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Beyond the ontological turn: affirming the relative autonomy of politics

It is commonly recognised that 'poststructuralism' has had wide impact across the humanities and social sciences.¹ The extent of this has been disproportionate, with disciplines such as literary criticism, media and cultural studies, being altered more extensively by poststructuralism than political science and international relations; although, as we shall see, these disciplines have also been influenced to a considerable extent.² Overall, I welcome these developments, however in this paper I nonetheless feel bound to raise a few objections about the general direction of poststructuralism. Indeed, I share the observation, advanced by several commentators³ that those working with poststructuralism tend - increasingly it seems - to be preoccupied with questions of ontology, and in my view this is clearly at the expense of either a refinement of political concepts or a concrete analysis of forms of power and domination. I stress that these are tendencies, and they are found to a greater or lesser degree in different authors. There are of course those who cut against the grain, and there have been valuable poststructuralist analyses of the machinations of power. Michel Foucault's work is an obvious case in point. Nevertheless, a concern with ontological questions is clearly a feature of much contemporary work within the various traditions of poststructuralism.⁴ I think we need to counter this tendency, to open critical distance from questions of ontology, and to turn poststructuralism instead to a more concrete engagement with 'the political'.⁵

In the first section I distinguish between a narrow (post-Saussurean) and a broader definition of 'poststructuralism', and I consider the impact of poststructuralism on the disciplines of politics, international relations, and especially political theory. I stress the broader definition of poststructuralism, because the preoccupation with ontology is found across these wider contributions. This is, it seems, an occupational hazard for those currently working with poststructuralism. This predilection is elaborated more fully in the following section, and there I also differentiate my position from others who stress the inadequacy of poststructuralist accounts of politics and of 'the political'. I provide some explanation for the current turn to ontology, which stems from the circumstances of ontological pluralism, and I consider some of the consequences of this development. We see that this leads many poststructuralists to fetishize seemingly obscure categories, and where there is an explicit analysis of power and politics; these tend to be read off in a direct fashion from the underlying ontological classifications.

Having registered these criticisms, in the final section I advance a few specific claims about the relationship between ontology and politics. First, I argue that the only sincere response to the circumstances of ontological pluralism is to affirm the inherent contestability of each ontological perspective. Then I develop the idea of a 'relative autonomy' of politics from ontology, where ontology cannot be said to determine politics in any direct or straightforward fashion. We need to stress this relative autonomy, to open space where we can turn our attention towards a more concrete analysis and critique of forms of power and domination.

Poststructuralism: narrowly and more broadly defined

¹ For a wide-ranging discussion of the impact of poststructuralism, see Dews, 1987.

² Many are critical of these developments (for example, Searle, 1983; Geras, 1988; Keohane, 1989); others understand the important contribution of poststructuralism across the humanities and social sciences (for example, Connolly, 1974; Dews, 1987; Howarth, 2013).

³ For example: Critchley, 2007; Strathusen, 2009; Kioupkiolis, 2011; Bosteels, 2011.

⁴ In fact, the turn to ontology represents a more general trend in the contemporary social sciences. For example the same tendency is evident in the work of those 'critical realists' inspired by the work of Roy Bhaskar; e.g. Hay (2002) and Furlong and Marsh (2010).

⁵ I stress that by 'the political' I do not share Chantal Mouffe's emphasis on the danger of intense forms of conflict and 'antagonism' (Mouffe, 1993). Instead, we should associate 'the political' with a focus on forms of power and domination, resistance and freedom.

The term 'poststructuralism' refers to movements in continental philosophy that emerged in the mid-1960s as a reaction against structuralism. From its inception, poststructuralism was not a homogeneous body of thought, and many of those associated with poststructuralism are unlikely to invoke the term to describe their work (Angermuller, 2015). Indeed, the key French thinkers who developed this movement - such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Foucault – did not describe themselves as 'poststructuralists', and - as XXX explains in his contribution - the term is largely a retrospective formulation by American academics to describe the contribution of these leading French theorists. Nevertheless, the term clearly has traction, and because it captures the common objectives of this generation of thinkers who sought to break with the structuralist paradigm. In the early 1960s structuralism was the predominant intellectual tradition in France, represented in anthropology by Claude Levi-Strauss, in psychoanalysis by Jacques Lacan, and in Marxism by Louis Althusser, all of whom tended to explain social phenomena with reference to grounded, fixed, or underlying structures (Dosse, 1998a; 1998b). Despite their different points of emphasis, the poststructuralists worked through the assumptions of structuralism in various ways and to break with its ahistorical, apolitical, universalist and positivist propensities. There is not the scope here to discuss the contributions of each of these thinkers in detail. Instead, I distinguish between a narrow definition of poststructuralism, referring to those who engaged primarily and explicitly with Saussure's theory of structural linguistics, and a broader definition which refers to the wider movements associated with 'poststructuralism' and who share many core theoretical assumptions which I describe below.

Key to an appreciation of structuralism is the detail of Saussure's theory of structural linguistics. At the heart of Saussure's approach was his insight that the 'the basic unit of any language [is] the linguistic sign', and that the sign is composed of a sound or acoustic element (the signifier) and the mental image/concept or idea (the signified) (Saussure, 1974, 67; Sturrock, 1979, 6). Saussure also stressed that there is no necessary relationship between a given idea and the sounds with which it is represented (Saussure, 1974, 67-8). This leads to an emphasis on the 'arbitrary' relation between the signifier and signified, and in turn to the realisation that we can only ever understand the meaning of a signifier through its relations to other signifiers within a structured 'totality' (*langue*) (Saussure, 1974, 67). The signifier, in other words, is like a pawn in the game of chess: it is not defined by its 'positive content' - as a pawn 'in and of itself' - but rather *negatively*; that is, in its relations to the other chess pieces (Saussure, 1974, 117). The pawn is pawn because it is not the queen, a bishop, the king or a rook. This is what Saussure meant when he said that 'in language there are only differences...without positive terms' (Saussure, 1974, 120).

It follows from Saussure's approach that the meaning/value of a signifier is dependent upon the system or context in which it is invoked. However, Saussure also presented the context, or the underlying linguistic structure, as static. His emphasis was on 'synchronic structure', i.e. on analysing the relations between signs at a fixed point in time, rather than a 'diachronic approach', which would trace the morphology in the meaning of signs as they change historically. We can therefore associate 'poststructuralism', in a narrow sense, with those who explicitly reworked Saussure's theory to challenge his claim that the play of signification is fixed within a particular temporal moment. This was primarily developed in the work of Lacan and Derrida (Lacan, 1998, 161-197; Derrida, 1978, 351-370; 1982, 307-330). Lacan emphasised what he called the permanent sliding of the signified under the signifier. In other words, he highlighted how meaning is never fully fixed but rather tends to veer off or to be repeatedly displaced, until some anchoring point manages to halt this sliding and temporarily stabilise meaning. Lacan used the example of the signifier 'table' to draw attention to this ambiguous play of meaning, because a 'table' (as a noun) can refer to both an item of furniture or to a set of figures displayed in columns, and (as a verb) 'table' can also refer to the act of putting forward a set of suggestions in a meeting (Lacan, 1998, 32). Similarly, Derrida coined several innovative terms to describe this repeated disruption of established points of meaning. The most notorious of which is the idea of *différance*. *Différance* draws attention not only to the spatial

differences and relations between signifiers (i.e. the differences within a given context), but also to the reiterated patterns of deferral and disruption, i.e. the play of meaning that repeatedly disrupts Saussure's idea of synchronic closure (Derrida, 1982).

If we take this as 'poststructuralism' in the narrow sense, we see that one of the core objectives was to emphasise the inherent ambiguity of language and representation to disrupt claims to fixity and closure. The influence of poststructuralism in this limited sense was arguably at its peak in the 1980s, when Derridean 'deconstruction' was dominant in American literary criticism. However, if we turn now to the wider impact of poststructuralism, it is clear that reports of the death of poststructuralism in the late 1980s, for example by Anthony Giddens's, were misguided (Giddens, 1987, 195). In fact, to the contrary, no sooner had poststructuralism mobilised these criticisms of fixed (linguistic) structure, then these ideas began to be fused and imported into other traditions and perspectives such as Marxism, colonial studies, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and feminism. In so doing, the impact of poststructuralism gave birth to new approaches such as post-colonialism, post-Marxism, and post-Anarchism. Indeed, this has been the distinguishing feature of the impact of poststructuralism, i.e. the diffusion of its core ideas into a series of related disciplines and approaches. To some considerable extent, this has included the disciplines of political science and international relations. For example, this can be seen in the work of those who have mobilised Foucault's notions of governmentality and bio-politics to bring critical insights to discussions about state sovereignty in international relations (Campbell, 1992). Commentators have also drawn attention to the homology between poststructuralism and the 'new institutionalist' approach in political science, with its similar emphasis on the open-ended and transient quality of informal political institutions (Torfing, 2012). Nevertheless, we also noted at the outset that these disciplines have shown greater resistance to poststructuralism than other areas in the humanities and social sciences. Indeed, poststructuralism has not penetrated the core of these disciplines which remain governed by various forms of neo-positivism; i.e. by rational choice theory and post-behavioralism in political science, and by the debates between neo-realism, liberalism, and constructivism in international relations.

However, one area where the impact of poststructuralism has been prevalent over the past few decades is in Anglo-American political theory. The influence of poststructuralism has been especially evident in the contributions of several leading political theorists, variously associated with 'agonistic' and 'radical democracy'. For example, in *Political Theory and The Displacement of Politics*, Bonnie Honig drew upon Derrida and others to show how the predominant liberal and communitarian approaches attempt to reduce politics - which she described in terms of permanent contestation - to either philosophical principles of justice or to a shared background of moral norms (Honig, 1993, 131). In *The Return of the Political*, Mouffe drew upon the Derridean notion of the 'constitutive outside' to problematize the same tendency towards closure in liberalism as well as in deliberative theories of democracy. These approaches too readily assume the possibility of rational consensus, and, on Mouffe's view, they consequently misunderstand the inherent antagonism at the heart of 'the political' (Mouffe, 1993, 2). In *The Ethos of Pluralisation*, William Connolly similarly drew on poststructuralism to criticise the predominant conception of pluralism in American political science. His stress was on the dynamic nature of 'pluralisation', and how this repeatedly disrupts established configurations of identity and difference (Connolly, 1995, xiv). These contributions are good examples of how poststructuralist insights *can* be brought to bear on explicitly political questions, and perhaps especially as a key resource for the refinement and critique of political concepts. Indeed, Connolly's *The Terms of Political Discourse* - which was first published in 1974, and which subsequently passed through several editions, increasingly showing the influence of poststructuralism - provides an exemplary case of how key concepts used in political science, such as power, interest, and freedom, can be reworked in light of poststructuralism (Connolly, 1974). This focus on enhancing political concepts has also been evident in the work of Ernesto Laclau who likewise mobilised poststructuralism to rework concepts such as hegemony, representation,

populism, and emancipation.⁶ In each case, Laclau wrestled these concepts away from their more established meanings, either in conventional Marxist theories or in mainstream political science, in order to give them a wider and more productive set of connotations.

In one form or another, each of these theorists endorses the poststructuralist emphasis on temporal dislocation over fixed structure. However, they do not all proceed via an explicit critique of the structuralist theory of the sign, and so they have varying degrees of proximity to poststructuralism narrowly defined. It is therefore necessary at this point to broaden the definition of 'poststructuralism' to account more fully for these and other comparable contributions. Indeed, we ought to include in a wider account of 'poststructuralism' a number of fellow travellers who do not take their principal inspiration from a reworking of Saussure, but whom nonetheless share a common theoretical orientation. This would include other prominent French theorists such as Jean-François Lyotard and Gilles Deleuze, but also Richard Rorty, who shared a considerable amount with this collection of French theorists but who took his inspiration from American pragmatism (Deleuze, 1983, Lyotard, 1984; Rorty, 1989). Despite significant differences, these contributors shared a broad set of theoretical assumptions, which can be described as follows. Each of these thinkers draws attention to the contingent nature of identity, to the importance of relationality, they tend to emphasise temporal dislocation over fixed structure, and there is a strong emphasis on the anti-dialectical or open-ended character of this temporal dislocation. Moreover, these theories tend also to embrace epistemological perspectivism, drawing attention to the ungrounded nature of truth claims, and more generally they mistrust appeals to 'reason', which need to be repeatedly unmasked as ruses for the exercise of power. It is for these reasons that poststructuralist theories are commonly referred to as anti-essentialist and anti-foundationalist, and in the remainder of this paper I use the term 'poststructuralism' to refer to this wider series of movements. Indeed, we can concur with David Howarth when he says that poststructuralism, in this broader sense, is characterised by a 'particular style of theorising' or by something like a common ethos (Howarth, 2013, 6). However, those who work within these traditions are also increasingly prone to prioritise discussions of ontology over an analysis of power and domination, and it is to this that we now turn.

A displacement of 'the political' through a preoccupation with ontology

As I have said, I am not alone in my observation that contemporary poststructuralist theory often appears preoccupied with questions of ontology. In this section I outline some of the causes and consequences of this phenomenon. First however, we should note how this assessment also resonates with a more wide-ranging set of reflections that emphasise, in one form or another, that poststructuralism is in some sense insufficiently political. Indeed, these kinds of criticisms have been commonly expressed, and sometimes by those who are broadly associated with these traditions. Derridean 'deconstruction' for example has been especially subject to this kind of criticism. Slavoj Žižek has criticised deconstruction for leading to a political impasse and Connolly has also stressed that deconstruction runs the risk of producing a kind of 'perpetual postponism' in politics (Žižek, 1999; Connolly, 1995). Similarly, Diana Coole has described the tendency of poststructuralists to circumvent political questions, and this is again despite her overall commitment to continental traditions of thought. She draws attention to the prominent Routledge series of books on 'Poststructuralism and the Political' - which includes titles on 'Derrida and the Political', 'Deleuze and the Political', 'Foucault and the Political' and so on - and points out how, in her view, these books display a lot of sophisticated theory but tend also to show a marked absence of engagement with explicitly political questions (Coole, 2000). More recently, Lois McNay has criticized those associated with 'agonistic democracy', such as Connolly and Mouffe, for what she describes as the social and political 'weightlessness' of their analyses, because in her view these theories are too abstract and don't engage with questions of structural inequality (McNay, 2014, 14).

⁶ For example: Laclau and Mouffe 1985, Laclau, 1996.

I agree with the underlying sentiments behind these interventions, although I take odds with some of the specific points of emphasis. For example, I think McKay makes valuable observations; however she mistakenly associates this tendency with a collection of thinkers who are, arguably, the least blameworthy of this general trend. Indeed, it is important to stress that there have been good examples of poststructuralist analyses of the operations of power and domination. Foucault's work is surely exemplary, and perhaps so too is the work of Judith Butler. Nevertheless, those who McNay flags up for criticism - such as Connolly, Laclau, and Mouffe - have also contributed to our understanding of power and the political, and especially, as we have seen above, through their refinement of political concepts. For example, Laclau's reworking of the notion of populism provides crucial insights into the current context of 'post-truth politics', the UK vote for Brexit, and the Presidency of Donald Trump (Laclau, 2006).⁷ Indeed, the achievements of this earlier generation of thinkers ought not to be underestimated, and so I think we need a more precise understanding of the reasons for this growing tendency to displace 'the political' with questions of ontology. For this, I suggest we look more closely at the circumstances of ontological pluralism, which increasingly delimit work in the social and political sciences.

As well as the diffusion of poststructuralism into a range of related disciplines, another defining feature has been the fragmentation of the poststructuralist paradigm itself, as well as a proliferation of a range of related perspectives and ideas emerging often in debate with the proponents of poststructuralism in the narrow sense. So, for example, in addition to recurrent exchanges between poststructuralists and proponents of psychoanalysis, more recent years have seen the emergence of approaches such as actor network theory, speculative realism, and the new materialism.⁸ Indeed, what we find in contemporary continental philosophy is a constant pluralising of distinct approaches and different positions. If each of these perspectives can be brought under the heading of 'poststructuralism' in a broad sense, then poststructuralism is clearly thriving in the form of a set of interlocking viewpoints and debates. There is not the scope in this paper to fully account for these different positions, nor is my objective here to choose between them. The point is simply to draw attention to this recent proliferation of perspectives, and to emphasise the link between this development and the tendency to prioritise questions of ontology. Indeed, despite their many points of commonality, it is ultimately the differences that define these respective approaches, and the proponents have stressed the uniqueness and priority of their respective positions. Moreover, when they do so, they typically present these differences in ontological terms.

A number of prominent examples will have to suffice here to illustrate this general trend. The debate (which is mainly) between those who follow Deleuze and proponents of psychoanalysis has been presented as an alternative between theories of 'abundance' and 'lack'.⁹ This is, for sure, an important topic, which is in large part about the status of desire, and whether desire should be understood as a productive force of life or is instead generated by prohibition. The point is not to underestimate the importance of these respective claims, but simply to note how this debate operates at the level of competing ontological positions. The same is true for more recent debates that have followed from the intervention of the 'new materialism', which is further discussed by XXX in his contribution to this symposium. Central to these approaches has been a critique of anthropocentrism, and an attempt to undermine the distinction between human and nonhuman

⁷ McNay's point about social weightlessness is nonetheless insightful, and ought to be applied more generally to contemporary political theory. Indeed, her observations serve as a constant reminder to avoid the enticement towards abstraction that adheres in all modes of political theorising. We might note how her criticisms are not too dissimilar from those levied against contemporary analytical approaches. Those who work with Rawlsian 'ideal theory' have long been criticized for reducing politics to abstract theories of morality, law, or applied ethics, but this line of critique has recently received renewed impetus following the call by self-styled 'realist' theorists to bring normative political theory back to a focus on the situated context of claims to justice and right (For example: Rossi and Sleat, 2014).

⁸ For example: Latour, 1993; Meillassoux, 2008; Bennett, 2010.

⁹ See the essays collected in Thomassen and Tonder, 2005.

forms of agency (Bennett, 2010). Again, the critical responses to these arguments have tended to focus on claims about the fundamental characteristics of human beings, for example in their capacities for action and judgement (Zerilli, 2015). As I have said, my objective here is not to choose between these positions, but simply to draw attention to the ontological register in which these claims have been articulated. In some senses this is ironic, given that poststructuralism is widely perceived to eschew foundations, and yet what we find is seemingly endless debates about different forms of post-foundations; here there are no essences, but, it seems, many competing - often passionately competing - forms of anti-essentialism. The message that emerges from these debates is clearly that ontology matters, and informs a particular vision of politics. However, the danger is, I think, that questions of ontology tend to displace a more direct focus on explicitly political questions. Often, these debates take the form of a respective fine-tuning of ontological viewpoints. At this level of abstraction, there is a lot of respective talking past each other, but little in the way of a direct analysis of forms of power and control or a refinement of political concepts.

Indeed, another difficulty that emerges from these recent trends is the tendency towards a proliferation of competing sets of complex and seemingly obscure ontological concepts and categories. Of course, poststructuralists have for a long time been criticised by analytical philosophers for their apparent obscurantism,¹⁰ and I stress that my claim here is *not* that poststructuralists are deliberate obscure. Rather, I think the problem follows more directly from this standoff between competing ontologies. As each side seeks to refine their respective ontological perspectives, they do so through the initiation of novel concepts and terms. For the most part, these terms do have specific meaning within the respective theoretical frameworks, but, to the uninitiated, these frameworks must increasingly appear to resemble an abyss of murky and incomprehensible vocabularies. Finally, when poststructuralists do engage more directly with questions of politics, there is a tendency to read their favoured forms of politics directly from the ontological categories, i.e. to reduce politics to these underlying ontological viewpoints. Again, a couple of pertinent examples will have to suffice to illustrate this more general trend. This can, for example, be seen on each side of the categories of 'abundance' and 'lack' - for instance when Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri move directly from a Deleuzean ontology of desire to a conception of political subjectivity in terms of the immanent movement of 'the multitude', and when Žižek similarly sees a direct connection between the Lacanian account of constitutive 'lack' and his defence of a Leninist politics of revolutionary rupture or what he calls 'the Act' (Hardt and Negri, 2001; Žižek, 2002). This tendency - to treat ontology and politics as somehow synonymous - needs, I think, to be resisted, and so in the final section I advance some more general reflections on the relationship between ontology and politics, with a view to establishing the relative autonomy of politics from ontological concerns.

The relative autonomy of politics from ontology

Having outlined these various criticisms, in this section I consider the notion of 'weak ontology' that has been invoked to describe the forms of ontological argument associated with poststructuralism, and I defend the idea of ontological pluralism, which not only draws attention to the multiplicity of different worldviews, but insists also that no specific viewpoint can claim metaphysical certainty or priority. Moreover, I make the case that the circumstances of ontological pluralism suggest a relative autonomy of politics from ontology. This emphasis is designed to open space between ontology and politics, to re-direct our efforts towards a more concrete analysis of political concerns. Indeed, the future success of poststructuralism will depend I think on the capacity of theorists working with distinct ontological viewpoints partly to look across these differences, and to prioritise instead the need to sharpen our conceptual tools for understanding politics, power, and domination.

¹⁰ For example: Searle 1983.

To appreciate the approaches to ontology characteristic of the various traditions of poststructuralism, we need briefly to acknowledge the influence of Martin Heidegger. Indeed, Heidegger was a significant inspiration for the development of poststructuralism, and more generally his work has been central to the way in which we think about ontology today. For the ancient Greeks, ontology was a branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature of 'Being' or with 'what is'? However, Heidegger highlighted how conventional approaches to ontology – especially since Plato and Aristotle - have tended to take a foundationalist approach. Here, ontology is more or less associated with a categorizing of the basic kinds of phenomena that are said to exist beyond the realm of appearances. On Heidegger's account, this conventional metaphysical orientation, which runs through the western tradition, is too simple and straightforward. As he sees it, these approaches have forgotten the most elementary question of ontology, which is about the 'meaning of Being' as such. Therefore, what ought to be a most difficult and demanding question, has instead 'taken on a clarity and self-evidence such that if anyone continues to ask about it he is charged with an error of method' (Heidegger, 1998, 21). Traditional metaphysical approaches also typically present ontological questions in cognitive and rational terms, i.e. as a matter ultimately to be resolved regarding epistemological questions about what can and cannot be known to be true, and again this tendency runs through the tradition, and is just as evident in Plato as it is in Hobbes, as well as in contemporary analytical philosophy.¹¹

As well as these critical observations, Heidegger also put forward an alternative approach that he called 'fundamental ontology'. By way of contrast, Heidegger proceeded by way of a phenomenological rather than a cognitive approach. His focus was on the basic modes of human 'being in the world' and his analysis moved inexorably to the conclusion that the question of the meaning of Being ultimately resists every attempt at definition, in part because of the disruptive temporality that is constitutive of human experience (Heidegger, 1998, 53). Heidegger's influence on poststructuralism (especially on Derrida) - with its comparable stress on temporal dislocation - should be evident, and this is so too with his general approach to ontology.¹² Indeed, when poststructuralists engage in questions of ontology they are generally not seeking to resolve the ancient philosophical problem, i.e. to define with cognitive certainty the 'essence' or 'nature of being' (Strathausen, 2009). Instead, following Heidegger, they typically aim simultaneously both to define some fundamental features of the world, and to acknowledge that these fundamentals are contingent, and so they cannot be fully grounded. With this characteristic double gesture, Oliver Marchart has argued, poststructuralists are best understood as *post*-foundationalist rather than as resolutely *anti*-foundationalist or *anti*-essentialist (Marchart, 2007). Similarly, Stephen K. White has distinguished between what he calls 'strong' and 'weak' ontology. The former - more traditional - approaches 'claim to show us how the world [really] is', whereas poststructuralist proponents of 'weak' ontology draw attention to the need for ontological foundations, but at the same time present their assumptions about the 'self' and the 'world' as inherently contestable (White, 2000, 6).

This characteristic double gesture has been exemplified in the work of Connolly.¹³ Connolly's appreciation of post-foundationalism leads him to stress the inherent contestability of every set of ontological claims. This effectively politicises ontology, because it follows that no set of ontological assumptions can claim metaphysical certainty, nor is it possible to describe reality in neutral terms.

¹¹ For example: Plato, 1992; Hobbes, 1968, 76; Quine, 1976.

¹² Of course, Heidegger is not the only influence for 'poststructuralist' conceptions of ontology. A fuller account would need to explore for example also the importance of Deleuze's ontology of 'immanence' and 'life'. This has been a major reference point for the 'new materialist' approaches, and, no doubt, there are some crucial points of difference between the new materialism and certain strands of Heideggerian thought. There is no scope in this paper to address these differences. However, they do get coverage in XXX contribution to this symposium.

¹³ For example: the chapter 'Nothing is Fundamental' in *The Ethos of Pluralisation*, as well as Connolly, 1993, 377.

Indeed, we saw in the previous section that we currently experience a condition of ontological pluralism, and we can now add that none of the contending ontological viewpoints are incontestable, and so they are all in some sense politicised. Moreover, I want to stress that these circumstances – of the politicisation of ontology – are different from the tendencies I described above, i.e. the tendency to displace more straightforwardly political concerns with ontological questions. Indeed, the politicisation of ontology seems both inevitable, given the fact of ontological pluralism, and something to be welcomed. However, this inevitability does not also follow for the tendency to reduce politics to ontology. There are, as we saw above, reasons for this increasing tendency, and these do, in part, follow from the circumstances of ontological pluralism, as each side seeks to defend and refine their ontological categories. Indeed, it is not easy to avoid questions of ontology altogether. As Carsten Strathusen says ‘ontologies literally live (i.e., they become embodied and practiced) by the credo of those who adhere to them, and this credo is not simply a matter of rational power or philosophical logic’ (Stathausen, 2006). Nevertheless, my sense is that the tendency to reduce the study of politics to categories of ontology is not inexorable, and it remains possible to establish some element of critical distance from a given set of ontological assumptions. To finesse this point, I advance the idea of a ‘relative autonomy’ to further highlight the relationship between ontology and politics.¹⁴

The term ‘relative autonomy’ is borrowed from Althusser, who was, of course, working within the Marxist framework, and who developed this idea to explain the relationship between the economic base and the various realms of the ‘superstructure’, i.e. politics, law, ideology and culture (Althusser, 1971). Althusser sought to overcome what he understood as the simplistic account of economic determinism characteristic of conventional Marxism, where the superstructure was conceived ultimately as a ‘reflection’ of the underlying economic infrastructure or of the ‘forces and relations of production’ (Althusser, 1971). By way of contrast, on his account, each of the different elements of the superstructure needs to be grasped in terms of its own distinct purposes and effects, and these, in turn, are only ever related to the infrastructure, as well as to each other, in complex forms of mutual imbrication or ‘over-determination’ (Althusser, 1971). In other words, whilst the economy necessarily retained a determining role in relation to the various elements of the superstructure, this was never a simple or absolute form of determination, and the latter retained a degree of ‘relative autonomy’ from the former.

Althusser’s intervention gave rise to a great deal of debate and critical assessment, his relationship to structuralism and poststructuralism is complex, and there is no scope here to evaluate these discussions in detail. We should note however, that the most pertinent reproach of the idea of ‘relative autonomy’ was developed by Laclau and Mouffe. They showed that the idea of relative autonomy could not be squared with Althusser’s simultaneous desire to retain the notion of the overarching ‘determination of the economy in the last instance’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, viii). Laclau and Mouffe were I think correct to emphasize the incongruity between these two contrasting objectives in Althusser’s theory. Nevertheless, the preliminary move in Althusser’s argument, i.e. to establish the relative autonomy of the superstructures from the economic base, seems also highly pertinent and analogous to our discussion of the relationship between ontology and politics. Moreover, Laclau and Mouffe’s criticism of ‘relative autonomy’ does not apply here, since my aim is not to attribute ontology with a determinate status in the first, last, or any other instance. Instead, my suggestion is that we need to appreciate that politics is something distinct from ontology with its own discrete characteristics, that ontology plays a *conditioning* and constraining role in how we

¹⁴ My emphasis on ‘relative autonomy’ is inspired by Pierre Bourdieu, who invokes this phrase in his consideration of the relationship between Heidegger’s philosophy and his association with Nazism (Bourdieu, 1991). However, Bourdieu stressed the relative autonomy of philosophical thought from the context in which it was articulated, and vice-versa, whereas my emphasis is instead on the relative autonomy of the realm of ‘the political’ (understood as a theatre of domination, resistance and freedom) from the conditioning effects of philosophical thought.

perceive and interpret political events and experiences, but this is not a relationship of determination.ⁱ In fact, to the contrary, politics is not reducible to ontology and there is no straightforward relationship between one's political views and commitments and one's ontological assumptions about how the world is. My sense is that the term 'relative autonomy' neatly captures what is at stake in this complex interrelationship, where this takes the form of a strong mutual imbrication between ontology and politics, but where this is not a relationship of straightforward necessity and where these different registers are not simply reducible to each other.¹⁵

As evidence for this relative autonomy of politics from ontology, we can highlight how it is possible to get different kinds of political analyses from those who share a basic set of ontological assumptions. In this respect, we might note the traditions of both left and right Hegelianism, or that Heidegger's association with Nazism did not stop many French leftists intellectuals appropriating core elements of his thought, or, as the saying goes, that there are as many different forms of Marxism and there are Marxists. More recently, we could cite the heated exchanges between Laclau and Žižek, who share a common commitment to Lacanian psychoanalysis but who have disagreed strongly about their respective political viewpoints (Laclau, 2006; Žižek, 2006). Laclau stressed a Gramscian inspired politics, with an emphasis on the role of the new social movements and the need to build a collective hegemony, whereas Žižek has sought to retain a conventional Marxist account of the priority of class struggle, and to revive a Leninist story about the need to seize political power (Laclau, 1996, 43; Žižek, 1999, 236; 2002). Similarly, we might note the way in which Mouffe has invoked Schmitt's conception of 'the political' in the service of a broadly left/pluralist form of politics, which is clearly distinct from Schmitt's own brand of neo-conservatism. These examples demonstrate how it is possible to derive different political analyses and commitments from a given ontological horizon, and by way of conclusion I stress that it must also be possible to establish common political alliances and agendas between those who disagree about questions of ontology.

Conclusion

Clearly one does not fully choose one's ontological horizon. Nevertheless, I think we do retain greater choice with respect to our political opinions and priorities, and, in my view, the future direction of poststructuralism would be best served by an explicit shift towards a more concrete focus on forms of power and domination, as well as an analysis of the conditions of freedom and emancipation. I recognise that these points of emphasis reflect a particular set of assumptions about the nature of 'the political', and these suppositions are contestable. However, my contention is that this emphasis on politics as power and domination remains crucially important in the context of neo-liberalism. Indeed, this is an area where, I think, the insights of poststructuralism - with its stress on contingency, relationality, and temporal dislocation - can be particularly fruitful. This is because the forms of power that we face today are increasingly complex and cannot be properly explained by approaches that reduce domination to single explanation (e.g. Marxism), nor by those who take a methodically individualist approach (e.g. the neo-republican account of domination put forward by Philip Pettit). By way of contrast, if those associated with poststructuralism (broadly defined) could begin to talk a little less about questions of ontology, and build instead common political objectives and frameworks of analysis across different ontological traditions, then our understanding of the operations of power in the current system of global capitalism might well be significantly advanced. Moreover, there is a degree of urgency here, because the current preoccupation with ontology (at the expense of a more concrete analysis of power and domination) is, in the end, to give into the philosopher's impulse, i.e. to merely interpret the world, when the point is to change it through political critique and activism.

¹⁵ Here my thoughts resonate with Bruno Bosteels, who is similarly critical of the preoccupation with ontology characteristic of a great deal of contemporary continental thought, and who likewise maintains that 'there can be no determinate politics...that would simply derive from ontology' (Bosteels, 2011, 43).

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