Introduction:
The Question of the Political

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$\mathcal{T}$he task of "reinterpretation" announced in the title of this collection is taken form a now classical article by Claude Lefort, itself suitably titled, "The Question of Democracy," written in 1983.[1] In it Lefort began by lamenting a certain omission among those writing in the continental tradition. Although in other areas continental philosophers surely could not be accused of lacking both in sophistication and it subtlety, when it comes to the domain of the political things seems to be different. "I am surprised: how can they handle ontological differences with such subtlety, vie with one another in exploiting the combined resources of Heidegger, Lacan, Jakobson and Levi-Strauss, and then fall back upon such crass realism when the question of politics arises?"[2]

In one sense Lefort's concern now seems almost anachronistic. Posited within a certain leftist legacy that, by a historicist argument, has been charged with being outdated, Lefort's ire also was aimed at another (equally modern) realism that had abandoned political philosophy for historicism and a search for laws based upon apparently empirical "fact." In this, however, Lefort seems only to echo once more a complaint that had accompanied the writings of proponents of a return to classical political thought for the bulk of this century. Indeed Lefort himself cited Leo Strauss's *Natural Right and History* for a model of such rejection of the social sciences and their historicist allies.[3] Such an alignment, moreover, points to an admittedly ambiguous event, namely, the complicity that has conjoined those committed to classical questions of political philosophy and those working in the tradition of continental philosophy that descends from post-Kantian origins. This complicity doubtless begins (explicitly) as early as Hegel and Marx.[4] All of this might be claimed, in turn, to make the continentalists' internal debates over the unwieldy status, even the death, of the subject, the disequilibrium of individuality and the ubiquitous transcendence of power (and justice) seem occasionally and ironically to smack—if not simply of a certain excess—then perhaps of a certain nostalgia and,

perhaps even again, a certain anachronism. But it is surely not insignificant that such debates themselves arose in the same moment in which arose hopes that political philosophy might acquire empirical grounding in the social sciences. Both would attest to the theoretical dispersion we continually haunt, divided, as it were between the ancients and the moderns, without being able to endorse either.

Recent historians of political philosophy, including Luc Ferry and Alain Renault, recast the writings of major phenomenologists (Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Arendt) as attempting to "preserve the reference to human rights from what in modernity threatened to take away all its meaning."[5] Again, the claim in one sense seems well taken. The phenomenological return to the life world did time and again take an antimodern, indeed "premodern" bent. As such it always emerged, to use Heidegger's term, from within a certain "reciprocal rejoinder" [Erwiderung] with the past at stake. The destructions and retrievals that phenomenologists sought to undertake were fully poised to recapture the ethical and theoretical "life" that modernity had called into question—not only by its institutions, but in the very rational paradigms of modern philosophy. In Heidegger such retrievals were again obvious, initially linked in the *Habilitationschrift* to Scotus, then more implicitly to Augustine and Aristotle, and later to Hölderlin and the Presocratics. If, in one sense Heidegger never quite said the ancients had captured what was at stake, in this respect, at least, he followed Scheler, who had lamented the calculative levelings of the ancient's virtues in modernity and had himself sought a certain retrieval of Augustine (via Pascal).[6] Such retrievals were again no less apparent in Husserl's return to *theoreia* and a bracketing of the instrumentalist and demonstrative paradigms of the moderns. And Lefort's own retrieval of political thinking was foreshadowed in Merleau-Ponty's defense of Machiavelli, a renewed classicism and a "humanism in extension" that sought (like Sartre) the remnants of virtue within traditions in which it had become both corrupted and at risk.[7] The latter however would critically appeal to the classical not as true literally *[a la lettre]* but, beyond the level of propositional content, as still capable of "calling forth new echoes and revealing new lustres *[reliefs].*"[8] Such expressivist repetitions, however, again would be complex and by no means would be a reinstatement of the past; repetition here did not preclude the simple disavowal of the past. It was, after all, Merleau-Ponty who claimed elsewhere that establishing a tradition means forgetting its origins. Therein emerge the complications in the relation between event and *Geschichte* and the necessity of "taking up again the interpretation of the Cogito and time."[9]

In fact, never were the repetitions at stake in such retrievals reducible to formal iteration. Phenomenology was never simply ideologically

invested in a certain picturesque affirmation of the ordinary. It was not, to use Adorno's description of Husserl's evidential *Aufklärung*, a certain mythic inventory that, "as in natural history museums, relics of vanished life are assembled into a collection and put on show."[10] The debate, for example, between Sartre and Heidegger over transcendence and the uncanniness (or "vulgarity," to use the modern term) of the ordinary was not simply a quarrel between the ancients and the moderns. It was equally a debate over the problem of the excess and the indeterminacy of the rational in the wake of both. As Strauss realized, this problem too had ancient roots: "Transcendence is not a preserve of revealed religion. In a very important sense it was implied in the original meaning of political philosophy as the quest for the natural or best political order."[11] In one sense phenomenology did attempt to rearticulate the unities of premodern narratives concerning such an experience. Still, it likewise encountered another "phenomenology" whereby the unity of the life world was, to use Sartre's terms, in "tatters," internally disrupted in the temporalities that constituted the remainder of modern community. Thus Heidegger's hermeneutic of the "average" everyday life of *Das Man,* like Benjamin's puppets at the mercy of historical fate or the critique of *moralité quotidiennen* in Sartre, all delineate a certain irretrievable failure.[12] It may well be true that, as Lefort and other commentators have seen, the vernacular might still reveal the remnant of a certain virtue, a certain "counter influence"— or, as for Bakhtin, that it might facilitate dialogue beyond the petrifications of monological identity.[13] The various phenomenologies of everyday life in their own venue all in fact attested to this fecundity, but not without confronting its complications.

It is true enough that the "displacement" of modernity was not simply an emptying of transcendence nor an elevation of the ordinary. But, if Heidegger had sought out a certain retrieval of the transcendence of Being, the everyday practices that would provide their articulation were now as irretrievably broken down as the famous analysis of the craft *(techne)* of hammering that had brought the impoverishment of proof-theoretical rationality—and the present-to-hand—into consciousness. The later Heidegger, of course, insisted on emphasizing the historical etymological antecedents of ethos as situated in the problem of human "dwelling" and the healing *(des Heilung)* of Being as its "solution." Still, such claims too would need to be measured against *Being and Time*'s attempt to "wrestle" the remainder of Dasein's dwelling in the world from the violence of modern functionalism. Although Sartre had stressed the importance of decision and judgment with respect to the problem of transcendence that confounds such issues—charging Heidegger's account of transcendence itself as being guilty of *mauvais foi*—the traditional *l'homme de bien* would be charged precisely with a

certain irrationality, a certain automatism whose naive repetitions would
be incapable of acknowledging the necessities both of destruction and
of invention.[14] Here even Habermas's refusals to talk of the good in
political theory would not find simple opposition.[15] Indeed, despite the
antinomies at stake, in all these various arguments there was a certain
modern gloss that had condemned the ancient tradition, to use
Baudelaire's term, as "a funeral cortege."

The question was the task of thinking in its aftermath. Even the
strongest supporters of traditionality would find such support in the
ancients themselves (for example, Gadamer's recurrence to Cicero's
conviviality for his account of dialogue and *sensus communis*[16]) only by
refusing to deny at the same time the equivocity of such appeals. As
Benjamin put it, the tradition "streamed down violently and often from
opposite directions."[17] If those like Lefort (or Merleau-Ponty before
him) are to be understood as standing between the ancients and the
moderns, it is in confronting the ambiguity of virtue and the status of
political philosophy itself and the lingering possibility of a "good ambi-
guity" upon which we must rely. Here, to use Kant's terms, we stand in
"the ruins of the ancient systems."[18] Indeed, critique was in a sense
already motivated by the experience of detraditionalization.

What seemed most problematic then was the status of the disper-
sion inherent in the quarrel itself—and most incontestable, the link
between knowledge, "virtue," and power, the latter inevitably linked with
institutions, and the decisions procedures of political modernity itself,
the political contract. As a result the ancient problem of the institution
of the *form* of the political would be inextricably linked with the task (and
the struggles) of representation and recognition, and even, it has been
suggested, with the violence of judgment itself.[19] As Axel Honneth will
point out, the discourses became fragmented; devoid of the "markers of
certainty" (to use Lefort's terms). The problem was how to understand
the meaning of judgment, autonomy, and consensus in the midst of the
fragmentation of the hierarchies that structure the political, and, that
had structured the thinking we identify as metaphysical extending from
Plato to Hegel. But as Lefort's question indicates, such fragmentation
also is the ancient inheritance of democracy. Although classical accounts
could always invest the transcendence of *politeia* and its metaphysical *form*
or *eidos* in the *pros hen* or transcendental authority, that is, in nature,
community, or the sacred embodiment of the monarch, it is precisely the
incorporation of such transcendental authority that modern accounts of
legitimation called into question.[20] They did so ultimately, as Lefort notes,
precisely by removing certainty from the question of *politeia* itself. Ac-
cordingly, whatever remains of transcendence is always "elsewhere," nei-
ther simply outside nor inside institutional deployment; thus emerges the

fundamental indeterminacy as to the bases of power, law, and knowledge—as well as the work of ideology that is dedicated to the task of restoring certainty.

The problem of uncertainty—to use Habermas's terms, the "philosophical embarrassment" of underdeterminacy, and the suspicion of "socially conditioned ideology" it indicated—and the attempt to derive rational procedures in its wake did not then simply dissolve the problems of transcendence and incorporation that attended detraditionalization.[21] Indeed, it might be claimed that the locus of power became both more intensified and more problematic, no longer readily subject to "demarcation" and situated at the "outside" of theory. Objectivity and ideology, as Foucault put it, could not simply be opposed.[22]

Perhaps no one more than Foucault has directly confronted the overdetermined remainder of the Enlightenment project by examining the relations between "knowledge and power"—to reinvoke terms that resonate throughout modernity, beginning at least as early as Bacon's own attempts to grapple with the *interpretatio naturae*.[23] It is in this work, perhaps more than anywhere else, that the investigation of the complicated modern interface between truth and power, and institution and liberation became the task of enlightenment.[24] As the essays that close this volume demonstrate, Foucault's work becomes, as a result, both particularly fertile and particularly contested in our attempts to grapple with the legacy of theoretical and institutional modernity. Moreover, the effects of power and exclusion become especially pointed vis-à-vis the impact of recent discourses on matters not simply of class, but also of gender and race. Here again, if we are to "reinterpret" the political, then such reinterpretations will be complicated by the ideologies that complicate knowledge and interpretation.

Yet, no more than such questions dissolve the problem of transcendence (and conceptually the remainder of our link with the ancients) do they simply dissolve the requisites attending the question of certainty. No more than the suspicion that undercuts the transcendental authorities of nature and community dissolve the issues attending legitimation, do such challenges supplant or dissolve the requisites of judgment and the virtues (and limits) of the rational. It is true that, shorn of tutelage to the ancient traditions—but also shorn of the epistemic surety their foundations provided—the problems that attend the question of judgment and interpretation are inevitable. Hence, it has been argued, both the liberation and the "abandon" of individuality, as Heidegger saw in emphasizing the indeterminacy of the *Daseinanalytik*.[25] The individual can no longer be construed to be the *derivitatum* of the universal, nor can it be simply the latter's ineffable remainder.[26] Thus the problem of interpretation arises anew, especially

granted the blindness to which its underdeterminability makes it sub-
ject. But the problem of such "blindness" notwithstanding, it would be
no less blind to refuse to judge, or to suppose such "individuality" to be
simply beyond all community (conceptual or historical) any more than
it is beyond argument.

A good deal of recent discussion, accordingly, has been given once
more to the link between individuality and subjectivity and the question
of overcoming the split between the "I" and "me"—and then ultimately,
the complicated relations between both and the we of constitution and
contract. Such discussion has arisen among thinkers devoted to a num-
ber of different research programs. Axel Honneth addresses this prob-
lem anew in his 1992 SPEP plenary presentation, included in this volume.
The problem, again, was originally stated by Sartre in opposing the I of
transcendental reflection to its conditions, which would remain
irrecuperable to all transcendental semantics, a self, that is, always strictly
taken "other than I." The question still revolves around the (ancient)
problem, or "prohibitions" to use Foucault's term, concerning the sci-
ence of the individual. Moreover, if Foucault traced the emergence of
the question of the individual to post-Kantian thought, and to Hölderlin
in particular, he likewise realized its ambiguous status within the
epistemic and political struggle of modernity. Henceforth, he observes,
"the destiny of individuality will be to appear always in the objectivity
that manifests and conceals it."[27] Although perhaps no one more than
Sartre attested to—or at least prepared the meditation on—the division
of the subject, the division between the I and the me (and the I and
the other), it is likewise true that, as Sartre also saw, the theoretical
strategy of the refusal to affirm, skepticism fails; the problem of "dirty
hands" continually haunts the theoretical gnosticisms that would refuse
the task of judgment in defense of the ineffable. It is true: the analysis
of judgment would be complicated infinitely by this—as treatments
extending from Habermas to Lyotard would attest in extending not
only the genre of the logical symbolics of Kant's third *Kritik*, but Frege
and Husserl's logical investigations. But all such treatments, including
Sartre's, would stop short at the simple dissolution, and perhaps even
nominalism, of the judgment. And for good reason. Hobbes's reduc-
tion of the copula to calculation was the condition for the possibility of
the calculations of utilitarianism. This is the linchpin of what Strauss
called "the moral problem" in Hobbes, namely that Hobbes is no longer
concerned with the *eidos* of *politeia*, but with its failure. The ancients'
reliance on nature would now be refigured time and again only in stoic
abjections before the other. In all this, Sartre and those after him from
Lacan to Lyotard have been charged with providing a "negative" ac-
count of intersubjectivity, a "regress" to Hobbes that entailed a certain

"continental" *rapprochement* with emotivism.[28] And such charges seemed unavoidable when the genre of tragedy seemed to supervene upon political judgment—as when, for example, Lacan, culminating a certain post-Kantian tradition, claimed Antigone knew the meaning of law better than Kant. For all the fallibilism of political institutions and the underdeterminacies of political theory, however, *caesura* is not justice.[29] It is perhaps overly hasty to claim that the complex (that is, ontic-ontological) relation between politics and the political remains irreducible to the biconditional of *caesura*. Such claims remain to be adjudicated. Nonetheless, it is true too that Sartre's "opening" surely articulates the complications of the political, divided not only between self and other, agency and institution, freedom and necessity, but also, theoretically, between expressionist and literal forms of discourse, and proof theoretical, instrumental, and other forms of the rational, narrative, and law.

No more than the question of being or the question of ethics, would the reinterpretation of the political simply put an end to theory, the problems of community, the issue of recognition, and, to use Nancy's term, the sharing *(partage)* of voices—or to add Mead's, the voices of the past and the future, the not yet discovered as much as the already excluded, both overdetermined in their alterity.[30] It involves a problem of recognition in a number of senses as theoretical modernism was undoubtedly slow to apprehend—and as the itinerary that connects Hobbes to Hegel and Hegel to Levinas attests.[31] The implications are complex; their theoretical ramifications are neither simply epistemic nor ethical in character, but in a sense both, the complexity of the *Erwiderung* itself. Moreover, not simply these enter as Lefort suggested early on, in claiming that we will need a new ontology for the political, its ethics, and its recognitions.[32]

This collection presents rich examples of such reinterpretations. It begins with rereadings of classical figures in continental thought and then proceeds to take up current topics in the legacy of political theory. The final section provides a number of different analyses and evaluations of the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault's work, as has been seen, has played a pivotal role in debates in this area, and the differences that emerge in these analyses shed light, not only on the status of this thought, but on the variety of approaches to political thinking in continental philosophy at large.

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assistance of Karen Smith. Stephen Watson wrote the introduction.

NOTES

1. Claude Lefort, "The Question of Democracy," *Democracy and Political
Theory*, trans. David Macey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

2. Ibid., 10.

3. Ibid., 12. See Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: Univer-
sity of Chicago Press, 1953). Lefort here endorses Strauss' critique as
"sufficiently elegant." For a more extended treatment (and critique) of the
position, see Lefort's discussion in *Le travail de l'oeuvre machiavel* (Paris:
Gallimard, 1972) 3:9.

4. See for example, Karl-Heinz Ilting, "Hegel's Auseinandersetzung mit
der Aristotelishen Politik," *Philosophisches Jahrbuch* 71 (1963–1964): 38–58, and
Axel Honneth's discussion of this problem in his "Moral Development and
Social Struggle: Hegel's Early Social Philosophical Development," *Cultural Po-
litical Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment*, ed. A. Honneth, et al.
(Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 197–217.

5. Luc Ferry and Alain Renault, *Political Philosophy*, vol. 3: *From the Rights
of Man to the Republican Idea*, trans. Franklin Philip (Chicago: University of
Chicago Press, 1992), 31.

6. Scheler's own account of the modern, calculative "levelings" of the
classical virtues of justice, self-control, loyalty, veracity, and economy can be
seen in the concluding chapter to his 1912 work, *Ressentiment*, trans. William
Holden (New York: The Free Press 1961). Compare Heidegger's explanation in
Being and Time: "The way in which 'care' is viewed in the foregoing existential
analytic of Dasein, is one which . . . attempts to Interpret the Augustinian (i.e.,
Helleno-Christian) anthropology with regard to the foundational principles
reached in the ontology of Aristotle." See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*,
trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962),
492n.

7. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, trans. John O'Neill
(Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 176, and "A Note on Machiavelli," in *Signs*, trans.
Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965, 211–23.

8. Merleau-Ponty, "Introduction," *Signs*, 11.

9. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin
Smith (New Jersey Humanities Press, 1981), 374 (translation revised). Merleau-

Ponty's claim that establishing a tradition requires that we "forget its origins" occurs in a number of contexts. See for example *Signs*, 59.

10. Theador W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A MetaCritique: Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenological Antinomies*, trans. Willis Domingo (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982), 217.

11. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 15.

12. See Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969). Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 76.

13. Lefort, "The Question of Democracy," 16. Compare Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), ch. 3. Here we should stress the importance of Lefort's reading of Machiavelli, or Bakhtin's of Rabelais, or, with respect to interpretation and the turn to history as a domain of "poesy and daily experience," Bacon.

14. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), 336; Saint Genet, Actor and Martyr, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963), 24.

15. Jürgen Habermas, *Facts and Norms*, trans. William Relig (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).

16. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 19ff.

17. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977), 106.

18. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 655 (A835/B863).

19. See Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority," trans. Mary Quaintance, *Cordoza Law Review* 11 (1990).

20. On this issue see the classical study of Ernst Kantorwicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

21. Jürgen Habermas, *Post-Metaphysical Thinking*, trans. William Mark Hohengarten (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 154.

22. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. Scheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 184. Beginning with the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* Foucault attempted to more fully articulate the relations of power and empowerment that unite knowledge and ideology, a deployment whose threshold of modernity Foucault too related to Machiavelli. See *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Richard Hurley (New York: Random House, 1980), 97.

23. Francis Bacon, see *Novum Organum*, book 1, aphorisms—attesting already to the complicated relations between the rise of "science" and the rise of "humanism." Compare Michael Foucault, "Theatrum Philosophic" trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon in *Language, Counter: Memory Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 65–196.

24. See Michel Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

25. See, for example, Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (BT), 236. Compare Jean-Luc Nancy, "Abandoned Being," trans. Brian Holmes in *The Birth to Presence* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 36–47.

26. Hence the critical status of individuality, not only in this volume, but in the recent literature generally. See, for example, Jürgen Habermas, "Individuation through Socialization: On George Herbert Mead's Theory of Subjectivity" in *Post Metaphysical Thinking*, trans. William Mark Hohengarten (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992); Alain Renault, *L'ere de l'individu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989); Jean Luc Nancy, Manfred Frank, *What Is NeoStructuralism?* trans. Sabine Wilke and Richard Gray (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). Despite the conceptual incommensurability which threatens the differences in these positions, there is doubtless a certain accord on this issue. And the issue, as has been indicated, is also not foreign to Heidegger, whose Dasein analytic as fundamental ontology was after all from the outset linked not only ontically but ontologically to the problem of determinability and individuation (BT, 62). Finally, it is not insignificant to note that Strauss's *Natural Right and History* concluded with the claim that "the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns concerns eventually, and perhaps even from the beginning, the status of individuality" (323).

27. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1973), 198.

28. See Axel Honneth, "The Struggle for Recognition: On Sartre's Theory of Intersubjectivity," in *The Fragmented World of the Social: Essays in Social and Political Philosophy*, trans. Charles Wright (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), ch. 9. On the proximity of Sartre to other forms of emotivism, see Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), ch. 2.

29. See Jacques Lacan, "Kant with Sade," trans. James B. Swenson, *October* 51 (Winter, 1989): 68. In this text, too, Lacan notes the importance of the stoics in the psychoanalytic event, an issue further elaborated on by Julia Kristeva in her "Psychoanalysis and the Polis," trans. Margaret Waller, in *Transforming the Hermeneutic Context*, ed. Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 89–105.

30. G. H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), 168.

31. Compare, for example, Emmanuel Levinas, "The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other" and its attempts to overcome the fallibilism of reciprocal wills, concession and compromise: and obligation—in short, again to contract.

32. Lefort, *Le travail de l'oeuvre machiavel*, 425.