

Demos Agonistes: An Afterword
Reflections on the *Streit* of Political Agonism

*Forthcoming in As Diputas de Nietzsche (Florianopolis, Brazil:
Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina Press 2018).*

The original plan for this book included a chapter on the *agon* in political contexts. It seems only natural that a book on agonism would, in fact, explore the political applications, since it is an area of intense interest among some political theorists, and it is the domain in which we find some of the more extended discussions of agonism generally. But the English version of this book did not include such discussion for at least two reasons: it was not a primary focus for Nietzsche himself, who, as I have argued, was more concerned with broader cultural and philosophical applications, and it did not fit with the overarching organization of the book, which links applications in specific domains (e.g., art, philosophy, morality) with agonies—or contests—with specific emblematic figures, such as Homer, Socrates, Paul, and Wagner. In short, I did not find Nietzsche's own ideas about *political* agonism so well developed that I could elaborate them, and I could not find a specific agonist against and with whom I might argue that Nietzsche was pushed to develop those ideas even though I recognize that others might do so.

Nevertheless, since I had, in fact, given extensive consideration to Nietzsche's reflections on different forms of conflict and contest, the structure of such relations, and the kinds of entities that are created and/or produced in various kinds of contestation. It seemed to me that something was lost when I made the hard decision to cut material I had already prepared on the topic for the book. So, for this Portuguese edition, I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to go beyond the original text with the addition of this afterword to address some

dimensions of Nietzsche's agonism applied in a political context as well as what I think is the value of his work for contemporary political agonism, which I believe remains underappreciated, particularly beyond Nietzsche studies. Along the way, I also engage some fine work on the topic that was published after my book.¹

In an earlier discussion of Nietzsche's political agonism, I subtitled my contribution "*Reflections on the Streit of Political Agonism*," utilizing and leaving untranslated the German word *Streit*. *Der Streit* can be variously translated as *argument*, *dispute*, *quarrel*, *conflict*, *controversy*, or *fight*, depending on the context. In my title, I had multiple senses of the word in mind: I was weighing and taking specific sides in a controversy about the value of Nietzsche's ideas about agonism and whether they were derived from or supported fascist forms of political power, and I was particularly concerned to articulate what I thought was Nietzsche's interest in terms of what are the terms of conflict, or, put another way—what it is that is being fought and won, or what I have discussed in the book in terms of the *good* or *goods* of the contest. One of these goods, I have argued, is the right to determine values, to define new standards of excellence. In the context of political agonism, I think Nietzsche regards the *Streit* of political agonism as potentially founding a particular organization or set of power relations that might be political in nature.

Political agonism has been a topic of growing interest among theorists of democratic politics in recent decades. They draw upon a diverse set of sources for their views of agonism, including Arendt, Schmitt, Derrida, and Wittgenstein. Only occasionally, do they draw directly on Nietzsche,² yet I think that nearly all theorists working in this area would benefit from further consideration of Nietzsche's conception of the *agon*, its social and communal contexts, as well

as his analyses of its vulnerabilities. Classical appropriations of the *agon* such as what one finds in Arendt,³ focus 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. In such cases, 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 other hegemonic and exclusionary political forces. Conceived thus, a polity with commitments to *agonistic practice* allegedly allows for marginalized voices to find expression and to be recognized as legitimate contestants. In such organizations, a vision of the public good is not fixed but rather is contingent and always open to new possibilities.⁴

Nietzsche scholars have grappled with several varieties of agonism.⁵ Additionally, political theorists have contended over the fundamental suitability of *Nietzsche's* agonism for contemporary application and development.⁶ My focus here is not really to intervene—at least not much—in this debate. Instead, I focus on two relevant features of Nietzsche's agonism that pose some complications for agonistic political theory generally and criticisms of Nietzsche's views specifically. Briefly put, I point out that: (1) even radical democratic forms of political agonism might not be so radical thereby limiting the extent to which such organizations are capable of grounding and founding values and forms of identification, and (2) Nietzsche's agonism is not as socially impoverished as some have argued so that those with broadly republican interests might still have something to gain from further engagement with Nietzsche's views.

I.

To what extent does Nietzsche's agonism resemble the form found in radical democratic political theory? A primary way in which it obviously does is in its positive appraisal of conflict, tension, and struggle, as I have elaborated extensively in this book. Like the form of agonism in radical democratic political theory, Nietzsche's agonism, as I have shown, includes restraints. We see this positively in "Homer's Contest," where he discusses what he calls the original meaning of the practice of ostracism as an affirmation of the value of the contest, and in other early writings, such as *The Birth of Tragedy*, where he identifies the productive force of art in the tensional relation of the opposing artistic forces. Additionally, we find it in his later writings, often negatively, as Nietzsche points out various ways in which the agon is subject to decay and decline, and ultimately, life-negating forms of violence, such as what he identifies in Christianized morality in *On the Genealogy of Morality* and *The Antichrist*.

More significantly, Nietzsche's agonism resembles that of radical democratic political theory in its understanding of the potential fruits of conflict, its productive features, rather than simply the fact that it may discharge or direct hostility. As I have argued at length in this book, Nietzsche envisions the *agon* as a cultural and social site for the creation of a shared sense of excellence, 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, as I have argued, the articulation of standards of judgment, the *constitutional basis or founding of judgment itself*.

One of the most extensive defenses of a radical democratic agonistic theory is found in Chantal Mouffe's *The Democratic Paradox*. Mouffe develops a view she describes as an "agonistic pluralism" that "far from jeopardizing democracy [promotes a kind of] agonistic confrontation [that] is in fact its very condition of its existence."⁷ Like Nietzsche, she promotes a form of opposition that engages the "worthy opponent," and she distinguishes modes of opposition (albeit perhaps with less specificity than Nietzsche). Mouffe contrasts *antagonism* with *agonism*: 'enemies' engage in antagonism whereas 'adversaries' struggle agonistically.⁸ 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 fellow agonists as legitimate opponents, those who are truly worthy of contention and who are sought not simply for victory for its own sake. But Mouffe parts company with Nietzsche when she qualifies legitimation as rooted in a recognition of "shared adherence to the ethico-political principles of liberal democracy: liberty and equality."⁹

What Mouffe describes in terms of adherence to shared principles of liberty and equality turns out, in my view, to be more detailed and constraining than the views of Rawls and Habermas that she criticizes. For Mouffe, Rawls' political liberalism and Habermas's communicative action both rest 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.¹⁰ Separating the private from the public (Rawls) and dividing procedural elements from their content (Habermas) are 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?¹¹ 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"¹²—be different from other values that are deemed too difficult or impossible to reconcile? Ultimately, Mouffe claims, "Rawls and Habermas want to ground adherence to liberal democracy on a type of rational agreement that would preclude the possibility of contestation."¹³ "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."¹⁴ This clash of two types of autonomy—the one found in individual rights to liberty and the other 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.

For Mouffe, it is important to recognize the political nature of limits that are presented as "requirements of morality or rationality."¹⁵ She advocates creating political frameworks that promote the "*availability* of democratic forms of individuality and subjectivity."¹⁶ Thus, she thinks, we refocus the question of citizenship and reconceive 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."¹⁷ Such a view takes as yet undecided, and therefore *contestable*, "the conditions of existence of the democratic subject."¹⁸

Mouffe recognizes that the commitment to democratic values—democracy's legitimation, in other words—is 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'.¹⁹ 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.

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 of power relations, political practice cannot be envisaged as simply representing the interests of preconstituted identities themselves in a precarious and always vulnerable terrain."²⁰ 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."²¹ 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.²²

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 (democratic, in Mouffe's case) regime. 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* at 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 I doubt that it is fully palatable for those committed to democratic values, including Mouffe herself.

The desirability of democratic values appears to be immune to critique in Mouffe's work. She loosens rationality from its concrete basis in the specific 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 this would have 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 hegemony, and it is incompatible with Mouffe's sense of the agonistic ethos.

Mouffe's model of the adversary engages Connolly's notion of "agonistic respect," and it is supposed to allow for 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."²³ 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."²⁴ 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."²⁵ 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."²⁶ Agonistic respect in the political realm manifests "between rough equals" while relations "between an oppressed constituency and its respondents" are characterized by "critical responsiveness,"²⁷ which is "an ethical relation a privileged constituency establishes with culturally devalued constituencies striving to enact new identities."²⁸

Recall that Mouffe's 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 would presumably exclude from legitimate public discourse those seeking to bring about theocratic solutions to political problems. Moreover, it effectively engineers the

kinds of contests that might emerge. Ultimately, Mouffe's adversaries will differ only in terms of the content they give to those liberal democratic principles of "liberty and equality,"²⁹ 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 by Mouffe with the effect of 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.

At this point we can anticipate a good response to this objection: What it means to hold values at all includes having some sort of ranking of those values. That is to say that the meaning of values entails their relations to other values, so perhaps it is inevitable that we should find evidence of this in Mouffe's work. What is problematic is not the evidence of a hierarchy of values as such—that seems to be precisely what legislating, in the sense I have used the term here, means. But, for those committed to the (democratic) good of agonistic exchange, having a hierarchy of values that exempts itself from the need to ground its authority agonistically is highly problematic. Mouffe's version of the limits of agonistic pluralism excludes prospective agonists intent on defending a different vision of what could and should constitute judgment in the agonistic arena. This 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.

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 viewpoint (including even 'liberal' outlooks), so any remedy would have to begin with loosening the fixation of conviction."³⁰ 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*."³¹ 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 this disposition toward democratic procedures does not strike me as analogous to the limits Nietzsche recognized as compatible with the agonistic organization of the Greeks. Such procedures are decision mechanisms. An attractive (and most promising) feature of the *agon*—as Nietzsche imagines it, and not necessarily as he considered it practiced in ancient Greece—is the prospect that agonistic interactions potentially serve as occasions for distinguishing individuals (and the visions of the good they might advance or represent) as well as 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.³²

This demand might be asking too much of democracy itself—namely, that it to be (or to be willing to become) what it is not. It is perhaps democratic *agonism* rather than agonistic

democracy. By insisting that deep democracy must be willing to authorize or re-authorize its constitutional principles, one might expose democracy to risks it cannot afford. Meeting the challenges above might 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? A democratic polity might be 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, although it is not clear that democracy could sustain thorough-going agonism and still remain democratic. 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 radical democratic agonistic theorists insists—then it must be willing to meet all prospective contestants,³³ not simply those who are like-minded but disagree about the details.

Nietzsche demonstrates great sensitivity to the ever-present threat and various manifestations of *antagonism*. In contemporary politics, this includes efforts to disaggregate and fragment,³⁴ choking off the agon-space and separating agonists from it. This is evident in two dominant trends that loom large in our immediately contemporary politics: populism, which makes excessive claims to unity that stifle differences that drive genuine conflict and substitute mimicry and a simulacra of conflict for politics; and terrorism, which leads to radical

fragmentation that brings about the end of difference through destruction of the political (and all other forms of opposition).

We find these very concerns expressed in Nietzsche's objection to democracy. Consider a passage from *On the Genealogy of Morality* 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]." ³⁵ Such passages are often read as Nietzsche's endorsement of what is essentially a kind of sadism, a will to use other human beings in any and every way in order to pursue whatever whim may come. Few seem to grasp why Nietzsche might object to whatever resists *en toto* any domination, and why he is compelled to fashion his own term for that sentiment—"misarchism" [Misarchismus]—rather than utilize the available term "anarchism" [Anarchismus]. Masking 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. In short, 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, democracy, in most of its expressions and instantiations, works to thwart the contestatory engagements that might actually serve to legitimize its ends. In endorsing a kind of equality that insists upon sameness, democratic organization *shuts down the contest* by refusing to meet the thornier (and therefore more significant) challenges of difference. Hence, on Nietzsche's

account, the founding ideal of democracy—equality—is groundless, ultimately meaningless, and perhaps even duplicitous and violent in the ways in which it constrains agonistic engagement of its principles.

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.³⁶ Bonnie Honig's views represent another interesting point of comparison with those of Nietzsche (and Mouffe) outlined here. While Nietzsche seeks to ground and found values that can be shared, the conditions for common action that define politics,³⁷ Honig seems to want to maximize diversity and otherness: "agonistic democracy becomes again a strategic doctrine concerned with identifying and encouraging opportunities for the expression of human freedom, which 'escape or resist administration [and] regulation' and which have the capacity to disrupt the otherwise cyclical movements of social processes within the ostensibly 'private' realms of the household and the economy."³⁸

Perversely, on Nietzsche's account, democracy claims to ground itself on a principle of human activity, yet, by stubbornly refusing to subject its foundational values to scrutiny, it forecloses the real exercise of that possibility. Hence, according to Nietzsche's understanding, it *depletes* the significance of human existence on which it claims to found itself. An institution or state so constituted, as Nietzsche sees it, is careening down the path to nihilism. For Nietzsche, the *agon* provides a site for sorting out difference as well as regulating standards of judgment. He admires the *agon* not because of its *tolerance* and sheer variety but rather for its efficacy 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. This dimension of Nietzsche's conception of the agon,—its ability to constitute a community, thereby binding those comprising it—leads me to the second major point that I wish to emphasize as relevant to the investigation of Nietzsche's views of agonism applied in a political context: namely, the richer sense of the social—specifically *derived from his agonism*—than what is generally recognized in his work. To be clear, I do not think this constitutes a political philosophy, but I do think it potentially makes Nietzsche's agonism a greater resource for political theorists.

II.

As just described, what Nietzsche positively observes about the agon in its ancient context is its ability to *produce* values.³⁹ My concern in this section is about who is involved in this form of creativity—is it just two contenders, squaring off, or are there broader social dimensions to Nietzsche's agonism?

Institutionalized agonistic engagements test specific qualities. In arranging for competition, they organize the terms of engagement and anticipate, on the basis of prior engagements, what will count as excellence—that is, they determine what may emerge as victorious. Successful contestants instantiate, vivify, or reanimate those values. Superior competitors may even redefine such terms so as to revalue excellence relative to the contest in which it is produced. Such contexts are, importantly, not isolated peer engagements. Individual perspectives of the direct participants do not define the terms of evaluation: the judgments and decisions of the broader community do so. This is what it means to *win* —namely, to satisfy the success conditions as defined and determined by the community or institution that makes the

contest possible. Thus, the sphere of activity or field of relations is broader and more complex than what might appear in the activities of the contestants alone.

Various social and cultural institutions are utilized for the preservation and maintenance of the competitive enterprise. It is not at all the case that the only check on the power of a great competitor is one who is able to surmount him, and it is not only the community of immediate participants (the primary contenders) who are maintaining the boundaries of the contest. In the agonistic model Nietzsche envisions, as elaborated in this book, educational institutions and practices acknowledge the importance of the contest for the development and production of individuals with distinctive talents (*KSA* 1, 789). And this is regarded as benefitting society as a whole and not only the persons so educated: “the goal of agonistic education was the welfare of the whole, of civic society” (*KSA* 1, 789), in service to the whole community. Moreover, Nietzsche thought this desire for service, to be the standard bearer for the good of the community, motivated individual development: “Every Greek felt in himself, from childhood on, the burning wish to be an instrument of the well-being of his city in the contest of the cities: with this his selfishness was enflamed, with this it was bridled and restrained” (*KSA* 1, 789-90). Nietzsche appears to clearly recognize a broader field of relations is necessary to direct—or, if one prefers, *discipline*—the agonistic drive. This is so for the good of both the individual and the community in which he or she lives. The dynamism of the culture he imagines as oriented and animated in this form of life is what he most admires, not simply the heroes or heroism *produced* through the exchange.

As I have described in this book in elaborate detail, it is clear from Nietzsche’s works that an orientation toward contest shapes an entire way of life; it may impact virtually every

corner of culture. The specific, primary opposing powers might be isolated in view in order to understand the substance of particular agonistic exchanges, but these conflicts arise out of a much broader field of relations—this includes the educational systems that produce those powers, the civic institutions that make the possible, the communities of judges that provide moments of decision and determine victory, the social institutions and practices that employ and relay those decisions in the form of the currency of the new standards of excellence, and the broader array of values that may limit and shape the economies circulating this currency. The tendency in the scholarship—including, at times, that evident in this book—to frame Nietzsche’s agonism as an essentially dyadic structure leads readers to overlook this larger field of relations.

That there are fields or domains of activity involved in agonistic engagements is strongly suggested in Nietzsche’s extended meditations on the different forms of evaluation and value evident in what he calls slavish and noble in the *Genealogy*. Indeed, a key distinction between the two is how they regard their opposition, how they think about their enemies and the role the enemy plays in their conceptions of themselves. The modes of evaluation and judgment that opposition supports are at issue for Nietzsche and not simply that the good/evil axis makes it harder for noble gentlemen to tangle.⁴⁰ It is possible to identify some constituents of the field of activity associated with agonistic engagements in Nietzsche’s text and to extract some of the general characteristics of the broader social space comprising agonistic engagements.⁴¹

The agon is better conceived as a field of relations—or, perhaps better still, as a *domain of activity*—than as a dyadic relation. A domain of activity is a social space that is organized around a broad goal or purpose. It is typically differentiated according to what one contributes

in pursuit of the goal and the levels at which one participates. In the language of more contemporary sociological inquiry, we might also see such goals as typically involving pursuit of some form of social capital. Domains of activity indicate types of actions that can be engaged and opportunities and responsibilities attending them.

Domains of activity are like *fields* that serve as sites of symbolic struggle in which “what is at stake is the very representation of the social world and, in particular, the hierarchy within each of the fields and among the different fields.”⁴² These domains organize around processes of differentiation. Within them, agents *become who they are* relationally.⁴³ We might also think of domains of activity as defined and articulated in terms of forces or power relations.⁴⁴

Another defining feature is the kind of capital, or social powers, that circulate within them.

Studies of ancient Greece include examinations of the economies of *kudos*, which are certainly germane to the agonistic fields.⁴⁵

In articulating some of the general features of agonistic domains of activity, we might recognize a variety of participants and orders. The primary contestants (or combatants or agonists) might be regarded as at a first order. These are the frontline participants whose meetings and interactions may come to stand in for (or represent) the whole. But there could be no match in the first place were it not for an institutional framework that defines and sanctions the major terms of the engagement. This includes not only the practical matter of designating the spaces of engagement (their nature and actual locations) but also identifying their various constituents, including defining terms of eligibility, general goals or objects, rules of engagement, and decision mechanisms. We might consider this as a second order.

Additionally, there are institutional features requiring maintenance and sustenance, and this

constitutes a third order comprising the sustainers of the institutions, including those who contribute to the production of prospective first-order participants as well as those who may occupy the positions defined in the second order (e.g., judges).

Finally, I think we can see further, at least in Nietzsche's account, a fourth order that is responsible for maintaining the ethos or milieu that motivates and orients the activities of the other orders. This order accounts for what Nietzsche calls the *ethical coloring* that gives form to a variety of interactions beyond and outside of the institutionalized engagements of the first and second orders; it facilitates the activities required to produce contributing participants throughout.

This fourth order is a value economy; it captures the production, circulation, and reproduction of value that Nietzsche links with agon insofar as it serves as a mechanism for instantiating and affirming what will count as excellence. The value economy both *fuels* the activities of the other three orders and *responds* to what transpires, the transactions, within them. It provides the wellspring of meanings that are in play in agonistic exchanges, and it accounts for the circulation and reproduction of the meanings of their outcomes. This is to say that it is through the activities of the fourth order that the values produced through agonistic exchange are redistributed and instantiated in the broader community. In allowing the norms for excellence to be shaped through agonistic exchanges, the community benefits from what the agon contributes to the production of value. Values produced in the agon are absorbed by the community insofar as it adopts and makes use of those norms outside of the agon; and the products of agonistic engagement, institutionally supported and socially cultivated, may

provide new standards of measure that *add meaning* outside of the institutions through which they were produced.

Nietzsche makes frequent reference to individual contestants, but he is also aware of (and most interested in) what makes them possible and sustains them, what I have designated above as second order. Section 226 of *The Wanderer and His Shadow* bears the title *Greek Prudence*, where Nietzsche writes: “Since the desire for victory and eminence is an inextinguishable trait of nature, older and more primitive than any respect for and joy in equality, the Greek state sanctioned gymnastic and artistic contests between equals, that is to say marked off an arena where that drive could be discharged without imperiling the political order. With the eventual decline of the gymnastic and artistic contest the Greek state disintegrated into inner turmoil” [underlined emphasis added]. This might seem to be largely dyadic and separate from others insofar as it occurs in a space that is ‘marked off.’ But it is sanctioned and regulated for those developing the judgment to distinguish competitors as such, not merely as a diversion for those already considered ‘equals’. Here Nietzsche actually seems somewhat less mindful of the essential importance of the broader field that cultivates audience, judges, and prospective competitors than he was in his “Homer’s Contest,” as discussed in chapter 1, since there he explicitly links the dwindling of precisely these broader social capacities supporting agonistic institutions with the decline of the state that supported them.

We find evidence of what I have called a third order of agonistic relations in Nietzsche’s repeated discussions of wariness of attracting the envy of the gods, mentioned also in “Homer’s Contest.” For example, where he discusses the envy of the gods in *WS 30*, Nietzsche mentions

those (such as Ajax) who suffer destruction for their singular challenge to the gods. Anyone who is in the position of being subject to the envy of the gods is so “when he who is accounted lower” exceeds the common measure. The context of this accounting is significant—the broader community supports its development, and it occurs through agonistic engagement. The currency of this accounting is the social capital mentioned above. These things are important for understanding how it is that the disastrous fate of suffering the envy of the gods is a *price to be paid for an illegal transaction in this economy*: “Within the social order of rank this envy imposes the demand that no one shall enjoy rewards that *exceed* his station [that is, what has been duly earned in agonistic engagement], and that his happiness too shall accord with his station, and especially that his self-conceit shall not grow beyond these bounds.” As discussed in chapter 1, the envy of the gods contributes to the powers, checks, and brakes that do, after all, *discipline* competitors in the agonistic scheme Nietzsche envisions.

Something of what I have described in terms of the fourth order is evident in Nietzsche’s discussion of revenge in *WS 33*. There, he provides examples of individuals who have reason (or not) to avenge themselves against their opponents. One seeks revenge against an offending opponent either out of self-preservation or out of a desire to hurt the opponent and gain restitution. This would generally sound like a relationship primarily among two people were it not for the second kind of revenge, which includes the restitution of honor, a much broader, socially derived and contingent phenomenon. And in *WS 29*, Nietzsche describes “the envious man” who is “conscious of every respect in which the man he envies exceeds the common measure,” where the broader context speaks to the wider benefit of the community and the application of its standards as his primary source of interest.

A thoroughgoing agonistic spirit that could anchor a value economy along the lines suggested above in the identification of a fourth order can be found in a remarkable passage from *WS 222*:

Only when, in the secular world of competition outside the religious cult, joy in the victory in the contest had risen so high that the waves here produced flooded over into the lake of the religious sensations; only when the statue of the victor was set up in the courts of the temples and the eye and the soul of the pious frequenter of the temple had, willingly or unwillingly, to accustom itself to this inescapable sight of *human* strength and beauty, so that, standing thus close to one another, spatially and in the soul, reverence for man and reverence for god came to blend together; only then was the fear of an actual humanization of the divine image also overcome and the great arena for plastic art in the grand style opened up yet still with the restriction that wherever *worship* was to be conducted the ancient forms and ugliness were preserved and scrupulously imitated. But the *sanctifying and bestowing* Hellene might now pursue to his heart's content his desire to let god become man.

The cultural saturation of agonistic values in the case Nietzsche describes ultimately disciplines (shapes and directs or orients) the activities of *sanctifying and bestowing*, that is to say, the evaluative practices more broadly, of the culture that produced and sustained such relations. It is *this* rather than any particular heroic exploit that Nietzsche seems to admire about what he understands as ancient Greek agonism. He is less focused on the heroic urbanity of his exemplary ancient Greek agonists than he is upon the dynamism of the institutions that make

them possible: the kinds of relations constituted and others they produce. Agonistic interactions provide the occasion for forging relations from which standards for measure are drawn and, in some cases, dramatically revised. In attending to this, Nietzsche emphasizes the relation between the community and the individual that pervasive and institutionalized competition advanced. (I expand this idea in an analysis of Pindar's *Olympian* 10 in chapter 1.)

Just how thick Nietzsche's notion of the social is, the extent to which it could serve a more robust political view, remains an important question, and I do not suppose that I have addressed it here. What I think is clear is that Nietzsche's own contests need a social context, the basis for the *good* (that is, the mechanism of revaluation) he seeks even if it may not be the case that he is always so aware of this. A focus on the domain of activity that agonistic relations bear and sustain might suggest different ways human beings might live together; it could be relevant to a theory of action (and potentially to exploration of the form of *super-morality* Nietzsche anticipates); it might encourage us to further refine our understanding of power and its variety of forms and expressions. At the very least, further research along these lines could provide resources for some interesting applications. One thing gained by looking at the broader social context is the opportunity to glimpse and scrutinize other kinds of relationships within that sphere. Agonistic engagements require certain conditions and have tangible impacts on the social domain, and their products and larger domains of activity may play important roles in the foundation of a basis for community. What it means for the community to hold or consecrate the values produced through agonistic exchange is that *they express them*. They do this in their day-to-day and routine activities, not in some remote space separated from the larger whole.

Some critics appear to think Nietzsche regards communities as constituted by individuals, primarily, rather than the other way around,⁴⁶ but it would appear that, at least in the context of the agonistic model, Nietzsche prioritizes the community insofar as it consecrates and authorizes, legitimizes, memorializes, and embodies the values produced in agonistic exchange. What it means to be a victor is not simply to *bear* the prize of winning; rather, in victory, one's achievement is *borne* by others who affirm and apply the standards such performances establish. What is clear is that exceptional individuals cannot independently establish their own values and terms of excellence by dint of will, nor does this derive through agreement with or concession by one's defeated peer. Such expressions of what will be upheld as new standards of excellence both *need* and *receive* their meaning from the broader community in which they abide.

Part of the appeal of agonistic political theories is their efficiency for negotiating differences and managing conflict. In his *Agonistic Democracy: Constituent Power in the Era of Globalisation*, Wenman observes that our increased physical and virtual proximity has intensified not only our sense of connectedness but also our experience of conflict.⁴⁷ Moreover, this has accelerated conflict cycles, intensified perceived differences, and has led to increased polarization. Wenman notes that "the goal of politics" is not the "removal of conflict"—"at best, political conflict can be perpetually displaced in ways that are mutually beneficial to contending parties."⁴⁸ In part because Nietzsche does not provide us with a fully developed view of politics, he does not underscore this feature as a good of the *agon*, but, as I have tried to show here, this does not mean that Nietzsche has nothing to contribute to the discussion. He

is less concerned with *resolving* the conflicts that characterize much of political life than he is with *organizing* conflicts that are potentially productive. He does this not simply to facilitate the expression of difference or its proliferation; rather, he sees conflict as a condition of the possibility of community. Of course, this is not to say that conflict always resolves in a positive sense of community. It obviously does not, and throughout this book, I have sought to take notice of and elaborate the very many ways in which conflict can disintegrate or spill out into violence.

If we were to speculate about the practical consequences of implementing a Nietzschean program of political agon, it could very well be the case that the resulting intensification of conflict through the proliferation of contest could actually yield more and more destructive conflict. I don't think this is necessarily the case, but it is certainly a possibility. If this territory is to be explored further, I think we would also have to acknowledge that Nietzsche thinks that this risk is nevertheless necessary if the goods of contest are to be gained. These speculations are worthwhile and perhaps represent serious consideration for anyone who might wish to do what Nietzsche did not and develop a full-blown political theory based on his reflections on agonism, but I do not think *Nietzsche* owes this to us.

¹ Portions of this text were originally published as “Demos Agonistes Redux: Reflections on the *Streit* of Nietzsche’s Political Agonism” in *Nietzsche-Studien* 32 (2003): 373-389. That piece was originally written as a response to a specific debate between Alan Schrift and Dan Dombowsky in the pages of *Nietzsche-Studien*. This version generalizes the discussion and takes up work that was published considerably later and includes portions of another forthcoming text titled “Nietzsche, Agonistic Engagements, and Domains of Activity,” in H. Siemens and J. Pearson, ed., *Conflict and Contest in Nietzsche’s Philosophy* (DeGruyter, 2018).

² I note “directly,” because Arendt, Schmitt, and Derrida developed views that were informed by their (not always positive) readings of Nietzsche, among others.

³ See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), and "Philosophy and Politics," *Social Research* 57:1 (Spring 1990) 73-103.

⁴ For example, see William E. Connolly, *Identity/Difference* and *The Ethos of Pluralism*.

⁵ See, for example, Hatab, Connolly, Thiele (1990), and some engagements by Honig.

⁶ Extended engagements with that work can be found in Mark Wenman, *Agonistic Democracy: Constituent Power in the Era of Globalisation* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁷ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), p. 103.

Hereafter cited *DP* followed by the relevant page number.

⁸ *DP*, pp. 102-3.

⁹ *DP*, p. 102.

¹⁰ *DP*, pp. 89ff.

¹¹ Mouffe illustrates how these problems for Rawls and Habermas are related and form the basis of their disagreements. See their articles she cites: Jürgen Habermas, "Reconciliation Through the Public Use of Reason: Remarks on John Rawls's Political Liberalism," *The Journal of Philosophy* XCII, 3, 1995, and John Rawls, "Reply to Habermas," *The Journal of Philosophy* XCII, 3, 1995.

¹² *DP*, p. 89.

¹³ *DP*, p. 92.

¹⁴ *DP*, p. 93.

¹⁵ *DP*, p. 93.

¹⁶ *DP*, p. 95.

¹⁷ *DP*, p. 95.

¹⁸ *DP*, p. 96.

¹⁹ *DP*, p. 97. Mouffe cites Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford, 1958), p. 46e.

²⁰ *DP*, pp. 99-100.

²¹ *DP*, p. 100.

²² *DP*, p. 100.

²³ *DP*, p. 134.

²⁴ Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, 166.

²⁵ Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, 179.

²⁶ Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, 178.

²⁷ Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, p. 234 n38.

²⁸ Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, 235 n 40.

²⁹ *DP*, p. 102.

³⁰ Lawrence Hatab, *A Nietzschean Defense of Democracy*, p. 67.

³¹ *ND*, pp. 67-8.

³² Hatab's brief section on "nonprocedural agonistics" in a democracy is noteworthy. Nonprocedural agonistics are "opportunities at the margins of political procedures for defeated interests" (*A Nietzschean Defense of Democracy*, pp. 91-92). 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" (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.

³³ 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.

³⁴ Wenman, 33.

³⁵ Walter Kaufmann's translation emended.

³⁶ See her *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

³⁷ See Wenman, 222.

³⁸ Bonnie Honig, *Politics of Displacement*, 123-4, as cited in Wenman.

³⁹ See also, this volume, pp. 18-22 and passim.

⁴⁰ I elaborated some of these examples in my 2014 presentation for the Friedrich Nietzsche Society. I am grateful to the audience at that presentation for the stimulating discussion.

⁴¹ Portions of this section were developed as remarks for a talk titled "Agonistic Engagements and Domains of Activity," presented at the University of Helsinki, June 22, 2017. I am grateful to the audience for its comments, questions, and suggestions.

⁴² Pierre Bourdieu, "The social space and the genesis of groups," *Theory and Society*, 14:6 (1985): 723-744; 723.

⁴³ Bourdieu thinks of these in spatial terms (hence his notion of *habitus*, from which one's perspectives on the field— *prises de position*—are held) such that "one cannot really [...] occupy two opposite regions of the space," "The social space and the genesis of groups," 724.

⁴⁴ Bourdieu describes what he calls *fields* in similar terms. They are articulated: "as a set of object power relations that impose themselves on all who enter the field and that are irreducible to the intentions of the individual agents or even to the direct *interactions* among the agents," "The social space and the genesis of groups," 724. Indeed, for Bourdieu, it is not only explicitly competitive fields that are organized in this way; rather, *all fields of activity* are characterized by currents of broadly agonistic engagement that are crucial for ascertaining distinctions and differences—a view that is shared, albeit in a somewhat different domain, by Walter Ong—'Every field is the site of a more or less overt struggle over the definition of the legitimate principles of division of the field. The question of legitimacy arises from the very possibility of this questioning, of a break with the *doxa* that takes the ordinary order for granted,' "The social space and the genesis of groups," 734.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Leslie Kurke, "The Economy of Kudos," in *Cultural Poetics in Archaic Greece: Cult, Performance, Politics*, ed. Carol Dougherty and Leslie Kurke (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993). For Bourdieu the social order itself is comprised of an array of fields: 'In reality, the social space is a multi-dimensional space, an open set of fields that are relatively autonomous, i.e., more or less strongly and directly subordinated, in their functioning and their transformations, to the field of economic production. Within each of these sub-spaces, the occupants of the dominated positions are constantly engaged in struggles of different forms

(without necessarily constituting themselves into antagonistic groups)' ("The social space and the genesis of groups," 736). See also the appendix to Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Stanford University Press, 1998). See also Ong, *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), and discussion by Connolly in his *Identity and Difference*. I am grateful to Tom DeGloma and Leonard Feldman for discussion of these ideas.

⁴⁶ Although Kathleen Higgins recognizes that 'the agon model seems closest to a practical ideal [for community in Nietzsche's texts],' she nevertheless holds that Nietzsche's community remains idealized and limited to the exceptional few who are the direct competitors, perhaps owing to Nietzsche's own (personal) 'hermit tendencies,' such that 'Nietzsche's ideals of community offer clearer guidance for individual aspiration than for community organization as such.' See Kathleen Higgins, "Festivals of Recognition: Nietzsche's Idealized Communities" in *Individual and Community in Nietzsche's Philosophy*, edited by Julian Young (Cambridge University Press, 2014) 77-92; 80. She worries that 'the *agon* among communities of taste [as Siemens elaborates] can proceed without much interaction of an everyday sort, since the necessary social interaction can proceed at a distance' (*ibid*, 82n4). Discussions of varieties of expressivism that derive from or are consistent with Nietzsche's views are relevant here, including in the political context. See, for example, David Owen, "The Expressive Agon: On Political Agency in a Constitutional Democratic Polity," in Andrew Schaap, ed., *Law and Agonistic Politics*, edited by Andrew Schaap (Abingdon, GB: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2009).

⁴⁷ Wenman, *Agonistic Democracy: Constituent Power in the Era of Globalisation*, p. 40.

⁴⁸ Wenman, 40