Varieties of Agonism: Conflict, the Common Good, and the Need for Synagonism

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Critical political thought has recently witnessed a revival—and recasting—of interest in conflict as the driving force of politics and as the conceptual cornerstone for thinking the political. Within this strand, the term "agonism" has acquired some discourse-organizing role, as in the work of Chantal Mouffe, Bonnie Honig, and William Connolly among others. The shift away from the one-sided concern with rationality and consensus, which marked debate in political theory for decades, as is most clearly visible in the long dominance of authors such as John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, is desirable. Our concern is, however, that agonistic political thought risks merely replacing one one-sidedness with another one and does little more than inaugurate a new round in the time-honored debate about conflict- and consensus-oriented social and political thought.[1] This risk stems from some obliviousness to conceptual history in contemporary debates, one feature of which is the acceptance of existing—"sectoral" or "disciplinary"—divides in social and political thought, and accordingly the conceptualization of conflict as either economic or social or political. The remedy for this risk, we will suggest, is a retrieval of conceptual constellations from earlier debates for current purposes and the restoration of a more comprehensive perspective on conflict in social and political life.

Furthermore, we will try to show that even though there are strong reasons for emphasizing the agonistic aspects of political life, mere emphasis on the latter too easily discards or downplays questions about the common good, both about its nature and about the ways in which it can be achieved. In other words, agonism would need to address more clearly the substantive scope of conflict. In an earlier essay, we have sketched the contours of a broader perspective on society and politics, which focuses on the interpretation and production of the common good in and through conflict, by use of the term "synagonism."[2] We proposed this concept, borrowing from Greek as the classical language of political philosophy, to underline the inevitability of conflict in a free society, while at the same time suggesting that such conflict can occur in ways that benefit the city. The term "synagonism" can best be understood in its contrast with the more familiar "antagonism," which is composed of the prefix *anti* (against) and *agon* (struggle) and is used, since Marx at least (see below), to refer to struggle that can only end with the decisive victory of one party over the other, or even the annihilation of the loser. In contrast, synagonism—replacing *anti* with *syn* (together, co-)—literally

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means *co-struggle*: the struggle of one against another in view of excellence winning. Thus, synagonism can be understood as *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*. In the current article, we will more systematically confront the past and present varieties of agonism with this approach. Thus, we will in the following refer to synagonism as an articulated way of conceiving of conflict and the common good, based on the assumption that some such way—which does not have to refer to our own attempt—would be useful to better grasp the challenges our contemporary societies and polities face.

Our reasoning will proceed as follows. As a first step, we will briefly discuss three basic—one may want to say "classical"—ways of theorizing conflict: the economic theory of competition, the social theory of (class) antagonism, and the political theory of agonism. These are "sectoral" theories in the sense that they locate significant conflict in one area of social life, and their conclusions for society and politics at large are limited not least by these sectoral assumptions about the source of conflict.[3] Despite those limitations, a discussion of these approaches can serve to elucidate the issues at stake in any more comprehensive social and political philosophy of conflict, to which we turn in the second step of our argument. For our purposes, we select two of those latter approaches, one classic—Immanuel Kant's anthropology and view of history—and one contemporary—Axel Honneth's "struggle for recognition," both of which, while reserving a prominent position for conflict, link such struggle more closely to a common purpose of those entering into conflict. Each of these brief discussions is meant to serve as a stepping-stone for the further specification, by means of contrast, of the approach of synagonism.[4]

"Sectoral" Approaches to Conflict

Under the label of agonism, the current debate about conflict takes place almost exclusively in political theory. However, at least three major versions of theorizing conflict in social and political life have been proposed over the past few decades, all directed against dominant (disciplinary) alternatives, that focused rather on consensus and cooperation. During the 1950s and 1960s, "conflict sociology" became a label for sociological perspectives proposed by Lewis Coser, Ralf Dahrendorf, and John Rex among others, which challenged the dominant Parsonsian view according to which normative consensus was the key to understanding social integration.[5] During the 1970s, "neo-liberal economics" in various guises argued in favor of a renewal of competitive behavior against the so-called Keynesian consensus that required concertation and cooperation among organized economic actors. Both of these approaches had roots in the classical traditions of the social sciences, the former in Karl Marx and Max Weber, and the latter in classical political economy and neo-classical economics. Agonism, in its current form, emerged in (critical) political theory during the 1990s, drawing on the preceding rediscovery of this vein in Carl Schmitt's and Hannah Arendt's works,

which in turn were influenced by historical studies of ancient Greece, in particular Burckhardt's, and of "neo-Roman" republican thinking having its source in Machiavelli.[6] The following retrieval of the main elements of these approaches is necessarily brief and schematic, focusing on the basic understanding of the relation between conflict and the common good and largely disregarding other aspects as well as most debate internal to those intellectual traditions.

Competition: The Invisible Hand

The economic theorem of market competition is usually considered as originating in Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*, but the author who first used this theorem as the cornerstone for the systematic elaboration of "political economy" was Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations*. The origins of the economic theorem of competition are roughly contemporaneous with those of social contract theory, and both approaches centrally deal with the conceptual consequences of the rise of what is often called the modern concept of freedom.[7] Thus, the theorem was originally part of a comprehensive discourse of moral and political philosophy rather than of any specialized discipline of economics.

Mandeville's agents are conceptual individuals in the same way as those of Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*; and the question that arises for both is one about the collective outcome of the sum of the actions (or interactions) of these individuals. Individualist political theory poses the issue of order as a normatively required outcome and then looks at the preconditions for achieving it, the main precondition being the act of agreeing on a social contract that founds the state. Individualist economic theory, turning the issue around, investigates the mechanism of interaction and then claims to find a collectively beneficial outcome that emerges by virtue of the mechanism alone, without any additional requirements.

The discipline of economics as we know it emerged from philosophy in several steps. "Political economy" was first a subfield within moral and political philosophy. When it emerged as a separate field of inquiry, it was still a mode of political theorizing, as the adjective indicated. The political economists of the nineteenth century did not merely propose free trade and *laissez faire* as the best way to organize commerce; they saw their proposal as a scientifically based argument for the reordering of society and politics. Marx's denunciation of this "science" as "ideology" revealed the tension within this double commitment. It was with the marginalist revolution in the late nineteenth century, now known as the beginning of neoclassical economics as it is basically still taught today, that "economics" dropped the adjective "political"—most visibly in Marshall's *Principles of Economics*—and claimed to be a pure science.

The core of this theorizing resides in the assumption of rational actors meeting in markets with a view to exchanging their goods to maximize their utility. Even though—or because—these actors are conceptualized as similar, they enter into a form of conflict with others. Their immediate aim is to exchange as many of their goods as possible and/or at the highest price possible, and thus they

oppose others who aim to sell the same goods under conditions of limited demand or who aim to buy goods at the lowest price possible. The assumption that numerous such agents encounter each other in markets turns such situation of conflict into "competition." The additional assumptions that all agents know about the goods and their prices, that is, they have "complete information," and that no agent can influence the exchange by nonmarket means, lead to "perfect competition." Under conditions of perfect competition—and this is the outcome of key relevance for our argument—markets will achieve "equilibrium" and the interests of all agents will be satisfied in the best possible way. Thus, conflict turns into order, and order satisfies everyone.

For our purposes, we can summarize the economic theorem as suggesting that this adversarial behavior of individuals becomes socially beneficial. The means by which we arrive at this result is the conceptualization of conflict as "competition." Normatively, economists are thus inclined to argue for a social condition in which all economic actors can freely position themselves in competition with other actors. Furthermore, the need to fare well in such competition would unleash innovations and thus improve the overall societal situation. At first sight, the similarities to synagonism appear striking. Like economic theorizing, synagonism focuses on singular human beings (rather than pre-constituted collectivities) and their interaction (this is a key issue to which we will need to return below). It similarly suggests that some superior outcome will be created in conflictive interaction, and it implies that the outcome can be improved by conflict. A closer look, however, reveals that the economic approach deviates from our conception in several fundamental respects.

First, the *knowledge* basis on which the theory of economic competition is erected differs radically from the one adopted in synagonism. As already alluded to above, the political economists and their successors in economics assume that they produce *scientific* knowledge uncovering the laws of economic action. The concept of the market provides the formal frame in which interaction takes place; its formalizability enables the identification of laws and regularities. In contrast, a social and political *philosophy* of synagonism would insist that the rule framework for improving the city is itself modifiable by the actors in the course of their struggle. The question whether and when market interaction is appropriate is thus a judgment that needs to be considered and debated among those who interact in the polity.

In line with its understanding of science, political economy assumes that *causal mechanisms* are at work in society that turn competition and its outcomes into something that was not intended by the actors themselves. The constitutive metaphor of this approach—"the invisible hand" of political economy—gives 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*. This formula captures two aspects that distinguish synagonistic from economic thinking: the *agency* at work and the *substance* of the outcome of conflict.

Political economists assume that all novelty that is accepted by the market is good, precisely because it is mechanically validated by the conflictive interaction. Synagonism, however, considers that an evaluation by the actors is required to judge whether something new enhances the common good. Economic theorizing ever since Adam Smith has focused on increase, be it in terms of "wealth," "growth," or "development," as the outcome of competitive interaction. It has thus robbed this outcome of any substance, a move that made it desirable to have "ever more" of the good that the conflict produces. Arguably, as many critics have pointed out, such elimination of limits to the increase of something that is substantively undefined is absurd.[8] A synagonistic approach would insist that substantive reasons why a good is good can and need to be invoked in the conflict over its production; "goodness" is a matter of interpretation, and such interpretation is itself part of the conflictive interaction.

Antagonism: Behind the Backs

Presenting his writings as a "critique of political economy," Karl Marx directly addressed the theory of economic liberalism that later became the core of the economic sciences. He is also often seen as the author to whom we owe the introduction of "antagonism" as a key concept into social and political thought;[9] certainly he emphasized the idea of conflict in social and political life. Reinterpreting in a more political vein the normative idea of liberty, which is also at the core of economic liberalism, he spoke of the "free association of free human beings" (Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*) and suggested that economic freedom alone would result in alienation and oppression because human relations would turn into relations between things as a consequence of the generalization of commodity exchange. The conflict between agents in competitive markets was for him, therefore, only one form of conflict in capitalist society; and compared to the conflict between capitalists and workers it was not the decisive one. For him, rather, history was driven by class struggle and bourgeois society bred an antagonism between individuals that did not have its roots in competing persons but in the societal conditions of life. Such philosophy of history also enabled him to see 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" (Marx, *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy*).

Clearly, Marx's theory of antagonism shares with the economic theory of market competition some features that set it, too, apart from synagonism. Two of those features stem from the common historical context of elaboration. In terms of the *knowledge* basis on which the theory of class antagonism is erected, Marx provided a mirror image to the approaches of the would-be science of political economy by denouncing them as ideology while himself claiming to be unveiling the truth about domination in bourgeois society. Unsurprisingly, too, the critique of political economy shares with its object the view that there are *causal mecha-*

nisms that bring the outcome of conflictive interaction about without the agents willing it. Rather than an "invisible hand" enhancing the wealth of nations, Marx's relevant metaphor is the working of history "behind the backs" of the human actors.[10]

As a consequence of this move, Marx's theory of antagonism differs radically from the economic theory of market competition in a third respect: where economic theorizing focuses on individuals and their interactions, Marx introduces pre-constituted social groups such as classes to whom a human being may belong without knowing or wanting to. To situate synagonism in this respect, we need to embark on a brief exercise of comparative ontology. In terms of basic ontologies, the opposition between atomism/individualism, on the one hand, and holism/collectivism, on the other hand, is a dispute between forms of "social metaphysics" that cannot be won.[11] In our time, true, all "collective concepts" (Max Weber) have rightly been exposed to critical scrutiny. Thus, it has become rather implausible to build an approach in social and political thought on concepts such as "class" or "nation." However, this contemporary-contextual situation does not give any ontological advantage to individualism over collectivism. In our view, a more fruitful starting point is an understanding of the social world as composed of singular human beings already in social relations. From such an angle, there is no principal reason to doubt the existence of structured and even relatively durable sets of social relations that can be conceptualized as groups or classes—in contrast to much current sociological debate about individualization. We only suggest that such phenomena should be seen as historical configurations to be analyzed empirically rather than conceptualized ontologically.[12]

As a consequence of the ontological rather than historical postulate of collectivism, the possibility of reflexive agentiality that is important for synagonism is much reduced in Marx's thought—with the exception of his particular theory of revolution. The latter, though, draws our attention to another difference. In contrast to both economic thinking and synagonism, Marx recognizes immediate beneficial effects of conflictive interaction in the present in an only very limited way, and sees them rather as emerging in a novel societal configuration of the future.

In positive distinction to economics, though, Marx takes care not to formally predetermine the quality of the outcome of conflict. Well aware of the issue, 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, thus, also without link to the present of the actors. In synagonism, the outcome of conflictive 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 antagonistic and its outcome determined and another one, not yet reached, in which antagonism subsides and the outcome of conflict 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.

Agonism: Dealing with the Adversary or Enemy

Current agonistic approaches have been developed with surprisingly little recourse to the aforementioned traditions of conflict-oriented economic and social theory, even though there is a personal link to Marxism in some authors such as Chantal Mouffe. This absence may partly be explained by the fact that agonism is proposed as political theory, or as a theorizing of the political, rather than social or economic theory. However, the acceptance of such sectoral separation continues the mere shifting of the underlying problématique, as happened in the Marxist response to political economy, in place of elaborating a more comprehensive approach. Indeed, like conflict sociology and neo-liberal economics, this most recent revival of conflict-oriented thinking draws selectively on long-standing intellectual traditions. There are two quite distinct such historical sources, the recourse to which in large part also explains the bipolar structure of current debates.

Niccolò Machiavelli's view of the beneficial nature of conflict between the few and many, the nobility and the people, in the *Discourses* may be considered as a common starting point, but the path divides over the interpretation of this analysis. On the one hand, some authors see this text as a key event in the constitution of civic republicanism, a political theory that strongly shaped debates in England and then in North America until the late eighteenth century, to subside later on. Such republicanism is sometimes seen as reviving political concepts from the Roman Republic and thus referred to as "neo-Roman," sometimes reinterpreted in more original fashion by going back to the democratic tradition of the Greek polis, in particular to Aristotle's rendering of it.[13] In all cases, though, it is the emphasis on the citizens' commitment to the polity and the honorable contest over how best to contribute to the common good that is seen as the characteristic feature of this mode of thinking. On the other hand, Carl Schmitt's definition of the political as being based on the distinction between friend and enemy provides the key reference to other authors, most centrally Chantal Mouffe, who "pluralizes" Schmitt's rather monolithic and essentialist concept of the political by inserting it into the neo-Gramscian view of a struggle for hegemony under conditions of democratic pluralism.[14]

The republican strand of agonistic thinking by and large sustains a strong understanding of the common good. In contrast to the liberal tradition, this understanding is not merely procedural; some broad agreement about the nature of the common good is primary to the struggle among the citizens, which then

becomes a struggle over how best to realize such common good. In the Schmittian strand, in contrast, agon is truly central and the good is defined in the struggle and by the winner. At least in situations of strong dissociation, there is no good in common between friends and enemies, winners and losers. In current agonism, Mouffe's pluralization is a means to deal with, and remedy, this absence of any commonality, but the strong recourse to Schmitt appears barely compatible with any idea of a nonexclusionary common.

More than both economic and Marxian thinking, the tradition of agonistic political philosophy has significant features in common with synagonism. Returning to our ways of assessing the former two, we can single out three such features: agonistic reasoning occurs in the form of philosophy rather than science, not least because its origins far predate the assertion of the idea of a science of the social world. For related reasons, agonism emphasizes agency; in numerous versions it indeed appears as strongly antideterminist and at least bordering on a voluntarist stance. Significantly, both Carl Schmitt and Hannah Arendt included a critique of the determinism of social-science reasoning in their argument. And finally, the outcome of agonistic interaction is here clearly seen as related to the will and intention of the actors, not by some mechanism that works without their knowing.

However, agonistic reasoning does not satisfy all the exigencies of the comprehensive social and political philosophy of conflict that we see as needed. To some extent, its desiderata can be identified by briefly returning to the tension between the Arendtian and the Schmittian strands of agonistic thinking, as we may call them for the sake of brevity. The rather inimical coexistence of these strands points to an unresolved relation between conflict and the commons. In the former, even though Arendt herself does not refer to it explicitly, there tends to be an assumption of pre-given commonality that moves this thought close to communitarianism. For this reason, some theorists of deliberative democracy such as Jürgen Habermas have sometimes included the whole republican debate in the category of communitarian thinking.[15] In such reading there is little import of agon in agonism despite the use of the term. In turn, the strong emphasis on struggle in the latter approach is necessarily based on a partial, partisan definition of the common, namely the one that will be imposed by the winners—at least temporarily, in the current, more moderate versions. A partisan common, though, is a *contradictio in adiecto*, despite all conceptual edifices that might be erected to conceal the effects of such move. Thus, the bifurcation of contemporary agonism is indicative of the lack of any convincing answer to the question how conflictive interaction relates to the common good.[16]

This lack, we argue, is largely due to the fact that by presenting itself as a political theory agonism deprives itself of some of the possible resources by the use of which an answer can be found. As briefly indicated above, two of the key sources of inspiration for current agonism, Carl Schmitt and Hannah Arendt, argued for their emphasis on the political by referring to the need to reject what they saw as overly strong notions of the social. Their criticism of social determinism and of the denigration of the political as the "administration of the social"

(Arendt) certainly contains valid insights. Given the force of their argument, though, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to build on them when developing a "non-sectoral" social and political philosophy of agonism.[17] Such a philosophy, in turn, is required because sectoral approaches cannot answer any question about the scope of agonism, that is, the substantive matter to which conflictive interaction refers. Such substance will not be limited to what is sometimes seen as genuinely political issues, such as the boundaries of the polity and the relation to other polities, in other words, matters of sovereignty and of war and peace. Rather, conflict will include concern for issues that were central to social and economic theories: the satisfaction of needs, material (in-)equality and solidarity, access to spheres of commerce, communication, and education.

Or, to put our critique in different terms, current agonistic theorizing tends to work with an understanding of the political that emphasizes the form of the political relation over the problématique that the relation addresses. Chantal Mouffe, for instance, 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."[18] 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 a reference to common matters and the need to decide about them, whether by agreement or not. And on the other hand, it reserves for the political what in any conventional understanding can also occur in other, nonpolitical walks of life, namely dispute and conflict. This leads to the opposition of an antagonism-based understanding of the political to a consensus-oriented one on which much current agonistic reasoning is based. However, the opposition is posed without referring to that which political dispute or agreement is about.[19] In contrast, a synagonistic approach would focus on the political as being concerned with common matters without predetermining in which way—agonistically or consensually—these matters are confronted. Synagonism would thus refuse to see either 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, it would see the political as posing the much more substantive question of the continuity of, and the amendments to, the community. As a consequence of such assumption, synagonistic political reasoning can only proceed fruitfully when it is linked to substantive social analysis.[20]

Interim Conclusion

Concluding this first step of our presentation, three observations can be made. First, there has been a long history of varieties of agonism, that is, ways of emphasizing conflict in social and political thought, but the main strands have each focused on conflict under one particular angle only: economic competition, "social" antagonism in class struggle, and political agon. In each of these cases, the link to a comprehensive understanding of social and political life is undercon-

ceptualized and/or problematic. Second, none of the varieties of agonism is entirely superseded. Current agonistic pluralism, for instance, could benefit from the considerations in economics about enhancing the common good, and from the implications about the socially structured nature of conflict in the antagonist strand of thinking. Third, none of these "pure" varieties is entirely convincing. The emphasis on conflict appears understandable as a move against the predominance of consensus-oriented thinking in certain historical periods, but it tends to go along, not necessarily with a neglect, but with an underproblematization of that which conflict is about.

Synagonism maintains an emphasis on conflict, but, unlike agonistic pluralism, it introduces into the idea of conflict a substantive orientation that is seen as identifiable in the meanings the actors attach to the conflict. Thus, unlike in competition according to economics, the benefit of the city does not emerge mechanically as the aggregate outcome of exchange actions, and, in contrast to the Marxian notion of antagonism, the reaping of the benefit is not postponed into an undefined future beyond the grasp of present actors. In relation to these latter two approaches, on the one hand, the theory of synagonism does not 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. In relation to agonistic pluralism, on the other hand, synagonism is too much interested in the conditions of action as based in social relations to adopt either a perspective of pure political philosophy or one in which the expression of the political is socially predetermined.

Comprehensive Approaches to Conflict and the Common Good

Our somewhat stylized reasoning certainly did not do justice to the richness of conflict-oriented thought, even though we claim to have captured the main lines of such thinking. To give more precise contours to the alternative that we are advocating, it is useful to conclude by considering those varieties of agonism in social and political thought, rare as they may be, that contain stronger components of synagonism than the three "sectoral" theories. The two such approaches we single out are situated at the dawn of political modernity and in the current era, respectively: We will briefly discuss Immanuel Kant's concept of "unsocial sociability" and Axel Honneth's social philosophy of the "struggle for recognition" as particular varieties of agonism, namely as conceptualizations in which the conflictive ("unsocial," "struggle") is explicitly connected to the consensual, or to the notion of some good in common ("sociability," "recognition").[21]

Unsocial Sociability: The Thinning out of the Social

The concept "unsocial sociability" is arguably Immanuel Kant's key contribution to *social* philosophy. Linking the affirmative form of "the social" with its negation, Kant establishes the most general possibility of thinking together that

which divides human beings and that which unites them.[22] The core formula of this idea can be found in the fourth proposition of his *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* of 1784, which needs to be quoted in full:

> *The means which nature employs to bring about the development of innate capacities is that of antagonism in society, in so far as this antagonism becomes in the long run the cause of a law-governed social order*. By antagonism I mean in this context the *unsocial sociability* of men, that is their inclination to come together in society, coupled, however, with a continual resistance which constantly threatens to break this society up.[23]

Kant characterizes here unsocial sociability as an antagonism, thus underlining the conflictive nature of this phenomenon.[24] Further description shows that Kant depicts here something close to what we call synagonism. The "resistance," namely, that human beings encounter through other human beings "awakes all forces" in them, "makes them overcome their laziness and [. . .] gain a rank among [their] fellow human beings."[25] As a result of this activity, "the first true steps from rawness to culture" are taken; "all talents are gradually developed; the sense of taste is formed"; and continued enlightenment can then even mark the beginning of the foundation of society as a moral whole. Clearly, it is here interaction across resistance that enhances the excellence of the city as well as of its members, thus synagonism.

However, it seems that these beneficial effects arise—not unlike the view of political economists and Marx—against the intentions of the human beings themselves. Apparently, Kant works with a dualistic anthropology, in which will and intention of the singular human beings are opposed to human nature: "The human being wants concord; but nature knows better what is good for the species: it wants discord." There is an idea of "necessity" (a term used in the fifth and seventh propositions) that drives humanity to its achievements, and unsociability is seen as the means used by nature to produce "fruit" as culture, the arts, and the "best societal order." The "unsocial," then, becomes something that works "behind the backs" of human beings and may bear fruit that was not on their horizon of action. In such a reading, one can see how Hegel's, and also Marx's later philosophies of history with an emancipatory intent, were inspired by Kant's opening.

Nevertheless, it is also true that Hegel and Marx developed their ideas rather against Kant, and a second reading can show why this is so. Staying close to Kant's *Idea for a General History*, one can recognize a shift in mode of presentation, between propositions five to seven, on the one hand, and eight and nine, on the other. In the former, Kant identifies "problems" that humankind needs to address and solve, whereas in the latter he speculates about a "plan of nature" within which those solutions are contained and may emerge in the course of history. It is this latter mode that lends itself to an interpretation as a teleological philosophy of history. In relation to the former set of propositions, however, this "plan of nature" can be seen to materialize in the "philosophical attempt" to

elaborate possible solutions to the problems through use of the faculty of reasoning. In this sense, philosophy is not providing a superior worldview from some plane of reason that is entirely separate from the ordinary mind and experience of humans, but rather is a contribution to pragmatic engagement with the world. Kant's ideas about conflicts and their outcomes would then stay close to our concept of synagonism, but we would still need to grasp the difference between these two modes of presentation.

If, namely, as we think Kant holds, a good social and political order is *not* the *automatic* result of a "plan of nature" that is already effective without human beings contributing to it, then the analysis of the "problems" points to the difficulty of moving from the "unsocial" toward the "social." The question, which has indeed occupied Kant's interpreters, is how the relation between the "inclination to come together in society" and the risk "to break this society up" is determined.[26] The "plan of nature" then is to be read as the outline of a separate political theory that receives its guidance from reason, and not from the human inclination toward "unsocial sociability" itself. Rather than preparing the ground for substantive philosophies of history, Kant thus contributes to a (rational, normative) political theory that takes distance from the social. Starting out from the assumption of autonomy and seeing the need to contain the consequences of autonomy by elaborating universal norms, his potentially rich social philosophy turns toward a liberal proceduralism that transforms the synagonism of "unsocial sociability" into an "antagonism" that needs to be handled by rationally devised procedures.

Struggle for Recognition: Social Pathologies without Polity

Drawing on Hegel's response to Kant, Axel Honneth's theory of recognition tries to be more specific about both the "social" and the "unsocial" in human life. Avoiding the Kantian-liberal thinning out of the social, he introduces three dimensions of social relations—love/friendship, respect, and solidarity/accomplishment—and develops a theory of society (or social philosophy) that emphasizes the need for a balanced coexistence of all three realms of recognition in a well-ordered society.[27] This philosophy links the common ("syn") to conflictuality ("agon") by insisting, on the one side, on recognition as a basic human need and striving, bringing human beings together, but, on the other, also on the struggle for such recognition as the mode in which this striving is pursued, a struggle that may bring human beings also apart. It also works with a differentiation of dimensions that allows the introduction of concepts of liberty and autonomy, on the one hand, as the basis for the legal form of recognition through respect, and of community broadly (or rather collectively) understood through the notion of solidarity that is conceived as society-wide. Thus, one may think that the major components that we have been asking for are already present in the social philosophy of recognition. On closer inspection, however, this is not entirely the case.

Honneth himself inscribes his thinking into the tradition of social philosophy and, thus, distinguishes it from political philosophy. The separation of the two

genres, according to him, occurs at the moment when the belief that the pursuit of the good life could be the objective of a polity crumbles in the face of increasing individualization and pluralization. From then on, political philosophy limited itself to developing a theory of justice on the basis of equal liberty, Immanuel Kant and John Rawls marking two of the most important way-stations on this trajectory. In contrast, social philosophy inherited the question of the good life, but—accepting the dissociation of the political—limited its reach to the analysis of societal processes that endangered the possibility for members of any given society to pursue a good life, a tradition reaching from Rousseau and Hegel to Marx and Nietzsche to Adorno and Horkheimer.[28]

Consequently, Honneth's *Struggle for Recognition* is focused on the idea of social interaction and its forms; questions of the appropriate form of the polity enter only, so to say, "externally" in terms of institutional requirements for supporting and safeguarding all modes of recognition that are needed for human beings in their "private" lives.[29] The "pathologies of the social" that are in the center of social philosophy—alienation, anomie, atomization—arise, it appears, in ways that are unrelated to the political constitution of a society. From the point of view of synagonism, in contrast, such separation of the social from the political is neither (1) a necessary step in the history of intellectual genres, nor (2) an appropriate conceptual path to understanding the normative problems of specific sociopolitical configurations.

(1) The conceptual separation of the social from the political as is common today is by and large a response to the success of the so-called democratic revolution that posited equal liberty of individuals as the starting-point of politico-legal reasoning.[30] The political having apparently been robbed of its substance, the social was to step in to explain both (or rather alternatively) societal integration and social pathologies. There is, however, no compelling reason to assume that the relations of human beings to each other ("the social") have either no impact on the substance of the polity at all any longer (the individualist–liberal and the proceduralist views) or that they determine the appropriate direction of the political (both "left-wing" and "right-wing" communitarianisms in the form of the cultural-linguistic or the class-interest-based theories of the polity). The question of the legitimate substantive objectives of a polity may have become much more difficult to answer under conditions of democracy, of collective self-determination, but the arrival of the politico-legal individual on the historical scene does not turn the relations of these beings toward each other into something necessarily a-political.

(2) In recent essays, written after an intense engagement with the political philosophies of communitarianism, Honneth acknowledges the problem of separation (to paraphrase Michael Walzer[31]) by explicitly discussing the relation between the (social) theory of recognition and a (political) theory of justice.[32] It seems, however, that all that occurs here is an explication of the prior idea that a society in which all realms of recognition are present in a balanced way fulfils the requirements a theory of justice would pose. Honneth, thus, accepts explicitly the impact of political action on the conditions for the pursuit of the good life,

alleviating somewhat his earlier sharp separation between the social and the political. However, he remains within a mode of reasoning in which it is a philosophy of the social, his theory of the struggle for recognition namely, that determines what the appropriate conditions for the good life are. In other words, he stabilizes the relation between the social and the political with a view to retaining a clear-cut, socio-philosophically determined answer to the question what a "pathology" is and what an "injustice" is.[33]

Conclusion

At this point, we are able to systematically distinguish the requested theory of synagonism from other agonistic approaches, referring by the latter generally to social and political philosophies in which conflict and struggle are seen as key features of the social and political world. After our interim conclusion above, we can be brief and proceed by referring explicitly only to the theory of the struggle for recognition as an agonistic approach that is comprehensive and not sectoral and that explicitly addresses the relation between the social and the political.

Starting with this latter distinction, first and most fundamentally, synagonism would not present itself, unlike the theory of the struggle for recognition, as a *social philosophy, but as a philosophy that theorizes the relation between the social and the political*. While the theory of the struggle for recognition remains content with identifying social situations in which human beings are insufficiently recognized, the theory of synagonism, in contrast, would see the outcome of the "struggle," of the "agon," as potentially directly improving the "life in common," or as enhancing the quality of the polity. The relation to other human beings that is expressed in "syn" indicates that the struggle is based on respect and, indeed, "recognition" of the other, but it also expresses the sense that "agon" enhances the common good, a dimension absent in Honneth's conceptualization.

By implication, second, the theory of synagonism would not be a theory, the focus of which is exclusively on the *well-being of the singular member of a society*, but also one that emphasizes something *collective and political*. The human being is here conceptualized not only as "social" in the sense of realizing her/his self in interaction with others, but also as "political" in the sense of a being in community, as a being whose status is enhanced by the way she/he contributes to the common.[34]

And, third, the theory of synagonism would not inscribe itself into the tradition of theories of the well-ordered society. In the theory of the struggle for recognition, the appropriate plurality and level of recognition seems achievable, and then the normative condition of something like a good society is satisfied,[35] whereas in the theory of synagonism the competition always strives for something better, something not yet achieved; it is inherently creative of the novel.

Notes

[1] Recent work in this area is characterized by attempts to overcome this opposition (see, for instance, Andrew Schaap, "Agonism in Divided Societies," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 32, no. 2 (2006): 255–77), without though, as we hope to demonstrate here, overcoming the more fundamental limitations of this political-theory debate. Refraining here from detailed referencing for reasons of space, we point to Andrew Schaap's article also for further references to theorists of agonism and of deliberative democracy, the latter being the label under which consensus-oriented thinking mostly occurs.

[2] Nathalie Karagiannis and Peter Wagner, "Towards a Theory of Synagonism," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 13 (September 2005): 235–62.

[3] Historically, indeed, the approaches have partly succeeded each other by means of shifting these assumptions.

[4] The authors would like to thank the participants in a seminar at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt in September 2006 and in the workshop on "Social and Political Agon" at the European University Institute in November 2006, as well as three reviewers for the *Journal of Social Philosophy*, for helpful comments and suggestions.

[5] See, e.g., Lewis Coser, *Continuities in the Study of Social Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1967); John Rex, *Social Conflict: A Conceptual and Theoretical Analysis* (London: Longman, 1981).

[6] Jacob Burckhardt, *The Greeks and Greek Civilisation* (London: Fontana Press, 1998); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975); Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[7] See Peter Wagner and Nathalie Karagiannis, "The Social and the Political: Retrieving the Meanings of a Distinction," in *The Social Sciences in the Global Age*, ed. Peter Wagner (Cambridge: Polity Press, forthcoming).

[8] Cornelius Castoriadis, "La 'rationalité' du capitalisme," in *Figures du pensable: Les carrefours du labyrinthe VI*, ed. Cornelius Castoriadis (Paris: Seuil, 1999), 65–92; Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).

[9] Immanuel Kant already used the term (in German) in the fourth proposition of his *Idea for a General History of Humankind with a Cosmopolitan Intent* of 1784 (see below). At about the same time as Marx, it was also employed by John Stuart Mill and may have been a neologism that became diffused during that period in English political philosophy.

[10] Outcome-oriented agency is not entirely absent in Marx's writings, as the progress of class struggle requires the development of class consciousness; and a stronger role for agentiality was foreseen in some strands of the Marxist tradition, often drawing on the early writings. The articulation between such human agency and basic tenets of the underlying philosophy of history has, however, not been convincingly spelled out within that tradition. We return to this general question below in our discussion of Kant.

[11] Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, *De la justification* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).

[12] This argument would need to be developed further in and for a contemporary re-specification of the concept of solidarity. See Nathalie Karagiannis, "Multiple Solidarities," in *Varieties of World-Making: Beyond Globalization*, ed. Nathalie Karagiannis and Peter Wagner (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 154–72; Nathalie Karagiannis, ed., *European Solidarity* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007). For a contemporary critique of capitalism see Peter Wagner, *Modernity as Experience and Interpretation: A New Sociology of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), pt. II.

[13] Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*; Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*; Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

[14] See, among other writings, Chantal Mouffe, *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt* (London: Verso, 1999); Chantal Mouffe, *Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism* (Vienna: Institut für höhere Studien, 2000), Political science series 72; Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005).

[15] Jürgen Habermas, "Three Normative Models of Democracy," in *The Inclusion of the Other*, ed. Jürgen Habermas (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 239–52.

[16] For a recent subtle discussion of Arendtian and Schmittian components in current debate, reviewing not least Mouffe's reading of Arendt, see Keith Breen, "Agonism, Antagonism and the Necessity of Care," in *Law and Agonistic Politics*, ed. Andrew Schaap (London: Ashgate, forthcoming 2008). There is ongoing discussion about Arendt's agonism; see for instance, Dana Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999). We are aware of the fact that our distinction between Arendtian and Schmittian agonism, following an established way of speaking, does not quite do justice to Arendt, whose agonism is indeed rather close to synagonism, except for the relation between the social and the political that we discuss below.

[17] We have briefly discussed Chantal Mouffe's conceptualization of the political and the social in Karagiannis and Wagner, "Towards a Theory of Synagonism."

[18] Mouffe, *Deliberative Democracy*, 15; see also similarly Mouffe, *On the Political*, 9.

[19] See Bonnie Honig, "On Two Paradoxes in Democratic Theory: Rousseau, Habermas and the Politics of Legitimation," paper presented at the University of Chicago, 2002, for a similar criticism.

[20] Our objective is to apply the synagonistic approach to questions of policy-making, and we have started to do so in Nathalie Karagiannis and Peter Wagner, "The Stranger and Synagonistic Politics," in *Law and Agonistic Politics*, ed. Andrew Schaap (London: Ashgate, forthcoming 2008).

[21] It may seem more suitable to discuss either Kant and Hegel or Habermas and Honneth, and certainly our analysis could be extended to those of these thinkers on whom we do not focus. The asymmetric comparison, though, permits—in brief space—the demonstration of the shift in and between the social and the political that underlies our analysis (see for more detail Karagiannis and Wagner, "The Social and the Political"). In Kant, at the moment before the rise of the social sciences, there is an implicit separation of the social and the political, a divide that becomes explicit in Honneth after a long experience with, and critique of, the social sciences.

[22] We will not explicitly discuss, but only briefly allude to, the relation of Kant's thought to either political or economic liberalism (social contract theory and the theory of market competition) and to the impact it has had—via Hegel, also a key source for Axel Honneth much later—on Marx's theory of antagonism.

[23] Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose" (1784), in *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 44.

[24] We want to note—without taking this further in this context—that Kant himself is ambiguous on one of the components of "unsocial"; immediately after the lines we have quoted, Kant writes: "Man has an inclination to *live in society*, since he feels in this state more like a man, that is, he feels able to develop his natural capacities. But he also has a great tendency to *live as an individual*, to *isolate* himself (our italics), since he also encounters in himself the unsocial characteristic of wanting to direct everything in accordance with his own ideas." This opposition of solitude and conflict seems drawn from Rousseau. However, "Kant differs from Rousseau, since he believes that the state of nature is not a state of perfection. Thus, man is not corrupted by society. On the contrary, society has civilised him" (Reiss, *Kant's Political Writings*, 27).

[25] We will see in a moment the proximity to Hegel's and Honneth's concept of recognition.

[26] See, e.g., Hans Reiss in the "Introduction" to *Kant's Political Writings*, 36.

[27] Axel Honneth, *Kampf um Anerkennung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), English trans. *Struggle for Recognition* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995). In Karagiannis and Wagner, "Towards a Theory of Synagonism," we have shown how notions of love, friendship, and respect are central to the idea of synagonism, thus highlighting the ancient roots of Hegel's and Honneth's key concepts. Aristotle discusses "recognition" in sec. XI of *Poetics*.

[28] Axel Honneth, *Pathologien des Sozialen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984).

[29] For a related critique plus an attempt at introducing more explicitly political reasoning into Honneth's approach, see Jean-Philippe Deranty and Emmanuel Renault, "Politicizing Honneth's Ethics of Recognition," *Thesis Eleven*, no. 88 (February 2007): 92–111.

[30] We have attempted a synagonistic re-reading of the concept of modern freedom in Nathalie Karagiannis and Peter Wagner, "The Liberty of the Ancients Compared to the One of the Moderns," in *The Greek* Polis *and the Invention of Democracy: A Politico-Cultural Transformation and Its Interpretations*, ed. Johann P. Arnason, Kurt Raaflaub, and Peter Wagner, in preparation.

[31] Michael Walzer, "Liberalism and the Art of Separation," *Political Theory* 12, no. 3 (1984): 315–30.

[32] Axel Honneth, "Gerechtigkeit und kommunikative Freiheit: Überlegungen im Anschluss an Hegel," in *Subjektivität und Anerkennung*, ed. Barbara Merker, Georg Mohr, and Michael Quante (Paderborn: Mentis, 2004), 213–32; Axel Honneth, "Preliminary Remarks on Theories of Justice as Analyses of Society," lecture in the Colloquium "Philosophy and Society" at the University of Rome Tor Vergata, May 2008; Joel Anderson and Axel Honneth, "Autonomy, Vulnerability, Recognition, and Justice," in *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism: New Essays*, ed. John Christman and Joel Anderson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 77–100.

[33] The current research program on "paradoxes of capitalist modernization" of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, directed by Axel Honneth, can be seen as the embarking on an empirical research agenda on these issues. For a first programmatic presentation, see Axel Honneth, ed., *Befreiung aus der Mündigkeit: Paradoxien des gegenwärtigen Kapitalismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2002). Until now, though, the relation between the research agenda and the philosophy has not been clearly spelled out. The recent Rome lecture (Honneth, "Preliminary Remarks") addresses this issue directly and refers to the (Hegel-inspired) method of "normative reconstruction" with the objective of "showing which social spheres make which contributions to securing and realizing values that are already socially institutionalized." While broadly agreeing with the approach, we note two points of difference: From a synagonistic perspective, first, it is not "spheres" but actions, thus the struggle itself, that make such contributions. And second, the idea of social institutionalization of values obscures the persistent need for arguing for values (and their changes) as something indeed to be striven for in common, thus something inherently political.

[34] A faint echo of this idea can be found in Honneth's third mode of recognition, variously referred to as solidarity and accomplishment, in which, however, it is rather the "economic," production-oriented contribution to the common that is seen as a ground for recognition.

[35] In "Gerechtigkeit und kommunikative Freiheit," Honneth refers the possibility of future improvements of institutions and practices to the "validity surplus" inherent in the plurality of principles of recognition. This is a step beyond the idea of a stable institutional arrangement that merely guarantees this plurality, but it remains a philosophical argument about validity rather than an ultimately empirical sociological argument about the struggle itself and the struggling actors' orientation toward what we call the benefit of the city.