The Post-Political and Its Discontents
Spaces of Depoliticisation, Spectres of Radical Politics

EDITED BY JAPHY WILSON AND ERIK SWYNGEDOUW
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For Tim, in return for your Little Red Book
For Arno, Nikolaas, and Eva: the world is yours to make

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Western democracies are only the political facade of economic power. A facade with colours, banners, and endless debates about sacrosanct democracy. We live in an era where we can discuss everything. With one exception: Democracy. She is there, an acquired dogma. Don’t touch, like a museum display. Elections have become an absurd comedy, shameful, in which the participation of the citizen is very weak, and governments represent the political commissionaires of economic power. There isn’t democracy, only the appearance of democracy. We live in a simulation. If we want real democracy, we will have to create it ourselves.

José Saramago (2006)

In *Seeing*, the final installment of his magisterial urban trilogy, José Saramago offers an incisive dissection of our current political predicament. A few years after a strange episode of collective blindness, city administrators are preparing for a general election. The great day for the democratic festival is a miserably rainy Sunday, and once all the ballots are counted, it turns out that a large percentage of people have spoiled their votes. The city elites of the Party of the Left, the Party of the Middle, and the Party of the Right are disquieted, if not alarmed. Something must have gone wrong, these surmise, probably the bad weather . . . A week later, the elections are repeated. This time the weather is better, but the electoral outcome is even worse: 83 per cent of the citizens vote blank. What Saramago calls ‘the simple right not to follow any consensually established opinion’ deeply troubles the city government. One minister refers to it as a conspiracy against the democratic system itself. In its desperate attempt to understand what is going on, and to root out what must be an organised subversion against the sacrosanct democratic principle, the government declares ‘a state of emergency’, unleashing all manner of repressive tactics to uncover the masterminding source
of the anti-democratic plot. But none can be found. In a final desper-
ate attempt to make the city and its citizens come to their senses, the
government decides to decamp to another place, leaving the residents
to their own devices and anticipating a descent into anarchic cata-
strophe. However, nothing of the sort happens. Everyone goes about
his or her daily life, and the city continues as normal.

In this allegory, first published in 2004, Saramago ruthlessly sati-
rises the disaffection of a growing number of people with the insti-
tuted rituals of representative democracy. Thousands of passive
rebels refuse to do what is expected of them. They reject the ballot
box, and just go on with life as if nothing has happened. With chilling
precision, Saramago diagnoses the deadlock of contemporary ‘demo-
ocratic’ governance. We live in times both haunted and paradoxical.
Instituted representational democracy is more widespread than ever;
identitarian concerns and all manner of issues and problems are
made visible and politicised; ‘participatory’ and ‘inclusive’ forms of
governance are nurtured and fostered on a range of geographical
scales; and lifestyle preferences, the unsustainable re-engineering of
our climate, the sexual escapades of the former IMF chairman, the
heroic resistances of indigenous peoples, fracking, the repression
of gay people in Russia, the garbage left on the sidewalk, the plight
of the whale, the governments’ austerity agendas to get the economy
out of the doldrums – all these issues and an infinity of others are
politicised in certain ways. That is, they are discussed, dissected,
evaluated, raised as issues of public concern and debated at length in
a variety of public and political arenas. Everything, so it seems, can
be aired, made visible, discussed, and rendered contentious.

In short, democracy as the theatre of and for the pluralistic and
disputed consideration of matters of public concern would appear to
be triumphant. Political elites, irrespective of their particular party
allegiance, do not tire of pointing out the great strides that demo-
ocratic civic life has made. We are told that the great battle of the
twentieth century between totalitarianism and democracy has been
finally and decisively concluded in favour of the latter. The history
of humanity, marked by heroic-tragic ideological battles between
opposing visions of what constitutes a ‘good’ society, has suppos-
edly come to an end. Democracy is now firmly and consensually
established as the uncontested and rarely examined ideal of institu-
tionalised political life. There are of course still ongoing rearguard
archaic ideological battles on the geographical and political margins
of the civilised world, waged by those who have not yet understood
the lie of the land and the new horizon of history. When the need
arises, they are corralled by any means necessary into consensual
participation in the new global democratic order (although not
always effectively, as the Afghanistan and Iraq disasters testify). In contrast, we – the West and its allies – will now forever live happily in the complacent knowledge that democracy has been finetuned to assure the efficient management of a liberal and pluralist society under the uncontested aegis of a naturalised market-based configuration of the production and distribution of a cornucopia of goods and services. Any remaining problems and issues will be dealt with in the appropriate manner, through consensual forms of technocratic negotiation.

This is supposed to be the final realisation of the liberal idyll. An untroubled, undivided, cohesive and common-sense society in which everyone knows his or her place and performs his or her duties in their own (and hence in everyone else’s) interests, organised through a diversity of institutionalised forms of representative government, aided and supported by participatory governance arrangements for all sorts of recognised problems, issues and matters of public concern. Yet political apathy for mainstream parties and politics, and for the ritualised choreographies of representative electoral procedures, is at an all-time high. Indeed, as soon as the practices of government were reduced to the bio-political management of the ‘happiness’ of the population and the neoliberal organisation of the transformation of nature and the appropriation and distribution of its associated wealth, new spectres of the political appeared on the horizon. Insurrectional and incipiently democratising movements and mobilisations exploded in 2011, and continue to smoulder and flare: Syntagma Square, Puerta del Sol, Zuccotti Park, Paternoster Square, Taksim Square, Tahrir Square, Sao Paulo, Oakland, Montreal . . . These are just a few of the more evocative names that have become associated with emergent new forms of politicisation. Assembled under the generic banner ‘Real Democracy Now!’ the gathered insurgents have expressed an extraordinary antagonism to the instituted – and often formally democratic – forms of governing, and have staged, performed and choreographed new configurations of the democratic. While often articulated around an emblematic quelling point (a threatened park, devastating austerity measures, the public bailout of irresponsible financial institutions, rising tuition fees, a price hike in public transport, and the like), these movements quickly universalised their claims to embrace a desire for a fully-fledged transformation of the political structuring of life, against the exclusive, oligarchic, and consensual governance of an alliance of professional economic, political and technocratic elites determined to defend the neoliberal order by any means necessary.

It is precisely this parallax gap that sets the contours and contents of this book.
From one vantage point – usually nurtured by those who seek to maintain things as they are – democracy is alive and kicking. From the other perspective, the democratic functioning of the political terrain has been eroded to such an extent that a radical re-ordering and re-configuration of the practices of ‘governing by the people for the people’ is urgently required. The latter position demands a dramatic transformation of the depoliticising practices that have marked the past few decades, and that have survived the global economic crisis in the perverted form of a ‘zombie neoliberalism’ (Peck 2010), which staggers blindly forward in the absence of its once-inspiring master discourses. Its continuity is ensured by a range of political elites from both Right and Left, and is legitimised by their continuous election to power – a power that has become more and more enfeebled as they delegate social and political choices to those demanded, staged, figured and ‘imposed’ by the socially disembodied ‘hidden hand of the market’.

Consider, for example, the radical austerity measures pursued by those who have no choice (like the Greek, Portuguese, Irish or Spanish governments) and by those who do (like the British, American, Dutch and Danish regimes). These measures are wholly inoperative in macro-economic terms, but are brutally effective in terms of redrawing class configurations. ‘Austerity’ is a class war fought by experts, consultants, economists and other elite bureaucrats and policy-makers, in close consultation with business elites and allegedly abstract and disembodied ‘financial markets’. This consensualised framing of the natural order of the social stands in stark contrast to the politicising mobilisations of the past few years. The growing unrest of a large part of ‘the people’ has rattled the elites assembled in Davos and elsewhere, and the uprisings against austerity were labelled ‘seeds of dystopia’ by the World Economic Forum in its 2012 World Risk Report:

Two dominant issues of concern emerged from the Arab Spring, the ‘Occupy’ movements worldwide and recent similar incidents of civil discontent: the growing frustration among citizens with the political and economic establishment, and the rapid public mobilization enabled by greater technological connectivity. A macro and longer-term interpretation of these events highlights the need to improve the management of global economic and demographic transformations that stand to increasingly define global social trends in the decade to come . . . A society that continues to sow the seeds of dystopia – by failing to manage ageing populations, youth unemployment, rising inequalities and fiscal imbalances – can expect greater social unrest and instability in the years to come. (World Economic Forum 2012: 16)
What is the relationship between these seeds of dystopia and the political desert in which they stubbornly take root? Already in the early 1990s, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy (1997) provided an exquisitely dialectical exploration of what they labelled ‘the retreat of the political’, understood as both the disappearance and the re-treating of the political in theoretical musings as well as modes of appearance. A proliferating body of thought has since begun to decipher, both theoretically and empirically, the dynamics of depoliticisation, and the contours and characteristics of the alleged ‘disappearance of the political’. According to this literature, contemporary forms of depoliticisation are characterised by the erosion of democracy and the weakening of the public sphere, as a consensual mode of governance has colonised, if not sutured, political space. In the process, agnostic political disagreement has been replaced by an ultra-politics of ethnicised and violent disavowal on the one hand, and the exclusion and containment of those who pursue a different political-economic model on the other. These extremes are placed outside the post-democratic inclusion of different opinions on anything imaginable in stakeholder arrangements of impotent participation and ‘good governance’, which ensure that the framework of debate and decision-making does not question or disrupt the existing state of the neoliberal political-economic configuration. This process is generally referred to as one of post-politicisation, institutionally configured through modes of post-democratic governance.

This book explores the contours of post-politicisation, and proposes a series of theoretical approaches to excavating the dynamics through which post-political modes of governing come into being. In addition, the book identifies a range of new forms of politicisation, which mark the present geopolitical landscape in ways that potentially open up an incipient ‘return of the political’. In the remainder of this introductory chapter, we provide some conceptual clarifications regarding the nature of post-politics. We then explore the philosophical, terminological and political differences between some of the key thinkers of post-politics, focusing on the theorists whose work most consistently informs the contributions to this book: Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Rancière, and Slavoj Žižek. We conclude with an overview of the book as a whole.

**The meaning of post-politics**

During times of decline and reaction in which an actual transformation of the prevailing political order seems ever more unlikely, language often
comes to the rescue so as to allow one to revitalize, think anew, or at the very least re-delimit the concepts of ‘politics’ or ‘the political’ with the simple yet thought-provoking addition of a prefix. (Bosteels 2011: 76)

In recent years, an emergent literature across the social sciences has conceptualised contemporary processes of depoliticisation in terms of ‘post-politics’, ‘post-democracy’, and ‘the post-political’ (see for example Allmendinger and Haughton 2011; Catney and Doyle 2011; Clarke and Cochrane 2013; Crouch 2004; Diken 2009; Fuller 2012; Garsten and Jacobsson 2007; Goeminne 2012; Hilding-Rydevik, Hakansson and Isaksson 2011; Kythreotis 2012; Mouffe 2005; Oosterlynk and Swyngedouw 2010; Pares 2011; Raco and Lin 2012; Rancière 1999; Rorty 2004; Schlembach, Lear and Bowman 2012; Swyngedouw 2007, 2009, 2010, 2011; Vergopoulos 2001; Williams and Booth 2013; Wilson 2013; Žižek 1999). The precise meaning of these terms is highly contested. Broadly speaking, however, they all refer to a situation in which the political – understood as a space of contestation and agonistic engagement – is increasingly colonised by politics – understood as technocratic mechanisms and consensual procedures that operate within an unquestioned framework of representative democracy, free market economics, and cosmopolitan liberalism. In post-politics, political contradictions are reduced to policy problems to be managed by experts and legitimated through participatory processes in which the scope of possible outcomes is narrowly defined in advance. ‘The people’ – as a potentially disruptive political collective – is replaced by the population – the aggregated object of opinion polls, surveillance, and bio-political optimisation. Citizens become consumers, and elections are framed as just another ‘choice’, in which individuals privately select their preferred managers of the conditions of economic necessity. Under these circumstances, as Rancière observes,

the disenchanted opinion spreads that there isn’t much to deliberate and that decisions make themselves, the work proper to politics simply involving an opportune adaptability in terms of the demands of the world marketplace and the equitable distribution of the profits and costs of this adaptability. (Rancière 1999: viii)

The contributions to this volume seek to make sense of this situation, exploring the specific mechanisms through which the post-political is constituted, and searching for the political possibilities that continue to haunt the present. They engage directly with the political theory underpinning the literature on post-politics, seeking variously to affirm, challenge, and extend the parameters of this
Theoretical approach, through the detailed empirical analysis of contemporary processes of post-politicisation. In the literature on post-politics, there is a great deal of confusion and divergence over the precise meaning of the term. Here we provide a theoretical introduction to post-politics, post-democracy, and the post-political, in preparation for the much more involved debates that form the substance of this book.

The post-political can be thought of as what Jacques Lacan would call a Borromean knot – a set of densely intertwined registers that constitute what we call ‘reality’. Lacan named these registers the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary. In Lacanian terms, the post-political can be understood as a Borromean knot comprised of the Imaginary – the ideology of the ‘end of history’ according to which the great ideological battles of the past have all been settled; the Symbolic – the set of institutional mechanisms and practices through which politics is reduced to the consensual management of economic necessity; and the Real – the ontological displacement or erasure of ‘the political difference’ between the established institutional arrangements of a given social order, and the establishment of that social order on an always absent ground.

In ideological (or Imaginary) terms, the post-political era began with Francis Fukuyama’s notorious proclamation of ‘the end of history’, according to which the fall of the Berlin Wall marked the conclusion of the long historical struggle between competing ideologies. Liberal democracy and the market economy had proved themselves to be the best possible basis for social organisation, and all that remained was for the backward parts of the world to catch up with the West (Fukayama 1992). The end of history was also declared to be ‘the end of ideology’ and even ‘the end of politics’, ‘whereby both senses of “end”, as a telos fulfilling itself and as an eliminating gesture, come to coincide exactly’ (Rancière 1999: 75). Utopia, in short, was a thing of the past:

If we are to believe the discourse of the wise, our fin de siècle is the finally conquered age of realism. We have buried Marxism and swept aside all utopias. We have even buried the thing that made them possible: the belief that time carried a meaning and a promise . . . The ‘end of history’ is the end of an era in which we believed in ‘history’, in time marching towards a goal, towards the manifestation of a truth or the accomplishment of an emancipation . . . The thinkers who have made it their speciality to remind us without respite of the [twentieth] century’s horrors also explain to us relentlessly that they all stem from one fundamental crime. The crime is to have believed that history had a meaning and that it fell to the world’s peoples to realize it. (Rancière 2010a: 8)
Of course, the end of utopia is itself utopian, and the end of ideology is itself ideological. Yet while it is easy to deride the end of history thesis as the most transparent of ideological contrivances, it contains an important truth. In Fredric Jameson’s words, the political horizon of our times is defined by the fact that ‘It is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism’ (Jameson 2003: 73). The defeat of actually existing communism signified a crisis of the political imaginary of the Left, from which it has yet to recover. As Žižek has observed, ‘today’s predominant form of ideological “closure” takes the precise form of a mental block which prevents us from imagining a fundamental social change, in the interests of a “realistic” and “mature” attitude’ (Žižek 2000: 324). In recent years, this mental block has manifested itself in the inability of the Left to mount a meaningful and sustained challenge to neoliberalism in the context of the greatest crisis of global capitalism since the Great Depression (Hall, Massey and Rustin 2013). Meanwhile, politicians, business leaders, and liberal intellectuals have persisted in their insistence that, faced with the unprecedented breakdown of the ‘free market’ system, there is still no alternative. As banks are bailed out with public money and the welfare state is dismantled in the name of austerity, electorates are told that ‘We’re all in this together’, and are called upon to unite in support of the expert managers of the global economy. An editorial in The Economist explains the situation as follows:

In the short term, defending capitalism means, paradoxically, state intervention. There is a justifiable sense of outrage amongst voters . . . that $2.5 trillion of taxpayers’ money now has to be spent on a highly rewarded industry. But the global bail-out is pragmatic, not ideological. When Francois Mitterand nationalised France’s banks in 1981 he did so because he thought the state would run them better. This time governments are buying banks (or shares in them) because they believe, rightly, that public capital is needed to keep credit flowing. (The Economist 2008, emphasis added)

The ‘pragmatic’ combination of socialism for the rich and austerity for the poor has been accompanied by the continuing evisceration of political contestation from the institutional (or Symbolic) mechanisms of the global economy. In institutional terms, post-politics is defined by the reduction of the political to the economic – the creation of a ‘welcoming business environment’, which inspires ‘investor confidence’, and provides the economic guarantees deemed necessary for ‘strong and stable markets’. This subordination is not purely ideological, but is embodied in concrete institutional forms, including the privatisation of central banks; the imposition of austerity on the
instruction of the International Monetary Fund; the subordination of national legislation to the juridical regimes of the World Trade Organization and other multilateral organisations; the translation of corporate agendas into public policy through close formal and informal cooperation with business networks; and the delegation of numerous decision-making powers to non-state and quasi-state institutional forms (Crouch 2004; Brand 2005; Swyngedouw 2005). The economy is therefore increasingly insulated from even the most limited forms of democratic accountability, even as the state increasingly legitimises itself in terms of its capacity for ‘pragmatic’ and ‘responsible’ economic management:

The legitimacy of state power is thereby reinforced by the very affirmation of its own impotence, of its lack of choice faced with the world-wide necessity it is dominated by. The theme of the common will is replaced by that of the lack of personal will, of capacity for autonomous action that is anything more than just management of necessity. From an allegedly defunct Marxism, the supposedly reigning liberalism borrows the theme of objective necessity, identified with the constraints and caprices of the world market. Marx’s once scandalous thesis that governments are simple business agents for international capital is today the obvious fact on which ‘liberals’ and ‘socialists’ agree. The absolute identification of politics with the management of capital is no longer the shameful secret hidden behind the ‘forms’ of democracy; it is the openly declared truth by which our governments acquire legitimacy. (Rancière 1999: 113)

The elision of democracy with the dictates of capital has only been further consolidated by the ongoing fallout from the global economic crisis. Elected leaders slavishly follow the orders of banks, bond markets, and multilateral institutions. In the cases of Greece and Italy, they have even been deposed on the instruction of these institutions, and replaced by ‘non-ideological’ technocrats (Rachman 2011). The political novelty of this scenario has been noted in the pages of the Financial Times:

European democracy has a new organising assumption. Citizens may still change their leaders from time to time, but only on the clear understanding that elections do not herald a change of direction. Left or right, inside or outside the euro, ruling elites are worshipping at the altar of austerity. Governments are permitted a tilt here, or a shading there. None dares challenge the catechism of fiscal rectitude. (Stephens 2012)

The situation is little different elsewhere. Around the world, notwithstanding the protests that have flared up around Occupy, the
Indignados, and the so-called Arab Spring, the global economic crisis has been mobilised not to re-politicise the economy, but to further advance its depoliticisation. We now live in a permanent state of economic, environmental and social emergency, in which our societies must no longer be concerned with the fight for freedom and equality . . . but with the struggle for survival, which is prey to the slightest blunder. The smallest wage rise, the smallest [fluctuation] in interest rates, the slightest unforeseen market reaction is, in fact, enough to disrupt the acrobatic balance on which our societies rest and plunge the entire planet into chaos. (Rancière 2010a: 18)

This image of a society poised above the abyss invokes the ontological (or Real) dimension of the post-political. The key thinkers of the post-political share a post-foundational ontology, according to which there is no essential ground to any social order. In contrast to political philosophies that ground society in a state of nature, a primordial hierarchy, or an economic base, post-foundational theorists begin from the position that all social orders are profoundly contingent, and structured to conceal their own absent ground. Just as Heidegger distinguished between the ontic and the ontological, and Lacan delineated reality from the Real, so these theorists distinguish between politics and the political (Bosteels 2011: 45–9). ‘The political difference’ (Marchart 2007) is not between politics and other social spheres, such as civil society or the economy, but between politics as the contingent and incomplete attempt to ground a particular set of power relations on an ultimately absent foundation, and the political as the ineradicable presence of this absence itself, which continually undermines the social orders constructed upon it, and which holds open the possibility of radical change. In Marchart’s phrase, ‘Not “everything is political”, but the absent ground/abyss of everything is the political’ (Marchart 2007: 169).

This ontological dimension is crucial to the meaning of post-politics. Indeed, we would suggest that many of the criticisms and limitations of the literature on post-politics result from a failure to adequately grasp the significance of this dimension. Orthodox Marxists, for example, accuse the theorists of post-politics of fetishising the political as a separate sphere independent of economic processes (see for example Walker 2012). But the distinction that is being drawn is not between politics and the economy, but between politics-as-social order and the political as the ontological void beneath that order – an order that includes the entirety of the ‘political economy’ with which orthodox Marxists concern themselves.

The post-political literature is also accused of conspiring in the
processes of post-politicisation that it claims to critique, by paint-
ing a picture of a closed world in which transformative action has
become impossible (see for example Darling 2013). This is indeed
the case for some of the secondary literature, but only to the extent
that it strips the theory of its ontological dimension, on the assump-
tion that ‘Worrying too much about the ontological status of politics
may risk causing us to overlook its everydayness’ (Gill, Johnstone
and Williams 2012). It is precisely the Real dimension of the political
which ensures the impossibility of the closure of politics, and which
implies an understanding of the post-political, not as a realised total-
ity, but as an anxiety-ridden and necessarily impossible attempt to
erase ‘the ontological instance of antagonism’ (Marchart 2007: 161).
If real politics and real democracy can only exist in the gap between
the post-political and the void that it denies, then ‘it is the lack of
understanding of “the political” in its ontological dimension which
is at the origin of our current incapacity to think in a political way’
(Mouffe 2005: 9).

Theoretical mediators: Mouffe, Rancière, Žižek

The key thinkers of post-politics share a post-foundational ontology,
a concern with the evacuation of the political, and a commitment
to radical democratisation and egalitarian emancipation. However,
their conceptualisations of post-politics, democracy, and the politi-
cal differ in significant respects, and a basic grasp of these differences
is essential for an understanding of the debates played out in this
volume. Here we will limit ourselves to a schematic presentation of
their positions. We will begin by summarising their understandings
of post-politics and the political difference, before briefly considering
their positions on the nature and possibility of radical politics today.

For Chantal Mouffe, the political is ‘the dimension of antagonism
... constitutive of human societies’, while politics is ‘the set of prac-
tices through which an order is created’ (Mouffe 2005: 9). Mouffe
equates ‘politics’ with the contingent construction of hegemony, and
‘the political’ with a we/they antagonism that she claims is the neces-
sary condition of all political identities (Mouffe 2005: 16–17). The
political subverts any hegemonic formation, ‘destroying its ambition
to constitute a full presence ... as an objective reality’ (Laclau
and Mouffe 1985: 127). Democracy, for Mouffe, is an institutional
arrangement in which the antagonistic confrontation between
enemies is sublimated into the agonistic engagement of adversaries
(Mouffe 2009: 551). The post-political names a hegemonic order
in which the antagonistic dimension of the political has not been
sublimated, but repressed (Mouffe 2005: 18). The demise of social
democracy, the rise of the Third Way ‘beyond Left and Right’, and
the ‘unchallenged hegemony of neoliberalism’ are all symptomatic of
a state of affairs in which there is no longer any room for agonistic
dispute (Mouffe 2005: 35–63). But because antagonism is inherent
to society, the post-political results not in the end of history, but in
a return of the repressed, in the form of right-wing nationalisms and
religious fundamentalisms, which give expression to the antagonism
that has been eviscerated from the domain of democratic contesta-
is the lack of political channels for challenging the hegemony of
the neoliberal model of globalisation which is at the origin of the
proliferation of discourses and practices of radical negation of the
established order’.

Rancière agrees with Mouffe concerning the structure of the politi-
cal difference, but conceptualises it in terms of a tripartite division
between the political (le politique), politics (la politique), and the
police (la police). For Rancière, the relationship between ‘the politi-
cal’ and ‘the police’ is symmetrical to Mouffe’s distinction between
the political and politics. That is to say, society’s absent ground
is defined as ‘the political’, and the institutions that reproduce a
given social hierarchy are identified as ‘the police’. In contrast to
Mouffe, however, Rancière uses the word ‘politics’ to denote ‘the
meeting ground’ between the political and the police. Furthermore,
for Rancière the absent ground of the social is defined not by antago-
nism, but by equality – the unconditional equality of each and every
one of us as speaking (and hence political) beings (Rancière 1999:
16). The governmental order of the police determines the ‘distribu-
tion of the sensible’ – the systematic organisation and naturalisation
of inequality as common sense. It is structured against the equality
that it conceals, and operates through the exclusion of a part of
society that is given no part in society (Rancière 1999: 21–42; 2001:
Thesis 7).

Democracy, which for Rancière is another word for politics, is
staged whenever a part of those who have no part asserts its presence,
as the embodiment of the universal principle of equality (Rancière
1999: 99–101). Equality is to be understood as neither a utopian
longing nor a sociologically verifiable condition, but is an ontological
given, which is affirmed and given content precisely through its per-
formative staging and enacting. Politics (or democracy) is the staging
of equality that exposes a wrong, and through this, attempts to
inaugurate a new partition of the sensible. Politics therefore always
works on the police. It is the confrontation of the inegalitarian and
oligarchic logic of the police with the logic of inequality.
Rancière uses the concept of ‘post-democracy’ to refer to what Mouffe calls ‘the post-political’. In contrast to Mouffe’s approach, Rancière sees post-democracy as operating not through repression, but through disavowal. In psychoanalytic terms, disavowal denotes a defence mechanism based not on repressing pathological symptoms, but on accounting for them in such a way that their traumatic dimension is diminished. For Rancière, post-democracy involves a specific configuration of three forms of the disavowal of politics, through which the police order seeks to neutralise the political agency of the part of those who have no part. These are: archi-politics – the representation of the community as an organic whole with nothing left over (for example anti-immigrant nationalism); para-politics – the institutionalised competition for places within an established hierarchy (for example representative democracy); and meta-politics – the subordination of politics to a deeper ‘essence’ (for example ‘the market economy’) (Rancière 1999: 61–93). Post-democracy is a specific distribution of the sensible, which synthesises these forms of disavowal under the banner of ‘consensus’. The outcome is the eradication of democracy in the name of democracy itself:

Every politics is democratic in this precise sense: not in the sense of a set of institutions, but in the sense of forms of expression that confront the logic of equality with the logic of police order. It is on this basis that we use the notion of post-democracy . . . to denote the paradox that, in the name of democracy, emphasises the consensual practice of effacing the forms of democratic action . . . It is the disappearance of the mechanisms of appearance, of the dispute opened up by the name ‘people’ and the vacuum of their freedom. It is, in a word, the disappearance of politics. (Rancière 1999: 101–2)

Like Mouffe, Rancière is clear that post-democracy results not in the smooth order of rational consensus, but in the resurgence of identity politics and violent fundamentalisms (Rancière 1999: 124–5). For Rancière, however, this is not an expression of an ineradicable friend/enemy antagonism, but is a fragmented, inarticulate eruption of the demand for equality, which cannot be articulated in universal terms within the post-democratic order (Rancière 1999: 118–19).

Žižek follows Rancière in framing the political difference in terms of politics and the police. Drawing on Lacan, however, Žižek claims that Rancière ‘fetishizes the order of police’, by failing to take into account the violence on which it is founded, and the obscene enjoyment of power, which is the underside of its meticulous distributions of the sensible (Žižek 1999: 187, 282). Žižek also differs from Mouffe, to the extent that he identifies a historically specific form of
class struggle, rather than a transhistorical antagonism, as the void that prevents the totalisation of society. For Žižek, class is to be understood not in sociological terms, but as a rupture in the fabric of capitalist society that perpetually undermines any attempt at unity or coherence (Žižek 1991: 100). It is this rupture that is sutured by contemporary modalities of depoliticisation.

In his account of depoliticisation, Žižek adopts Rancière’s three forms of disavowal, but adds a fourth, which he calls ‘ultra-politics’ (Žižek 1999: 220–35). Ultra-politics, as embodied in the so-called ‘War on Terror’, establishes an absolute distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’, denying any shared symbolic space in which to engage on terms other than violence. Žižek augments these four forms of disavowal with his concept of ‘post-politics’. Whereas for Mouffe the post-political is defined by repression, and for Rancière post-democracy is a specific form of disavowal, Žižek distinguishes post-politics from other forms of depoliticisation on the basis that it operates not through repression or disavowal but through foreclosure – the total erasure of the political from the Symbolic. The outcome of foreclosure is not ‘a truncated symbolic order’, but a seemingly complete symbolic order, which ‘lacks the inscription of its lack’ (Žižek 2008: xii). Foreclosure, it should be noted, is the form of denegation peculiar to psychosis. It is this shift from disavowal to foreclosure – from a neurotic to a psychotic ideological structure – which defines post-politics as a modality of depoliticisation, and which explains the violence that erupts within it:

Today, however, we are dealing with another form of the denegation of the political, postmodern post-politics, which no longer merely represses the political, trying to contain and pacify the ‘returns of the repressed’, but much more effectively ‘forecloses’ it . . . Post-politics emphasises the need to leave old ideological divisions behind and confront new issues, armed with the necessary expert knowledge and free deliberation that takes people’s concrete needs and demands into account . . . [However,] the political (the space of litigation in which the excluded can protest the wrong/injustice done to them) foreclosed from the Symbolic returns in the Real . . . in thoroughly ‘irrational’ excessive outbursts of violence . . . These violent passages à l’acte bear witness to some underlying antagonism that can no longer be formulated in properly political terms. (Žižek 1999: 236–7, 243)

To summarise the respective positions of Mouffe, Rancière, and Žižek, we can say that Mouffe is concerned with the post-political as the repression of antagonism, Rancière with post-democracy as the disavowal of equality, and Žižek with post-politics as the foreclosure
of class struggle. These divergent understandings of the nature of post-politics imply very different political projects. For Mouffe, the post-political evisceration of agonistic dispute from the public sphere threatens an escalation of violent antagonisms, and must be challenged by a reanimation of social democracy, a repoliticisation of the division between Left and Right, and a radical democracy of agonistic pluralism (Mouffe 2005: 21–3, 119). She is opposed to ‘the traditional conception of revolutionary politics’, and is focused not on the overthrow of liberal democracy, but on ensuring that liberal democracy realises its unfulfilled potential (Mouffe 2005: 51–3).

Žižek is highly critical of this form of ‘radical democracy’, arguing that it participates in the foreclosure of class struggle by limiting itself to ‘palliative damage-control measures within the global capitalist framework’ (Žižek 2000: 321). In her call for a modification of the police order designed to prevent the emergence of antagonism, Mouffe also differs from Rancière, who is committed to the antagonistic disruption of the police order by the staging of equality by those excluded from it. For Žižek and Rancière, as we have seen, the ontological dimension of the political difference is not structured by antagonism in the abstract, but by class struggle and equality respectively. They affirm the political potential of this dimension, and therefore ground their politics in the antagonistic moment that Mouffe seeks to avoid. Rancière defines this as the moment of ‘dissensus: the putting of two worlds in one and the same world’, in which a part of those who have no part presents itself as a singular embodiment of universality (Rancière 2010b: 69). For Žižek, the political moment is defined by an ‘Act’. Against the post-political reduction of possibility to reality, an Act realises the impossible, by changing ‘the very parameters of what is considered possible in the existing constellation’ (Žižek 1999: 237).

According to Rancière, the political moment ‘consists above all in the act of revoking the law of birth and wealth; in affirming the pure contingency whereby individuals come to find themselves in this or that place; in the attempt to build a common world on the basis of that sole contingency’ (Rancière 2010a: 6). Žižek would endorse the egalitarian spirit of this statement, but has criticised Rancière for his singular commitment to the spontaneous uprisings of the oppressed, which he sees as politically ineffective (Žižek 1999: 281). For Žižek, ‘because the depoliticized economy is the “fundamental fantasy” of postmodern politics, a properly political act would necessarily entail the repoliticization of the economy’ (Žižek 1999: 432). In collaboration with Alain Badiou, Žižek has sought to rehabilitate ‘the idea of communism’ (Badiou 2010; Douzinas and Žižek 2010; Žižek 2013), insisting that ‘[t]he only true question today is . . . does today’s
global capitalism contain antagonisms powerful enough to prevent its indefinite reproduction?’ (Žižek 2010: 212).

Rancière, however, is strictly opposed to any return to the metapolitics of orthodox Marxism, which he accuses of subordinating politics to economic and historical laws, and of constructing new forms of inequality on the basis of claims to exclusive knowledge of these laws (Rancière 1999: 81–91). Such laws do not exist for Rancière, and while an anti-capitalist politics is necessary in his opinion, it cannot be derived from the internal dynamics of the capitalist system, but ‘must be radically heterogeneous to the logic of capitalism and the materiality of the capitalist world’ (Rancière 2010b: 82–3). For Rancière, communism is just another name for democracy, and ‘Being ... communists means being thinkers and actors of the unconditional equality of anybody and everybody’ (Rancière 2010b: 82). We return to the meaning of communism in the Conclusion of this book, in which we also engage with the work of Alain Badiou, as a fourth important thinker of the political.

The post-political and its discontents

The contributions to this book build on the theoretical approaches sketched here, through the exploration of specific sites of post-politicisation. The aim throughout is threefold. First, to critically engage with the theoretical literature on the post-political, mobilising it as a tool of critique, and developing it in relation to the complexities of actually existing processes of depoliticisation. Second, to identify the discourses and practices through which the post-political is constructed in diverse spheres of reality, in order to reveal the contingency, fragility, and incompleteness of post-politics, as well as exposing its imaginaries, its strategies, and its effects. Third, to search for the spectres of radical politics that continue to haunt the post-political world, exploring their emancipatory potentialities, and confronting their political limitations.

There is no consensus among the contributions here. Indeed, the book can be read as an irruption of dissensus, not only against the post-political police order, but also against any attempt to police the conceptual terrain of its critique. Many of our contributors are convinced of the critical value of the theoretical literature on post-politics, and seek to put it to use, identifying its tensions and weaknesses, while modifying and extending it in relation to a complex and ever-changing reality. But some are highly critical of this literature, drawing on specific cases of depoliticisation and repoliticisation to argue that the conceptual apparatus of post-politics is inadequate to
the critical analysis of our political predicament. This is as it should be. After all, what could be more absurd than a critique of post-politics in which everyone agreed?

The book is divided into two parts. Part I explores contemporary spaces of depoliticisation, while Part II focuses on the return of the political. Part I begins with a triptych of cases of the post-political in the fields of planning, ecology, and development. Mike Raco provides a fine-grained analysis of planning reform and public-private partnerships in the UK, as an example of broader processes of post-politicisation, which operate through ‘isolating and contractualising key dimensions of decision-making and removing them from the terrain of formal politics’. Larry Reynolds and Bronislaw Szersynski then discuss the post-politics of agricultural biotechnology. They trace a dialectic of depoliticisation and repoliticisation through which technology and science have been mobilised in the contested regulation of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in the European Union. In her chapter, Sangeeta Kamat argues that post-politics is not restricted to ‘the West’, but is the dominant political modality of contemporary international development. Kamat critiques the ways in which seemingly democratising discourses of empowerment, inclusion and participation are mobilised within the new development architecture. Drawing on research in Andhra Pradesh, India, she shows how the formally democratic practices of women’s self-help groups have failed to challenge entrenched relations of domination.

The next four chapters engage more critically with the post-political approach, questioning its political limitations and expanding its theoretical parameters. Nicolas Van Puymbroeck and Stijn Oosterlynck criticise the literature on post-politics for applying ‘the notion of the “post-political condition” as a one-size-fits-all label to describe (rather than explain) currently dominant political forms associated with global capitalism and the neoliberal order’. Drawing on the work of Rancière, Puymbroeck and Oosterlynck develop a more nuanced conceptual approach, which they put to work in an exploration of the relationship between liberal multiculturalism and racist ultra-politics. Japhy Wilson then assesses the emergent development paradigm of ‘philanthrocapitalism’. Building on Žižek’s work on *jouissance*, Wilson uses the case of philanthrocapitalism to argue that the post-political operates not only through discursive and institutional mechanisms, but also through the mobilisation of disavowed forms of enjoyment. In his chapter, Bülent Diken draws on Žižek, Agamben, Badiou, and Marx, in an exploration of the relationship between post-politics, religion, and violence. Diken conceptualises post-politics as a form of ‘economic theology’, and argues
that ‘despite seeking to expel violence from its system of values at a surface level, post-politics itself produces a paradoxical, ecstatic violence’. The section concludes with Ingolfur Blühdorn’s stark assessment of the depoliticisation of contemporary environmental governance, which he conceptualises as a ‘technocratic politics of unsustainability’. Blühdorn is highly critical of the literature on post-politics, arguing that it indulges in a romantic attachment to radical political transformation, which prevents the Left from confronting the true gravity of the ecological crisis.

Part II begins with Erik Swyngedouw’s account of the proliferation of insurgencies across the world’s major cities since 2011. Swyngedouw argues that the spectres of the political immanent in these rebellions pose a series of theoretical and practical questions that require urgent attention. His contribution considers what to think and do now. Is there further thought and practice possible after the squares have been cleared, the tents have been broken up, the energies have been dissipated, and everyday life has resumed its routine practices? Where and how can fidelity to the emancipatory Idea immanent in these insurrectional events be nurtured and sustained? In her chapter, Wendy Larner takes issue with Swyngedouw, and with the post-political approach in general. Larner argues that this approach is politically disempowering, to the extent that it denies the political status of less explosive forms of contestation. Drawing on her work with a ‘radical social enterprise’ in the city of Bristol in the UK, Larner claims that ‘it is out of such incomplete, paradoxical, and compromised experiments . . . that new political formations will emerge’. Shifting from the micro-politics of grassroots urban renewal to the geopolitical domain of global governance, Hans-Martin Jaeger makes a similar argument for the political status of a seemingly limited project. Through a critical engagement with the work of Mouffe, Rancière, and Foucault, Jaeger contrasts two visions of world order – the ‘cosmopolitan’ project of the EU and the ‘multipolarity’ of the ‘BRICS’ (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). He argues that despite being integral to the global police order, the BRICS are opening a space of dissensus within it, by calling international inequalities into question.

The final four chapters return to the wave of protests and uprisings that swept across the world in 2011. In his contribution, Alex Loftus asks what the literature on post-politics can contribute to our understanding of these events. Building on Bosteels’ critique of the ‘speculative leftism’ of post-foundational theory, Loftus challenges Laclau and Mouffe’s appropriation of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, arguing that Gramsci’s original Marxist project offers a more fruitful basis for radical critique. Maria Kaika and Lazaros
Karaliotas then seek to demonstrate the critical utility of the post-politics literature, though an ethnographic analysis of anti-austerity protests in Syntagma Square in Athens. Drawing primarily on Rancière, they show how the protests became divided, the ‘upper square’ degenerating into nationalist populism, while the ‘collective self-management of the “lower square” conveyed valuable new elements for democratic politics’. In her analysis of anti-austerity protests around the world, Jodi Dean notes the tendency of protesters to frame their struggles in post-political terms, suggesting that post-politics is primarily a condition, not of the Right, but of the Left, and that ‘the real political problem today is that the left accepts capitalism.’ In a detailed critique of the Occupy Wall Street protests in New York’s Zucotti Park, Dean claims that their concern with direct democracy prevented the realisation of their communist potential. In the final chapter, Andy Merrifield provides a freewheeling overview of the possibilities for militant politics in our time. Comparing the post-political condition to Kafka’s The Castle, Merrifield argues that attempts to either storm or escape the castle are equally futile, and that radical politics must retain a fidelity to the conviction that ‘underneath everything we see, everything we know, even beyond what we can currently imagine, there lies another reality, one uniting all hitherto ununited aspects of reality, all hitherto ununited social movements.’ In the Conclusion, we reflect on the lessons to be drawn concerning the nature of our political predicament, in which radical change has never seemed less possible, yet has never been more necessary.

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