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Towards a Theory of Synagonism*

NATHALIE KARAGIANNIS
Sociology, University of Sussex
and
PETER WAGNER
Sociology, European University Institute

Surpassing belief, the device and
Cunning that Man has attained,
And it bringeth him now to evil, now to good.
If he observe Law, and tread
The righteous path God ordained,
*Honoured is he [*hypsipolis*]; dishonoured [*apolis*], the man whose reckless heart*
Shall make him join hands with sin:
May I not think like him
Nor may such an impious man
Dwell in my house

Sophocles, *Antigone*

IN the above stasimon of the chorus in Sophocles' *Antigone*, a clear line is drawn between those who act according to the civic *and* religious laws and those who do not. The chorus, composed of old men, does not distinguish between those who follow the city's rules and those who follow the 'righteous path' of God, but puts them on the same side of elevation in the *polis*, an honourable position in the city, and nobility. On the opposite side are those who espouse that which lacks nobility, because of their 'reckless heart' or 'daring'. Antigone, the woman who, despite the rules expressed by the ruler of the city, decides to bury her brother by blood – an enemy of the city in a recent conflict – acts according to her own understanding of religious and blood ties. Creon, the man opposing her, is the ruler of the city but also her uncle: following his own understanding of the rules, he decides to punish her. Both protagonists act daringly, recklessly closed and even tragically trapped in their rigid and monological conception of their duty: both are fundamentally *apoleis*, she who despises the city's laws, he who renders them incompatible with other spheres of belonging and justice such as family or religion. The lack of self-reflexivity and the rigidity of Creon and Antigone, which are underlined by the open and

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pragmatic attitude of the chorus, bring about doom for all: death upon death, and the continuity of the city's rule by a man who would rather die, too. Thus, rather than seeing in this tragedy the fight between the city and religion, or between political involvement and the private sphere, or between the state and the family,[1] we can observe the results of the lack of respectful dialogue in view of the good of the city.

Respectful dialogue in view of the city's benefit would unveil to both tragic protagonists that which they are too blind to see: that irresolvable dilemmas may arise when the relations between human beings are conceptualised in complete separation from the handling of common matters within a collectivity of human beings.

For the former, the relations between human beings, the term 'social' has imposed itself in the language of the social and political sciences over the past two centuries – with the French term *lien social*, the social bond, being probably the best expression for the phenomenon in question. For the latter, the handling of common matters, the term 'political' has persisted since its invention by the ancient Greeks.[2] In the history of the social and political sciences, however, the meanings of these two terms have often shifted. They are sometimes defined as almost synonymous, sometimes as opposed to each other, and very frequently brought into a hierarchical relation, the one dominating the other.[3] That is why the dispute between Antigone and Creon is often interpreted as one between conflicting sets of rules, rather than as a problem of lack of respect for each other and lack of concern for the benefit of the city. To retrieve this latter meaning, one would need to discuss the dilemmas that each of them puts forward in ways that openly pose the *question of the social* – ties of various kinds that create particular relations between human beings – and *its significance for the political* – the identification, regulation and deliberation of common matters within a collectivity of human beings.

[1]For well-known examples of philosophical interpretation of the dispute between Antigone and Creon, see: Hegel 1807/1931; Heidegger 1942; Nussbaum 1986; Castoriadis 2001; and, for an overview of such interpretations, Steiner 1979. For a valuable insistence on the emotions in the *Antigone*, see Nussbaum (1986, p. 133) and Castoriadis (1986).

[2]The expressions 'the social' and 'the political' may sound somewhat awkward in English and, in contrast to their French or German versions, they are not in very common use in English-language social and political theory. However, these terms adequately convey a thematisation of *relations* between people – rather than a given collectivity that is implied in the terms 'society' and 'polity' – and thus lend themselves to a focus on the actors and on a conceptualisation beyond institutional forms.

[3]Our reasoning cannot escape the difficulty arising from the fact that we have to express in the same language those shifting meanings of key terms. Our own writing is inevitably affected by the fact that we need to write across the divide in political language that marks the turn of the 18th century, as variously identified by Michel Foucault, Reinhart Koselleck and Quentin Skinner. Inasmuch as this divide was deep and radical and at the same time brought our current political language about (as at least Koselleck maintains), we cannot but use the concepts provided by it, even though we need to reach situations in which those very same concepts did not exist. This problem is posed with particular acuity for the ancient Greek concepts. Christian Meier (1990, in particular chapters 1, 7 and 8) reflects on this as a historian who wants to understand ancient Greece; we face the same issue from the viewpoint of a conceptual elaboration for the present.

In other words, we suggest here that *Antigone* can be read from the angle of a social and political theory that emphasises respectful struggle and the benefit of the city: the theory of *synagonism*. We further suggest that this theoretical scheme needs to rethink the relation between the social and the political in a way that keeps these two concepts distinct, on the one hand, but brings them into an open and reflexive connection, on the other.

Thus, the task of this article is threefold: the elaboration of the theory of synagonism as a novel approach to social and political theory; the re-examination of the conceptual relation between the social and the political as a means to situate the novel approach in the current intellectual context; and the interpretation of an old and much-discussed paradigm, Greece at the time of the *polis*, with a view to illustrating the ways in which the social and the political were connected in a context that knew – and sometimes praised – synagonistic action.

Lest we be misunderstood, our aim is not a reappraisal of the ancient world or a 'return of the Greeks'. Rather, it is to argue with, for and against the example of the Greeks about the best way to bring the social in relation to the political. This choice is thus based on three assumptions: first, that the paradigm of the Greek *polis* is widely known and does not need a plethora of explanatory detail; second, that the ancient Greeks are as worthy as any other historical people of the quasi-ethnographic viewpoint that we adopt in this reconstruction; and third, that the particularity of their social and political setting in a limited space and time renders them a very useful reference for our reflection.

Synagonism, this unusual Greek word, can be made familiar via a related, but better known term: *ant*agonism. In contrast to antagonism, which is composed by the suffixes '*anti*' (against) and '*agon*' (struggle) and which means struggle of opposed forces, *syn*agonism – composed by '*syn*' (together, co-) and '*agon*' (struggle) – means co-struggle. This co-struggle can have two meanings: the first, which is not used here, is the struggle of comrades against a common enemy. The second, which is used and enriched, is the struggle of one against another in view of excellence-winning. We can thus offer a first definition of synagonism that will guide our further elaboration of the concept: *synagonism is the respectful struggle of one against another, bound by rules larger than the struggle, in view of excellence-winning for the benefit of the city*.

Emphasising struggle, synagonism is a theory of conflict.[4] Setting this approach in the context of current social and political theory requires taking a look at three other traditions of social and political theorising that have focused on adversarial behaviour: antagonism as a key concept in the critical tradition of social theory; competition as the cornerstone of political economy and later neo-classical economics; and agonism as a recently revived term of twentieth-century political philosophy. Similarities and differences between these three

[4]In the following, we use the term 'synagonism' both for the theory of synagonism that we aim to develop and for the kind of interaction that is made central in this theory.

concepts and the one proposed here are first spelled out (Section I). Subsequently, our reasoning proceeds in three major steps; in each step, one feature of the theory of synagonism is explored. We focus our attention on friendship (Section II.A), on ritual (Section III.A) and on autonomy (Section IV.A), all of which are aspects of ancient Greek social and political life that are acknowledged as central by both classicists and political philosophers.

Each of the aspects resonates with a key conceptual element of the major 'modern' approaches to political philosophy. Thus, friendship resonates with the community of communitarianism (Section II.B); ritual with the rules and procedures of proceduralism (Section III.B); and autonomy with the freedom of individualist liberalism (Section IV.B). In each case, it is argued that the modern approaches hold too restrictive assumptions about the relation between the social and the political. In confrontation with those modern assumptions, the revived ancient concepts sustain novel understandings of community (Section II.C), procedure (Section III.C) and freedom (Section IV.C) as key elements of a comprehensive approach to synagonism that works with a reflexive relation between the social and the political.[5]

I. ANTAGONISM – COMPETITION – AGONISM

The terms 'social' and 'political' are today often used on the basis of some disciplinary or other intellectual convention without any consideration for consistency across different approaches. At the same time, major intellectual battles are being fought in the name of the one or the other concept, such as the one for 'the return of the political'. For the purposes of our reasoning, three brief remarks on the history of the concepts and the current conceptual constellation suffice.[6]

First, an elaborate distinction between the social and the political is of rather recent origin. The difficulty that the translation of a key term of Aristotelian political thinking such as *koinonía politiké* keeps posing is telling. To give one example, in H. Rackham's translation of *Politics*,[7] *koinonía politiké* is variously translated as 'society', 'community' and 'partnership', terms that refer to highly different ways of conceiving of the ties between human beings. The first translations into Latin, inspired by Christian thought, worked with variations of *communio* and *communicatio* for the noun and had *politica* or *civilis* as the

[5]While this article can only be seen as a first step towards the elaboration of this approach, we want to note one major omission explicitly. For reasons of space, we cannot deal here with the question of inter-polity relations, and thus not with such important themes as the question of membership and exclusion and the problem of disempowering and distance that so-called globalisation may create when disconnecting the site of political decision from the site of the effects of that decision.

[6]Again for reasons of space, we cannot here discuss in detail the history of the relation between the two concepts in social and political thought. For some more elaboration on this aspect, see Karagiannis and Wagner 2005.

[7]For the Heinemann/Harvard University Press edition of Aristotle's works (vol. XXI, 1932).

adjective. It was in the Renaissance in the context of the Florentine Republic that the full term was for the first time rendered as *societas civilis*, thus inaugurating a wholly new lineage of conceptual development focusing on the social and the civil.[8]

Second, this conceptual innovation gained its full impact only from the late 18th century onwards in a movement described as 'the rise of social theory' or as 'the invention of society' and related to the rise of the social sciences as the major tools for the self-understanding of modern societies.[9] It is less rarely observed, but crucial for understanding the separation of the social from the political, that 'society' was invented precisely in the search for bonds between human beings, a search responding to the increasing centrality of individualist reasoning in political thought from Hobbes to Locke to Kant. Henceforth, the social sciences coexisted with political thought – but in relative separation from it – and were used to answer questions to which political thought no longer responded.

Jumping over most of the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, thirdly, the contemporary constellation in political thought reflects this schism between the social and the political. To relate briefly and schematically to the approaches discussed in more detail below: individualist liberalism tends to operate with an 'a-social' concept of the human being or with a 'thin' concept of the social bond; proceduralism separates the social from the political; and communitarianism, using a holist social ontology, tends to conflate the social with the political. As political theories, these approaches use a restrictive conception of the social to underpin their view about if and how political order is possible. In our view, though, they have done so by reasoning away the agonistic aspect of what, for want of a better term, we call 'social and political life'.

In contrast, this observation also suggests that the lack of a separation between the social and the political up to the Renaissance may have entailed a richer understanding of social and political life, including precisely the aspect of conflict. Of course, it cannot be claimed that the denial of conflict shaped all of social and political thought over the past two centuries. A critical reader may, at this point, have the impression that the theory of synagonism is nothing but a renewal, by different means, of those understandings of social and political interaction that emphasise the beneficial consequences of adversarial behaviour. In the recent past, three major versions of such thinking were proposed, all directed against dominant alternatives that rather focused on consensus and co-operation. During the 1960s, 'conflict sociology' became a label for those

[8]For a recent analysis of the history of translation, see Hallberg and Wittrock 2005. Implicitly acknowledging that which we describe as an openness of the relation between the political and the social in ancient Greece, Martha Nussbaum is tempted to translate *politikon* as 'social' (1986, p. 345).

[9]Heilbron 1995; Donzelot 1984.

sociological perspectives, as proposed by Lewis Coser, Ralf Dahrendorf and John Rex among others, that doubted the dominant Parsonsian view according to which normative consensus was the key to understanding social integration. During the 1970s, 'neo-liberal economics' in various guises argued in favour of a renewal of competitive behaviour against the so-called Keynesian consensus that required concertation and co-operation among organised economic actors. Both of these approaches had roots in the classical traditions of the social sciences, the former in Karl Marx and Max Weber, the latter in classical political economy and neo-classical economics. The third approach, as most recently formulated by Chantal Mouffe, but also developed in different terms by Bonnie Honig and William Connolly, finds its inspiration in politico-theoretical approaches, like Carl Schmitt's, that have emphasised conflict as a component of the political.

Marx is often seen as the author to whom we owe the introduction of 'antagonism' as a key concept into social and political thought.[10] Famously, he suggested that history was driven by class struggle and that bourgeois society bred an antagonism between individuals that did not have its roots in those individuals but in the societal conditions of life. He also saw the relations of production in bourgeois society as the 'last antagonistic form' of the social process of production, because the antagonism itself would create the material conditions for its 'solution'. Radically rejecting the possibility of synagonism under capitalism, he thus transferred the positive effects of conflict to a later point in history. At that later point, though, it seems that *agon* would become unnecessary, since the antagonism would have been solved (although Marx refused to speculate about the condition of social life after the end of pre–history).

Presenting his writings as a 'critique of political economy', Marx directly addressed the other major political philosophy that placed conflict at its centre, the theory of economic liberalism that later became the core of the economic sciences, now known as neo-classical economics. In this theorising, socially beneficial adversarial behaviour becomes central through the concept of 'competition'. Normatively, political economy was arguing for a social condition in which all economic actors could freely position themselves in competition to other actors. The need to fare well in such competition would unleash innovations and thus improve the overall societal situation. Like the theory of synagonism, such economic theorising focuses potentially on singular human beings (rather than pre-constituted social groups such as classes) and on identifying beneficial effects in the present (rather than under a novel societal

[10]Short of a more detailed investigation, we just note that the term was already used in German by Immanuel Kant in the fourth proposition of his *Idea for a general history of humankind with a cosmopolitan intent* of 1784. At about the same time as Marx, it was also employed by John Stuart Mill in *On liberty* and may have been a neologism that became diffused during that period in English political philosophy.

configuration of the future only). At a closer look, however, both this approach and the one inspired by Marx deviate from our conception in three fundamental respects.

First, the *knowledge* basis on which the theories of economic competition and class antagonism are erected differs radically from the one adopted in the theory of synagonism. The political economists and their successors in economics assume that they produce *scientific* knowledge uncovering the laws of economic action; Marx provided a mirror image to these approaches by denouncing them as ideology while claiming to be unveiling the truth about domination in bourgeois society. In contrast, the social and political *philosophy* of synagonism insists that the rule framework for improving the city is itself modifiable by the actors in the course of their struggle.

Second, in line with their understanding of science, both political economy and its critique assume that there are *causal mechanisms* at work in society that turn competition or antagonism into something that was not intended by the actors themselves. The constitutive metaphors of these approaches – 'the invisible hand' of political economy and the working of history 'behind the backs' of the human actors in Marx – give telling testimony to this view. In contrast, synagonistic interaction takes place with the *view of the desired excellence of the results held by the actors themselves*, as the examples of theatre and athletics demonstrate.[11]

Thirdly, these approaches have highly different views of the *outcome* of conflictual interaction. Ever since Adam Smith, economic theorising has focused on increase, be it in terms of 'wealth', 'growth' or 'development'. It has thus robbed the outcome of any substance, a move that made it desirable to have 'ever more' of the good that the conflict produces. Such elimination of limits to the increase of something that is substantively undefined is absurd, as many critics have pointed out.[12] Well aware of this problem, Marx left the social condition that would prevail after the 'solution of the antagonism' – the *telos* of history – open and in need of definition by the actors themselves in that situation. Since that situation itself was remote, as it would only arise after a major rupture in history, it was left completely undefined and without link to the present of the actors.

In the theory of synagonism, the outcome of conflictual interaction cannot be determined by theoretical reasoning either. However, in contrast to Marx, no basic distinction is drawn between one societal condition in which conflict is

[11]The excellence (*aristeuein*) of an action is closely related to the public rank and honour (*time*) of the person who performed it: the Greek *politai* (irrespective of their social configurations) espoused aristocratic values as far as the *polis* was concerned (see Meier 1990, p. 50). In *Nicomachean Ethics* (1129b26ff), Aristotle treats justice as 'the most authoritative' of the excellences and at the same as 'complete excellence' itself, in that all excellence has an other-related or social aspect. True excellence of character has a relational aspect (see Nussbaum 1986, p. 352). This Aristotelian view bridges political theory (justice) and social theory (the bonds between people): see Karagiannis and Wagner 2005 for more on this 'bridge'.

[12]Castoriadis 1999; Boltanski and Chiapello 1999.

antagonistic and its outcome determined and another one, not yet reached, in which conflict subsides and the outcome is open to choice and will. Rather, it depends on the actors to define the nature of their conflict in general and to *project outcomes upon the horizon of the future, linking experience to expectation by means of imagination*. As the result of interaction between many actors is not controlled by the intention of any single one of those actors, outcomes of synagonism are thus open to historical contingency, but at the same time always informed by the situation of interaction and its interpretation by the actors.

The third approach, 'agonism' or 'agonistic pluralism' presents features that are closer to the theory of synagonism. To follow Chantal Mouffe's description, agonistic pluralism acknowledges 'the ineradicability of antagonism and the impossibility of achieving a fully rational consensus'.[13] It thus aims at overcoming shortcomings of democratic theory, of the Rawlsian and Habermasian kinds, by showing that the true nature of the political is neither justice nor morality and that political objectives cannot be achieved through rational consensus. To the contrary, according to Mouffe, the true nature of the political is conflict and it, therefore, works through passion and exclusion; though consensus is desirable, it is always conflict-laden consensus. In a context of inextricable power relations where, contrary to Rawls' veil of ignorance and to Habermas' ideal speech situation, inequalities exist and persist, democratic theory should thus aim at creating democratic forms of identification that will contribute 'to mobilise passions towards democratic designs', in other words, to transform antagonism into agonism.[14]

Though broadly sympathetic to this approach, synagonism differs from agonistic pluralism in three respects: while agonistic pluralism aims to be a *normative* theory of democracy that, based on a certain reading of *the political*, insists on *exclusion* as an inevitable outcome of agonistic politics, synagonism combines *descriptive and normative* components towards a theory that *relates the political to the social* and aims to overcome exclusion by insisting that inclusion can be accompanied by *dissent*.

First, while bearing strong normative elements, synagonism is also a descriptive and analytical-interpretative approach. Contrary to agonistic pluralism, which reasons purely from the perspective of normative political philosophy, one of our starting claims is that there are instances of synagonism in actual social and political life. Ancient Greece is a historically existing witness of such instances.[15] Instead of proposing the instrumentalisation of passions and emotions towards democratic designs – a proposal the dangers of which are well

[13]Mouffe 2000.

[14]Mouffe 2000, p. 16, see further Mouffe 1999, p. 5.

[15]In future elaborations of our approach, we will aim at analyzing further examples of synagonism, including contemporary ones.

known in the light of historical deviations from liberal democracy – our own theory suggests to start from existing instances of synagonism and to make them more salient.

Second, rather than aiming directly at a renewal of democratic theory as agonistic pluralism proposes, the perspective of synagonism first requires re-theorising the link of the political to the social, an operation that in a further step also has implications for theorising democracy. To clarify our own conceptualisation, it is useful to point out how Mouffe's – largely implicit – view of the relation between the social and the political differs. At first sight, Mouffe, too, seems to regard as social relations all ways of human togetherness and to see political relations as a special case of the former. However, at a closer look, Mouffe has a stronger, almost determinist understanding of the impact of structures of the social on the political, and she has an understanding of the political that emphasises the form of the political relation over the problématique that the relation addresses.

As to the former, Mouffe refers to 'social and power relations, language, culture and the whole set of practices that make the individuality possible' as well as to 'an ensemble of practices that make the constitution of democratic citizens possible': she seems to regard the social as providing the condition of (versions of) the political.[16] Instead, synagonism insists on the need to leave the relation between the social and the political indeterminate. We want to renew the question that sliding passages such as the one above ignore, neglect or refuse to pose: what – under different circumstances and in different theoretical traditions – is the precise relation between the social and the political, and why does such neglect or refusal often take place?

As to the latter, Mouffe defines the political through antagonism: 'By "the political", I refer to the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations, antagonism that can take many forms and emerge in different types of social relations'. In our view, this definition is doubly misleading. On the one hand, it omits from the political what any conventional understanding of the term would include, namely an element of (possible) agreement and decision about common matters. And on the other hand, it reserves for the political what

[16]Mouffe 2000, p. 10. The nature of 'individuality' is not further discussed, even though political theories do not differ least on this central question (see Sections IV.B and IV.C below). In both these phrases, we detect a belief in the existence of some kind of social which is constitutive of both the political and the 'individual'; see critically on such conceptualizations Lefort (1986). At other points, the terms become almost interchangeable, even though the crucial difference in the following quote seems to be the one between the social order as hegemonic *tout court*, and the political order being the *expression* of such hegemony: 'Since any *political order* is the expression of hegemony, of a specific pattern of power relations, political practice cannot be envisaged in simply representing the interests of pre-constituted identities, but in constituting those identities themselves in a precarious and always vulnerable terrain . . . To assert the hegemonic nature of any kind of *social order* is to operate a displacement of the traditional relation between democracy and power' (Mouffe 2000, p. 14, our italics).

in any conventional understanding can also occur in other, non-political walks of life, namely dispute and conflict.[17] There is nothing wrong with overcoming conventional understandings. However, the opposition of an antagonism-based understanding of the political to a consensus-oriented one without referring to that which political dispute or agreement is about seems unfruitful.[18] In contrast, our approach focuses on the political as being concerned with common matters, with the fate of the community, without predetermining in which way – agonistically or consensually – these matters are confronted. Synagonism refuses to see conflict or agreement as the overarching component of political life (or, for that matter, of the 'nature' of human beings): both exist and both are possible in the debate about the fate of the *polis*. Rather, synagonism sees the political as posing the much more substantive question of the continuity of, and the amendments to, the community.

Finally, for synagonism, in contrast to agonism, dissent does not mean exclusion. Mouffe herself is rather ambiguous about what exactly exclusion is,[19] but if agonistic pluralism tends to accept exclusion because it refuses to disguise it 'under the veil of rationality or morality', it forgets that democracy must always fight against the temptation of the tyranny of the majority. That there is disagreement and conflict in political debate does not necessarily entail exclusion. Accepting exclusion as a consequence of dissent is dangerously close to oppressing minorities of opinion. It is neither irresponsibly optimistic nor illusionary to point at the *inclusion* of minority. The feeling or the principle of solidarity, and thus inclusion, can go hand in hand with dissent (see Sections II.C and III.C below).

In the light of this brief synopsis of approaches to conflict in society, it has become clear that, on the one hand, a theory of synagonism cannot follow the social and economic sciences in developing causal models of conflicts and their outcomes on the basis of an overly strong social ontology and/or philosophy of history. On the other hand, it is too much interested in the conditions of action as based in social relations to adopt a perspective of pure normative political philosophy. In terms of genres of scholarly pursuit, it thus needs to situate itself in the realm in between social science and moral and political philosophy.

[17]Mouffe (2000, p. 15) works with a distinction between the political and politics, the latter being defined as follows: ' "Politics", on the other hand, indicates the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of "the political" '. This latter definition overlaps with our understanding of the political, and we fail to see why the antagonistic subset of those practices should be singled out as 'the political' and made central for a theory of democracy.

[18]See Honig 2002, for a similar criticism.

[19]It changes from exclusion of those outside the demos, in her discussion of Schmitt, and exclusion of alternatives when a democratic decision is reached. The latter, one should think, is the normal outcome of agonistic interaction, and a theory of agonistic pluralism should be able to address this question more satisfactorily. The former, though, is not naturally part of the tradition of democratic theory that has tended to focus on intra-polity matters. As mentioned, it must also be addressed by the theory of synagonism, even though this cannot be done here.

Thus, the key elements of our definition of synagonism – respect, struggle, rules, autonomy, excellence of the person and the benefit of the city – are neither explanatory variables nor general normative claims. They are features of socio-political life of which human beings are generally aware – aware of their existence in social interaction, of their problematic nature as a guide for political action, and of the expectations they generate.

II. LOVE, FRIENDSHIP, SOLIDARITY: THE COMMUNITY OF SYNAGONISM

O, all invincible love

Sophocles, *Antigone*

The difficult balance between togetherness and separateness is at the core of the question of the social as it relates to the political. What does the theory of synagonism have to offer as a step towards an answer to this question? On the side of distance or separateness, synagonism entails *agon* and respect. On the side of fusion or togetherness, it entails the common good. Indeed, according to the synagonistic understanding of the social and the political, struggle must be respectful and it must aim at a good that is common to those who fight. In order for this answer to become more concrete, we need first to see whether and how, from Athens onwards, *agon* is separate from, yet related to, love and how friendship determines the community. These steps lead us to retrieve the concept of solidarity and to look at it anew.

A. *Agon* and Love

Our current understanding of love, largely inherited from the Christian understanding, separates this term sharply from struggle and dispute. Luc Boltanski's work on love and justice as 'competences', for instance, emphasises that '*agape*' is at the antipodes of '*agon*'. In situations of love, there is no dispute (separateness) – or when there is, dispute is dissolved by the imperative of fusion (togetherness). In situations of *agon*, interaction is characterised by diametrically opposed views, or contradictory views, or at any rate views that are thought of as incompatible: in *agon*, no common ground is sought.[20] In the ancient Greek understanding, in contrast, the distance between *agon* and love is less than absolute, as the usage of *agon* in the Homeric universe shows where it means assembly or the space where the assembly takes place.[21] Later, in the two centuries during which the Athenian *polis* unfolds its most debated forms of existence, *agon* and love remain intimately linked.

[20]Boltanski 1990.
[21]Rahe 1994, p. 29.

On the one hand, in the Athenian context, too, *agon* is about struggle and about distinction (or excellence). The current reader immediately understands the component of struggle in *agon*. The component of distinction is slightly more difficult to grasp since our current understanding of struggle comprises undertones of struggle for survival, in which the outcome is often the elimination of one of the two (or more) fighters.[22] But in ancient Greece, elimination is a desirable outcome of the struggle only and exclusively in (frequent) times of war and, even then, it is instrumental for an ethics of honour and post-mortem fame. The example of the Homeric Achilles is the most striking one: his pursuit is that of excellence (*aristeuein*) and for that, he is willing to embrace an untimely death for an undying fame.[23] Another similar figure is the Athenian Alcibiades whose striving for distinction is emphasised in opposition to the 'quietness' of the peace-seeking mass.[24] Xenophon and Plato, and even earlier Heraclitus,[25] all point to the importance of the pursuit of movement and honour that distinguishes great men from common ones, and more importantly, men from animals (that do not possess honour) but also from gods (to whom fame brings closer).[26]

Love, on the other hand, is fusion between the lovers, fusion with the spark of divinity in humans or fusion as the overwhelming of one part of the psyche by the other: as loss of control, it can be despised; as madness, it is hailed.[27] The madness that *eros* brings about also points towards the annihilation of the difference between gods and humans. In Plato's *Phaedros*, when *hedony* (pleasure) and *doxa* (opinion) are balanced, humans are characterised by *sophrosyne* (prudence), but when *eros* wins, *hubris* comes about. *Eros*' compelling force is at least equally strong as that of *agon*; and it is either incompatible with justice or belongs to a justice of its own.[28]

In the Athenian context, the pursuit of the *eromenos* by the *erastis* aims at fusion; however, it is by definition inscribed in inequality or difference. This tension is perhaps exemplary of the tension between love and *agon* in general. It unfolds, and is resolved, in the way the relation *eromenos-erastis* is inscribed in institutionalised forms of the social. Eros between an older and a younger

[22]More fruitfully, this understanding, in which the victory of the one entails the elimination of the other, should be reserved for the term ant-agonism.

[23]For a reversed portrait of Achilles as an absurd blood-thirsty monster, see Christa Wolfs's troubling *Cassandra*.

[24]See Alcibiades' speech before the – for Athens – catastrophic war in Sicily (for the link with political liberty which entails the opportunity to do something of note, see Section IV).

[25]Rahe 1994, pp. 30–31.

[26]See Castoriadis (2001) for the anthropology of Sophocles (and of his contemporaries) where *anthropos* is clearly placed between animals and gods. The same anthropology is to be found in Shakespeare's theatre and in particular in *The Tempest*, between Prospero and Caliban.

[27]Such fusion is not only psychic, as is revealed to us in a chorus line of *Antigone* where *eros* is the impulse of the body for pleasure. The difference between psychical and bodily love is not always upheld by Socrates/Plato.

[28]For the consideration of philosophy (a 'sphere' of its own) as *eros*, see *Phaedros*. On love and *agon* as bridged by philosophy, see Deleuze and Guattari 1991, pp. 14–17. For the Heideggerian account of philosophy, in which being as *eros* has a concealed but significant place, see Mouzakitis 2002, p. 43. n. 52.

man has an important component of education and of development:[29] in order for these elements to be fully wrought and brought to the fore, the younger man exposes his body in the gymnasium (*gymnos* – naked) and his soul or mind in the public space.

Love becomes the preparation of younger men for the duties and the manners of full manhood and citizenship. As a consequence, it is as much a preparation for external *political* liberty in the sense that it prepares for war – to the defence of this chosen community – as it is a preparation for internal excellence since it prepares the young men for the athletic games, or the battles of art: in both activities, the agonistic element is present. Simultaneously, love is most evidently linked to the need for, and the praise of, internal *social* concord and friendship at the scale of the city.[30] Significantly, after having been the apanage of the Athenian aristocracy, by the fifth century pederasty (*pais*: young boy, *eros*) becomes democratised and practised at a much larger scale. It becomes subordinated to the broader concern for friendship in the city, a notion describing both a social situation and a political goal.

B. Friendship and Community

Although we cannot go into detail regarding the Greek conceptualisation of civic friendship, we need to note that both Plato and Aristotle underlined its normative necessity as a binding element for the people of the *polis*.[31] When couched in contemporary politico-philosophical terms, the bond of friendship (*filia*) created between people of the same *koinonía* is most poignantly and convincingly expressed in communitarianism. Communitarianism can be defined most broadly as that approach which sees strong friendship at the centre of people's general relations, Rousseau's *amour social* having been a major source of inspiration for communitarianism. This friendship creates commonality; it is what makes people belong to community. The debate about communitarianism has certainly gone beyond this founding inspiration, but communitarians all share the assumption of a substantive bond between people who feel closely related to each other.[32] Significantly, they let the possibility of dealing with common matters (the political) depend on ties of togetherness between human beings (the social).

The synagonistic view partly accepts this idea of a social relation, in this case friendship, pointing towards the political, and partly rejects it. Synagonistic

[29]On the ancient Greek understanding of development, see Castoriadis 1976 – to be read against the background of our earlier criticism of the objective of unspecified increase in 'wealth' in the economic sciences.

[30]For instance: Rahe 1994, pp. 118–19.

[31]We note in passing that in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant defines friendship as that which lies between love and respect, that is, between the amorous impulse of fusion and that of necessary distance or separateness.

[32]See for a central reference Sandel 1982. Taylor (1995) is one of the few authors within the communitarian debate who made a systematic distinction between the social and the political.

interaction could not successfully occur if the participants in it did not have a shared understanding of the value of '*syn*'. In other words, there have to be broadly understood social ties between human beings so that they can successfully interact towards the benefit of the city. A prerequisite for synagonism to exist is that people agree on how to evaluate themselves as participants in it, that they have means to see how (more or less) important their contribution is. Similarly, following the inspiration provided by the communitarian approach, there must be enough trust for people to agree on excellence and merit.[33]

Nevertheless, synagonism differs from communitarianism in that it assumes no strong cultural commonality between participants in synagonistic interaction: synagonism sees no need for them to agree on issues that concern their past or, say, their 'language' – be it artistic, literary or class-related. Communitarianism is based, not only on a strong conception of the social ties, but also on one that unites all members of a political community in a homogeneous and often closed way, thus tending to the exclusion of those who do not possess the characteristics necessary for this particular social bond. In synagonism, in contrast, it is precisely the questioning of those ties and their meaning in enacting them that erects the political, as work at common matters, on the social. In other words, when the question of the fate of the community (the political) is self-reflexively asked, then the substantive ties between people (the social) are strengthened as they are referred to and synagonistically interpreted. This view entails that human actors are regarded not just as participants in something that always exists beyond them, or above them or *before* them,[34] but also as creators and institutors of the social. Such a conception underlines something to which we will devote more detailed analysis below: the relation between the terms *agon*, action and actor, all of which are derived from the same etymological root, *ag**.[35]

C. SOLIDARITY

After this rethinking, the concept of friendship as we retrieved it from ancient Greece cannot be sustained as such but needs to be enlarged towards the idea of solidarity. While having undergone important historical transformations, the concept of solidarity is preferable to friendship for two main reasons: first, unlike friendship, solidarity does not exclusively refer to a feeling of the domain of the Greek *thymos*. Solidarity certainly does not leave untouched our deepest emotions and can thus be subject to the unpredictable and radical changes

[33]Within the by now wide debate in social theory on the notion of trust, we note Offe (1998) for an exploration that emphasizes the need for such a concept in political theory, making a link between trust, democracy and solidarity. On the idea of *grandeur* (worth, greatness) of a person, see Boltanski and Thévenot 1991.

[34]'Before' is meant primarily in the chronological sense, pointing to the traditionalist, conservative or nostalgic component of some versions of communitarianism, but also in the sense in which we stand *before* an institution, the law etc. (for the latter, see Derrida 1992).

[35]See Turner (1982) and Section IV of this article.

that characterise them, but it is nevertheless also a normative or reasoned principle.[36]

Second, the term solidarity is preferable because it refers clearly to that at which it aims: making things solid or keeping them together. Short of an unavailable comprehensive history of the concept, we can ascertain that solidarity was historically proposed precisely as a term that addresses the lack of, or the weakness of, social ties after the rise of individualist thinking in economic and political liberalism. Normatively, it aimed at strengthening those social ties to make a good political order possible under the novel conditions.[37] The theory of synagonism takes, indeed, a position that identifies in the social that which strives for the benefit of the city, and first of all, for the city to be possible – without, though, needing to propose a homogeneous and closed concept of the social as the 'sub-strate' of the political, as much contemporary political theory with communitarian leanings does.

In the light of these new elements, we can return again to our initial definition of synagonism: *the respectful struggle of one against another, bound by rules larger than the struggle, in view of excellence-winning for the benefit of the city*. The *respectful struggle* must now be read through the gradual transformation of the tension between *agon* and love into friendship and into solidarity. The aim *of excellence-winning* must now be understood as the struggle that does not lead to elimination but enhances one's status in the social as a political actor. The *benefit of the city* must now be conceived as the shared understanding of common matters that people develop starting out from the social bonds they already have and interpreting as well as strengthening them in their very interactions.

III. THEATRE, RITUAL, RULES: THE PROCEDURE OF SYNAGONISM

As you from crimes would pardoned be
Let your indulgence set me free

Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Epilogue 20

In ancient Athens, synagonism is institutionally present in two main forms of social interaction: athletics and theatre.[38] The differences between these two expressions of the social are numerous but we insist on three important similarities. First, the main reward for winning an athletic or theatrical competition is not money but recognition and fame: the notorious wreath of

[36]We note here our partial agreement with Mouffe on the inability of 'rationality' to solve all of the problem, but underline at the same time that this conceptual broadening entails that outbursts like Creon's who wishes that 'no woman' has 'rule' may be avoided (*Antigone*, l. 327) and the bond not limited to men, as in Greek pederasty.

[37]See Fiegle 2003, for a comparison of French and German usage through the nineteenth century; and Karagiannis 2004, for a step towards a larger genealogy.

[38]Aristotle, *Poetics*, III. 4–IV. 3.

laurel was far more significant for the winner (and the loser) than any pecuniary advantage.[39] Second, both are highly ritualised and ritualistic processes whose rules are clearly articulated and followed and in which innovations are allowed only if they are the mark of genius. Thirdly, both athletics and theatre are fully realised only in front of an audience: theatre is not just an author, a text, and actors, but also, fundamentally, an audience that watches the play. Athletics is not just the performers, a ball or a lance and the gymnasium, but also the performers' admirers and the sports' followers. Both theatre and athletics are forms of interaction that are ruled by rules established beyond the competitors, which are not economic and which are re-confirmed by the people before whom they actually unfold.

A. Theatre and the Audience

Theatre in ancient Athens is the expression of both the social and the political. Its place is so central that Plato, having turned to philosophy after his attraction to theatre, accuses Athenian democracy of being a 'theatrocracy'.[40] Indeed, when Plato writes, the changes that Greek drama has undergone since the sixth century – the passage from epic poems to plays; the addition, by each of the great tragic writers, of one more actor – conclude in a fundamental slide between the earlier Dionysian perception and usage of theatre and the more reflexive and self-reflexive understanding by the Athenians, an understanding that will later again be lost.[41]

From the point of view of the social, Victor Turner, drawing on Clifford Geertz, found perhaps the most adequate expression by calling ancient drama a social commentary[42] – and this for a number of reasons. First, much of what we know about the social in ancient Athens is to be found in tragedies (and comedies), which thus have turned into a historical commentary on the social self-understanding of Athens for us: we gain insight into the importance of family ties, the weak position of women in the household, the clashes between proponents of different layers of religion. Second, we learn about the structure of Athenian social relations also through the information we have about the audience of tragic *agonai*, such as the fact that it was enlarged by Pericles so that the poorest citizens could also attend, or the participation, rare but certain, of *metoikoi*, women and children. Thirdly, and maybe most importantly, the

[39]Although the money reward in theatre competitions was not despised, and a lot of money went to sponsoring (*choregeies*); see Meier 1990, pp. 87–88. On general contempt towards money in Athens, see *Pericles' Funeral Oration* by Thucydides and Aristotle's *Chrematistiki*, as discussed, for instance, in Hénaff 2003.

[40]Papaioannou 2003.

[41]Papaioannou 2003, on Athenian theatre; Nietzsche 1967; and Benjamin 1998, on the loss of this understanding.

[42]Turner 1982.

tragedies were a social commentary by, for and about the ancient audience itself: the famous definition of tragedy by Aristotle says precisely this, highlighting features such as the feelings of pity and fear aroused in the spectators by the view of the heroes' suffering.[43] Having to face the tragic dilemmas that the protagonists face, the Athenian audience reflects upon the bonds that keep it together and divide it. The famous example of *Antigone* interrogates the Athenians about their filial and familial duties, the hierarchy within the family bonds, their loyalty to their gods and to their past, as well as their view of women.[44] By its focus on the distance between the action that takes place and the human beings who are involved in it, shedding light on their contribution to the action (*techne*) and on their absence of total control over it (*tuche*), tragedy also shows to the Athenian public that the humans are inscribed in a social world – always represented by a pragmatic chorus.

Theatre as one of the most significant forms of the social, to summarise this part of our argument, cannot 'take place' without its audience, holding it afar and at the same time bringing it close. We propose that the instantiation of the social through theatre is made of the following elements: *necessary* active participation of people, that is, a participation without which this art cannot exist; *democratic* participation, since all male citizens are part of the public;[45] *substantive* interaction that takes place through the concatenation of themes, proposed each time in each piece, upon which the audience reflects; and *fruitful* interaction, that is, an interaction whose outcome brings about excellence: by influencing the jury of the theatrical matches, the Athenian public sees itself as supporting the best one among the views of its own society and polity that are proposed to the audience.

The significance of Athenian tragedy is, however, also political. Indeed, in addition to interrogating the members of the audience about that which holds them together (and one answer is, precisely, tragedy itself), tragedy also asks them questions about the fate of the community, or more precisely, about the possibility of change in this community. In *Eumenides*, for example, Orestes is put to trial for the murder of his mother before the goddess, Athene, and the

[43]From xii.6–xiii.4 of his *Poetics* onwards, Aristotle presents the most effective (and ineffective) ways of arriving at such result for the audience: for example, 'one should not show worthy men passing from good fortune to bad. That does not arouse fear or pity but shocks our feelings'. What should be shown is 'the sort of man who is not pre-eminently virtuous and just, and yet it is through no badness or villainy of his own that he falls into the misfortune, but rather through some flaw in him [*amartian*], he being one of those who are in high station and good fortune, like Oedipus and Thyestes and the famous men of such families as those' (4–10). In relation to the gap between 'acting' and 'happening', one notes, very significantly, the absence of guilt (though *amartia* has been transferred to the Christian vocabulary later as sin).

[44]Antigone is certainly a heroine but she is also treated like a mad person by Ismene, her sister, or scolded as a mindless woman, by her uncle Creon.

[45]The exclusion of women from citizenship is, with slavery, an unavoidable issue in the Greek paradigm. It cannot be discussed here for reasons of space, but will inform the theme of membership in the future steps of this elaboration.

Aeropagus (which had then been abolished, a fact that was still stirring scandal in Athens): the Furies (*Erinyes*) accuse him; Apollo defends him. The mortal votes are divided. Finally, Athene casts her vote for him; the Furies threaten Athens with plagues but are finally transformed into Eumenides by Athene who proposes them honours in the city. The political is here located, first, in the trial (*dike*) taking place in the midst of citizens and of the *polis* – in the argumentation, the *logos* renders the space common and political as much as the delimited space commands *logos*[46] – but also, second, in the explicit questioning of the old by the new and in the acknowledgement that change is possible. The tremendous step that this has represented for the constitution of citizenship has caused many an important author to talk about the invention of 'politics' or 'the political' in ancient Athens.[47] To the political aspect of tragedy thus corresponds its 'jural' feature, that is, its 'judgmental, investigative and even punitive' features, including the position of each Greek tragedy and comedy itself in a theatrical competition.[48]

Thus, we arrive at a view of ancient Athenian theatre as a rather stable ritual that, on the one hand, is comprehensively embedded in Athenian social life and, on the other hand, addresses political questions through reflexive judgement that is open to innovation. The relationship between the ritual and the jural in theatre, or between theatre's social and its political aspects, is a complex one. On the one hand, rather than denoting a naïve emotivity on the basic level of a developmental anthropology, the ritual aims at a loss of control while fulfilling this aim through forms that are all but strictly controlled. On the other hand, the jural emphasises reasoning, and the articulation and formulation of emotions in an order of justice. Arguably, however, from the viewpoint of the audience, the jural and ritual aspects of the theatre cannot exist the one without the other. These two aspects, and through them the social and the political, are combined in *catharsis*[49] – cleansing and clarification – which comes about when the protagonists understand their *hubris*, when they see clearly what has gone wrong in their efforts to influence the action. The audience purges its emotions and sentimentality (the Aristotelian *astheneian*) through the regulated and foreseen canalisation of a tragic story: there is no suspense, but a ritual whose *telos* is known beforehand. It is precisely this ritual – self-reflexive depiction of the rules that keep people together – that allows the jural, that is, the political to come forth.

[46]See Castoriadis' (2003) observation on Vernant's phrase '*La raison est fille de la polis*', identifying there the mutual – reciprocal – constitution of *logos* and *polis*.

[47]See the contributions of Meier, Raaflaub and Castoriadis in Arnason and Murphy 2001.

[48]Turner 1982.

[49]Tragedy is, then, a representation of an action that is heroic and complete and of a certain magnitude – by means of language enriched with all kinds or ornament, each used separately in the different parts of the play: it represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions (among the numerous discussions of Aristotle's understanding of tragedy, see Nussbaum 1986; and also the very original Euben 2003).

B. Ritualistic Consensus

Ancient Greek theatre has thus several characteristics that qualify it as synagonistic expression. In the following, we insist on the element of the ritual and relate it to the emphasis on procedures in modern political philosophy. Allowing for dissent but channelling it into regulated forms, proceduralism – as the approach is sometimes called in short – has been an important part of the modern intellectual landscape after the dangers of consensual politics have been highlighted by the 20th-century totalitarianisms.

From a normative point of view, proceduralism has been advocated as a solution to the dilemma between a thin (or poor) and a thick (or rich) understanding of the social, or, in terms that place it among the other two modern political philosophies that we look at here, between individualist liberalism and communitarianism. Paying particular attention to procedures and to their design, this approach claims to minimise the original inequality between 'individuals', an inequality that is often largely due to the community they belong to, while taking the 'individual' a step further than pure individualist liberalism since it also gives her a reasonably fair, and often protected, way to arrive at an outcome that is considered just. However, as is evident from our own way of exposing the matter and as both older (Kant) and newer (Habermas) examples of proceduralism show, the approach has close links to individualism in the implicit emphasis it places on the need for consensus among human beings who are taken to be originally completely separate from each other.

From the perspective of synagonism, proceduralism usefully emphasises that its *result* cannot be the unique factor used to characterise and evaluate an interaction. To arrive at an adequate assessment, an evaluation of any, say, collective decision needs to be accompanied by a reflection on *how* it comes about, *how* it is 'performed' – and, at a most fundamental level, *that* it comes about and *that* it is performed. Procedures in the modern understanding and rituals in the ancient one have in common that they indicate the steps required to be taken so that a collectively acceptable outcome can be reached at all. Similarly, and unlike contemporary agonistic pluralism, synagonism does not espouse the view of the political as the product of constant conflicts or contradictions – and here there are affinities with proceduralism's aversion towards conflict. Certainly, conflict cannot be present everywhere all the time since perpetual struggle prevents social life, even though it may be respectful and may take place with a view of excellence's victory.

C. Solidarity in Dissent

However, the synagonistic approach also takes its distance from proceduralism, in at least three major ways. While thinking that the specific struggle of synagonism cannot be pervasive of all social life but must take place on

important occasions, we do not agree with proceduralism's attempt to empty the ritual of social elements. Actors entering a negotiation or a procedure that should lead to a just outcome – justice or injustice being a political conclusion to draw – are people with social bonds or, in contemporary parlance, with cultural resources (or baggage, as the appropriate metaphor may be). Contrary to the founding assumption of proceduralism, people may always be unfairly treated by procedures just because these procedures are foreign to them and because they have not participated in making them. In turn, synagonism suggests that the idea of a ritual to be found in known forms of social relations, such as friendship, is retained and enacted. In other words, it asks that the procedure (ritual) be designed as an institution that arrives at a reflexive judgement about the common good in the specific struggle between the actors, in awareness and acknowledgement of the social bonds between them.

The second – and related – objection of synagonism to proceduralism is that the outcome of a pure proceduralist ritual is unlikely to be the furthering of the benefit of the city, since it will always stay with any original inequality inscribed in the positions of proceduralist negotiators.[50] This objection differs from the first one in that it does not take issue with the institutional basis of proceduralist arrangements – atomism and the 'veil of ignorance' – but with the objective of the procedure: beyond aiming at consensus, synagonism aims at solidarity (as introduced in Section II.C). Synagonism suggests that the benefit of the city cannot naturally be taken to be the aggregate of the individual benefits of its members, but that it needs to be determined in the synagonistic interaction itself in which both the ideas of respect for the other and of excellence entail an orientation towards inclusion that is more than formal.

This objection leads to a further, final one: to arrive at substantive outcomes such as solidarity and inclusion, procedures (rituals) cannot be as rigid as – for internally consistent reasons – proceduralism would require them to be. While the ritual is absolutely vital for the social, it must show a certain measure of openness. Although such a statement may seem contradictory, it expresses nothing but the creative aspect of social action, an insistence on openness and imagination – in the sense in which the ritualised form of the tragedy could be altered by extraordinary playwrights to accommodate new purposes.[51] In this light, the synagonistic ritual is also a ritual instead of rituals, the *mise en forme* of an openness, as it were.

Thus, unlike proceduralism, synagonism accommodates an element of dissent, which is inscribed in *agon*. By being connected to the notion of solidarity, however, it further enhances the ties between *agon* and love. Thus introducing

[50]We take (complex) equality to be a worthwhile objective for the city, as we deplore that – legitimate – talk on liberty has tended to erase the concern for equality from recent debates.

[51]Thus, the major innovations of Greek drama would never have occurred if Aeschylus had not added a second actor to the epic monologue and Sophocles yet another one, i.e. had they not had the imagination and the courage to exit the ritual (to an extent). For one account of the manifold ways of doing this, see Hirschman 1970.

the possibility of disagreement and strife in the social, the element of dissent also highlights why friendship as we understand it in an everyday manner is not an overall satisfactory basis of social relations. Additionally, the social need not be conceived as exclusively made of raw conflict to acknowledge that people can create their social relations while and through disagreeing.

Moving from the social to the political, from the relation to the other towards the decision on the common, this element of dissent permits the exceptional exit from the ritual – which should be understood as so exceptional as the temporary suspension of a Constitution. In other words, synagonism accepts the need for procedures to arrive at ways of handling common matters, but it insists on the legitimacy of exiting from the procedures as an exceptional mode of addressing novel circumstances, or known circumstances in a novel way. This is an evidently very dangerous proviso, but without being able to opt out of the ritual, no truly imaginative and democratic social and political life can exist.

Looking back at our initial definition of synagonism, *the respectful struggle of one against another, bound by rules larger than the struggle, in view of excellence-winning for the benefit of the city*, we have now further enriched its understanding. The idea that there is a *struggle* can now be understood as an ever possible and renewed dissent that is voiced on a background of solidarity (*respect* and *the benefit of the city*). But this struggle *is bound by rules*: here, we must see the significance of a given procedure, of a given ritual according to which the struggle takes place. We will see below why these rules must be larger than the struggle, but for now we have also discovered that the participants in the struggle can, exceptionally, exit the rules.

IV. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND THE AUTONOMY OF THE *POLIS*: THE LIBERTY OF SYNAGONISM

Autonomy is an expression of openness. Heteronomy is an expression of closure since it closes the possibility of an interrogation on the social's own institutions, and consequently, the political possibility to revoke them. The following questioning is constitutive of the autonomous social: are our gods the true gods? Are our institutions the institutions we ought to have?[52] What ought the fate of our community be?[53]

A. Autonomy of the *Polis* and in the *Polis*

Autonomy is a constitutive element of synagonism, as only autonomous entities can struggle against each other in pursuit of excellence for the benefit of the city. This is evident in the immediate etymological distinction between autonomous (*auto-nomos*) and heteronomous (*heteros-nomos*): the first word designates

[52]Castoriadis 1997b.
[53]Lefort 1986.

those who give themselves their own laws whereas the second refers to a given or imposed law. It is hardly conceivable that participation in a struggle for excellence in the benefit of the city can be imposed on anyone by an external law. Possibly, struggle for excellence alone can be imposed, if excellence is equated, erroneously, to raw power; or a struggle for the benefit of the city can be imposed, if the benefit of the city stands as a unique, ultimate and one-sidely defined goal (like for Creon in *Antigone* or in totalitarianism). But for a struggle to be fought in view of excellence for the benefit of the city, one's own self-given law is needed.

However, 'one's own law' must be understood in a larger way than liberal individualism understands it, and the path to this larger way is opened by the example of the autonomy of the ancient Greek *polis*. Arguably, it is in ancient Greece that gradual autonomy is achieved in such a way and to such an extent that we may call it the first historical occurrence of autonomy of a society.[54] Here, we focus on ancient Athens in particular, although it must be noted that other *poleis* achieved autonomy as well, sometimes even earlier than Athens, as for instance in Sparta where citizens were deemed '*omoioi*' (the same, that is, equal). But the exceptional feature of Athens is the coincidence, in the fifth and fourth centuries, of outward and inward autonomy, the free determination of collective matters by the free citizens of the polity, that is, the invention of democracy.

The most striking examples of 'giving oneself one's own law' are the legal reforms of Solon and Cleisthenes. Solon is remembered for his establishment (and reform) of inheritance laws, in particular for the children of those killed in war.[55] But he is also remembered for his *stasis* law, which is of paramount importance for the illustration of our argument: the law stated that, in case of civil strife, any citizen who would not side with one of the opposing parties would be considered *atimos*, that is, without rights.[56] The intention behind this law was to enable the constitution of a majority that could counter the minority's *stasis*. In other words, the law admits, and hopes to solve, possible unintended struggle that does not aim at the benefit of the city. It is a telling example of the autonomy of a society that recognises its own frailties and attempts to counter them. Additionally, through its enforcement of a majority, it is a step towards

[54]Castoriadis 1986.

[55]Rahe 1994, pp. 50–52. This particular concern, arising out of the frequent wars that were conducted by the Greek *poleis* and, thus, their external autonomy, is very salient in Thucydides rendering of Pericles' Funeral Oration, there linking the financial aspect of the matter (with the *polis* shouldering the financial burden of the education of the dead warriors' progeny until adolescence) to the ethical injunction that these children try to be only a little worse than their fathers, since being as good is impossible.

[56]*Athineon Politeia* 8.5; Meier 1990, pp. 263–4; see Castoriadis 1986, for a view of this measure as combination of ethos and polis. '*Atimos*' is subject to interpretation: for Meier, it means unprotected by civil law; for Castoriadis, the person who loses civic rights.

the enlargement of the circle of the citizens that could and should participate in the common life.[57]

Cleisthenes' reform was more ambitious, as it aimed at the institutionalisation of 'civic presence'.[58] Three of the most salient features of this very complicated reform need to be mentioned: the re-organisation of Attica into new administrative units, the *phylai*; the concentration of decision-making and deliberations in Athens; and the decrease of the distance between the nobility and other social classes. Each feature is extremely important for the leap into the autonomous social that it reveals. Thus, the newly (re)constituted *phylai* did not anymore correspond to religious, familial, communal or professional ascriptions. In them, people were mingled in such a way that the only *social* commonality they shared was precisely this: the *political* common. The centralisation of political deliberation was intended to facilitate the clear establishment of a common will. Finally, the bringing together of nobility and laymen (peasants, artisans etc.) prevented the tendency – which had until now always been confirmed – of different factions of the nobility to create their followers in the people to arise.[59] In the combination of these features we identify the first emergence of a self-understanding of the relation between citizens *qua* citizens, irrespective of their other belongings. And we identify the first self-reflexive institution of such an understanding, too: it is in the increasing demands for participation by the people that Cleisthenes found his inspiration.[60]

B. Autonomy as Personal Liberty

It is on the principle of the autonomous individual that individualist liberalism establishes its reasoning and, as such, it seems to stand in the continuity of the Greek emphasis on autonomy. Liberalism's understanding of autonomy, however, is ambivalent and uneven. It is ambivalent because the typical liberal individual is both autonomous, since she gives herself her own rational rules,

[57]Meier 1990, p. 47. We do not have space here to expand on the context in which Solon formulates his laws and in particular the tremendous change of mentality that the 'restoration of a just order' must have meant. The first step (the insight into the destruction of the just order) is easy to understand, but the second (according to which humans are able to restore this order) irretrievably distances humans from gods. In his discussion, Meier (46) strangely does not see this last point; as he does not bring it close to the 'restoration of the past' through drama (Turner 1982).

[58]Meier's expression (1990, p. 61).

[59]Meier calls this the divorce of the political from the social order. We do not agree, for reasons of definition of the two core concepts – as can be see throughout this article. Let us also note that this gives us the environment of *Antigone*, in which the heroine defends values of the nobility and archaic religious rules against an enlarged understanding of the *polis*.

[60]Meier 1990. This autonomy, inward and outward, of Athens was of course not perfect, as many commentators have underlined. Women, slaves and *metoikoi* did not participate in the formulation of the Athenian common, and it is our view that these categories of people were not as marginal to the common as has been claimed, but that, to the contrary, they were subjected to a common defined by others, the male citizens. In other words, these were clear cases of heteronomy.

and heteronomous, since she cannot live alone.[61] And it is used unevenly because it works with different anthropologies, and more precisely, different understandings of the human *phusis*, that range from the famous 'wolf' to Rousseau's benign depiction of the first human beings.

In comparison, in ancient Greece, the autonomy of the individual does not really exist in the form of this most widespread current understanding of autonomy. Witness the Aristotelian view: 'It is evident that . . . the human being is by nature a *politicon* [social] animal, and that the person who is citiless through nature (*apolis dia phusin*) and not through luck is either an inferior creature or greater than a human being'. This understanding of what it means to be an autonomous person is rather different from the one espoused in individualist liberalism: it comprises not only the Socratic injunction to know oneself (*gnothei s'auton*) but also the idea that one should be economically and otherwise (*to soma autarkes*) self-sustainable, that one should give rather than owe, or that the good life is the free life.

From individualist liberalism, the theory of synagonism retains the emphasis on the autonomy of the person vis-à-vis the social. Indeed, synagonism emphasises struggle (even if other elements point to co-ordination and friendship), and struggle is excluded in configurations where the singular human being is confused with the social. The individual must remain free to challenge, or to distance herself from, the other and the social in synagonistic interaction. In words that we have already used regarding the addition of an element of dissent to solidarity, it is the potential disruption of 'the ritual' that is allowed by this emphasis on autonomy.[62] Indeed, the autonomous actor *accepts* to follow the ritual; at the exceptional moment when that actor does not make any sense of the ritual any more or when she sees that her or the *polis*' autonomy or any other element of synagonism is endangered, she may step out of it.

Although synagonism is close to the Aristotelian view, it does not make any precise argument on the human *phusis*. It only says that the categories through which human action is observed and thought are inherently interactive. Second, synagonism is *phusei* (by its nature) the opposite to (liberal) antagonism. Like Kant, who sees greater freedom as increasing the 'antagonism' between the members of society, individualist liberalism works with the assumption that freedom brings antagonism, and that such antagonism can be countered by the contractual will. In this view, the social relation between human beings is predominantly a contract between two or more individual contractors.

[61]Indeed, rational choice theories are the epitome of this ambivalence since games and other expression of individual rationality take as their unique starting point the rationality of the individual but can only ever demonstrate it through interaction.

[62]In the preceding section, we have argued that the theatrical performance of conflict opens the way for dissent – the formula 'solidarity in dissent' combines the stabilisation of the procedure with the possibility of exceptionally exiting the procedure. Here, in addition, we show that an assumption of autonomy is necessary for that latter possibility to arise – as an actor expressing dissent. These are two complementary dimensions of exiting the ritual.

Liberalism's antagonism thus expresses the idea of opposition for the sake of winning through an understanding of a social situation or of political deliberation and regulation in which the only applicable criterion for winning is the power of one over the other, or in any case, a criterion defined by those two 'individuals' (or collectivities, groups) involved.

Liberal antagonism's reliance on the contract is one of its greatest disadvantages. In liberal antagonism, no other entity than the two (or more) opponents participates in the definition of the rules to the struggle: in other words, the ritual is contingent – which means that, before 'the social', the ritual can be exited at any moment, as long as the contract permits it. It is a non-binding ritual; at the limit, it is no ritual at all. In the perspective of synagonism, this is unacceptable because, despite preserving freedom and thus allowing (all too largely) the exiting of the ritual, it renders the struggle a priori dependent on the inequality of the opponents. Evidently, no struggle can take place without inequality or else there is no possible victory. But this inequality must be the temporary outcome of the struggle, not its structural, as it were, precondition.

In sum, notwithstanding liberalism's precious insistence on the freedom of the individual vis-à-vis the social, it falls short of a richer account of the social and political world. Most significantly, it also rests content with the utter contingency of social relations, with the fundamental inequalities of the 'original position' of the social actors and with the absence of any 'ritualistic' guarantee of social interaction against the dependence of the weakest part of the contract on the strongest.

C. Beyond the Contractual Relation

Synagonism strives to incorporate the enriching features of liberalism while rejecting its impoverishing aspects. In order to do so, the autonomy of the social, as found in readings of ancient Greece, can be related to the autonomy of the singular human being and to the autonomy of the political. In other words, personal autonomy should not mean absolute freedom of the subject, but should rather be conceived of as emerging and developing socially. This is accomplished when one recognises that 'the problem of autonomy is that the subject meets in itself a sense that is not its own . . . ; autonomy is the relation in which others are always present as the otherness and as the self-ness of the subject'.[63]

In our perspective, this understanding of autonomy, as we borrow it from Cornelius Castoriadis, needs to be seen as unfolding across three steps. First, the capacity of an individual to act only becomes a capacity for autonomy once it is set into the context of relations to others; in this sense, personal autonomy is always social. Second, for any set of social relations to be regarded as an autonomous 'society', one needs to imply that it gives itself its own laws, that it

[63]Castoriadis 1997a, p. 108.

'poses' its own institutions, and is *conscious* of giving itself its own laws, that it *knows* that this is what it is doing. Third, giving oneself one's own law entails the possibility of revoking one's own law. Thus, an autonomous society has democracy as its political form. Democracy is inherently the only regime that can revoke itself: it is thus a regime of risk and therefore, when this risk becomes reality, a tragic regime. This embodiment of the autonomous social into a political form points to the understanding of the political as a project that aims at a re-formulation, as it were, of the social into an autonomous being.

With the added elements brought by liberalism, and their modification, let us look again at our definition of synagonism: *the respectful struggle of one against another, bound by rules larger than the struggle, in view of excellence-winning for the benefit of the city.* This section has first made us observe that the combination of aims of the struggle – 'excellence-winning for the benefit of the city' – can only signal autonomy and thus rules out heteronomy, as no actor subjected to an external law could fight voluntarily for both these aims. It has moreover shed light on the fact that the struggle 'of one against another' implies an individuation of the social actors, and thus, a certain degree of autonomy that characterises them. Finally, by defining autonomy as social, it has illuminated the need to insist that the rules governing the fight be '*larger* than the struggle'.

V. CONCLUSION

At the end of our exploration, synagonism does not descend on the stage of our article as a *deus ex machina*: it does not claim to bring all dilemmas to harmonious solutions. If it claimed to do so, it would merely be finding *conceptual* solutions to questions that arise as recurrently problematic in *experience*. That is precisely what we try to avoid. Synagonism does not offer solutions. Rather, it is a term that allows the kind of conceptual differentiation that has become necessary at the very least after the advent of modernity. At the same time, it avoids the 'art of separation'[64] that liberalism – and the social sciences that arose in response to it – has perfected by introducing formal divides between realms of life that are in actual experience always interrelated.

The deeds of Man fill us with wonder, says the chorus of *Antigone*, with wonder and with dread. As long as Man is in tune with the environment around him, as long as he follows the rules that he has participated in making and amending, as long as his relation to what surrounds him is dia-logical, Man is worthy of the highest praise in the city: out of all the links that he weaves, out of the social, he arises as a political person. But when Man narrows his horizon to his own self, when the values he defends and in whose name he speaks cut

[64]Walzer 1984.

him off from the others, when he enters the mono-logical mode – when he becomes an 'individual' – he is as good as blind.

Antigone gives a central place to the chorus: made of older men, it expresses a position that is at the same time compassionate with the suffering of the heroine, reasonable and pragmatic when giving advice to the ruler, and wise in its admiration and dread of the deeds of human beings. But the chorus is unstable. It is oscillating and, ultimately, unsure of what it should do and what it should suggest. And its reasonable suggestions come too late. There is only one person who sees earlier than anybody else what is about to happen.[65] Enter Teiresias, the blind prophet:

> 'My lords, I share my journey with this boy
> whose eyes must see for both; for so the blind
> Must move abroad, with one to guide their steps'

And so, with him, enters also a young boy. Blindness, as a tragic *topos* of unveiling of the truth, does not and cannot march alone. The young boy is Teiresias' eyes and his guide in the steps he takes 'abroad'. Teiresias, whose prophetic capacity is unsurpassable and who has never lied or proven wrong, he who beholds such power, needs to be accompanied by a young human being. We can imagine what this means for the young man, too: blind loyalty and devotion to the prophet, attentive and prompt listening ('Boy, lead me home again', he asks when, outraged at Creon's reaction, he decides to leave him) and the best possible education in far-sightedness and prudence. That is the image with which we would like to close this article, an image of a strange sort of co-existence, not harmonious in any predictable way and that corresponds neither to Antigone's slightly high-brow noble aspirations, nor to Creon's stubborn identification with the *polis* – an image to be continued.

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[65]Nussbaum's *Fragility of Goodness* first drew our attention to Teiresias. However, instead of emphasizing the community that Teiresias and the boy form, we would like to let the asymmetry and the tension that cannot fail to be created between them – a potential solidarity in dissent – take the form of an open question.

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