Depoliticization of politics and power: Mouffe and the conservative disposition in postfoundational political theory

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Postfoundational political theory has been criticized for being incapable of establishing a normative basis for politics. This is because postfoundationalism's conception of the "political" as a radical contingency disproves the existence of an objective ground that would make it possible to evaluate political movements from a neutral position. In this article, I counter this critique by distinguishing between Chantal Mouffe's political theory and other postfoundational theories based on their respective normative implications. This is done by explicating how Mouffe's way of conceptualizing the political implies a conservative political disposition. In order to accomplish this, I develop an understanding of the conservative political disposition, which refers to the normative idea that police power is necessary for producing and upholding a social order. Through an analysis of Carl Schmitt's theory, I elaborate that the conservative disposition is an attempt to justify the depoliticization of social relations. On the basis of this idea that some political theories have normative implications that are in line with the conservative disposition, I examine postfoundationalism. My argument is that while Mouffe's theory does imply the idea that police power is necessary, this is not the case with other postfoundational theories. On the contrary, other postfoundational democratic theories categorically deny that a form of power, namely police power, would be necessary.

KEYWORDS

depoliticization, police, conservatism, postfoundational political philosophy, power, Chantal Mouffe

Introduction

To a certain extent, Chantal Mouffe's theory remains an enigma to her critics, even to theorists within her own theoretical tradition, postfoundationalism. Critics have accused her either of giving too much leeway to uncontrollable politicization (Aytac, 2020) or of establishing too strict limits to politicization (Devenney, 2020). This means that her theory is either too relativistic to have any basis for distinguishing between various regimes (Hildebrand and Séville, 2019) or that it relies on objective principles insofar as it contradicts the postfoundational idea of radical contingency (Marttila and Gengnagel, 2015). Furthermore, her reliance on the radical conservative and National Socialist legal

theorist, Carl Schmitt, has been criticized for institutionalizing politics (Palonen, 2007; Boucher, 2019); alternatively, it has been claimed that her theory underestimates the role of institutions (Leiviskä, 2018).

It seems that the main reason for this critique is that scholars are unsure of what distinguishes Mouffe's theory from other postfoundational theories. Postfoundationalism is often read as a unified block within which theoretical differences are scant. Some even seem to identify Mouffe's theory with Ernesto Laclau's theory due to their joint book on the topic (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014). This has given rise to some surprising accusations, such as the claim that Laclau is "left-Schmittian" (Boucher, 2019, p. 300), even though Laclau never (at least to my knowledge) refers to Schmitt. Furthermore, many tend to believe that all postfoundational theories have similar normative entailments. However, it is the contention of this article that the normative implications of Mouffe's political theory radically contradict other postfoundational theories and their visions of how politics should be constructed.

In postfoundational political theory, thanks to Mouffe and her coauthor Laclau, the "political" has become a central topic. According to Oliver Marchart, the distinction between political and politics originates from a failure to establish an ultimate ground of politics (Marchart, 2007, p. 5, 11, Marchart, 2010, p. 145, Marchart, 2011, p. 966). With the term "the political," postfoundationalism generally refers to the fact that all political systems and social relations are contestable in so far as they are based on political decisions that exclude other possibilities. This exclusion entails a basic antagonism and a possibility of politicization. For postfoundationalists, this contestability entails that everything in politics is necessarily contingent, i.e., that there is no ultimate foundation that would remove the possibility of contestation (Marchart, 2007, p. 30, Marchart, 2018a, p. 11). All social and political matters are discursively constructed, which means that their structures and systems can never be exhaustive (Howarth, 2014, p. 5). Discursively structured realities are social practices that establish and link together heterogeneous elements (Howarth, 2014, p. 10). This means that there is no ultimate ground on which a discourse could anchor itself; rather, as Tomas Marttila encapsulates it, "the social realm is subjugated to an incessant and unstoppable interplay between equally self-referential, objectively non-necessary and socially contestable conceptions of the ideal mode of societalization" (Marttila, 2015, p. 22).

In this article, I start from the hypothesis that the concept of the political is central to understanding normativity in postfoundational theory. There are various ways of distinguishing between different theories of the political, such as their different manners of conceptualizing the political (Bedorf, 2010, p. 16–32; Flügel-Martinsen et al., 2021, p. 7–9). It should not come as a surprise that different theories that only agree in distinguishing the political from politics (Marchart, 2007, p. 7, Nonhoff, 2021, p. 59) will have very different normative implications. Therefore, the concept of the political does not provide a unifying theoretical basis for postfoundational theory. There is rather a plethora of sources of inspiration, such as Jacques Rancière, Hannah Arendt, and Schmitt, and different ways of emphasizing the role of the concept of the political for normative theory.

Postfoundationalism can be distinguished into two categories: theories emphasizing discourse analysis and theories of radical democracy. Whereas, the former has mostly been interested in critically analyzing various political organizations and media landscapes in postfoundational terms (Palonen, 2012; Marttila, 2015; Nikisianis et al., 2019), the latter type has sought to develop a democratic theory out of postfoundationalism's main principles (Devenney, 2020; Marchart, 2021). Such a democratic theory and its normative interpretation can already be discovered in the seminal contribution to postfoundational theory, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* by Laclau and Mouffe, in which they establish the programmatic thesis that "the task of the left … cannot be to renounce liberal-democratic ideology, but on the contrary, to deepen and expand it in the direction of a radical and plural democracy" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014, p. 160). For them, this project is about deepening democratic ideals by understanding the political basis of all social relations and thus the possibility of democratically politicizing them (Howarth, 2014, p. 37; Marchart, 2021, p. 25).

However, critics have argued that Laclau's and Mouffe's theory does not really justify such a political project (Žižek, 2008, p. 174; Marttila and Gengnagel, 2015, p. 159). This is because it is based on the idea that all political systems are radically contingent, which implies that there is no objective position from which to evaluate various political systems (Marchart, 2007, p. 4). For example, Žižek (2000, p. 229–230) has argued that the normative implications do not follow from such descriptive premises. I will point out that postfoundational theories are normative, even if unintendedly. My focus is on the conservative normative possibilities inherent in theorizing the political. At face value, there is nothing surprising in pointing out the conservative implications of postfoundational theory for the concept of political. Many have acknowledged Schmitt's influence on the conceptualizations of the political (Marchart, 2007; Bedorf, 2010; Flügel-Martinsen et al., 2021).[1] However, rather than simply pointing out this influence, I want to understand how the concept of the political could avoid the pitfalls of conservative normative implications. In doing so, I hope to both clarify the problems that one must take into account when theorizing the political and contribute to a broader discussion on the normativity of postfoundational theory.

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1 Marchart, however, names Paul Ricœur as the most important influence when it comes to developing the concept (Marchart, 2007, p. 35).

I hope to move the discussion forward rather than create more confusion. For this reason, my argument is not that the concept of the political itself is problematical, but rather that a specific interpretation of it (namely, the Schmittian) brings about conservative normative implications. While Schmitt's conservatism and Nazism should not come as a surprise to anyone, it seems that Schmitt's conceptual apparatus is still being used for both analysis and normative visions of politics (Felices-Luna, 2013; Manara and Piazza, 2018). There is an idea that Schmitt's concept of the political could be detached from his antidemocratic ideas (see, e.g., Howse, 1998, p. 65). Furthermore, many think that a Schmittian concept of the political can be separated from his understanding of political power and adapted to other conceptions of power. There are, e.g., attempts to bring the friend/enemy distinction and the Foucauldian analytical framework together (Barder and Debrix, 2011; Newswander, 2011; see also Deuber-Mankowsky, 2008). My argument is that Schmitt's specific way of interpreting the concept of the political in itself founds a normative theory that should not be appropriated for normative political theory, and for which I use the term "conservative political disposition."

The point of discussing the conservative disposition is not to create an all-encompassing theory of conservatism. Rather, I hope to establish a heuristic notion that will help others to assess various theories in terms of their normative implications. The basic point that I want to make is that the conservative political disposition understands political power as a necessary instrument for limiting politicization and political change. From the conservative viewpoint, there can and should be no politicization within the political system; there are mere disturbances that need to be policed (Röttgers, 2010, p. 48). The conservative political disposition is about policing political action in Rancière's (1995, p. 51) broad understanding of the term as various manners and practices of maintaining and producing order.

The point of analyzing the conservative political disposition rather than simply analyzing conservative theorists is to underline that conservative implications can be implicit in theories that are explicitly anticonservative. It is for this reason that I will discuss Mouffe's theory. Of course, Mouffe herself has always understood that evoking Schmitt's ideas requires some qualifications. As she states in an interview: "[U]sing Schmitt to criticize liberalism brought me into a very ambiguous position. I tended to agree with his critique of liberalism, but I did not want to follow him in his rejection of liberal democracy" (Decreus et al., 2011, p. 684). There is an obvious tension between Schmitt's critique of pluralism and Mouffe's own radically pluralistic project that applies Schmitt's understanding of the political dimension. However, my argument regarding Mouffe's theory is not that this tension cannot be solved, but that Mouffe's theory seeks to establish the need for police power capable of limiting politicization.

I argue that Mouffe's theory establishes the *necessity* of police power. This contradicts the basic postfoundationalist principle of the contingency of all political structures and systems. In the first section, I will support this argument by elaborating on the conservative disposition. This notion of the conservative political disposition refers to the idea that police power is necessary in the production and upholding of social order. I will discuss this by means of developing the distinction between (re)politicization and depoliticization. Depoliticization is about establishing the necessity of social order. Governments and powers will seek to limit the possibility of politicizing the current order by means of various practices. The conservative disposition seeks to support such depoliticization by conceptualizing politicization within a political system as a mere disturbance that threatens the prevailing order. Here I will analyze Schmitt's concept of the political and its justification of the idea that within the prevailing order there can be no politics but merely police power capable of limiting politicization. This is because, for Schmitt, the political is focused on the distinction between friends and enemies as homogeneous political unities within which there can be no politicization.

Next, I will move on to postfoundationalism. I will develop an understanding of how postfoundationalism differs from the conservative disposition and its normative entailments. Here, two ideas are crucial. First, the radical idea of a lack of ultimate grounds denies that police power is necessary. Second, because there is no such ground that would establish an objective basis for deciding between alternatives, homogeneity within a social sphere becomes impossible. This is because there is no ultimate identity (e.g., an identity based on class or nationality) that could produce an incontestable unity within a political system. Rather, there will always remain something heterogeneous to such unities, something that will make it possible to develop new identities and new ways of politicizing the social sphere. This structural heterogeneity establishes that a Schmittian unity that would justify police powers can never establish its own necessity and truly become depoliticized. I argue that the contingency and heterogeneity of politics allow it to be conceptualized in a manner altogether different from that of Schmitt, as a degree of antagonism rather than as the distinction between friends and enemies.

Lastly, I will critically examine Mouffe's theory. Because Mouffe understands the political in the Schmittian sense as the possibility of establishing a limit between the internal and the external, a distinction between friends and enemies, she contradicts the postfoundational idea that the political as a degree refers to any conflict rather than an ultimate contradiction. As Thomassen points out, if we understand antagonism as a pure distinction between the inside and the outside (Thomassen, 2019, p. 45), then pure antagonism seems impossible and the concept should rather be understood as a matter of degrees (Thomassen, 2019, p. 56). For example, Laclau claims that a populist antagonistic frontier is internal to a political system (Laclau, 2005b, p. 107). However, unlike Phelan, who argues that Mouffe's conception of agonism as a

limited form of antagonism affirms the idea that antagonism is not absolute (Phelan, 2022), I argue that Mouffe does understand antagonism as something that is qualitatively different from agonism and not just a matter of degrees. For this reason, her political theory ends up claiming that the role of institutions is to limit the possibility of antagonism, meaning that police power will always be necessary for any political system. After developing this analysis of Mouffe's political theory as having normative implications that are in line with the conservative political disposition, I will conclude this article and discuss what this means for postfoundationalism.

The conservative political disposition

I will now elaborate on how a political theory might have conservative normative implications. In order to do this, I will first explain what I mean by normativity and why political theories and their concepts are necessarily (explicitly or implicitly) normative. This is crucial for analyzing Mouffe's political theory as she claims that the political is a descriptive category (Mouffe, 2000, p. 101, 129, Mouffe, 2005b, p. 13, 20, Mouffe, 2013, p. xiv; 2018, p. 91). Mouffe clarifies what the "political" is by making a distinction between the ontic and the ontological. The former refers to particular beings or objects and the latter to how these particular entities exist. "This means that the ontic has to do with the manifold practices of conventional politics, while the ontological concerns the very way in which society is instituted" (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 8–9). What interests me in this distinction is that it seems to argue that the political informs analyzes of politics and not vice versa. For Mouffe, "politics" refers to a political order whereas "the political belongs to our ontological condition" (Mouffe, 2005b, p. 16). However, I argue that the concept of political is itself a normative concept that is intertwined with politics and power relations. It is for this reason that political has to be analyzed as taking part in politics and therefore cannot be analyzed as being independent of or prior to politics. My argument follows Johanna Oksala's critique of postfoundational attempts to define the political as an ontological category. "Distinguishing some realm of reality as "political," and then attempting to clarify the ontology pertaining to it, would imply that a prior ontological distinction between what belongs to the political domain and what does not has already been made and is secured in place" (Oksala, 2012, p. 15–16). This means that defining the political as an ontological category already implies a conceptual decision that establishes normative limits to what we should or should not view as political.

All political concepts take part in power struggles, either implicitly or explicitly. As I will point out below, Schmitt's concept of politics cannot be detached from his normative understanding of how political power should operate. I agree with Torben Bech Dyrberg when he says that "the very conceptualization of power constitutes an inseparable part of

power struggles: discourses *on* power are also discourses *of* power" (Dyrberg, 1997, p. 86). In order to take part in redefining and utilizing concepts, the theorist must enter the realm of politics. A political theory might be described as "metapolitical" insofar as it draws "new lines of partition, think[s] new distinctions" as Badiou puts it; theory is a way of taking part in politics, a "*sui generis* activity of thought which finds itself conditioned by the events of real politics" (Badiou, 2005, p. 55, 62). Political theory is, therefore, always part of politics, as it is both conditioned by and intervenes in political struggles.

For this reason, the traditional postfoundational idea that the political is ontologically prior to politics must be inverted in order to gain perspective on the normative nature of the concept of the political. One should view the political from the perspective of politics, as the concept of the political is itself a site of contestation. To establish conceptual boundaries regarding how we should understand the political is a political act in itself. Conceptualizing the political is conditioned by politics. To quote Oksala, this means that "any ontological schema, any interpretation of reality, is an imposition, not a pure description of the given" (Oksala, 2012, p. 21). It is the central idea of this thesis that the concepts that we use to think and interpret our political reality are normative in the sense that they establish limits to what can be considered possible. As Étienne Balibar points out, to contemplate and represent the world is "to impose an *order* in it" (Balibar, 2017, p. 54). Such an imposition is to take part in a political act, even if it is a metapolitical one.

However, saying that all political theories are normative does not mean that they are normative in the same way. In order to define the conservative political disposition, a distinction between repoliticization and depoliticization has to be made, or else all political theories can be defined as conservative, which would simply render the notion meaningless. This is because all normative theories seek to understand how politics should be organized, yet not all of them are conservative. It might be that depoliticization, if defined broadly, is indeed a structural necessity of all theories. However, as I will argue below, there are important differences that make it possible to make distinctions that bring out the defining features of the conservative disposition. My argument is that the conservative disposition is about seeking to justify depoliticization by means of arguing that political power ultimately is and *should be* police power.

In order to clarify what I mean by police power, I will first establish the distinction between repoliticization and depoliticization. Starting with the latter, I understand it in similar lines to Laura Jenkins as a strategy that "entails forming necessities, permanence, immobility, closure, and fatalism and concealing/negating or removing contingency" (Jenkins, 2011, p. 160). Depoliticization is about establishing incontestability and limiting the possibility of politicizing certain matters. This can be established discursively by making alternatives seem like non-viable options (see, e.g., Bates et al., 2014), or establishing institutional structures in such a way that makes

change impossible (see, e.g., Burnham, 2000). The European Union and its economic policies are a good example of both, as scholars have criticized the various institutional (Streeck, 2015) and discursive (Ojala and Harjuniemi, 2016) means of depoliticizing it.

Depoliticization should not be seen as an absolute term, as it is always contingent and context-dependent. Depoliticization categorically implies a prior political decision, i.e., the decision to establish certain limits, and the possibility of repoliticization, i.e., the demand for making a new decision. However, it seems that, if successful, repoliticization introduces new limits and thus leads to depoliticization. Because of this Bates et al. (2014, p. 257) have urged that we should conceive de- and repoliticization not as opposing processes but as parallel ones, so that they point at different parts in a process of "shifting boundaries." To repoliticize an issue is to challenge power relations and limits in order to establish new ones. To depoliticize is to seek to police and limit the possibility of politicization.

I understand the "police" here as an instrument of depoliticization, i.e., of countering politicization in order to uphold the prevailing order. According to Michel Foucault, policing is a broader technology of governing by administering and ordering social relations within a state (Foucault, 2019, p. 318–319). Similarly, in his genealogy of police power, Giuseppe Campesi claims that "the police has assumed a crucial role not so much in keeping and protecting order as in *producing* order" (Campesi, 2016, p. 2). Police power is about producing and maintaining the prevailing order. It is, therefore, about establishing limits and enforcing them, which is essentially depoliticization. Rancière's notion of police as being distinct from politics is particularly helpful. According to Rancière, the "police" refers to political order and its maintenance. To take part in politics in this sense means to maintain political order and the various mechanisms of upholding it, i.e., politics as police regards "the composition and concordance of a community, the organization of powers, the distribution of positions and functions, and the system of legitimating this distribution" (Rancière, 1995, p. 51). The political order is a series of institutions, distributions and methods of governing, and limits and confines of subjects (Rancière, 1995, p. 52). The police, therefore, outlines the aspect of politics connected to order and its maintenance. In contrast to the police, politics, for Rancière, consists of contestations of this order in the name of those whose voice and perspective have been excluded. Politics is about challenging "the natural order of domination," which Rancière interprets as the process in which the poor accomplish "the interruption of the simple effects of the domination of the rich," namely, the political order that the rich have instituted (Rancière, 1995, p. 31). This means that politics contradicts the police order and disrupts its effect of making the political order seem "natural" (Rancière, 1995, p. 56).

Conservatives tend to interpret politics in the sense of the police. They argue that a power that is capable of establishing

limits and boundaries for human action is necessary. Thomas Hobbes's version of this idea is probably the most influential one. For him, strong coercive power is necessary for order to exist. In Hobbes's famous dictum, words alone are not enough to create obligations (Hobbes, 2018, pp. XIV, § 63–64). "Covenants, without the Sword, are but Words, of no strength to secure a man at all" (Hobbes, 2018, pp. XVII, § 85). Coercive power is necessary for order because it is the only way of making sure that subjects limit their actions so as to stay within the confines of the law. This means that coercion is a precondition for order, so that "there must be some coercive Power, to compel men equally to the performance of their Covenants, by the terrour [*sic*] of some punishment … and such power there is none before the erection of the Common-wealth" (Hobbes, 2018, p. XV, § 71–72). An authority capable of punishing in a way that upholds the social order is something that must be instituted by free subjects to reign over them and make sure that they obey laws. It is this authority that ensures the transition from the state of nature to civil society.

For conservatives, the establishment of a social order does not mean that humans would ultimately learn to live in harmony. As Nöel O'Sullivan puts it succinctly, conservatism can be characterized as "opposition to belief in radical political and social change on the ground that it rests on several mistaken assumptions, of which the most important [is] that human nature is highly malleable" (O'Sullivan, 2013, p. 293). This means that policing their behavior is a continuous task that will always be necessary for producing and maintaining order. As the conservative political theorist Leo Strauss claimed, if the opposite were true, i.e., if it were possible to cultivate human nature fit for civil society, it would mean overcoming human nature, which would ultimately make the justification for sovereign power redundant (Strauss, 2001, p. 223–225). Similarly, Joseph de Maistre, the French counterrevolutionary conservative, argued that "society is really a state of war. We find here the necessity for the government. Since man is evil he must be governed; it is necessary that when several want the same thing a power superior to the claimants judges the matter and prevents them from fighting" (de Maistre, 1996, p. 37). In this quote, de Maistre agrees with Hobbes's original idea that the necessity of government is based on the ever-present possibility of the state of nature as the state of war of all against all (Garrard, 1996, p. 442–443). If social order is politically produced and can never be secured completely, then political power capable of policing individuals and groups will never become unnecessary.

A theory that seeks to reform a system in order to limit politicization does so to strengthen and fortify the processes of distinctions and distributions that constitute the political order. In line with Rancière's definition, theories can stand on the side of the "police" rather than politics if their goal is to confer stability to political authorities and ultimately depoliticize. To put it bluntly, a theory is depoliticizing if it takes the side of the definite order. Schmitt's theory belongs in this category,

as it perceives politicization as a problem to be countered by state means. While some, like Rancière, would interpret politicization, i.e., the demands of those who are dominated, as a call for the democratization of the economy, the conservative political disposition takes part in framing politicization as something to be depoliticized. This, as I will point out next, is at least how Schmitt's concept of the political frames politicization.

Schmitt famously established, in *The Concept of the Political*, that the political refers to a contradiction that "is the most intense and extreme contradiction and every concrete contradiction becomes more political when it reaches closer to the most extreme point of the grouping between friends and enemies" (Schmitt, 1932/2015, p. 28). Any social contradiction can become a political one and, once it does, it ceases to be strictly social. Such intensity is reached when an internal sphere within which there can only be friends is accomplished. A political contradiction means that a border must be established between what is interior and what is exterior to a political unity, the former being an "in itself pacified, territorially closed and for strangers impenetrable, organizational political unity" (Schmitt, 1932/2015, p. 44). This means that intensity is a question of power; the power to produce a distinction between friends and enemies founds a totality within which there can only be friends.

The power to create a political contradiction is for Schmitt about producing a territory that has been pacified, i.e., "to generate "peace, security and order" and therefore create the *normal* situation" (Schmitt, 1932/2015, p. 43). Like Hobbes, Schmitt thinks that such a task of producing a pacified political unity demands that there is a monopoly of political power within such a unity. As is commonly known, in his Weimar-era writings, Schmitt thought that only the state has this kind of power to produce political unity. As Schmitt writes in his *Constitutional Theory*, a state should have a monopoly on political power in order to ensure social order and resolve conflicts of interest that might emerge in it (Schmitt, 1928/1993, p. 4). This means that for Schmitt, the political as an intensity is a normative concept, meaning that a state *should* have the power to uphold a distinction between friends and enemies. "The state has the monopoly of the political as long as it really is a clear, simply defined quantity that stands against the non-state, and 'unpolitical' groups and issues" (Schmitt, 1932/2015, p. 22). A political unity must, therefore, be strong enough to make sure that no intense contradictions emerge within it. Such contradictions, however, are not political, since a political one would mean a new distinction between interior and exterior. Therefore, for Schmitt "an internal political contradiction" is in a sense a conceptual impossibility because that would imply that there could be two political unities within a unity.

The reality that the concept of political describes demands internal homogeneity and the exclusion of the heterogeneous. Such a situation is not something natural that would pre-exist the political contradiction. Rather, political unity is something that is produced out of heterogeneous masses. This is why the state is such a vital institution; "the institutions of a state have the function to make this uniformity possible and to renew it daily" (Schmitt, 1928/1993, p. 47). The point about such unity being unnatural is that because of its political nature the need for state power never ceases; without it, the heterogeneous would triumph. Since political unity is a construct, its disintegration is an ever-present possibility. To put it in concrete terms, the state is granted great powers to ward off the possibility of civil war. As Schmitt defines it, civil war takes place when the state becomes too weak to stop domestic conflicts that become stronger in intensity (Schmitt, 1932/2015, p. 30–31). This means that political unity is constantly threatened by internal pluralism, a point that Schmitt does not tire of reminding (Schmitt, 1924/1988, p. 21, Schmitt, 1927/1988a, p. 86, Schmitt, 1930, p. 138, Schmitt, 1930/1958, p. 45–46).

So far, I have established that for Schmitt, the concept of the political disqualifies internal pluralism within the political unity (Schmitt, 1927/1988b, p. 69, Schmitt, 1932/2015, p. 42; Hirsch, 2010, p. 342–343). This idea of the political as intensity is related to a normative understanding of politics and depoliticization. As Schmitt states, depoliticization and limiting of politicization is a "specifically *intensive* type and manner of doing politics" (Schmitt, 1932/2015, p. 20n22; emphasis added). Depoliticization is an important term in Schmitt's political work of the late years of the Weimar Republic, during which he defines it as a positive term that "is actually understood usually as a disposal of a specific manner of doing politics, i.e., party politics" (Schmitt, 1930/1958, p. 56). Party politics refers to the political tensions within the republic and the idea that their tensions are becoming so intense as to threaten the unity of the state. For this reason, the correct meaning of depoliticization, Schmitt claims, is "de-party-politicization" (*Entparteipolitsierung*; Schmitt, 1930/1958, p. 56). The state is and needs to be strong enough to be able to limit such tensions from erupting, meaning that "only a strong state can depoliticize … [because] the act of depoliticizing is specifically an intensive political act" (Schmitt, 1932/1995, p. 81). Only a state that is strong enough and has the power to limit politicization can ensure order. It is this normative vision of state power that the concept of the political as an intensity establishes.

From all of this, I conclude that Schmitt's theory of the political aims to justify a strong state that reduces internal political action through policing measures limiting the possibility of politicization. Within the state there are policing measures that target "conspiracies, rivalries, factions, and rebellion attempts from malcontents; 'disturbances' to put it briefly" (Schmitt, 1932/2015, p. 10–11). There are no actual political movements within the state, merely order and various disturbances that threaten it. By defining the concept of the political as an intense contrast between friends and enemies, Schmitt himself takes part in policing what is proper to the political and what is not. Ultimately, such a theory cannot but

stand on the side of the prevailing order and transform politics into policing and limiting politicization.

Postfoundationalism and normativity

I will now move on to discuss postfoundationalism and its normative implications. Its basic premise, the radical contingency of all political systems and social relations, seems to be antithetical to any normative ideas. This has been a common lamentation against postfoundationalism in so far as it does not give us any means of evaluating various struggles (Meiksins Wood, 1998, p. 74; Boucher, 2019, p. 314). However, according to the principle that I have established above, all political theories and concepts are at least implicitly normative in so far as they affect the way we perceive politics and the possibilities for action in it. To define an ontological basis for politics is itself to take part in politics. However, as I mentioned in the previous section, not all theories seek to depoliticize or limit politics in a way that would establish the necessity of police power for social order. In this section, I clarify the normativity of postfoundational theory and distinguish it from the conservative political disposition. I will heavily rely on Laclau's theory and argue that his theory is distinct from the conservative disposition. I base this idea on how Laclau interprets the antagonism that emerges in social relations creating new identities and differences. Antagonism is the moment of the political for Laclau, i.e., the moment where social relations are repoliticized. For postfoundationalism, all relations and systems can be politicized, which means that all political systems and social relations are always contingent. The possibility of antagonism, therefore, affirms the necessary contingency of political systems (see, e.g., Marchart, 2018a, p. 33). As Howarth puts it, this means that "there is always the possibility of new political frontiers that can destabilize and reorientate blocs and systems of power" (Howarth, 2014, p. 14). However, rather than frame antagonism and the fragility of social order as justifying the necessity of police power, postfoundationalists argue that it in fact constitutes the very possibility of democratic politics.

Can an idea of radical contingency produce any normative foundations or is it radically relativist? To point out the obvious, postfoundationalism is not nihilism. Postfoundationalism is distinct from antifoundationalism in that it affirms the existence of foundations, but maintains that they are necessarily contingent (Marchart, 2007, p. 2, 12, Marchart, 2010, p. 146). To quote Marttila: "Postfoundationalism is based upon the ontological premise that social norms, values, beliefs, and rationales cannot reflect any external necessities such as teleological course of history, objective material constraints, the inherent nature of human being, or the like" (Marttila, 2015, p. 33). This means that no antagonistic grouping or political system is ideally, ethically, or objectively better. As Marttila and Vincent Gengnagel point out, this means that

postfoundationalism is epistemologically relativistic (Marttila and Gengnagel, 2015, p. 170). The thesis of the contingency of all foundations denies the possibility of an objective position from which to make such evaluations. However, this is not a thesis that would make postfoundationalism completely incapable of critique. Rather, according to Marttila and Gengnagel, postfoundational critique can take the form of an immanent critique similar to Foucault's analyzes (Marttila and Gengnagel, 2015, p. 156–157; see also Saar, 2007). The point about all social relations being contingent seeks to uncover the political basis of the social. Because of its political basis, no social relation is beyond contention. It is this idea that establishes a normative basis for criticizing attempts at objectivity and creating hegemonic regimes. Therefore, postfoundationalism's basic principle is that all claims to objectivity are political and contestable because there are no objectively necessary political systems or social relations.

The principle of radical contingency denaturalizes depoliticization. This means that postfoundationalism uncovers the contestable nature of all systems and relations. That is, antagonism is an ever-present possibility, and a political system or an antagonistic frontier can never completely suppress this possibility. According to Laclau, this is important as all political decisions are hegemonic in so far as they seek to repress alternative decisions (Laclau, 1996, p. 62). An antagonistic frontier, as Thomassen puts it, seeks to establish coherence and closure by naturalizing a specific friend/enemy relation (Thomassen, 2019, p. 57). However, an antagonistic frontier cannot become necessary as all naturalizations and closures are bound to remain contingent and fail to achieve totality: "We are dealing here with something that is both the condition of possibility and limit of hegemonic articulation" (Thomassen, 2019, p. 55; see also Marchart, 2018b, p. 22). This means that antagonism as a concept encapsulates the necessary relation between politicization and depoliticization. On the one hand, a popular front creates a political identity around what has remained heterogeneous in social relations in order to politicize and decide on these social relations. On the other hand, such a decision is bound to establish new social relations and exclude heterogenic elements external to it, which again means depoliticization.

In order to clarify this idea and what it implies for normativity, I will discuss how postfoundationalists understand the interplay between politicization and depoliticization. As Marchart puts it, Laclau understands the social as sedimentation of political decisions and practices, in contrast to which "the political is defined as the moment of the institution of the social as well as the moment of reactivation of the contingent nature of institutions" (Marchart, 2007, p. 138). The lack of a final ground means that making decisions is a necessary aspect of politics (Marchart, 2007, p. 2–3). Laclau theorizes decisions with the help of Jacques Derrida's notion of "undecidability" (Laclau, 1996, p. 57). To put it in terms that seem tautological, a

decision takes place where it is possible to make one. However, this simply means that decisions are not possible where they have been predetermined by rules, where there in fact are no viable options, or where all choices lead to the same result. As Thomson puts it, a decision takes place "only if there is the possibility of a different outcome" (Thomson, 2005, p. 162). According to Derrida, a decision must remain heterogeneous to anything that determines it, or else it would not be a decision but simply predetermined by its conditions or merely an application of a rule or program (Derrida, 2005, p. 219). There must, therefore, be an undecidable element to all real decisions, i.e., all decisions must be necessarily contingent. According to Mouffe, this, in fact, makes the contingency of the social apparent, as all decisions are conditioned by undecidability (Mouffe, 1996, p. 2, 4). "A true decision," as Laclau describes it, "escapes what any rule can hope to subsume under itself" (Laclau, 1996, p. 55; Bedorf, 2010, p. 22). Prior to the decision, there is a necessary undecidability between choices, or else the decision would be forced or predetermined. This heterogeneity of a decision with regard to all its conditions, as Derrida puts it, is the condition of politicization (Derrida, 1996, p. 83).

The undecidability of decisions, as Mouffe explains it, affirms both the contingency of the social and the primacy of the political over the social (Mouffe, 1996, p. 4). There are no social relations before a decision, and because there always necessarily exist competing possibilities for any decision, the social can never become total. For Laclau, this establishes an important paradox, one that I interpret as the paradox of depoliticization and repoliticization: "[T]hat which limits freedom—i.e. power—is also what makes freedom possible. … In deciding within an undecidable terrain, I am exercising a power which is, however, the very condition of freedom" (Laclau, 1996, p. 54). The very possibility of making a decision entails the freedom to repoliticize social conditions, and yet the very decision establishes new limits. This means that undecidability points toward the contingent political ground of society and, according to Laclau, the "final failure of society to constitute itself as society" (Laclau, 2007, p. 35; see also Laclau, 1990, p. 90–91). And yet a decision that establishes a social relation is never neutral but presupposes an exclusion, i.e., "true limits are always antagonistic" (Laclau, 2007, p. 37). A decision is the very condition of freedom and yet making a decision serves to limit freedom. In other words, there is a necessary tension between undecidability and decision, which is the necessary condition for politics to exist (Laclau, 1996, p. 62; Marchart, 2018b, p. 20–21). Thomson provides a precise formulation of this process: "The decision is politicizing, it challenges and suspends the political status quo, but it is also depoliticizing, as it sets new political precedents" (Thomson, 2005, p. 167). Every political decision precedes a rule, or else it is not a decision, but it also sets a new rule that depoliticizes the situation.

As Marchart summarizes it, the notion that all foundations are contingent means that "every foundation will, therefore, be a partial foundation within a field of competing foundational attempts" (Marchart, 2007, p. 7). All attempts to sediment a social practice are based on an earlier reactivation of prior sedimentation and are, therefore, also susceptible to further reactivations (Marchart, 2007, p. 139). However, according to Marchart, this is not a return to the original decision, but simply the reactivation of "the contingent and antagonistic character of social sedimentations" (Marchart, 2018b, p. 93). This simply means that what is politicized is not the undecidable situation before a decision, but rather the contingency of the prior decision becomes apparent by means of demanding and creating new alternatives. No depoliticization is final since all social relationships can be repoliticized. This idea that every decision that establishes a foundation will always be antagonistic and therefore remain open to contestations, i.e., that every depoliticization can be repoliticized, gives us an important insight into how postfoundationalism departs from Schmitt, who will interpret the ever-present possibility of overcoming politicization as necessary for social order to exist. What is it that distinguishes these two interpretations and distances Laclau from the idea that police power is necessary? The conservative disposition does, indeed, agree that all decisions can be politicized and all social relations are unstable, and it is precisely for this reason that police power is necessary. I will answer this question by briefly discussing Laclau's understanding of populism, which he claims is synonymous with the political (Laclau, 2005a, p. 113, Mouffe, 2005b, p. 154).

To put it bluntly, populism is the creation of a frontier between two groups. As Laclau himself defines it, it is the construction of a chain of equivalences between demands and identities that then end up in "the construction of "the people" and "power"" (Laclau, 2005b, p. 108). Whereas, for Schmitt, political unity is always the one that has power, for Laclau, the populist mode of articulation is always incommensurate with hegemony as it is always formed on the basis of demands that have not been met. This means that unlike Schmitt's political unity, which creates a dichotomy between the internal social order and the other one that is external to it, for Laclau, the populist rupture is an internal frontier that dichotomizes the social order itself from within (Laclau, 2005b, p. 107). In fact, populism should be interpreted as a way of resisting those in power, as both populism and resistance always take the form of contradicting power (see, e.g., Gebbhart, 2021, p. 95). The difference, as I will explain next, is that Schmitt understands the political as the most intense contradiction, which makes the idea of an "internal political contradiction" a conceptual impossibility, whereas for Laclau there are different degrees of antagonism (Laclau, 2005a, p. 154, Mouffe, 2005b, p. 113; Howarth, 2014, p. 15). This means that the possibility of antagonism or populism does not necessarily require police powers to limit them.

One could argue that a populist movement ultimately seeks to establish a Schmittian unity that depoliticizes the possibility of dissent. For example, Jan-Werner Müller argues that a populist movement does not leave room for disagreement as it believes that there is only one authentic will of the people. For this reason, Müller argues, populism is in fact an apolitical approach since does not leave room for debate and deliberation (Müller, 2016, p. 97). This, however, would contradict the basic postfoundational thesis that it is impossible for a political group to organize social relations in a way that is incontestable. Incontestability is antipolitical as it would do away with heterogeneity and therefore with the possibility of new antagonisms (Howarth, 2014, p. 17). There always remains a heterogeneous element in all popular movements and the antagonistic relation that they posit. This heterogeneity undermines the possibility that an antagonism could become incontestable. Rather, there is always something that escapes political articulations. As Lasse Thomassen puts it, "the existence of these heterogeneous elements shows the ultimate contingency of the constitution of an identity or a discourse, including antagonistic identities and discourses" (Thomassen, 2019, p. 51). This idea that no articulation of a popular identity can be exhaustive counters the orthodox Marxist idea that the antagonism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat has precedence over other possible antagonistic relations (Devenney, 2020). There will always be the possibility of a moment, such as right-wing populism or fascism, in which what cannot be subsumed under the antagonism between workers and the bourgeoisie can be used to create an altogether different antagonism (Thomassen, 2019, p. 54; Howarth, 2014, p. 15). Heterogeneity thus allows us to show both the impossibility of populist demands for closure and the necessity of populism.

Whereas, both Rousseau (2008, pp. 56–58) and Schmitt argue that the sovereign state has a legitimate basis for using coercive means to destroy internal threats and quell rebellions, it is the very idea that heterogeneity can never be subsumed into absolute sovereignty that enables postfoundationalism to disqualify such claims for incontestable coercive authority. As Marchart puts it, there can be no Rousseauian general will that would establish an absolute identity between individuals and their representatives, but rather "the lonely hour of sovereignty never occurs, except in the actions of a representative that are always less than sovereign" (Marchart, 2005, p. 15). This means that the representatives of a people are never sovereign to such an extent that they would have the right to cast out the heterogeneous elements from within. Furthermore, as Mark Devenney has argued, there cannot be a "people" because that would simply create a ground for establishing proper limits to the political (Devenney, 2020, p. 47). Whereas, Schmitt understands the political distinction as the most intense distinction between friends and enemies, as one that establishes a distinction between internally homogeneous

unities, postfoundationalists tend to understand antagonism in less absolute terms.

As I see it, this idea of ineradicable heterogeneity lays the grounds for a normative theory that is altogether distinct from the conservative disposition. The heterogeneous, i.e., those who have yet to assume a name politically, as Marchart puts it, holds within itself the possibility of repoliticizing and establishing a new antagonism (Marchart, 2005, p. 15). I will conclude this section by discussing the possibility of normativity in postfoundationalism. Geoff Boucher has claimed that a normative theory of democracy requires an evaluation of decisions based on "egalitarian, pluralistic or participatory" principles. However, Laclau's theory seems to claim that using such principles would be depoliticizing and thus fall prey to its own critique of depoliticization. For this reason, Boucher argues that postfoundationalism can only be descriptive and never normative (Boucher, 2019, p. 317; see also Schubert, 2021, p. 45).

I argue, by contrast, that Laclau's theory is normative and distinct from the Schmittian one. Laclau understands the political as any degree of contestation, whereas for Schmitt the political is the most intense degree. While Schmitt believes that no political friend/enemy grouping can exist within a political unity, Laclau believes that political antagonisms and frontiers can emerge in various degrees within a political sphere. An antagonistic frontier does not create an inner side and an outer side, but is simply the outcome of a necessary heterogeneity within the political sphere. For this reason, Laclau would not agree with Schmitt that heterogeneous elements are necessarily a threat to politics. This has important normative ramifications regarding political power. While Laclau will agree that power is necessary for freedom, as pointed out above, he does not agree with the Schmittian idea that freedom and power are the same things. According to Schmitt, the state establishes the normal situation, and for the individual, there is no other freedom but that which "the strong state is capable of granting" (Schmitt, 1930, p. 34). Even though both agree that power is a presupposition of freedom, for Schmitt, freedom is something that is only possible within a political unity capable of keeping heterogeneity at bay (Schmitt, 1932/2015, p. 43). In contrast, Laclau points out that "power is the shadow of freedom" (Laclau, 1996, p. 54). While power is a necessary presupposition, it is not freedom itself. Rather, contestations of the prevailing order can be interpreted also as manifestations of freedom rather than threats to it. Laclau does not identify freedom with institutions, because contestations of politics can take place even in those systems that are ultimately repressive. However, this does not mean that Laclau's theory could not be used to create open societies and institutions capable of making room for contestation and politicization. It is exactly this possibility that I seek to elaborate next.

It is true that Laclau's own theory is not tied to an institutional framework, such as liberal democracy, because "this emergence of a 'people' is no longer the direct effect of

a particular framework" (Laclau, 2005a, p. 167, 171; Howarth, 2014, p. 16). However, Laclau's own position has not discouraged others from developing normative ideas about institutions. According to Marchart, the postfoundationalist normative project is concerned with democratization by means of the conflictual process and deepens the democratic revolution that started with the French Revolution (Marchart, 2021, p. 25). The French Revolution sets a precedent: "[W]here all nobility and proper evaporates and a new political order is founded overnight, there the contingent and conflictual nature of social relations become irrefutable" (Marchart, 2021, p. 24). This democratic revolutionary tradition can be linked to institutions, as democratic institutions, therefore, become central to ensuring this by enabling people to participate in processes that politicize prior decisions. Therefore, democratic institutions contradict repressive and depoliticizing measures that seek to naturalize certain social relations. As Karsten Schubert puts it, such a democracy means an "institutionalization of pluralism" (Schubert, 2021, p. 56).

Furthermore, not all political systems can be justified on the basis of the postfoundational principle of contingency. "While all conceivable political regimes, all forms of political order and ordering, are necessarily grounded in the abyss of an absent ground, most of them tend to disavow their abyssal nature" (Marchart, 2007, p. 158). Only democracy ultimately accepts the lack of any objective foundations. A democracy is a system that makes room for the contestation of prior decisions, and is therefore necessarily postfoundational (Marchart, 2007, p. 158; Marchart, 2011, p. 967). Unlike other regimes, which might turn the failure of ultimate foundations into a doctrine of the necessity of police power and coercion, democracy interprets radical contingency as its normative basis (Marchart, 2011, p. 968). Marchart points out that theorists who emphasize sovereignty, most notably Hobbes, in fact, do away with politics altogether as they restrict "the moment of politics to the originary fiat by which order—the order of the Leviathan—is established" (Marchart, 2007, p. 50). In contrast to such theories claiming that the establishment of a social order means that politics must be reduced to mere policing, postfoundationalism seeks to establish institutions capable of being open to politicization. This means that the main task for postfoundationalism is to keep the political basis of the social open. For this reason, Marchart declares that postfoundational theory understands democracy as an end in itself (Marchart, 2021, p. 38).

Mouffe and the conservative political disposition

In this section, I will look at Mouffe's radical democratic theory and its conceptual basis. My argument is that her theory establishes the necessary role of power to depoliticize or police politicization in a way that resembles the conservative disposition. To point out the obvious, Mouffe does not argue in favor of strong coercive force and centralized power structures. My argument here is rather to point out that her specific understanding of antagonism ends up implying a political theory that seeks to limit rather than open up the possibility of contestation. While her intention is to make conflict and politicization a part of democratic theory and argue that politics cannot be transformed into a rational or an ethical system, her reliance on the conservative political disposition points toward the opposite interpretation. Since it agrees with the basic tenets of the conservative disposition, her theory can be used to police and limit attempts to politicize the prevailing order. It seems to me that this is due to Mouffe's conceptual link between political and violence, both of which are described as antagonistic relations.

In fact, as I will point out below, antagonism is violence, meaning that for Mouffe the concept of the political refers to the ever-present possibility of violence. This is a problematic theoretical decision on her part for two reasons. First, it contradicts the basic tenet of postfoundationalism, which is that the contingency of a system is not based on empirical facts but is seen as a structural necessity (Marchart, 2007, p. 17). Antagonism simply refers to the limit of a political order (Thomassen, 2019, p. 44). Second, it argues for the necessity of police power, which a political system needs to keep violence at bay. Here, I agree with Oksala's argument that Mouffe's theory of the ineradicability of antagonism as violence serves as a way of limiting our understanding of what politics should be. "The narrowing of the range of the political thus becomes the price we pay for having to keep the irreducible violence at bay" (Oksala, 2012, p. 64, 65). Whatever the political system might be, it is established to produce order and prevent the possibility of violence from erupting. With regime and system changes, violence does not disappear; what changes is the manner in which societies are depoliticized.

To start with Mouffe's way of characterizing antagonism, she claims that we have to "acknowledge" the ever-present possibility of antagonism (Mouffe, 2000, p. 101, 129, Mouffe, 2005a, p. 14, 20, Mouffe, 2013, p. XIV, 2018, p. 91). Acknowledging the possibility of antagonism points toward the idea that antagonism, or the political, is not a political issue in itself, but a necessary aspect that can only be described. The political dimension exists whether we want it to or not, and acknowledging it means to understand the impossibility of a final reconciliation of differences and conflicts (Mouffe, 2018, p. 92, Mouffe, 2013, p. 15). The problem with some political liberals is that they attempt to "negate the political" (Mouffe, 2005b, p. 7). Mouffe even describes the lack of understanding of the political as "blindness to antagonism" (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 2). The political refers then to an ontological fact, one that cannot be negated, and it constitutes a blind spot for theories that fail to acknowledge it (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 12). This metaphor

of blindness emphasizes the idea that the political as the ever-present possibility of antagonism exists independently of our cognition or experience of it. If I am blind to an object, that object does not cease to exist but simply remains out of sight for me. Therefore, antagonism is something that exists as an ontological aspect of our world that we cannot affect in any way.

Now, this is still along the lines of standard postfoundationalism. However, the way that Mouffe grounds the structural necessity of antagonism takes her on a different path. First of all, Mouffe seems to argue that antagonism refers to something natural, rather than something structural or ontological. That is, antagonism is part of the "*nature* of the social world" (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 10; emphasis added). Mouffe does this by interpreting antagonism as violence, meaning that antagonism is ineradicable because violence cannot be eliminated (Mouffe, 2000, p. 130). There is a "component of violence and hostility inherent in social relations" so that the political can never be completely negated (Mouffe, 2013, p. 2–3; see Mouffe, 2000, p. 131–132, Mouffe, 2005b, p. 153). It is Schmitt, Mouffe claims, who "makes us aware of the dimension of the political that is linked to the existence of an element of hostility among human beings" (Mouffe, 2005b, p. 2; see also Mouffe, 2013, p. 138). In these passages, the role of violence in Mouffe's theory becomes evident. In order to argue that the political is ineradicable, she identifies antagonism with violence and roots it in human nature. Because humans are inherently violent, the political is ontological given that necessarily exists.

Furthermore, the idea that political is based on the nature of human beings is further developed when Mouffe uses the word "healthy" to describe a form of democracy that "calls for a vibrant clash of political positions and an open conflict of interests" (Mouffe, 2005b, p. 6). A democracy that does not completely suppress conflict is one that acknowledges the nature of the politics. "Antagonism, as Schmitt says, is an ever-present possibility; the political belongs to our ontological condition" (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 16). A democracy cannot allow for antagonism to take place, however, since that would divide the collective without a common mediator. The door is opened to this kind of interpretation by Mouffe in a telling remark that to acknowledge the political means to "acknowledge that 'state of nature' in its Hobbesian dimension can never be completely eradicated but only controlled" (Mouffe, 2005b, p. 6). In my view, this analogy brings Mouffe even closer to conservative disposition. Antagonism as the state of nature seems to mean that political systems are constantly on the verge of succumbing to antagonisms because of the ineradicability of violence in human nature. This seems to suggest that establishing a political system is for the sake of keeping the state of nature at bay. That is, politics is *always* the suppression of the political.

Politics as the necessary suppression of the political becomes evident when we look at Mouffe's understanding of the conflict. As in the conservative disposition, conflict is understood as something that inherently has the possibility of erupting into

violence. For Mouffe, conflict, in order to be accepted as legitimate, needs to take a form that does not destroy the political association. This means that some kind of common bond must exist between the parties in conflict, so that they will not treat their opponents as enemies to be eradicated, seeing their demands as illegitimate, which is precisely what happens with the antagonistic friend/enemy distinction (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 20). What Mouffe then wants to do is to make a distinction between enemy and adversary, of which the latter still adheres to the distinction between the political and politics (Mouffe, 2005b, p. 4). For this reason, Mouffe uses the term "agonism" to describe a diluted form of antagonism: "*Antagonism* is struggle between enemies, while *agonism* is a struggle between adversaries" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 102–103). Mouffe's own idea of radical democracy as a form of politics is one that could transform antagonism into agonism (Mouffe, 2000, p. 117). One can always invert this formula and point out that agonism, i.e., a peaceful conflict between adversaries, has the inherent possibility of intensifying into antagonism. Every contestation and politicization has the ever-present possibility of erupting into violence.

It is from this idea that all conflicts carry the seed of violence and dissolution of the political system that Mouffe is forced into understanding politics as a form of policing politicization. Mouffe's own idea is that the best way to limit the possibility of antagonism is the same as transforming antagonism into agonism: "[T]he core questions of politics: what are the limits of agonism and what are the institutions and the forms of power that need to be established in order to allow for a process of radicalizing democracy?" (Mouffe, 2013, p. 14–15). This means that politics is about limits, i.e., about depoliticizing the political. Mouffe uses different words for limiting the political, such as "defusing" (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 19, Mouffe, 2005b, p. 5, 153), "taming" (Mouffe, 2005a, p. 19–20), and "sublimating" (Mouffe, 2013, p. 9). The point of radical democracy is to limit the possibility of politicization. This is where the liberal component in Mouffe's own project comes to the rescue. Liberal institutions, such as the rule of law, separation of powers, and defense of individual rights, help to limit political agonism from developing into antagonism (Mouffe, 2005b, p. 150). Because the political as the possibility of hostilities and violence is ineradicable, "the need for institutions to deal with them will never disappear" (Mouffe, 2013, p. 84). This means that institutional power that is used to keep antagonisms at bay will always be necessary for upholding public order—an idea that is strikingly similar to Hobbes's justification of sovereign power.

As I have shown, this understanding of political can be seen as a normative form of politics and therefore cannot be isolated from normative ideas about politics. Politics is, in this sense, the suppression of the political through institutional means. Therefore, it seems that the concept of the political as the real possibility of conflict allows for establishing a certain form of politics that is able to limit conflict and establish order. Politics

is about the limiting the political or, to rephrase it, the function of politics is to depoliticize so that excessive politicization can be limited for the sake of order. Fundamentally, this idea comes down to equating the possibility of politicization with the possibility of violence. Power, violence, and politics are closely related to one another. To establish a relation between these is to argue for a certain form of the political system that is based on limiting politicization in order to limit the possibility of violent conflict. The conservative political disposition operates within this framework to achieve certain political ends, such as the centralization of power.

There are many aspects of Mouffe's theory that are in agreement with other postfoundational theories. Like Laclau and Marchart, Mouffe argues that instituting a political order means that a decision between different interests has to be made. The political, as the dimension of antagonism, is therefore constitutive of politics in an ontological sense (Marchart, 2018b, p. 10, 29). Similarly, Mouffe's idea that a concrete political order is based on exclusion and closure (Mouffe, 2000, p. 25, 130, Mouffe, 2005b, p. 151–152, Mouffe, 2013, p. 3) is the same as Laclau's notion that a political system establishes limits that exclude specific political possibilities (Laclau, 2007, p. 38; Marchart, 2018b, p. 20–21). Limits are never neutral; they are based on exclusion and antagonism (Laclau, 1990, p. 90–91, 2007, p. 35, 37; Mouffe, 2000, p. 98–99). As Mouffe bluntly puts it, "things could always be otherwise. Every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities" (Mouffe, 2013, p. 131). These are standard ideas that I have discussed above and that all postfoundationalists share. My argument is not based on these points, because that would implicate that no postfoundational theory can escape the conservative disposition. Rather, it is the way that Mouffe interprets antagonism that gives these ideas a different tone that is not present in other theories.

The way Mouffe interprets antagonism as an extreme socially destructive force is what ultimately brings her on a par with Schmitt and other conservatives. Mouffe does not simply claim that antagonism is a structural necessity. Rather, contingency is based on the idea that the possibility of violence is a natural given so that the whole point about political systems becomes the suppression of such violence from erupting. We can, therefore, evaluate politics based on how well it wards off this possibility. Whereas, the neoliberal political system is to blame for violent outbursts of right-wing populism, the emergence of which the deliberative theories of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas are incapable of stopping, Mouffe's own radical democratic theory is superior because it is able to tame and thus limit the amount of violence in the social sphere (Mouffe, 2018, p. 4–5). Like Schmitt, Mouffe posits the idea that antagonism is something that should not emerge within the political sphere because antagonism is extreme and more intense than agonism. Antagonism becomes something that will always have to be policed in order to make sure that it remains only a possibility. Other postfoundationalists do not deny the

possibility of violence, as this would contradict the principle of radical contingency. However, by tying the political to the possibility of violence, Mouffe makes it possible to interpret every contestation as a potential threat to the prevailing order. While Marchart argues that the totalizing tendencies of Schmitt's influence on the left could be countered by emphasizing that only internal contradictions should be viewed positively (Marchart, 2007, p. 44), Mouffe's distinction between agonism and antagonism banishes antagonism from the social sphere as something to be kept at bay. It is for this reason that I agree with Anniina Leiviskä's argument that Mouffe's political theory establishes limits to democratic participation and is therefore incapable of opening a space within which radical otherness could make itself manifest (Leiviskä, 2018, p. 504). It is for this reason that Mouffe ultimately cannot distance herself from the conservative political disposition.

Conclusion

In this article, I have developed a heuristic device, the conservative political disposition, in order to assess the problematic normative implications of political theories. The conservative disposition is about establishing the necessity of police power for the upholding of social order. I have used this notion to establish a distinction between Mouffe and other postfoundationalists. My argument has been that Mouffe differs from other postfoundationalists insofar as she establishes the necessity of policing politicization by means of liberal institutions. Both the conservative disposition and postfoundationalism argue that society, in the sense of a social sphere independent from politics, could be possible. As Marchart puts it succinctly, postfoundationalism reveals that behind what appears to be a wholly constituted society there is nothing but struggles (Marchart, 2018a, p. 28). While the conservative disposition argues this in order to point out the necessity of police power and coercion, postfoundational theory argues that all social structures are necessarily open (Marchart, 2007, p. 6). Therefore, instead of demanding the closing of territory from contestations, postfoundational theory establishes the necessity that, to quote Devenney, "there is always space—no matter how limited—for intervention" (Devenney, 2020, p. 32).

My argument is not that the Schmittian state and the Mouffean radical democratic system are not distinct. To be clear, Schmitt does not claim that the state is a necessary institution. As Marchart points out, Schmitt understands the political as something that could assume many forms, and the state is just one historical manifestation of the political among others (Marchart, 2007, p. 42–43; see also Röttgers, 2010, p. 41). However, Schmitt's theory argues that all political systems necessarily depend upon police power. The conservative disposition seeks to produce an internal sphere within which there exists a (relative) homogeneity. As Kurt Röttgers puts

it, this is especially the case in Schmitt's interpretation of the political as it refers to a "regression of social complexity, which includes the replacement of power … with violence" (Röttgers, 2010, p. 50). This is in contrast to Laclau's idea of populism as always producing an internal frontier within a political system. The possibility of populism is based on the idea that there always remains something that is heterogeneous to the political unity. In fact, one could argue that populism is a form of resistance in the sense that Mareike Gebbhart understands it, namely, as a form of countering police power and the hegemonic order (Gebbhart, 2021, p. 99).

Marchart claims that there is a distinction between the Schmittian and the Arendtian trajectory in postfoundationalism. It is a split between the former emphasizing "strategic and conflictual struggles of politics" and the latter focusing on the "rationality of politics" (Marchart, 2007, p. 38). According to Marchart, Arendtians will highlight the associative aspect and Schmittians the dissociative aspect of politics (Marchart, 2007, p. 39). The Arendtian concept of the political posits the idea that the constitution of a public sphere will enable people to freely associate with one another, whereas the Schmittian concept points our attention to the foundational role of dissociation in any political unity (Marchart, 2007, p. 41).

However, my discussion establishes a different way of distinguishing between the Schmittian and other postfoundational theories regarding political. Whereas, Laclau understands antagonism as a question of degree *within* a political system, Schmitt claims that the political contradiction is the most intense one and can never take place within a political unity. From these differences, an altogether different approach to political institutions appears. For Schmitt, the role of the state is to uphold political unity by means of police power. Postfoundationalists argue that because of structural heterogeneity within a social sphere, police power can never establish its own necessity. The "people" can never become a totality that would establish the legitimacy of casting out heterogeneous elements from societies. For postfoundationalists, on the contrary, the role of institutions is to ensure the openness of societies and make sure that internal tensions and antagonisms can emerge. I pointed this out and argued that this establishes a postfoundational basis for normativity. As Marchart puts it, the possibility of contestation draws our attention to the fact that freedom is an ineradicable part of politics (Marchart, 2007, p. 22). Because contingency is the same as the possibility of contestation (Marchart, 2018a, p. 33), contingency is the basis for freedom and democratic politics. We are free in so far as we can politicize the prevailing system of relations we find ourselves in, and democracy is the political system that enables this freedom.

Even though past and current political systems might require coercive and executive institutions to exist, this does not mean that they are necessary for politics. This is what the conservative disposition would want us to believe. As Oksala puts it, simply because violence has been essential to state power, "this platitude does not yet imply that violence is an irreducible feature of the political. If politics is not equated with the establishment and maintenance of the state, but is understood to cover all the dense capillary networks of actions upon action in a society, then it is not difficult to imagine forms of political practice that are not tied to the use of violence—legitimate or illegitimate." (Oksala, 2012, p. 48.)[2] The fact that we can discover violence in power relations throughout the history of power does not yet entail that violence is a necessary or an ontological aspect of politics and power. Even though violence has been pervasive in the past, this does not mean that it will be so in future and that radically different forms of power relations should have to reproduce this essential link between violence and power.

For example, the abolitionist theory argues that police power has always been present in modern societies and is nonetheless contingent and contestable. As Geo Maher puts it, "we live in a world of police, a society built around policing and that presumes their necessity" (Maher, 2021, p. 10). Police power itself has been depoliticized by making it seem a natural part of political systems. It seems that in order to resist this one needs to counter political theories that seek to make policing necessary by claiming that the state of nature is ineradicable and the need for dealing with its manifestations will never end. Abolitionism, like the classless society presaged in *The Communist Manifesto*, is not simply antipolice, but pro-movement in that it seeks to establish an alternative system that will make policing obsolete (Maher, 2021, p. 11). For example, Derecka Purnell has developed various ways of resolving conflicts without relying on the coercive police force (Purnell, 2021). My point here is not to claim that change begins with theory, but rather that in imagining a political future without coercive power—a world that "is *real*, and in some sense, it already exists," as Maher (2021, p. 227) puts it—the conservative political disposition needs to be criticized also by categorically denying the necessity of police power.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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2 Furthermore, Foucault did not deny the fact that the modern state's power was, indeed, based on the capacity to use coercive measures. This capacity is identified, in Foucault's analyses, with sovereign power, which is described as the power to take lives or to let live (Foucault, 1976, p. 178). Furthermore, sovereign power is tied to coercion and violence because Foucault characterizes it as a "juridical model" of power, in the sense that sovereignty had a legal basis for political power and a "legal obligation of obedience" (Foucault, 1997, p. 23–24; see also Lehtinen and Brunila, 2021).

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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