'd really rather this garbage government announce their own pull out from parliament.”

b) Comments which had nothing to do with the news story, were off topic or otherwise pointless, or the same comment posted more than once.

Examples: a user posts the lyrics to Oh Canada for no apparent reason

Complaints about Al Gore, even though he had nothing to do with Canada pulling out of the Kyoto Accord

c) Comments that simply were insults directed at other commenters without being part of an argument or explanation of why this user disagreed, comments that displayed an extremely low level of coherence or were purposely inflammatory with no argumentative content.

Examples: “All the lefty loons who don't like it should move to north Korea. You'll like it there. You can live in Kyoto everyday” and going on to claim that climate change is a “UN scam created by communists to take our jobs.”

“as someone with a science degree, I'm qualified to say that everyone here is an idiot”

An attempt to cover the spectrum was made, with CBC having a perception of representing more left wing and liberal positions (The Toronto Star and Globe and Mail either had 0 comments on this story or they have been deleted since this story originally appeared), the National Post and Sun News representing more right-wing positions, with these two sites examined to create a larger pool of comments to match the CBC's level of commenting. On the two Reddit discussions, /r/Canada had a mixed response with a slight majority opposing the withdrawal from Kyoto while /r/worldnews was overwhelmingly in favour of Canada's decision.

CBC.ca “Canada pulls out of Kyoto Protocol”

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-pulls-out-of-kyoto-protocol-1.999072>

881 total comments

230 in category a) (26.1%)

142 in category b) (16.1%)

22 in category c) (2.5%)

44.7% of all comments poor quality

National Post “Canada pulling out of Kyoto accord”

<http://news.nationalpost.com/2011/12/12/canada-formally-withdrawig-from-kyoto-protocol/>

74 total comments

27 in category a) (36.4%)

8 in category b) (10.8%)

13 in category c) (17.6%)

64.9% of all comments poor quality

Sun News Network “Canada officially becomes first country to withdraw from Kyoto agreement”

<http://www.sunnewsnetwork.ca/sunnews/politics/archives/2012/12/20121214-172915.html>

252 total comments

40 in category a) (15.9%)

40 in category b) (15.9%)

58 in category c) (23%)

54.8% of all comments poor quality

/r/Canada “Canada officially withdraws from Kyoto Accord”

[http://www.reddit.com/r/canada/comments/na75c/canada\\_officially\\_withdraws\\_from\\_kyoto\\_accord/](http://www.reddit.com/r/canada/comments/na75c/canada_officially_withdraws_from_kyoto_accord/)

261 total comments



17 in category a) (6.5%)

8 in category b) (3%)

6 in category c) (2.3%)

11.9% of all comments poor quality

/r/worldnews “Canada withdraws from Kyoto protocol”

[www.reddit.com/r/worldnews/comments/14v84m/canada\\_withdraws\\_from\\_kyoto\\_protocol](http://www.reddit.com/r/worldnews/comments/14v84m/canada_withdraws_from_kyoto_protocol)

198 total comments

20 in category a) (10.1%)

46 in category b) (23.2%)

6 in category c) (3%)

36.4% of all comments poor quality

## Curriculum Vitae

**Name:** Trevor Smith

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University of Ottawa  
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