

Malte Kayßer
From the Ethical to Politics

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Malte Kayßer

From the Ethical to Politics

On Deconstruction's Necessary Leap
Toward Immanence in Light of the Other

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1. Introduction

When Donald J. Trump was elected to the Presidency of the United States of America in the November of 2016, this unexpected incident put the world to frightful shock. In a first bedazzled reaction, Trump's ascent to the most powerful public office on earth had to serve as the overarching narrative key event for each contemporary tragedy: 'the decline of democracy', 'the downfall of the West', 'global warming', 'capitalism prevailing', 'authoritarianism striking back', et cetera. This veritable manifold of heralding Trump both as a symbol and symptom of literally everything 'bad' happening in the world was not mirrored by the one specific conclusion to which the inevitable soul-searching came, once it had to be decided who was to take the blame for this defeat of the established political system. In an exceptional unanimity, both sides of the aisle – the right in malicious delight, the left in flagellant self-chastening – declared a distorted liberalism to be the scapegoat. Distorted by what, one may ask? Distorted by culture, the argument goes, distorted by 'postmodernism'. How so?

Even before the actual election *The Washington Post* somewhat prophetically augured the future consent by headlining "Clinton vs. Trump: Modern vs. postmodern". In this article we already see at play the argumentative core assumption of the current debate: "Donald Trump is our first full-on "post-modern" presidential candidate. Truth, for him, isn't some objective entity a responsible politician should refrain from crossing". Thus, after postmodernism – due to some sort of hostile take-over – entered politics in the form

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of Donald Trump and the universal accessibility of an objective truth has been challenged, now “it’s time to panic”.¹

Such panic seems to have provoked a great many like-minded pieces in newspapers and magazines worldwide after the unthinkable had become true. Out of this impressive heap² I would like to single out the article “Donald Trump Is The First President To Turn Postmodernism Against Itself”³ by David Ernst since we not only find a fierce polemic in there, but also a nicely beaded denomination of everything that is supposedly wrong with postmodernism. According to Ernst, Trump cracked the code to power in a cultural tableau ruled by postmodernism. He is said to be not only the alternative right’s answer to political correctness, but both are “the fruits of postmodernism”. Its philosophy is deemed to be the original culprit, because in it we find “nihilism in the common presumption that all truth is relative” which in turn renders morality “subjective”, henceforth making each lifestyle “equally true and worthy of validation”.⁴ This departure from the modernist universal truth leads to a focus on subjective authenticity and therefrom to the unmediated celebration of differences, be they (sub-)cultural, religious or ethnic. Yet since the emphasis of authenticity comes value-free, postmodernists prefer the broken – but honest – antihero in all its greyish blackness over the modern hero with his shining white vest.

For Ernst, Trump is the appealing antihero come true, who had his precursors in figures of popular culture such as Walter White, Tony Soprano or Frank Underwood. As such, he might be a liar, but at least he admits to it *authentically*. Furthermore, the appeal to diversity demands the one moral imperative available to postmodernists, namely to discredit anything as-

¹ Swaim, Barton (2016): “Clinton vs. Trump: Modern vs. postmodern,” *The Washington Post*, 9/27/2016 (online).

² The titles truly speak for themselves: Heer, Jeet (2017): “America’s First Postmodern President,” *New Republic*, 7/8/2017 (online); Williams, Casey (2017): “Has Trump Stolen Philosophy’s Critical Tools?,” *The New York Times*, 4/17/2017 (online); Benko, Ralph (2017): “The Left, not Kellyanne Conway, Invented ‘Alternative Facts’,” *Forbes*, 2/11/2017 (online); Stephan, Felix (2016): “With the Weapons of His Opponents,” *ZEIT Online*, 11/14/2016 (online), et cetera.

³ Ernst, David (2017): “Donald Trump Is The First President To Turn Postmodernism Against Itself,” *The Federalist*, 1/23/2017 (online).

⁴ Ernst, “Donald Trump Is The First President To Turn Postmodernism Against Itself”.

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sumed to be superior in terms of goodness, since this will inevitably result in “prejudice, interpersonal strife, and inequality”. In that sense, postmodernism is to be considered nothing but an “anti-culture that measures success insofar as it deconstructs anything that other people value”. With the deconstruction of truth and the consequent moral relativism in play, Ernst adds “hypocrisy”, “fanaticism”, “hysteria” and so forth to this list of indignation. In the end, postmodernism receives his final verdict by being accused of only finding satisfaction in power to shut others up by insinuating them to be bigots. Trump in turn merely intuitively adopted the weapons offered to him, when he began to first *deconstruct* his opponent’s truth and then *reconstructed* his own infamous ‘alternative facts’.⁵ And so, the revolution was swallowed by its prodigies.

Interestingly, the current, pretty one-sided debate behaves like a much less sophisticated revenant of a discussion the academia had more than ten years ago, which back then was sparked by a series of papers by Bruno Latour⁶ culminating in “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern”. This last scientific paper is often quoted by the articles mentioned above to provide a philosophical backing which is why I would like to recall its positions in order to get a full picture of the claims made against ‘postmodernism’.

Bruno Latour begins his charge with a disarming gesture of *mea culpa*. After posing his eponymous question, he asks whether “we [are] not like those mechanical toys that endlessly make the same gesture when everything has changed around them.”⁷ By ‘we’ he refers to philosophical Critique most often aligned with continental philosophy, critical theory and (/or) postmodernism. So Latour counts himself into the philosophical camp to be criticized. Be prepared then for a story of a lost son returning home. He is deeply worried, since the ‘gesture’ critique repeats without end is the deconstruction of seemingly imperturbable truths. Such a deconstruction was

⁵ Ernst, “Donald Trump Is The First President To Turn Postmodernism Against Itself”.

⁶ Latour, Bruno (2002): *War of the Worlds: What about Peace?* Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press; Latour, Bruno (2003): “The promises of constructivism”, in: Don Ihde (Ed.): *Chasing Technology: Matrix of Materiality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press (Indiana Series for the Philosophy of Science).

⁷ Latour, Bruno (2004): “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?”, *Critical Inquiry* 30 (4), 225.

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called for, when the ideas of traditional subordination of women to men or racial inequality had to be shattered, yet the same intellectual tool is in principle applicable to scientific results on whose validity experts consent, ‘climate change’ being Latour’s prime example. The incessant possibility to *de*- and *re*construct truth – philosophically grounded in postmodernism’s premise of non-closure – allows for “an artificially maintained scientific controversy”⁸, which is constantly fuelled by conspiracy theory and conservatives who use those exact same tools designed by leftist critique. Latour maintains therefore that these tools are “like weapons smuggled through a fuzzy border to the wrong party” bearing the “trademark: *Made in Criticalland*”.⁹ Thence:

My argument is that a certain form of critical spirit has sent us down the wrong path, encouraging us to fight the wrong enemies and, worst of all, to be considered as friends by the wrong sort of allies because of a little mistake in the definition of its main target. The question was never to get *away* from facts but *closer* to them, not fighting empiricism but, on the contrary, renewing empiricism.¹⁰

For Latour, the critical spirit on the wrong path, threatening to drag the whole of critique down into the abyss of intellectual discredit, is deconstruction and in order to save constructivism from this wake he attempts to cut the rope between these two schools of thought by asking “what’s the difference between deconstruction and constructivism?”¹¹. The short answer would be, that although both deconstructionists and constructivists agree on the principle that truth has to be constructed and that a direct accessibility of the objective truth of a thing is impossible, discord exists on the consequences of such proposition. While constructivists see it as an incentive to construct an earthly truth that comes at least close to its absolute version – thus arguing for the necessity to construct *good* instead of *bad* truths – deconstructionists claim even an approximation to be unattainable. In consequence the latter ones would be unable to *re*construct after a successful deconstruction, which would turn them effectively into nihilists – if they argued consistently, but Latour does not even concede such a secondary virtue to the decon-

⁸ Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?”, 226.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 230.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 231.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 232.

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structionists. In his eyes, they operate alongside a paradox which usually remains unseen, because the “Critical Gesture” functions by two separated moves, that rely on a binary opposition between a *fact* and a *fairy* position of statements about an object.¹² The first move of the critic usually consists in debunking the naïve belief of his auditorium in some seemingly natural, unchangeable force of an object, say for example the assumed superiority of the object “men” in regards of rational decision-making which provides a ground to exclude women from any tough choice to make. Once the critic has magnanimously displayed this belief to be nothing more than a mental construct with real consequences – thus showing the *fairy* position of the object –, the thankful auditorium assumes to have been emancipated from heteronomy to a state of independent sovereignty and cheers the critic.

Yet for Latour, the critic won’t allow his listeners to indulge in their newly found freedom, because now it is time to show that, “whatever they think, their behaviour is entirely determined by the action of powerful causalities coming from objective reality, they don’t see”,¹³ these causalities being “whichever pet facts the social scientists fancy to work with, taking them from economic infrastructure, fields of discourse, race, class, gender.”¹⁴ Implicit to this second move is the recourse to objects – the “powerful causalities” – whose *fact* position, i.e. its truth, has to be accepted by the critic in order for his argument to work. Effectively, the critic claims a privileged access to the sphere of transcendental truth wherefrom he brings down to earth the principles of the constitution of social reality. But the question arises how the critic can do so without contradicting his claim about the constructed nature of truth which denies any possibility of a direct access to the transcendent sphere of an absolute truth free from any subjective bias and distortion. This is why, for Latour, the critic cannot make his argument without sacrificing the holy grail of logical consistency and him proceeding nonetheless is judged to be not only highly condescending toward the masses whom the critic denies that access, but also “the ultimate gratuitous, disrespectful, insane and barbarous gesture”.¹⁵

¹² Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?”, 237.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 239.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 238.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 243.

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In the end, then, it gets quite clear, why in Latour's eyes the once powerful train of critique did run out of steam: the deconstructionists had taken over and killed off its engine. The picture Latour paints of deconstruction is a devastating one, because it leaves any professed deconstructionist two choices likewise sinister: Either to stay true to its philosophical premises leading to a nihilism that disarms any substantial critique beforehand, or to continue this performance of critical barbarity described above, rendering oneself a hypocrite – if done consciously – that unwantedly provides the means to fuel another engine: the one of the Trump train.

Now, after this scathing portrayal of deconstruction, Latour deems it to be only a natural act of self-defence to cut the rope that hitherto connected deconstruction and constructivism as siblings. More than willing to get loose of this apparent intellectual deadweight and its contaminating smell, Latour even proposes a rebranding of constructivism to *compositionism*, a term which rests on the aforementioned principle that if truth has to be constructed, then it is imperative not to dismantle it as contingent and unnatural, but to *compose* it rather good than bad as an approximation to the inaccessible totality of objective truth.¹⁶ Designed to counter deconstruction's alleged nihilism, compositionism therefore entails a normative tendency I will come back to later throughout this study.

However, contrary to the impression evoked by Latour's argument, I claim that the discussion about the vices and virtues of deconstruction is not over yet. In fact, this discussion has not even begun, because one can barely call this one-sided blame game a discussion, when the accused has had no chance to make his case. True, deconstruction's alleged founder, Jacques Derrida, died in 2004, so we cannot expect a statement from the grave, but its opponents should at least try to substantiate their claims made against deconstruction by providing an in-depth analysis of the philosophy they seem so intent on to obliterate. But, quite the opposite: all we find is caricature. The famous "every truth is socially constructed"-principle is thrown into a bowl with some quotes from Lyotard or Baudrillard that have been divorced from its context. Soon there is some connection made to the Nietzschean *Übermensch* and therefore to nihilism, or Heidegger and thus nazism in order to show that deconstruction had been rotten from the seed.

¹⁶ Latour, Bruno (2010): "An Attempt at a "Compositionist Manifesto"", *New Literary History* 41 (3), 471–490.

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Seldom there is an actual mentioning of works, but when it happens, it is somehow always the same classics from the 1960s to which is referred, the *Sturm und Drang*-period of postmodernism, in which indeed the destruction of essentialist truths had precedence over the necessity to rebuild something afterwards. What followed from the 1970s onwards has often been characterized by the so-called ‘ethical turn’ in light of which questions of normativity, ethics and politics were thematised, in order to confront the threat of nihilism if sole destruction would prevail. Strangely, these reflections make no appearance in the current debate. Furthermore, the whole terminology used is fuzzy at best. ‘Critique’, ‘postmodernism’, ‘poststructuralism’, ‘deconstruction’ float around as exchangeable synonyms and such distinct philosophers as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault or Gilles Deleuze are mentioned together as if they would adhere to one single philosophical school of thought. If we follow Latour this far and take out of that assemblage the notion of ‘deconstruction’ seemingly as postmodernism’s key feature, then I have to claim that his account of deconstruction is *badly composed* and functions not as a truthful resemblance but as a straw man, as a distorted negative horizon in front of which his compositionism is enabled to shine even brighter.

Nevertheless, it is not only Latour to blame, since in a way he indeed only described the manner in which deconstruction’s current state presents itself to him. Deconstruction’s present problem is less to have been built out of rotten seed, but more the forgetfulness of some of its self-declared heirs of the normative implications deconstruction urgently brings to the fore – and these implications do not exhaust themselves in a moral relativism of the infamous ‘anything goes paradigm’. Such a forgetfulness leads distinguished thinkers like Chantal Mouffe to assert that “there is something very problematic about the idea of ‘human rights’,”¹⁷ since its universal implementation would have to suppress culture-dependant differences on the interpretation of the substance of ‘human dignity’.

¹⁷ Mouffe, Chantal (2014): “Democracy, human rights and cosmopolitanism: an agonistic approach”, in: Costas Douzinas, Conor Gearty (Eds.): *The Meanings of Rights. The Philosophy and Social Theory of Human Rights*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 188.

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Such a forgetfulness leads effectively to a distorted deconstruction that indeed comes close to Latour's portrait: it oscillates fatefully between the dissolution of any binding truth on the one hand and the ensuing necessity to decide without any possible recourse to a universally justifiable principle on the other. This is not critical barbarity, this is a factual nihilism that abstains from any judgment beyond the insular borders of communitarian (sub-)societies. This is political cowardice out of fear to make oneself's hands dirty if one would actually engage with the world of immanence across one's own doorstep. What those thinkers do not see, is that the pockets one keeps his hands in, bear some dirt themselves. Melville's "I would prefer not to" is an irresponsible denial to confront an exposure to the Other. Yet, to shy away from a decision does not mean it won't be taken. Pressing issues will be decided, but if the intellectual left has given up all hope to do so *justly*, the intellectual right, worshipping Carl Schmitt's decisionism, will step in without further ado. To refuse a responsible decision on the grounds of postmodernism (or deconstruction as a debatable *pars pro toto*) amounts to an unconditional surrender to authoritarianism's revival.

Thus I claim that deconstruction – like Latour's 'critical gesture' – has to consist of two steps, the first of *de-*, the second of *re-*construction. This second step can only evade the alleged logical inconsistency, if the decision to be taken can be grounded in a transcendent principle compatible with deconstruction's ontology. I claim that such a principle can be found, and I am confident to answer the following research question affirmatively:

On grounds of what normative principle(s) can we legitimately construct a polis if every entity is per se deconstructible?

In order to give a substantial response, for once I would like to actually let the texts of the philosopher speak from whom the term 'deconstruction' originally emanated: the aforementioned Jacques Derrida. To him, one has to add Emmanuel Lévinas, since his writing served from the very beginning as a major inspiration for deconstruction's ethical impetus. This has been attempted before, for sure. As early as in 1992, Simon Critchley began to explore the up until then only vaguely intelligible link between normativity and deconstruction.¹⁸ According to Critchley there was indeed to be found a normative gap in Derrida's philosophy insofar as deconstruc-

¹⁸ Critchley, Simon (2014 [1992]): *The Ethics of Deconstruction. Derrida and Levinas*. 3d. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

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tion supposedly lacked the capability to *reconstruct* after it had transcended the former truth of an entity. To make up for that caveat, Critchley pushes Lévinasian ethics to the frontlines and argues that the latter's plea for an ethical primacy of the Other enables a move forward to a *justified* Said. He continued to make 'ethics' the main theme of his subsequent writing¹⁹ and while Lévinas always provided a fruitful ground for this endeavour, Derrida slowly fell out of the picture, although it was especially the episode from the early 1990s up until his death during which Derrida fully fleshed out deconstruction's ethical potential. This tendency of Critchley combined with a growing orientation toward anarchy as a political paradigm make his approach unfit to fully answer my question.

More recently, Madeleine Fagan offered her take on the matter in her monograph *Ethics and Politics after Poststructuralism*. Her argument is basically a reassessment of Critchley's, in which she challenges the alleged primacy of the other's Otherness over the self by guiding attention to places in the works of Derrida and Lévinas where they more or less overtly relativize that primacy themselves. To make this tension apparent, she introduces the work of Jean-Luc Nancy and his neologism of 'transimmanence' as a fusion of transcendence and immanence. In this notion any hierarchy between the two – transcendence being the ontological realm of the Other, immanence in turn being the one of constituted reality – is dissolved, which leads Fagan to a disarming conclusion: "[M]y argument cannot offer resources for any general ethics or politics nor any general ethico-political commitments or guidelines".²⁰ Unfortunately, it is this exact reasoning that feeds deconstruction's critique. To the contrary, I uphold that it is exactly this insoluble aporia, that enables such a 'general guideline'.

Therefore, I argue, both in Derrida and Lévinas intertwined, there is to be found a very strong normative impetus that on the one hand complicates

¹⁹ Critchley, Simon (2009 [1999]): *Ethics - Politics - Subjectivity. Essay on Derrida and Levinas, & Contemporary French Thought*. 2nd. London/New York: Verso (Radical Thinkers); (2008 [2007]): *Infinitely Demanding. Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*. London/New York: Verso; (2014 [2012]): *The Faith of the Faithless. Experiments in Political Theology*. London/New York: Verso; Critchley, Simon (2015): *The Problem with Levinas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²⁰ Fagan, Madeleine (2016 [2013]): *Ethics and Politics after Poststructuralism. Levinas, Derrida, and Nancy*. 2nd. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (Taking on the Political), 152.

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the seeming simplicity of how to take a just decision due to deconstruction's questioning of the decision's underlying principles, yes, but which also argues for the upmost necessity to make such a decision. None of them pleads for moral relativism.

This relativism though, can be found in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. His fundamental ontology of the sense of Being is mostly congruent to Derrida's and Lévinas' account of how reality comes into being via traveling from Being (transcendence) to being (immanence). Yet what is missing in Heidegger completely is 'the Other' as (1) a regulative idea providing a normative principle and (2) the 'mechanism' of how to move from Being to being via Derrida's famous 'différance' or Levinas' less known 'Saying'. Despite a different terminology, both of them argue for the ethical apriori of the 'Other' from which it is possible to think 'Being' in the first place. Since Heidegger completely overlooks this *fundamental* pre-condition of his fundamental ontology, he is focused on Being's translation into being, while Lévinas and Derrida focus on the 'Other' enabling a Being to be translatable in the first place.

Being and Time is Heidegger's attempt to restore the subject's authority over Being's interpretation into being, which Heidegger views as usually lost into the indifferent everydayness of the "They". Of importance for him is thus the subject's liberation from the claws of society with authenticity being the goal. The subject is portrayed as the sole, tragic hero, amidst a sea of lower subjects who don't dare to escape their "they"-ness. Heidegger's orientation is heavily biased toward the world's interpretation by the unchained subject. As long as this interpretation occurs "authentically", Heidegger won't care about the content of this interpretation.

Derrida and Lévinas shift their focus toward the rights of the "they" as the others of society endowed with their "Other"-ness, never to be fully understood. Their modification of Heidegger is not a wholesale repudiation, more a fundament to build upon because if left without further emendation, this fundament results into a dangerous elevation of the subject liberated from every outward-oriented ethical concerns, easily affiliated with an authoritarian ideology since its prime concern is self-*authorship*.

Therefore, I argue that Derrida's and Lévinas' ethics, their ontology and its consequences for questions of 'justice' can only be fully grasped, if Heidegger's ontology is presented beforehand.

In part one of study, I will do exactly this and elaborate not only on *Being and Time*, but also on Heidegger's intellectual development from there

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onwards into his late philosophy, culminating in “the turn” eminent in title for example in his late *On Time and Being*²¹. This is less a rejection *Being and Time* but more a complicating revision in the sense of him questioning the subject’s ability to liberate itself fully. Attention is shifted from the being the subject creates toward the Being from which it receives being. Heidegger’s super-elevation of the subject becomes slightly toned down and this is done primarily by Heidegger turning to language as an object of philosophy. I argue that many of his elaborations are structurally almost analogous to Lévinas and Derrida on this terrain, but with a different set of notions applied. Yet, still missing in Heidegger is a thorough account of ‘the Other’. Though in the end he advocates an actual “ethos of releasement”, it is less a plea for a social ethics but still subject-oriented, suggesting an intellectual humility of the subject toward the being it is confronted with.

Contrary to Lévinas, who often takes up the early Heidegger of *Being and Time* polemically as some sort of negative image to contrast his own work with, Derrida knew the later Heidegger and thus his critique is less harsh, but piercing nonetheless. The first part of this study shall provide an insightful account of Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, formatted in order to provide a better grasp of Derridean deconstruction and Lévinasian ethics.

The second part continues right where the first stopped as it will show how Derrida and Lévinas build on Heidegger in the dire need to transcend him. I want to sketch both their sets of theoretical notions enabling us to think about the research question, the development of these two sets and their inter-relation. To me, these two thinkers are way too intertwined to be covered separately.

The difficulty lies in Lévinas and Derrida being no co-authors as for example Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Lévinas occupied himself a lot with theology, supra-ethics and phenomenology, being classical in the sense of writing essays and treatises that on a very abstract level revolve around the question of how to escape being’s injustice. Derrida in turn followed a different routine by reading philosophical classics and deconstructing them while doing so. The ethical impetus of deconstruction is much less visible in his early works as it is prevalent and obvious in his late philosophy. While Derrida is quoting Lévinas quite regularly as an inspiration, discusses his

²¹ Heidegger, Martin (1972 [1962-64]): *On Time and Being*. Edited by Joan Stambaugh. New York/Hagerstown/San Francisco/London: Harper Torchbooks.

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work (critically) and even held the funeral speech for Lévinas, the latter in turn mentions Derrida only seldom. Yet their operating vocabulary is partly the same, as Lévinas resorts also to ‘différance’ and applies the same technique of alienation as Derrida by designing neologisms like ‘essance’ instead the homophonous ‘essence’. Completing this second part, I am going to relate both Derrida’s and Lévinas’ theoretical sets to Heidegger and will focus attention on the decisive breaking-points between him and them. Central to this undertaking is the apriori of ‘the Other’ enabling to think the ontological difference of Being and being in the first place.

The third part in turn shall be my attempt to link philosophy with political theory, namely the one of Ernesto Laclau, who proclaims for himself to have translated Derridean deconstruction faithfully into a tool-set of empirical discourse analysis that empowers us to grasp the existence of collective identities. Thus we see not only a shift from philosophy into the social sciences, but also one from the individual to the collective subject. I will argue, that indeed Laclau devises a political ontology to be viewed as a most exact execution of Derridean deconstruction as long as we only see deconstruction’s descriptive propositions about ‘reality’. This political ontology enables us to question the naturalness of every entity as contingent, originally political and therefore changeable. The associated discourse analysis is powerful in that it allows the critical dissolution of every seemingly objective structure.

Yet, what Laclau himself states is, that he only follows Derrida closely up until the latter resorts to the normative prevalence of ‘the Other’. For Laclau, this alleged bias threatens the sphere of ‘the political’ in that it attenuates the range of legitimate actions to be undertaken by any collective in power. Thus in his eyes a normatively infused deconstruction runs counter to Laclau’s attempt of widening the sphere of ‘the political’ (i.e.: the realm of confrontation with infinite possibilities to decide). Laclau refuses an ethical grounding of his political ontology on Derridean terms not to speak of Lévinas, who he only mentions once in an interview in which he opposes Lévinas strongly.²²

I argue, that Laclau has to pay a bitter price, if he wants to keep the sphere of ‘the political’ unharmed, namely the danger of allowing collective

²² Hansen, Allan; Sonnichsen, André (2014): “Discourse, the political and the ontological dimension: an interview with Ernesto Laclau,” *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 15 (3), 257.

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entities to arise that would do away with any democracy he seems to defend so fervently. As aforementioned, his wife and co-author of the classic *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* Chantal Mouffe is a good example of what happens, once we descend from the still quite abstract sphere of Laclau's thinking to the normative evaluation of contemporary society and world politics to which Mouffe applies Laclau's political ontology. Her position especially in regards of global politics is strikingly communitarian, almost classical realist in her arguing for the necessity of a balance of power in the eyes of an irresolvable-anarchy. It is informed by a strong argument for non-interference and the dissolution of universal human rights in favour of local interpretations, unregulated by any cosmopolitan authority. She adopts Carl Schmitt and his friend-foe paradigm quite indiscriminately, a paradigm Derrida had insistently attempted to overcome in *The Politics of Friendship*.

This is why I contend that whereas Laclau's political ontology is of great use for empirical analysis, its normative void is dangerous and needs to be enriched with the ethical impetus of Derridean deconstruction and Lévinasian ethics. By reading Laclau against the grain, I aim to show his blind-spot, namely that he successively withdraws his own ground by arguing for a non-containment of 'the political'. In short: I want to deconstruct Laclau's political ontology.

In the end, Laclau will be shown to offer a paradoxical picture: on the one hand he is deeply inspired by Derrida and works closely with his vocabulary, but rejects his (and Lévinas') philosophical innovation of turning *ethical* attention to 'the Other'. In doing so, he is practicably re-shifting the focus from 'the Other' toward the ontological difference again, the political residing on the plane of Being while the actual politics resemble being. Thus Laclau's political ontology amounts to a backwards regression toward Heidegger's philosophy – the one Lévinas and Derrida wanted to transcend so direly. By deconstructing Laclau, I attempt to fuse his political ontology and his empirical discourse analysis with an ethically inspired deconstruction.

This fusion will provide a starting point to answer our initial research question. I will argue for the impossibility of a finite truth to be set in stone in order to enable the incessant possibility of calling contemporary society, politics and reality into question. The idea of "the Other" teaches us humility in light of a reality which is so abundant that it has to transcend us in its infinite entirety. The range of 'the political' has to be enclosed insofar as it can never be allowed to abolish this principle on which a democratic society

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rests. This principle guarantees the society's openness toward the stranger, the unknown and the future.

Therefore: it is not time to panic, once postmodernism as deconstruction enters politics. It is high time to accept deconstruction as a helping hand in the never-ending endeavour to *compose* a democratic polity.

2. Martin Heidegger – Ethics of the Self

2.1 *The Ontological Difference as Difference*

As the introduction has shown, the central matter in dispute about deconstruction's vices and virtues revolves around the questions about the status of truth, its accessibility and the normative consequences of the latter. Thus, we find ourselves wandering the realms of metaphysics as ontology, epistemology and ethics. Such a wandering has been undertaken in philosophy many times before by prominent philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel and so forth. Postmodernism and as a proxy especially deconstruction is no exception to such an endeavour and its affiliated thinkers often take the philosophy of Martin Heidegger as a first starting point, providing them with a map on how to survive this journey when travelling off the beaten tracks in order to sidestep the traps, which they see the philosophical tradition unconsciously caught in. Yet, as the current debate claims, by wandering off the conventional pathways in rugged terrain deconstruction might have ventured into its own blind alley. But before losing ourselves as well – now in murky metaphors – let us enrich this comparison with substance by making explicit how Martin Heidegger takes issue with the philosophical tradition.

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) is most notably known for his opus magnum *Being and Time*²³, which was first published

²³ Heidegger, Martin (2001 [1927]): *Being and Time*. 21st. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

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in 1927. In this work, Heidegger approaches the ‘question of Being’ in relation to time as an issue that had occupied his mind already for 20 years after he had read in 1907 – a pupil still – Franz Brentano’s dissertation *On the Several Senses of Being*²⁴ from 1862. On the title page of this work, Brentano quotes Aristotle’s phrase “τὸ ὄν λέγεται πολλαχῶς” [to on legetai pollakos], which is the famous introductory remark to book Z of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* that is normally rendered into ‘being is said in many ways’.²⁵ Heidegger though proposes with “A being becomes manifest (sc. with regard to its Being) in many ways”²⁶ a much less conventional translation that on first glance seems somewhat far-fetched, which he would nonetheless claim to be more faithful to Greek thinking. For Heidegger, hidden in this sentence, we find the question that according to himself has always determined the way of this thinking²⁷, which Heidegger expresses as follows:

what is the pervasive, simple, unified determination of Being that permeates all of its multiple meanings? [...]. What then does Being mean? To what extent (why and how) does the Being of beings unfold in the four modes Aristotle constantly affirms, but whose origin he leaves undetermined? [...].²⁸

What does Being mean? Why and how does it ‘unfold’ into being? We can see here at play the intended differentiation between *Being* with a capital ‘B’ and *being* with a small one and thus we find ourselves thrown into the classical sphere of ontology. From Plato onwards Being designated the features likewise expressed in a sum of similar entities that allow us to group them in one category. Take the category ‘dog’ as an example. No dog will mirror completely its fellow counterparts: one dog may be small, the other big, one

²⁴ Brentano, Franz (1975 [1962]): *On the Several Senses of Being*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press.

²⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1028^a, cited after Ross, William (1975 [1924]): *Aristotle’s Metaphysics. Volume II. A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary by W. D. Ross*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

²⁶ Heidegger, Martin (2003): “Preface”, in: William J. Richardson (Ed.): *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*. 4th. New York: Fordham University Press (Perspectives in Continental Philosophy, 30), X.

²⁷ Heidegger, “Preface”, X.

²⁸ *Ibid.*