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## A Critique of Agonistic Politics

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*'the instant of decision is madness'*

**Kierkegaard**

### What is Agonistic Politics?

Modern agonistic politics<sup>1</sup> is a late modern political movement of thought which derives from the constitutive and regulatory feature of power and conflict in-between (political) human relations -in a word it grounds on agon- and which persistently lays great stress on the possibility of a democratic co-existence in spite of this power and conflict factuality. With its insistent emphasis on democracy, this movement of thought has offered an influential solution to the modern democratic/political legitimacy crisis by cultivating the hope that it is possible to set up a new or newly thematized delicate balance between universal and particular, identity and difference, unity and multitude or ever between reason and freedom.<sup>2</sup>

Moving on a thought heritage essentially composed of Friedrich Nietzsche, Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci<sup>3</sup>, modern agonistic politics has been deeply influenced by main doubt masters including aforesaid figures and particularly Jacques Derrida and Ludwig Wittgenstein. It is possible to underline five primary aspects characterizing modern agonistic politics: Firstly, agonistic politics rejects all of the "essentialist" approaches that have predominated the conception of

modern history and knowledge for so long. Rejection of essentialism and adoption of contingency is the core characteristic of agonism. And closely associated with this, agonists attribute a central significance to the notion of “political” as an expression of perpetual reconstructive nature of social domain and so as an expression of impossibility of social essence. Secondly, agonists conceive the identity and difference as constructive moments and against the dogmatic vision of identity they hinge on the irrevocability of “difference” as a “constitutive outside”.<sup>4</sup> Thirdly, agonists assert that the antagonistic power relations founding the social are irreversible and they believe that these relations which are in Laclau and Mouffe’s particular terms defined as hegemonic relations can be transformed.<sup>5</sup> Fourthly, agonists have a positive perspective aspiring to transform the social antagonisms to an ambitious and enthusiastic “agonistic confrontation”. Fifthly and finally, agonists has a radical conception of democracy perceiving democracy not as an “institutional formation” or “governmental regime” to emerge once and for all, but rather a political process the paradoxes of which can never be removed.

It is possible to paraphrase agonistic political theory’s vital contribution to modern political thought in two aspects: The creative political insight suggested by the eventual undecidability of paradoxical relation/eternal dialogue between identity and difference and the emancipation praxis suggested by the everlasting articulation network (the conception of hegemonic struggle and impossibility of society) triggered by irreducible pluralism of subject configurations. These two critical aspects coherently raised by agonists have deeply influenced modern political thought and owing to the radicalism of agonistic criticism, a new and vivid rhetoric came into prominence in modern political theory where the “political” instead of “politics”<sup>6</sup> and the “emancipation” instead of “freedom” became main point of discussion.

Agonistic politics is before all, a defence of “political” against “politics”. For agonists the political is an expression of impossibility of an eventual “essence” in social domain and eventual “seamlessness” of the society composed of ineradicable antagonisms. The society has no any sutured pattern because the social itself does not have any essence. The overlooking of the political comes with the reduction of the social into factitious “essences” and the loss of agonistic vividness. In fact the rejection of the political never hinders its fierce return. As an expression of the rejection of the political the falsity of the essentialism is hidden in the phrase that this

essentialism attributes a factitious “identicalness” or “completeness” to the contingency<sup>7</sup> and seamlessness which are deeply embedded within the individual and social identity.

Since the Ancient Greece one of the justifications of critical and cautious approach to the democracy has been based on this claim: democratic freedom breeds anarchy and destructs the political community. Modern agonism has developed an approach grasping these “anarchy” and “destruction” theses stated for the sake of criticism/fear of democracy as a, so to say, positive and founding aspects of democracy. In other words, for agonists “anarchy” refers rather to an emancipation gesture and yet “destruction” refers rather to the principle of displacement/deconstruction. Viewed from this perspective, politics and democracy are not a form of governance but are a form of subjection and the illusory consensus setting the social is nothing more than a fugitive and contingent moment which is predestined to be “destroyed” by a new hegemonic articulation or conflict network. In an agonistic democracy the setting priority of the political in fact refers to this assertion; the institutive/legal moment and the emancipation moment are by no means identical and including democracy there is no any political framework or form of relation to guarantee this identicalness. In Laclau and Mouffe’s understanding, the radical characteristic of democracy rests on its radical impossibility (Laclau and Mouffe 2001:149-193; Laclau 2007:34-35).

Modern agonism contradictorily positions itself on the left but in fact it is an expression of radical left political movement’s drastic transformation in the direction of adopting liberal values. And yet, firm commitment to liberal democracy is the main characterizing feature of modern agonism. Just as in the case of deliberative democracy model, in agonistic democracy model the Schmittian dilemma regarding the incompatibility of liberalism (freedom and pluralism) and democracy (equality) has been heavily tackled with and within this framework a positive perspective has been developed aspiring to balance liberalism and democracy without abandoning any of them and through maintaining the tensions between them.<sup>8</sup> In fact the main concern to oppose the approaches aiming for reducing democracy into institutive procedures or ethical essentialism surpassing the social praxis is what essentially lies behind the need/goal of counterbalancing liberal and democratic rationales.

Agonists have a deep concern about certain topics as such that the modern democracies are not sheer democracy, that the bureaucratic system has captured the political domain, that the bureaucratic system has transformed citizens into passive receivers of political decisions and that by formulating a de facto juridical/administrative understanding of politics liberal theory has contributed much to this unfavourable situation. According to them, the liberal theory's juridical/administrative (instrumental) understanding of politics is an attempt to minimize -if not to eradicate- the conflict and dispute which constitute vital elements of a robust democratic politics. Nevertheless, in the final analysis, this attempt refers to elimination of politics. Reviving democracy as a political phenomenon is the most significant contribution of modern agonistic politics to reverse this process.

Tracing Foucault<sup>9</sup> who was to speak of the constant struggle (agonism) between power relations and the intransitivity of freedom, agonists have tried to conceive of the relationship between power and freedom from a realistic and comprehensive aspect. Accordingly, power and freedom are constitutive moments and in plain terms neither freedom can be defined as non-existence of power and nor power can be defined as non-existence of freedom (Laclau 1996:51). As there is no any antagonistic relation between power and freedom, it is misleading to envisage a free society fully cleared off power relations. Therefore, the main challenge with the democratic politics is not how to eliminate the power itself but how to build power configurations -in other words "agonistic confrontations"- which are more compatible with democratic values (Mouffe 2000:17-21).

Modern agonistic thought is in fact a critique of modernism closely associated with founding, constructive/positive values of modernism. But as this positive reference is overshadowed by agonistic/radical critical attitude which has, on almost all occasions, a strong tendency to underline the antagonisms (dissents), this point remains somehow ambiguous. Agonism, in one respect, refers to (as though hardly noticed) a synthesizing study of liberalism and socialism as founding counterparts. However, as for the modern agonism in question, one can hardly dismiss the argument that there exists a bizarre contradiction or incompatibility between the critical socialist perspective (perhaps it is more wise to describe this as "Left Nietzscheanism") inherited from the recent past and the firm commitment to liberal democratic values. The irony with the agonistic thought's canon setting criticism

essentially stems from the postulation that agonists have totally adopted postmodern/post-structuralist critical elements that had been reduced into regulative context of modern reason and they have attempted to configure these critical elements into positive values/norms of modernism which were believed to have already disappeared. Viewed from this perspective, modern agonism is rather a critique of modern critique (in specific it is the critique of the attempts to save the modern reason). Just like the positive context emerging in the moment of “sublation” of “self-sublation in Hegelian dialectics, as a critique of modern critique, agonistic critique has already articulated with the modern geist as a positive moment.

### **Five Critical Aspects**

In this study, main critical points regarding modern agonistic politics have been brought into discussion under five problematiques. Firstly, with their attempts to eliminate the violence from the agonistic geist, agonists are philosophically led to dwell on a conflicting and untenable standpoint.<sup>10</sup> The conception of violence-free agon is the most questionable and fragile aspect of agonistic politics because there exists a philosophical/theoretical contradiction between “the principal defence of agon” and “the elimination of violence”. Agonists, on the one hand, attribute a core founding meaning to power and conflict relations, but on the other hand, in order to eliminate the violent forms/contents that these relations may involve they refer to a reasoning which is essentially in conflict with their original onto-politic assumptions (original philosophical premises). However, if power and conflict are onto-politic facts, the attempt to differentiate or distinguish agon and violence can be argued not on onto-politic level but on onto-ethical level. So regarding this point, agonistic politics poses an ambiguity in-between -ontological, political and ethical- levels. As an inevitable result of this ambiguity, the agonistic conception where the violence is categorically dismissed cannot stay away from contradiction in itself. If it is not thoroughly a matter of defending a tamed agon, it is a logical requirement to prefer one of the following two options for the sake of eliminating this ambiguity: either it must be clearly stated that an exceptional fact excluding the onto-political understanding is in question here or it must be acknowledged that exclusion of violence can only be argued on political-ethical level but not on ontological level. However it is hard to conclude that agonists have a clear preference on this issue. In

fact agonistic thought has an additional ambiguity particularly with regard to the second choice, yet the general ambiguity on ethical stance leaves out the problem whether the agonistic struggle (or the democratic hegemony struggle) has a political/ethical meaning/context. On this point agonists confine themselves only to referring either to an immanent materialism as in the case of W. Connolly or to the meta-ethical language of hegemony as in the case of Laclau and Mouffe.

Another aspect leading agonistic politics to a dilemma is related to the matter of reason and harmony. On which principle or set of principles will a theory arguing that the society is composed of ineradicable antagonisms and stressing that the struggles, the asymmetries and the inequalities triggered by the phenomenon of power are everlasting be able to base its own conception of order which is exclusive of any ideal of absolute harmony? Evidently the general name for this principle or set of principles is “agon” in agonistic politics. However, how those already in conflict with each other will come to an agreement on the grounds or norms of this conflict is a material problematique. Although agonists assume a radical skepticism about consensus they are well aware of the fact that the liberal democracy that they advocate must be based on a particular consensus over a number of basic institutions or values. In fact the consensus is indispensable, but the accompaniment of consensus with disagreement is unavoidable and inevitable. What agonists, in this respect, do explicitly and poignantly reject is the idea of reason-based consensus a typical example of which can be seen in deliberative democracy.

The criticism of pure reason-based enlightenist attitude which is to eliminate emotions and passions is what lies essentially behind the agonistic sharp criticism of the idea of rationalist consensus. Agonistic political theory has played a quite significant role in the criticism of enlightenist/liberal ideology that has a goal to set up human-human and human-nature relations on pure/rationalist principles and that also has an aspiration to build a homogeneous/harmonious political community under the guidance of these pure/rationalist principles. Agonistic political theory’s critical contribution is particularly vital with regard to the revelation of antagonistic nature of allegedly independent, harmonious and conflict-free social norms and relations introduced in the fictions of neo-liberal politics and society -such as political liberalism- as manifestations of late period enlightenist/liberal ideology. By elaborating on the potential risks and drawbacks implicated in the fiction of reason-

based consensus, theorists of agonistic politics have focused our attention on the investigation of any chance of co-existence in a pluralistic political society where the differences are getting ever deeper. Owing to the strong agonistic criticism of dominant liberal paradigm, it became fully evident that both the liberal paradigm is - quite contrary to what was suggested- heavily associated with ontological assumptions and the political liberalism is not as independent, harmonious and tolerant as supposed or expected to be. However, in spite of all these mentioned merits agonistic political theory's relationship with reason and so with consensus is still problematical. Before all, the agonistic attitude assuming the idea of rational consensus simply as a cover for power is quite generalizing and reductive. Agonists almost tend to -as what Habermas once expressed for the postmoderns- remove the baby (the idea of consensus based on common reason etc.) along with the dirty bathing water (instrumental reason, technocracy, elimination of the passions etc). Nonetheless, as it is impossible to set up a democratic political/social system without referring to principles and norms associated with creation of a minimal common reason (suggesting the opposite implies being sceptical about democracy but agonists do not extend their arguments to that point because according to them liberal democracy is the main heritage to care for), it is urgent to generate a *modus vivendi* to establish the harmony and community which are vital for the sustainability of political/social life. By sharply declaring that this *modus vivendi* cannot be established on the basis of rationalist consensus, agonists, in a sense, tend to weaken the basis of their own political/social theory which remains heavily indebted to rationalization process.

The third problem with agonistic politics is related to the identity or status of the agonistic "other". Agonists have a conception of democracy which reflects a particular synthesis of the notion of Derridian "constitutive outside" and Wittgensteinian "game" leitmotiv. Democracy is a game of which rules are constantly due to change with the interpretations of "different" players/participants and there is no any fixed "constitutive outside" in this game. In this playful democracy conception, it is particularly emphasized that there exists an irresolvable paradox between identity and difference and every description of identity definitely includes a description of other (enemy or adversary) that is to be excluded or negated. This postulation brings to mind the question of who/what the "constitutive outside" of an

agonistic democratic order/identity will be. As agonism already postulates a description of identity, it must have a definite excluded or negated “other” as well. It seems that this “agonistic other” is reflected by those who, in the simplest term, reject agonism or those who are in the position of “enemy” or “adversary” in relation to any possible agonistic democracy. Agonists have an ambivalent attitude towards this agonistic other. On one hand, it is asserted that those who do not adopt the rules of the democratic game are already part of the democratic game, on the other hand, it is suggested that those who do not adopt the rules of the game should be excluded from the game as seen in the example of Mouffe arguing that those who question the fundamental institutions of democratic society cannot be regarded as legitimate adversaries (Mouffe 2005:120). The first attitude falls into an ambiguous definition of game by its effort to equate the radicalism emerging out of the non-adoption of agonistic rules of game with any sort of agonistic form or activity (like disagreement, struggle or challenge) within the rules of the game. The most significant drawback with this sort of understanding which is to, by itself, undermine the conception of game is that it reduces the (antagonistic) radicalism emerging in the challenge of the rules into routine and common manifestations of agon.<sup>11</sup> Even worse, this understanding may well function as a highly effective instrument in the legitimization of a neo-liberal democratic order where all of the manifestations of radicalism are purely eliminated. The second attitude suggesting that those who do not adopt the rules of the game should be excluded from the game is certainly more consistent in itself when compared to first one. However this attitude also drives its supporters to another theoretical stalemate. If, just like in any game, those who do not adopt the rules of the game are to be excluded from the game, calling this game as agonistic democracy or not will not make much sense. However, the non-existence of any fixed “constitutive outside” is one of the most important aspects to define the agonism.

The fourth critical point regarding agonistic politics is associated with the matter of historicism. One of the most important results of agonism to have a liberal discourse far from the legacy of radical left politics (particularly far from the revolutionist background) is that historical critique and analysis being the critical instruments to challenge the past have been eliminated from the agonistic rhetoric. Driven by the concern to distance themselves from the truth philosophies that claim



to answer all metaphysical questions, agonists, in the guidance of the principle of contingency, have attempted to develop a political theory which meticulously keeps away from any sort of historicity and historical analysis and lays its hopes on “the emergence of new forces” in the future. Thus, the liberal context of the future-oriented emancipatory hope dominated over the context of the marxist/revolutionist challenge of past. Briefly stated, the philosophical thought-space of agonistic *credo* is located in the history-less contingency -timelessness- “between the past and future”.

There is no doubt that what lies behind the agonists’ pussyfooting attitude towards historicist philosophy and analysis is the concern to avoid any sort of determination or conditioning which may imply subordination of the emancipation process to a fixed framework. Thus in accordance with this attitude, a determined critical posture has been advanced both against liberalism’s progressive philosophy of history and historical dialectic materialism’s deterministic conception of history. Again within this scope, as in the case of enlightenist liberalism, establishing a supra-historicist and contingent relation with the “universal” has been offered with a view to highlight the plurality of subject configurations and affirm the emergence of new forces. Viewed from this perspective which is dependent more on “irreversible flow and pace of time” than Benjaminist understanding of “history as the redemption of the past”; history as the knowledge of the past is nothing more than a grave of metanarratives that is to suppress the progress of subjectivity and freedom. And just like the agonistic empty universal waiting for to be represented by the fugitive/partial, the historical is nothing but a monadologic empty sign waiting for to be filled by the new forces.

Being an articulative discourse of modern conjuncture is the price agonistic political theory pays for its own “historylessness”. If agonistic politics is to position itself anywhere beyond this point, it has to come to terms with the “historicism” more explicitly. However, modern agonistic politics conceives this challenge either an extension of radical historicism just like in dialectical materialism or an extension of transcendental historical pattern as seen in Hegel, and on behalf of overcoming this dualism it prefers merely setting up a contingent, playful and ambiguous relation with the “historical”. This ambiguous approach to history, reaches one of its most explicit expressions in Laclau and Mouffe’s conception of hegemonic politics. Because

Laclau and Mouffe's hegemony theory as a post-marxist model is before all the theory of this historical ambiguity upon which the promise of emancipation is based.

The fifth and last critical point regarding agonistic politics is associated with the notions of resentment and undecidability.<sup>12</sup> Though there is no any natural or essential relationship between them, these two notions constitute pivotal quilting points (so to say "point de capiton") of modern agonistic politics. As is known, posing a discourse to articulate political theory and psychoanalysis is one of the outstanding characteristics of agonistic politics. Agonistic theory has been significantly influenced by psychoanalytic theoretical background extending from Freud to Lacan. Admittedly, it cannot be argued that agonistic political theory has a definite understanding of human nature. Yet agonistic politics before all is not a theory of human-self/nature but it is a theory of political agents and relations thereof. Nevertheless, it can be argued that agonistic politics still reveals a vague anthropological perspective. According to this perspective, the man as a resentment-holder existence moving under the corporate impacts of his reason and sensations is a political/contingent subjectivity who is steadily in search of power and seeking for to take his social/political decisions on the basis of an essentially undecidable ground. It can be observed that the two notions "resentment and undecidability" are to emerge as key concepts with regard to the agonistic spirit (psyche). However agonists, who are to insist on the ineradicability of power and conflict in the political arena, hardly raised any arguments regarding the origins or onto-genetics of this power and conflict. Therefore the sophisticated agonistic relation between resentment, undecidability and power keeps remaining uncertain on a large scale. But it might not be a mistake to roughly infer that a mechanism as follows is in process with regard to the agonistic spirit (psyche): "The resentment as a repressed sensation of wrath, roaming in the corridors of mind and free from the actuality of ego" steadily drives the self to the pursuit of power. There exists a significant parallelism between the irreversibility of power in the social relations and the irreversibility of resentment in the human nature. Therefore, owing to this irreversibility of resentment and power it is inevitable that a "schism" or "conflict" is to emerge both on the level of individual self and on the level of in-between (political) human relations. This "schism" or "conflict" constitutes the base of authentic undecidability as well.

Instead of eliminating the ontological schism causing the origination of resentment (for Nietzsche this schism is revealed by the confrontation of self with the “existence” and for Connolly it is revealed by the confrontation of identity with the “difference”), agonists seek to develop a strategy to appease the unfavourable outcomes posed by that schism. The agonistic democracy model in fact is one of the expressions of this strategy in the widest sense. However there exists a paradox here; the paradox between the recognition of the ineradicability of resentment and the appeasement policy of the resentment. In effect, Connolly’s world of thought is extensively woven by this paradox. But when this sort of paradox which is expected to promote critical sensitiveness is coupled with the modern agonistic political theory’s effort (a theory that hinges on the perpetual iteratedness and fathomlessness of the decision on the basis of a Derridian undecidability) to take apart the non-western and non-liberal “other” modality away from the agonistic perspective, the context of the paradox becomes unexpected. The unusual point is that in spite of that sheer emancipatory promise posed by the idea of Derridian “democracy to come” (Derrida 1994:81), agonistic democracy does not imply any emancipatory promise beyond the pursuit of a western and liberal democratic order (an order where inside, the resentment is subject to an appeasement and where outside, the resentment against the “other” is subject to an instigation). Perhaps this point is not sufficiently disturbing for the agonists who are committed to live with all kinds of paradoxes; on the contrary it is a key stimulus to inspire critical thinking. Nevertheless, if a definite paradox-oriented politics affirming the dilemmas, ambiguities and paradoxes in the political life is reduced into a form of elimination of the paradoxes, it means that we all along hold the lesser paradox and yet the lesser radical politics in our hands.

In fact the agonistic political theory is based on a limited and relatively reductive interpretation of Nietzschean resentment.<sup>13</sup> In this interpretation, an opposite relationship is set between “emancipation” and “resentment” and thus the positive relation between two notions is entirely ignored. But in the Nietzschean sense, beyond being a psycho-ethical fact, resentment has also a psycho-ontological aspect dependent on “time and existence” and with this second meaning resentment reveals an ineradicable essence; that is, it inevitably goes with the existence and emancipation. In the agonistic rhetoric -especially in Connolly- emancipation is perceived merely as a positive psycho-ethical process enabling the emergence of

new forces and wherein the existential resentment is eliminated. But will not the world freed of existential resentment be a world where the politics -and so the problem of emancipation- is fully eliminated as well? On the other hand, it is also so meaningful that a political theory overemphasizing the role of irrational factors like power, conflict and passion etc. in human nature or in-between human relations has a theoretical weakness in the acknowledgement of resentment which is to constitute one of the most significant irrational motives of emancipation. Perhaps there has been no one other than Walter Benjamin to put strikingly the indispensable/positive relation between emancipation and resentment: The will for emancipation (and together with this both the hatred and sacrifice, as these are the most typical expressions of resentment) “are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than by the ideal of liberated grandchildren” (Benjamin 2003:394). There is no doubt that the agonistic conception of resentment is located quite far away from this Benjaminist understanding.

Agonistic political theory just like several other postmodern theories or political praxes is associated with a specific conception of “otherness” which is growing in importance. In agonistic theory, one of the main aspects intended to emphasize by referring to the undecidable nature of identity/the rejection of essentialism is the undecidable messianic plurality of the difference/the “other”. Agonists attribute a specific meaning and value to this undecidable other’s role to displace the language, law, ethics and subjectivity; because for them the “other” is an existence who perpetuates the conflict between identity and difference. Again for agonists the undecidability is an indispensable component of pluralizing, displacing and rearticulative political understanding. Yet, an emancipatory agonistic politics, in other words this decisive moment, can only be fertilized in the contingent womb of undecidability law. In this sense, there is no essential/radical distinction between decision and undecidability; the unity of them evokes the unity of “essence” which has a dual appearance as existence and genesis. But a radical reference to undecidability law may lead to the perception of covering the relationship between power and emancipation as an undecidable relationship as well. And yet the most unexpected result with regard to this point is that the radical reference to undecidability law may well ally with the meta-politics of “ruling decisionism”.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

As clearly seen in the debates concerning the main problematics as resentment, undecidability, subjectivity, emancipation and universality, agonists have an effort to make the “positive” function as “negative”.<sup>15</sup> However, as far as what we have learned from Hegel, the negative can only have a negative function and the positive functioning of the negative is possible only through a dialectical interaction. In the absence of suchlike dialectical conception/interaction, the insight or emancipation gesture expected from the “negative” by agonistic politics becomes fully deprived of its original context. In fact, what is dominant over the agonistic rhetoric is -just contrary to what is argued- a Kantian perspective, in other words, a transcendental/immanent formalism. Especially, Laclau’s standpoint reveals a typical example of this sort of formalism. And this point should be particularly noted that the distance between the “transcendental universality” in the Kantian sense and the “empty universal waiting for to be represented by the particular” in the Laclauan sense is not as far as supposed to be. Agonistic politics is an explicit defence of Kant against Kant, and yet it must not be ignored that the agonism’s modern heritage inherited from its predecessors is mainly an outcome of the incomplete dispute (agonism?) between Hegel and Kant which seems unsolvable for now.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “agonistic” is derived from the greek word “agon” which refers to contest or struggle and in particular it figures the state of being polemicist or disputatious in the context of physical, psychological, philosophical and ideological conflict. In Ancient Greek drama it was used to express the struggle or tension between principal characters that precipitates the action of the play (Varchaver and Moore 2001:7). Agon is a scene where the primary protagonists of the play appear, centre stage, to confront each other in verbal contest. Particularly the plays of Aristophanes provide noteworthy examples of the dramatic exploration of the agon (Clarke 1996:56). As a post-marxist and post-liberal movement of thought agonistic politics is also known as “agonistic pluralism”, “agonistic democracy” or shortly “agonism”. The concept “agonistic politics” in this study refers to all three definitions in particular but as a philosophical/theoretical conception in general it is intentionally referred to encompass much broader intellectual context. In other words, while agonistic politics is a pluralistic, democratic and conflict-focused political understanding, in this study an extensive philosophical/theoretical conception of agonism is preferred which cannot be simply reduced into aforementioned components.

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<sup>2</sup> Modern agonistic politics is in fact one of the two components of radical democracy which has come to prominence along with the emergence of new social movements since 80s and which has primarily aimed for the consolidation of liberal democracy. Apart from the deliberative democracy represented by primarily Jurgen Habermas and John Rawls, the agonistic democracy represented by notably Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, William Connolly, James Tully, Bonnie Honig and partially Sheldon Wolin has developed a radical understanding of democracy fundamentally opposing to any sort of pursuit of rational consensus. For a comparison of agonistic democracy model and deliberative democracy model see, e.g. Aletta J. Norval (2007:38-39); Seyla Benhabib (1996:15-21). Especially in the context of radicalization of democracy, the vision introduced by Laclau and Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2001) has sparked inspiring discussions. For a brief comparison of classic agonism and modern agonism see also Andreas Kalyvas (2009).

<sup>3</sup> To understand better the contribution of these figures to modern agonistic politics an analogy may be helpful. In this regard, it is possible to infer that Nietzsche refers to the “spirit” of modern agonism, Gramsci guides for the social and political strategy of modern agonism, Foucault stands for the plurality of subject configurations and antagonistic articulations and lastly Arendt features the political glossary of agonistic social framework.

<sup>4</sup> According to Connolly, the paradox between identity and difference is fully engaged with power and it cannot be cleared of politics; the efforts to overcome the paradox of identity and difference imply the elimination of politics (Connolly 1991:92). For a brief description of the paradoxical relation between identity and difference see also *ibid.* p. 64-68.

<sup>5</sup> The antagonism which is conceived by agonists as a given characteristic of objective and social reality cannot be eradicated but it is possible, so to say, to tame it. As Laclau puts it; “antagonism and exclusion are constitutive of all identity” (Laclau 2007:52). See also Chantal Mouffe (2000:12-15); Laclau and Mouffe (2001:122-127).

<sup>6</sup> The division between “political” and “politics” introduced by Mouffe is quite revealing with respect to understanding the priority attributed to “political” in agonistic thought. By “the political” Mouffe means the dimension of antagonism which is constitutive of human societies and by “the politics” she means the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political (Mouffe 2005:9). A similar approach can be seen in Sheldon Wolin who makes a significant distinction between “politics” and “political”. According to Wolin, politics refers to the legitimized and public contestation, primarily by organized and unequal social powers, over access to the resources available to the public authorities of the collectivity. “Politics is continuous, ceaseless, and endless. In contrast, the political is episodic, rare” (Wolin 1996:31).

<sup>7</sup> The term “contingency” is a quite contentful concept which is generally referred for the negation of any type of dogmatic, essentialist and fundamentalist approach and in some cases the implications such like coincidental, arbitrary and even chaotic are wrongly attributed to it. By pointing out that contingency has thoroughly political implications, Oliver Marchart underlines the fact that the figures of contingency like undecidability, division, discord, and antagonism can be traced back conceptually to Heidegger’s work (Marchart 2007:3). Perhaps the best explanatory facet of the contingency is its embeddedness within the unpredictable and the being. Connolly also touches on the multifaceted character of the term “contingency”: “By contrast to the necessary and universal, it means that which is changeable and particular; by contrast to the certain and constant, it means that which is uncertain and variable; by contrast to the self-subsistent and causal, it means that which is dependent and effect; by contrast to the expected and regular, it means that which is

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unexpected and irregular; and by contrast to the safe and reassuring, it means that which is dangerous, unruly, and obdurate in its danger" (Connolly 1991:28).

<sup>8</sup> In contrast to Schmittian pessimism of political realism, agonism maintains the liberal promise of freedom in social and political spheres and explicitly develops a pluralistic understanding of politics. In other words, believing that the political tensions have an essential role in society agonists argue that these tensions should be addressed not with a mentality to suppress the "other" but through a much more emancipatory and pluralistic understanding.

<sup>9</sup> According to Foucault, saying that there cannot be a society without power relations is not to say either that those which are established are necessary, or that power in any event, constitutes an inescapable fatality at the heart of societies, such that it cannot be undermined. "Instead, ... the analysis, elaboration, and bringing into question of power relations and the "agonism" between power relations and the intransitivity of freedom is an increasingly political task-even, the political task that is inherent in all social existence" (Foucault 2000:343). And yet the Foucaultian ethos of esthetic self-creative activity constitutes a substantial part of this political task.

<sup>10</sup> Arendt, meticulously elaborates on the incompatibility of political power and violence. Although she indicates that there exists a very strong relation between war and revolution (Arendt 1990:17), in her study *On Violence* she points out that: "...it is insufficient to say that power and violence are not the same. Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power's disappearance. This implies that it is not correct to think of the opposite of violence as nonviolence; to speak of nonviolent power is actually redundant. Violence can destroy power; it is utterly incapable of creating it" (Arendt 1970: 56). We can also find traces of violence-free understanding of politics in Connolly and Mouffe's works. Nevertheless, perhaps Laclau is the only one who speaks of the indistinguishability of agon and violence more explicitly. On *Emancipation(s)* he utters that "... it is precisely because of this, because there is an ontological possibility of clashes and unevenness, that we can speak of freedom" (Laclau 2007:115-116).

<sup>11</sup> Here it may be a challenging point to recall Jacques Ranciere's conception of antagonism. The division between "those included in the democratic game" and "those excluded from the game" corresponds to Ranciere's division between the structured social body in which each part has its place and 'the part of no part' which unsettles this order. Ranciere makes a sharp distinction between "police" and "politics" and associates the sheer existence of politics with the revelation of the falsity of the assertion that the community does exist and it already covers everyone (Ranciere 1995:63-92; 1999:35-39; 2001:10-12). As Ranciere puts it: "Politics exists when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part" (Ranciere 1999:11). This vision of antagonism may seem parallel to agonistic conception of politics because Ranciere also covers "dissensus" as the essence of politics. However for Ranciere this concept of dissensus cannot be expressed by the regular agonistic terms like agonistic respect, reciprocity or else. And yet in Rancierian sense, the agonistic hope for the transformation of antagonisms into agonisms almost amounts to "elimination of politics".

<sup>12</sup> To explain the term "undecidability" more clearly, Derrida uses the example of "a spectre appearing neither present nor absent." An undecidable entity is both present and absent simultaneously (Derrida 2002:252-253). Apart from textuality Derrida also attributes political meanings to undecidability and meticulously distinguishes it from the term "indeterminacy". According to Derrida, "undecidability is always a determinate oscillation between possibilities (for example, of meaning, but also of acts). These possibilities are themselves highly

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determined in strictly defined situations (for example, discursive-syntactical or rhetorical-but also political, ethical, etc.). They are pragmatically determined." He says "undecidability" rather than "indeterminacy" because he is interested more in relations of force, in differences of force, in everything that allows, precisely, determinations in given situations to be stabilized through a decision of writing. In broad sense undecidability also includes political action and experience in general (Derrida 1988:147-148).

<sup>13</sup> Modern agonistic thought rests on a positive Nietzsche interpretation in general. In this interpretation where some nihilistic themes disregarded, the mature Nietzsche with his Zarathustra identity who calls for the reevaluation of the values comes to the forefront rather than the young Nietzsche with his iconoclastic identity who calls for the abandonment of the values. This positive Nietzsche interpretation draws on three significant dimensions of Nietzschean project. First, Nietzsche hopes that his project might move the human species (or some of its members) out of sickness and into recovery. Second, Nietzsche recovers the origins of the values that now we take to be universal, transcendent, and true in order to show that they are in fact conditional or partial. This recovery is not nostalgic. Third and last, Nietzsche's genealogical recoveries show that all language, all moral values, indeed all systems of valuation are palimpsests of interpretation (Honig 1993:42-45).

<sup>14</sup> For a critical view of this point see Antonio Y. Vazquez Arroyo's article (2004).

<sup>15</sup> Attributing a decisive/positive meaning to *negative* is an inherent consequence of the perception of paradoxical politics. This paradoxical perception is also apparent in Connolly's emphasis on the permanent undecidability between the forces of identity/difference, concentric/rhizomatic and pluralism/pluralisation. Mark Wenman comments on this "paradox" and underlines the crucial point that by way of contrast, it is only via recourse to the negative -understood as a decisive moment that fractures the social field- that we can momentarily move beyond this perpetual paradox of temporality, and properly conceptualise the introduction of the new, the possibility of a *creatio ex nihilo*. However according to Wenman, the negative can also be brought into the service of the self-unfolding of the One, as it is in Hegelian dialectics where negativity is understood as an internal moment in the self-mediation and self-sublation of the absolute. And yet it is also possible to conceptualise radical negativity as something like the 'void of being', as that which is present in the order of things but only as their inherent blockage, as the impediment that forever prevents the realisation of the plenitude of 'life' (Wenman, 2008:165-166). For an intriguing comment of this negativity see also, Slavoj Žižek (1991:193-195).

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