

DISKUSSIONEN

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DEMOS AGONISTES REDUX REFLECTIONS ON THE *STREIT* OF POLITICAL AGONISM

Political agonism has been a topic of growing interest among theorists of democratic politics for some years. While it is by no means the case that all contributors to that area would describe themselves as Nietzscheans, nearly all would benefit from further consideration of Nietzsche's conception of the *agon*, its function in the regulation of various drives in communities and individuals, and the numerous ways in which it is vulnerable to decay. Agonistic models have been advocated by both postmodern theorists (e. g., William Connolly) and those more in the tradition of Aristotelian conceptions of politics (e. g., Hannah Arendt). The Classical appropriation of the *agon* focuses on the significance of action in the public realm as the chief way in which a person realizes and exercises his or her political character. Thus, the *agon* provides an institutional framework that secures, defines, and regulates legitimate engagements among fellow citizens. Radical democratic political theories tend to emphasize the performative possibilities that are available in an agonistic arena, and how those possibilities facilitate and provide outlets for resistance to hegemonic and exclusionary political forces. Conceived thus, a polity with commitments to the significance of the *agon* allegedly allows for marginalized voices to find expression and to be recognized as legitimate contestants. The vision of the public good is not fixed in such an organization, but rather is contingent and always open to new possibilities.¹

Among Nietzsche scholars and critics, agonism has become a more common theme in discussions of Nietzsche's works and their applications. Recent articles in *Nietzsche-Studien* grapple with the appropriation of Nietzsche's agonism in

¹ See Connolly, William E.: *Identity/Difference*. Minneapolis 2002; and *The Ethos of Pluralization*. Minneapolis 1995. Also see Arendt, Hannah: *The Human Condition*. Chicago 1958; *Between Past and Future*. New York 1978; and *Philosophy and Politics*. In: *Social Research* 57,1 (1990), pp. 73–103.

radical democratic political theory. Most recently, Don Dombowsky takes to task Alan Schrift (and by extension all those who use Nietzsche's philosophy to support radical democratic political theory) for his reading of Nietzsche's agonism.² Dombowsky questions whether radical democratic political theory is compatible with what he calls Nietzsche's aims of "recodification"³ and domination,⁴ and he claims it is incumbent upon Schrift to "demonstrate how Nietzschean agonism is more like radical democratic agonism (which affirms competition, tension and conflict) and less like fascist agonism (which also affirms competition, tension and conflict)."⁵ Herman Siemens reviews some of the current literature that addresses appropriations of Nietzsche's conception of the *agon* in political theory.⁶ As Siemens illustrates well the *agon* model applied in politics fruitfully engages aspects of Nietzsche's work but raises many new and important questions that have not been adequately resolved, including why Nietzsche himself did not apply his extensive reflections on the *agon* to his considerations of democracy; indeed, why he seemed to apply it predominantly to matters of culture rather than to any political framework. Siemens claims that appropriations of Nietzsche's conceptions of the *agon* need "to show how the *agon* can be used to systematically address the problems he locates in democracy."⁷ I wish to sketch the outlines of how such a project might take shape, while addressing concerns raised by Dombowsky. Ultimately, I shall develop two general themes: 1) there is still more work to be done in articulating how Nietzsche conceived of the limits and purposes of contest, and herein lies the distinction Dombowsky seeks; *however*, 2) once more fully considered, Nietzsche's views of the *agon* cannot be faithfully applied (all the way down, so to speak) without fully subjecting the ideals of democracy itself to agonistic scrutiny and contestation, and this is where the real labor of Nietzsche's agonism begins. I shall argue that it is not Nietzsche's *aristocratism* that is problematic for radical democrats but rather his *radicality*. To the radical democrats, I advance further challenges that issue from the same texts upon which they draw, which raise further questions about the prospects of a *Nietzschean* democracy. Thus, I conclude, if one is truly committed to agonism as a model for *potentially* liberatory political practice, one must be willing to risk a democratic order in the process.

² Dombowsky, Don: A Response to Alan D. Schrift's *Nietzsche For Democracy?* In: Nietzsche-Studien 31 (2002), pp. 278–290.

³ Dombowsky: A Response, loc. cit., p. 283.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 284 f.

⁵ Ibid., p. 286.

⁶ Siemens, Herman: Nietzsche and agonistic politics: A review of recent literature. In: Nietzsche-Studien 30 (2001), pp. 509–526.

⁷ Siemens: Nietzsche, loc. cit., p. 513.

I. *The Good Of The Contest*

One of the most frequently raised but easily answered challenges to the Nietzschean agonistic model is that it lacks limits or checks on aggression and that it promotes forms of domination and violence that are incongruent with democratic ideals. For example, Fredrick Appel, in his *Nietzsche Contra Democracy*,⁸ falls just short of claiming that Nietzsche is an advocate of genocide. Dombowsky, in the response in question, claims, "Nietzschean agonism is basically compatible with the commitment to perpetual war or permanent confrontation characteristic of fascist ideology."⁹ Appel and Dombowsky follow countless others who fail to acknowledge the limits Nietzsche places on agonistic interactions and the distinctions he draws between resistance and violence.¹⁰ Dana R. Villa, *Democratizing the Agon: Nietzsche, Arendt, and the Agonistic Tendency in Recent Political Theory*,¹¹ recommends the work of Hannah Arendt over that of Nietzsche for those interested in elaborating an agonistic politics, claiming that Arendt's *agon* is better tempered by restraints that allow for active engagement and the exercise of judgment and respect, whereas models drawn from the works of Nietzsche and Foucault devolve into the promotion of essentially reactive "incessant contestation" and mere self- and group-expression.¹²

As Siemens describes, the first set of charges can be easily addressed by reviewing the limits Nietzsche indicates for the *agon* in the practice of ostracism: a matchless force that forecloses the possibility of genuine engagement is subject to expulsion. This practice stems from an institutional commitment to ensuring the vitality of the contest rather than preserving the status quo. Nietzsche's contest is further limited by the ways in which he conceives what constitutes productive action within the *agon*. Nietzsche deploys a theory of action drawn on the agonistic model. In his distinction between different modes of action within the contest and his investigation of whether creation or destruction is at work in those actions, one finds the emergence of a Nietzschean ethos of contest, which develops over time and is applied virtually throughout each of Nietz-

⁸ Appel, Frederick: *Nietzsche Contra Democracy*. Ithaca, London 1999.

⁹ Dombowsky: *A Response*, loc. cit., p. 287.

¹⁰ Only somewhat more persuasively does Appel argue that Nietzsche's philosophy is far too much at odds with the egalitarian heart of democratic ideals, but his conception of egalitarianism and the degree to which it is essential to "key liberal-democratic verities" remains largely unsupported in his work. As I discuss below, Lawrence J. Hatab wrestles with these very issues as he argues for the plausibility of rendering some form of democratic politics compatible with Nietzsche's other philosophical projects and interests.

¹¹ Villa, Dana R.: *Democratizing the Agon: Nietzsche, Arendt, and the Agonistic Tendency in Recent Political Theory*. In: *Why Nietzsche Still?* Berkeley 2000, pp. 224–246.

¹² Villa: *Democratizing*, loc. cit., p. 225.

sche's writings.¹³ Moreover, as the agonistic model is extended to pertain not only to competitions among noblemen but also to physiological and political constitutions, what one finds is something more than merely an encomium to fighting or the provocation to conflict. Nietzsche's agonistic ideals do not promote reactivity and "incessant contestation," because it is not *contest for its own sake* that agonistic striving seeks.

As I have argued at length elsewhere, Nietzsche sees the *agon* as a cultural and social site for the creation of a sense of the public good, a practice of meaning making. What is at stake in agonistic interaction is the authorization or legitimation of values and meanings – the production and definition of excellence, the articulation of standards of judgment, the constitutional basis or founding of judgment itself. And as Nietzsche sought to poetically extend the metaphor of *agon* to metaphysics, he sought a unified theory of development and change that would apply not only to descriptions of processes of valuation but also to descriptions of all natural development, growth, and change. Whether or not the *agon* can adequately serve the functions Nietzsche envisioned for it remains a topic for further investigation, but it should be clear from the numerous discussions that treat Nietzsche's conception of the *agon* that he is not simply an advocate of a form of might-makes-right Homeric nobility or the celebration of bravado. Rather, Nietzsche's view of *agon* unfolds in an attempt at a comprehensive interpretation of life.

In his response to Schrift, Dombowsky denies the applicability of Nietzsche's earlier ideas about the role of ostracism to his later interest in *agon*. Claiming that the Nietzsche of *Homer's Contest* stands far way from the Nietzsche who authored the later writings, Dombowsky endeavors to show that the later Nietzsche replaces his interest in contest and competition with a thirst for domination. He claims that Schrift is not sensitive to the development of Nietzsche's ideas and ways in which his views about the *agon* in particular shift over time. Dombowsky claims that Nietzsche favors a unified rather than a multiply subject who aims for domination not merely over the multiple aspects of himself but of other beings, especially other human beings. But the argument Dombowsky endeavors to mount against Schrift on this point is constructed in the very manner about which he is critical – namely, in the course of criticizing Schrift for not being more attentive and sensitive to the development of Nietzsche's ideas over time with regard to the *agon*, Dombowsky cites snippets of ideas and phrases from the *Nachlass*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and *Beyond Good and Evil*, stitching them together in a rather haphazard manner.

¹³ I sketch this development, focusing on Nietzsche's most prominent agonists, in my *Nietzsche Contra Homer, Socrates, and Paul*. In: *Journal of Nietzsche studies* 24 (2002), pp. 25–53.

Support for Dombowsky's claims depends upon attributing to Nietzsche interest in a strict and rigid rank ordering. The evidence he mounts for this claim (again, drawn from fragments of a great variety of sources) supports the latter (i. e. rank ordering) without the qualifications that Dombowsky wishes to associate with it, namely its *rigidity*. This opens up a concern that apparently continues to need to be addressed despite the fact that intelligent discussions of these matters have appeared in the secondary literature. The issue can be more narrowly focused in addressing the following question: *What is the relation between the openness of the agon and the creation of new values?*

Surely, Nietzsche's philosophy aims at creating new values and supporting those who might become their legislators. This does not translate into allowing everyone to become one's own legislator of values such that what we are left with is a great relativism (the battle over how Nietzsche's perspectivism stands in relation to relativism has already been won, I take it). The point of supporting creators of new values is to have those values received and endorsed, through the ways in which said values animate and make possible vibrant forms of life by those who hold them. How does the *agon* negotiate not only the sorting out of difference but also the regulation of the standards of judgment? Nietzsche admires the *agon* not because of its *tolerance* and sheer variety. It is hailed specifically and repeatedly as a mechanism for the production of value through which individuals and communities become *bound to*, not *liberated from* the claims of values of others.

The linchpin of Dombowsky's case against Schrift, that the later Nietzsche unlike the author of *Homer's Contest* "wants the institution of agonism without the institution of ostracism"¹⁴ appears to rest upon speculation about how Nietzsche conceives the relation between the immoralists and their opponents. This relation is articulated by drawing on phrases from *Twilight of the Idols* and the *Nachlaß* in which it is allegedly revealed that:

Preserving opposition and war, tension and competition, is necessary and prudent for the "immoralists and anti-Christians", who see that it is to *their* "advantage that the Church exist" (GD Moral as Widernatur 3). They do not aim to destroy the Christian ideal but only to end its tyranny. For "the continuance of the Christian ideal is one of the most desirable things there are." The immoralists require that their enemies "retain their strength", but at the same time they want "to become *master over them*" (Nachlaß 1885–87, KSA 12, 10 [117]), perhaps to make them an instrument of governance or for the purpose of external regulation.¹⁵

And so it is here that Nietzsche himself apparently "gives up the contest" (to borrow a phrase from Nietzsche's own *Homer's Contest*), evident in the fact

¹⁴ Dombowsky: A Response, loc. cit., p. 286.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 286.

that he wants to *win*. But what we really have here is Dombowsky conflating the aims internal to agonistic engagement with the goals external to specific contests that support and regulate the agonistic institutions themselves. Opponents should *want* to win. Nietzsche never casts his conception of the *agon* in any way that commits him to the facile view common in various quarters of contemporary education that “it isn’t whether you win or lose but how you play the game”.¹⁶ For those participating in the contest, for those subjecting themselves to the scrutiny of the community that provides the condition for the possibility of contestation, winning is surely the primary aim, although, as I have discussed elsewhere, this does not necessarily commit them to the view that they must seek to win at any cost.¹⁷ Clearly, desiring to compete well is compatible with desiring to win, and one might prudently strive to compete well as a means toward greater success. But truly great competitors do have an interest in competing well – in whatever ways that becomes defined by the community or institution that makes competition possible, other than merely as a means to the end of victory.

What great victors want are *legitimate* (and legitimizing) wins. By “great victors” I mean those whose accomplishments acquire maximal meaning in their communal context. There can be little doubt that what such competitors seek for themselves is victory that is complete: namely, that which secures their entitlement to the distinction not only of having surmounted their opposition but also of serving as the standard bearer of what constitutes excellence in the context of those particular kinds of agonistic exchange. In this sense, it seems perfectly reasonable to say that the victor wants *mastery*, that the victor does not wish to be subjected to ostracism, that the victor might rightly consider ostracism a violation of the terms of fair play. But that does not mean that the community that seeks its own regulation through agonistic interaction must be similarly disposed. Nietzsche is quite mindful of this difference, often much more so than those who continue to wrestle with the challenges of agonistic politics today.¹⁸

¹⁶ See, for example, Kohn, Alfie: *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*. Boston 1992.

¹⁷ See my *Of Dangerous Games and Dastardly Deeds: A Typology of Nietzsche's Contests*. In: *International Studies in Philosophy* 34,3 (2002), pp. 135–151.

¹⁸ See Herman Siemens' intelligent discussion of the “medial sense of the agon” and immanent judgment in his *Nietzsche and agonistic politics*, loc. cit. (esp. pp. 521–522 and 516–518). On the same topic, Siemens discusses V. Gerhardt's *Das 'Prinzip des Gleichgewichts'*. In: *Nietzsche-Studien* 12 (1983). Also see Siemens, Herman: *Agonal Communities of Taste: Law and community in Nietzsche's philosophy of transvaluation*. In: *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 24 (2002), pp. 83–112, especially pp. 102–106. Siemens addresses the issue of the apparent conflict between respect for the *agon* and the competitors' desire to win in his *Nietzsche and agonistic politics*, footnote 78, p. 521, where he writes, “One cannot play a game unless one wants to win; and one cannot play to win if one is playing for the sake of the game itself. See van Tongeren, P.: *Die Moral von Nietzsche's Moralkritik*, Bouvier, Bonn 1989, on ‘Nietzsche's impraktikable Moral.’” It should be clear that I agree with Siemens' first claim – that playing a game that has a *telos* of victory requires wanting to win, though some games have no such aims – but dispute the

II. *The Democratic Challenge*

Supporting the position that the Nietzschean agonistic model is compatible with democracy is a more serious challenge than the objection about limits raised at the beginning of the preceding section. As Siemens discusses in detail, the relevant literature is riddled with a variety of shortcomings on this topic, ranging from failing to take stock of Nietzsche's critique of democracy to failing to appreciate precisely how Nietzsche conceived the *agon* to work and the possible domains to which it might extend. On Nietzsche's objection to democracy, consider a passage from *On the Genealogy of Morals* II:12 in which Nietzsche reiterates his chief concern with democracy. Calling it a "misarchism," Nietzsche claims that the democratic sentiment "opposes everything that masters [*herrscht*] and wants to master [*herrschen will*]." ¹⁹ Such passages are often read as Nietzsche's endorsement of what is essentially a kind of sadism, a love to dominate or even to abuse, a will to use other human beings in any and every way in order to pursue whatever whim may come. But few seem to appreciate why Nietzsche might object to whatever resists *en toto* any domination, and why he is compelled to fashion a term for that sentiment – "misarchism" [*Misarchismus*] – rather than utilize the available term "anarchism" [*Anarchismus*]. Masking itself as anti-totalitarian, the democratic sentiment fails to recognize as a legitimate interlocutor what calls into question democracy's foundation, i. e., what it upholds as quintessential democratic principles of equality, liberty (conceived as freedom from restraint), etc. Democracy is not, in this light, lacking a ruler (or free of a ruler) but rather exemplifies a kind of perverse form of ruling, one that exemplifies a hatred of all *arché*, a suspicion of all ranking and ordering. It is risk-averse; it cannot permit the most serious contest that it could possibly be asked to withstand – a challenge to its core ideals. Hence, as Nietzsche sees it, most examples of democracy or expressions of democratic sentiment work to thwart the contestatory engagements that might actually serve to legitimize its ends. In its endorsement of a kind of equality that insists upon sameness, democratic organization shuts down the contest by refusing to meet challenges of difference; it refuses to play. Hence the founding ideal of democracy –

second – that playing to win and playing for the sake of the game, what I have described as playing well, are mutually exclusive goals. If it were really the case that competitors played exclusively and only to win, we might imagine that the best competitors would be those who would refuse to compete against those potentially superior to them, that they would agree to engage their opposition only when their opponents were dwindling in their powers, and that cheating would be rampant even among, perhaps especially among, the top competitors. Why is it that this is not the case? Precisely for the reason that competitors recognize, indeed that they seek out, the legitimizing function of institutionalized *agon*. What they seek is not merely winning or even recognition: winners want *meaningful* accomplishment.

¹⁹ Walter Kaufmann's translation emended.

equality — is groundless, meaningless, or perhaps even duplicitous and violent in the ways in which it constrains agonistic engagement of its principles.²⁰ Perversely, democracy claims to ground itself on a principle of human activity, yet, in its stubborn refusal to subject its foundational values to scrutiny, it forecloses the real exercise of that possibility. Hence, it *depletes* the significance of human existence on which it claims to found itself. An institution or state so constituted is careening down the path to nihilism. What remains questionable is whether an agonistic form of democracy could overcome Nietzsche's challenge, and to address that we would do well to consider a more fully developed agonistic theory.

One of the most extensive defenses of an agonistic democratic theory is found in Chantal Mouffe's *The Democratic Paradox*. Mouffe advocates an "agonistic pluralism" that "far from jeopardizing democracy [promotes a kind of] agonistic confrontation [that] is in fact its very condition of its existence."²¹ Her account bears features remarkably similar to those associated with Nietzsche's conception of the Greek *agon*. She, too, promotes a kind of opposition of the "worthy opponent," and she distinguishes modes of opposition (albeit perhaps with less specificity than Nietzsche), contrasting *antagonism* with *agonism*: 'enemies' engage in antagonism while 'adversaries' struggle agonistically.²² The 'adversary' differs from both the 'enemy' and the 'competitor' (over whom one seeks to win in the liberal contest of the fittest) in that the 'adversary' recognizes its fellow agonist as a legitimate opponent, someone who is truly worthy of contention and who is sought not simply for victory for its own sake. But Mouffe parts with Nietzsche when she qualifies legitimation as rooted in a recognition of "shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy: liberty and equality."²³ Obviously, mere departure from Nietzsche's perspective is insufficient grounds for critique of Mouffe's position, so let us consider how Mouffe's view is problematic even on her own terms and in light of objections she herself raises against other contemporary models of deliberative democracy.

Mouffe points to the thorny issues of legitimacy and the binding force of agreement in forms of deliberative democracy. The success of both the political

²⁰ Wendy Brown provocatively considers these very consequences that might be drawn from certain contemporary political movements that are allegedly pursued in the name of democracy and justice, including sexual harassment law and legal remedies aimed at redressing other inequities. See her *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. Princeton 1995.

²¹ Mouffe, Chantal: *The Democratic Paradox*. London, New York 2000, p. 103. Hereafter cited DP followed by the relevant page number.

²² DP, pp. 102–3.

²³ DP, p. 102.

liberalism of Rawls and the communicative action of Habermas rests upon commitments to some form of public reason that is excised from the realm in which a plurality of values abides and would potentially thwart the prospects for consensus in collective decision-making.²⁴ Mouffe claims Rawls' separation of the private from the public and Habermas' separation of procedural elements from their content are largely strategies for attempting to escape the inexorable fact of conflicting values. Why, one might ask when considering Rawls' view, is Justice a value on which substantial "overlap" is possible while other values that consistently resist consensus are simply relegated to the private realm? And why is commitment to the procedure of deliberation, as Habermas considers it, not itself shaped by values, and how can that procedure not be said to play with normative force in determining the possible outcomes?²⁵ In other words, why should the political values Rawls and Habermas esteem – what Habermas treats as "existential" issues about the good life and what Rawls calls "comprehensive" views of a "religious, moral or philosophical nature"²⁶ – be different from other values that are deemed too difficult or impossible to reconcile? This is precisely the kind of separation to which Nietzsche would cry, "Foul!" Ultimately, Mouffe claims, "Rawls and Habermas want to ground adhesion to liberal democracy on a type of rational agreement that would preclude the possibility of contestation."²⁷ "What they want to deny is the paradoxical nature of modern democracy and the fundamental tension between the logic of democracy and the logic of liberalism."²⁸ The clash of two types of autonomy – that found in individual rights to liberty and that realized through democratic participation in the name of equality – cannot be reconciled merely by cordoning off the realms in which their overlap would produce conflict.

Mouffe claims these two realms have different "grammars". Rather than seeing this as the Achilles heel of democracy, Mouffe considers alternative ways of negotiating apparently irreconcilable tension. She insists that, "This does not mean accepting a total pluralism, and some limits need to be put to the kind of confrontation which is going to be seen as legitimate in the public sphere. But the political nature of the limits should be acknowledged instead of being presented as requirements of morality or rationality."²⁹ What she advocates is the creation of political frameworks that promote the "availability of democratic

²⁴ DP, pp. 89 ff.

²⁵ Mouffe illustrates how these problems for Rawls and Habermas are related and form the basis of their disagreements. See their articles she cites: Habermas, Jürgen: Reconciliation Through the Public Use of Reason: Remarks on John Rawls's Political Liberalism." In: The Journal of Philosophy XCII, 3, (1995), and Rawls, John: In: Reply to Habermas. In: The Journal of Philosophy XCII, 3, (1995).

²⁶ DP, p. 89.

²⁷ DP, p. 92.

²⁸ DP, p. 93.

²⁹ DP, p. 93.

forms of individuality and subjectivity.”³⁰ Such a model is recommended as refocusing the question of citizenship and reconceiving the subject not as metaphysically discrete and endowed with natural rights but as emerging from “social and power relations, language, culture and the whole set of practices that make agency possible.”³¹ Such a view takes as yet undecided (i. e., *contestable*) “the conditions of existence of the democratic subject.”³²

Although Mouffe does not envision the agonistic polity as calling into question the very commitment to democracy to which the *agon* is supposedly suited, she does recognize that the commitment to democratic values – democracy’s legitimation, in other words – must be founded not upon rationally justified first principles that are masked as objective or value-free, but rather upon shared forms of life. Citing Wittgenstein, Mouffe likens this to “a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it’s *belief*, it is really a way of living, or of assessing one’s life.”³³ Translated back into Nietzschean terms, the *agon* potentially crafts a contentious arena that produces public meaning-making of the most significant sort: shaping the meaning of human being and the constellation of values that follow from it. Insofar as agonistic interaction provides a mechanism for generating meaning and value, the political *agon* affords investment in the *good* of the good life. It gathers the values that serve as the grist of political judgment. This, I take it, is the aim of what Nietzsche calls “legislation” or value creation. It is what gives shape and content to our willing such that it becomes shared (i. e., legitimated) in the judgment that renders it victorious.³⁴

Mouffe thinks her model has a further advantage over forms of deliberative democracy in that hers allows for recognition of power as constitutive: “Since any political order is the expression of a hegemony [where hegemony is characterized as the collision and collapse of power and objectivity], a specific pattern

³⁰ DP, p. 95.

³¹ DP, p. 95.

³² DP, p. 96.

³³ DP, p. 97. Mouffe cites Wittgenstein, Ludwig: *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford 1958, p. 46e.

³⁴ Such considerations lie at the heart of the conflict between reason and persuasion as Nietzsche sees it. Reason, when considered as having judicial force that exceeds any and all power that might potentially emerge through persuasion, is little more than masked tyranny. The epistemic and moral force of reason requires legitimation, as Nietzsche sees it. When the rational thoroughly eclipses the rhetorical, the result is a stultification of the mechanism through which legitimation can be forged. Reason must *earn* the right to legislate: to exercise and direct a form of will, to create and arbitrate values. This does not mean that reason becomes simply one among many kinds of bases for social organization, among which we have no criteria for determining which is best or most appropriate. What it does mean is that reason or the rational is not merely and always *presumed* to be universal, its authority is not given *a priori*. Reason is thus objectionable to Nietzsche because of its *unfounded* (i. e., unlegislated) hegemony and its annihilation of the legitimation procedures it obliterates as it circumvents them.

of power relations, political practice cannot be envisaged as simply representing the interests of preconstituted identities themselves in a precarious and always vulnerable terrain."³⁵ The challenge to be faced in late modernity is not how to eliminate power, as Mouffe sees the objectives of the deliberative models she considers, but rather "how to create forms of power more compatible with democratic values."³⁶ Echoing (faintly, perhaps) Nietzsche's admiration of the role of ostracism in the Greek *agon*, Mouffe claims,

Coming to terms with the constitutive nature of power implies relinquishing the ideal of a democratic society as the realization of a perfect harmony or transparency. The democratic character of a society can only be given by the fact that no limited social actor can attribute to herself or himself the representation of the totality and claim to have the 'mastery' of the foundation.³⁷

With Nietzsche, Mouffe might grant that it is not to be expected that there will be no aspiring masters but rather that the social order must seek to regulate those desires or be prepared to undertake the rather undemocratic activity of exclusion, because the emergence of such a master would effectively obliterate the basis of the (in Mouffe's case, democratic) regime. In other words, although Mouffe herself does not put it this way and may not even endorse such a claim, it seems the agonistic democracy needs both *hegemony* as its constitutional basis – the "legislation" and creation of the values and common forms of life that make the democratic subject a possibility – and *exclusion* when the hegemonic forces become so concentrated that they support totalitarianism. This strikes me as perfectly compatible with Nietzsche's conception of the role of ostracism in the Greek *agon*, but is it palatable for those committed to democratic values, including Mouffe herself?

Why should the desirability of democratic values be immune to critique? Mouffe loosens rationality from its concrete basis in the ordering of democratic values in the works of Rawls and Habermas, and claims that a better democratic order would be one in which we could contest the content and priority of such values. But can democracy do precisely what Nietzsche suspected it could not – put its own value on the line and genuinely fight to legitimize the basis of its own hegemony? Mouffe's admirable model still does not answer this question. A democratic theory that would call itself "Nietzschean"³⁸ – or one that could withstand the Nietzschean challenge – must be willing to risk itself. It must fully recognize its contingency and fragility; it must be willing to face tyranny

³⁵ DP, pp. 99–100.

³⁶ DP, p. 100.

³⁷ DP, p. 100.

³⁸ Mouffe's does not; she claims to take her inspiration chiefly from Wittgenstein and Derrida.

and to meet it as a worthy opponent. But precisely this would not be permissible as Mouffe gives content to agonistic respect.³⁹

Recall that the adversary differs from the enemy in the way that the adversary is recognized as a legitimate opponent because of the shared commitments specifically to democratic principles. Mouffe's adversaries recognize or agonistically respect only fellow democrats. This is problematic not only for the undemocratic kind of exclusion it sanctions (e. g., it would presumably exclude from legitimate public discourse those seeking to bring about theocratic solutions to political problems), but also because of the way in which it effectively engineers the kinds of contests that might emerge. Mouffe's adversaries will differ only in terms of the content they give to those liberal democratic principles of "liberty and equality,"⁴⁰ and hence *the point of the contest will always and only be to give meaning to those two values*. Mouffe claims that the chief aims of an agonistic pluralism are mobilization of passions around democratic objectives and the transformation of antagonism to agonism, thereby further inscribing a commitment to democratic principles. And so, in the end, the hierarchy of values Mouffe criticizes in the works of Habermas and Rawls is merely reordered with liberty and equality beating out reason. She has not escaped the problem of erecting a hierarchy of values that has the consequence of *determining in advance*, at least to some extent, the forms of life that might follow from that order.

³⁹ I take it that Mouffe's model of the adversary is her attempt to give Connolly's notion of "agonistic respect" more content, and it allegedly aims to preserve a strong sense of hostility in the struggle. She is concerned that other agonistic theorists draw on the concept of agonistic respect in ways that ultimately, "eliminate the antagonistic dimension which is proper to the political. The kind of pluralism they celebrate implies the possibility of a plurality without antagonism, of a friend without an enemy, an agonism without antagonism" (DP, p. 134). In her final chapter, she suggests that an ethics of psychoanalysis, drawn heavily from Lacan and developed in the writings of Žižek (e. g., *Enjoy Your Symptom!* London 1992), is better suited to a late or postmodern conception of human existence and the nature of political action (see DP, pp. 129–140). Connolly's conception of agonistic respect gathers its bearings more from the sphere of the ethical than the political. He figures agonistic respect as emerging from the shared existential condition of the struggle for identity and as shaped by our recognition of our finitude. Thus conceived, agonistic respect is "a respectful strife with the other achieved through intensified experience of loose strands and unpursued possibilities in oneself that exceed the terms of one's official identity" (Connolly: *Identity/Difference*, loc. cit., p. 166). It facilitates an appreciation for difference and recognition of the ways in which identity is constituted by and therefore dependent upon difference. It emerges from the recognition of mutual "contingency in [...] being" (ibid., p. 179). Connolly envisions an "agonism of difference, in which each opposes the other (and the other's presumptive beliefs) while respecting the adversary at another level as one whose contingent orientations also rest on shaky epistemic grounds" (ibid., 178). Agonistic respect in the political realm manifests "between rough equals" while relations "between an oppressed constituency and its respondents" are characterized by "critical responsiveness," (Connolly: *The Ethos of Pluralization*, loc. cit., p. 234 n 38), which is "an ethical relation a privileged constituency establishes with culturally devalued constituencies striving to enact new identities" (ibid., p. 235 n 40).

⁴⁰ DP, p. 102.

At this point we can anticipate a good response to my objection: What it means to hold values at all includes having some sort of hierarchy or ranking of those values (i. e., that the meaning of values entails their relations to other values). What I find problematic is not Mouffe's having a hierarchy of values as such – that seems to be precisely what legislating, in the sense I have used the term here, means. What is problematic for those committed to the (democratic) good of agonistic exchange is having a hierarchy of values that exempts itself from the need to ground its authority agonistically. It should also be clear that the Nietzschean objection to Mouffe's version of agonistic pluralism is not her establishment of limits. Nietzsche envisions numerous constraints on the *agon*, but he would not grant the exclusion of prospective agonists intent on defending a different vision of what should constitute judgment in the agonistic arena. Mouffe's exclusion of all those who do not share a commitment to "liberty and equality" requires justification and a defense against the charge that it is too constrictive.

III. *Redux*

But one might object that I am perhaps demanding too much of democracy – indeed, that I have asked it to be (or to be willing to become) what it is not. Perhaps it seems that what I have sought is democratic *agonism* rather than agonistic *democracy*. By insisting that deep democracy must be willing to authorize or re-authorize its constitutional principles, perhaps I expose democracy to risks it cannot afford. Perhaps meeting the challenges above would require democracy to hold its constitutive values of liberty and equality too lightly, all too playfully, such that it could not truly offer a viable framework for political action at all. Why would any political order so willingly invite its usurpation? Indeed, what sort of *order*, or *arché*, could such a scheme be? It seems to me that a democratic polity is the most conducive to a radicalized agonistic politics. Only democracy seems capable of negotiating contingent manifestations of power and order with enough flexibility to allow that order to be contested and reconstituted. Still, that does not lead me to the conclusion that Nietzsche ought to have been an advocate of democracy or that he failed to appreciate democracy in its truest sense. It is not clear to me that democracy could sustain thorough-going agonism and still remain democratic. Nevertheless, I think an agonistic pluralism, even the likes of which Mouffe offers, must ultimately involve itself in some significant risk, to risk "going to ruin" (*zugrunde gehen*) as Nietzsche's Zarathustra describes the process of self-overcoming. If a democratic constitution requires a radical openness to contestability – as each of the agonistic theorists insists – then it must be willing to meet all prospective

contestants,⁴¹ not simply those who are like-minded but disagree about the details.

The single most-sustained account of a *Nietzschean* democracy, which draws heavily on ideas elaborated in *Homer's Contest*, remains Lawrence J. Hatab's *A Nietzschean Defense of Democracy*,⁴² and it is worth reviewing in the context I have established as the strongest case for a specifically Nietzschean political *agon*. Hatab demonstrates that Nietzsche's critique of democracy follows his critique of morality. In particular, the liberal democratic sense of freedom as freedom-from-restraint is cast as identical in form to the kind of freedom sought in slavish morality: a reactive manifestation of power that artificially effects its domination over would-be oppressors by reversing the terms on which freedom and authority are pursued and legitimized. The values that drive such a conception of freedom – e.g., equality – and the metaphysical assumptions it brings in its wake – e.g., the rational, autonomous political subject – are at odds with the order of striving forces envisaged in Nietzsche's conception of nature and human social reality, and are largely unsustainable without appeal to a supreme creator and guarantor of metaphysical sameness and entitlement. Hatab argues that Nietzsche's critiques of democracy largely aim at exposing the questionable foundation of (particularly) liberalism's most cherished ideals and constitutional assumptions.⁴³ He then considers whether democracy could withstand the challenges posed by Nietzsche (i. e., his questioning of its apparently foundational ideals). In particular, Hatab considers the viability of democracy *sans* the ideal of metaphysical equality, while preserving procedural equality (i. e., equality before the law) and equal opportunity for participation. Ultimately, Hatab argues, "democratic values can be defended without any sense of equality that connotes some positive description or condition of human nature, or that stems from some kind of metaphysical essentialism."⁴⁴ Loosened from the grip of substantive egalitarianism, democracy, Hatab claims, can be rendered compatible with other key Nietzschean insights regarding perspectivism, truth, and ethics.

Hatab's notion of agonistic respect differs from Mouffe's. For Hatab (agonistic) "[d]emocratic respect [...] depends not so much on regarding others positively as upon recognizing the finitude and contingency of one's own beliefs and interests. Again, a myopic disrespect or disregard can be evident in any view-

⁴¹ Of course, some visions of the public good might not be worthy contestants in the sense that they are *incapable* of mounting a real challenge to the existing order (e.g., that we should extend voting rights to Urantian aliens). That sense of "worthiness" however is much different from the sense described by Mouffe.

⁴² References for citations of Hatab's *A Nietzschean Defense of Democracy* (Chicago 1995) are abbreviated ND.

⁴³ ND, pp. 22–39.

⁴⁴ ND, p. 59.

point (including even 'liberal' outlooks), so any remedy would have to begin with loosening the fixation of conviction."⁴⁵ Nevertheless, even agonistic democratic respect is chiefly *democratic* as it retains for Hatab a paramount concern for *democratic principles*: "a basic attitude [...] essential to democracy" is that "[f]rom a political standpoint *we must value democratic procedures more than our own beliefs*."⁴⁶ Hatab strives to figure these procedures primarily as rules of engagement, commitments that ought to be able to be accommodated within a Nietzschean agonistic framework given Nietzsche's appreciation for the necessity of limits to the contest. But is this disposition toward democratic procedures really analogous to the limits Nietzsche recognized as compatible with the agonistic organization of the Greeks? I am inclined to say that they are not. Such democratic procedures are decision mechanisms, and an attractive (and most promising) feature of the *agon*, as Nietzsche imagines it, not necessarily as he considered it practiced in ancient Greece, is the prospect that agonistic interactions potentially serve as occasions not only for distinguishing individuals (and the visions of the good they might advance or represent) but also for calling into question the very standards of judgment (or decision procedures) themselves. Hence, the commitment to democratic procedures that Hatab claims as intrinsic to agonistic respect in the context of democracy would need to be (at least *potentially*) subject to contestatory revision or suspicion as well. Can Hatab's (or anyone else's) agonistic democracy sustain that constant threat? That one might be hard pressed to consider any political arrangement capable of resilience to such risks might indicate that the *agon*, at least in the revolutionary way it is sometimes conceived by Nietzsche, is not viable for politics. If it is the case that Nietzsche's agonism is incompatible with democracy as I describe it here, it is owing less to his aristocratism than his radicalism.

Hatab claims the kind of "suspicion" allowed and sustained in an "agonarchy" – a political order contingent upon "wide-open" contestatory praxis for political decision-making – is highly compatible with Nietzsche's perspectivism and his critiques of dogmatism. Democracy, Hatab claims, is particularly well suited to "a politics of suspicion," and it can be "maximized in a postmodern atmosphere to unmake unwarranted fixtures wherever they may reign – even, and especially within, democracy itself."⁴⁷ One might very well ask precisely how close to the heart of democracy those fixtures might be questioned, and what, more precisely, constitutes warranty in an agonarchy, as Hatab conceives it.

In his vision of agonistic democracy, Hatab acknowledges that his conception of democracy does not admit of *legitimation*. Fundamentally, he claims, democracy

⁴⁵ ND, p. 67.

⁴⁶ ND, pp. 67–8.

⁴⁷ ND p. 74.

is “both the *creation* and *interrogation* of social goods”⁴⁸ rather than an advancement of specific values conceived as good *a priori*. In this respect, I consider Hatab’s view to be superior to that of Mouffe at least with regard to the matter of consistency within an agonistic model and, in Hatab’s case, withstanding the Nietzschean challenge as I have described it above. Hatab claims, “we should restrict reflections on democracy to procedural matters, in such a way that any ‘baseline’ conviction about philosophical questions would be a contestant *in*, rather than a presupposition *of*, political discourse.”⁴⁹ “An agonistic democracy should presume *nothing* other than the civic attitude and the procedural requirements that foster the fair *competition* of baseline beliefs for the prize of contingent decisions.”⁵⁰

Hatab’s discussion of will to power as it relates to agonistic political power also raises some problems. He conceives of will to power as “an agonistic field, wherein power is pluralized and continually checked by challenges in an interplay of power sites.”⁵¹ But will to power is not exhausted by agonistic relations, and the *agon* does not always seem to support the kind of “check” in terms of “balance” that democracy theoretically affords. Power is always subject to challenge in the Nietzschean agonistic arena, but that does not mean that it is always thwarted from domination and oppression. It is merely tyranny that Nietzsche thinks is avoided when an *agon* is adequately moderated by ostracism, and one should be mindful of just how close to tyranny Nietzsche thinks the pursuit of freedom treads as he articulates it in *Twilight of the Idols* – “five steps from tyranny, close to the threshold of the danger of servitude” (TI, Skirmishes of an Untimely Man 38).⁵² In order for one to be faithful to Nietzsche (or even to a view considered *Nietzschean*) that threshold must remain precisely that – right at the door of tyranny, at times perhaps breathlessly shy of crossing over the saddle.

Perhaps most relevant to addressing this particular concern is Hatab’s brief section about “nonprocedural agonistics” in a democracy. Nonprocedural agonistics are “opportunities at the margins of political procedures for defeated interests.”⁵³ They may take numerous forms, including acts of civil disobedience. Hatab cautions, however, that they “would have to be peaceful, since violence and rebellion cross the edge of defensible political practice – at least in a properly functioning democracy.”⁵⁴ As I argue in the first section of this paper,

⁴⁸ ND, p. 79.

⁴⁹ ND, p. 85.

⁵⁰ ND, p. 86.

⁵¹ ND p. 75.

⁵² “fünf Schritt weit von der Tyrannei, dicht an der Schwelle der Gefahr der Knechtschaft.” (GD, Streifzüge eines Unzeitgemäßen 38)

⁵³ ND, pp. 91–92.

⁵⁴ ND, p. 92.

one can derive a similar limit to legitimate agonistic engagement from Nietzsche's philosophy, although he reaches that conclusion not based upon respect for democracy but rather from an ethos of agonism broadly conceived. Nonprocedural agonistics allow for the (informal) challenge and interrogation of the very procedural elements or prevailing standards effecting the exclusion or defeat that motivates the extra-procedural conflict.

Above, I insist that a political order modeled on Nietzsche's ideas about the *agon*, would have to allow for a kind of thorough-going critique that none of the most extensive accounts of agonistic democracy seem to be able to accommodate, and which I doubt any political order (in so far as it remains an ordering) could sustain. But Hatab opens the door at this juncture for incorporating such an openness to challenge by locating it at the margins of a democratic polity. It is, finally, to precisely these sorts of considerations that I wish to direct future discussions of Nietzsche's agonism. A greater effort to elaborate whether and how democracy is particularly well suited to support these sorts of agonistic relations would certainly advance the discussion and could form the basis of the most promising lines of pursuit for a productive rapprochement between Nietzsche's philosophy and contemporary political theory.