

Oliver Marchart. *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007. viii + 198 pp. \$36.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-7486-2498-0.



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Published on H-Ideas (February, 2009)

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Post-foundationalism, along with post-modernism and post-structuralism, is assailed for its perceived absence of scholarly rigor and proper theoretical grounding. In short, many modern scholars wonder if there is a foundation to post-foundationalism? Oliver Marchart's work thus is a welcome contribution to the tradition as it offers a cohesive account of post-foundationalism, constructing the ground for appropriately analyzing an ultimately groundless world. Combining an insightful and at times critical investigation of the philosophy and concepts behind this perspective, he makes a compelling case for what post-foundationalism is and how it should guide political thought and action. However, despite its advantages the work suffers from a lack of engagement with the psychoanalytic turn of this approach as well a more critical exploration of the dynamic ways in which Marchart's view of the political (social break) not only challenges but also may reinforce existing foundations (what the author refers to as the realm of the social and politics). In

doing so Marchart retains a relatively traditional critical paradigm of this approach which detracts from and ultimately hampers the originality and significance of this work overall.

This relatively slim but ambitious monograph can be divided into three sections--the first a historical and thematic overview of post-foundationalism beginning with Martin Heidegger, the second a critical summary of four of its main theorists (in order Jean-Luc Nancy, Claude Lefort, Alain Badiou, and Ernesto Laclau), and a concluding chapter combining the contributions of these theorists into a proper and cohesive post-foundational perspective. What emerges is a largely convincing and, perhaps more impressively, clear account of post-foundationalism and its importance for social analysis.

The first chapter is an incisive defense of post-foundationalism against charges of anti-foundationalism. It focuses on the concept of "necessary contingency," arguing that the social,

both ontologically and ontically, is always constituted in the eternal move between attempts at some form of grounding (or foundation) and the forever failure of such efforts due to the radical contingency underlying all experiences. The point in Marchart's view is not to deny that grounding exists but understand instead how it is never permanent since contingency is a necessary condition for its possibility and a constant presence in its attempted manifestation.

The second chapter continues in this vein with an in-depth genealogy into how this difference between ground/groundless (foundation/foundationless) is played out in the theoretical distinction between politics and the political. For Marchart the ontological difference between being and beings is present in the always unstable movement from stability to instability, order to break, politics to the political. The political serves thus as an intervening force against politics, the intrusion of contingency on a perceived necessary and closed social order. Consequently, it cannot be simply studied at the nominal (empirical, historical) level but must be examined primarily at the ontological level, as all things ontically (having to do with beings empirically) are formed within this more fundamental transcendental relationship between politics and the political essential to being. The interrogation of this relationship then is an investigation in to the quasi-transcendental condition of the social, in Marchart's words "the very name of the horizon of constitution of any object" (p. 58).

In the next set of chapters he critically summarizes four theorists who have addressed this difference between politics and the political, foundation and contingency. He begins with Jean-Luc Nancy, linking the philosopher's distinguishing of *le politique* and *la politique* with a broader discussion of ground/groundlessness. For Nancy, politics is part and parcel to immanentism, the complete conflation of human experience to a necessary and inescapable social order. It is this process

which catalyzes totalitarianism, "the foundationalist principle of immanence, that is to say, the denial of any transcendence in the name of a constitutive outside" (p. 71). To counter this trend he highlights the need for transcendence centering on the retreat of politics toward a more open and nondetermined "inoperative community" composed of subjects "sharing singularities." For Marchart this "community" represents an "expression" of the political--one where individuals live together not in "communion" resting on a shared assumed ground but a recognition of the other as an dislocated individual living commonly with other beings in the absence of such ground. Yet while Marchart largely supports Nancy's position he ultimately critiques the theorist for falling prey to what he terms as "philosophism," firstly by depoliticizing the political (the event of break) through prioritizing notions of pluralism at the expense of antagonism ,and secondly by focusing too heavily on the process of thinking as opposed to more political concerns.

Marchart then turns his attention to Claude Lefort, countering what he sees as the "sloganization" of the thinker's work with a more in-depth investigation guided by an ontology of the political. To do so he connects Lefort's famous claim that in democracy "the place of power is empty" with the more fundamental "originary division" between the political and politics. While other forms of government seek to "conceal" the political through politics, democracy exists as the "ontic institutionalisation" of the radical contingency underlying the social. Elections do not represent the unitary "will of the people" but instead, in the words Marchart, "their paradoxical role is to serve as institutional *markers of uncertainty*" (p. 106, emphasis in the original).

Marchart follows this analysis of Lefort with a discussion of Alain Badiou, arguing that his work represents a "post-foundational philosophical system" revolving around an ontology of the political. Badiou centers his theory on the Lacani-

an notion of lack, as any articulation of the social, reality, will be necessarily incomplete. For this reason, Badiou stresses the “event” which breaks with a “set” order. From this basis he advocates a “politics of the real” (Marchart correctly notes that Badiou reverses the terms “politics” and “political,” with the former symbolizing break and the latter order) which retains fidelity to the radical contingency of Being as opposed to a given social order or political program. Marchart highlights in particular Badiou’s emphasis on a “philosophy of the political,” focusing on how “truth” and “justice” emerge from dislocation, instead of the traditional political philosophy which understands these concepts as part of a specific normative order. Especially insightful is Marchart’s reading of Badiou, which equates the Christian concept of grace with fidelity toward an “event,” revealing contingency as contrasted to evil, which is equated with foundationalism. Nevertheless, Marchart criticizes Badiou for what he terms “ethicism,” contending that the thinker’s over-prioritization of political, contingency leads to an ignoring of the strategies necessary to politics, the “dirty hands” required for acting within a “political reality.” Quoting Marchart, “Wouldn’t such ethicization of politics prove to be politically disabling, if only for the reason that one will always be sure to find oneself on the right side, on the side of an ethical, emancipator politics” (p. 130)?

The final theorist Marchart examines is Ernesto Laclau, a thinker who epitomizes “a more realistic point of view regarding politics” in relation to an ontology of the political. Along with his co-writer Chantal Mouffe, Laclau theorizes the necessary relationship between contingency and order, as order inherently catalyses contingency and vice-versa. Here the relationship between the political and politics is manifested in the eternal but ultimately impossible desire of a social order to achieve closure and become an objective “society.” Importantly, order is associated with discourse, as all objects are mediated through a process of discursive articulation. Discourses

strive for hegemony, to create the exclusive understanding regulating how subjects perceive their reality. Given their inherent incompleteness, the social is forever caught within the play of hegemony, as discourses are constantly challenging one another for dominance. For Marchart this represents perhaps the best current theorization of the relationship between politics and the political, one which accepts groundlessness but “does not give in to the temptation of doing away with grounds in the plural and with the process of constant and always necessarily partial grounding” and more so accepts the importance of power for this process as well as the “priority of the political over the social” (p. 151).

The book’s concluding chapter offers what Marchart refers to as a “political ontology” to explain post-foundationalism. He argues for placing the political as the *prima philosophia*, having precedence over philosophy, with the political not existing as a “regional autonomy” but as fundamental description of the condition of possibility for society and subjectivity more generally. Particularly Marchart notes how the radical contingency underlying all social experiences is constantly mediated by its manifestation as politics on the ontic level. As such he calls for a more nuanced approach which respects the integrative nature of politics and the political. Every action, all experience simultaneously holds within it the possibility for openness, dislocation, and the trace of the ground which gave it birth. Given the impossibility of the political at the ontic level, politics takes on a dual character—both representing the social, composed of a determined order and sedimented set of practices, and as a reminder of the world’s groundlessness and thus radical openness. For Marchart it is the social’s shared nature conducted in the interplay of the political difference—at once open and closed, groundless and grounded—which defines us as beings and reveals to us the contingency at the center of Being.

This is unquestionably a theoretical work of the highest caliber. However, for all its excellence it nevertheless contains dramatic blind spots. Perhaps the most glaring of these is Marchart's almost complete lack of engagement with the psychoanalytical turn of post-foundationalism. While he mentions Jacques Lacan, and his acolytes, most notably Slavoj Žižek, it remains unexplored how subjects experience the political and politics, not merely symbolically but on the affective register. An existing order—politics, hegemonic discourse—persists not merely as a closed system sustained due to its perceived rationality and objectivity but also linked to the ways it psychologically grips subjects, providing them enjoyment in their interpellation. A closer investigation of this part of the post-foundationalist tradition would have revealed the differing ways politics is maintained despite the ever-present possibility of the political, social break, as well as the role of transgression in not only transcending but also sustaining these orders.

This leads onto the second, and arguably stronger, criticism of the work—namely the retention of a traditional paradigm whereby the political is a force for dislocating politics, as openness inherently serves to challenge order. However, if as Marchart claims, that ontically the political is only ever presented in the context of politics, groundlessness emerging from a ground, a natural question which arises is how politics uses this unevenness for its own reproduction. More precisely, given that politics is always made in the tenuous relationship of contingency and order, it would seem imperative to understand how it incorporates and uses the political, the presence of openness and contingency, to its advantage. This is especially prescient in an age where politicians of all perspectives and types speak of transcendence and newness (“a new America,” “New Labour”) while remaining committed to established sets of policies and hegemonic values. At stake therefore is not so much whether the political appears within politics, which as Marchart

correctly points out is inevitable considering the fundamentally contingent nature of the social, but how this openness is shaped so as to conform or challenge an existing order. The dual nature of politics for Marchart, representing both order and openness, exemplifies this position—as politics is conducted through not only marginalizing contestation, trying to achieve closure against contingency, but the opening of space for specific types of contestations and experiences of social openness of over others (e.g., political democracy contra workplace democracy, debating social issues over economic issues, highlighting the electoral contest between mainstream political parties at the expense of more fundamental ideological challenges to liberal democracy).

In conclusion, this is an excellent monograph, recommended to all those interested in critical theory. Furthermore, it is an invaluable resource for both newcomers and those more familiar with the approach. To this end it makes a strong case for showing the political not as a subsidiary to philosophy but as *prima philosophia*, the most full expression of being and the condition of possibility for beings. Yet this compelling argument is constrained by an overly traditional view of the relationship between the political and politics. Having acknowledged the eternal presence of the political in politics, it is now necessary to understand exactly how politics is established and reproduced through the appearance of the political, the very presence of ground made firm through groundlessness.

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Citation: Peter Bloom. Review of Marchart, Oliver. *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*. H-Ideas, H-Net Reviews. February, 2009.

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