

# **Austere Politics: The Abstraction of the Political in Post-Marxism**

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On August 6, 2011, following the shooting of Mark Duggan by the Metropolitan Police, riots broke out in Tottenham, North London, which spread sporadically over the next seven days to other areas of London and other cities in England. The riots and the looting that followed were widely condemned for violence and lawlessness, but in addition some (including some on the left who spoke positively of the political significance of earlier London riots), chose to criticize these riots for being apolitical.<sup>1</sup> Why was the political or otherwise nature of these events the ground on which people chose to make their critique? Why has “apolitical” become a term of abuse, and “political” a term of praise, particularly for those on the left? This is hardly an isolated incident: the decline of the political is a common complaint on the left, with the political apparently being wiped out by economics or technocracy, sometimes combined under the name ‘neoliberalism’.

A position that values the political by sharply distinguishing politics, on the basis of certain essential characteristics, from the non-political, produces its own political problems. A definition which draws a sharp line between political and non-political, risks missing the political significance of events and activities which, intertwined with

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<sup>1</sup> See Andrew Swallow, ‘Politicians Condemn Tottenham Riots’, *The Guardian*, 2011, as well as Bauman’s claim that those involved in the riots exhibited literally no subjective agency at all, that their minds contained only ‘the explanations they heard on TV and read in the papers’, and so the events can only be explained in terms of causes, not meanings, ‘can be only explained in terms of “because of”, not in terms of “in order to”’ (Zygmunt Bauman, ‘Fuels, Sparks and Fires : On Taking to the Streets’, *Thesis Eleven*, 109 (2012), 11–6 (p. 12)).

the supposedly non-political, fall outside the strictly-drawn lines of the political. The case with which I opened, the 2011 UK riots, is one example where a strict definition of politics led theorists to miss the significance of events, but such cases seem to be increasingly the norm. If politics is tied to particular organizations (parties, unions), particular sites (legislatures, the media) or particular forms of action (from electoral participation to petitions and demonstrations), the political seems to be a contracting and ever less relevant sphere. From the new social movements of the 70s and 80s (criticized as apolitical for their focus on single issues) to the anti-globalization movement of the 90s and early 2000s (criticized as apolitical for its unwillingness to unite issues into a coherent critique of contemporary institutions), to the Occupy encampments which arose in US and European cities in 2011-12 (criticized as apolitical for their unwillingness to make demands or express a positive vision of the society they desired), the last few decades have been characterized by collective action in opposition to the prevailing organization of society in ways which are not fully or at least not straightforwardly captured by definitions of the political. A political theory which is concerned with maintaining the distinctiveness of the category of the political by purifying that category, by determining precisely what is political and what is not, prevents us from seeing these movements as political, and in particular it prevents us from considering that it might be their 'impurity', their combination of political, social, economic, and other tropes, which allows them to be political.

I call this politics, which is disconnected from a consideration of society and the economy, 'austere politics'. It is austere because it attempts to define politics in the narrowest possible way, and it treats any expansive or impure definition of politics as dangerous, as a luxury we cannot afford. It is this disconnection of politics from a consideration of society and the economy which makes austere politics a problematic

form of political theory. A political theory predicated on the autonomy of the political encourages us to explain political concepts only by reference to other concepts which we can be sure are also political; indeed, any attempt to relate politics to non-political categories comes to be viewed with suspicion, as involving a reduction of the political to some other, non-political, sphere. My view is that any satisfactory investigation into politics will involve explaining how what appear to be political concepts are necessarily related to other, less obviously political, concepts. This is not a reductionist move, because the apparently non-political concepts imbricated with politics are no more purely non-political than political concepts are purely and solely political. If politics involves action, that action takes place in a world, and that world cannot be explained solely in political terms; therefore any adequate theory of politics will need to be open to all the categories and areas of study necessary to understand the world in which political action takes place. We cannot say anything useful about justice without considering the economic organizations which control distribution, nor can we say anything useful about power without considering the institutions through which power is exercised, nor about identities without considering the histories which have produced and continue to ascribe these identities. Austere politics, by focusing our attention on politics considered as autonomous, encourages us to forget these necessary supplements to our political categories.

This paper has two purposes. The first is to persuade you that 'austere politics' is a coherent concept and one which usefully characterises certain elements of contemporary political theory. The second purpose is to suggest that austere politics leads to bad political theory. In the course of making my case on this second point, I will also suggest that Marx's work can be helpful in developing a political theory which provides an alternative to austere politics. I begin the paper by describing some

current work in political theory from Alain Badiou, Peter Hallward, and Jodi Dean, which I think particularly exemplifies austere politics. I then turn to a much broader discussion of modern political theory to show how austere politics is rooted in features of political theory which we can find more widely; in doing this, I also offer some justification for my use of the term ‘austere politics’. Finally, I develop a more detailed reading of Dean’s work to show what I think are the problems that result from austere politics.

### **Post-Marxist austerity**

One use of this theme of the central importance of a narrow, purified notion of politics is of particular interest. Recent years have seen what we might call a neo-Jacobin or neo-Leninist trend in political theory from the Marxist or post-Marxist tradition. This trend has insisted that the lack of attention to politics, narrowly defined, has placed a limitation on the radical potential of left-wing political theory and practice; the examples of this trend I will explore here are Badiou, Hallward and Dean. This neo-Jacobin trend can be distinguished from the more general theme of a modern ‘decline of politics’ because the neo-Jacobin position does not necessarily identify a general, epochal decline of politics, but instead sees the problem as a lack of political will specifically on the left.<sup>2</sup> These authors propose a reinvigorated politics of will as the solution, which is why I call them ‘neo-Jacobin’; this politics of will is also central to the features of this account of politics which lead me to label it ‘austere’. Before I turn to this question of austere politics, however, I

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2 Indeed, the popularity, on the left, of accounts of a decline of the political is because they provide a theoretical alibi for the failure of actual left politics, according to Jodi Dean, ‘Politics without Politics’, in *Reading Rancière*, ed. by Paul Bowman (Continuum, 2011), p. 23.

will explain in more general terms how the category of the political is constructed by these authors.

For Badiou, politics is one of the distinct domains in which true novelty, a radical break with existing conditions, is possible.<sup>3</sup> What distinguishes politics from other areas of radical rupture is that politics is collective, indeed politics is the situation ‘in which the collective becomes interested in itself’.<sup>4</sup> Given this definition of politics, it is no surprise that for Badiou the quintessential philosopher of politics is Rousseau. What is both most important and most novel in Rousseau (who, Badiou writes, ‘forever establishes the modern concept of politics’<sup>5</sup>) is the ideas that politics is not natural or given, but needs to be created, or rather depends on a creation, the creation of the body politic: ‘politics is a *creation*, local and fragile, of collective humanity’.<sup>6</sup> What allows Rousseau’s account of politics to inaugurate this new era is that ‘it discerns an absolutely novel term, called the general will’.<sup>7</sup>

The general will is also central to Hallward’s republican, or, as he calls it ‘dialectical voluntarist’, politics. The defining feature of this voluntarism is that ‘what is ultimately determinant is not the given economic or historical constraints but free human action – the ability of “each single individual” to prescribe their own ends and make their own history’.<sup>8</sup> Politics, for Hallward, depends on detaching the will from material conditions. It is true that Hallward’s voluntarism is dialectical inasmuch as it recognizes that this will is realized in a world of material necessity, where ‘the political exercise of will distinguishes itself from mere wish or fantasy through its

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3 Politics is one of precisely four such domains, the other three being art, science, and love (Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (London ; New York: Continuum, 2005), pp. 339–40)

4 Badiou, p. 340.

5 Badiou, p. 345.

6 Badiou, p. 345 Badiou’s emphasis.

7 Badiou, p. 345.

8 Peter Hallward, ‘The Will of the People’, *Radical Philosophy*, 2009, p. 26.

capacity to initiate a process of genuine “realisation”.<sup>9</sup> However, it is important to note that this dialectic between will and circumstances arises at the point of the will’s *realisation*; material constraint does not play a role in the will’s conception or creation.<sup>10</sup> Because politics is the elaboration of a collective will, then, for Hallward it has at its origins a narrowing or detachment: politics is definitely not (even if it might later encounter) the material circumstances Hallward lists as ‘appetite ... causality ... context ... habit ... tradition ... history ... power ... the unconscious ... convention ... writing ... desire ... drive’.<sup>11</sup>

When politics is narrowed to the exercise of will, it has a particular name: sovereignty. In a theory of popular will, this sovereignty must be specifically popular sovereignty, a sovereignty exercised by the people rather than an external ruler. This is the key Jacobin moment in the idea of communism proposed by Dean, a theory of ‘communism as the sovereignty of the people’.<sup>12</sup> Popular sovereignty is the sovereignty of ‘the people as a *collective* body’,<sup>13</sup> and what the naming of the people as the sovereign introduces is this crucial distinction between the people *as* the sovereign – as singular body, a ruler – and the people as dispersed individuals, the people as subjects. Dean is explicit about embracing this ‘nonidentity between the people and its sovereignty, that is to say, the gap between the government and the governed’,<sup>14</sup> and it was this distinction that was Rousseau’s great innovation within republican theory. The similarity with Rousseau is interesting because it brings into focus a continuity between a supposedly radical model of politics and a much more general trend in modern politics. The mechanism of popular sovereignty, in which the

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9 Hallward, p. 25.

10 A genuine will is not ‘adapted’, to use Hallward’s term, to circumstances (Hallward, p. 17)

11 Hallward, p. 21.

12 Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (New York: Verso, 2012), l. 743. References to this text are to locations in the Kindle edition.

13 Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, l. 782.

14 Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, l. 826.

people is sovereign when and because it is represented as such, is a central theme of modern politics, the general constellation of political systems called ‘liberal’ in the broad sense. I will show in the final parts of this paper that the critique of liberalism (and its material infrastructure, capitalism) which the neo-Jacobins are so keen to undertake in fact requires a critique of the purified, abstract politics that they advocate. In order to make that argument, however, I first need to explain in more detail the centrality of this abstract politics to modern political thought, which will also involve clarifying what I mean by calling this politics ‘austere’.

### **A history of austerity**

One of the founding moments of Western political science is an attempt to distinguish the political from the non-political. Aristotle opens the *Politics* by telling us that there is one particular kind of ‘association which is political’ and that ‘it is an error to suppose, as some do, that the roles of a statesman, of a king, of a household manager and of a master of slaves are the same.’<sup>15</sup> This founding moment has been rendered in mythological terms by Strauss, as a time of direct access to ‘political things’, a direct access now lost to us.<sup>16</sup> While we are unlikely to explicitly accept this Straussian myth today, something like it does, I think, continue to exert an influence on how we understand political theory. We are still likely to think that locating the specificity of the political is, historically and practically, the starting point of political

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15 Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. by T. A. Sinclair and Trevor J. Saunders (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 1252a7. It is, strictly, anachronistic to refer to Aristotle as ‘founding’ Western political science, as the relevant category of the ‘West’ was constructed centuries after Aristotle’s death. Rather the retroactive mythologisation of Greek philosophy as a founding moment was itself a moment in the production of the idea of the West. In what follows, I will concentrate on the temporal specificity of a ‘modern’ understanding of politics, but it is worth keeping in mind that this modernity is also eurocentric.

16 Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1959), p. 27. In fact, for Strauss, by the time Aristotle was writing, direct access to political things was well on its way out. That the political is always-already lost for Strauss of course enhances its mythic allure.

theory, and that a failure to attend to this specificity is both a theoretical and political danger. In this paper, I want to pick apart this assumption that political theory depends on the specificity of the political, to historicize the idea by paying attention to the various different ways in which we might distinguish the political, and what it might mean that modern political theory has chosen a particular mode of distinction, an abstraction of the political from material circumstances which I refer to as ‘austere politics’.

Mitropoulos points out that the different uses of Aristotle’s distinction between politics and ‘economics’ (*oikonomia*, which is the etymological root of ‘economics’, does not mean the same thing as the modern term), from Machiavelli onwards, at least, say more about the concerns of the authors making use of Aristotle than they do about some supposedly foundational category of greek political theory.<sup>17</sup> Mitropoulos draws particular attention to the modifications to the understanding of the relationship between politics and economics which coincide with the development of capitalism and the rise of social contract theory,<sup>18</sup> and it is this early modern reconfiguration of the distinctiveness of politics that I want to focus on. In the early development of social contract theory from Hobbes to Rousseau, politics is first defined through an abstraction from material circumstances, and all the circumstances that are now ‘external’ to politics are conceived as an excess, a kind of luxury which is a distraction *from* politics.

The distinctive idea introduced into the understanding of politics in the early-modern period, which continues to be central to theories of the political today, is that the political sphere is artificial. This innovation can be traced back to Hobbes,<sup>19</sup>

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17 Angela Mitropoulos, *Contract and Contagion: From Biopolitics to Oikonomia* (Brooklyn, NY: Minor Compositions, 2012), p. 57, and ch.2 more generally.

18 Mitropoulos, pp. 52, 61.

19 As with any theory, Hobbes’s account of the artificiality of politics has precedents, but it has a

summed up in the opening lines of *Leviathan*, which describe the study of politics as the study of artifice, ‘for by Art is created that great Leviathan called a Common-wealth, or State (in latine Civitas) which is but an Artificiall Man’.<sup>20</sup> So, the political sphere is a *creation*, a distinct and separate thing brought into being by human artifice.

It is worthwhile emphasising the novelty of Hobbes’s claim that the political sphere is artificial, both because it seems so obvious today and because it was so counterintuitive in Hobbes’s time. In working out the logic behind the Hobbesian concept of politics, it is useful to think about why this became a possible way of thinking about politics in the early modern period specifically. We can certainly locate reasons within the intellectual tradition Hobbes was working in and against, particularly the emerging critique of scholastic metaphysics.<sup>21</sup> However, there were also developments outside of philosophy to which Hobbes’s theory provides a response. The early modern period saw the dissolution of the feudal system in which the organisation of daily life and material reproduction was directly tied up with the organisation of rule. This system broke down with what Marx calls ‘political emancipation’ in ‘On the Jewish Question’ and the ‘double freedom’ of the worker in *Capital*.<sup>22</sup> The social reorganisation which began in the early modern period involved

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central importance for Hobbes that it does not have for his predecessors. See David Runciman, *Pluralism and the Personality of the State* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), chap. 2.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas A. Spragens, *The Politics of Motion: The World of Thomas Hobbes* (Lexington KY: University of Kansas Press, 1973) and Allen S Hance, ‘Prudence and Providence: On Hobbes’s Theory of Practical Reason’, *Man and world*, 24 (1991), 155–67 provide different accounts of Hobbes’s thought which both locate it in relation to Aristotelian metaphysics. Cees Leijenhorst, ‘Hobbes’s Theory of Causality and Its Aristotelian Background’, *The Monist*, 79 (1996), 426–447 suggests ways in which some of Hobbes’s ideas emerged out of modifications made within scholasticism. For the more general climate of anti-scholastic thought in Hobbes’s time, see Quentin Skinner, ‘Hobbes’s Life in Philosophy’, in *Visions of politics*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), III, 1–37.

<sup>22</sup> Karl Marx, ‘On the Jewish Question’, in *Early writings*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 211–242 (p. 232); Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 272.

the creation of a specifically economic sphere and so, at the same time, a distinctively political sphere. As Marx puts it, the end of feudalism ‘unleashed the political spirit which has, as it were, been dissolved, dissected and dispersed in the various cul-de-sacs of feudal society; it gathered together this spirit from its state of dispersion, liberated it from the adulteration of civil life’.<sup>23</sup> In the early modern period, that is, the political state as a separate sphere was being materially constructed; thus the question of how such a separation *could be* constructed became a matter of philosophical concern, and we can see this concern being worked out in Hobbes.

The solution Hobbes devises to this question of how politics might be constructed is the concept of representation.<sup>24</sup> Representation is first a mode of separation, a way of separating some or all of a person’s acts from that person themselves. Hobbes connects the word ‘person’ with the Latin ‘*persona*’, meaning outward appearance or mask, and this connects representation with a kind of impersonation, in which acts performed by one person are taken as being the acts of someone else;<sup>25</sup> a representative acts on behalf of the person being represented. This produces a metaphysics of agency in which acts can be detached from concrete individuals and transferred to others.

Representation is a type of separation for Hobbes, then, but what makes it so important for his political theory is that this separation is the basis for a subsequent unification. Because representation allows for the arbitrary transfer of acts from one

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23 Marx, ‘On the Jewish Question’, p. 233.

24 Hobbes, chap. 16. One of the earliest authors to draw attention to the centrality of representation for Hobbes’s theory was Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (University of California Press, 1967), chap. 1. This remains one of the most extensive discussions of Hobbes’s theory of representation, although it is confined to representation in *Leviathan*. For a discussion of representation throughout Hobbes’s work, see Mónica Brito Vieira, *The Elements of Representation in Hobbes: Aesthetics, Theatre, Law, and Theology in the Construction of Hobbes’s Theory of the State* (BRILL, 2009).

25 Hobbes, p. 112.

person to another, it also allows for the transfer of acts from many people to one person. This creates the possibility of unity, because ‘it is the *Unity* of the representer, not the *Unity* of the represented, that maketh the person *One*’.<sup>26</sup> This moment of representation is crucial for Hobbes as it is the only way in which many people can be understood as a unity; and, furthermore, they can only be understood as a unity because, in transferring their acts to a single representative, they have created something new: the single person that the representative ‘bears’.<sup>27</sup> This is how politics works through abstraction in Hobbes: diverse individuals separate out part of themselves, some of their actions, and transfer these to another; this act of representation produces an ‘artificial person’ which substantializes the unity produced out of prior diversity.

The central role of abstraction to politics is made explicit in the chapter of *Leviathan* following that on representation, where Hobbes describes how a commonwealth, or sovereign, is created through a universal alienation and unification of people’s wills. It is ‘as if every man should say’, Hobbes writes, that ‘I ... give up my right of Governing myself,’ which leads everyone to ‘conferre all their power and strength upon one Man’.<sup>28</sup> This theory is shared by Rousseau, who describes the fundamental principle of the social contract as ‘the total alienation of each associate together with all his rights’ which ‘creates a corporate and collective body’.<sup>29</sup> It is because this alienation, or separation and unification, of powers is the basis of politics that Marx sees Rousseau as a particularly good example of ‘the abstraction of the political man’,<sup>30</sup> but the similarity to Hobbes also reinforces Marx’s

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26 Hobbes, p. 114.

27 Hobbes, p. 114.

28 Hobbes, p. 120.

29 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, trans. by G. D. H Cole (London: Everyman, 1993), p. 191.

30 Marx, ‘On the Jewish Question’, p. 234.

broader point that this abstraction is characteristic of modern politics – from the authoritarian Hobbes to the comparatively radical republican Rousseau.

It is also useful to look at Rousseau because Rousseau is much more concerned than Hobbes by the ambiguities and complexities of representation. Hobbes describes representation using the language of acting and theatre, but does not seem concerned by the possibility that the similarity between the way a person is ‘counterfeited on stage’<sup>31</sup> and the way they are represented in politics might cast doubt on the seriousness or reality of the political sphere he analyses and constructs.<sup>32</sup> Rousseau, however, is alert to the paradoxes of representation, whereby a falsehood (a representation) stands in for the thing it represents. It is in Rousseau’s repeated insistence on the need to distinguish between proper and improper representations that we can see why the abstraction at the heart of modern politics is also a form of austerity.

One of the central features of Rousseau’s political theory is his contention that politics is threatened by luxury, ostentation, and excess (he is of course inheriting a long tradition of republican theory on this point). In Rousseau’s presentation, this is tightly connected to his views of gender, which doubtless explains why the best writing on this theme comes from feminist interpreters of Rousseau. While I think the austere model of politics lends itself to anti-feminist positions today as much as it did in Rousseau’s time,<sup>33</sup> I want here to use these discussions of gender in Rousseau

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<sup>31</sup> Hobbes, p. 112.

<sup>32</sup> Hobbes is not in general very concerned about questions of falsity or dissimulation. His discomfort with rhetoric, which is an important motivation for much of his theory, is not that rhetoric uses words in ways that are *false*, but in ways that are variable, as when one rhetorician describes an act as courageous when another describes it as reckless, leading to disagreement and conflict. See Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. chap. 7.

<sup>33</sup> Although I don’t have space to make this argument in any detail, my contention is that austere politics, by rendering the non-political irrelevant to politics, is likely to ignore the kinds of material conditions that particularly oppress women.

to elaborate on how placing austerity at the centre of a conception of the political produces a more general logic of politics which extends beyond Rousseau. In particular, Rousseau's anxiety about gender makes his a particularly clear case in which to see a more general modern anxiety about protecting the proper of politics from improper adulteration by the non political.

Wingrove writes that Rousseau's 'republicanism consists in the proper performance of masculinity and femininity',<sup>34</sup> and the idea of 'proper performance' is crucial to the gender of republican politics. 'Performance' is an interestingly double-edged word because it can mean both to act and to counterfeit action; this is why in Rousseau's theory performance always needs to be tied to propriety. Performance in the first sense, of activity, is central to politics for Rousseau (as indeed it was for earlier republicans). What is comparatively new in Rousseau is that what makes political acts genuine *acts* is that they have the right relationship to will. Politics involves the direct, uninterrupted conversion of the general will into action; see for instance Rousseau's description of the idyllic state in which 'the first man to propose them [laws] merely says what all have already felt, and there is no question of faction or intrigue or eloquence in order to secure the passage into law of what every one has already decided to do, as soon as he is sure the rest will act with him.'<sup>35</sup> The cause of this idyllic situation is that 'men who are upright and simple are difficult to deceive because of their simplicity; lures and ingenious pretexts fail to impose upon them, and they are not even subtle enough to be dupes'.<sup>36</sup> That Rousseau refers

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34 Elizabeth Rose Wingrove, *Rousseau's Republican Romance* (Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 6.

35 Rousseau, p. 274. Another example of this transparent relation of will to action is Rousseau's famous assertion that 'the sovereign, merely by virtue of what it is, is always what it should be' (Rousseau, p. 194).

36 Rousseau, p. 274. See the discussion of this passage in Ingrid Makus, 'The Politics of "Feminine Concealment" and "Masculine Openness" in Rousseau', in *Feminist interpretations of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. by Lynda Lange (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), pp. 187–211 (p. 197).

to 'men' here is not at all accidental or conventional, but lies at the heart of Rousseau's gendering of politics: politics is a masculine domain because it is direct and men are capable of this kind of directness, at least they are if they have not been corrupted.<sup>37</sup>

It is here that the opposing sense of performance, as counterfeit, is relevant, because this type of performance is the threat to politics and this particular threat is resolutely presented by Rousseau as feminine. The primary places where Rousseau locates this feminine or feminised performance are the theatre and the salon. Even in these circumstances, however, 'the natural man is still discernible under the vile ornaments of the courtier' and 'not content to be passive and beautiful, he also wants to be active and useful'.<sup>38</sup> The performance which is 'beautiful' rather than 'active', that is, is a kind of masquerade or ornamentation in which an ostentatious costume conceals the properly masculine citizen capable of an honest and direct participation in the general will. As Zerilli writes, to become citizens, men

must renounce the elegant discourse and elaborate dress of the demimonde, those signifiers of class privilege and counterfeit masculinity. The social contract, it turns out, is a linguistic and sartorial contract, an agreement about the proper symbolic forms of communication among citizens. Simple attire and direct speech are to function as outward signs of men's devotion to each other and to the universalistic principles of the patrie.<sup>39</sup>

At the centre of modern political theory, then, is a kind of austerity, a rejection of ostentation or ornamentation. This derives from this theory's organisation around the concepts of popular sovereignty and the general will: will must flow directly and transparently from the people through the sovereign into action, and any excess of

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37 Makus, p. 188.

38 Linda Zerilli, "'Une Maitresse Imperieuse': Woman in Rousseau's Semiotic Republic", in *Feminist interpretations of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. by Lynda Lange (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), pp. 277–314 (p. 278).

39 Zerilli, p. 280.

appearance threatens this transparency. This way of understanding politics depends on a norm of representation as proper appearance, in which what *is* appears *as* just what it is and nothing else, as against improper appearances which, through luxury or theatricality, appear as something other than what they are.<sup>40</sup> This austere concept of representation is at the centre of modern political theory, from Hobbes through to today's radical political theory. This contemporary radical theory, furthermore, insists that what makes it radical is this particular approach to politics which I have been calling austerity; but the ubiquity of austerity to modern political theory might make us a little sceptical about whether it can really function as a hallmark of the radical. Marx expressed just this scepticism in his early work, and much of his mature work can be seen as an attempt to work out an alternative to austere politics. In the remainder of this paper, I will attempt to explain how Marx shows us the limits of austere politics.

### **The limits of austerity**

The advocates of austere politics base their claim to be political radicals on what they see as the special role of politics in resisting our contemporary late capitalist or neoliberal condition. The problem these authors identify is the domination of the economy, that is, the way our lives are controlled by economic structures which themselves are not subject to our control. Separating off the political as a distinct sphere of sovereign will makes it possible to conceive of a project in which the political takes control over the economic. Dean is particularly clear in her insistence that the weakness of the contemporary left is due to giving up on this political logic of

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<sup>40</sup> 'To be and to seem became two totally different things; and from this distinction sprang insolent pomp and cheating trickery, with all the numerous vices that go in their train.' (Rousseau, p. 95)

sovereignty and control in favour of logics of complexity and consensus which are compatible (or indeed directly derive from) economic logics.<sup>41</sup>

Doesn't this concern with the power of politics *over* economics undermine my claim that 'austere' politics is cut off from economic and material concerns? No, because it turns out that the attempt to construct a politics which is capable of ruling over economics is self-undermining; this is Marx's central critique of Rousseau and modern politics more generally. To understand how construing politics as sovereign over economics undermines itself, we can start by looking at Dean's attempt to ground her account of politics in an account of class struggle. One apparent difference between Dean's and Rousseau's accounts of the people is that, for Rousseau, the people may contain all who will to join it, while Dean makes the people a class concept in that the people excludes 'the rich' and is made up of 'the rest of us'.<sup>42</sup> However, although Rousseau does not explicitly exclude the rich from the people, he does do so implicitly, by insisting on the need for equality, and a certain economic austerity, among the people. Popular sovereignty is undermined through 'idleness and money...through the hustle of commerce and the arts, through the greedy self-interest of profit, and through softness and love of amenities and personal service'.<sup>43</sup> Thus Rousseau sets up a distinction between the people proper and the

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41 Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, l. 803, 1771. Dean's claims about the problems of 'the left' throughout *The Communist Horizon* are weakened by the book's lack of clarity about who its targets are. Although the book often seems to be an intervention into the milieu around Occupy Wall Street, when specific criticisms are made they tend to be of left-liberal academics such as Laclau and Mouffe. The impression that academics are the real targets and intended audience of the book is strengthened by the tendency to refer to academics as 'we' or 'us', as when Dean suggests that 'leftists' fear the Leninist party because 'we fear the unstoppable force of the people mobilized against the system, a force that university gates are incapable of blocking' (l. 519). This lack of clarity means that Dean doesn't engage with the debates which informed the trends she is ostensibly criticising, such as the extensive discussions among anarchist and anti-authoritarian activists using formal consensus decision making about the advantages, disadvantages, and appropriate occasions to use consensus. One of the best summaries of these debates is Common Wheel Collective, *Collective Book on Collective Processes* <<http://www.geocities.com/collectivebook/intro.html>> [accessed 24 February 2014].

42 Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, l. 699.

43 Rousseau, p. 265.

rich, who are not really part of the people and work against it. Tamás points out the existence of a tradition within socialism, heavily influenced by Rousseau, which focuses on a qualitative distinction between rich and poor which is then moralized: the rich have an illegitimate concern for their economic self-interest and this economic concern disrupts the proper, purely political, functioning of the general will and popular sovereignty.<sup>44</sup> As Tamás argues, however, this Rousseauist socialism is quite different from the theory and politics of Marx, which is concerned with material and structural divisions which explain the functioning of political economy, the division between those who control the means of production and those who do not. Dean is firmly within the Rousseauist tradition, and this is why her suggestion of ‘the people as the rest of us’ as a replacement for ‘the proletariat’ is so inadequate;<sup>45</sup> she provides no account of how this division operates, except for a few moralizing references to ‘theft’ carried out by the ‘super rich’.<sup>46</sup> Further, as Tamás points out, class struggle is a feature specifically of the economic and political organization of capitalism; it is not, contra Dean, a timeless metaphysical name for ‘the fundamental antagonism through which society emerges’ or ‘the fact that there is not set of ordered relations constitutive of society as such’.<sup>47</sup> Dean’s account of class struggle is one that avoids the economic and reinterprets class purely in political terms; and, furthermore, in terms of a philosophical, abstract, and ahistorical account of politics.

This reduction of class to a political abstraction is a necessary consequence of Dean’s theoretical approach, which depends on drawing a sharp distinction between politics and economics, and in making this distinction Dean is very much in the

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44 Gáspár Miklós Tamás, ‘Telling the Truth About Class’, *Grundrisse: Zeitschrift für linke Theorie & Debatte*, 2007 <<http://www.grundrisse.net/grundrisse22/tellingTheTruthAboutClass.htm>> [accessed 24 February 2014]. See also Rousseau, p. 203.

45 Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, l. 629.

46 Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, l. 439.

47 Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, l. 698.

mainstream of modern political theory. Marx addresses political theory, including that of Rousseau, in his early work, prior to 1845; indeed, it was his growing identification of the problems with politics as described by modern political theory which motivated his turn towards the study and critique of political economy which would occupy the rest of his life. Although a fuller discussion would have to include Marx's discussion of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, for the specific argument I am making here the most relevant text is 'On the Jewish Question', which at first appears to be a response to Bauer on the question of Jewish emancipation, but develops into a critique of the concept of political emancipation, and indeed of 'the political' as such. Marx's criticism turns on what I have already identified as the central conceptual move of the modern liberal state, the role of representation in taking a population of diverse individuals and uniting them into one political community. Marx notes that this unification does not abolish difference but merely claims that difference has no political significance:

Nevertheless the state allows private property, education and occupation to *act* and assert their *particular* nature in *their* own way, i.e., as private property, as education and as occupation. Far from abolishing these factual distinctions, the state presupposes them in order to exist, it only experiences itself as a *political state* and asserts its *universality* in opposition to these elements.<sup>48</sup>

That is to say, the existence of the political state depends on the existence of the private, economic, sphere of civil society; the 'private interest' of egoistic bourgeois society is the 'presupposition' of the public interest of the state,<sup>49</sup> and the state must thus continually reproduce this sphere of civil society if it is to remain in existence. Marx realises that Rousseau has correctly understood this aspect of modern society, and quotes Rousseau's description of the political community which 'must take man's

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48 Marx, 'On the Jewish Question', p. 219.

49 Marx, 'On the Jewish Question', p. 221.

own powers away from him and substitute for them alien ones which he can only use with the assistance of others', and glosses this as: 'political emancipation is the reduction of man on the one hand to the member of civil society, the *egoistic*, *independent* individual, and on the other hand to the *citizen*, the moral person.'<sup>50</sup>

This puts a different spin on the history of the development of liberalism which Dean tells, drawing on Foucault. Foucault follows Marx in connecting the arrival of the modern liberal state with the bifurcation between economic man and political man: 'Liberalism acquired its modern shape precisely with the formulation of this essential incompatibility between the non-totalizable multiplicity of economic subjects of interest and the totalizing unity of the juridical sovereign.'<sup>51</sup> Dean errs, however, in interpreting this incompatibility as necessitating temporal succession, in which juridical sovereignty is replaced by economic rationality. On the contrary, as Marx and Foucault both know, the incompatibility of political sovereignty and economic rationality is due to the mutual dependence of the two separate spheres into which modern society carves human life, setting the market to rule over one and the state to rule over the other. This misunderstanding leads Dean to mis-cite Marx to the effect that political economy leads to 'an incapacitating of collective strength, a fragmenting of it into suppositions of individuals already competing and opposed',<sup>52</sup> forgetting that for Marx it is this fragmentation which leads to the political form taken by 'collective strength', the political form of the state.<sup>53</sup> Dean, in other words, is caught in the ideology of the liberal capitalist state because she believes the conceptual polarity of state and economy means that the state can dominate the

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50 Marx, 'On the Jewish Question', p. 234.

51 Foucault, quoted in Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, l. 796.

52 Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, l. 805.

53 Marx, 'On the Jewish Question', p. 233.

economy, when in fact the economy is the presupposition of the state.<sup>54</sup> The idea of popular sovereignty over the economy, that is, depends on the illusory separation of politics from economic, an illusion produced by and central to the distinctive conditions of capitalist society.

To put it another way: austere politics wants to purify politics of any extra-political influence in order to strengthen politics, to make politics capable of asserting collective, popular, control over these extra-political forces. But austere politics has just the opposite effect: the separation of the political from the non-political produces the situation where we are dominated by extra-political forces over which we have no control, and prevents our political concepts from gaining any purchase on these forces. As Marx writes:

The more powerful a state and hence the more *political* a nation, the less inclined it is to explain the *general* principle governing *social* ills and to seek out their causes by looking at the *principle of the state*, i.e. at the *actual organization of society* of which the state is the active, self-conscious and official expression. *Political* understanding is just *political* understanding because its thought does not transcend the limits of politics. The sharper and livelier it is, the more incapable is it of comprehending social problems.<sup>55</sup>

In a sense, this paper has been an extended attempt to make this quotation from Marx plausible. Austere politics is a way of thinking about politics which intentionally cuts politics off from ‘the actual organization of society’, and as a result it is ‘incapable of comprehending social problems’. This is an approach to politics with deep roots in the history of political thought, and it has this extended history because it reflects something real in the history of political development: modern liberal-capitalist society does indeed depend on a process of separation of politics from the

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54 Marx, ‘On the Jewish Question’, p. 222.

55 Karl Marx, ‘Critical Notes on the Article “The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian”’, in *Early writings*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 401–420 (pp. 412–3).

non-political. It is important, however, that political theory understands the historical contingency of this separation rather taking it as a self-evident conceptual starting point. It is especially important that left political theory, which is attempting to think against liberal capitalism, recognises that it cannot do so if it continues to understand politics and the non-political as necessarily distinct.

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