

State of Play.

Play and Game in 20th Century Political Thought.

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Abstract

This dissertation aims to make a contribution to our understanding of the 20th century political theory of play. Particularly in the 20th century, play and game analogies become ever more influential in political theory. I suggest that what unites this ‘turn to play’ is the desire to develop a critique of and also an alternative to traditional models of political authority. In response, this thesis is organised around a comparative reading of four influential accounts of politics as play – which focus on play as a political activity, rather than simply using play as a metaphor for politics. Each account offers important lessons for politics as *play activity* – and taken together they offer a kaleidoscopic perspective on politics as play. However, in presenting these four accounts, the thesis highlights the importance of Johan Huizinga’s conception of politics as play, as a particular engagement with play that remains neglected by political theorists, yet which nevertheless provides vital insight for our understanding of the challenges of 21st century politics.

For Daan, Lois, and Ilya

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This game's over; let the games begin.

Introduction. State of Play.

Play and Game in 20th Century Politics

As recent debates about democratic backsliding, populism and growing social-economic inequality show, contemporary democratic politics is facing heavy weather. Some of these issues – populism¹, social-economic inequality, political polarisation – in part stem from dynamics within the political order, and as such may be redressed in part within the political process. However, other problems, such as the globalisation of financial markets, or climate change, exceed the competence of current political systems, that is to say, the basic set of institutional arrangement to organise public affairs, to deal with them. Furthermore, we also now see external challenges not just to the state but to the scope of the field of politics itself as a site of public deliberation, decision and legislation to organise society along shared, public rules. For example, as Jamie Susskind has recently suggested in his book *Future Politics*, the dissemination of digital technology has all the potential not just to transform the way we do politics, but also to privatise large domains of politics; that is, to shift the debate and decisions about justice, power and freedom from public institutions to third, non-public parties.²

Together, these trends demand not just a serious engagement with strategic questions about what political institutions may address them but also require us to rethink the fundamental

¹ E.g. in his recent book on the subject, Jan-Werner Müller theorises populism as as the perceived democratic but also anti-pluralist uprising against perceived technocratic elites. Jan-Werner Müller (2017). *What is Populism?* London: Penguin Press.

² Jamie Susskind (2018). *Future Politics. Living Together in a World transformed by Tech.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

conceptual and normative questions about what politics is for and what it should be about. Here, with politics I mean the organisation of public life, as well as the controversies and debates about which aspects of life we should and should not regulate collectively. The basic premise is that living together requires not just common institutions, procedures for decision making and modes of deliberation but also common practices to attune social conduct.

Still, contemporary political theory, in its emphasis on struggle on the one hand, and on procedure on the other as two dominant frames in our approach to politics, has tended to neglect the importance of cultivating these common practices in maintaining a mutual political sphere.

A core claim throughout this research, therefore, is the idea that the game, and the activity of playing, offer an important conceptual and normative alternative to these dominant approaches in contemporary political theory. If we make politics more game-like, we might also make it more playful and thereby attain a number of important political objectives: peacefully channelling social competition into pacified, ritualised competition, move beyond the need for sovereign control, and promote public participation and engagement.

Throughout this research the work of Johan Huizinga will both serve as a lens and inspiration for this alternative conception. Already in his 1938 book *Homo Ludens* the Dutch historian suggested that we should consider politics no less than other activities we engage in as play-activity.³ Politics is more than just managing conflict, or a reflection of an underlying economic struggle. Rather, for Huizinga, like other types of play, politics offers a setting that brings players together in a meaningful shared activity. In this case, the organisation, practice and cultivation of a political community in and through its public institutions. Also, politics as play suggests that engagement in political action goes beyond a sense of duty, or pursuit of

³ Johan Huizinga (1950b). *Homo Ludens. Proeve Eener Bepaling Van Het Spelelement Der Cultuur*, in *Verzamelde Werken V*. Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink. Throughout this research I will refer to this Dutch edition of the collected works.

rights. Rather, for Huizinga it also invokes the enjoyment that we may get when we interact with others in the maintenance of public affairs.

The importance of Huizinga's work is not only the initial insight that politics is play but also allows us to situate and re-evaluate his contribution by reconnecting it to a broader 'turn to play' in 20th century political theory I aim to retrace. Huizinga's simple but thought-provoking thesis that politics should be understood as a play-activity in a *literal sense* and not just as helpful comparison allows me to draw out and bring together in this research four ways to rethink politics as play-activity in 20th century politics. This may also help us to examine the importance of play for 21st century politics.

These are: the attempt in game theory and subsequently neoliberalism to rationalise politics through the model of the game (Rational Play); the contrasting reconsideration of politics as the art of association (Aesthetic Play) in Arendt and Gadamer; the game both as a critical model of neoliberal politics – that is, the marketisation of public life - and as a quest for free-play through emancipation from external authority in Derrida and Foucault (Critical Play); and fourth and finally, the importance of cultivating politics as fair play in the work of Johan Huizinga (Cultivating Play). For some of these writers, play and games are central to their work, whereas for others they figure as a revealing aside. Either way, I argue that reading their work in this perspective also opens up their understanding of politics more generally. How have the protagonists of these strands conceptualised play and game in relation to the political realm? What did they hope to achieve by reconsidering politics this way?

As I will suggest a recurring theme throughout these four accounts is the question not just how to avoid social conflict but also to foster new forms of political interaction and participation. The 20th century saw politics frequently turn into a battlefield of ideological confrontation or worse spill over into actual conflict. Moreover, a continuous problem remained the frequently fraught relation between the state, with its central coercive potential and its

citizens. Could there be political alternatives to pacify social conflict without the frequent use of political coercion and domination? In the conclusion I will draw out and bring together what each of these perspectives can teach us about the conditions of contemporary politics. Therefore, I want to argue for the particular relevance of Huizinga's conception of politics, which I call politics as fair play and the broad outlines of which can be found in brief in *Homo Ludens* but which I aim to flesh out here in much greater detail.

Politics as fair play revolves around a number of tenets, which are developed in contrast to the work of the prominent German legal thinker Carl Schmitt, whose work has recently enjoyed a renaissance for its critique of liberal politics.⁴ In contrast to Schmitt's assertion that politics begins with and find its end in the potential for existential conflict, Huizinga singles out politics as *play activity*, which aims at *fair play*, or concern for playing well. Moreover, Huizinga is mindful of the importance to strike a *balance* between competition and performance in order to maintain a common field of politics. The intension to strike this balance anticipates the potential charge of political romanticism, insofar as it does not aim to integrate players into a unified body politic but rather to set the conditions for the cultivation of a mutual practice which allows for a plurality of players. Thus, the introduction of game and play elements into politics is by no means to romanticise politics as Schmitt argues, as I will show in greater detail in the chapter on Huizinga.⁵ Rather, it points to the importance of *cultivating* the conditions of politics as play activity, in and through the introduction into politics of playful elements and actors that are skilled enough to really *play*. Finally, this entails that we reconnect the political realm with other domains of cultural practice; an understanding in marked contrast with

⁴ This entails: i) the systematic publication and discussion of Schmitt's oeuvre in historical context; ii) the renewed reception of a number of his key ideas, such as the notion that all modern political concepts derive from theological ones; and iii) his reintegration into the political canon as a serious critique of liberalism. For a detailed discussion and notes, see chapter four below.

⁵ E.g. Schmitt's critique of the German Romantic writer Adam Müller, who in his *Lehre vom Gegensatz* had sought to overcome the tension between play and seriousness in the realm of politics. Schmitt singled out Müller as a hopeless naive romantic, in his 1924 book *Political Romanticism* (EN transl. Guy Oakes, 1986, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press). I'm grateful to Prof. Krul for raising this point. The argument I seek to develop here suggests that the reconnection of politics to play by no means implies political romanticism.

Schmitt's assertion that politics requires a radically autonomous realm. In contrast, Huizinga warned against the dangers of turning politics into a site of existential struggle and suggests that the cultivation of play both within the political realm as well as the reconnection *of* that realm to other domains of play can help us to do so.

In other words, I suggest that a renewed focus on politics as play may help us to rethink such critical issues as the shift away from sovereignty in modern politics, the importance of participation, as well as the responsibility for the conditions of the political playing field; and moreover, that Huizinga's turn to play offers vital inspiration to do so.

Beyond Everyday Metaphor: the Relevance of Play to Political Theory

Open a newspaper and there will be the obligatory reference to games and play. Recently, politicians of different camps accused each other of 'playing games' over such serious matters as the consequences of Brexit. Former Home Office Minister Penning went one further to suggest that then Prime Minister May was 'playing a game of Russian Roulette with the country'.⁶ We hear about the 'election game' at the heart of democratic politics, which, come election time, requires a 'ground game' by contestants to secure a voting base.⁷ Democratic politics itself is occasionally considered as 'democratic game', to highlight both its competitive nature, as well as the requirement of a shared set of rules to play it well. Similarly – particularly in liberal quarters – we are frequently reminded of the importance of a concern for a 'level playing field'. Still, players engaging with each other, whether in political or economic competition, have the desire to become 'game changers', that is to secure a decisive strategic advantage which potentially transforms the playing-field.⁸

⁶ Daily Telegraph, 19-9-2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2018/09/19/theresa-mays-chequers-dead-dodo-says-mp-helped-get-number/>, last accessed 19-09-2019.

⁷ Joseph Napolitan (1972). *The Election Game and How to Win it*. New York: Double Day.

⁸ As the authors of a Washington Post article on Hungary suggest: 'The story in Hungary shows a far more subtle erosion of democracy — one where politicians took advantage of transitory control of the legislature to rewrite the

Beyond such everyday uses, game and play also have become important political analogies. For instance, central to Douglas North's highly influential (and subsequently Nobel Prize winning) neo-institutional approach to explaining political economic interaction is the notion of institutions as 'rules of the game', which both open up and limit the possible interactions between strategic players.⁹ Similarly, Joseph Schumpeter understood democracy primarily in terms of electoral competition between elites, though he also noted that 'democracy cannot be expected to function satisfactorily unless the vast majority of the people in all classes are resolved to abide by the rules of the democratic game and that this in turn implies that they are substantially agreed on the fundamentals of their institutional structure.'¹⁰ Indeed, such was the confidence in democracy during the so-called Third Wave of Democratisation in the wake of the Cold War, that for many democracy had become 'the only game in town'. The notion, popularised by Linz and Stepan, identifies the conditions for democratic consolidation: widespread popular support for democratic procedure, political recognition of the electoral process, and finally, lack of serious competition from rival alternatives.¹¹

What all these uses of the game analogy share is that they primarily understand the political game as a setting for the regulation of a complex, value-plural social order, and consider the rules of the game as the shared procedural rules for its smooth functioning. The political game works as long as its participants accept these basic rules. Indeed, it is easy to see in the game an attractive metaphor to identify the competitive, strategic but also the performative dimensions of contemporary politics. However, what has all but dropped out is the *activity of play* that make the game of politics possible. Also, it neglects the value players

rules of the political game.' Washington Post, 08-04-2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/04/08/hungarians-vote-today-but-are-voters-enough-to-protect-democracy/>, last accessed 19-9-2019.

⁹ Douglas North (1990). 'Chapter 1: An introduction to institutions and institutional change', in *Institutions, Institutional Change, and Economic Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 3-10.

¹⁰ Joseph A. Schumpeter (1994). *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, Intr. Richard Swedberg. London/NY: Routledge. p301.

¹¹ J.J. J. Linz. & A.C. Stepan (1996). 'Toward Consolidated Democracies', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 7(2): pp. 14-33.

may attach to the participation with each other in this activity. In other words, whereas initially the references to political games suggest interaction, they actually reflect a broader problematic focus in contemporary politics on mechanisms, regulations and procedural rules. Of course, political institutions and regulations are important but our study of them should never obscure, nor replace, our interest in the actual activity they facilitate.

In this research I develop the claim that beyond convenient metaphor or trope, the game is also an important normative model to rethink the playing of politics beyond the focus on conflict and central authority. By contrast, in concentrating on the activity of play *within* the political game, we can also reconsider the playful dimensions *of* politics, a view with widespread implications for our understanding of 21st century politics.

In short, the story I want to develop is that we move beyond the dominance of play and game as metaphor and expedient analogy, towards an understanding of politics as play-activity. Huizinga serves both as a source of inspiration and as interlocutor in order to retrace 20th century political theory through the perspective of politics as play. This opens up four approaches, all of which seek to develop playful alternatives to the dominant paradigm of politics as sovereignty. The focus on politics as play-activity may also help us to retrieve and explore a middle ground between the dominance of overly rationalist accounts in contemporary politics on the one hand, and agonist struggle-orientated conceptions of politics on the other. Agonists are right to point out that rationalist, consensus-orientated politics neglect power, hierarchy and conflict and put too great emphasis on and trust in procedural ‘rules of the game’. However, I suggest that the ideal of agonism – peaceful contestation of political views – *itself* requires robust commitment and cultivation of a shared playing field and play ethos, which must be practiced in and through the political activity of play. The (re)turn to Huizinga’s model of Cultivating Play, then, may help us to explore these commitments in more detail. Here, *fair*

play takes on a new significance, because we move from an emphasis on agreement on rules towards an expression of a mutual practice cultivated in everyday interaction.

Combined, the ‘turn to play’ in politics argued for in this research has a threefold relevance. First, to offer a lens to *revisit* a relatively neglected dimension of 20th century political theory. Second, to help us *rethink* politics away from the game as instrumental setting, towards a more expansive play-activity. Finally, the study of politics as play may also help to identify what can promote and sustain the *practice* of this activity in 21st century politics.

In the remainder of this introduction I develop the foundations for the subsequent chapters by answering a number of preliminary questions. In the following section I consider the question what are games and what features make them attractive politically? Afterwards, I will sketch the broader historical context of this research by considering the question when and how did we start treating politics as a game. In the final section I offer an analytical breakdown of the chapter outline of this dissertation.

Politics as Play and Game: A Conceptual Overview

If we want to understand politics as play-activity, it is important first to consider briefly what we mean by such everyday terms as play and games. This will help us to make the transition towards *politics* as play and game below.

What is a game? The answer is surprisingly difficult and subject to heated theoretical debate. One prominent defender of the game in modern philosophy – Ludwig Wittgenstein – even held that it is neither possible nor necessary to offer a definition. Impossible, because no definition would cover the variety of game types; and unnecessary because most of us know perfectly well from experience what is meant by a game.¹² Regardless, Wittgenstein’s

¹² Ludwig Wittgenstein (2009). *Philosophical Investigations*. Revised 4th Edition. Edit. P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell. E.g. par 7, 22, 26.

overarching point in referring to the game is that in language as with any social practice – understanding does not revolve around giving definitions but entails the ability to engage meaningfully in a mutual practice. And, as Wittgenstein holds, this is equally true for the way we understand and use the term game (*Spiel*) itself. For Wittgenstein then, the reference to the ‘game’ was to invoke a context of meaning that is expressed in and through a mutual social practice.

Still, others have protested that it is perfectly possible to describe what a game is. I suggest if we want to understand the attraction of the game as a normative model for politics, it is helpful to identify a number of recurring game features. First of all, games are generally understood as a type of *fun social activity* we engage in for the enjoyment of interaction with others they offer. Moreover, games set basic *rules* about the goals of the activity as well as the permissible strategies in attaining them. Bernard Suits has helpfully suggested that part of the attraction of playing is precisely in the enjoyment of overcoming self-imposed obstacles: a game without limits would neither be possible nor very enjoyable to play.¹³ Games may be cooperative or competitive and when they are the latter, they offer the excitements of ‘mock’ battles; either way this competition is both limited and made possible by the rules of play. Finally, playing a game means to take on a *play attitude*: the game commences only when and to the degree that we as players accept the shared rules and objectives of the game, as well as our fellow-players who also partake in it. The play attitude is important because in adopting it, we come to care not just about the outcome but also about how the game is played.

We talk about playing games. However, in English *play* is also used in a more expansive sense, namely that of creative self-expression (and enjoyment of the pursuit of higher order human capacities more generally). This raises the question what is the relation between games

¹³ Bernard Suits (2001). *The Grashopper. Games, Life, and Utopia*. 3rd Edit. Introd. Thomas Hurka. Peterborough: Broadview Press. p39; Robert E. Innis (2001). 'Philosophy and the Play of Life', *Focaal: European Journal of Anthropology* 37: pp.121-142.

and play? Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* offers an interesting suggestion. Whereas we tend to think about games as trivial social pursuits that take place to relieve daily routines, for Huizinga the heightened experience of game-playing indicates that they are manifestations of a broader human capacity to *play*.¹⁴ One recurring idea of play is that involves the performance and celebration of human excellence as an intrinsic good.¹⁵ For instance, in his *Aesthetic Letters*, the German playwright Friedrich Schiller suggested that that we are most human when we are at play.¹⁶ With this he meant that in and through play we realise our capacity for creative self-expression. Particularly in modern philosophy play is frequently connected to the arts, as the exemplary domain of human expression.¹⁷ However, as I will examine in more detail in chapter Four, Huizinga argues that play is the driving force behind a wide variety of cultural practices, from legislation, to politics and the arts. And moreover, beyond the pursuit of individual goals, for him play first and foremost centres on the celebration of human communities in and through the cultural practices they've developed, and which may take the form of games, rituals, or performances. In other words, for Huizinga not only is play-activity a driver in the production of culture, a community also finds its best *expression* in and through its play-activities and their products.

Following Huizinga and Suits, here I suggest that one way to relate games and play is that games are a specific kind of play but that 'play' refers more to the shared performance of an activity, whereas the game refers more to the setting which makes possible and facilitates this activity. Games typically refer to the regulatory frameworks that structure a type of activity 'playing', which resolves around the enjoyment of self-imposed obstacles and requires us to take on a play-attitude and frequently takes place beyond the strictures and requirements of

¹⁴ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, Chapter 1. pp. 28-55.

¹⁵ Thomas S. Hendricks (2015). *Play and the Human Condition*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

¹⁶ Friedrich Schiller (2016). *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. London: Penguin. E.g. Letter 15.

¹⁷ Ingeborg Heidemann (1968). *Der Begriff des Spieles und das Ästhetische Weltbild in der Philosophie der Gegenwart*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

everyday life. Play, on the other hand, refers to the enjoyment and expression of excellence in human skill and capacities as an intrinsic good, that is, insofar as we pursue them beyond purely functional goals. Games offer settings for the pursuit of play and structure the performance, because they offer platforms for the mutual enjoyment of facility in practice, but play can also express itself through other creative-expressive practices, such as the arts.

Other writers such as Roger Caillois, and more recently Jesper Juul have sought to develop Huizinga's broad distinction between play/game and playful/earnest into a typology of play.¹⁸ Caillois for instance distinguished between structured ('ludic') and more free, open-ended ('paidia') conceptions of play. The anthropologist Victor Turner has similarly distinguished between 'liminal' and 'liminoid' play-activities.¹⁹ The former denote play as the ritualisation of threshold experiences (such as cultural rites de passage), which follow a careful script of separation, initiation, and subsequently integration into the community. Building on Huizinga, Turner identifies how such rituals are carefully scripted and synthesise agonist and representational dimensions of play as culture. Where liminal play the type of ritual, scripted communal activity, liminoid play is more individual, self-expressive and need not follow an inherited ritualised script (a movement he for instance sees in the shift from ritualist culture to modern theatre). Juul has distinguished between more game-centered, and more player-centered approaches. Whereas the latter aim at 'submission' or enabling 'constrained freedom', player centered approaches revolve around 'subversion' and 'creation'.

These distinctions are helpful because they integrate debates about play in broader discussions about culture, political economy, and modern politics. From the viewpoint of *culture*, with Huizinga we can examine if modern society indeed sees the shift towards new play-forms as drivers of cultural innovation. For instance, that modern society revolves less

¹⁸ Roger Caillois (1961). *Man, Play, Games*. New York: Free Press.; Jesper Juul (2016). 'Playing', in Henry Lowood and Raiford Guins, Eds. (2016). *Debugging Game History - A Critical Lexicon*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2016. pp. 351-358.

¹⁹ Victor Turner (1982). *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: PAJ Publications.

around ludic, structured performances that seek to harmonise social distinctions into a comprehensive order and more around self-expressive, open-ended forms of play. From the perspective of *political economy* we consider how play and games are central to many aspects of modern social life, yet are at the same increasingly integrated into the productive economy (e.g. consider professional sports, and the trend of gamification, that is, the use of game design for non-game purposes as I discuss below in chapter 1).

However, what features could make both terms attractive from a *political* perspective? First, they allow us to ‘politicise’ play. This means that on the one hand we should treat play-activity not (merely) as an autonomous domain of culture but one already wound up with other aspects of social life and hence subject to issues of conformity and contestation, authority and obedience. However, if politics is playful this also allows us to explore what types of play and game are appropriate to the political realm.

One of the ideas I want to explore in this research is that the fascination with play and game in modern politics is no coincidence but rather reveals an important contemporary attitude towards and conception of politics. I suggest that particularly in 20th century political theory, the game becomes an influential, if often pervasive, normative model to recast politics beyond the modern limits of authority, conflict and power as central issues in political life.²⁰ If we could make politics more like a game, we might also make it more participatory, more playful and thereby at once less prone to serious social conflict and sovereign control and more engaging as an activity to partake in.

The attraction of the game is twofold. It stems in part from the fact that it offers a model of social order that is dynamic, yet orderly without the requirement of top-down control. Moreover, to reconsider politics as a game also shifts away the emphasis from two dominant instrumental conceptions of politics: that as a mechanism to distribute power on the one hand,

²⁰ E.g. Jörg Neuenfeld (2005). *Alles ist Spiel: Zur Geschichte der Auseinandersetzung mit einer Utopie der Moderne*. Würzburg: Königshausen u. Neumann..

and as the promotion of social welfare on the other. Whereas, both these functions are outcome-orientated, to think about politics as play is to put back the focus on the meaning of political activity as a mode of creating, fostering and maintaining meaningful engagement between the variety of members that make up a political community. By way of example: democracy is frequently understood as the game-like competition for office through the electoral process to distribute offices. However, we can also see this ‘election game’ as an example of play, a ‘life form’ that is both aesthetic and ethical, insofar as it aims at cultivating a mutual commitment to the practice of equality. More generally, we can make the argument that in modern politics we make the transition from a politics which aims at the ludic ritual performance of a shared order towards a game with an agonist character, which acts as an enabling constraint to make possible an activity with a competitive character.

To consider politics as a game also implies the possibility of winners and losers. Yet, at the same time this focus also allows us to rethink how to offer the latter a legitimate place within the political order; moreover, beyond a focus on mechanism and setting, the activity of playing allows us to identify the importance of cultivating common practices between winners and losers within the shared setting of the political order. Similarly, to consider politics in terms of the game is not to trivialise political activity, or lower the stakes. Rather, it is to explore how politics can be a fully ‘serious’ activity with important consequences on the one hand, and maintain priority on the other of the fact that ultimately politics is about structuring and facilitating relations between players.

Game and Play in the History of Politics

When did we start to treat politics as a game? Although throughout this research the emphasis will be on the 20th century, it is possible to identify a number of precursors, whose ideas on the relation between play, game and politics have influenced 20th century thinking on politics as

play-activity.²¹ Some of the ancient Greek philosophers discuss explicitly politics in relation to play. For instance, Heraclitus, whose ideas inspired the young Nietzsche to develop his own philosophy of play as I discuss below, already develops what we might call a metaphysics of play.²² That is, a theory of social reality that puts play centre stage. This perspective understands the production of (social) reality as a field of opposing and frequently competing forces. As Heraclitus' famous *Fragment 52* suggests, the universe (or 'life cycle') is the dynamic, ever-shifting order which resembles the 'a child playing, playing checkers; the kingdom belongs to a child.'²³

Subsequently Plato, too, who in many ways reacted against this conception of a dynamic, emergent reality, interestingly also developed a link between politics and play, particularly in his dialogue *The Laws*.²⁴ There, play understood as performance in the service of the divine becomes the ultimate purpose of the political order and humans become 'playthings' in the hands of divinity. Plato's influence would have a remarkably long afterlife in the Renaissance humanist pursuit of *serio ludere*, that is serious play, or the pursuit of

²¹ For historical treatments of play reception, see e.g. Stefan Matuschek (1998). *Literarische Spieltheorie: Von Petrarca Bis Zu Den Brüdern Schlegel*. Heidelberg: C. Winter Verlag; Marcus Sandl (2014). 'Homo Ludens: Überlegungen zur Historischen Anthropologie des Spiels', *IASL*, Vol. 39(2): pp 404–42. Mechthild Nagel offers a more critical genealogy in Mechthild Nagel (2002). *Masking the Abject: A Genealogy of Play*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

²² E.g. Mihai Spariosu (1989). 'Preface: Play, Power and the Western Mentality', in *Dionysus Reborn. Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse*. Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press. pp. 1-28.

²³ 'Fragment B52', in Patricia Curd, Ed. (2011). *A Presocratics Reader*, 2nd Edition. Introd. Patricia Curd, Trans. Richard D. McKiraharan & Patricia Curd. Indianapolis/London: Hackett.

Compare, Nietzsche Par. 7: 'Ein Werden und Vergehen, ein Bauen und Zerstören, ohne jede moralische Zurechnung, in ewig gleicher Unschuld, hat in dieser Welt allein das Spiel des Künstlers und des Kindes. Und so, wie das Kind und der Künstler spielt, spielt das ewig lebendige Feuer, baut auf und zerstört, in Unschuld — und dieses Spiel spielt der Aeon mit sich.' Friedrich Nietzsche (2009). *Die Philosophie im tragischen Zeitalter der Zeit der Griechen*. Digitale Kritische Edition, Edit. Giorgio Colli & Massimo Montinari. Berlin/New York, Walter de Gruyter.

<http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/PHG>, last accessed 15-09-2019.

²⁴ Plato (2016). 'Book 7', in *The Laws*. Trans. Tom Griffith, Edit. Malcolm Schofield. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; d'Angour, Armand (2013). 'Plato and Play: Taking Education Seriously in Ancient Greece' *American Journal of Play*, Vol. 5(3): pp. 293-307.

knowledge through the playful spirit of inquiry, frequently in the form of literary games, full of allusive meanings understood only to insiders.²⁵

Similarly, there is a longstanding reflection on the pedagogical and political relevance of play and game activities for the education of children into responsible political adults, a theme we already find discussed in Plato's *Republic* as well as in Aristotle's *Politics*.²⁶ Indeed, the use of public rituals, spectacle and 'sacred games' are proverbially as old as (political) time. In other words, play is neither new nor restricted to 'modern' political theory. However, it is one way to argue for the importance of games as expedient to public loyalty, it is another to consider the political realm *itself* as a game. How can we make sense of this shift? In the following I want to highlight briefly a number of conceptual, intellectual and political changes that have shaped our more recent understanding of politics as a game.

Autonomy and Contingency: Political Games of Chance

One way to consider what makes the figure of the game increasingly relevant for *politics* in modern political experience is the emphasis on human plurality and ongoing competition as a result of a number of important early-modern political rifts: the Reformation – which introduced a basic split within Latin Christianity – and subsequently the European wars of religion, as well as a succession of civil wars. This raised a basic question how to mitigate the real potential for conflict by keeping the competitive urges at bay. In other words, it identified a political need to find mechanisms – if only of human design – that might help to resolve conflict, whilst

²⁵ E.g. for an excellent treatment of the importance of 'Serio Ludere' in Renaissance literature, see: Harry Berger, Jr. (1988). *Second World and Green World: Studies in Renaissance Fiction-Making*, introduction John Patrick Lynch. Berkeley: University of California Press. pp. 218-224.

²⁶ We also find the republican motif that games can instill patriotic virtues in children revisited in Rousseau's *Considerations on the Government of Poland*: 'By what means, then, are we to move men's hearts and bring them to love their fatherland and its laws? Dare I say it? Through the games they play as children, through institutions that, though a superficial man would deem them pointless, develop habits that abide and attachments that nothing can dissolve.', in Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1985). *The Government of Poland*. Trans. and Edited, Introd. Willmoore Kendall. Indianapolis/London: Hackett. p4.

acknowledging that humans might have a propensity after all for natural coexistence but require political institutions to regulate their conduct.

The important point here is that what gradually emerges in early modern thinking is a sense of politics as an autonomous field of social action – separate from morality and theology – with its own rules and dynamic, and one moreover that is guided by contingency and chance, as much as by strict rules and foreseeable outcomes. As Machiavelli already indicates clearly, it requires strategy, or the determination of a plan of action that explicitly takes into account the political aims of competitors. It can be argued that the paradigm of sovereignty is a response to the autonomy and contingency of the political playing field and thereby to take back control by squashing competition and enforcing social conformity. Essentially, sovereign politics entails the rationalised organisation of the state through the exclusive hierarchical rule of a singular authority over his subjects. Conceptually and normatively, this would also allow for enforcement of shared rules of conduct in order to facilitate a common public life, as writers such as Bodin and Hobbes attest. However, social harmony at home frequently only sparked more intense competition abroad; and here, political schemers would easily change alliances to secure their own political objectives. As the Ambassador Feuquières, servant to the French crown during the Thirty Years War noted about the diplomatic skills of his adversary Wallenstein during the Summer of 1633: ‘His game is too subtle for me’. Indeed, the game was so subtle that shortly thereafter the German kingmaker found himself assassinated on the instructions of his own master Ferdinand.²⁷

Parallel to this dynamisation and (contested) autonomisation of the political realm, in mathematics the study of games of chance drives innovation in probability theory. As told by Ian Hacking and others, the field of probability emerged from the analysis of games of chance in the 16th and 17th centuries, with important breakthroughs made by thinkers such as Huygens

²⁷ Geoffrey Parker (1979). *Europe in Crisis 1598-1648*. Fontana History of Europe. London: Fontana. p230.

and Pascal.²⁸ Essentially, it involved the reconsideration of chance as randomness into the quantifiable likelihood of probability. This not only opened up the game of chance to mathematical analysis but also suggested that random processes may have underlying statistical patterns, which could be calculated. This fascinating conceptual breakthrough follows from the initially mundane problem of ‘how to divide the stakes’ in an unfinished game of dice. The new mathematics of probability not only suggested that the problem could be treated rationally but also that a single, compelling and hence acceptable (fair) answer could be calculated. Beyond pastime activity, Huygens already inferred that this type of study could be broadened – e.g. that other issues could be treated like games of chance.²⁹

The broader relevance of this insight is that through probability theory the game becomes a model for a dynamic social pattern which, rather than obeying a deterministic logic, can be understood in terms of probabilistic frequencies. Moreover, also it opened up the suggestion that society itself could be understood in terms of underlying quantifiable patterns, much like the closed-off setting of the game of chance. This in turn opens up the political field (as well as the economic process) for control through risk management: positively in the form of investment for profit, negatively in the form of insurance, or the protection against adverse risk. Taleb has recently termed this basic belief in the analogy between games of chance and social behaviour the ‘ludic fallacy’, because it presumes the exhaustive probabilistic distribution of such games that is lacking in complex social behaviour.³⁰ Still, as I will develop briefly below and we will see in more detail in chapter One, the analysis of politics as a game of strategy is central to the influential Game Theoretical Approach to social behaviour.

²⁸ Ian Hacking (2006). *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction and Statistical Inference*, 2nd Edit. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²⁹ Anders Hald (1990). *A History of Probability and Statistics and their Applications before 1750*. Oxford: Wiley & Sons. p65.

³⁰ Nassim Taleb (2007). *The Black Swan*. New York: Random House. p309.

Changing the Rules of Play, Activating Players

Whereas the sovereign paradigm aims to maintain social harmony by reigning in competition, early adherents of political liberalism combine a scepticism of enforcing substantive conceptions of the good, with a positive emphasis on the (potential) benefits of play elements like competition and contest, and more generally of self-direction through shared conventions. One such example is in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. There, through his well-known example of the chess-master, Smith argues it is both undesirable and unpractical for a single ruler to control all of society:

He seems to imagine that he can arrange the members of a great society as easily as a hand arranges the pieces on a chess-board! He forgets that the chessmen's only source of motion is what the hand impresses on them, whereas in the great chess-board of human society every single piece has its own private source of motion, quite different from anything that the legislature might choose to impress on it. If those two sources coincide and act in the same direction, the game of human society will go on easily and harmoniously, and is likely to be happy and successful. If they are opposite or different, the game will go on miserably and the society will be in the highest degree of disorder all the time.³¹

Here, the explicit use of the figure of the 'game of human society' zones in on two of the core tenets of liberal political theory: it offers a critique of unchecked central government on the one hand, and develops an estimation of the virtues of individual initiative by members of the general public on the other. The comparison is also meant to underscore the dynamism of modern society, as well as the notion that our combined self-directed actions, even if not centrally commanded are still generative of social order.

This idea was subsequently further developed in Kant's liberalism. The importance of play in the work of Kant is generally acknowledged, particularly in relation to his aesthetics.³²

³¹ Adam Smith (1976). *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Eds. D. D. Raphael, and A. L. and Macfie. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p244.

³² E.g. Alexander Aichele (2000). 'III Spiel als Erkenntnisgrund: Zum Spielbegriff in Kants *Kritik der Urteilskraft*', in *Philosophie als Spiel: Platon, Kant, Nietzsche*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag. pp.77-108; Ingeborg Heidemann (1968). *Der Begriff des Spieles und das Ästhetische Weltbild in der Philosophie der Gegenwart*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

In Kantian aesthetics, play refers to the interaction between our reason and imagination, which not only makes possible a dynamic, unified experience of the world around us but also allows us to share and interact in it with others. We will find in the next section below and in greater detail in chapter Two, that Arendt drew on this idea to develop her own aesthetic approach to politics as an art of association with a particular role for our capacity to taste.

Noted and commented upon less frequently, is the role of play and games (both denoted by *Spiel* in German) in Kant's later political writings. In his 1784 *Cosmopolitan History* Kant identifies how the mechanism of the 'free play of human freedom' and the frequent antagonism of human motives actually generate progressive social institutions (an early version of the liberal adage that 'competition begets progress').³³ Similarly, in the *Contest of the Faculties* he discusses the historical importance of the French Revolution as a 'game of revolutions.'³⁴ In both cases only serious study (by a 'philosophical' spectator who investigates the causes behind events) can reveal what the players involved miss: the true meaning of their actions within the wider context of history as development. But this tells only half the story. For, it is during this same 'game of revolutions', as Kant calls it that people become aware of the confrontation between principal alternative normative models of government, even if those caught up in the game might fail to notice. Kant rejected the violent outbursts of the French Revolution but still believed in the dialectic significance of bringing the ideal of republican equality into the open. Similarly, the central objective of Kantian politics is neither to curtail the 'free play of human freedoms', nor to stifle competition. Reversely, its central aspiration is to channel these forces to productive purposes: to offer direction to this 'free play' by giving it substance through the ideal of autonomy, or meaningful self-direction. Here, the rational capacity for self-legislation is important but remains a preliminary for the actual goal of the mutual practice of freedom

³³ Immanuel Kant (1991). 'Idea for Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective', in *Kant: Political Writings*. Edit. Hans Reiss, Trans. H.B Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 41-53. p52.

³⁴ Ibid. (1979). *The Conflict of Faculties. Streit der Facultäten* (bilingual edition). Trans. and Intr. Mary J. McGregor. Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press. p153.

between emancipated players. The political goal here is not just to rethink the nature of political legitimacy ('the rules of the game') but also thereby to transform the docile subject into an engaging, participating *player*.

If this political game may not be the goal of human development, it surely becomes a central requirement for the full maturation of our individual potential to flourish. Thus, in a widely influential text in Continental liberalism *The Limits of State Action* (parts of which were first published in 1792, with the Revolution still in full force; the full manuscript first available mid-19th century), the German statesman, scientist and philosopher Humboldt similarly argues that the goal of government is to regulate but not to control the 'free play of forces' (*freie Spiel der Kräfte*), since the state cannot decide what is good for each but can create the environment wherein each of us can pursue their own goals.³⁵ In doing so, Humboldt refers to and further popularises into political usage a concept already used by Kant and others, namely that of the 'free play of forces' in the production of social order.³⁶

Yet, we find arguably the most direct link between human excellence and play in Schiller's *Aesthetic Letters* (1794). For Schiller play becomes a central driver of autonomous human development. Not only does Schiller in his letters develop and extend the Kantian concern with freedom as autonomy (or, literally: *self-legislation*) he also argues that this finds its fullest manifestation in and through play.³⁷ As such, for him creative self-expression becomes the central goal of life, and play the mode proper of its articulation. Schiller's emphasis on the relation between play, autonomy and self-expression also underscores what has become a recurring concern in play scholarship: that we share meaningful understanding of the world in and through the activity of play; indeed, that we 'exist insofar as we play'.

³⁵ Wilhelm von Humboldt (1969). *The Limits of State Action*. Edit. and Introd.. J.W.Burrow. London: Cambridge University Press.

³⁶ E.g. Bendixen develops traces the importance of the idea of the 'free play of forces' in the liberal theory of the market, in Peter Bendixen (2009). 'Der Eingebildete Markt und das Freie Spiel der Kräfte' in *Die Unsichtbare Hand: Die Freiheit unter der Markt*. Wien: Lit Verlag. pp. 79-134.

³⁷ Friedrich Schiller, *Aesthetic Education*.

As such, references to play [Spiel] abound in Schiller's *Aesthetic Letters*. In a Kantian sense, play (or 'the play drive', as Schiller calls it) offers a synthesising capacity to mediate between subjective experience on the one hand, and nature on the other; and gives meaning to both.³⁸ Yet, it is important to keep in mind that, signalling his frustration with the violent turn of French Revolution, Schiller develops his conception of play largely in opposition to and beyond the political realm. Instead, play refers to the domain of individual autonomy, as well as the pursuit of human excellence through artistic creation. Politics and the law, on the other hand remain the domain of force and the necessity of universal rules:

If in the *dynamic* state of rights one man encounters another as force, and limits his impact, and if he encounters another in the *ethical* state of obligation and opposes him with the majesty of the law and curbs his desire, then where conduct is governed by beauty, in the *aesthetic* state, he may appear to the other only as a figure, only as the object of free play. The basic law of this realm is to give freedom by means of freedom.³⁹

Still, as we will see in chapter Two, aspects of this strand of thought, which highlights play as an expression of a human capacity to the mutual enjoyment in the pursuit of a human capacity to creative self-expression, will also inform *political* thinkers such as Hannah Arendt and Hans-Georg Gadamer.

Critical Games: Nietzsche's Playful Attack on Authority

We find an even more radical reworking of the relation between autonomy, authority and game-playing in Nietzsche. Here the aim of the game is to release the individual from the conformist values of (bourgeois) society. Thus, for Nietzsche the game, as a setting of multiple possible outcomes becomes a strategy to undermine claims to necessity and to authority, both of which he saw as central to the tradition of western philosophy. For him, this had not only fostered a

³⁸ E.g. Ingeborg Heidemann (1968). *Der Begriff des Spieles und das Ästhetische Weltbild in der Philosophie der Gegenwart*, p10; Stefan Matuschek (1998). *Literarische Spieltheorie*.

³⁹ Friedrich Schiller, *Aesthetic Education*. Letter 27.

dangerous desire for control but at the same time had led to a culture of self-rejection which he sought to overcome.

Consequently, Nietzsche's work is rife with play and game (*Spiel*) references.⁴⁰ This synthesises in a 'playful' strand in his thinking, which will become an important source of inspiration for the approach to 'critical play' in 20th century political theory I will discuss in chapter Three, a critical examination of Nietzsche's play-thinking in the work of Derrida and Foucault.

A recurring theme of Nietzsche's thinking is that modern political order relies on a neglect and rejection of the agonistic, competitive basis for a thriving culture.⁴¹ This breeds a culture of resentment that exists in a perennial state of tension in between the norm of equality and practical social inequality. The problem with such a culture is that the desire to smoothen out all social tension and inequality not only diminishes its excellence, but also finds itself ill-prepared for the consequences of social distinction. In contrast, Nietzsche aims to develop a 'philosophy of play', that is, an approach to life which shuns external constraints in favour of an existence as self-expression. We shape our life in playful accordance with self-set standards and the elevation of the idea that reality develops through struggle, not beyond it. As he puts it momentarily in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

We have to test ourselves to see whether we are destined for independence and command, and we have to do it at the right time. We should not sidestep our tests, even though they may well be the most dangerous game we can play, and, in the last analysis, can be witnessed by no judge other than ourselves.⁴²

It is the vision of life as an artistic project of self-expression, the goal of which is to play well and to do so by one's own rules – for 'life to be a proper spectacle, its play must be well-played;

⁴⁰ For a systematic overview of play (*Spiel*) in Nietzsche, see Alexander Aichele (2000), Chapter 4 in *Philosophie als Spiel: Platon Kant Nietzsche*.

⁴¹ For a recent treatment of agonism in Nietzsche, see: Vanessa Lemm (2015). 'Nietzsche's Agon for Politics?' *Contemporary Political Theory*, Vol. 14 (1): pp. 12-17.

⁴² Friedrich Nietzsche (2002). *Beyond Good and Evil*. Trans. Judith Norman, Edit. Rolf-Peter Horstmann. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p39 (par 42).

but for this good play actors are needed'⁴³. Still, as we will see below, this individualist 'aristocratic' emphasis on self-reliance exists in a state of tension with the pursuit of social justice.

A Chapter Outline: 20th Century Politics, Beyond Power Play?

Although this remains a short outline, I would like to draw together a few historical connections between play, game and politics that have shaped in part our current understanding of their relation.

First, we see a change in the dimensions and scope of the political realm: a widening and broadening of the political playing field. This corresponds with the emergence of politics as self-standing dynamic field of social action. Although initially, politics is not considered in terms of the game, it follows a similar basic outline: regulated, yet open-ended, with players, strategy and luck determining political outcomes. Here, the political field corresponds to a game, or a model of dynamic, regulated but undetermined social order.

Second, the rules of play: not only has modern political theory a central concern with legitimacy, but it also considers legitimacy in terms of consent and participation. Similarly, rules of play both regulate but also make possible meaningful political interaction and channel social tension into ritual competition.

Thirdly, we see the gradual shift of subjects into social players: or, agents whose status is not determined but who rather engage and participate in the political process.

Finally, if we approach society as a game, we can consider how the human conventions that are frequently elevated to the status of inevitable truths and how they shape our daily conduct, are central in the production of social order. However, since such conventions are

⁴³ Ibid. (2006). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra. A Book for All and None*. Trans. Adrian del Caro, Edit. Adrian del Caro, and Robbert Pippin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p113.

subject to change, this means that the way we organise society is not set in stone but rather subject to human design and revision. This puts in focus the notion of the game as a set of human social conventions subject to change. Similarly, it allows for the possibility that to become an autonomous player means to identify one's own goals and follow one's own rules of play.

In the following, I discuss how I trace and develop these concerns in relation to the 20th century 'turn to play' for each of the four approaches already mentioned above: rational, aesthetic, critical and cultivating play.

Rational Play: Rationalising the Political Game

In chapter One (Rational Play) I analyse how during the 20th century the model of the game comes to play a central role in trying to answer this question and do so through the examination of two attempts to rationalise politics through the game. What if we can rationalise politics and thereby overcome the perennial problem of social conflict? This has been an important impetus of modern political science ever since Hobbes. If only we find the rational explanations for why political agents behave the way they do and how political order comes about, we can hope to avoid the traditional cycle of conflict and scarcity. Initially, we find the game as an explanatory tool in game theory. There, the game is an analytical model of the strategic interactive decisions rational players who have to take into account other players' decisions in the pursuit of practical goals.⁴⁴ The idea was that through the systematic analysis of such competitive choice-situations, drawing on statistical analysis and decision theory, policy makers could make rationally informed decisions in complex situations, ranging from corporate strategy to geopolitical nuclear conflict. Indeed, game theory became an important influence on US thermonuclear

⁴⁴ Robert Aumann (1987). 'Game Theory', in *The New Palgrave, A Dictionary of Economics*, Vol 2, Edit. J. Eatwell, M. Milgate, and P. Newman. London/Basingstoke: MacMillan. pp.460-482; Kenneth Binmore (1994). *Game Theory and the Social Contract, Volume 1: Playing Fair*. Boston: MIT Press.

strategy, as we will find it explained in the work of one its luminaries, the later Nobel laureate Thomas Schelling.⁴⁵ However, I will suggest that beyond explanatory tool, the game also offers a *normative* model to make politics more game-like: to transform a setting of frequent conflict into a pacified setting of ritualised competition. If only we can rationalise their conduct, we can turn existential adversaries into rational competitors who remain within the stable limits of the political playing field.

Still, as I suggest from the 1970s onwards, game theory is partially replaced by an even more radical attempt to turn all of society into a game: the neoliberal critique of politics. Whereas game theory remains focused on state power, I suggest that the full sway of the neoliberal project becomes clear when we see it as an attempt to liberate the individual – and her rational capacity to make personal choices about the good life – from the constraints of centralised state authority. Instead, the neoliberal aim is to transform society into a playing field, and the passive subject-citizen into an active player in pursuit of play, who can develop their full human potential in and through the competitive social game with others. However, as I will conclude, the rational attempt to liberate politics from conflict (game theory), or the individual from state interference (neoliberalism) also imposes new binding constraints that expose the limits of the project to turn politics into a rational game. I situate these conclusions within the recent trend of ‘gamification’, on the pervasive trend to draw on aspects of (video) game design to stimulate behavioural change.⁴⁶

Aesthetic Play: Retrieving Politics as Art of Association

In chapter Two (Aesthetic Play) I shift my attention to what I will call the viewpoint of Aesthetic Play, which I trace it in the work of Hannah Arendt and Georg-Gadamer. Both develop not only a critique the negative effects of political rationalism but also seek to retrieve an idea of politics

⁴⁵ Thomas C. Schelling (2006). *Micromotives and Macrobehavior*. London/NY: W.W. Norton.

⁴⁶ For notes and discussion, see par. 1.4.

as meaningful public activity beyond the exercise of state sovereignty. Initially, aesthetics refers to the realm of artistic expression and the faculty of taste, i.e. the capacity to discriminate between and select from alternatives. However, it also comes to mean the human capacity for meaningful coordinated expression, not only in the realm of the arts but as a feature of all human conduct in general. Or, to put it differently, how symbols, rituals and cultural practices open up the world as a meaningful realm for us to coinhabit. For Arendt, this means to rethink politics as an art of association. Rather than merely solving conflicts, or distributing welfare, ultimately politics is the pursuit of a shared way of life, in this case the mutual practice of the capacity for freedom.⁴⁷ However, as she puts it in a revealing passage invoking the game, paradoxically, this means we should also accept the rules of the game of life as they have largely been passed from generation to another.⁴⁸

Although more a cultural philosopher than a political theorist, Gadamer too, draws on play to our capacity to mutual understanding emerges largely from the dynamic activity of. Following Huizinga's analysis, Gadamer develops play into a hermeneutical model for understanding that starts from for our aesthetic ability to appreciate beauty.⁴⁹ For him, this reveals a wider human capacity to partake in a communal realm of experience through cultural media. The broader significance of this for Gadamer is to recover the idea that beyond political division and power, mutual cultural practices, which for him take the form of play, can bring us together and promote community solidarity.

Combined, what emerges through the perspective of politics as aesthetic play is that of a situated activity within its own demarcated space that promotes a shared practice we engage beyond any purely practical purpose. Rather, it is both the condition for and expression of a

⁴⁷ E.g. Hannah Arendt (2006). 'What is Freedom', in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, Edit. Jerome Kohn. London/NY: Penguin. pp. 142-169.

⁴⁸ Ibid. (1972). 'On Violence', in *Crisis of the Republic*. San Diego/NY/London: Harcourt. pp. 103-198. pp. 193-194.

⁴⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004). *Truth and Method*. Revised Trans. Joel Weinsheimer, and Donald G. Marshall. London: Continuum. Par 2.1. 'Play as an Ontological Clue to Explanation'. pp. 102-109.

political way of life. Still, at times this reinforces an idealism about the human capacity to overcome their differences (or accept them) and to partake in a communal way of life. Thus, despite Arendt's insight that human equality is not inherent but must be practiced, her insistence on the radical autonomy of politics from all other domains of social life neglects how hierarchical social distinctions tend to be reinforced through the political process. Similarly, even though Gadamer's approach explicitly allows for multiple voices within the continuing cultural dialogue, it tends to neglect the problem of power and how it affects whose viewpoints and which perspectives are endorsed culturally and which ones remain side-lined or unheard.

Critical Play: Exposing Power Play

In chapter Three (Critical Play), I examine a more radical approach to play as a model to rethink the foundations of the social order in the footsteps of the Nietzschean approach to play as critique. As suggested above, for Nietzsche philosophy itself became a game to unsettle basic assumptions and core beliefs about truth that keep us in their grip. If we want to become truly independent players, we should seek to abolish these ideas and define our own standards of conduct. Particularly from the late 1960s, this Nietzschean model of 'radical play' is developed first by authors such as Deleuze, Foucault and subsequently by Derrida, and more recently by the philosopher Agamben, to offer a systematic critique of the role of power in society.⁵⁰ For all their diversity, these authors share the idea that society is organised around pervasive social relations of domination that exceed the traditional political realm. To uncover these requires a sophisticated critique of power that identifies the interplay between top-down social institutions, shared norms and beliefs, and patterns of habituated self-control.

⁵⁰ Brian Sutton-Smith (1997). 'Rhetorics of Power', in *The Ambiguity of Play*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. pp. 74-90; Tilman Küchler (1994). *Postmodern Gaming. Heidegger, Duchamp, Derrida*. New York: P. Lang.; Giorgio Agamben (1993). 'In Playland. Reflections on History and Play', in *Infancy and History*. London: Verso. pp. 73-96.

Here I focus on Derrida and Foucault. Derrida develops the notion of play in two ways. First, to show that in our understanding of the world we frequently draw on oppositional pairs that both refer to but also exclude each other; and moreover that we tend to resolve this interaction by organising them hierarchically.⁵¹ However, for Derrida, this irreconcilable tension also shows in the way we try to impose our understanding as fixed upon the dynamic, contingent world around us. Play thus redoubles as a tool to examine critically and expose the assumptions that keep in place harmful hierarchies and as a model of reality as a dynamic and emergent, rather than stable and a manifestation of an underlying purpose. Foucault initially draws on the game as a tool to destabilise claims to sovereignty but subsequently also as a model to explain how in contemporary liberal society power operates through self-imposed social norms, as much as through top-down exercise of control. He particularly develops this critique through the analysis of the neoliberal game discussed in chapter One. Recent political theorists such as Chantal Mouffe, Andrew Schaap, and James Tully have developed such critiques into the political theory of agonism, which seeks to retrieve democratic politics as the peaceful battleground between competing political viewpoint but also to widen our understanding of politics beyond the traditional demarcations of the political realm.⁵² The idea is that if we acknowledge how everyday social relations from the workplace to school and in relationships also involve relations of power – agonist sites of contestation – we can make them visible, explain their machinations, and thereby open up the possibility of resistance. Still, at the core of this approach there is a basic tension between the desire to emancipate individuals and marginalised groups, or what we may call the ideal of free play, and the emphasis on the

⁵¹ E.g. Jacques Derrida (1978). 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Writing and Difference*. Trans. and Edit. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp. 278- 294. For further references see par. 3.2 below.

⁵² Andrew Schaap (2006). 'Agonism in divided societies', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 32(2): pp. 255-277; Chantal Mouffe (1999). 'Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?', *Social Research*, Vol. 66(3): pp. 745- 758; James Tully (2008). *Public philosophy in a new key Vol. I Democracy and Civic Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

pervasiveness of power and (latent) conflict across social relations, or the reality of power play. This in turn not only promotes a scepticism about public institutions but also leaves unanswered the question about what types of institutions might replace those that have been scrutinised and found wanting. This requires in part a shift back from the current emphasis on games as settings of strategic interaction and conflict towards play as a site of mutual practice.

Cultivating Play: Politics as Fair Play

In the final chapter (Cultivating Play), I examine in much greater detail Huizinga's contribution to the political theory of play. I will use Huizinga's less sceptical account and more engaged concept of politics to explain the relevance of play for contemporary politics.⁵³ In an exemplary way, he is aware of the tension between politics as competition and politics as collective performance rooted in a normative commitment to a shared way of life. This helps us to put in focus questions about the relevance of play to political theory for contemporary politics: Why should we care about politics as play? What sort of commitment does the game require from its players? and finally, What guarantees the 'integrity of the game' itself?

Huizinga is mindful of the interesting tension the heart of all political activity: it is agonist and competitive in nature, with multiple parties vying for office. As such, politics resembles the game. However, simultaneously, politics is also (at least in part) an expression of a shared commitment to a political way of life. Politics may be regulated, ritualised competition but this in turn already refers to a widely shared commitment to such pervasive norms as participation and contestation, or the ability to voice dissent against political authority. Ultimately, for Huizinga, the political game offers a setting for the cultivation of fair play, understood here not just as the liberal agreement on rules, but also as the enjoyment in mutual engagement. This returns us to the agonist emphasis on competition between genuine political

⁵³ Jason Edwards (2013). 'Play and Democracy. Huizinga and the Limits of Agonism', *Political Theory*, Vol. 41(1): pp. 90-115.

alternatives, not just within the context of a political economy of mutual exchange. Huizinga reminds us that political competition in this sense shared a similar structure to many other social domains, which are also structured in oppositional terms: law and justice, academic debate, artistic competition. However, what these all share is that what keeps each of these from collapsing into open conflict is precisely the ritualised setting that brings together different parties within the game.

Huizinga allows us to shift from game and play as metaphor to an *understanding* of politics as *activity*. Moreover, it helps us to stake out a third position in between ‘rationalist’ and ‘agonist’ perspectives in contemporary political theory. Whereas the former emphasises rationality and institutions at the expense of the meaning of the activity, agonism over-emphasises conflict at the core of political interaction and arguably fails to consider how the rules of play and shared ethos also make possible a political way of life. In contrast, Huizinga reminds us both of the intrinsic importance of politics as shared play activity, as well as the importance of playing to maintain the shared conditions of the political playing field.

In short, Huizinga’s vision of politics as play is not just metaphor but rather an activity. Not just a ‘leisure’ activity but rather an aspect of all dimensions of social life. Moreover, as an activity it is not merely a reflection of social relations but also to give rise to them. Finally, it is beyond the exercise on power but rather than that brings people together by drawing them into a common activity, the point of which is to practice mutual relations between individuals and groups from different walks of life. Written during the emergence of fascism across European politics, *Homo Ludens* puts in stark relief the prospects and limits of approaching politics as play. Although a reconsideration of Huizinga will not help us to overcome the distinction between competition and shared performance at the heart of politics – nor is this desirable – his emphasis on both elements as basic to political action offers an important starting point for the reconsideration of the prospects of politics as play-activity in the 21st century.

1. Rational Play.

The Attempt to Make Politics into a Rational Game

‘And if all these things are only valuable for their utility, no good man is to be found.’

- Cicero, *De finibus*, II.xviii

In the following chapters, I examine a number of playful approaches to politics in modern political theory. In Rational Play I examine how the model of the game comes to play a central role in the twentieth century quest for a rational theory of politics. This positioning of game and play in modern rational political theory is surprising because traditionally, game-playing is considered to exceed the human capacity for rational calculation. If anything, games are involving, emotional and at times not at all rational, rather than being the favoured setting for the manifestation of our practical capacity for prediction and cold calculation. Perhaps less obvious still is how in the 20th century a particular conception of the game becomes an influential model for the ambitious effort to rationalise politics itself.

What is at stake with a rational theory of politics, and how did the game become an important ingredient in it in 20th century political theory? Could it be that a rational political theory offers an explanation of the preconditions of political order? I will argue that it attempts to do just that on basis of an account of the causal mechanisms that bring it about. It does so under the assumption that social behaviour can be explained through the practical rational decisions that individuals take in the pursuit of their interests. From this perspective, a central conceptual issue is: what causes conflicts between parties with potentially competing interests, and which institutions in turn can help to incorporate peacefully these conflicting interests within a shared political system?

A classical Hobbesian solution to this problem has been the institution of sovereignty as the unilateral top-down exercise of control by a central authority over subjects. The idea is that individuals are willing to accept such control because it makes possible peaceful social interaction. In other words, (implicit) rational consent of the domination of the sovereign over his subjects is explained through the common good of security he offers in return. However, this top-down conception of sovereignty became problematic conceptually and practically with the increasing dynamisation of society, particularly after WWII.

Game theory is a 20th century manifestation of the desire to develop a rational political theory. It starts from the premise that, rather than shared cultural meaning or moral authority, practical interests serve as the backbone to explain how and why political order comes about. Game theory does so by recasting the problem of political order through the analogy with the strategic game.⁵⁴ Initially, within game theory the game serves as an analogy to explain politics as similar to a strategic game where players make decisions in a competitive setting with other players and where my decision depends on what others may do to pursue their, potentially conflicting, goals. To offer an explanation then, is to break down complex social states into the underlying strategic games that the parties are playing. Ultimately, this means that social behaviour and political order can be explained as a bargain game, or a practical exchange that reflects the relative distribution between the different interests of individuals.⁵⁵

However, I suggest that the ambition of the game theoretical program goes further. It does not just want to explain politics by analogy with a game, rather, its much more ambitious central aim is to *pacify* politics through the rationalisation of political decision making.⁵⁶ Put

⁵⁴ Robert J. Aumann (1987). 'Game Theory', in *The New Palgrave, A Dictionary of Economics*, Vol 2, Eds. J. Eatwell, M. Milgate, and P. Newman. London/Basingstoke. pp. 460-482.

⁵⁵ E.g. Thomas Schelling (1980). 'An Essay on Bargaining', in *The Strategy of Conflict*, rev. edition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. pp. 21-52.

⁵⁶ In his historical analysis of Game Theory, Richard Swedberg suggests that there: 'exists no necessary logical connection between game theory and ordinary games; they simply both contain the word "game."' p302. Richard Swedberg (2002). 'Sociology and Game theory: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives', *Theory and Society*, Vol. 30(3): pp. 301–335. I argue that the analogy is not incidental but fundamental because it does not only draw on the structural dimensions of games: i) constitutive rules; ii) players; iii) strategic interaction, but also – and

differently, the status of the game in game theory eventually is to become a normative model for the transformation of politics from the violent arena it so frequently had been during the first decades of the 20th century into a site of pacified, ritual competition. In obtaining this status, the model of the game offers a twofold attraction. First, it promises predictability in the rather messy dynamism of conflicting interests because outcomes fit within the matrix of options that are available within the game. However, more importantly, the transformation of politics into a game offers the potential to rationalise play itself, that is, to turn play as well as politics into a rational controlled and predictable activity instead of being an chaotic arena of conflict. Political agents may engage in all the political scheming and strategy to outcompete each other, as long as they operate within the limits of the game they do not engage in direct open conflict.

However, for all its attempts to make politics more like game-like and less conflictual, what challenges game theory is the remaining problematic status of central political authority in relation to the coercive potential it wields over its subjects, as well as its non-engagement with the problem of power.⁵⁷ Therefore, from the early seventies onwards we see an even more ambitious attempt to recast society through the model of the game, which seeks to transform society in general into a competitive playground. This neoliberal attempt is radical both because it challenges the traditional centrality of politics in the regulation of society by one the one hand giving the market a central role but on the other also seeks to transform not just politics but all of society into one big competitive game on the other. To refashion society this way would not only helps us to get rid of the problematic coercive power of the state but also offers individuals a new space for the pursuit of their self-development. The model of the competitive game of

perhaps most importantly – on iv) (implicit) recognition of players and outcomes. It is this latter aspect of ‘ritualised competition’ that defines a pacified ‘gamelike’ politics vis-à-vis strategic conflict.

⁵⁷ Elinor Ostrom has aptly labelled this first tenet ‘Leviathan as the only way’, in Elinor Ostrom (1990). *Governing the Commons The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 9-11. Ostrom’s own work remains a model of the reflexive, well-considered application of game theory to examine the emergence of public institutions. As to the lack of serious engagement with the problem of power, see Martin J. Smith (2009). *Power and the State*. London: Palgrave MacMillan. pp. 22-31.

the market thus becomes a motor for collective welfare because it productively channels social potential in way that central politics cannot. Perhaps more importantly still, it allows individuals a setting where they can enjoy the pursuit of self-fulfilment of their own goals and challenges by measuring themselves against others.

In short, I argue that for 20th century rational political theory, the model of the game is offered as an ultimately problematic attempt to resolve the traditional tensions at the heart of politics between the requirements of freedom and those of authority, and between the individual and the collective interest in the production and maintenance of political order. Games are attractive from this viewpoint because they are regulated, yet only structure but do not determine outcomes, which are settled in the dynamic interaction between players. Moreover, for adherents of game theory, the game allows for the excitement of competition but keep players within the orderly regime of the rules of the game. In this way, players reap both the practical and intrinsic rewards of heightened experience it offers, without the dangers of the potential of politics as site of actual conflict. Whereas for game theory the transformation of politics into a game ultimately remains one of practical exchange, the neoliberal transformation of society envisions a player who, when emancipated from external political constraints, is in pursuit of play as the self-development of one's full capacities.

However, I suggest that ultimately these attempts to rationalise politics through the model of the game run into a fundamental conceptual paradox with undesirable normative consequences. They both assume we are rational decision makers and explain our actions accordingly, but also want to make our actions *more* rational, which suggests that we frequently act irrationally and actually need guidance to bring out this capacity to reason. What, then is the status of rationality: a routine capacity, or rather a promising potential we have to practice?⁵⁸ This question is important because it points out that this tension requires introduction of ever

⁵⁸ Raymond Boudon (1998). 'Limitations of Rational Choice Theory', *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 104(3): pp. 817-82.

new elements of the game across society to close the gap between the rational predictability of the game, and the unpredictability of the ‘irrational’ world beyond it. Yet, doing so they introduce their own forms of domination, namely that of the regime of the game, to replace the political problems they resolved.

In game theory this problem reveals itself clearly in the gap between explanation and prescription; whereas the former aims at the explanation of behaviour through rational decisions, the latter actually wants to *make* our decisions more rational (and thus acknowledges that behaviour can be far from rational). This also hampers its prescriptive use to inform decision making, because decisions are rational to the degree that the assumptions on which they rely are plausible, and this is exactly in question during moments of political decision. In the end, all social action is forced into the straitjacket of a bargain game, or practical exchange, which is conceptually unsatisfactory and normatively undesirable. It may offer a solution to the problem of social conflict but in the process dissolves any plausible normative concept of the common good and why we should adhere to it.

Similarly, the neoliberal gamification of society may have liberated the individual from the constraints of direct political interferences, yet has also introduced its own new binding constraints. If the primary goal is to allow the individual to make their own rational decisions about what matters by imposing limits on state power, how did the neoliberal emphasis on competition actually create new social restrictions? To what degree is the claim that competition is both in the interest of the individual and the collective at odds with the observation that we are now forced to compete with each other (and with ourselves) constantly? Or, could the liberation of the individual just isolate us from meaningful interaction with others, because we are required constantly to see them as competitors? Similarly, the logic of competition has not made the *sovereign* state disappear, which was a core goal, but rather transformed it into an arbiter that constantly, actively intervenes to control the conditions of the success of the market

and us as players who have to compete in it.⁵⁹ We end up with the dubious paradox that on the one hand, political problems are the result of lack of competition, whereas on the other we just have to accept the reality of competition in society.⁶⁰

1.1 Game Theory: Towards a New Rational Foundation of Politics

How can we avoid conflict if we approach strategic interactions in economics and politics as strategic games? Game theory offers one answer to the pertinent question how a better understanding of the logic of conflict and cooperation can help us to make better, more informed – rational – decisions so that dangerous conflicts can be avoided.

Game theory is an approach to social behaviour which explains social outcomes as the result of rational decisions of individuals who make practical decisions in strategic interaction with others in a shared setting.⁶¹ We can explain social outcomes, from market behaviour to geopolitical strategy, by examining what practical reasons individual players have to pursue certain action plans as a result of a calculated trade-off between expected rewards in a setting that includes other parties who perform a similar calculation. The game here means two things. First, the general notion that social behaviour can be explained as the result of the sum total of individual decisions, which can be modelled in choice settings that are partially given and therefore leave room for strategic consideration of alternatives. To explain social behaviour

⁵⁹ This claim is at the heart of Foucault's critique, which I take up in par. 3.3.

⁶⁰ A good example of the contradictions informing the 'imperative' of competition can be found in Michael Porter's classic and highly influential text on managerial strategy *On Competition*. There, Porter in a single page can claim that competition 'is one of society's most powerful forces for making things better', and that it 'is pervasive, whether it involves companies contesting markets, countries coping with globalization, or social organizations responding to societal needs'; that it is 'truer today than before, as competition has intensified dramatically over the last several decades'...and has 'spread to all sectors of society'. In other words: that competition is both a fact of social life and a social norm to emulate, and constitutes a timeless truth as well as a historical development. Fascinating if disconcertingly, the book only offers responses to but no causal examination of the nature of competition. Michael Porter (2008). *On Competition*, Updated and Expanded Edition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review. p1.

⁶¹ E.g. Robert J. Aumann (1987), 'Game Theory'; Kenneth Binmore (2007). 'Getting Locked in', in *Playing for Real. A Text on Game Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp.1-38.

then, is to break down a complex social state by explaining it in light of the underlying pattern of individual strategic choices that give rise to it. Secondly, the game may refer to a specific type of strategic interaction within the broader taxonomy of game types and strategic scenarios, which together make up the game theoretical effort to offer a systematic, full rational explanation of social behaviour.

Thus, some theorists within the field attribute little importance to the identification of social states as ‘games’ per se but rather emphasise the importance of game theory as a theory of interdependent decision.⁶² However, although this captures the rational aspirations of game theory, it does undersell the importance of the game as a conceptual model for a number of reasons. Not only is social behaviour understood by analogy with the game as strategic setting, also this fails to see how game theory is derived in part from the study of games of chance at the beginning of the development of probability theory. More importantly, I suggest that the full importance of the game is precisely borne out when we consider that game theory does not only seek to explain social behaviour (by analogy with the game) but also wants to rationalise the political realm itself through rational institutional design. That is, to move politics from real social conflict to that of manageable, ritualised competitive game between rational players.

Modern game theory is usually traced to Morgenstern and Von Neumann’s 1944 book *Theory of Games and Economic Behaviour*, which sought to offer a systematic theory of economic behaviour through the analysis of strategic choice settings.⁶³ Since then, game theory has become an important methodology to analyse an eclectic array of social issues from business strategy, and ‘white flight’ in suburban neighbourhoods, to nuclear strategy during the Cold War as we will see.⁶⁴

⁶² E.g. Robert J. Aumann (1987). ‘Game Theory’; Richard Swedberg (2002). ‘Sociology and Game Theory’.

⁶³ John von Neumann & Oscar Morgenstern (1944). *A Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁶⁴ For an ambitious statement about Game Theory as unifying explanatory framework within the Social Sciences, see: Herbert Gintis (2009). *The bounds of reason: Game theory and the unification of the behavioral sciences*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

What this emphasis on the ‘recent’ genesis of game theory as a social scientific approach fails to capture how the approach fits in and borrows from a much broader trend of Enlightenment rational thinking that have shaped its core commitments.⁶⁵ First, the desire to offer a systematic rational explanation of social behaviour, by explaining the causal mechanisms that drive it. Social order is not the result of coincidence or magic but can be explained through simple mechanism: humans have needs and a rational capacity to make decisions to pursue them. Social order is the product of the choices that rational individuals make when they consider the expected benefits of different actions, considering that other individuals also pursue *their* goals. In other words, next to a belief in rational explanation based on mechanical causes, game theory like its Enlightenment predecessors stresses the human capacity to rational thought, although this should be understood as a capacity to reason from ends to means in light of a calculus of interests.

However, and this is particularly relevant for the game dimension of game theory, it borrows from the systematic analysis of the quantitative properties of games of chance, which ultimately supported a theory of probability. As Hacking and others have analysed, the study of games of chance was important in the history of probability because it started from the idea that games are not random but rather susceptible to underlying quantitative patterns.⁶⁶ Studying these allowed for the translation of uncertainty into risk, or quantifiable likelihood. Early students of such games, such as Huygens and Pascal, already suggested that social states could be treated as essentially analogous to games of chance. It was this insight that subsequently fuelled the pursuit of decision theory as the rational engagement with uncertainty through the prediction and management of risk.⁶⁷ In other words, the notion of the ‘game’ is not incidental

⁶⁵ Philip Ball offers an interesting historical account, which situates these recent Social Scientific ambitions against the background of the Enlightenment quest for a ‘Social Physics’. Philip Ball (2004). *Critical Mass. How One Thing Leads to Another*. London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

⁶⁶ Ian Hacking (1975). *The Emergence of Probability*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁶⁷ E.g. Peter L. Bernstein (1998). *Against the Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk*. London: Wiley.

to game theory but rather points to the utility of the game as an analogy in rational explanation since the advent of probability theory.

Finally, beyond such morphological and analogical similarities, game theory shares with other rationalist theories a basic ethical tenet: a rational theory of social explanation is not only possible but can also help us improve our decisions, or even better, can help to avoid social conflict and promote social goals, through improved institutional design. In short, this is where the aim of explanation subtly morphs into the desire to rationalise decision making.

In the early stages of the Cold War, game theory crossed over into the political realm and became a dominant framework to help inform geopolitical (nuclear) strategy. Indeed, the costly consequences of recent collective irrationality, as well as the prospects of global disaster made it even more imperative to find out how to avoid disastrous mistakes and irrational – and hence avoidable – conflict.

Political game theory, then offers an astute echo of that Enlightenment desire to rationalise political decision making. Not only was the development of a logic of conflict and cooperation more imperative than ever before, it was further complicated by the uneasy lesson of the recent past. Namely that, contrary to Enlightenment expectations, humans are susceptible to irrationality. This was confounded by an interesting but also disturbing insight developed by one of the early game theorists, Nash, that the rational pursuit of individuals within specific strategic situations may yield collectively sub-optimal but still individually rational outcomes.⁶⁸ Not only do such so-called ‘non-cooperative’ games have multiple possible, social outcomes (equilibria), each of which are the result of individual rational decisions. Also, parties will pursue these courses even in light of full awareness of what others do, in absence of a third

⁶⁸ E.g. The two main aspects of Nash-equilibria are that: i) they offer a rational demonstration of the outcome when all parties pursue their optimal strategy upon which neither player can improve; and ii) that games may have multiple Nash-equilibria. E.g. Kenneth Binmore (2007). *Playing For Real*, pp. 17-19.

party to enforce the agreement.⁶⁹ In short, in such scenarios collective disorder is not the result of irrational decisions but rather due to the ‘tragic’ locked-in conditions in which players of such games find themselves. From a game theoretical viewpoint, the emergence of central authority is a plausible response to the shared need to overcome this social gridlock.

Whereas the game theoretical literature emphasises the importance of explanation, I suggest that the full extent of game theory follows the triad: *explanation, improvement, transformation*. Explanation is not a goal in itself but rather allows us to inform better, more rational and hence improved decisions. However, the full extent of the game theoretical program is to rationalise the political realm through the transformation of the choice architecture and how this motivates behavioural change. We know that individuals often act irrationally, hence we must design the social environment in such a way that individuals become motivated (incentivised) to act in their rational self-interest. How can we structure political interaction in such a way that we tame the potential for real conflict by making politics into the competitive pursuit of similar objectives by players who accept the basic premises of the game; and more importantly, how can we understand the activity as a practical exchange, rather than in existential terms?

As such, in the next section, I examine three influential game theoretical accounts in modern political theory, first as explanation, then as framework for the improvement of rational decision making, and finally as model to transform institutional design.

⁶⁹ As Aumann puts it: ‘We classify games into cooperative or non-cooperative according as to whether or not there is available a mechanism that can enforce agreements.’ Robert J. Aumann (1985). ‘What is Game Theory trying to Accomplish’, in *Frontiers of Economics*, Edit by K. Arrow, and S. Honkapohja. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. pp. 28-76.

1.2. From Rational Explanation to Redesigning the Game of Politics

The Explanation Game: Governing the Commons

Why does central authority – and only centralised authority – safeguard the political order? In his 1968 classic, if controversial, paper on the ‘Tragedy of the Commons’ Garret Hardin develops a game theoretical response to what he perceived to be the central problem of political theory.⁷⁰ Echoing the late 1960s/early 70s interest in the limits of growth, Hardin frames the argument through a resurrection of the problem of the Malthusian trap – or the thesis that in the long run population outgrows our economic capacity to support it, leading to social collapse. However, the implications of the paper’s argument are more general and have been applied to a variety of collective action problems without central enforcement. As such, it remains exemplary not only because it offers a game theoretical application to a real life problem of considerable magnitude (ecological disaster) but also one which offers stark policy implication – if we accept its analytical soundness.

The underlying central argument is that in absence of central authority, each of us will use more of our collective resources (‘commons’) than is beneficial for the collective. In other words, over-exploitation of collective resources by individuals leads to ecological and social collapse. In economic terms, ‘commons’ are public goods, or goods with easy public access, the use of which by one party does not diminish their availability to others. What is particularly interesting here is that this outcome is presented both as the outcome of logical necessity, that is, the compelling conclusion of rational argument, and in starkly existentialist terms. What is at stake here is not just the distribution of resources but rather the collapse of the (social) ecology that allows for our mutual existence.⁷¹ Why is this the case?

⁷⁰ Garret Hardin (1968). ‘The Tragedy of the Commons’, *Science*, Vol. 162(3859): pp. 1243-1248.

⁷¹ Elinor Ostrom (1990), *Governing the Commons* offers a trenchant critique – based on Game Theory – on the logical necessity of central authority in her work on Common Pool Resources (CPRs). These are goods from which parties cannot be excluded (e.g. fisheries, forestry) and which here are said to lack third party enforcement, yet which are successfully managed through informal, collective regulation.

Following the premises of game theory, each of us has an incentive to get as much out of collective resources as we can. Moreover, the urgency to do so follows from the understanding that if *we* don't others will. However, as individuals maximise their resource consumption, collectively we over-exploit what in essence are finite resources. Hardin phrases this in the now classic concept of the 'tragedy of the commons': whatever is common to all will be over-exploited by everyone and therefore risk collapse.

As the title suggests, this is 'tragic' not only because here we are presented with a stark confrontation between individual and collective interest. More fundamentally, tragedy stems from the fact in the absence of a central authority to regulate our behaviour, we continue to act like this, in full awareness of the detrimental consequences of our aggregated individual actions.⁷² This is the core claim of what in game theory is known as a non-cooperative game, or a competitive situation where any agreement is non-binding and non-enforceable.⁷³ What makes the 'tragic' outcome of this vicious cycle rationally compelling is that game theory holds that even if collectively we agree to limit our actions, yet there is no one to see to this agreement, when push comes to shove it is rational for us to act in our own interest and to freeride on the collective good.⁷⁴ In other words, the core problematic here is that each of us would benefit from political cooperation to limit exploitation, yet no one will commit individually to do what it takes to resolve the problem.

Hence, the solution – and only viable solution – following from this argument is the collective institution of a central authority that regulates and enforces the terms of cooperation: 'The social arrangements that produce responsibility are arrangements that create coercion, of some sort'.⁷⁵ Thus, the threat of coercion makes possible what would otherwise become

⁷² To underscore the point, he offers an approving quote by the philosopher Whitehead that 'the essence of dramatic tragedy is not unhappiness' but 'the remorseless working of things'. Hardin, 'Tragedy of the Commons', p1244.

⁷³ See note 61.

⁷⁴ In Hardin's words 'Conscience is self-eliminating', p1246.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p1247. For two related, yet contrasting functional explanations for how social order emerges as the product of implicit evolutionary development, see Mancur Olson (1993), and David Axelrod (1984). Olson argues that the

untenable, namely durable political cooperation. (Besides central authority to enforce cooperation, economists have drawn a second important conclusion from the tragedy of the commons: that it requires, or at any rate justifies the institution of private property – the privatisation of parts of the commons for exclusive ownership by individuals – because this offers an incentive to look after resources that would otherwise be carelessly over-exploited.) Government is the central requirement to make the transition from the vicious cycle of overexploitation to the virtuous cycle of cooperation. However, the corollary here is that the absence of government ultimately spells disaster.

What is of particular interest about Hardin's political vision is its existentialist starting point: we may not enjoy shared preferences, yet our fates are ultimately wound up together. Moreover, Hardin admits that problems like that of 'the commons' do not allow for easy solutions, through technology or proper mechanism. Rather, they are the stuff of hard bargain and tough political choice. In other words, political cooperation does not come naturally, and our interest is frequently at odds with that of others, and with the common interest. Thus, politics should first and foremost be understood as a 'solution' to the tragic condition of potential human conflict and a mechanism to foster cooperation between otherwise hesitant individuals. It is *not* the result of a desire for a shared political way of life, or considered as an end in itself but rather as a practical solution to an otherwise intractable social problem. The basic social state is anarchy – or lack of central authority – and the resultant insecurity and threats associated with it. Consequently, what is in the common interest should be understood as the convergence between mutual individual interests, not as a good prior to and exceeding the sum of all of individual choice. In other words, individuals do not act out of public spirit or

state is a product of an exchange between subjects who pay taxes for security and warlords who forgo its use to extract stable rents from them. This turns them from 'roving' into stationary bandits. Axelrod interestingly offers a game-theoretical explanation of the emergence of cooperation and mutual trust *in absence of coercion* as the outcome of an emergent norm: 'tit-for-tat. Mancur Olsen (1993). 'Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development', *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 87(3): pp. 567-576. David Axelrod (1984). *The Evolution of Cooperation*. NY: Basic Books.

solidarity but rather because it is in their own enlightened self-interest. Similarly, the decision to allow government to enforce cooperation is not guided by a commitment to the shared good life but rather by a concern for survival. It remains a necessary imposition rather than a spontaneously accepted authority.

Game theory thus aims to explain how social institutions emerge because they fulfil specific functions that would make it rational for social parties to accept them, even in absence of explicit consent or rational deliberation. Here, the legitimacy of centralised authority follows from the shared desire for safety, which forms the rational foundation for sovereign government, which makes possible peaceful social coexistence.

The Strategy Game: Mutually Assured Stability?

Whereas the ‘tragedy of the commons’ offers a framework to *explain* political behaviour, the second example concerns arguably the most ambitious and most consequential use of game theoretical argument to inform strategic *decision making* in all of political science: its application to model nuclear strategy during the early days of the Cold War. When Thomas Schelling won the Nobel Prize for Economics in 2005 for his game theoretical work on decision making, it was this argument he sought to highlight as exemplary of its ability to support political strategy during his Nobel Lecture.⁷⁶ Indeed, political game theory made important advances precisely within the context of the Cold War, in particular at a place like RAND Corporation, the military think tank with which many of its luminaries (Schelling, von Neumann, etc) were associated.

The advent of Nuclear War at the end of WWII proved a watershed moment for political and military strategy due to the unprecedented nature and potential (global) scope of this new strategic capabilities. It was considered that an entirely new conception of military strategy –

⁷⁶ Thomas C. Schelling (2005). ‘An Astonishing Sixty Years: The Legacy of Hiroshima’, Nobel Prize Lecture 2005. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/economic-sciences/2005/schelling/lecture/>, last accessed 19-9-2019.

and in particular of political accountability – was required to rein in the potential disastrous use of nuclear arms; and many doubted its very character defied a rational, logical approach.⁷⁷ It is within this context that the game theorists' approach to nuclear strategy sought to rationalise the role of nuclear arms in military and political decision making: to maintain their capacity to deter, yet simultaneously diminish the chances of real nuclear conflict.

At the heart of this approach we find the paradoxical claim that escalating the potential for violent conflict may diminish its actual occurrence. Indeed, in his lecture Schelling attributes the success of this 'non-occurrence' to this sort of game theoretical approach to strategy. The argument is clear enough. In a strategic conflict, each party seeks to develop a strategic advantage over the other. In the Nuclear Age, this entailed the capacity for first strike, or the potential to wipe out the adversary before they could retaliate.⁷⁸ Indeed, nuclear arms added a new and truly decisive edge to the desire for strategic advantage. However, in response, parties would have a great incentive to attain nuclear parity, that is to have the capability to follow suit. Moreover, each party would not only seek first strike capability but also to develop an (automated) second strike capacity to emit full nuclear retaliation in case of an attack and thereby nullify the advantage of first strike, leading to mutual destruction (and both parties indeed did). And yet, this very logic of escalation would produce an – unintended – balance of power that would paradoxically stabilise a system otherwise characterised by non-cooperation.⁷⁹

Here, game theory holds that the logic of nuclear deterrence was not only plausible but rationally compelling: either the US would win a decisive strategic advantage over the Soviet

⁷⁷ President Eisenhower, himself surely no novice in the Art of War, went as far as to proclaim that in the Nuclear Age, 'War no longer has any logic whatever'. See, chapter 5 in John Gaddis, Philip Gordon, Ernest May, and Jonathan Rosenberg, Edit. (1999). *Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb: Nuclear Diplomacy since 1945*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 87-119.

⁷⁸ E.g. Chapter 2, and 'Appendix A Nuclear Weapons and Limited War', in Thomas C. Schelling (1980 [1960]). *The Strategy of Conflict*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. pp. 21-52; pp. 257-266.

⁷⁹ This remains a recurring strategy informing Schelling's use of game theory: individual responses within a general environment generate a social order that is not the product of collective intentionality. Thomas C. Schelling (2006). *Micromotives and Macrobehavior*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Union, or alternatively, the latter would be forced into following suit, with the ‘stabilising’ result of nuclear parity. Or, to put it in game theoretical terms, the non-cooperative game between parties who seek to win and have no incentive to cooperate with adversaries, paradoxically establishes the very conditions for and the pursuit of self-interest helped to attain the social equilibrium of mutually assured destruction (MAD). This may explain in part why in hindsight the early 1980s proved to be a particularly dangerous moment in US-Soviet nuclear relations. Then, Reagan sought to uproot the source of nuclear parity through the development of the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) – the missile defence system that would have to act as a nuclear umbrella, and was subsequently dubbed ‘Star Wars’ because of its similarity to the Hollywood franchise popular at the time.

The goal of strategy is management of uncertainty through the systematic, rational assessment of diverse action plans given the circumstances. Schelling’s ostensible goal in developing a ‘vernacular’ non-mathematical game theory was to allow its use in political (nuclear) strategy; and this is what eventually got him the Nobel Prize. However, the game theoretical approach to strategy raises one simple, if fundamental question: When it matters most, and when the stakes are highest, how do we actually *know* that the game will play out the way theory predicts? Does the assumption about the continuity of the game and the rationality of other players not precisely reintroduce the very uncertainty in decision making that game theoretical calculus aims to overcome? Put simply, what constitutes proof within a game theoretical calculus is only a *hypothesis* when applied to real life decisions. They assume that you can manage conflict by manoeuvring your adversary into a strategic setting of your choice, which in turn allows you to rationally predict and successfully respond to their course of action. In other words, strategic risk management is reflexive in that it creates its own risks which cannot be fully accounted for within the game theoretical calculations because they are *produced* by them. Here, the model of the game is not merely an attempt to explain the

behaviour of third parties but rather to incentivise other parties to join a strategic interaction of your choice. However, what this appropriation of game theory for prescriptive purposes to inform rational decision making does not take into account are factors beyond the controlled setting of the game: luck and other contingent factors that call into question their predictive validity. As one critic noted, Schelling got first-hand experience of this when during his stint as US Air Force consultant in the initial stages of the Vietnam war he opted for an intensive bombing campaign.⁸⁰ His strategy of a careful escalation of the conflict through a strategic bombing campaign did not manage to ‘induce’ the Vietnamese to respond as the theory predicted (and as its theorist had hoped). Instead, the unsuccessful campaign was suspended after a few weeks, at great human and material cost. The question of luck becomes even more pronounced when we know that nuclear conflict was averted numerous times, not on the basis of rational strategy but rather through human courage, or sheer luck.⁸¹

As such, the most fundamental strategy is to use game theoretical considerations to inform rational institutional design from the start: that is where we use game theoretical arguments to design the way we want to organise our public affairs.

Rawls: Fairness is the Name of the Game

A surprising example of this type of game theory in action is John Rawls’ game theoretical analysis to support his theory of justice.⁸² Here game theory comes to the design and organisation of public institutions because it allows us to consider around what basic principles we would want to organise our society. Rawls’ argument is well-known and the details need

⁸⁰ Alexander J. Field (2014). ‘Schelling, von Neumann, and the Event that Didn’t Occur’, *Games*, Vol 5: pp. 53-89.

⁸¹ Even a cursory reading of the – extensive – Wikipedia entries about military nuclear incidents and near-incidents is both sobering and frightful prospect about the ability to control adversarial risks. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_military_nuclear_accidents; en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_nuclear_close_calls , both last accessed 19-09-2019. One such incident in 1979 saw a computer glitch produce a false report of an all-out Russian nuclear attack. With 3-6 minutes to respond, they managed to confirm it was a fluke.

⁸² John Rawls (1999). *Theory of Justice*, Rev. edition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Belknap Press.

not concern us here. Rawls raises a simple, powerful question: what basic political institutions would you choose if you did not know where you would end up in society? His claim is that we would first aim to secure basic human rights; and second, to institute distributive principles of justice that favour the least well off socially. This second principle is known as the ‘difference principle’ but is essentially a game theoretical ‘maximin’ strategy, or the outcome that maximises the outcome for the parties least well-off. Together, these principles make up Rawls’ Kantian inspired theory of ‘justice as fairness’ which aims to update the core principle of personal dignity in contemporary market societies.

What is fascinating about Rawls’ argument is that he uses two strategies to defend this position. The first centres on his reliance on a Kantian deontological concern with basic rights and human dignity. However, beyond this deontological argument he *also* develops a game theoretical argument to support the same claim.⁸³ Here, the simple idea is that we would not only agree with the two principles because they resonate with our moral beliefs, but also because, from a rational perspective they are the logical choice to make. Rawls explicitly suggests that if we have to come to an agreement about core principles without knowing where we end up, justice as fairness is not only the right thing to do but also the rational choice to take:

the persons in the original position try to acknowledge principles which advance their system of ends as far as possible. They do this by attempting to win for themselves the highest index of primary social goods, since this enables them to promote their conception of the good most effectively whatever it turns out to be. The parties do not seek to confer benefits or to impose injuries on one another; they are not moved by affection or rancor.⁸⁴

Fairness becomes a rational strategy in light of basic collective uncertainty: in absence of vital social data, it would be rational to opt for basic rights, as well as a progressive principle of justice, because you’d better be safe collectively, than sorry individually. However, whereas

⁸³ John Rawls (1999), *Theory of Justice*, Par. 25: ‘The Rationality of the Parties’.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p125.

game theory models interdependent decisions, Rawlsian rationalism is even more resolutely rational-individualist, insofar as parties are meant to be strictly indifferent to other's choices.

It is interesting to consider how the Rawlsian Original Position – the position through which we settle on basic principles – mirrors the original problem of undivided stakes in the analysis of games of chance at the heart of the initial development of probability theory I discussed above. That is, the mathematical problem how to calculate the relative distribution of stakes in an unfinished game. Here, too, we find players committed to a resolution in light of undivided stakes, who desire a rational and hence acceptable and therefore fair solution to the problem.⁸⁵ Following this, we arrive at an interesting tension within the Rawlsian argument. Rawls suggests that under collective uncertainty we would reject the principle of utilitarianism (maximise collective benefit) but he does so through a distinctly consequentialist game theoretical logic.⁸⁶ What motivates us to act here is the incentive of the optimal outcome in light of uncertainty, and Rawls argues this would not be the case when choosing utility. In other words, Rawls relies on two contrasting notions of rationality: on the one hand, the means-end rationality of game theory, on the other the Kantian idea that freedom follows from the unencumbered exercise of the autonomous capacity for rational thought, that is to say to set oneself rational standards of conduct. Fairness here means to make the rational choice to distribute the stakes in such a way that those least off would benefit the most. This is fair not

⁸⁵ Chapters 3-5 in Hald (2003) deal with the progression from Cardano, through Pascal, to Huygens' work on games of chances, in Anders Hald (2003). *A History of Probability and Statistics and Their Applications before 1750*. New York: Wiley. pp. 33-80.

⁸⁶ We can identify this tension by citing that, although for Rawls, the Original Position should not be thought of as a game, 'since the parties are not concerned to win but to get as many points as possible judged by their own system of ends' he still *offers* a game-theoretical explanation for their decision. *Theory of Justice*, p 124 (par. 25) The 'Kantian' unencumbered rational self does not strategically take into account others, whereas the rationality of the game-theoretical individual is always intertwined with those of others, and Rawls develops such an explanation in par. 26. This also raises a conceptual question I will leave aside here: if the Rawlsian individual does not take others interests into account, can we still speak of a single Original Position, or is each contracting party rather engaging in a contract with *herself*? Surely to move the setting from one of a private morality to one of political justice means to accept that if anything, the parties to the Original Position are playing the game 'what institutions could we agree on if no one knew where they ended up in society'. But this already assumes that we accept the 'game' as common setting and take seriously others' reasons and concerns *within it*? It seems that Rawls adopts a game-theoretical (utilitarian) method to argue for a Kantian deontological conception of justice.

only because it takes into consideration matters of justice (which would reject luck or arbitrary divisions of merit and talent as grounds for distribution) but also because it makes rational sense to develop an ‘insurance policy’ if you don’t know whether you may end up at the bottom of the social ladder.

Rawls’ explicit adoption of the maximin strategy is offered as a complementary justification for his basic institutional principles regulating society because it offers an argument which practically rational agents would find compelling to accept. Here, game theoretical argument is offered as a plausible explanation for the rational institutional design of the basic structure of society.

1.3 The Neoliberal Transformation of the Game of Society

For all its ambition and theoretical scope, game theory remains politically limited. As we have seen above, its political focus remains with the status quo, frequently state centred, its outlook determinist and conflict-focused. More importantly, regardless of its importance, the game theoretical game remains distinctly functionalist in origin: whatever behaviour is explained through the prism of the game, it is considered to be the outcome of a practical mutual exchange. As such, it remains limited politically, associated as it is with political realism, and ultimately lacking in moral conviction.

Thus, from the 1970s we see a more radical theory which aims to transform society through the model of the game. The re-emergence of neoliberal thought fits within a broader context wherein nuclear conflict had given way to détente but where state authorities also became gridlocked with administrative overburdening (in part due to the growth and complexity of post-war welfare arrangements). This leads to a shift in the seventies and eighties away from the emphasis on government as central administration and towards governance.⁸⁷ This casts the

⁸⁷ Martin J. Smith (2009), *Power and the State*. pp. 98-106.

state as a facilitator and arbiter of policy frameworks, in which considerable responsibilities are delegated to third parties, although it is important to note that this does not diminish the scope and activities of the state as such.⁸⁸ Moreover, the 1960s had seen a systematic critique of authority in general in favour of the liberation of the emancipated individual. Together, these social, political and theoretical changes paved the way for a new way of thinking about politics and society beyond the confines of sovereign politics and centralised state authority.⁸⁹

However, arguably a more contentious claim is that its vision of society, too, is informed to the core by a normative model of the game. It is when we reconsider the conceptual claims in this light, that we can make most sense of what amounts to the replacement of ‘serious’ coercive politics, by the ‘playful’ participation in the market. Because in this vision markets essentially operate as games, they offer a resolution to the traditional problem in politics between freedom and authority in the production of social order. In other words recasting the neoliberal market project through the prism of the game allows us to see the full utopian potential of the desire to transform politics into a playing-field for the pursuit of self-development: not only do they replace coercion with participation, they also argue that collective welfare can be generated by an activity we engage in for its intrinsic rewards. Put differently, whereas game theory aimed to rationalise politics but essentially maintained the notion of a rational self-interested player, neoliberal theory aims at the transformation of the individual into an emancipated player who is released from the burden of central authority to pursue self-development through the enjoyment of competitive interaction with others. In this vision, negatively, markets check the coercive effects of centralised politics and productively channel social energies through ritualised competition. Positively, markets as games, offer the setting for the pursuit of play, or self-realisation through self-chosen challenges.

⁸⁸ Smith refers to this as the *Pastmodern* state (in contrast to the notion of a Postmodern state) to highlight that state power transforms but does not necessarily retreat from its role in ordering society

⁸⁹ Quinn Slobodian (2018). *Globalists. The End of Empire the Birth of Neoliberalism*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

As such what I argue here is not only that we should see this project as the latest example of an Enlightenment project to rationalise institutions but also that the model of the game captures its political, economic and ethical ambitions in one frame. Previous classical liberal theory (and also Rawlsian liberalism) underscores the basic legitimacy of central authority as long as it can be justified through rational consent. In contrast, this new strand remains fundamentally sceptical of all central authority and sees in the game a model for the emancipation of the individual from the restrictions of state authority. In a grand echo of Smithian ambition, in neoliberalism society itself becomes a great game that aims to resolve both the problem of the coercive potential of central authority and the question how to balance the competitive and performative dimensions of politics.⁹⁰ As such, it is no coincidence that one of the core theorists of this branch of liberalism, Friedrich Hayek, identifies ‘the interpretation of the social process as a game’ as a central organising concept of his philosophical opus *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*.⁹¹ There, the ‘game of catallaxy’ refers to the spontaneous order generated from individuals in pursuit of their own ends:

It is a procedure which, as Adam Smith (and apparently before him the ancient Stoics) understood, in all important respects (except that normally it is not pursued solely as a diversion) is wholly analogous to a game, namely a game partly of skill and partly of chance. We shall later describe it as the game of catallaxy. It proceeds, like all games, according to rules guiding the actions of individual participants whose aims, skills, and knowledge are different, with the consequence that the outcome will be unpredictable and that there will regularly be winners and losers. And while, as in a game, we are right in insisting that it be fair and that nobody cheat, it would be nonsensical to demand that the results for the different players be just. They will of necessity be determined partly by skill and partly by luck.⁹²

An implication is that markets should check and where ever possible replace politics, because markets are more game-like (and hence less coercive.)

⁹⁰ See note 26 above for Smith’s quote about the ‘game of society’.

⁹¹ Friedrich.A. Hayek (1998). *Law Liberty and Freedom*. 3 Vols. London: Routledge.

⁹² Ibid., Vol 2, p. 71. For an extensive discussion by Hayek of the ‘game of catallaxy’, see pp. 115-120 (Vol 2).

The basics of the doctrine are well-known. Individuals have rights, and the core and only legitimate job of government is to protect them. Moreover, economic rights – to ownership, exchange and consumption – are as basic as to individual freedom as are civil and political rights. This means that government should regulate but not otherwise interfere in the economic process. In other words, it should promote but not direct the ‘free play of market forces’ of supply and demand and secure the ‘level playing field’ of free and fair competition. Similarly, as Friedman argues in one of the core texts of the neoliberal outlook *Capitalism and Freedom*, the core goal of government becomes to ‘determine, arbitrate and enforce the rules of the game’.⁹³ For, the ‘day-to-day activities are like the actions of participants in a game when they’re playing it; the framework, like the rules of the game they play.’⁹⁴ Government, then, plays the umpire to this everyday social game.

As a political critique neoliberalism argues that whereas modern politics are centralised, top-down, monopolist and ultimately coercive, markets by contrast are anarchical, decentralised, competitive and hence open to plural goals. Moreover, they condition, but do not determine, the outcome of the social process, which is emergent and shaped by the aggregate efforts of many individuals. Here, the market thus becomes an effective check not only on the scope of politics – what should and should not be arranged through central planning – but also on the democratic process, insofar as it controls the (social) democratic capacity to override individual rights through majority decisions.⁹⁵

The market on the other hand offers a playful alternative to the coercive potential of centralised sovereign politics, welfare state provisions included. This is because the

⁹³ Milton Friedman (2002). *Capitalism and Freedom*, 40th Anniversary Edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p27. Strikingly, the quotes begins with: ‘something that the market cannot do for itself...’

⁹⁴ Ibid., p25.

⁹⁵ In his essay ‘The Principles of a Liberal Social Order’, Hayek conceptually separates liberalism and democracy and argues that the protection of the former sometimes requires the limitation of the latter. However, from the early-80s it became also practical policy both in the US and UK to break up trade unions and organised labour, to help ‘speed’ up the social democratic hold on individual liberties. In Friedrich. A. Hayek (1967). *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics*. pp. 160-177.

neoliberal conception of the market follows the normative pattern of the game. Markets not only check central power, they also channel social energy into ritualised competition. Or, as Hayek put it: ‘I have therefore proposed that we call the *game of the market*, by which we can induce the stranger to welcome and serve us, the ‘*game of catallaxy*’ (emphasis mine).⁹⁶ Catallaxy here describes the Hayekian ideal of a spontaneous economic order as a result of free initiative in the market. Moreover, the existence of competition does justice to the plurality of human motives and values and human desire pursue them. Markets operate along a framework of rules but do not determine outcomes, which emerge in the social interaction between private players. Therefore, for neoliberals we should take quite literally the notion of a ‘free play of markets’, which does not merely refer to market dynamism but rather to the dynamic social order that emerges out of the interaction between complementary forces.⁹⁷

In other words, *politically* markets control the coercive potential of centralised authority; *economically* they offer a principle for the creation and distribution of wealth; *socially*, they offer a setting for the spontaneous interaction and exchange between private parties in pursuit of particular aims. However, I suggest, that these come together in an ethical vision broadly construed of the market as a playground in the pursuit of self-chosen goals. Here, the competitive game-like structure of markets become constitutive of individual development, which here is best pursued in the playful, competitive market-setting where one can develop one’s full potential by measuring oneself against others.

Frank K. Knight, the pre-eminent 20th century theorist of risk before Keynes, already developed the positive virtues and play-character of competition in some detail in his classic

⁹⁶ Friedrich. A. Hayek (1978). *New Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics*. London: Routledge and Keagan Paul. p60.

⁹⁷ Peter Bendixen (2009). ‘Der Eingebildete Markt und das Freie Spiel der Kräfte’ in *Die Unsichtbare Hand: Die Freiheit unter der Markt*. Wien: Lit Verlag. pp. 79-134.

1923 article on the ‘ethics of competition’. Economic competition is not merely a mechanism to generate and distribute welfare, because:

economic activity is at the same time a means of want-satisfaction, an agency for want- and character-formation, a *field of creative self-expression*, and a competitive sport. While men are "playing the game" of business, they are also moulding their own and other personalities, and creating a civilization whose worthiness to endure cannot be a matter of indifference (emphasis mine).⁹⁸

The implication of this line of thinking is that centralised government turns individuals into subjects – that is, those who are subject to the sovereignty of the state; markets by contrast turns them into players, or emancipated autonomous agents. This corresponds to the full conception of freedom developed by neoliberal theory, in which attention goes to the political dimension of freedom as the right to non-interference. Occasionally, this finds substantiation in a moral claim about the importance of freedom to show respect for the dignity of the individual on basis of their capacity for autonomous rational judgment in matters about the good life. However, ethically, the substantive dimension of freedom here is that of the good life as individual self-development through the pursuit of self-imposed obstacles and challenges, which is best practiced in a competitive setting with others.

Finally, from an ethical perspective games offer an interesting resolution between the requirements of social order and the spontaneity of free interaction. I argue that it is this feature that for neoliberal theory sets apart markets from politics: like games, they too resolve the tension between freedom and authority in the production and maintenance of social order. On the one hand the market game offers a less coercive, more participatory contrast to the ‘serious’ coercion of centralised political sovereignty, on the other, games also offer the playing field for the pursuit of play as self-development through the enjoyment of the pursuit of personal goals in a competitive setting with others. With this, they offer not only a moral resolution to the

⁹⁸ Frank K. Knight (1923). ‘The Ethics of Competition’, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 37(4): pp. 579-624. p587.

traditional problem of political authority but economically, they also offer a playful alternative to the traditional logic of scarcity as a traditional root-cause for conquest and conflict. Here, the game of socio-economic competition also acts as the shared performance of a harmonious social order as it sets out basic rules to open up a field of possible interaction but otherwise leaves players free to engage with each other as they wish.

The market as game offers a distinct and in many ways more radical alternative than the game theoretical model discussed above, of the Enlightenment desire to transform politics through rational design. The rationality here is not only borne out by the claim that (decentralised) markets aggregate information in ways that centralised bureaucracies could not, as Hayek already suggested in his *Road to Serfdom*, and as a consequence offer more agile, responsive and efficient modes of distribution, or what might be called an ‘emergent rationality’.⁹⁹ Also, beyond the game theoretical rational individual, neoliberalism fleshes out the (classical) liberal vision that individuals deserve respect because they have the (rational) capacity to make independent decisions about what constitutes the good life. Put differently, the result of the ‘free play of market forces’ – the price mechanism – is here not only understood as a practical outcome but also as a manifestation of an emergent economic order, which is revealed and expresses itself (aesthetically) in the price. That is, the Hayekian ‘game of catallaxy’ at work in practice.

Here, to recast the neoliberal project through the model of the game helps us to understand that its goal is not first and foremost economic in nature because its vision of man is ultimately not that of *homo economicus*, as a maximiser of self-interest (which seems closer to the game theoretical player). Rather, I suggest that the market as game offers a setting for the pursuit of play. This reveals that neoliberalism is best seen as a political theory that aims at the emancipation of the individual. By limiting the space of central politics and through the

⁹⁹ Friedrich. A. Hayek (2006). *The Road to Serfdom*. London/NY: Routledge & Sons.

transformation of society into a game, or series of games, we support the spontaneous interaction between individuals in pursuit of their conception of the good life. Yet, this good life itself is understood as that of the player who challenges herself in enjoyable competition with others.

Still, this means that government should do more than just secure a level playing field but also promote this spirit of (individual) competitive entrepreneurship and personal choice throughout society. In other words, its aim is not just to change political institutions but also transform the actions and mentality of the players.¹⁰⁰ Put differently, the aim is to make the citizen more of an engaged, participating player, and less of a passive political subject. However, this requires not only that politics should be limited and economic obstacles be removed ('liberalisation') but rather that what is necessary is the introduction of a new play ethos across society: one where competition introduces new elements of choice and stirs up entrepreneurship, so as to motivate individuals to become active players.

1.4 The World as Game? The limits of Gamification as Rational Utopia

At the end of the 20th century, gradually the new phenomenon of 'gamification' emerged. Or, in the words of some of its exponents: the 'use of elements of game design in non-game contexts.'¹⁰¹ The trend of gamification follows in the footsteps of the development of the (video) game industry which has become the most profitable sector in the entertainment

¹⁰⁰ The liberal Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte recently defended the 'Participatiemaatschappij', or participation society, which rewards individual initiative. Ironically, in Dutch the term may also refer to a type of investment fund.

¹⁰¹ Deterding, S; Khaled, R; Nacke, L. E, and Dixon, D. (2011). 'Gamification: Toward a Definition'. CHI 2011 Workshop 'Gamification'; Deterding offers an excellent historical overview and analysis of gamification as a social trend. S. Deterding (2015). 'The Ambiguity of Games: Histories and Discourses of a Gameful World', in Steffen P. Walz, and Sebastian Deterding, Eds. (2015). *Gameful World : Approaches, Issues, Applications*. Boston: MIT Press. pp. 23-64.

industry, overtaking cinema, music and television.¹⁰² With its belief in utilitarian psychology on the one hand and its strong belief in digital technology, we can see it as a successor to the game theoretical programme.

Gamification is a strategy to motivate behavioural change anywhere from consumer engagement to learning new languages and trauma-recovery. The idea here is that making such activities fun by introducing an element of playful competition or a reward system (or both), stimulates desirable behaviour. To put it in technical terms: you subtly manipulate the choice architecture to incentivise behaviour change. However, gamification offers a powerful example not only of rational institutional design to promote desired outcomes, it also points to the game as a model of a setting that emphasises a participant's engagement with the activity.

The idea is clear enough: games motivate people, so if we introduce elements of game design into other social domains, they will motivate us to redouble our efforts. Moreover, because game-playing is a universal human trait, it can be put into practice into any social setting to transform behaviour. However, most radically by suggesting we can introduce play anywhere through rational institutional design, we can dissolve the traditional tension between practical activities we engage in because we have and those leisure activities we engage in for play: performing tedious practical tasks becomes fun. For its adherents, beyond individual improvement, gamification also offers the possibility of tackling social problems by motivating behavioural change that would otherwise cause social friction. Redescribing social issues as game-like challenges not only promises to engage increased participation by contrast with top-down enforcement, it also suggests that we can channel these social inputs to promote desirable social effects.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Market Analysis Firm NewZoo estimates the 2019 Global Market Revenue for video games at \$152bn dollars. Newzoo (2019). *Global Games Market Report*. <https://newzoo.com/solutions/standard/market-forecasts/global-games-market-report/>, last accessed 19-9-2019.

¹⁰³E.g. Jane MacGonigal (2011). *Reality is Broken. Why Games Make Us Better and How they Can Change the World*. New York: Penguin.

The gamification trend allows us to bring together the elements I have developed in the preceding. I argue that during the 20th century the game becomes a rational utopia aimed at resolving the causes of social conflict, to offer a space for the full exploration of human potential.¹⁰⁴ What makes this a *rational* utopia is that it follows from a core tenet of Enlightenment thinking: that we can overcome the traditional problems of scarcity, conflict and division through a rational explanation of what causes them on the basis of a causal-mechanical explanation of human behaviour. Moreover, central to rational theories is that they start from and take as their central focus the human capacity for rational judgement.

From an explanatory perspective, a rational theory is credible to the degree that it explains social states as a result of rational calculations, from a normative perspective, it is compelling to the degree that it offers convincing arguments to rational individuals to accept their premises. I suggest that both in game theory and subsequently in the neoliberal embrace of the market and in the gamification trend, the core feature in all these applications is the game, because games offer a social setting with a number of attractive features: they structure but do not determine outcomes; they are participatory, rather than top-down; they channel plurality into productive, ritual competition; and as such, *negatively* they replace conflict with competition and *positively*, they offer a site where players can enjoy the challenge of pursuing personal goals in an exciting field of fellow-players who are both competitors, and shared-beneficiaries in the performance of a spontaneous social order. Simply put, the model of the game as a blueprint for social order offers the fun of competitive interaction, whilst productively channelling the social plurality and private initiative that would otherwise be repressed through social coercion or lead to conflict.

However, this requires the transformation of society and with it the rationalisation of the player: players have a capacity for rational judgment but in practice they often behave

¹⁰⁴ Jörg Neuenfeld, *Alles ist Spiel*. pp.189-193.

irrationally. As such, this transformation aims to make society less conflicting and more game-like but this requires the transformation of the irrational subject into the rational player. Gamification, or the introduction of game-elements into non-game settings, offers the potential to rationalise decision making to incentivise social change, precisely by introducing an element of play into otherwise routine practical activities. Put differently, to make fun what is necessary. However, the ultimate goal here is not just to increase performance but to turn society itself into one big game, or series of games. As such, the gamification trend is only a manifestation of the underlying neoliberal tenet that generally competition begets progress and hence should be promoted across social domains. Competition not only dissolves the lack of choice associated with coercive monopolies, but also becomes a mechanism by which players can measure themselves in an stimulating environment with competitors.

At the end of this transformation, the purpose is to resolve a number of core contradictions that hamper the full pursuit of the individual as a player in their own right. First, the traditional problem of the tension between authority and freedom in the production of order. Second, the translation of ‘real’ conflict into ritual competition and thereby the simultaneous dissolution of the corrosive effects of competition. If competition benefits all, the tension between competition and cooperation vanishes, becomes the pursuit of plural motives. What also disappears is the traditional tension between rationality as causal determinism and the contingency of free choice. This is because the game is legitimated on basis of procedures, rather than outcomes (though, precisely this tenet helps to promote superior overall outcomes). Finally, the gamification of society overcomes the traditional distinction between work and leisure, that is, between activities that are motivated by practical gains on the one hand, and those we engage in for their intrinsic reward. Beyond individual development, however,

gamification also suggests it becomes possible to solve broader social problems by casting them in the form of a game.¹⁰⁵

As such, gamification offers the dream of frictionless social change, because transformations in social behaviour are not enforced but merely stimulated. Individuals now have compelling reason to participate in them, not only because they promote a desirable outcome from a rational viewpoint but also because they offer the intrinsic reward of enjoying the activity of game-playing. This suggests that in contrast to the top-down political attempts at transformation, social change does not necessarily require serious, centralised publicly enforced political decisions, which are the result of clear trade-offs between different social interests and may satisfy some but at the expense of others.

The Limits of The Rational Game

However, the practice of gamification is less straight-forwardly positive than theory suggests. In the same way that a theory of rationality must account for the frequent irrationality of human actions, so a theory that aims to transform society into a game must account for the tension between the game and ‘serious’ reality beyond it. Indeed, its rational strategy is to channel social tension into ritual competition and thereby tame the ‘real’ potential for political conflict. This also applies to theories which aim to rationalise politics through the model of the game. The attraction of the game is that it offers a controlled, yet open-ended matrix of possibilities that allows for the regulation of behaviour within a spontaneous setting. However, the desire to make politics and society more like game assumes the basic bifurcation between the game itself as a setting of dynamic control and the real world, which remains unstable, or always at least partially beyond full control. The game, then, works to the degree that this outside world can

¹⁰⁵ Steffen P. Walz, and Sebastian Deterding (2015). ‘An Introduction to the Gameful World’ in Walz, Steffen P., and Sebastian Deterding, Eds. *Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications*. Boston: MIT Press. pp. 1-13. pp. 5-7.

be brought into the game-setting, and players can be made to act on basis of its regime. This raises a number of conceptual and normative questions, which together point to the distinct limits of the game as a rational model of social order.

On an explanatory level, game theory both explains institutions as a result of individual rational choices but *also* explains rational choices in light of institutional constraints. In other words, its causality seems to run in contradictory ways. More importantly, its *prescriptive* potential essentially relies on the analogy between the game and the ‘real’ world, which is called into question during moments of crisis as we saw with the example of nuclear deterrence. Then, its rational *explanations* become hypotheses which presume the rationality of adversary that the theory was aimed to explain. When, for instance, we are in a conflict with an adversary who understands the conflict in existential terms, the minimal requirement of rational self-preservation seems of little use. Perhaps most fundamentally, because game theory starts from the individual it fails to capture how players not only get caught up in the game but also that part of the attraction of game-playing is the fun in engagement with other players. Here, the game is stripped to a series of strategic choices within a matrix of alternatives partially determined by external constraints and contestants. As I have suggested above, this is not so much a conceptual oversight as a reflection of a deep desire to rationalise politics itself: if only we can lure others into treating political conflict as a strategic game in pursuit of self-interest. This bespeaks precisely a desire to keep passion and true engagement with others out of the game.

As such, in the next chapter I examine a contrasting approach to politics as play activity, which I will call ‘aesthetic play’. This approach rejects the claim that politics can – and should – be reduced to the rational pursuit of self-interest within a shared institutional framework. Rather, writers such as Arendt and Gadamer argue that politics calls upon the capacity of participants to attune their social conduct.

2. Aesthetic Play.

Arendt and Gadamer and Politics as the Art of Association

In the previous chapter I examined the first strategy of reconsidering politics in terms of a game and thereby rationalising and pacifying the potential for conflict. There, the political game was theorised as the strategic choice setting between practically rational agents with potentially competitive aims. Consequently, rational play aimed to offer an explanation about the requirements for the emergence of political order through a logic of collective action. Moreover, the game was theorised as a practical mechanism to mitigate conflict, which is accepted because and insofar as it reflects players' interests. However, I suggested that for all its insight into the game as setting of rational interaction, it both overestimates the rational predictability of the political process and undersells the importance of politics as shared activity beyond practical and calculable exchange.

The aesthetic approach to politics as play discussed in this chapter can be understood as a historical and analytic response to the attempt to transform politics into rational play discussed in the previous chapter. Here, the central political question at stake is how we can reconsider the political realm as an intrinsically meaningful space for the mediation of human plurality? Aesthetic play rejects both the possibility and necessity of rationalising play. Rather individuals do not exist in isolation but always already find themselves situated in a world shaped by a complex of role models, cultural orientations and modes of conduct, which are largely given. The relevance of these is not only that we rely on them for our orientation onto the world but also that they offer a source of meaning. Moreover, this has less to do with a rational capacity

to independent thought than with our ability to make such practices our own. In short, they are *aesthetic* because they focus on the cultural forms through which we conduct, understand and evaluate our lives, and *playful* both in the interaction between our actions and the broader traditional horizon in which they gain their meaning and because they are expressed in performance, rather than in abstract thought.

To this end I examine the work of two authors who both develop aesthetic conceptions of politics as meaningful social activity: Hannah Arendt, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Within this framework, the experience of beauty and enjoyment plays an important role. Not only does it reveal our capacity for enjoyment beyond purely rational pursuits, it also means that in our evaluation and discussion of it, we can enter into a meaningful conversation with others in order to expand our horizon – a condition which moves us beyond the mere use of practical rationality. This in turn points to the normative ideal of play of a community organised around the pursuit of a mutual practice which is considered important in its own right. Whereas Gadamer explicitly theorises play, Arendt's references to play and game are less frequent. Still, throughout her thinking she explicitly relies on notions firmly within the realm of aesthetic play – appearance, performance, *agon*, taste, self-purposive action – to develop her political thinking. Moreover, below I develop a number of passages where she explicitly outlines the relation between politics and play and game, because these help us to draw out the playful contours of her political theory more generally.

Put differently, the perspective of aesthetic play allows us to bring together a range of issues in her work: the idea that politics is a *performance*, which requires a *playing field*, that has an *agonist* character – insofar as it respects human diversity, and which should be assessed through *aesthetic standards* as much as in moral terms. I argue that Arendt's focus on taste is no coincidence. Rather, for all the importance she attributes to action, her emphasis on taste as evaluative capacity reflects a broader concern *with thinking over action* that runs through her

work more generally, and informs her understanding of Kantian aesthetics in particular. I argue that only when we shift our attention from taste to play in Kant, do we get to understand the full political implication of Kantian aesthetics and the importance of play within it, which shifts the importance from discerning observers into active participants who become emancipated players in their own right.

The chapter is structured as follows. In the next section I reiterate briefly the key tenets of Kantian aesthetics and its critical reception in the phenomenological tradition, which serves as the common background to understand both Arendt's and Gadamer's responses. Then, in section 2.2 I discuss Arendt's aesthetic conception of politics as the performance of plurality. After a brief survey of the general aesthetic characteristics of her thought, I zoom in on her reading of Kantian aesthetics and in particular the political relevance of taste. There, I also explain what shift we have to make in order to defend my reading of Arendt's use of play. In section 2.3. I turn my attention to Gadamer and a central argument I develop is that in his view (aesthetic) play is a central organising concept to understand the hermeneutical project to identify the grounds for common understanding. In the final section (2.4) I bring together their mutual insights to consider the political relevance and limits of the approach of aesthetic play to politics. The turn to aesthetic play in Arendt and Gadamer forms part of a joint desire to rethink politics and social community beyond the strictures of political power.¹⁰⁶ As such, play becomes a normative model for a different way of looking at a community of practice held together not by authority or force, but rather by a mutual capacity to attune mutual conduct as a goal in itself. However, their wish to go beyond power as domination arguably also leads them to neglect its importance within the political realm. This raises a question that neither Arendt nor Gadamer discusses to full satisfaction: what are the institutional requirements for

¹⁰⁶ For Arendt, see: Margaret Canovan (1992). *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; for Gadamer, e.g. Georgia Warnke (2012). 'Solidarity and Tradition in Gadamer's Hermeneutics', *History & Theory*, Vol. 51(4): pp. 6-20.

maintaining the commitment to the politics of plurality and the legitimacy of different viewpoints both emphatically embrace?

2.1 Retrieving Everyday Experience

Since both Arendt and Gadamer draw from but also respond to Kantian aesthetics it is helpful briefly to reiterate its contours. An important concern Kant addresses is how to relate our capacity for reason, which is general, to our experience of the world, which is always an experience of particular things.¹⁰⁷ For him, a theory of aesthetic judgment thus aims at a synthesis by arguing that understanding is neither strictly rational – independent from experience – nor purely perceptive, or based on sense experience alone. Rather, human understanding of the world requires both. A theory of aesthetic judgment, then, is a framework that connects our (general) rational capacity for understanding, with our actual dynamic experience of the world, allowing us to make sense of and legitimate claims about it.¹⁰⁸ In other words, the scope of aesthetics far exceeds the legitimacy of an autonomous realm of art and the problem of beauty, but raises basic questions about how the manifold world of the senses, with the help of reason becomes available to us as unity of understanding. Nonetheless, within his theory of aesthetics, Kant has particular attention for the problem of beauty. This is because the perception of beauty exemplifies the conundrums as well as the capacities for judgments about the world more generally.¹⁰⁹

In short, Kantian aesthetics explores the issue of how the integration of the manifold of perception allows us to experience our everyday dynamic world as a meaningful whole. Moreover, this relies on a capacity for judgment that requires the interaction between our mental

¹⁰⁷ Immanuel Kant (2000). *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Edit. Paul Gayer, Trans. Paul Guyer, and Eric Matthews. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁰⁸ Samuel Fleischacker (1999). *A third concept of liberty : judgment and freedom in Kant and Adam Smith*. Princeton, N.J. Princeton University Press; Dieter Henrich (1994). *The Unity of Reason: Essays on Kant's Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁰⁹ This is also why the *Critique of Judgment* opens with an 'Analytic of the Beautiful' (first section, first book).

faculties, between our rational and imaginative capacities. For Kant, this becomes particularly clear in our experience of beauty because this has no other object but itself and cannot be fully understood in light of a mechanical-causal explanation: the experience of beauty is a hallmark as well as an exceptional case for our capacity to grasp the world as a meaningful whole.

The experience of beauty signals the harmonious ‘free play’, or ‘*freies Spiel der Vorstellungskräfte*’ of our mental faculties from which we derive a sense of pleasure.¹¹⁰ However, beyond this individual, subjective experience, our appreciation and evaluation of beauty for Kant precisely highlights our capacity to share with others and discuss such experience. Shifting his focus to our evaluation of beauty in expressions of taste, Kant argues that these not only presume our shared capacity to appreciate beauty but also that whilst our experiences of it remain particular, in our evaluations of it we still aim at universal agreement. Expressions of taste are expressions not merely of individual preference but rather aim at agreement with others in our estimation. That in everyday practice we disagree in such evaluations in no way diminishes their authority, because they both presume and aim at consent with others.¹¹¹ For Kant this has a broader significance: the (aesthetic) experience of beauty becomes the test case for our general capacity to attune social conduct through the shared capacity for judgement, which both presupposes and is aimed at a meaningful shared experience of the world. In other words, both the experience of beauty, as well as our evaluation of it, refers to a domain of human value, which cannot be reduced to that of mechanical-causality. Simply put, the fact that we can appreciate beauty already assumes that in our understanding we are capable of more than mere practical rationality, since the experience of beauty cannot be explained in general, rational terms. As we will see, Gadamer, too will share this multi-layered

¹¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, par.31.

¹¹¹ Ibid., par. 22.

conception of play as the dynamic ‘to-and-fro’ between us and our environment to organise our experience and act with others in tandem.

Phenomenology: Everyday Experience Beyond Kant

Both Arendt and Gadamer aim to reconsider politics and communal solidarity by retrieving the conditions of everyday experience. In doing so, they follow the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, which both draws from Kantian aesthetics and develops a critique of it.¹¹² A core problem phenomenological thinkers have traditionally attributed to Kantian (and Enlightenment) philosophy more generally, is its over-emphasis on the subject on the one hand, and the priority of rational explanation on the other. In contrast, the phenomenological tradition, from which both Arendt and Gadamer in part take their cue, aims to retrieve a pluralist understanding of our actual everyday dealing with the world and how we go about our lives.

The phenomenological perspective highlights a number of intellectual tenets. First, in its attempt to rethink philosophy and political theory from the perspective of everyday experience it rejects the modern attempt to ground these fields in a mere (rational) theory of human nature, which emphasises cognitive thought rather than embodied experience. Rather, phenomenologists suggest that a full understanding of human agency involves a serious reconsideration of the many modes through which we organise our understanding of the world. As such, they reject the attempt to reduce human understanding to the requirements of method.

This in turn entails a shift away from epistemology – the requirements for knowledge proper – towards ontology, or an investigation of the actual conditions of human experience in all its forms, not just abstract knowledge.¹¹³ However, beyond a critique of the modern

¹¹² Both Arendt and Gadamer explicitly discuss but also seek to expand the (limited) focus in Kantian aesthetics on understanding and taste. Both authors here make the shift from understanding to experience (which is latent in Kant), not only to expand the concept of judgment, but also to show how judgment is an integral element of our dynamic experience of the world.

¹¹³ Gadamer offers an interesting analysis of these historical and conceptual foundations of phenomenology in Hans-Georg Gadamer (1977). ‘The Phenomenological Movement’, in *Philosophical Hermeneutis*. Trans. and Edit.

emphasis on theory and epistemology at the expense of ontology, phenomenologists also develop their own epistemological outlook. Knowledge is not grounded in a human capacity to reason but rather in our ability to engage meaningfully with others through learned practices. Moreover, knowledge is not only a cognitive skill but an embodied practice: to know to find your way is skilfully and successfully around in the world. The corollary of this, is the suggestion that to focus on human reason is to miss an important dimension of human experience as such, namely that it cannot be broken down into the succession of facts but rather that it takes place within a meaningful space of everyday experience with others. This both requires and aims at a multitude of mutual practices, skills and normative orientations, which we practice largely beyond our explicit awareness.

This phenomenological approach and its relation to Kantian aesthetics offers a useful background for situating both Arendt's and Gadamer's work below. For as we will see, Gadamer locates the grounds for shared understanding in the cultural institutions, patterns and practices (e.g. the 'traditions') which are passed on from one generation to the next and which largely shape our understanding of the world beyond our individual constraints. Play here is the movement between the sources of tradition and their sedimentation in everyday social interaction. Similarly, for Arendt, the rejection of technical rationality as a ground for human understanding is the precondition for a full re-appraisal of the human capacity for freedom, or the human ability to start, signify and renegotiate ever new projects and social bonds.¹¹⁴ Freedom becomes a playful performance in its own right, not bound by external requirements of practical goals.

David E. Linge (1977). Berkeley/LA: University of California Press. pp. 130-181; *ibid.*, 'The Science of the Life-World', pp. 182-197.

¹¹⁴ Hannah Arendt (1998). *The Human Condition*, 2nd Edit. Introd. Margaret Canovan. Chicago: Chicago University Press. p9.

2.2. Arendt's Politics: Performing the Plurality of Men

First, it is useful to offer the general contours of Arendt's thinking and the importance of aesthetic categories within it. Put shortly, for Arendt, politics is aesthetic because ultimately it relies on a common performance, which in turn expresses itself in a joint commitment to a mutual way of life. Moreover, this entails a way of life that cannot be reduced to any deterministic conception of necessity (whether biological, psychological, or political) but rather constitutes the human capacity for freedom.¹¹⁵ Also, because it develops within its own sphere of activity, it should be evaluated by experiential standards internal to it, rather than through universal moral, religious, or scientific norms. However, this requires politics to become the stage on which we perform this practice of freedom to ensure that it remains autonomous from other human spheres of social activity, such as the economy and society. As such, as we will see below, it is unsurprising that notions of performance, practice, and the *agon* as a site of political practice continually inform her work.

The central animating problem running through Arendt's work is first to identify and second to reconsider what she perceived to be the crisis of modern politics and thereby to reconsider the modern conditions for politics as intrinsically meaningful activity. She was worried in particular by two important political tenets: first, the dangers of totalitarian politics, which saw the collapse of the distinction between state and society, and second, the reduction of politics to the sphere of material exchange in Marxism, utilitarian doctrine but also to a lesser degree in liberalism, with its emphasis on the primacy of individual rights.

In contrast, for Arendt we don't exist in isolation, nor is a political community the mere sum of its inhabitants. Rather, we become more than isolated individuals when we come to interact in and partake of the performative, public activity that is politics. As such, for Arendt, politics is a celebration both of the human capacity to establish and maintain human bonds, and

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p8.

the art of association which maintains the plurality of human beings.¹¹⁶ Particularly, in her later works, she develops an aesthetic approach to politics as performance: that is, a conception of politics as a social practice through which we reveal ourselves in interaction with others. This amounts to nothing less than the practice of freedom in everyday traffic. In other words, for Arendt placing *performance* at the centre of political practice is a way to address what she considers to be the deficient liberal conception of freedom as (mere) non-interference. Rather, in her view performance becomes the positive adherence to and expression of a shared commitment to basic values. What is at stake in her putting performance at the centre is both the celebration and peaceful negotiation of what she considers the basic fact of human plurality, that is, the idea that human beings are defined by history rather than by a common transhistorical human nature.¹¹⁷ This type of performance is aesthetic because, as Arendt holds, its goal literally is to put ourselves on *display*: ‘Generally speaking, culture indicates that the public realm, which is rendered politically secure by men of action, offers its space of display to those things whose essence it is to appear and to be beautiful...’¹¹⁸ Put differently, politics as the performance of aesthetic play.

However, for this history-based practice to occur, a common public space is required, and in Arendt, this is expressed through the notion of the *agon*, or the stage that acts as a political setting where people can both act out and negotiate their differences.¹¹⁹ In other words, the political sphere is both the expression and the precondition for the joint practice of freedom between individuals with contrasting viewpoints. As such, it is also a celebration of a human capacity to attune our conduct in light of a shared commitment to politics as a way of life. Still,

¹¹⁶ Hannah Arendt (2007). ‘Introduction into Politics’, in *The promise of Politics*. Edit. Jerome Kohn. New York: Schocken Books. pp 93-154. The first sentence of this essay: ‘Politics is based on the fact of human plurality’. p93.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., *The Human Condition*, p8.

¹¹⁸ Arendt (2006). ‘The Crisis of Culture: Its Social and Political Significance’, in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, Edit. Jerome Kohn. London/NY: Penguin. pp. 194-222. p215.

¹¹⁹ John Wolfe Ackerman, and Bonnie Honig (2011). ‘Agonality: Conceptions of Agonism in Arendt and Arendt Scholarship’, English trans. of “Agonalität,” published (in German), in Wolfgang Heuer, Edit. (2011). *Arendt-Handbuch: Leben–Werk– Wirkung*. Stuttgart: Verlag J.B. Metzler. pp. 341-347.

at the heart of this conception of politics as an *agon* for the performance and negotiation of human plurality, is a very strong claim about the importance of the autonomy of the political sphere, not only in terms of the standards with which we should evaluate it, but also of the requirements for its existence. And it is precisely the progressive disappearance of this realm and the possibility to negotiate political plurality, that is at the centre of Arendt's concerns.¹²⁰ This closely relates both to the particular anthropology, or vision of human beings, she develops to contrast other dominant such conceptions, and to her understanding of the purpose of political theory itself. Here, the challenge is to reconsider politics as the art of association beyond the modern strictures and technocratic determinism of political science. In the *Human Condition* Arendt thus discusses and contrasts three dimensions of human activity: labour, work, and action. Labour refers to the (biological) realm of human (re)production and human consumption, which is tied to requirements of subsistence. The critique here is that if you reduce political action to the requirements of labour, as classical Marxism does, you collapse the potential for human freedom into that of biological and material determinism. The second sphere, that of work, concerns the dimension of humans as makers, *homo faber*, which designates the systematic human ability to technology which allows us to control the environment. However, this dimension of human activity, too, ultimately understands our relation to the world around us in terms of the external determination of functional goals and mechanical causality. Politically, it leads to utilitarian technocracy and political consequentialism, both of which are antithetical to human freedom, because they ultimately explain human action in light of a determined outcome. (Where outcomes are settled through technocratic reason, any meaningful discussion about different actions plans is stalled: uncertainty here is not a problem to be solved by rational calculus but rather a condition for genuine freedom.)

¹²⁰ Hannah Arendt (1998), 'Part IV: The Vita Activa and the Modern Age', in *The Human Condition*.

As such, the final goal is to appraise the domain of activity she calls *action*, this constitutes the realm of human freedom proper, because it refers to the human capacity to start new things, as well as to maintain political bonds with other individuals beyond the sphere of material or biological necessity, as a worthy pursuit in and of itself.¹²¹ The perspective of action allows us to appreciate the open-ended horizon not as an uncertainty to be overcome but rather as the condition of human freedom, which appreciates that with each new historical individual there is the potential to make a difference and establish meaningful bonds with others. Canovan reminds us that for Arendt, action – the willingness to risk the new – stands in stark contrast to the desire for political certainty at the core of modern political ideologies.¹²² Arendt herself, in a passage on Machiavelli underlines our enjoyment that comes out of collectively seizing the political moment. Discussing two terms from Machiavelli: *virtù* – here, roughly the capacity to initiate political action – and *fortuna* – roughly, the (realisation of) a window of opportunity – she holds that: ‘there is no *virtù* without *fortuna* and no *fortuna* without *virtù*; the interplay between them indicates a harmony between man and world – *playing* with each other and succeeding together – which is as remote from the wisdom of the statesman as from the excellence, moral or otherwise, of the individual, and the competence of experts (emphasis mine).’¹²³

In this regard, it is also significant within the context of this research that Arendt shortly but incisively discusses the modern dichotomy between play and labour, which she argues, is at the heart of a dominant conception of human motivation. Within this ‘labour-oriented’ viewpoint, play comes to be understood essentially in terms of and as respite from the toils of labour – as a utilitarian pursuit that makes possible continuous labour – rather than as an

¹²¹ Hannah Arendt (1998). *Human Condition*; Ibid., ‘The Crisis of Culture’; Ibid. (1990). ‘Philosophy and Politics’, *Social Research*, Vol. 57(1): pp. 73-103

¹²² Margaret Canovan (1992). *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation*, p11.

¹²³ Hannah Arendt (2006). ‘What is Authority’, in *Between Past and Future*, pp. 91-141. p137.

autonomous, self-purposive practice or capacity for human self-expression.¹²⁴ However, what is at stake here is the underlying tension between ‘necessity and freedom, and it is indeed remarkable to see how plausible it is for modern thinking to consider playfulness to be the source of freedom.’¹²⁵

In short, for Arendt, politics is the autonomous domain for the pursuit of concerted action in the sense above, which here entails the practice of human freedom, understood here not as non-interference but rather as the positive estimation of the human capacity to establish and maintain meaningful bonds, attune social conduct to accommodate human plurality, and explore and discuss political commitments and action plans.

Playing Along the ‘Great Game of Life’

I argue it is no stretch to consider Arendt’s project in terms of play as this links together a number of central elements of her politics: performance, stage, *agon*, and concerted action in its own right. Moreover, it can be considered as *aesthetic play* because it stresses the importance of politics as a mutual performance we engage in for its own sake (as an expression of our joint commitment to freedom) within the carefully demarcated setting (the *agon*) particularly designated for that purpose. Or, as Dana Villa helpfully reminds us: ‘Arendt theorises action not only as essentially nonstrategic and noninstrumental but as essentially nonsovereign’.¹²⁶ This fits right in with the broader claim I develop throughout this dissertation: that the ‘turn to play’ in modern political theory should be understood both as a critique of and substitute for traditional models of political authority.

Arendt explicitly develops her interest in the playful dimensions of politics in an extensive passage of her essay *On Violence*. There, she offers what not only might be regarded

¹²⁴ Ibid., *The Human Condition*, pp. 127-128.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p127 n75.

¹²⁶ Dana Villa (1992). ‘Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticisation of Political Action’, *Political Theory*, Vol. 20(2): pp. 274-308. p275.

as an summary statement of her broader concerns but also outlines how these can be related through the notions of play and game. Therefore, it is not only worthwhile to cite this passage in full but also allows us to consider below how her treatment of politics as game links together the aspects of her interest in the performative, agonist, ultimately playful foundations of political life. Central here is the relation between rules and playing. As Arendt suggests:

comparison of the law with the ‘*valid rules of the game*’ can be driven further. For the point of these rules is not that I submit to them voluntarily or recognise theoretically their validity, but that in practice I cannot enter *the game* unless I conform; my motive for acceptance is my wish to play, and since men exist only in the plural, my *wish to play* is identical with my wish to live. Every man is born into a community with pre-existing laws which he “obeys” first of all because there is no other way for him to enter into *the great game of the world*. I may wish to change *the rules of the game*, as the revolutionary does, or to make an exception to myself, as the criminal does; but to deny them on principle means no mere “disobedience,” but the refusal to enter into the human community. The common dilemma -either the law is absolutely valid and therefore needs for its legitimacy an immortal divine legislator, or the law is simply a command with nothing behind it but the state’s monopoly of violence- is a delusion. All laws are “directives” rather than “imperatives” They direct human intercourse as the rules direct the game. And the ultimate guarantee of their validity is contained in the old Roman maxim *Pacta sunt servanda*. (emphasis mine)¹²⁷

What is particularly interesting about this passage is how Arendt develops the analogy with play along two, potentially contrasting dimensions: one dealing with what might be called the ontology of everyday experience, the other with the character of political legitimacy.

For one, it offers a critique of the liberal rights-based conception of rational consent as agreement on basic rules of play (‘the point is not...submit to them voluntarily’). For Arendt, this neglects the basic idea that rules both precede and make possible interaction, and that indeed, participation in political community with other people – not just with individual rights – is our initial key concern. As a matter of fact she argues explicitly that the ontology of play precedes the legitimacy of the (liberal) political game: to live is to want to participate in play. Whereas the liberal conception of freedom presupposes non-interference as central goal, for Arendt the entire point is meaningful engagements with others. Similarly, she offers an incisive

¹²⁷ Hannah Arendt, ‘On Violence’, in *Crisis of The Republic*, pp.193-94.

critique of legal positivism, where the law is understood as a command backed up with legal sanction, that is with the possible retorts to violence. Indeed, it is fitting in an essay which argues that political authority is lost, rather than exercised, the very moment when it is enforced violently.

However, we can draw out even more dimensions from this passage: the fact of plurality requires (initial) acceptance of the rules, insofar as it makes possible interaction between historically situated individuals; and such acceptance presents itself as taking part in the shared performance of play. In short, rules open up the political game as a setting, which facilitates the play-activity we engage in for its own sake. Put differently, rules are not only constitutive for common experience but also for a (political) way of life in that they make possible civil life with others. Therefore, rejecting them constitutes the ‘refusal to enter into human community’. Finally, at the heart of this communal performance is the observation of the famous old Roman dictum *pacta sunt servanda*, which redoubles as a corner stone of *Ius Cogens* (*Compelling Customary Law*): agreements are to be honoured. In other words, trust, rather than distrust is the cement of everyday social traffic. It is no coincidence that Huizinga, too, invoked exactly this principle at the end of his *Homo Ludens*, as we will see in chapter Four.¹²⁸

Still, I suggest this passage also manifests an interesting tension in Arendt’s thinking. On one level this is a short, if brilliant, analysis of the traditional Stoic motif of the requirements for the ‘game of life’, which understands reality as organised around given principles largely beyond our control.¹²⁹ However, I argue that this description oscillates not only between two levels of analysis – the game of life and the game of politics – but also between normative and

¹²⁸ Johan Huizinga (1950). *Homo Ludens*, p242.

¹²⁹ Interestingly, Adam Smith makes this link (which we also find in Epictetus) explicit in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*: ‘Human life the Stoics appear to have considered as a game of great skill; in which, however, there was a mixture of chance, or of what is vulgarly understood to be chance. In such games the stake is commonly a trifle, and the whole pleasure of the game arises from playing well, from playing fairly, and playing skillfully. If notwithstanding all his skill, however, the good player should, by the influence of chance, happen to lose, the loss ought to be a matter, rather of merriment, than of serious sorrow.’ pp. 278-279.

descriptive treatment. The game of life refers to an ontology of human experience of humans as historically situated, limited beings who inhabit a collective world sustained by cultural patterns and regulatory frameworks largely beyond their making but still constitutive for their existence. Similarly, the legal-political game regulates political conduct. For Arendt, their equivalence follows from the fact that the legitimacy of these frameworks does not follow from or even require our consent but rather from what they make possible, that is everyday 'human intercourse'. But this says nothing about the *content* of the law, nor does it follow empirically that all laws are 'directive' rather than 'imperative'. Arendt is right that the vast majority of law is facilitating, rather than punitive in a strict sense. The basic normative claim here seems to be that law is legitimate when it is not 'enforced' and where it is, it loses its legitimacy. However, it is striking that in an essay on violence, this not only introduces an overly-rigid distinction between the legal and the political domain, but arguably also paints an over-optimistic picture of the law as a normative regime. For, traditionally, law has been an instrument of government for centralised authorities to rule either a people or a territory.

Moreover, the legitimacy of the law within the legal positivist doctrine does not derive from non-coercion but rather from the fact that laws are not imposed arbitrarily but follow from our consent (at least theoretically). This transforms what might otherwise be an external imposition into self-chosen, 'voluntarily' agreed upon 'rules of the game'. The extent of the ambivalence is driven home when we consider that a rejection of the law 'in principle' need not entail a rejection of human intercourse in the 'game of life' at all but could just as well constitute a basic challenge to the legitimacy of political rule by casting doubt on the 'political game'. In short, there politics truly begins with the principled disagreement over the scope and legitimacy of the law as a regulatory framework as such.

Arendt: The Political Relevance of Taste

Arguably, Arendt develops her aesthetic conception of politics most elaborately in her (posthumously published) *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*.¹³⁰ It is interesting that there, she focuses primarily on the importance of *taste* as a shared capacity to judgement. Kant, in his aesthetic however, also identifies *play* as an important capacity and I will suggest below that this emphasis would have fitted more explicitly with Arendt's own emphasis on action – with its focus on bringing about new things in the world – whereas taste focuses more on the appreciation of what is already handed down to us.

The *Lectures* reflect Arendt's desire to rethink politics beyond the requirement of moral imperatives, technocratic determinism, and sovereign exercise of political control.¹³¹ Drawing on Kantian aesthetics, which holds experience and appreciation of beauty signals a broader capacity to share a common lifeworld, Arendt extends the scope of this idea to include politics too. For Arendt this means that, beyond the individual experience of beauty, we also have a capacity (and disposition) to share our evaluations with others. And these evaluations take the form of judgments about beauty, that is statements of *taste*, which are not just determined but negotiated.¹³² With this negotiation we enter the domain of human motives and reasons, which in turn sparks the discussion with others that takes us beyond our individual concerns, towards our relation with others. For Arendt, this reveals the *political* relevance of taste.¹³³ The fact that we disagree reveals our plurality, but the fact that for this practice to work even remotely, it both presumes and aims at a meaningful (open-ended) exchange. This opens up politics as a domain for the exploration of the different attitudes we may hold. However, reversely Arendt

¹³⁰ Hannah Arendt (1992). *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, edit. Ronald Beiner. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

¹³¹ E.g. Margaret Canovan (1994). 'A New Republicanism', in *Hannah Arendt A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 201-252.

¹³² Ronald Beiner (1992). 'Interpretative Essay', in Arendt, Hannah (1992). *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. Edit. Ronald Beiner. Chicago: Chicago University Press. pp. 89-156. p105.

¹³³ The claim is explored in Dana Villa (1992). 'Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche and Aestheticisation of Political Action', p294.

suggests with reference to Kant, it *also* shows how individuals from diverse walks of life may still be part of the same community. In other words, in the political realm, as in the realm of taste involves adopting a disposition of self-regulation which shows not only in our capacity to discriminate and evaluate alternatives but also a general refinement of judgment, which reveals itself precisely in one's willingness to leave behind personal concerns, take on alternative viewpoints and expand our horizon.¹³⁴

Simply put, Arendt develops a strict analogy between the autonomy of the aesthetic realm and the autonomy of the realm of politics: both have no purpose beyond themselves, and should not be restricted by material concerns or other forms of external determination. Finally, the goal here is not agreement *per se* (as we may disagree in our tastes) but rather the possibility to maintain a meaningful conversation, deliberate alternative viewpoints and to learn something by extending one's own horizon. However, clearly it *also* invokes the capacity for a community to discuss and deliberate alternative political action plans, where none can claim necessity, and each calls on the discussant's imagination to consider potential outcomes. Politics becomes a performance, that on the one hand requires us to take on an expanded mindset, but on the other also allows us to expand our horizon in interaction with others.

This performance is possible insofar as we accept these basic rules of play and has no other aim than the enjoyment of each other's company which constitutes the everyday practice of freedom. This is why I argue that for Arendt, politics is aesthetic play: the playful pursuit of a shared practice made possible by the mutual agreement of a shared ethos and setting of play. If this is the case, why then the strong emphasis on *taste* in Arendt? Arendt aims to show the analogy between aesthetic judgments and political judgments: both make valid claims about particular – shared – experiences, neither invokes a concept of logical necessity. Moreover,

¹³⁴ E.g. Annelies Degryse (2011). 'Sensus Communis as a Foundation for Men as Political Beings: Arendt's Reading of Kant's Critique of Judgment', *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, Vol. 37(3): pp. 345-358.

taste is the critical evaluation and appreciation of an activity, much in the way that public debate allows us to expand our political awareness.

However, whereas action is *generative* of new states of affairs, judgment mostly remains *evaluative* of existing ones. Moreover, although judgment is part of playing – the constant to-and-fro considerations for the required response – still, judgment is neither the whole nor even the purpose of play as activity: that is to keep going the meaningful flow of interaction between players. This suggests that in her focus on *taste*, for all her emphasis on action as suggested above, Arendt retains a strong preference for thinking over political action.

This raises two issues: For one, contrary to her focus on taste, it seems an important lesson of Arendt's precisely to expose the limits of aesthetic politics, which aim to resolve the problem of uncertainty through aesthetic visions of coherence either from the past, or projected into the future. Arendt reminds us that uncertainty is a requirement of political freedom because it warns us against fixing outcomes. However, secondly, whereas in the realm of aesthetics disagreement in taste has no direct consequence, in politics, disagreement is precisely where the potential for social conflict *begins*. In other words: which judgment is passed by whom, how is it enforced and to what effect? Arendt's reading of Kant rightly underscores our capacity to expand our own viewpoints to live together with others who may hold different views in a shared political space. Yet, the positive emphasis on our positive capacity to come together around a shared practice does not fully address what happens when we find ourselves in political disagreement. This is particularly significant when we reconsider Arendt's emphasis on the 'fact of plurality', our historical particularity. This may be an ostensible 'social fact' but it is also an *ethical norm* that must be upheld politically and cannot be reduced to a mere aesthetic preference: at any moment, an aesthetic vision of social coherence may lead precisely to a politics of conformity, rather than the practice of plurality that constitutes the heart of Arendt's conception of freedom. Here, a focus on *play* as a skill-based activity, rather than on

taste as a capacity to judgment might have better fitted her notion of politics as the practice of freedom based on the self-imposed recognition of plurality at the core of her playful conception of the game of politics.

2.3 Gadamer: Reappraising Play

In this section, we shift our attention from Arendt to Gadamer. As suggested above both authors elaborate upon but also respond to Kantian aesthetics. As we saw, for Arendt this meant developing the political relevance of taste (rather than the concept of play). More broadly, she develops a ‘playful’, aesthetic approach to politics insofar as our ability to take on an aesthetic disposition allows us to enter into meaningful conversation with others on the one hand, and the importance of performance. As we saw above, occasionally she explicitly connects the two concerns by arguing that ‘play’ is the dynamic performative activity we as specific historical individuals engage in with others in a world that is for the most part inherited rather than chosen. Still, I noted an important tension in Arendt between our roles as observers and our role as political players (who conduct the performance) and I suggest this is due to her focus on taste (and judgment more generally) over political action.

Gadamer on the other hand, puts the concept of play at the heart of his hermeneutical project. Again, the focus is aesthetic in that he starts from and argues for the general validity of the model of aesthetic experience and our capacity to enjoy beauty. However, more so than in Arendt, Gadamer foregrounds the dynamic interaction (‘to-and-fro’) between us and the world through which we integrate our perception of it into a meaningful whole. Put differently, Gadamer does emphasise the importance of play in Kant more explicitly than Arendt. However, simultaneously Gadamer argues that Kant’s focus on individual experience and rational understanding fail to capture to what degree human understanding is the result of largely inherited traits, skills, and practices, most of which we don’t examine critically but rather take

for granted. Although as we see Kant did address the problem of shared experience in his idea of a *sensus communis*, his dominant concern is the thinking subject. For Gadamer on the other hand, the full implications of play only become clear when we consider the constitutive role of inherited skills, practices and normative orientations for our understanding of the world. As such, his magnum opus *Truth and Method*, Gadamer develops his own account of aesthetic play at least in part in response to Kantian aesthetics¹³⁵

In short, for Gadamer play is a basic capacity that is constitutive of human experience and not a skill that can be reduced to a practical instrument for the rational explanation of the world (as we encountered in the previous chapter). The latter offers a reductive concept of human understanding which fails to capture that in many domains, knowledge is capacity to exercise a skill or practice, rather than a systematic explanation. At its most general level, for Gadamer, play reveals how the traditional inheritance of historical models, patterns and practice first opens up our understanding of the world. This stands in contrast to Robert Sullivan's critique, who laments the ever wider application of the concept of play in Gadamer.¹³⁶ This critique, however, fails to appreciate that for Gadamer (as for Kant) play is a fundamental constitutive capacity to integrate the manifold in a unified understanding of the world.¹³⁷

Similar to Kant and to Arendt, Gadamer emphasises the normative validity of aesthetic enjoyment as a self-purposive activity. This shows itself in our capacity to appreciate beauty. However, the full manifestation of play shows in the 'unity in diversity' we experience when we participate in shared rituals, festivals and performances more generally. Here, community expresses itself in and at play. However, here too, the relative emphasis on the unity of

¹³⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004). *Truth and Method*. Revised trans. Joel Weinsheimer, and Donald G. Marshall. London: Continuum. Par. 1.2A.

¹³⁶ Robert R. Sullivan (1989). *Political Hermeneutics: The Early Thinking of Hans-Georg Gadamer*. Philadelphia: Penn State University Press. pp. 7-9; 91-92.

¹³⁷ Stefan Matuschek (1998). *Literarische Spieltheorie*, p19.

experience in Gadamer's thought comes at the relative lack of attention for the problem of disagreement

Human Experience in and as Play

We find an early discussion of play in Gadamer's 1934 essay *Plato and the Poets*.¹³⁸ There, Gadamer seeks to develop the thesis that Plato's ethics can be located in the dialogical form of his writing. In other words, for Gadamer Plato's message is as much in the form – the dialogue – as it is in the content; and Gadamer develops this through the notion of dialogical play.¹³⁹ At the heart of dialogue is what Gadamer subsequently in his later work *Truth and Method* will call the 'to-and-fro' movement between the participants.¹⁴⁰

How does this notion help us to ground Platonic ethics in the dialogical form? At the heart of Gadamer's analysis of Platonic dialogues is the notion that we should treat them as an exemplary type of play: they both exemplify and illustrate the dynamic of play activity.¹⁴¹ First of all, Platonic dialogue is open-ended, yet orients participants through a loosely defined set of themes. This already indicates that dialogues have a dynamic of their own. Moreover, in these dialogues multiple participants engage in conversation and invariably the goal is not so much agreement as a deeper (mutual) understanding of the subject-matter. This in turn suggests the legitimacy and requirement of multiple viewpoints to any dialogue: without different voices, dialogue becomes impossible. Rather, what binds these participants is a mutual ethos based on submission to the conversation, where-ever it may lead, and the emphasis on persuasion rather than on enforcing opinions. Moreover, as Gadamer suggests, the meaning of these debates is at least in part in the activity itself, that is in the engagement with others in a spirited but cordial

¹³⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer (1983). 'Plato and the Poets', in *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, Edit. and Trans. P. Christopher Smith. Ithaca: Yale University Press. pp.39-72.

¹³⁹ Robert R. Sullivan. *Political Hermeneutics: The Early Thinking of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, p8.

¹⁴⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer. *Truth and Methods*, p104.

¹⁴¹ Ana Cristina Zimmermann, and John Morgan (2011). 'The Possibilities and Consequences of Understanding Play as Dialogue', *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* Vol. 5(1): pp. 46-62.

search for understanding for its own sake and as a celebration of company.¹⁴² Plato playfully exploits the dramatic effect of the interaction between what is said and what is *done* throughout the dialogue: the ethical debates about the nature of human relations are practiced simultaneously through the negotiations between participants to the dialogue.¹⁴³ A final characteristic of dialogue is that it aims at understanding and does not require fulfilment of exterior purposes: action may, but need not follow from it.¹⁴⁴ In other words, dialogue is an exploration of the requirements of ethical life and community beyond the immediate requirements of social action or responsibilities (as exemplified by the Socratic question). Rather, the art of dialogue itself constitutes the cultivation of a practice of being amongst, and taking an interest, in others.¹⁴⁵ In short, in Platonic dialogue Gadamer finds an exemplary analysis of a dynamic activity which is, apart from engagement in it for its own sake, foremost illustrative for our capacity to enter into community with others. The analysis of Platonic dialogue is also relevant because it helps us to examine in more detail the ‘playful’ structure of our engagement with the world.

Indeed, as such it is no coincidence that in his central work *Truth and Method*, Gadamer returns to the notion of play. In fact, I argue that Gadamer draws on and further develops his thinking about play to serve as a general model for human understanding: this is because for Gadamer human experience is exercised in and through play. Before pursuing the argument, we can already point to two clues Gadamer provides in support for this thesis: first the central location of the discussion of the relevance of play in *Truth and Method* and secondly, the remarkable structural similarities between his treatment of play on the one hand and his more general analysis of the hermeneutical cycle, as I will argue below.

¹⁴² Hans-Georg Gadamer, ‘Plato and the Poets’, p67.

¹⁴³ Robert R. Sullivan, *Political Hermeneutics*.

¹⁴⁴ Charles Taylor (2011), ‘Gadamer on the Human Sciences’, in Robert Dostal, Edit (2002). *Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp 126-142. p128.

¹⁴⁵ David E. Linge (1977). ‘Introduction’, to Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. pp. xx-xxii.

Gadamer, like Kant, suggests that getting to grips with the problems of aesthetics and our capacity to appreciate art and beauty reveal how we engage with the world around us and other people in it. It is worthwhile to reiterate that despite its misleading title *Truth and Method* is neither about ‘truth’ nor about any ‘method’ that stipulates the rules and procedures for discovering it.¹⁴⁶ Rather, Gadamer aspires to generalise the validity of the traditional interpretative approach to knowledge in the humanities by arguing that all human understanding is basically interpretive: because it involves the dynamic activity of contextualising what is new in light of what is ‘known’, which opens up our grasp of the new and may change our grasp of what was known.¹⁴⁷ As with Kant (and Arendt), for Gadamer, the analysis of aesthetic judgment is and our appreciation of art, forms an exemplary testcase to explore the issue, for the reason that art can never be reduced to purely practical goals.

So what then does Gadamer’s analysis of play amount to and how exactly does it relate to this broader theoretical ambition to highlight what understanding is ‘about’? His discussion forms an integrated part of the chapter on the ‘*Ontology of the work and its hermeneutical significance*’, and is said to provide a ‘*clue to ontological explanation*’.¹⁴⁸ In other words, appreciating art will help us get a grasp of the general argument and play is central to this.¹⁴⁹ Like the dynamic of dialogical play, play is here considered as the ‘to-and-fro movement’, which for Gadamer is self-purposive. Moreover, play is ‘presentational’ in that it suggests the capacity of any work to present itself as a unified, purposive whole, whose meaning emerges in dynamic interaction between the work and its audience. This dynamic ‘to-and-fro’ never purely concerns aspects of the work itself and the relations among the elements, nor the merely intersubjective response by the audience.¹⁵⁰ Rather, it is the dynamic between its internal parts

¹⁴⁶ Robert Dostal (2002). 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*. pp.2-3.

¹⁴⁷ Jean Grondin (2001). ' "Play, Festival, and Ritual" in Gadamer', in *Language and Linguisticality in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*. Edit. L.K. Schmidt. Lanham: Lexington Books. pp. 43-50. pp. 43-44.

¹⁴⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, par. 2.1.

¹⁴⁹ Stefan Matuschek, *Literarische Spieltheorie*, p19.

¹⁵⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p103.

on the one hand and the work as a whole in relation to the viewer the other that invites her to become a participant – an active player – rather than a mere spectator, in exploring it. Aesthetic experience thus requires the work as much as the viewer, because the former sets meaningful boundaries for the latter to explore.

Now, it seems that Gadamer follows Kant in arguing that this interaction is exemplary precisely because art is ‘presentational’ rather than an expression of interest and otherwise lacks practical utility. Aesthetic experience is the dynamic, interpretative process through which we come to an estimation of the work, and play is the condition as well as the fulfilment of this experience in an appreciation of dynamic harmony. Because, for Gadamer art has no other purpose than to show itself, studying how we experience it makes transparent how we acquire competence in other domains too.

As such, it is unsurprising that this description of play as the dynamic interaction of parts to synthesise into a meaningful whole bears remarkable similarity to Gadamer’s subsequent treatment of the more general hermeneutical conditions for human understanding. Consider how his analysis of the ‘hermeneutical circle’, or the dynamic of interaction between reader and text to arrive at its meaning, is strikingly similar to the description of play above.¹⁵¹ When reading a text, a central assumption we make is that it can be understood as a meaningful unity – in other words that the text is a unified comprehensive and comprehensible whole. Moreover, in reading we move back constantly between the parts and the whole: we seek to interpret new sentences in light of what we read, and we change our understanding of the whole in light of new material. As such, the hermeneutical circle is both a definition of what constitutes understanding – unity of understanding through the ability to relate how the different aspects relate together – but also of the activity of understanding in general: the ‘to-and-fro’ movement between expectation and reconsideration.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., par. 4:1A.

The hermeneutical circle, however, also reveals a basic pattern of human understanding in general: the dynamic interaction between knowledge and expectation in the continuous business of comprehending the world. This activity, too, is not circular, or a mere succession of events but rather results in what might be called an unfolding ‘unity of experience’. In Gadamer, play is the ideal-typical setting for the mutual dynamic, interpretative activity, which aims at mutual understanding if not necessarily at agreement. And in this sense, all coming to grips with the world is ‘interpretive’ in that one tries to connect what is already known with what is new, in the case of dialogue asking other interlocutors, in the case of reading, going back and forth constantly to what the text itself offers up.¹⁵²

This helps us to understand why Gadamer considers aesthetic experience as central to his account, whilst arguing that all understanding is interpretative (as well as applicative). This is because it highlights the ultimately playful character of human experience itself. Consider the performance of a musical composition: no two renderings are said to be the same, and in this sense all performances are said to be ‘interpretations’. However, it would be mistake to call these ‘just’ interpretations of an underlying original, which is uniquely appropriate and allows for singular expression. Rather the *reverse*, the work first sets the conditions for a meaningful exploration of its possibilities within such a performance. Moreover, although interpretations may differ, they are always guided by the criteria the work itself offers and by the desire more generally to present the work itself as intelligible, meaningful unity. Thus, for Gadamer aesthetic performance is a hallmark case precisely because there the purpose, or ‘point in playing’ is just that: to present the work as a meaningful unity to be enjoyed. Incidentally, this activity of playing highlights the ‘playful’ character of understanding as a dynamic capacity to come to shared understanding. However, it is important that this ‘shared understanding’ is not

¹⁵² E. D. Hirsch (1984). ‘Meaning and Significance Reinterpreted’, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 11(2): pp. 202-25; Lawrence Hinman (1980). ‘Quid Facti or Quid Juris? The Fundamental Ambiguity of Gadamer’s Understanding of Hermeneutics’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol 40(4): pp. 512-535.

a subjective agreement between performer and the audience on the meaning of the performance. Rather, both performer and audience share in a common understanding and appreciation of the work as it presents itself through the performance. For Gadamer, the performance is not the expression of the performer's intentions or subjectivity, rather she relies on her practice to share what the work itself offers to both (though each player will develop different aspects of it). In this, technical mastery is neither sufficient, nor the purpose of playing proper – and in similar vein understanding itself is never and cannot be mere technical exercise, because it finds its origin in our shared, everyday capacity for meaningful interaction. The point is rather to 'play well'.

In short, on one level *Truth and Method* is an extended plea by a humanist for the legitimacy of the humanities at a time when they were in danger of being pushed aside by the social sciences. However, on a more pervasive level, it also offers an extended critique of and alternative to, what Gadamer perceived to be the dangers of Enlightenment rationalism. Its reliance on technical rationality not only sacrificed the complexity of human understanding to the requirements of method but also failed to appreciate how our shared experience of the world have more to do with inherited skills, practices and normative orientations, rather than rational knowledge. If play, then, becomes a 'clue to ontological explanation', this is more consequential than it sounds. Inspired by Huizinga, Gadamer turns to play as a normative model to explore human experience beyond the reductionism of Enlightenment rationalism.

Gadamer's Aesthetic Play: A Community in and at Play

Gadamer returns to the problem of play once more in a well-known lecture 'On the Relevance of the Beautiful'.¹⁵³ Arguably, there not only do we find its fullest expression but also its

¹⁵³ Hans-Georg Gadamer (1986). 'The Relevance of the Beautiful', in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*. Edit. and Introd. Robert Bernasconi, Trans. Nicholas Walker. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 1-56.

broadest ramifications for Gadamer's social philosophy. Again, we encounter the familiar terminology of play as 'to-and-fro movement', 'purposiveness' (or 'inner rationality') aimed at and reaching its fulfilment in 'self-presentation' (*Selbstdarstellung*), which is shared between audience and work.¹⁵⁴

More explicitly than in *Truth and Method* however, Gadamer revisits the thesis that appreciating art is an exemplary form of human understanding by relating it to the broader capacity for concerted, purposive action. Although nowhere argued explicitly, it is clear that such communal 'playful' activities as ritual and festival are both exemplary modes of play as well as expression of a community's ability to attune mutual conduct in light of shared values and commitments.

The title of the lecture is revealing in this regard. Gadamer relies on the German *Aktualität*, which both denotes that which is relevant – what matters – and what is 'actualised', or has fulfilled its potential. As such, the '*Aktualität*' of beauty is its concrete realisation in specific works of art, as well as the continuous relevance of these works historically, to incite in us a meaningful response. Even modern art, whose substance breaks ostensibly with the traditional objectives of classicism, naturalism and realism, still aim to present us with the opportunity to consider its contributions as meaningful units of appreciation. Moreover, it is precisely its 'self-contained', or self-purposive manner of presenting itself that makes art a 'unique manifestation of truth whose particularity cannot be surpassed'.¹⁵⁵

Using Gadamer's reflections on the relevance of beauty, it is possible to connect the two Gadamerian 'models' of play I have discussed above: that of dialogical play on the one hand, and of playful understanding on the other into a broader argument for play as an expression of community. The relevance of beauty in the shared aesthetic play of ritual or festival combines

¹⁵⁴ Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, pp. 22-23.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p37.

this ideal of a community acting in tandem, without succumbing to singular point of view.¹⁵⁶ Rather, highlighting the polyphonic character of dialogue as a conversation between different, distinct voices and voicings, communal engagement in aesthetic play reveals the possibility of social harmony and concerted action in light of the basic limitations and differences of human experience.¹⁵⁷ Finally, what this shows is how such a sense of community revolves around a shared practice, rather than around 'theoretical' knowledge. In this light it is revealing that Gadamer explicitly invokes the Platonic concept of 'symbolic' unity, for in Plato beauty is the re-cognition of a fundamental concept of transcendental harmony.¹⁵⁸ This echoes Gadamer's earlier observation that '[t]he continuity of this Platonic tradition is attested by the affinity between the Platonic theory of beauty and the idea of a universal hermeneutics.'¹⁵⁹ Gadamer, too, ultimately suggests that beauty is the recognition of fulfilment of purpose in social harmony in light of basic limitations of finite human existence.¹⁶⁰ Here, play expresses itself in community, yet the community also comes together in play.

As such, the recurring figure of play as self-purposive 'to-and-fro' activity allows us to connect the various dimensions of Gadamerian hermeneutics. Starting with the idea that understanding means to comprehend something as a coherent, meaningful whole, Gadamer considers all understanding to be a dynamic activity of interpreting what is new against a background of what is already known. In other words, it is the back and forth process of integration of the new into the known, but also to revise the known through novel insight. This becomes especially clear in the realm of aesthetics, which in turn becomes the hallmark model for his general understanding of the human hermeneutical condition. Gadamer captures this in

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Jean Grondin (2000). 'Play, Festival, and Ritual in Gadamer: On the Theme of the Immemorial in this Later Work', in *Language and Linguisticality in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*. Edit. Trans. Lawrence K. Schmidt. Lanham: Lexington Books. pp.43-50.

¹⁵⁷ Georgia Warnke (2012). 'Solidarity and Tradition in Gadamer's Hermeneutics', *History and Theory* Vol. 51(4): pp. 6-22.

¹⁵⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful*, p15.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., *Truth and Method*, pp. 486-7.

¹⁶⁰ Robert. R. Dostal, *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, p9.

the model of the dialogue, or the dynamic conversation between us and the world, and others to attain better (mutual) understanding as a goal in itself. The dialogue also constitutes an ethical form allowing for distinct voices, wherein players submit willingly to the flow of conversation to guide their quest for understanding. We engage in conversations to engage with others as an ethical practice in its own right but also to attain greater self-understanding. In this sense, the play of dialogue also points to the transformative dimension to aesthetic play as superior understanding. Moreover, genuine play as dialogical interaction cannot be forced but requires a mutual openness between participants. As suggested above, communal festivities and rituals are important manifestations of, as well as sites to cultivate, our capacity for play.

Finally, at the most general level, I would argue that play as self-purposive to-and-fro dynamic captures Gadamer's conception of tradition as a transmitted framework of shared values and practices through which the world becomes comprehensible to us, and offers substantive models for the cultivation of play as purposive mutual engagement. Similarly, traditions are not static, or rigid but rather have their own internal dynamic of change as suggested by the above described hermeneutical process of understanding. Play, then, becomes the hermeneutic criterion through which we participate with others in a shared lifeworld.

2.4. The Limits and Possibilities of Politics as Aesthetic Play

What are the political implications of the perspective of aesthetic play as I traced it in different iterations in the work of Arendt and Gadamer? At its most basic it is informed by a critique shared by both authors of and desire to develop alternatives to a number of dominant political perspectives: first, the reductionism of utilitarianism, which explains all social interaction through the exchange of interests between rational individuals. Similarly, both Arendt and Gadamer seek to investigate the limits of political liberalism which emphasises freedom as non-interference and legitimacy as rational consent. For both authors, liberalism fails to consider

that our desire to engage precedes individual rights, because the successful implementation of a regime of rights already presupposes and aims at a community accepting its normative hold. Arguably the most basic critique both develop is of power politics as exercised through the sovereign control of the modern state. Although Arendt confronts the issue more directly in her work than Gadamer, the work of both authors is inspired by a critique of the ideological dimensions of Enlightenment rationalism and its political expression in expert rule as final authority. This not only prevents any serious debate about different political alternatives but is ultimately detrimental to political freedom, since it aims to redirect our capacity to form, signify and reconsider social bonds towards predictable, rational outcomes. In other words, beyond the claim to expertise Enlightenment rationalism reveals an uncanny desire to control: to control uncertainty, to rationalise political outcomes but ultimately also to control human conduct.

In response, both re-examine the relevance of aesthetic play as a model for non-instrumental interaction with others we engage in for its own sake – because we are communal beings to the core who desire company. Both Arendt and Gadamer start from the diversity of human agents. However, in the domain of aesthetics they locate a capacity to take on a shared disposition which allows us to enter into conversation with others and expand our own particular historical and intellectual horizon. For Arendt, when debating taste we enter into the intersubjective realm of conversation and Gadamer explores dialogue as a similarly open-ended mode of interaction. The core element for both is that we do justice to the variety of human viewpoints when we aim at a meaningful interaction, rather than at consensus. This is because the goal is not agreement but rather to expand one's perspective on the world by engaging in meaningful conversation: one should not be forced to agree, nor does lack of agreement signal a deficient discussion. The requirement of consent precisely introduces a technical requirement that limits the genuine freedom to enter into conversation. Given this emphasis on meaningful interaction, both Arendt and Gadamer stress interpretation as the dynamic 'playful' activity of

attuning our experience with others in a shared world. However, what prevents this from collapsing into the mere aggregate of individual viewpoints is that it is grounded in a common concern. Namely, to maintain what Kant called *sensus communis*, a common realm of experience. Indeed, as Arendt suggested in the extensive quote above, we can challenge this framework but you cannot challenge ‘in principle’ the rules that makes possible everyday human intercourse.

Although both authors stress the degree to which we are shaped by historical forces largely beyond our control, for Gadamer this offers the relative historical continuity which acts both as a window into the past, and as an orientation for understanding the present. Arendt on the other hand, focuses on novelty as a constitutive element of true action: both defying and embracing the very uncertainty towards the future that we saw rational play wanted to overcome.

However, at the heart of the approach of aesthetic play we also find a basic conceptual tension: whereas in their normative work both Arendt and Gadamer emphasise the unity of experience, in their social and political critiques they stress that the conditions for such unity are largely lost in modern society.¹⁶¹ Aesthetic play is to restore what we have lost in modern society. Thus, Arendt laments the lost precondition of an authentic political experience and in a similar vein Gadamer refers to the problematic dominance of Enlightenment rationalism. This points to an idealism, that is a focus of conceptual ideas and norms over empirical practice, in their approach to politics which challenges the political action they seek to retrieve through the analysis of aesthetic play; and this idealism shows itself in a number of ways.

First, the emphasis on coherence and unity of experience comes with an implied but definitive suggestion about a more unified, coherent past in the work of both authors. It is obvious in Arendt, who frequently invokes the rift between our fragmented society and the

¹⁶¹ Margaret Canovan (1992) brings this to light in her essay: ‘The Contradictions of Hannah Arendt's Political Thought’, *Political Theory*, Vol. 6(1): pp. 5–26.

unity of a more coherent classical past. However, in Gadamer this tension becomes clear when we consider what he does *not* discuss in *Truth and Method*, which focuses on the importance of shared tradition in opening up the world for our understanding of it. This focus on unity of experience stands in stark contrast to the extraordinary assault on everyday experience and traditional continuity by Nazism only a decade and a half prior to the publication of the book.

Second, it is striking that both authors put such emphasis on the exemplary importance of aesthetic, artistic and intellectual models in revealing the broader conditions of human experience. Now, certainly there is some validity in measuring a culture by its greatest intellectual and artistic accomplishments. That is, as long as we don't mistake these as being representative of the character of political community in general, or somehow equate intellectual coherence with social unity. In other words, their reverence for the legacy of the classical tradition constitutes both the source of their greatest insight and of their over-idealisation of the (classical) past. In his well-known lecture on ancient and modern liberties, Constant already observed that the unity of ancient Greek political purpose, so admired by Arendt, was maintained through a rigorous regime of social norms at a tremendous cost to any concept of personal liberty.¹⁶² Canovan suggests we should not ascribe to Arendt such an idealised vision of Greek politics, still, throughout her work it seems to serve as the normative touchstone for political action and to highlight the contrast between (classical) past and present.¹⁶³ Moreover, if Arendt's problem is not an idealism that separates a noble past from a fragmented present, hers still remains an idealism of intellectual coherence over the messiness of daily political practice.

However, the perhaps most basic challenge to their approach to aesthetic play is that in their desire to overcome the modern obsession with political power and social control, they tend

¹⁶² Benjamin Constant (1988). 'The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns', in *Constant Political Writings*, Edit. and Trans. Biancamaria Fontana. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 309-328.

¹⁶³ Margaret Canovan (1994). *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

to neglect the role of political institutions and the importance of power for the political realm. Arguably, because they seek to find alternatives to political power, they tend to neglect its importance in politics. This becomes clear when we consider that both authors mostly focus in their writing on the general human capacity to enter into meaningful relations with others but rarely discuss the specific material and institutional requirements that would make possible its full exercise. This is where the idealist focus on aesthetic play and on ideas tends to obscure the requirements of everyday politics.

We find a good illustration of this in Arendt's insistence on the radical separation of the political sphere from other social domains, which has been challenged by Pitkin as the result of an abstracted, untenable distinction between politics and society.¹⁶⁴ For Arendt, this is the only way to render possible the full exercise and negotiation of human plurality that is at the centre of her concept of freedom. Indeed, in holding up an aesthetic performance inspired model of politics she offers us an important contrast to the reductive visions – politics as domination, as exchange – we have become so familiar with. At the same time critics argue that her failure to address the institutional and material requirements of her political vision leads her to underestimate how political inequality may be built into the political system (and seriously limits the pluralist potential of her politics).¹⁶⁵ More pessimistically, at times it led her to challenge the legitimacy of other than in her eyes 'purely' political means such as legal redress, to tackle social and material inequalities.¹⁶⁶

Gadamer, too, in his analysis of tradition develops a general, rather than a specific argument: that tradition is an indispensable mechanism for the transmission of knowledge,

¹⁶⁴ Hannah Pitkin (1998). *Attack on the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

¹⁶⁵ E.g. Chantal Mouffe's short but incisive critique of Arendtian agonism in the (online) article 'Agonist Politics and Radical Democracy', *Pavilion: Journal for Politics and Culture*, n.d. <http://pavilionmagazine.org/chantal-mouffe-agonistic-democracy-and-radical-politics/>, last accessed 19-9-2019.

¹⁶⁶ Kathryn T. Gines (2014). *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

practices and skills is beyond debate. However, the question becomes more complex and at once more political when we consider the various tenets within the ‘Western’ tradition, even if understood very loosely. This is characterised as much by moments of crisis as it is by historical and intellectual coherence. Within his hermeneutics it is less easy to identify and scrutinise the pernicious dimensions of tradition, which may have remarkably long lifespans.

Aesthetic play starts from the celebration of a shared practice. Still, the question remains whether this mostly entails an evaluative capacity or also an ‘active’ one: should we mostly consider the perspective of the spectator, or also that of the political players? Moreover, what is the significance of *disagreement* within this model, particularly when we apply it to the political realm. Indeed, we could argue that the politics only begin with the reality of disagreement and the requirement of finding mechanisms to resolve it peacefully.

Taken together, the idealism of the approach of aesthetic play, I argue, characterises both Arendt’s work and that of Gadamer – with its focus on ideas, intellectual coherence and unity of experience – remains unclear about the political institutions required to develop their normative model of aesthetic play, particularly in relation to the importance both attribute to the legitimacy of human diversity and the plurality of political voices. It rightly emphasises human plurality and the importance of performance, yet arguably lacks a full engagement with the traditional problem of power in politics.

Hence, in the next chapter I will look at a critical perspective on politics as play, which aims to relate its playful, performative dimensions to its hierarchical and dominating elements.

3. Critical Play.

Derrida, Foucault and the Politics of Power Play

And when [Heraclitus] was requested to make laws for them, he refused, because the city was already immersed in a thoroughly bad constitution. And having retired to the temple of Diana with his children he began to play at dice; and when all the Ephesians flocked round him, he said, 'You wretches, what are you wondering at? is it not better to do this, than to meddle with public affairs in your company?'

- Diogenes Laertius, *The Life of Heraclitus*

In the perspective of critical play I develop in this chapter, playing becomes a strategy to destabilise conventional assumptions about the world around us, how we know it and how it is organised. In other words, critical playful theorists move from 'playing within the rules of play', to play 'with the rules of play' in the attempt to challenge the conditions of the status quo itself and examine to what degree it is a product of contingency rather than of inevitability.¹⁶⁷ The 'playful' character of critical play thus belies a deeply serious intent, namely to expose a fundamental error, as well as its social consequences at the heart of our thinking about ourselves and the world. The central premise here is that our thought is a product of the human imagination, expressed in conventions and frequent illusions, rather than a straightforward reflection of an intrinsic truth. As such, critical play aims to provide a developmental history – or genealogy – of how this 'illusory' mode of thinking came about, and with what consequences for the social order. It does this by re-examining the most basic beliefs and commitments at the heart of our understanding of the world, in our language, and finally in the institutions organising society.¹⁶⁸

I argue that the aims of critical play as methodology are twofold: first, negatively to develop play as a strategy to uncover and reveal the real consequences of our commitment to

¹⁶⁷ E.g. Tilman Küchler (1994). *Postmodern Gaming Heidegger, Duchamp, Derrida*. New York: P. Lang.

¹⁶⁸ Mechthild Nagel (2002). *Masking the Abject: A Genealogy of Play*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

ultimately arbitrary social institutions. Second, positively to open up new routes for the social emancipation of individuals and traditionally marginalised social groups by freeing them from the strictures of socially enforced modes of (self) domination. As a systematic critique of the political status quo, the perspective of critical play questions the unity and coherence of political order.¹⁶⁹ For one, what keeps the social order in place is a set of dominant ideas and mentalities, which are also reproduced by the subjects within that order. However, once we start questioning these, the appearance of social order gives way to a struggle between opposing views about how to organise society, each of which aims to shape it in its own fashion. Critical play also highlights that what makes society order ‘playful’ is that it is not the result merely of top-down control but rather emerges through the interaction between institutions, social norms and individuals who internalise patterns of self-control through habitual learning.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. In the next section (3.1) I offer a brief context of the ‘turn to play’ as a strategy of critique in contemporary social and political theory. Put shortly, these can be understood as the attempt to undermine theoretically ‘fixed’ conceptions of philosophical truth and to destabilise traditional conceptions of (sovereign) authority in politics. This will offer the stage in section 3.2 for a closer examination of one exemplary attempt to turn play into a strategy of critique in the work of Derrida. For Derrida, play is both a figure to explore the multiple levels at work in linguistic meaning but as a consequence also the impossibility to arrive at a coherent uniquely true understanding of the world.¹⁷⁰ Still, for Derrida play identifies the degree to which western philosophy is fuelled by a quest for theoretical coherence that reveals a dangerous desire to control. In modern politics this desire shows itself in the paradigm of sovereign politics as exclusive, centralised authority. Play, then, becomes a strategy to reconsider the character of authority by considering its conceptual and

¹⁶⁹ Albrecht Wellmer (1998). *Endgames: The Irreconcilable Nature of Modernity: Essays and Lectures*. Trans. David R. Midgley. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.; Oliver Marchart (2007). *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

¹⁷⁰ See par. 3.2 below.

normative contradictions. In section 3.3 we turn from conceptual to sociological critique. In particular, I show how, in his late work, Foucault draws on the model of the game to examine how contemporary liberal society has substituted traditional top-down authority for new, pervasive forms of self-domination. Importantly, he develops this critique through the analysis of the liberal attempt to substitute ‘coercive’ centralised (state) authority for the ‘playful’ decentralised model of the market but also widespread practices of self-control which keep in place an undesirable social status quo. Games thus become a model to examine critically how social conformity can go hand in hand with individual freedom in a liberal society

In section 3.4, I spell out the model of the political game and play that follows from this conceptual and sociological critique, namely that of *agonist* politics. Agonism draws on the notion of politics as an *agon*, or site of political performance, as we already saw in the discussion on Arendt in the previous chapter. However, whereas for Arendt the *agon* is the setting for the manifestation of human plurality, recent agonist thinking focuses on its importance as a site of peaceful political contestation, in particular of the liberal emphasis on consensus. Moreover, whereas Arendt puts great emphasis on the autonomy of the political *agon* from other social domains, in contrast, recent agonists have explored how ‘the political’ – the potential for social conflict through hierarchy – can pervade all domains of society, not just those of the traditional political realm. Agonism couples a critique of the liberal attempt to foster rational agreement, with a defence of politics as the peaceful battleground of competing ideologies. However, as I will argue in the final section (4.5), although agonist political theory offers promising leads to rethink politics beyond liberal consensus, its conception of democracy remains wedded to a conception of society as a forcefield where latent social conflict lurks behind the competing political viewpoints battling for pre-eminence.

3.1 Rethinking Political Practice: From Language Games to Critical Play

Before I explore more in-depth the status of play and game in Derrida and Foucault, first it is interesting to situate their views against a broader context of the critical reception of play and game to reconsider traditional assumptions about truth, politics and society. From the mid-20th century, the figures of play and game also become tools to destabilise traditional beliefs about the relation between language, truth and everyday social action.¹⁷¹

The work of the influential 20th century Austrian- British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein is exemplary in this regard. It is well known that in his later work, Wittgenstein shifted his attention to the study of ‘language games’ as epistemic exercises to inquire into the status and structure of linguistic practices.¹⁷² Wittgenstein himself was not concerned with politics, yet his ideas have proved widely influential in political theory. The basic argument is clear: meaning of language resides in its use; use is context dependent, and moreover contexts are particular and change over time and place. Consequently, at most, similarities in linguistic meaning rely on broad ‘family resemblances’, which defy reduction into an underlying stable conceptual meaning, and Wittgenstein suggests this applies to the concept of the game (*Spiel*) itself, too.¹⁷³ With this idea he wanted to argue both that linguistic meaning is open-ended and context-dependent, and to draw attention to the importance of language as (learned) practice, which is intertwined with other non-linguistic social activities.

Wittgenstein’s philosophy and in particular his conception of the language game has been instrumental in the subsequent ‘linguistic turn’ in the Social Sciences and Humanities, which

¹⁷¹ Marcus Sandl (2014). ‘Homo Ludens: Überlegungen zur historischen Anthropologie des Spiels’, *Internationales Archiv Für Sozialgeschichte Der Deutschen Literatur*, Vol. 39(2): pp. 404-421.

¹⁷² E.g. Ludwig Wittgenstein (2009). *Philosophical Investigations*, Revised 4th Edition, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, par 7, 22, 26.

¹⁷³ As Wittgenstein argues in the *Blue and Brown Books*, ‘there is a tendency to look for something in common to all the entities which we commonly subsume under a general term. We are inclined to think that there must be something in common to all games, say and that this common property is the justification for applying the general term ‘game’ to the various games; whereas games form a family of members the members of which have family likenesses.’ Ludwig Wittgenstein (1975). *The Blue and Brown Books*. Oxford: Blackwell. p17.

aimed to dissolve the clear separation between theoretical reflection and action. Beyond directly inspiring a Wittgensteinian approach to political theory (as found in the work of the writers such as the historian Quentin Skinner or political theorist Hannah Pitkin), it suggested that linguistic exchange becomes possible and refers to a background of communal practices, rituals and value orientations, which remain largely implicit ('tacit'). This not only emphasised the importance of communication as *performance* but also shifted attention to a fascination with politics as embodied practice, or ability to respond to others within a shared framework of reference. Correspondingly, 'knowing your way around' the complex of rituals and appropriate gesture become an important and politically relevant marker of cultural distinction.

A final implication, which more recent influential writers like Rorty and Lyotard have drawn from Wittgenstein's framework of language games, is that if meaning is contextual, we must reject notions about 'fixed' truth. For Rorty, play expresses the notion that understanding is dynamic, contextual and changes historically.¹⁷⁴ Similarly, Lyotard rejects philosophical 'grand narratives' in favour of historically situated 'language games' of political meaning.¹⁷⁵

A similar but more radical approach to play as a model for rethinking the foundations of the social order, follows in the footsteps of the Nietzschean approach to play (*Spiel*) as critique. For Nietzsche philosophy itself became a playful activity to unsettle basic assumptions and core beliefs about truth that keep us in their grip. If we want to become truly independent players, we should seek to abolish these ideas and define our own standards of conduct. Particularly from the late 1960s, this Nietzschean model of 'radical play' is developed first by authors such as Deleuze, Foucault and subsequently by Derrida, and more recently by the philosopher Agamben, to offer a systematic critique of the role of power in society.

¹⁷⁴ Richard Rorty (2010). 'From Logic to Language to Play', in *The Richard Rorty Reader*, Edit. Christopher J. Voparil, Richard J. Bernstein. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell. pp. 145-151

¹⁷⁵ Jean-François Lyotard clearly sets out his method as the analysis of language games, pp. 9-11. Jean-François Lyotard (1984). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minnesota: Univ of Minnesota Press.

For all their diversity, these authors share the idea that society is organised around pervasive social relations of domination that exceed the traditional political realm. To uncover these requires a sophisticated critique of power that identifies the interplay between top-down social institutions, shared norms and beliefs, and patterns of habituated self-control. Here, too, the focus is on the performative dimension of social conduct: norms are embodied and values are expressed in everyday interaction.

What is relevant for this chapter is that frequently, these themes are developed through the figures of game and play. Play here becomes a figure to express an irreducible dynamic of interaction, anywhere from the relation between a text and its wider discursive context, to the relation between social agents in the production of social order. Similarly, the game comes to mean a setting of social interaction based on conventional rules which structure but do not determine outcomes. Nonetheless, games promote particular patterns of conduct, which allows critical theorists to consider how apparently individual choices can go hand in hand with the enforcement of social norms and beliefs, independently of coercive central authorities. Put differently, if society is little more than ‘conventional’ spectacle, the game becomes the primary tool to undermine its legitimacy by exposing its conventional foundations. Play becomes the mechanism to unsettle these basic beliefs but also acts as a normative model for contextual understanding and situational identity: by exposing the recurrent attempts to enforce truth by fixing meaning or ordinating ‘correct’ behaviour, we can expose undesirable structures of domination. This in turn may serve as a precondition in the attainment of ‘free play’: setting one’s own rules of play through the emancipation of external domination. However, because adherents of critical play tend to focus on the pervasiveness of power and develops a critique of authority in *general*, simultaneously it fosters a strong scepticism against the sort of political institutions that might support political emancipation.

3.2 Derrida: Jester with Words

In this section I focus on the role of play in the work of Jacques Derrida. Derrida, one of the most influential post-war French philosophers, who had a particular interest in the relation between language, thought and its influence upon our understanding and organisation of the social world. Moreover, as an Algerian born Frenchman, he brought an outsider's experience to his understanding of the attitudes pervading French society and politics. This inspired in him a lifelong mindfulness not only of the dynamics of social exclusion but also a scepticism against the self-evident exercise of power of whatever kind (whether political or intellectual). As I will develop below, the notion of play has an important role in his thinking both conceptually and strategically. Conceptually, it helps him to tackle issues of the relation between language, truth and belief; strategically, it helps him to uncover the desire for control beyond our frequent claims to fix truth.

For Derrida, like Nietzsche, philosophy is a playful activity which aims to unsettle and destabilise how we think about the relation between language, knowledge and power.¹⁷⁶ However, in spite of its often jesting quality, Derrida's underlying aim is serious: to expose how the very way we talk and think about the world keeps in place an illusion, namely that our thinking and writing about the world is somehow reflective of and refers to a stable underlying reality. This is not only fruitless – because it is impossible – but also harmful since it reflects a deep-seated desire to aim at control by imposing our own understanding and beliefs onto the (social) world. For all its substantive differences traditional Western modes of philosophy and political theory share three recurring traits: these modes develop a model of order as hierarchy, moreover, aim to close the debate by monopolising truth, and finally, postulate an authority figure that regulates yet remains outside of this order.¹⁷⁷ When put together, they fuel a harmful

¹⁷⁶ Nicole Anderson (2003). 'The Ethical Possibilities of the Subject as Play: In Nietzsche and Derrida', *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Vol. 26 (1): pp. 79-90.

¹⁷⁷ This is my approximation of the steps in Derrida's critique of what he dubs the 'metaphysics of presence', or the basic belief in western philosophy in an underlying stable order that transcends the contradictory world of

theoretical desire for unity and coherence, which, when translated into concrete politics, keep in place a hierarchy that excludes marginal voices. For Derrida, this means we have ‘to recognise that in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other.’¹⁷⁸

Exposing this hierarchy must be understood as a strategy of resistance against its domination over our thinking and central to this project is Derrida’s theorisation of *play*.¹⁷⁹ Derrida’s strategy of play as critique has several aims: first, to uncover and thereby to expose the basic, problematic assumptions informing philosophy and political thought; and secondly, by exposing these to rid us of the dangerous illusion about fixed truths and to replace them with a more nuanced, contextual understanding of the world and our place in it. In other words, the project is to eradicate the metaphysical basis of our thinking and thereby release us from the oppressive consequences it has wrought.

What combines these aims in the work of Derrida is the notion of play as ‘*différance*’, or a radical openness that defies systematisation, or capture of our multifaceted experience of the world in one grand symbolic order.¹⁸⁰ *Différance* is a term coined by Derrida, which playfully mimics the French terms for ‘difference’ (as in opposition) on the one hand and ‘deferment’ (or postponement) on the other; both of which are captured by the French verb *différer*. For Derrida it thus expresses both that linguistic terms gain their meaning not in isolation but always within a broader linguistic context, and that because their meaning is context-dependent and dynamic, we should stop looking for fixed meanings and final purposes.

experience and linguistic description. For an analysis, see Richard Bernstein (1987). ‘Serious Play: The Ethical-Political Horizon of Jacques Derrida’, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, Vol. 1(2): pp. 93-117

¹⁷⁸ Jacques Derrida (1981). *Positions*. Trans. and Annotated Alan Bass. Chicago: Chicago University Press. p41.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. (1978). ‘Structure, Sign, and Play in the History of the Human Sciences’, in *Writing and Difference*. pp. 278-293.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. (1973). ‘*Différance*’ in *Speech and Phenomena And Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, Trans. and Introd. David B. Allison. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. pp. 129-160.

It is precisely this capacity that allows for the possibility of an ever new ‘play of signifiers’, or new combinations of meanings and their organisation.¹⁸¹

Play, then, can be understood as the principle of unresolved dynamism both making possible and preventing the closure of meaning, because the multiple levels at work in language can neither be reduced to each other, nor to some underlying fixed principle. In this vain, deconstruction is Derrida’s strategy to expose how traditional philosophy has precisely sought to fixate these meanings and how a different ‘deconstructionist’ reading allows us to explore the interplay at work between many, frequently contradictory dimensions of textual meaning: between what is expressed in the text and what is assumed by the reader; what is outside the text but somehow implied by it through its broader linguistic context; and finally between language as medium and the complex world around us it aims to describe. For Derrida we should not understand this as ‘hermeneutic method’ as such, if by this we imply a set of procedures by the use of which we try to determine the true meaning of the text. Rather, it is to show how the text operates and draws from these various dimensions, without aiming to resolve the potential discrepancies and contradictions we will uncover.

Politicising Play: ‘Plato’s Pharmacology’ and ‘Force of Law’

Derrida puts to use this deconstructionist approach to re-examining texts in his famous reading of Plato’s *Phaedrus*, which deals with the relation between speech, language and reality. Derrida puts to use his conception of play as a way to re-examine textual coherence, but also

¹⁸¹ Jacques Derrida, ‘Structure, Sign, and Play’, p294. Things always gain their meaning both in reference and contrast that which they are not; but this relation is not neutral but implicitly hierarchical. By way of an everyday example: consider a suited man in a working-class neighborhood; or reversely wearing a tracksuit in a business environment. The clothes we wear not only signal (different?) social classes but indirectly refer to what is *not* worn. They signal what we identify with but also indirectly what do *don’t*. Clearly, these wardrobe conventions are conventional and subject to change but they do have impact on the way we relate to others in the public realm (and are indicative of a wider set of social norms and attitudes relating to social class).

more fundamentally to identify its core ideological commitments.¹⁸² In *Phaedrus*, which ostensibly discussed the nature of love, Plato also develops his ideas about the relation between speech and writing and in particular the primacy of the former over the latter. Not only does living speech capture the vivacity and dynamism of conversation, as such, for Plato it also offers a more *direct* representation of thought. The dead letter of writing on the other hand, offers a mere pale imitation of both.¹⁸³ In his reading, Derrida points out that Plato understood clearly, and played with, the irony that he puts forward this idea in a *written* dialogue. Indeed, as we already noted with Gadamer, the form of the dialogue captures the playful dynamic of interaction in the pursuit of truth (and the implication here is that it cannot be accessed otherwise). However, in spite of this masterful irony, according to Derrida, Plato still aims to resolve the tension between writing and speaking by trying to fixate both within a stable underlying hierarchical order of truth as cosmic harmony. In other words, although Plato is intimately aware of the dynamic relation between thought, speech and writing, which for Derrida is at the heart of his notion of play as *différance* – or the unresolvable multiplicity of language as symbolic means of communication, he still seeks to capture its supposed underlying essence. In other words, Plato not only offers his conception of the relation between language, speaking and writing but in doing so also imposes a model of truth, which has as its core a desire to impose a fixed order upon the complex reality around us.

In his reading of Plato, Derrida seeks to identify how ideological assumptions reveal themselves in classical texts. He subsequently also applies a similar reading to the law as the principle of regulatory order in his essay *Force of Law*.¹⁸⁴ Here, too, the aim is to reveal a

¹⁸² Jacques Derrida (1981). 'Plato's Pharmacy', in *Dissemination*. Trans. and Introd. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp. 63-171.

¹⁸³ This is what Derrida means when he suggests that the "god of writing [here, signifying the self-creative, self-referential character of language as medium] ... cannot be assigned a fixed spot in the play of differences. Sly, slippery, and masked, an intriguer and a card, like Hermes, he is neither king nor jack, but rather a sort of joker, a floating signifier, a wild card, one who puts play into play.' p93.

¹⁸⁴ Jacques Derrida (1992). 'Force of Law : the 'Mystical' Foundation of Authority', in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*. Eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson. London: Routledge. pp. 3-67.

hierarchical opposition between two key concepts within our understanding of the legal order: law as justice, and law as command (legal sanction backed up with force), which is subsequently resolved by subsuming the one term under the other. The question Derrida asks is what happens when we pursue this need for conceptual and moral clarity in a practical setting, such as enforcing the law? The relevant point is that for Derrida this precisely shows the commitment to and consequences of trying to overcome or at least mask how play as *différance* threatens the possibility of a coherent, unified moral viewpoint. Here, the desire to resolve tensions between legal norms, and limitations to the enforcement of law come together in the exercise of ‘power play’ – that is the use of force which is both deemed necessary *and* justified by a privileged political agent who can wield it.

Derrida seeks to challenge the classical interpretation of the normative ideal of rule of law, or the administration of justice through the voluntary submission to the law as a regulatory system. One problem is that law shows its authority not just in its potential to persuade us of its validity but rather when it has to be enforced as soon as the law is challenged. However, more basically, Derrida aims to show that in the final instance the legal order is upheld by the state monopoly of force. This shows itself in particular in the paradox of the state of emergency where the state temporarily suspends the law, ostensibly in order to protect the legal order. Here, the state suspends the very set of rules that offer the foundation for its authority to begin with: it asserts its authority at the moment it suspends its own legal validity and in suspending the law seeks to uphold its legitimacy as a regulatory body of rules.

In short, although law rules when force does not, and force rules where law is absent, ultimately, for Derrida, force trumps over law precisely because in last instance force keeps in place the legal order. Here, the critique of rule of law is extended beyond the traditional problem of just and prudent political rule, in order to identify the perennial tension between the legal-

political order and the demands of justice. Here we see the full consequences of the attempt in law to dissolve the interplay between multiple social viewpoints and moral commitments through the enforcement of a strict unifying concept of order. In other words, the result of a desire for moral clarity and legal coherence must ultimately end up enforcing a rigid code upon those who are both bound by it but whose concerns are not considered in it.

Derrida: Opening Up Play?

What is the relevance of Derrida's interpretation of play as '*différance*' for our broader understanding of play in politics? First, *negatively* that, because language operates on multiple levels and always derives its meaning from context, we should forego claims to moral certainty and unified truth. This is because of the playful – unresolved – interaction between these levels, which defies a final coherent unified understanding of the world. Or, as Derrida puts it in 'Structure, Sign, and Play':

There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology-in other words, throughout his entire history-has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play¹⁸⁵

Also, it foregrounds the importance of interpretation as an activity: if play points to interaction, then interpretation becomes the activity of playing, that is, the ongoing conversation between us and whatever we seek to understand (whether it is texts or human conduct).

As such, Derrida echoes ideas we found in Gadamer about the playful nature of human understanding. However, by invoking the notion of play as *différance*, Derrida also highlights how easy it is for players to get caught up in the activity – a hallmark of playing. This acts as a

¹⁸⁵ Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play', p293.

warning against the colonisation of truth and the desire on our part to impose a monopoly of truth that precludes a genuinely free, open-ended conversation. In other words, Derrida is arguably more mindful than Gadamer of the role of power in the frequently implicit claim to authority we assert in particular in moral and political debates.¹⁸⁶ However, *positively*, Derrida's perspective on play sees in the ever-new play of linguistic interaction both the possibility of meaningful exchange and the reason of its open-ended character as ongoing project.

However, what politics should guide this more 'contextual' approach to meaning often remains unclear: although it is vital to warn against the dangers of imposing oneself, it is another to ask what shared political arrangements guaranteeing the actual free play between players might replace them. This is because one conclusion of Derrida's critical politics of play as *différance* suggests that when considered as a game, politics is caught in between two dimensions of power: politics are simultaneously both 'inclusive' insofar as the political order may contain and keep in political subjects who are kept inside but whose concerns are not addressed (say, detained migrants, or residents without citizenship) and 'exclusive' in that all politics draw up and enforce a boundaries between who can play and who remains outside. In other words, the political game does not only work along a hierarchy of importance *within* the field of play but perhaps more strikingly, it also enforces a clear separation between what is part *of* the game and what is not, and who can play, and who cannot. Although incisive, this scattered conception of power makes it difficult to define a clear political agenda for social change. Moreover, the playful emphasis in Derrida on allusion, contradiction and jesting risks to descend into political quietude: it is difficult to speak truth to power when your concept of power is all-encompassing and you dissolve the notion of truth.

¹⁸⁶ This is a point also made by James S. Hans in his comparative reading of Gadamer and Derrida. James S. Hans. (1980). 'Hermeneutics, Play, Deconstruction', *Philosophy Today*, Vol. 24(4): pp. 299-317.

3.3. Foucault's *Truth Games*

Where for Derrida the text can be understood as the instrument of an author's claim to truth, the law can be understood as the instrument through which the sovereign both exercises and legitimates his claim to dominance. This idea is expressed particularly well in what Foucault in his later work comes to call 'games of truth' (*jeux de vérité*). Consequently, we will turn to the repressive *effect* of such social institutions in the work of Foucault. In short, whereas Derrida mostly focuses on the influence of longstanding pernicious habits on our *thinking* about politics, Foucault throughout his career was particularly keen on explaining how ideas and social norms end up *shaping* society and social behaviour.¹⁸⁷ His approach can be called 'post-Marxian' because he develops a critical sociology that rejects the classical reductive emphasis on economic class to examine how beliefs and social norms shape social institutions to keep in place (other) pervasive social inequalities. An important aspect of the Foucaultian approach, is its rejection of the classical explanation of political power as top-down exercise of social control. Rather, he develops a 'playful' analysis that investigates how the interaction between political authority, social norms and ultimately self-control through learned behaviour together give rise to the social order. In short, power is exercised as much through self-control as a result of habituation and learned social roles as it is through political control.

Games of Truth

Interestingly, particularly in his later work, Foucault explicitly theorises both truth regimes, and their influence on social institutions, through the figure of the game: the model of the 'truth

¹⁸⁷ As is well-known, there was not only a difference of method and emphasis but also a degree of intellectual animosity between the two. This seems to have centered – how ironic – on the apparent misreading on Derrida's behalf of Foucault's analysis of Descartes. In what can only be understood as an academic take-down, this led Foucault to consider: 'how it is that an author as meticulous as Derrida, and as attentive to texts, could have been guilty of so many omissions but could also operate so many displacements, transpositions, and substitutions?' Michel Foucault (1998). 'My body, this paper, his fire', in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*. The Essential Works of Michael Foucault, Vol. 2. Edit. Paul Rabinow. New York: The New Press. pp. 393-418. p405.

game' not only allows Foucault to examine the influence of dominant belief systems in shaping present society but also to express how these are products of human convention and artifice, rather than signalling some necessary correspondence between thought and world.¹⁸⁸ However, we also see how the complexity of social order arises out of the 'game-like' dynamic interaction between authorities, social norms and practices of self-control, which structure but does not determine social outcomes. As such, Foucault's turn to the game as a model to study contemporary liberal society is no coincidence. Rather, it follows from his understanding that, at its core, the game becomes the central normative model within post-war liberal political theory to transform society.

In particular, Foucault develops the notion of 'games of truth', or *jeux de vérité*, which he starts to apply this extensively throughout his later writing. As he himself argues:

In short, the critical history of thought is neither a history of the acquisitions of truth nor a history of its occultations; it is the history of the emergence of *truth games*. It is the history of "veridictions," understood as the forms according to which discourses capable of being deemed true or false are articulated with a domain of things: what the conditions of that emergence have been; what price has been paid for it...(emphasis mine).¹⁸⁹

What is the relevance of this concept of truth games for Foucault's thought? First, it echoes his approach to social theory as playful, daring activity: giving up on certainties and 'finding out', regardless of the consequences, rather than assuming beforehand what form understanding may take. Second, it considers 'truth' itself as object of playful inquiry. As suggested above, Foucault's project is not to chart the historical development of truth, but rather the successive notions *about* truth and how these have shaped our understanding of society. Thirdly, the idea of a truth game suggests how social order is produced in the dynamic interaction between rules of play (social norms, notions about truth) and players; and how such changing rules, give rise

¹⁸⁸ Ferda Kemal Keskia (2002). *Problematization and Games of Truth: Michel Foucault's Analytics of the Constitution of the Subject in Political Modernity*. PhD. Dissertation. Columbia University.

¹⁸⁹ Michel Foucault, 'Foucault' in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, pp. 459-464. p460. Significantly, this bibliographic entry in a philosophical dictionary was writing by Foucault himself under the pseudonym Maurice Florence (M.F).

to new ‘games’ and hence new configurations of the social order. Fourthly and finally, this critical strategy of exposing the conventional nature of social institutions as ‘games’ allows for the liberation against the claim to dominance implicit in truth claims as such. The notion of a ‘truth game’ thus allows us to connect a variety of the central concerns within Foucault’s work, or as he himself put it:

In actual fact, I have always been interested in this problem, even if I framed it somewhat differently. I have tried to find out how the human subject fits into certain *games of truth*, whether they were *truth games* that take the form of a science or refer to a scientific model, or truth games such as those one may encounter in institutions or practices of control.¹⁹⁰

That for Foucault, understanding is as much a literary as it is a technical exercise, already becomes apparent from his style, often elusive and allusive, aimed at rhetorical effect as much as theoretical exactness. Ultimately, understanding is the result of playing with ideas and thinking in (inter)action, rather than the stable conclusions following the precepts of methodology, even if his work bespeak a much more sophisticated methodological approach than his texts often suggest. This notion of understanding as thinking in action and tinkering around with ideas explains in part his disregard for disciplinary boundaries (itself a key methodological precept in his work) as well as the wide thematic variety of his oeuvre. This emphasis on rhetorical effect is by no means a stylistic flourish but points to a key feature of his work, which is precisely to break down conventional notions about the presentation of one’s findings: the Foucaultian text develops its message through rhetorical form as much as through its semantic content and by doing this, it aims to make a broader point about how texts operate in general.

This ties in with Foucault’s interest in truth telling as a *social* activity, or in other words, what is at stake in the act of truth telling itself, which he refers to as *parrhesia*, or the

¹⁹⁰ Michel Foucault (1997). ‘The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom’, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*. The Essential Works of Michael, Vol. 1. Edit. Paul Rabinow. New York: The New Press. pp. 281-302. p281.

‘parrhesiastic game’. Rather than looking at the truthfulness of such statements, he suggests that the act of truth telling reveals its significance where the speaker may face social consequences (e.g. truth telling as activity of daring). However, it also shows how truth telling is as much a ‘presentational’ activity, through which the speaker signals her values and commitments, as it is about putting forward a definite claim about the world. This opens up our understanding of the activity of truth telling to such questions as who is authorised to speak truthfully and under what conditions:

Thus *the true game of parrhesia* will be established on the basis of this kind of pact which means that if the parrhesiast demonstrates his courage by telling the truth despite and regardless of everything, the person to whom this parrhesia is addressed will have to demonstrate his greatness of soul by accepting being told the truth. This kind of pact, between the person who takes the risk of telling the truth and the person who agrees to listen to it, is at the heart of what could be called *the parrhesiastic game* (emphasis mine).¹⁹¹

Still, beyond this seemingly ‘playful’ approach lies a serious project: to expose the supposed neutrality of truth claims altogether. Thus, a second meaning of ‘truth game’ consists in Foucault’s attempt to provide a critical history of truth as the succession of different understanding of what constitutes ‘truth’, what forms it can take and how to organise it theoretically. As such, this ‘critical’ project not only brackets truth claims by putting aside the question of their correctness but also – and more drastically – argues that all such claims are products of their specific socio-historical context, rather than representing timeless claims to inevitability. These are rhetorical because they invoke persuasiveness without challenging their own assumptions and establish their own criteria for what distinguishes truth from falsehood, through the “the play of true and false” and aim at dominance because they make an implicit claim about their own authority in relation to other similar such claims. Frequently, this dominance is reinforced by the privileged position and status of the speaker, who confers

¹⁹¹ Michel Foucault (2011). *The Courage of Truth. The Government of the Self and Others II*. Lectures at the College de France. Edit. Frédéric Gros. Trans. Graham Burchell. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan. pp. 12-13.

legitimacy on a system of beliefs, as much as these in turn provide authority for her. Finally, bodies of knowledge inform and justify the character of our social institutions and our very understanding of what constitutes the ‘desirable’ social order. Although truth claims never merely are manifestations of power-relations, they open up a space where social inequalities can emerge. As Foucault suggested:

When I talk about power relations and games of truth, I am absolutely not saying that games of truth are just concealed power relations-that would be a horrible exaggeration. My problem, as I have already said, is in understanding how truth games are set up and how they are connected with power relations.¹⁹²

Truth Games and the Production of Social Order

The notion of games also provides Foucault with an *explanatory* critical model of social order. Games here are understood as relatively self-contained spaces of possibility, which allow for play as the dynamic of interaction between players, and between players and rules of play in bringing about social order. This play, moreover, is characterised by the fact that it cannot be reduced to any of its constitutive elements, as it is rather the product of their interaction. As such, rather than being the result of ‘top down’ exercise of power, or distribution of social norms, the notion of games helps us to understand how society is produced out of this twofold interaction between rules and players. This conception of ‘society as game’ has various components.

For one, it defies any straightforward determinism in the explanation of social order, since either pure exercise of power, nor basic conceptions of human nature can account for the emergence of social order. Rather, the game demarcates a limited site of potential interaction which has definite (if implicit) limits, within which a variety of configurations become possible.

Also, it is the interaction between players and rules that establishes the order of the game. This means that neither a focus on the nature of players, nor a focus on the rules of play

¹⁹² Michel Foucault, *Ethics*, ‘The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom’, p296.

allows us to explain the nature of social order, because they are mutually constitutive: what constitutes a player, and how to act as one, is defined by the rules of play, yet it is first by ‘putting them into play’, that these are activated. Related to this is the dynamic of interaction between explicit and implicit rules of play, notions and standards of correctness within the sphere of playing. Thus, an important aspect of Foucault’s explanation as to why social order remains, if there is no legitimate foundation for its continuation relies as much on self-control – growing into and accepting as valid the myriad of social norms as pertaining to your own conduct – as it does on ‘external’ regimentation and active coercion of social conduct through social institutions.¹⁹³ Social order constitutes a ‘truth game’ where players accept the validity and even fundamental correctness of the rules to which they ‘consent’. In Foucault’s own work this is, for instance, how we accommodate to and come to perform social norms about gender. However, this applies equally to social media users, who voluntarily sign up but come to embrace the frequently competitive incentive schemes through which they operate, or for academic instructors who come to understand their performance in light of student evaluations, which are then used by academic institutions for marketing purposes.

Moreover, if games are relatively self-contained spaces of interaction, the ‘validity’ of their rules and their outcomes is ‘internal’ to these games. This notion also fits with Foucault’s genealogical understanding of history as a sequence of relatively self-contained notions about truth, each producing the criteria for their own correctness, none of which can aspire to timeless validity. However, if social order is a game, games have their own ‘internal’ models of organisation and standards of correctness, this also has important implications for our understanding of the player: if players are defined and produced by the game they play, as much as the other way around, it is an illusion to consider a ‘transcendental’ player, whose characteristics remain stable historically. Each game is played by, yet also gives rise to its own

¹⁹³ E.g. John D. Caputo & Mark Yount, Eds. (1993). *Foucault and the Critique of Institutions*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press.

‘type’ of player. This calls into question, or at any rate challenges, the importance of a stable human nature.¹⁹⁴

In short, what Foucault wants to do with the critical analysis of society through the framework of the game is to highlight how social organisation is never just the product of debates about how to apply collective rules, but rather the controversy about what should be these ‘rules of play’ should apply and how to enforce them. Here, the use of truth games is to reopen the debate with liberals by saying: you’re playing a game and you ask us to play along and accept your rules of play, based on our consent to common institutions rooted in a mutual capacity for rationality and respect for individual rights. However, what if we *reject* this claim? Then, the authority of your institutions no longer follows from rational argument. Thus, to focus on truth games we play in trying to settle moral and political debates, also allows us to see how in any community we can find controversy not only on the application of shared norms but also on the status of these rules to begin with.

Politics as Self-regulation and the Self-regulation of Politics

We find arguably the fullest expression of Foucault’s understanding of society as game is in his later analysis of Neoliberalism in the well-known lecture series on *The Birth of Biopolitics*.¹⁹⁵ This treatment highlights not only the liberal ‘game-like’ conception of society with its emphasis on (formal) rights that structure but do not determine social outcomes within a setting of economic competition. Or, in other words, its generalisation of the model of the economic game to understand societal relations. More fundamentally, what Foucault’s analysis also allows us to explore is the full implications of neoliberalism as a political philosophy or basic normative vision of the social order aiming to balance the two play-dimensions of the game as

¹⁹⁴ ‘Man is a recent invention’. Michel Foucault (1994). *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage Books. p386.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. (2008). *The Birth of Biopolitics*. Lectures at the College de France, 1978-79. Edit. Michel Senellart. Trans. Graham Burchell. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

competitive setting and play as collective self-expression at the heart of modern politics. This sheds additional light on the model of the rational game and the recent trends in gamification I discussed in chapter One.

A key question that Foucault addresses is what ties political liberalism, with its emphasis on individual liberty and limited government, to economic liberalism, which emphasizes the priority of the market as a free setting of social exchange: the emphasis on *self-regulation*.¹⁹⁶ Beyond the emphasis on individual rights and ‘limited government’, the positive capacity for (collective) self-regulation allows for the synthesis between individual interests on the one hand, and collective purposes on the other in the liberal doctrine. Still, this also constitutes the paradox that the pursuit of freedom (in the form of autonomy as self-legislation) requires constant supervision and dynamic control (in the form of self-control).

What changes in Post-war (neo)liberal political theory is the idea that markets as the domain of free exchange should come to check the monopoly of political power as exercised by government: markets are anarchical, whereas politics is essentially monopolistic. Beyond this critique of centralised power it is possible to identify a positive normative vision that Foucault identifies through the notion of ‘governmentality’, or the central principle of constant self-regulation (of individuals, of political authorities, and ultimately of markets) at the heart of liberal politics. This ideal highlights that if we cultivate the human capacity for self-regulation, what emerges is a social order not controlled through top-down exercise of central authority, but rather a spontaneous order emerging through the free play of social forces. As such, the game offers the baseline conditions, or regulatory framework for the production of the social order which emerges from and is revealed through the spontaneous interaction between self-purposive interaction between individuals and organisations. In other words, it is by

¹⁹⁶ Indeed, that market competition requires constant dynamic state management, rather than (mere) laissez-faire politics is what distinguishes classical liberalism from the neoliberal political program. Michel Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, pp.118-121.

generalising the model of the market as economic game that we can resolve the traditional tension between regulation and freedom and between rational self-interest and collective self-expression: between play and game. This resolution is possible because on the one hand centralised regulation is essentially put to the service of cultivating the human capacity for self-regulation, whereas on the other because the market itself offers a synthesis between competition and cooperation. Markets emerge through competition but competition also acts as regulation of the market, moreover, this model balances the competitive dimension of the game, with the collective self-expression of play as (self)regulative idea: ‘We have therefore a system of laws as the rules of the game, and then a game which, through the spontaneity of its economic processes, displays a certain concrete order’¹⁹⁷ Within this liberal vision of society, the social order is the manifestation of free pursuit of individual goals and aspirations as channelled through the decentralised principle of the market, which acts both as a check on excessive political authority and which is controlled internally through the self-regulative principle of economic competition. Market failure here is not a systematic aspect of markets in general (as suggested by the Marxist emphasis on the inherent potential to oligopoly - and eventually monopoly - as a result of existential competition for economic domination), but rather a defect that can regulated politically. However, and this both completes the liberal normative vision of the game and reveals its paradox, as Foucault suggests:

The game, mechanisms, and effects of competition which we identify and enhance are not at all natural phenomena; competition is not the result of a natural interplay of appetites, instincts, behaviour, and so on. In reality, the effects of competition are due only to the essence that characterises and constitutes it. The beneficial effects of competition are not due to a pre-existing nature, to a natural given that it brings with it...has its own structure. Its effects are only produced if this logic is respected. It is, as it were, *a formal game between inequalities*; it is not *a natural game between individuals and behaviours* (emphasis mine).¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ Michel Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, p173.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p 120.

In other words, although competition is the mechanism through which the spontaneous order of markets is produced, markets themselves often do not emerge spontaneously but rather require active political intervention.

This, then, becomes the central political goal of the modern vision of liberalism: not merely to ‘liberalise’ markets by eradicating legal boundaries but rather to introduce the market to social domains where it was not active previously, including aspects of government itself. This signals the contemporary shift from ‘government’ as centralised rule, to ‘governance’ as the (constant) administration of the regulatory framework for a decentralised civil society.¹⁹⁹ This paradox – that economic markets are at once basic to the liberal explanation of economics, yet necessarily require constant political interference – explains why the new branch of liberalism is a *political philosophy*, rather than mere doctrine of *economic management*.²⁰⁰ At its heart we find a normative vision of society as the free exchange between individuals in pursuit of their own interests, who collectively give rise to a spontaneous social order, which requires active (and continuous) political intervention to set it and keep it on its right course. Moreover, as Foucault argues, its theory of social institutions also requires a conception of the player who understands herself primarily as the emancipated individual in pursuit of her own goals.

¹⁹⁹ E.g. Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, p173: ‘In short, both for the state and for individuals, the economy must be a game: a set of regulated activities-you can see that we have come back to what we were saying at the start-but in which the rules are not decisions which someone takes for others. It is a set of rules which determine the way in which each must play a game whose outcome is not known by anyone. The economy is a game and the legal institution which frames the economy should be thought of as the rules of the game. The Rule of law and *l'Etat de droit* formalize the action of government as a provider of rules for an economic game in which the only players, the only real agents, must be individuals, or let's say, if you like, enterprises. The general form taken by the institutional framework in a glewed capitalism should be a game of enterprises regulated internally by a juridical institutional framework guaranteed by the state. It is a rule of the economic game and not a purposeful economic-social control’

²⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. 201-202: ‘This is the idea that the economy is basically a game, that it develops as a game between partners, that the whole of society must be permeated by this economic game, and that the essential role of the state is to define the economic rules of the game and to make sure that they are in fact applied.’

3.4 Agonism: Politics as Peaceful Battleground?

We can understand the political theory of agonism as the translation into politics of these theoretical and sociological insights. Agonism emphasises social division over social unity, it focuses on politics as performance rather than rational debate, and it highlights confrontation over consensus. Agonism starts from the basic idea that politics rely on an inherent tension: that it seeks to resolve the social division that requires its emergence in the first place.²⁰¹ In other words, politics both refer to the activity to articulate social differences, as well as the activity to mediate them. As such, negatively agonism is a critique of the pervasive dominance of the liberal desire for rational agreement in politics. At its best this emphasis on consensus is illusory, yet at worst it marginalises legitimate dissent by failing to take disagreement seriously: for, if agreement is the product of rationality, so then disagreement stems from political irrationality. Thus, agonists hold, liberals have a tendency to reduce political difference to moral disagreement, which is particularly dangerous when a majority presents itself as the exclusive voice of reason. Therefore, agonists such as Mouffe and Tully have turned into an explicit political critique Foucault's analysis that beyond its focus on limited government and individual liberty, liberalism has its own totalising tendencies not just insofar as it wants to transform all of society in light of its own tenets but also that it claims for itself the status of master rationality against which all other debate is to be measured.²⁰²

However, beyond this 'negative' critique of liberal orthodoxy, agonists seek to rethink politics as a playground for the expression of and peaceful confrontation between different

²⁰¹ E.g. 'Introduction: For an Agonistic Pluralism', in Chantal Mouffe (1993). *Return of the Political*. London: Verso. pp. 1-8; Ibid. (1999).; 'Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?', *Social Research*, Vol. 66 (3): pp. 745-758.

²⁰² E.g. Chantal Mouffe, 'Deliberative Democracy', p752: by postulating the availability of public sphere where power and antagonism would have been eliminated and where a rational consensus would have been realized, this model of democratic politics denies the central role in politics of the conflictual dimension and its crucial role in the formation of collective identities. James Tully (2008). 'Chapter 4: The Agonistic freedoms of citizens', in *Public Philosophy in a New Key*, Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 135-159. Moreover, the project draws direct inspiration from Foucaultian approach to philosophy as critical activity (chapter 2).

political viewpoints. Thus, agonism can be understood as a defence of democratic pluralism against liberal orthodoxy. The central question here becomes: how can we do justice to social differences without letting them escalate into social conflict?

Here, the full extent of the ‘playful’ dimensions of agonist political theory come to the fore. Essentially, agonism revolves around the possibility to maintain political competition within a demarcated setting of peaceful democratic confrontation. In other words, it transforms politics into a playground (*agon*) where social differences on the one hand can be articulated and revealed, yet on the other are channelled into ritualised competition. Put differently, the *agon* channels the potential for genuine social antagonism and with it the possibility of real conflict through the democratic process. At the same time, it acknowledges that social divisions cannot be ‘resolved’ once and for all but are constitutive of all political action and integral to any community. To say, then, that politics is an agonist game is to suggest that the game offers a setting where players can battle out their social differences peacefully, whilst admitting that no comprehensive solutions to social issues are possible.

It also means that – as we saw elsewhere – the rules of the game are constitutive of the activity they make possible. In contrast to classical Marxism, within an agonist context this means both that social divisions are not reduced to class differences, and that the political realm may also become the autonomous setting where latent social disagreements become salient.²⁰³ Thus, whereas liberalism emphasises agreement and rational debate, agonists point out the importance of sentiment and performance in politics. For politics to become a site of proper ‘ritualised competition’, it has to give leeway to the embodied articulation of social differences, which otherwise remain neglected, or worse, find destructive outlets beyond the realm of political negotiation. Moreover, this acknowledgment also gives space to the diversity of social voices and viewpoints beyond the realm of mainstream political debate; and in this sense, the

²⁰³ Andrew Schaap (2009). ‘Introduction’, in *Law and Agonistic Politics*. Farnham: Ashgate. pp. 1-14. pp. 2-3.

competitive dimension of democratic politics here both serves as counter-weight against technocratic government, and as a defence of the plurality of genuinely diverse political viewpoints.

In short, agonism develops a democratic counterweight to liberal technocracy by theorising the agonist game as a form of ritual political competition within a demarcated setting of peaceful confrontation, which funnels potential social conflict into the peaceful confrontation of political viewpoints. However, and this is essential, this includes the controversy over the extent and scope of political debate and action too. In this sense, the *agon* significantly exceeds beyond the traditional realm of parliamentary politics to include any setting where social differences may come to the fore and require political articulation and (re)negotiation. As can be summarised ‘the political’, that is, the capacity for social conflict due to exercise of power relations, extends beyond the realm of politics.

3.5 Critical Play and the Politics of Power Play

Put together, a critical conception of politics as *power play* emerges. This entails not merely the strategic pursuit of domination of one party over another, but rather the enforced social unity based on a claim to revealed truth. Moreover, beyond top-down control, the social order is kept in place through the interaction between central authorities, social norms and self-control. This is why power is said to be productive, rather than merely coercive: it is a feature of all social relations going beyond the more clearly defined hierarchical authority in the traditional political realm and reinforced through learned behaviour as much as through force. As Derrida maintains, this power-play orientated model of order as hierarchy, with a designated authority at the top and deductive, rationalist pursuit of truth, has deeply shaped western thought in its desire for coherence and unity, often resulting in the subordination and marginalisation of other voices.

Foucault has extended this analysis by analysing how dominant social norms come to inform social institutions that shape our daily social conduct, which are often reinforced by regimes of expertise (truth games) that demarcate the limits of authoritative understanding and social standards. However, because society inherently is a forcefield shaped by multiple, opposing forces and important goal of critical play is to reveal the illusory basis of this desire for enforced social unity, in part by undermining its theoretical coherence and also by uncovering alternative undercurrents of thought and action subverting this mainstream. It is through the systematic analysis of social relations of domination that we not only understand how social conformity is enforced often at the expense of marginalised individuals and groups but also how this constitutes an important precondition for social liberation from these strictures.

In this sense, we can see in the critical play of Derrida and Foucault, a concern stretching back to Nietzsche: all three both develop and radicalise the Enlightenment project of rejecting the uncritical acceptance of traditional authority. However, they also extend this critique to the concept of *authority* itself – and any claim to authority that restricts the individual.²⁰⁴

This also raises a paradox. Critical play aims to offer a systematic explanation of how conventional ideas keep in place an undesirable contemporary order: its observation highlights the pervasiveness of relations of power, whereas its normative idea is the liberation *from* such strictures – that is, the ideal of the emancipation of individuals and marginalised social groups (and more generally, the eradication of pernicious social attitudes). The latter seeks emancipation from externally imposed conventions to shape one's own life in favour of self-chosen rules, which the former deems impossible. Part of the attraction of this critical story is its insistence that there are no universal blueprints for social organisation but rather historical

²⁰⁴ As Stanley Rosen puts it 'the playfulness of the great deconstructor [Derrida] cannot conceal the bitter seriousness with which he attempts to remove what he regards as the misunderstanding of self-consciousness. Derrida continues the Nietzschean attempt to purify the Enlightenment by a destruction of bourgeois civilization.' in Stanley Rosen (1987). *Hermeneutics as Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p51.

players, who must renegotiate their social relations in the present. Yet, a central background assumption is that a critical theoretical perspective uncovers what other perspectives have missed: the illusory, yet harmful assumptions informing traditional western political theory as such.

The link between Derrida's notion of play as *différance* and Foucault's idea of society as social performance of truth games is the tension between the emphasis on what we can call 'power play' in society, and the ideal of 'free play' for the individual. Here, power play is not just the exercise of power but rather its use combined with the claim to (unique) legitimate authority – coincidence of exercise of power and its justification by those who yield it – in order to shape society in light of *your* vision of the truth, to monopolise debate in order to bend others to your will, or more subtly the realisation of social conformity through self-imposed social norms. Free play then constitutes the - mostly latent - vision of the individual and traditionally excluded groups to shape their own way of life, unrestricted by the internal and external pressures of the frequently subtle, interactive ways in which we exercise power over others.

Still, its focus on power and scepticism of collective institutions makes that this approach hovers uneasily between an extensive, highly incisive critique of society and the relative inability to formulate an alternative to the status quo: between the explanation of society as the domain of power play, and the political ideal of free play as self-determination that respects the social plurality of individuals. For instance, we find Giorgio Agamben, who draws on Derrida's critique of the law, musing that: 'One day humanity will play with law just as children play with disused objects, not in order to restore them to their canonical use but to free them from it for good.'²⁰⁵ However, playing with the law in this sense remains an *intellectual* game. The point about laws at their best, is that they incapsulate the promise of facilitating the

²⁰⁵ Giorgio Agamben (2004). *State Of Exception*. Trans. Kevin Attell. Chicago: Chicago University Press. p64.

negotiation and peaceful resolution of the perennial social differences of which critical play makes us well-aware. Moreover, laws are not just behavioural norms backed up with legal sanction. They are also constitutive of any communal interaction.

The translation of these emancipatory concerns into the political theory of agonism, as developed by Mouffe, Tully and Schaap, is more promising. Still, agonism too retains a strong focus on social division, marginalisation and the potential for social conflict due to inequality. Moreover, agonism is not just a ‘procedural’ defence of democratic institutions but also comes with its own emancipatory politics that wed a hope for democratic prospects with a scepticism about actual political consensus and agreement (which for agonists frequently reflect power inequalities, as much as rational convictions). Agonism, too, is informed by a restless vision of society as a force field where competing political viewpoints aim for (hegemonic) dominance. What is missing in agonism, is the idea that the agonist playground is not only a site where political factions can battle out their disagreement, but also the playing field where they can practice and cultivate their commitment to a shared democratic politics, as we will see in the next chapter.²⁰⁶ Rather, taking her cue from Carl Schmitt’s critique of liberalism, Mouffe equates ‘the political’ with the latent capacity to conflict due to social divisions and the fact that such the exercise of (discretionary) authority and political control invariably play an important role in deciding their outcome. Huizinga, who directly opposes Schmitt’s work on the other hand, tries to reconsider a politics that is seeks to bring parties together without necessarily aiming to resolve all their differences. Rather, what brings players together in his vision is the desire to cultivate a shared way of life. Clearly, agonists are right to focus on the role of competition and struggle in politics, and correspondently with the focus on strategy. However, if struggle is the mechanism to attain social emancipation, I argue that even for agonism struggle cannot be the end of politics. Rather, it is the peaceful contestation in a shared realm where

²⁰⁶ Jason Edwards (2012). ‘Play and Democracy: Huizinga and the Limits of Agonism’, *Political Theory*, Vol. 41(1): pp. 90-115.

different players and groups can articulate, defend and test out rival ideas and viewpoints. However, just as agonists highlights the unfeasibility of a purely procedural conception of politics and the public realm as defined by agreement on basic rules. Therefore, I suggest that Cultivating Play allows us to understand that agonism, too, requires a normative commitment to maintaining a shared playing field and mutual play ethos which can be summarised under an expansive conception of ‘fair play’ as the commitment to playing-well (not just adhering to common rules).

4. Cultivating Play.

Huizinga, Homo Ludens and Politics as Fair Play

What is called style in the aesthetic, is called order and loyalty in the ethical...For, play presupposes association, in the best sense of the word.

- Johan Huizinga, 'Over de grenzen van spel en ernst in de cultuur'²⁰⁷

At this juncture in my analysis of play and game in political thought, I want to extend the argument beyond rational play, aesthetic consensus and radical critique, each with their limitations, to a focus on the *cultivation* of play. I do so through a re-examination of Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, which not only argues for the centrality of play to the development of culture but also offers a statement about the importance of play to politics, which transcends these as I hope to show in this chapter. Huizinga first published *Homo Ludens* in 1938 (and revised in 1940) after a distinguished career as a cultural historian engaged primarily with the Medieval and the Early Modern period; a career that in subsequent years had shifted more and more toward a cultural critique of the contemporary situation. As Ernst Gombrich highlights, by the mid-Thirties Huizinga had become one of the most celebrated historians of his day, initially due to his *Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1919, EN trans. 1924) but also for his subsequent books on *Erasmus* (1924), his contributions to historiography, and the unlikely 1935 international bestseller *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*. In the latter we find a marked shift from the study of the past to a cultural critique of the present.

Homo Ludens can both be read as an extension of this critical work, as well as a summation of a career in the service of the humanities. However, I argue that in *Homo Ludens*

²⁰⁷ Johan Huizinga (1950f). 'Over De Grenzen Van Ernst En Spel in De Cultuur', in *Verzamelde Werken V* Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink. pp. 3-25.

Huizinga goes beyond cultural criticism to develop a defence of politics as play activity. Central in this approach to politics as play is the importance of the cultivation of the political game both as a setting of regulated competition and as a practice of attuning mutual conduct.²⁰⁸ Play points to the broader human capacity for meaningful mutual engagement with others in a shared sphere with others. In addition to this capacity already emphasised by Gadamer, in Huizinga's view this space is maintained in part in and through the agonistic activity of playing itself. That is to say, since politics in part relies on the articulation of differences and the competition for office, this sphere has an agonist dimension. This means that the political game helps to structure political competition but simultaneously involves the peaceful negotiation of political difference to maintain this playing field.

In the analysis below I will argue that far from retreating into the safe realm of culture as play, Huizinga develops in *Homo Ludens* the notion of play that turns out to be a diagnostic criterion for assessing the political crisis of the thirties and the possibilities for political recovery. Although the ostensible goal is to develop a general theory of play, at the heart of Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* I argue we can also find an incisive analysis of the importance of play for political theory and a critique of the disastrous consequences of its rejection, as he locates it in the work of the prominent fascist legal philosopher Carl Schmitt.²⁰⁹ This is all the more relevant in light of the renewed interest in Schmittian political theory in recent years. Reading *Homo Ludens* through this lens, what emerges is a decidedly more politically engaged thinker than many of his sympathetic critics have found. Here, Huizinga is neither strictly the politically naïve eminent cultural historian in aesthetic retreat, nor the analyst who neglected the political

²⁰⁸ Johan Huizinga (1950b). *Homo Ludens: Proeve Eener Bepaling Van Het Spelelement Der Cultuur*, in *Verzamelde Werken V: Cultuurgeschiedenis III*. Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink. pp. 26-246. Throughout I will refer to the Dutch Edition of the Collected Works (*Verzamelde Werken*), unless a decent translation exists. (E.g. in contrast to *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*, which was published during his lifetime the English edition of Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* was translated from a German edition rather than the original Dutch). Some of his historiographic writings and shorter essays on the Middle Ages and Renaissance were published in Johan Huizinga, *Men and Ideas: History, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance*, Trans. James S. Hans and Hans van Merle (Meridian Books, 1959).

²⁰⁹ Willem Otterspeer, 'Man the Player: Huizinga's "Homo Ludens" Revisited', *The Low Countries* 20 (2012): 50-57, http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_low001201201_01/_low001201201_01_0007.php, last accessed 19-9-2019.

gravity of the times. Rather, Huizinga's 'turn to play' must be understood as an significant political statement about the importance of recognising the play dimension to politics and the serious consequences when these are neglected. What emerges from this treatment is the notion of *fair play* not merely in the 'procedural' sense of respecting the rules but rather of acknowledging the relevance of the engagement in politics of all participants, and setting the conditions, or arranging the playing field in such a way that this engagement becomes possible.

Huizinga's brief observations on politics as play can be situated within his broader conservative disposition, but also his specific estimation of British parliamentary politics and appreciation of the International legal tradition starting with Pufendorf and Grotius, as well as his emphasis on corporate autonomy. This latter point became particularly salient when Huizinga, who had become a chancellor of the University of Leiden in the mid-thirties, caused a minor diplomatic incident when he forbade a Nazi-sympathising German academic from partaking in a conference at the University due to his antisemitism. In other words, the political outlook hinted at in *Homo Ludens* draws from a distinct understanding of politics as limited, rule-based, reciprocal activity.

As such, I want to consider the relevance of Huizinga's political theory of play by bringing together and fleshing out a number of core ideas that he himself discusses relatively briefly. The idea is that if we read *Homo Ludens* through this political perspective, this allows us to make explicit and reconnect the two dimensions of the book: its 'negative' critique of the rejection of play in Schmittian politics (and its consequences) on the one hand, and its 'positive' defence of politics as play-activity. Huizinga himself explicitly develops his idea within context of the thirties and the works bears the marks of the era. However, I argue that we can build upon and extend Huizinga's insights for our contemporary situation.

I develop the argument as follows. First, I locate *Homo Ludens* within the broader concerns of Huizinga's work. *Homo Ludens* has often been read as a contribution to the

historical study of culture and one way to approach it is as an important methodological contribution to the study of the past (section 4.1). However, in section 4.2 I argue that Huizinga's more ambitious aim was to develop a normative model of culture as play, through which he sought to address two dangers that affect modern society: its pervasive reliance on utilitarianism on the one hand, and the more immediate danger of nascent fascist, reactionary politics on the other. This allows us to make the transition from culture to politics as play in section 4.3, where I develop the contrast between Huizinga's and Schmitt's conceptions of politics. My core claim is that at the heart of *Homo Ludens* we find a defence of politics as play activity, partially by situating it within a general framework of the importance of play for culture, but in particular also through a critique of the consequences of Schmitt's authoritarian politics. A central message of *Homo Ludens* is to offer a brief if incisive analysis of a politics that lacks or positively aims to destroy the conditions for politics as play activity. In other words, as I suggest in section 4.4, it is incisive to analyse and develop a critique of Schmittian politics through the lens of play. Together these sections not only allow for a more fleshed out idea of Huizinga's conception of politics as *fair play* than is offered elsewhere, but more importantly seeks to identify the relevance of play for the analysis of contemporary politics. Thus, in the final section (4.5) I consider the broader implications and relevance of Huizinga's analysis for our contemporary understanding of politics as play activity. There, I will also briefly revisit the previously discussed models – rational, aesthetic, critical play – in light of Huizinga's conception.

4.1 Locating *Homo Ludens*: Culture as Play

In his introduction to *Homo Ludens* Huizinga suggests that the issue of play, the relation of play and earnestness, as well as the expression of cultural practices runs through his entire work.²¹⁰

²¹⁰ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, pp. 26-27.

Gombrich, in his analysis of Huizinga's essay similarly argues that the problem of play and earnestness is the central issue informing all his work.²¹¹ In his earlier cultural historical work, most notably in his famous *Autumn of the Middle Ages*, first published in Dutch in 1919 (and translated throughout Europe in the early Twenties) Huizinga analysed how the cultural and artistic practices of the late-Medieval Burgundian court allows us a vision of its more general social and cultural attitudes.²¹² There, he argued that this culture should not be understood as an important precursor of a subsequent Renaissance Humanism, but rather as a final stage in a distinctly 'Medieval' cultural tradition.

Central to the understanding of his own task as a cultural historian, is as much his concern with the visions, aesthetic forms, and cultural ideals and how these inform communal life, as with their manifestation in artefacts and cultural practice, as he identified them in his 1905 inaugural lecture on the 'Aesthetic component of historical representations'.²¹³ Still he was generally keen to distinguish between the *idealism* of such expressions, and the often harsher social *reality* they informed. Huizinga's fascination with culture as a framework for self-expression and signification is also reflected in his approach to history and his understanding of the historical discipline itself.²¹⁴ From this perspective, *Homo Ludens* has the joint purpose of offering a response to a central methodological debate in the cultural sciences and to put forward a normative model of culture as play.

As such, on one level *Homo Ludens* can be understood as a response by an accomplished historian to a central question in the historical sciences: if the past is different from the present, and moreover, the domain of human intent, how do we get access and come to understand the

²¹¹ Ernst H. Gombrich (1973). 'Huizinga's Homo Ludens', *BMGN: Low Countries Historical Review*, Vol. 88(2): pp. 275-296.

²¹² Johan Huizinga (1950d). *Herfsttij Der Middeleeuwen*, in *Verz. Werk III* Haarlem: Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink. pp. 3-435. A previous, curtailed English translation was titled *Waning of the Middle Ages*. A more recent translation (still reliant on a German edition) by Rodney J. Payton and Ulrich Mammitzsch bears the title *Autumn of The Middle Ages* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996).

²¹³ Johan Huizinga (1950e). 'Het Aesthetische Bestanddeel Van Geschiedkundige Voorstellingen', in *Verz. Werken VII*. Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink. p 28.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-94.

past? Neither suggesting that the past is a wholly ‘foreign country’, nor essentially similar to our own age would do. Huizinga, then, suggests that play, provisionally understood here as the sedimented products and practices of human self-expression in culture, offers a good point of entry into this problem of approaching the past. Because human beings have an innate desire for self-expression and this never merely represents the personal intention of the maker but also embodies broader values, artistic models and social concerns of the age, they offer access into the past. In other words, the careful analysis of past artefacts, aesthetic models and cultural practices gives us a point of entry into the broader social and cultural concerns of the past communities we are interested in.

Moreover, as a cultural historian, Huizinga was interested particularly in those products of culture which are not (merely) representative but also *exemplary* of that culture, insofar as they both identify and perhaps embody central aspirations of the broader culture from which they stem. By studying elements of what a past community considered its best and most treasured accomplishments, we get a highly valuable insight into the complex past, both in its differences from and relation to our present. In *Waning* he offers a brilliant insight following from this cultural historical approach to the past: while late-Medieval court culture valued its lyric poetry, Huizinga suggests this strikes the modern reader as stale and formulaic, while its visual culture still resonates with, and speaks to, us. Beyond this historically interesting shift in literary estimation, this raises a profound question not only about the divergent reception of different cultural media such as literature and visual arts, but also about the primacy of the visual in subsequent western cultural history.

Huizinga’s goal in *Homo Ludens* is more ambitious. Going beyond the plausible suggestion of play as a *domain* of self-expressive social conduct, he argues that it offers a model for the explanation and analysis of culture in general. In other words, his principal thesis is that culture arises *in and as play*. Therefore, it is helpful first briefly to consider Huizinga’s concept

of culture and how it arises ‘in play’. Minimally, culture can be understood as the set of inherited traits, institutions and norms passed on and reshaped from one generation to the next. This already means that humans as cultural animals are not fully determined by their psychological, biological or sociological impulses here and now but rather shape at least in part the conditions of their own existence. For Huizinga this holds the important corollary that human action can neither be explained in terms of, nor ever fully reduced to, such impulses. Hence, the suggestion that the human sciences are concerned with the irreducible domain of human culture and moral intent. However, on the basis of this suggestion, Huizinga develops a more expansive normative concept of culture. Thus in the *Shadows* he argue that:

Culture, as a condition of society, is present when the control over nature in the material, the moral, and spiritual field maintains a state which is higher and better than would follow from the given natural conditions, and whose characteristics are a harmonious balance of material and spiritual values and a more or less homogeneous ideal in whose pursuit the community's various activities.²¹⁵

In other words, as Van Deursen has suggested, it integrates a conception of *balance*, *self-limitation* and a sense of *collective striving*.²¹⁶

Subsequently, Huizinga defines play as a (type of) activity that is demarcated by spatial-temporal boundaries within a setting of voluntarily accepted rules of play that we engage in for its own sake. To suggest that play is ‘self-purposive’ implies that it cannot be understood fully in terms of practical goals or functional conduct. Rather, it is a creative and self-expressive activity in its own right. Put differently, ‘functional’ activities like reproduction, nutrition and security seeking have all without exception a play-dimension insofar as they are always already situated within the context of communal cultural practice and therefore solely understandable in terms of that context. Understanding basic needs in functional terms cannot do without an understanding in terms of contextualised playful cultural practices. Huizinga identifies two

²¹⁵Johan Huizinga (1936). *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*. New York: W.W. Norton. p36.

²¹⁶ A.T. van Deursen (1994). ‘Huizinga en de Geest der Eeuw’, *23ste Huizinga Lezing*. Amsterdam: Bert Bakker.

modes of play: on the one hand play manifests itself in *performance*, where players activities converge towards the presentation of a shared goal. On the other, we find play as *competition*, or agonist settings of interaction such as the game, wherein players seek to attain divergent objectives. However, it is important to note that in Huizinga's understanding they should not be understood as mutually exclusive play-activities per se. Rather, play as performance allows for the possibility of distinct voices. Similarly, competition too, at least in part revolves around the enjoyment of a skilful performance, as well as the joint acceptance by competitors of the shared framework of the game itself. Both play-forms are united in the idea that the play setting structures the interaction between players who in this sense acknowledge the primacy of rules of play in guiding and hence making possible their mutual conduct.

Put differently, we can argue that Huizinga's conception of culture comprises two dimensions. The first dimension is the 'play *in* culture', or the myriad products of cultural expression as they are located in cultural institutions, art and shared normative frameworks. Second, there is also the dimension of the 'play *of* culture', which highlights how (and to what degree) a culture allows for the cultivation of a shared way of life. Combining the two notions into one argument, we find that for Huizinga human play expresses itself in culture, that is, in the form of transmitted traits, as well as the striving and aspirations of the members of a community, embodied as these are in the core institutions, artistic products and normative ideals of the community. Because culture arises in and as play it can be studied systematically insofar as it structures human action around shared institutions and norms.

Thus for Huizinga a core idea is that culture is played insofar as human interaction tends to sediment into relatively more durable patterns of conduct and products of the human imagination, which come to shape the historical conditions of our existence. Moreover, this allows us to reconnect and understand individual historical actions and cultural products in relation to the wider cultural models, of which they are both instances and expression. In

addition to this, all culture for Huizinga embodies a collective striving which finds expression in a human capacity for play: self-expressive capacity for the attunement of social conduct as a goal in itself. This explains why for him play is both the mechanism for and the expression of cultural development, because culture thrives where technical mastery is combined with a voluntary agreement by players to accept basic rules to orient their joint conduct. As Erich Voegelin argued in an early review of *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga's conception of culture as play here mirrors the Aristotelian conception of social conduct as both orientated towards as well as an expression of the common good.²¹⁷ For Aristotle, we are political not only because we rely on each other in a practical sense but because we enjoy coexistence with others in a community. At any rate, for him it would be a mistake to reduce all political action to practical mutual exchange.

However, for Huizinga this attains a new historical dimension: to claim that culture is played also highlights its *historical*, manmade and therefore temporal character. Precisely because culture is the product of human creation, neither the institutions to organise and maintain public life, nor the willingness to accept them are necessary and as such they are always subject to decline. Hence, another dimension of play as self-purposive activity entails that part of the activity of playing involves the cultivation of the conditions of those institutions enabling the rules and conditions of play in general. In other words, the full significance of this model of culture is that it identifies play as a general capacity for cultivation and mutual engagement for its own sake. This allows us to enter and understand other and past cultures, whilst acknowledging that all cultural institutions are products of a particular historical development, and as such require constant cultivation to be maintained. In other words, the central notion here is that play is both the impetus and expression of a human capacity to culture.

²¹⁷ Erich Voegelin (1948). 'Review article: Homo Ludens', *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 10(2): pp. 179-187.

This inherently normative conception of play as culture may (partially) explain the apparent paradox in Huizinga's claim that although culture arises in and through play, the play aspect in modern culture is on the wane. For, as he argues although all culture may be played, not all play equally cultivates the conditions wherein culture can flourish. Moreover, play is always realised in particular although all play refers to a general human capacity for mutual intelligibility and (collective) self-expression.

A number of critics have taken Huizinga to task for his idealist assumptions. Above all his desire to separate play from any functional behaviour and other domains of life idealises culture and play and thereby disengages it from the reality of everyday social existence. Moreover, they have suggested it fails to explain how play engages with these other 'cultural' domains. Above I have suggested that we can partially go around this criticism if we understand play a general (cultural) capacity which becomes particularly clear in human activity aimed at self-expression. Beyond this concern about the relation between play and culture, however, lurks a more pressing political critique. Adorno charged that Huizinga's emphasis on play implies that art and culture both act as a gateway into and thus reflect the core concerns of society at large.²¹⁸ However, for Adorno art necessarily remains fragmented, just as the society from which it stems remains a product of social fragmentation not cohesion. More recently Nagel has argued that this implies a commitment to maintaining an elite culture, which emphasises some identities, groups and values at the risk of marginalising others.²¹⁹ Put differently, in his focus on the interplay between art and cultural practice, Huizinga fails to grasp or account for the reality of social power – a charge I briefly discuss in the final section.

²¹⁸ Theodor Adorno (2002). *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans., Edit. Introd. Robert Hullot-Keller. London: Continuum. pp. 318-319.

²¹⁹ Mechthild Nagel (1998). 'Play in Culture and the Jargon of Primordality: A Critique of Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*', in *Play and Culture Studies, Vol 1*, ed. Margaret Duncan et al. London: Ablex Publishing. pp. 19-30.

4.2 From History to Contemporary Cultural Critique

However, on another, no less personal level, *Homo Ludens* follows from Huizinga's profound unease about the state of culture in what might be called the crisis of the thirties, as it spread throughout Europe.²²⁰ In 1935 he had sought to address the manifold symptoms of this crisis, from the rise of antisemitism and biological racism, through the collapse of International Relations and the political expansionism in the wake of the collapse of the Weimar Republic in Germany. This comprehensive cultural critique bore the ominous title *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*.²²¹ The book became a bestseller throughout Europe. Although at times, its tone strikes one as that of classical conservative cultural criticism, nonetheless, its central aim was diagnostic in the original sense of the word: to evaluate and judge the conditions of the present in the light of a potential for cultural and political renewal.²²² In principle, the critique was meant not merely to point to the cultural, ethical and political *inadequacies* of the present, as the Dutch historian Geyl critically suggested, but rather to address the root causes of the crisis, so as to spell out conditions for future *restoration*.²²³ Therefore, as Gombrich and others have noted, *In the Shadow* and *Homo Ludens* should be treated as a diptych, with the former providing the initial diagnosis of the root causes of the crisis as he saw them, to which the latter would provide a 'positive' response.²²⁴ In other words, for Huizinga, the idea of culture as play aims at identifying the key problems and possible remedies for what he perceived to be the central problems of his age.

²²⁰ Léon Hanssen (1996). *Huizinga En De Troost Van De Geschiedenis: Verbeelding En Rede*. Amsterdam: Balans; H. L. Wesseling (2002). 'From Cultural Historian to Cultural Critic: Johan Huizinga and the Spirit of the 1930s', *European Review*, Vol. 10(4): pp. 485-499.

²²¹ Johan Huizinga (1950c). *In de Schaduwen van Morgen*, in *Verzamelde Werken VII*. Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink. pp. 313-428.

²²² Robert Anchor (1978). 'History and Play: Johan Huizinga and His Critics', *History and Theory* Vol. 17(1): pp. 63-93.

²²³ Pieter Geyl (1963). 'Huizinga as Accuser of His Age', *History and Theory*, Vol 2(3): pp. 231-262.; Huizinga, *In de Schaduwen van Morgen*, p317.

²²⁴ Ernst H. Gombrich, 'Huizinga's Homo Ludens', pp. 275-296.

So, were are these dangers? They were twofold: first the rise of a pervasive utilitarianism creeping into all domains of social life; and second the more immediate concern of the emergence of fascism at the time. What unites both is their moral consequentialism, or the understanding that the outcome of an action constitutes its sole worth. Together, they constituted an important threat to the playful dimensions of modern politics.

For Huizinga, the pervasive dominance of modern utilitarianism is problematic because of its systematic focus on individualism and its tendency to reduce all value to the sphere of material exchange. If culture was indeed little more than the sum total of actions that both aimed at and follow from the pursuit of a mere individual benefit, we would lose sight of the importance of shared normative ideals. Echoing Constant's analysis of liberalism, he suggested that a culture orientated around individualism is self-undermining because the participants lose sight of the fact that individualism itself is a cultural ideal sustained by social institutions. Huizinga's cultural critique develops the notion that increasingly modern society is organised around the utilitarian pursuits of practical benefits at the expense of such 'higher' human capacities that foster communal life.²²⁵ This utilitarianism was in danger of reformulating all social relations in term of functional interaction, and ultimately reducing all playing as self-purposive activity to expressions of social interests. Huizinga's claim is not so much that play itself as a social activity vanishes – indeed, he argued, the competitive impulse might be more prevalent in society than before, in particular in the sphere of the modern economy – but rather that it changes in character: it may still constitute playing in its 'outward' orientation, yet increasingly loses its 'inward' ethos, which becomes subject to functional purposes.²²⁶ Surely, this reflects the more widespread cultural pessimism at the time about the waning prospects of culture as an expression of shared values, rather than the organisation for practical gains.²²⁷

²²⁵ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p223.

²²⁶ Ibid., pp. 223-224.

²²⁷ Wessel Krul (2006). 'Huizinga's Homo Ludens. Cultuurkritiek En Utopie', *Sociologie* 2(1): pp. 8-28.

Yet, the critique exceeds mere cultural conservatism.²²⁸ Huizinga's argues that if a society loses its capacity to appreciate and evaluate social activities in terms other than purely practical goals, it will undervalue the significance of the social order itself. Relating it to the overarching theme of *Homo Ludens*, such a society would take for granted the very 'playing field' and the historical conditions of play, on which social interaction relies. Thus – in contrast to the idea of *Homo Faber* (man the maker) – *Homo Ludens* is meant to highlight precisely that we do not coincide with what we make and that we can appreciate and cultivate human relationships as meaningful for their own sake.

Huizinga also developed a second, more directly political critique in response to the dangers of the nascent reactionary and fascist thought of his age. He did this through an analysis of what he took to be its core tenets and singled out in particular Carl Schmitt's theory of power politics as indicative of this broader reactionary political trend. I would like to emphasise that Huizinga's 'turn to play' to explain this trend should not be understood as a retreat into the realm of aesthetics by an eminent cultural historian at a loss facing the political dangers of the time. On the contrary, it is because Huizinga shared the concerns by some of his reactionary adversaries about cultural decline and the importance of a common political outlook, that he was able to articulate the dangerous political implications when such objectives are pursued at all costs. This goes against Nagel's claim that Huizinga's ludic turn should be understood in relation to a broader anti-modernist ideological search for origins, which she also identifies in the work of Heidegger.²²⁹ This fails to appreciate that for Huizinga, play as self-expression always remains embedded in the life of the community. Moreover it brushes over the fact that his conception of play precisely emphasises the appreciation for (ethical) *self-restraint* and

²²⁸ This argument we subsequently find echoed elsewhere in writer like Habermas who argues, too, that utilitarianism starts with evaluating practical benefits but ultimately ends up aligning *all* social practices in light of utilitarian benefits, through what he calls he 'colonisation of the lifeworld'. See Jurgen Habermas (1987). Vol II. of his magnum opus, *Theory of Communicative Action: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*. Cambridge: Polity.

²²⁹ Mechthild Nagel, 'Play in Culture and the Jargon of Primordality'.

social reciprocity that was lacking in the political thinking of his reactionary adversaries, with their emphasis on rule-breaking, drastic measures and the authentic life of struggle.

In the remaining part of this section, I set out the general contours of his analysis of emergent reactionary politics. This will allow me to locate Huizinga's specific critique of Schmitt in the next section and how in response he develops his own model of politics as play in *Homo Ludens*.

Beyond their divergences, reactionary political thinkers such as Oswald Spengler, Carl Schmitt, and Hans Freyer (all of whom Huizinga briefly discusses in the *Shadows*, or in *Homo Ludens*) shared a number of traits. First, they all identified a cultural, or even *spiritual crisis*, accompanied by a sense of *decay* and potential collapse of civilisation. Moreover, as Huizinga well-understood, they argued for the *primacy of action* over contemplation: in decisive action, not in his thinking, man shows his true worth. Thirdly, this sense of alarmism was often developed in *grand historical theories* which both offered explanations of the mechanisms of decline, as well as arguing for the centrality of struggle in history. Thus in Spengler, he noted how a morphological conception of civilisation, each following its own cycle of development and decay, was married to the general claim that all civilisations are doomed to decline – Western civilisation being the latest victim to fall prey to this fate. Schmitt too traced a conception of *history as battlefield* between incompatible political regimes, as I will develop in more detail below. Moreover, such grand historical theses were often developed with *prophetic claims* to authority which both offered unique insights into and principles to unlock the significance of historical events, as well as the prognosis of spiritual renewal. This renewal was to be found in the pursuit of an *authentic lifestyle*, through the pursuit of shared political action which found its ultimate meaning in the participation of a cultural community's *pursuit of glory* on a world-historical stage.²³⁰ As Huizinga suggested in his *Shadow*, when translated into

²³⁰ Dick Pels (1998). 'The Primacy of the Political in Fascism', *Telos* 110: pp. 39-71.

political ideology, such a cultural doctrine entailed the principled rejection of parliamentarianism as inadequate and base, as well as the rejection of capitalism (increasingly associated at this time with ‘Jewishness’) for its reduction of human action into the cycle of consumption and production thereby pacifying genuine battle into mere economic competition. Moreover, it constituted a desire for decisive action and defence of executive politics, with dictatorship and doctrine of the ‘amoral state’ as its political models. Socially, it embraced the conception of an essential hierarchy as a constitutive dimension of social order, either on the basis of biological traits, which leads to biological racism, through a cult of physical excellence, or in the form of the ‘total’ State. (Hence the tension between the desire for integration into an undivided *ethnos*, or community of fate and the ‘Nietzschean’ inspired cult of the extraordinary individual; which becomes a contradiction if we take into account that in Nietzsche the pursuit of individual excellence constitutes a rejection of the masses) Finally, writers in this conservative reaction condoned or positively glorified the use of violence, with violent action not only an inevitable aspect of political struggle but also a creative-destructive mechanism of self-expression.

Put together, such a reactionary political ideology rallied in its rejection of traditional models of legitimate political authority, gloried in the extremities and limitlessness of human action, with history emerging as domain for struggle to attain exercise of executive authority by the strong, and aimed to reinvigorate the spiritual life of the community.

4.3 From Culture to Politics as Play: Huizinga contra Schmitt

Whereas in his *Shadow* Huizinga identified these broader reactionary tenets, in *Homo Ludens* he sharpened his analysis by focusing in particular on the work of Carl Schmitt. The suggestion I want to develop in more detail is that this short and incisive takedown of the Schmitt’s work constitutes the political core of *Homo Ludens*. There, he develops a model of politics as play in

contrast to the disastrous political consequences which aim to uproot the very conditions for maintaining politics as playful activity. At stake are two fundamentally incompatible conceptions of the role of conflict in the realm of politics. First, I will briefly discuss the core tenets of Schmittian political theory and then discuss Huizinga's response below. There is some debate about the relation of Schmitt's thinking to a broader Conservative Revolutionary movement, the extent of his Nazism, as well aspects of the traditional Catholic two-swords doctrine informing his authoritarian politics.²³¹ Schmitt was careful to distance himself from other reactionary thinkers (he loathed all things revolutionary) and seems to have been a reluctant Nazi Party member.²³² However, particularly in his writing from the mid-twenties onwards Schmitt went far beyond traditional 'authoritarian' concern with the political duty to obedience to the state and ventured to develop a totalising perspective on the strict primacy of the state in society. If, for Schmitt political community was not to be understood (primarily) as an *ethnos*, or exclusive ethnic community in the way that other reactionary writers did, he did make it clear that it was to found in the total identification of state and society.²³³ Although Schmitt himself saw his political theory as the natural conclusion of the principles of rationality to politics, ultimately, they rely on an unresolved contradiction in his work. Namely, that

²³¹ In his book on Schmitt as theorist for the reich, Joseph Bendersky argues for the importance of separating Schmittian critique from the Nazi regime he first rejected, only to briefly serve under it later as Reich lawyer. Joseph Bendersky (1983). *Carl Schmitt: Theorist for the Reich*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Although it is important not to brush over the distinctions between the various outlooks comprising the Conservative Reactionary movement (and fascism), here I argue that there is important continuity between all of them, e.g. a) all develop large-scale historical theses, b) coupling a sense of decline with a c) prophetic message of renewal. However, where they differ from other conservatives, these authors also argue it d) belies a desire for decisive political action by an unchecked executive. Their contiguity in this regard is not coincidence but instrumental in shaping the contours of political theory at the time.

²³² Joseph Bendersky (2014). 'Schmitt's Diaries', in *Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*. Edit. Jens Meierhenrich, and Oliver Simons. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Digital Edition.
[DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199916931.013.005](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199916931.013.005), last accessed 19-9-2019.

²³³ E.g. Carl Schmitt's 1937 essay, 'Totaler Feind, totaler Krieg, totaler Staat', in Carl Schmitt (2014). *Positionen und Begriffe, im Kampf mit Weimar-Genf-Versailles, 1923-1939*, 4th edition. Berlin: Duncker&Humblot.; Joseph W. Bendersky, 'Carl Schmitt and the Conservative Revolution', in *Telos* 72 (Summer 1987), pp. 27-42; Jerry Z. Muller (1991). 'Carl Schmitt, Hans Freyer and the Radical Conservative Critique of Liberal Democracy in the Weimar Republic', *History of Political Thought*, Vol. 12(4): pp. 695-715; Dick Pels, 'Primacy of the Political'.

political authority is about maintaining political order and preventing conflict, yet that the political domain itself only comes into being through conflict.

Politics as Battle

Schmitt has come to be known as a central critic of modern liberalism in modern political theory. However, his critique of liberalism is but a part of a more general theory of politics, wherein it is possible to identify a number of components of the broader reactionary tenets I discussed above: from the primacy of action over thinking, and the priority of politics over other social domains, to a preference for unchecked executive authority, the total state and the rejection of parliamentary politics, as well as the desire of the unification of a community of fate to find meaning in the battlefield of world history.²³⁴ Thus on the one hand, he presents his political theory as the logical conclusion of a sovereign legal-political theory with its core emphasis on centralised political authority, yet on the other continuously focuses on the necessary and frequently creative role of conflict in politics.

It is well-known that Carl Schmitt developed his political theory to examine the implications of what he perceived to be the basic problems of modern political theory, and in particular the problems associated with the parliamentary model of the derelict Weimar Republic. This becomes particularly clear in his well-known 1932 book *The Concept of the Political*.²³⁵ Schmitt's strategy there is to overcome the liberal regime by exposing its inner contradictions and thereby underscore the need for effective political authority. For Schmitt, the reality of politics shows in its potential for conflict. The liberal approach to politics, however, is precisely to neglect this inconvenient truth about the political realm and in doing so both to intensify the potential for civil strife and to decrease the state's capacity to regulate it. He developed his attack on liberal political theory through a threefold strategy: to show its

²³⁴ Dick Pels, 'Fascism and the Primacy of the Political'.

²³⁵ Carl Schmitt (1996). *The Concept of the Political*, revised Edit. Trans. and Intr. George Schwab. Chicago: Chicago University Press. [Orig. *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 1932.]

internal incoherence; political ineffectiveness; and its perpetuation of the very core beliefs about political authority it had sought to replace with reason. Together, these only fanned the flames of political conflict.

First, liberal doctrine is internally inconsistent. Whereas its idea of legitimacy relies on voluntary consent its understanding of authority actually assumes the monopoly of violence by the state – the former implies reciprocity, the latter means top-down control. Moreover, its universal idea of rights conflicted with its actual territorial claim to grant exclusive rights to members of its community. Still, in spite of the state's reliance on a monopoly of force, in practice liberalism distributes its powers amongst three branches, and also anchors decision making and legislation in lengthy parliamentary procedures. This not only serves to intensify political disagreement but also limits the state's capacity to act to restore order when necessary. However, the most basic claim was that liberalism suffered from a fatal hypocrisy. Liberalism rejects the core belief that government is rooted in divine authority. In contrast, it seeks to break with religious tradition to found politics on principles of consent and a human capacity to reason. And yet, Schmitt argued, liberalism actually maintained the very core belief which supported those religious roots it had sought to eradicate: the idea that law requires obedience, which must be upheld by a central authority (the sovereign). This is the basis for Schmitt's famous claim in his 1922 book on *Political Theology* that modern politics ideas are a form of secular theology: religious beliefs dressed up as arguments from reason. Hence also his insistence on the strict analogy between God, who exercises his majesty through miracles, and the state which upholds its power to make decisions about political exceptions to the rule.²³⁶

In short, for Schmitt 'the political' both entails the conceptual claim that politics is best understood as conflict, which sets it apart from all other domains of human action, and the *normative* claim that proper government requires the ability to act decisively, unconstrained by

²³⁶ Carl Schmitt (2005). *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, Edit. and Trans. George Schwab, Chicago: Chicago University Press. Originally published in 1922.

lengthy debate and the fetters of law. The problem with liberalism is that it could neither see nor accept this, and the result is only to intensify social conflict. Schmitt, then, starts from the basic assumption of politics as a radically autonomous sphere of action, enjoying priority over other and pervading all other spheres.²³⁷ In this sense it must be a total activity.²³⁸ Moreover, this realm is defined by and emerges with the key distinction between friends and enemies. As such, politics (only) becomes ‘political’ with the advent of serious struggle, which he defines as the possibility of the ‘existential negation of another being.’²³⁹ Therefore, it is the extreme – the exception – which reveals the true character of politics: politics only emerges, rather than vanishes with the possibility of open conflict. Hence, it is the case that all political competition must entail struggle (rather than competition) and frequently struggle is decided by violence.²⁴⁰ As Huizinga argued, and Richard Wolin more recently pointed out, it is no coincidence that Schmitt’s philosophy is rooted in a cult of unrestrained decision, the desire for action over thought characterised by the *Vitalist* philosophy of the time, and the condoning or even downright glorification of total warfare, to which much political planning is the purpose.²⁴¹

Furthermore, at the heart of this political theory is an anthropology, or vision of man, which considers man an ‘evil’ (*böse*) being, who requires domination and is incapable of mutual trust, as Strauss aptly remarked in his private correspondence with Schmitt.²⁴² Within this theory, political community is a ‘unity of friendship’, which is held together by a shared essential opposition and rejection to a common ‘enemy’. As such, at the core of Schmittian political theory we find the paradoxical notion that all politics are defined in terms of ‘post-political’ purposes: political community relies for its identity and existence on post-political

²³⁷ E.g. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 27.

²³⁸ Ibid., p26.

²³⁹ Ibid., p27.

²⁴⁰ ‘Chapter Two: Carl Schmitt’, in Mark Lilla (2016). *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics*, Revised Edition New York: NY Review of Books. pp. 47-76.

²⁴¹ E.g. Johan Huizinga, *Shadows*, pp. 368-369; Richard Wolin (1992). ‘Carl Schmitt: The Conservative Revolutionary Habitus and the Aesthetics of Horror’, *Political Theory*, Vol. 20(3): pp. 424-447.

²⁴² Leo Strauss (1996). ‘Notes on Carl Schmitt *Concept of the Political*’, in Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, pp. 97-122.

unity within, and the existential struggle for the domination or eradication of the opponent; the very opponent who provides the pretext for political action itself. Moreover, this ‘friendship’ is emptied of all conceptual content because this would imply mutual trust, which Schmitt rejects as a foundation for political action. Political action thus structures all aspects of society, and takes place beyond – and defies capturing in – any system of regulation.²⁴³

Hence, it is no coincidence that Schmitt seems to imply the importance of an unchecked executive – a dictatorship that is – as key element for effective politics, as early as 1921 in his book on dictatorship.²⁴⁴ However, he himself acknowledges that the traditional institution of dictatorship was directed at basically maintaining the temporarily suspended legal order. His own model on the other hand, reconsiders dictatorship as the political leadership which is no longer bound to and breaks with the old (legal) order, to fashion a new one according to its own design. It does not so much transgress but rather aims to overcome the legal order it rejects. Indeed, subsequently in Schmitt’s work we see the advent of similar ‘legal’ doctrines which have in common that all law emanates from the *Führer*.²⁴⁵

In other words, what emerges from Schmitt’s political theory is a politics that aims at a decisive break with the institutional structures of modern society through a singular creative activity of shaping a new social political order. Moreover, this order must be ‘post-political’ because internally it aims at friendship, and externally it aims at neutralising the other. At bottom, though, what informs this vision is the strict inability of parties to come an agreement, or peacefully settle their differences. And although some have suggested that Schmitt nominally accepts a minimal framework of international law this seems strictly incompatible with the dark

²⁴³ Richard Wolin (1992). ‘Carl Schmitt: The Conservative Revolutionary Habitus and the Aesthetics of Horror’.

²⁴⁴ Carl Schmitt (2014). *Dictatorship: From the Origin of the Modern Concept of Sovereignty to Proletarian Class Struggle*. Cambridge: Polity.

²⁴⁵ This is arguably the central theme in Agamben’s reading of Schmitt, in Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

anthropology of humans as untrustworthy beings pervading his politics.²⁴⁶ Or, as Huizinga already clearly identified, its key premise is that *pacta non sunt servanda* – treaties are not (to be) observed.²⁴⁷

Finally, politics aims at the dissolution of the very conditions of politics as playful activity, and strips contestants from their basic status as purposive agents, the engagement with which merits ethical judgement. Thus interestingly, Schmittian politics shows its ‘playful’ creative-expressive roots precisely at the moment where it asks for the singular creative genius to reshape decisively the field of play. (At any rate Schmitt had no problem in defending such ‘reshaping’ in his theory of a right to *Grossraum*, or ‘great space’, in wake of Germany’s occupation of Prague in March 1939.)²⁴⁸ With its strict emphasis on autonomy, and its embrace of existential struggle as the decisive political moment, it rejects and seeks to upend the possibility of players coming to terms with each other, and thereby to maintain and cultivate meaningful relations based on anything but enmity. The ‘other’ becomes an obstacle to be ‘removed’.

Huizinga’s Politics as Play

It is against the contours of this Schmittian political theory that we should understand Huizinga’s political intervention, developed particularly towards the end of *Homo Ludens*. It is against this conception of politics as inevitable existential struggle between adversaries who constitute mutual obstacles to be removed that Huizinga develops his own model of politics as play as it follows from his more general theory of culture.

²⁴⁶ E.g. “What remains is the remarkable and, for many, certainly disquieting diagnosis that all genuine political theories presuppose man to be evil...”, Carl Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, p61.

²⁴⁷ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p243.

²⁴⁸ Carl Schmitt, ‘Grossraum gegen Universalismus’, in *Positionen und Begriffe*, pp. 295-302.

For one, Huizinga in his characterisation of politics as playful activity not only highlights the human capacity to attune social conduct in light of mutually purposive goals and the resolution of social difference through peaceful means, he also seeks to reconnect politics to other social activities. Whereas Schmitt insists on the autonomy and priority of the political realm, for Huizinga this realm is related to and connected to and influenced by a variety of other ‘playful’ social activities.²⁴⁹ Moreover, the point of politics as playful activity is that contestation occurs within a shared realm of play, and the purpose of the activity taking place within it at least in part constitutes the maintenance of this realm itself, and the opportunity it offers for articulating and settling social differences.²⁵⁰ Thus, politics is competitive, as with Schmitt, but this competition is bounded in two ways: not only is it limited in that it takes place in a demarcated sphere, but is also circumscribed by a capacity for self-regulation and restraint we all have. This nowhere implies that for Huizinga political contestation is without vehement passion and important consequences. It is rather that the point in playing is to win, but to win by all means would be to defeat the point of playing itself. Huizinga also shares Schmitt’s notion that politics takes place ‘beyond the rule’ but this is not because players must *reject* such rules but rather because playing itself as particular activity requires one to make a judgment beyond what the rule as general condition specifies: the rules of play make the activity of playing possible, yet play as particular interaction between specific players both actualises and goes beyond the general possibilities of that framework.

Moreover, at the heart of Huizinga’s theory is an anthropology of play which starts from the possibility of mutual trust, the ability and desire of human beings to maintain meaningful relationships, and the general capacity to settle political differences in a peaceful manner. Or, as Huizinga maintained in his opening speech in acceptance of his position as University Chancellor at Leiden: ‘what is called style in the aesthetic is called order and loyalty in the

²⁴⁹ This is the key reason why politics is discussed in relation to, and as one of a variety of cultural activities.

²⁵⁰ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p239.

ethical’²⁵¹ Politics as playful activity breaks down when players can no longer find such common ground.

However, even such a collapse – and with it the advent of (civil) war and all the dire consequences to go with it – does not preclude in principle observing the enemy as a ‘player’, that is as a purposive, acting agent, who merits ethical as much as political judgment. Within this vision, to be a player is not only to be ‘virtuoso’ but also to cultivate a sense of self-regulation and ability to restraint. As I will argue in the following section, this ultimately shows in the conceptualisation of politics itself as a ‘limited’ activity, rather than inevitably existential struggle. In other words, though some have pointed to the negative dimension of Huizinga’s conception of culture, here we might identify its *positive* claim: e.g. that all playing accepts the ‘meaningful restrictions’ of rules of play in opening up a site of play. Self-restraint is not a sign of political weakness, but a political virtue, especially in competitive politics, as it manifests itself in the ideal of *fair play*. As he puts it: ‘true culture requires everywhere and in any case *fair play*, yet *fair play* is little else but the equivalent in play-terms of good faith.’²⁵²

For Huizinga, then, politics should be understood firmly in terms of play: it is competitive, insofar as within the political realm parties of different social and political orientations compete for office. However, what makes politics ‘playful’ as much as any other type of contest, is precisely that players confront each other within a shared realm of play and recognise each other as player *within* the game. This is perhaps the reason why he mostly discussed politics – traditionally considered as the archetypical site of contestation – within the broader framework of other play settings, and never in strictly autonomous terms. Although this need not detract from the seriousness of the realm of political action, in Huizinga’s vision politics are not essentially different from but rather related to a number of other playful social

²⁵¹ Johan Huizinga, ‘Over de Grenzen van Spel en Ernst in de Cultuur’, p7; English translation derived from Willem Otterspeer, ‘Homo Ludens Revisited’, p56.

²⁵² Ibid., *Homo Ludens*, p244.

activities. It highlights the importance of a shared setting of play, as well as the fundamental capacity of players to self-restraint. Within this playing field an adversary is a player – someone who belongs to the sphere of the game. Moreover, as much as it attains a confrontational aspect, politics as play also reflects a political community's capacity to set itself standards of shared conduct to organise its public affairs and settle its social differences in a peaceful way.

Oakeshott, who draws on Huizinga's argument, has equally pointed to this play dimension to politics but suggested that if politics reduces into mere play, it risks political quietism, or in other words, to take the political out of politics.²⁵³ However, in my view this is not necessarily what Huizinga's argument implies. Rather, it points to the fact that although the play in seeking political office, in articulating social differences and in exercising political power may be consequential, it is just not that 'anything goes'.

In other words, Huizinga is aware of the potentially darker implications of play, with its claim to adherence to the regime of playing. Hence, the reason he puts such emphasis on the reciprocity of playing. Yet, he *also* suggests there is nothing inherently combative in structuring politics in competitive terms; nor that losers should not have a legitimate place within the political game. Indeed, it is part of the way we set up the political process to allow for this competition, whilst ensuring that it takes places and does not ultimately undermine the central goal of cultivating political relations between different social groups within the political game. Nor, does this trivialise the political process per se: decisions still matter, but they are now in part animated by a common concern to 'keep the game' going. Similarly, for the figure of the *spoilsport* Huizinga briefly introduces. Whereas the cheat continues to pay lipservice to the game, the spoilsport aims to break it. However, here, if part of the activity of playing is to cultivate the conditions of the game, then the spoilsport can be understood in terms of the

²⁵³ Michael Oakeshott (1996). *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*. Edit. Timothy Fuller. New Haven: Yale University Press. pp.111-113.

freerider who on the one hand seeks to benefit from the game, without wanting to contribute to it.

4.4 Assessing Schmittian Politics through the Lens of Play

At the heart of this controversy, then, we find two incompatible conceptions of political activity and more precisely, two diverging claims about the nature and function of struggle within politics. For Schmitt politics is a realm of open conflict and hence struggle is both inevitable and a positive force of self-expression within it. The reading of Huizinga I have sought to develop so far basically disagrees with both such claims. Moreover, for the German theorist politics only fully manifests itself as transgressive, executive action, that is, in the moment of decision. In contrast, although Huizinga, too recognises the agonist character of the political realm as a site of disagreement, this neither entails nor necessitates open conflict. Rather the reverse, for him political institutions point to a basic desire and capacity of human agents to settle their social disagreements in a peaceful fashion in light of a shared commitment to fair play. Here, politics becomes possible precisely because we impose certain limits and acknowledge shared procedures to facilitate peaceful everyday interaction as a pursuit in its own right.

Thus, although Huizinga does not reject the idea that politics are competitive and frequently involve conflict he denies that politics find their purpose in the exercise of conflict, as Schmitt argues. Rather, for Huizinga, what makes politics possible is precisely the ability to reach agreement in light of the manifold potential sources of social disagreement and political divergence – even if the agreement is about the shared realm of competition – the ‘agon’. Clearly, these must and always be subject to renegotiation but to suggest that politics is struggle is to make a mockery of this capacity. Nor, Huizinga argues, is that which exceeds the regime of political rules necessarily transgressive, because *all* playing takes place beyond the rule

insofar as the point of playing is meaningful interaction, not following a rule. This, however, does not imply that to playing is therefore *against* the regime of rules. Moreover, whereas this leads Schmitt to conclude that the imperfections of legal order require its transgression, Huizinga could still retain its importance, whilst maintaining that play embodies but cannot be reduced to the legal order.

In this regard it is significant that Huizinga added a revealing aside to the 2nd edition of *Homo Ludens*, which was published in September 1940. Once again referring directly to Schmitt's elementary distinction, Huizinga notes that 'in overcoming this pitiful friend-foe relation, humanity first lays full claim to recognition of its dignity.'²⁵⁴ By then, the Netherlands had come under German occupation.

Competitors vs Adversaries

What are the *consequences* of Schmitt's political theory, and how does Huizinga's analysis of politics as playful activity help us to evaluate these? There are two aspects to this problem. First, Schmitt develops a critique of liberalism by revealing its central paradox, namely that it tries to anchor legitimacy – the right to rule – in legality, or the positive regime of laws. However, argues Schmitt as second point, this misses the simple fact that the exercise of authority cannot be grounded in this legal order, because it must decide how, why and when to exercise it. At heart, executive authority is exceptional, rather than juridical. In other words, political authority cannot be bound by the legal sphere as such.

Yet, this critique develops into a 'positive' political theory which argues that political legitimacy itself is not tied to legality, because the genuine political act is a creative-destructive decision which transgresses the legal regime. Thus, the critique of legality entails a rejection of the possibility to of grounding legitimacy in rational-legal terms. However, the positive

²⁵⁴ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p242.

argument constitutes a defence of the legitimacy of exceptional political measures, unbound and unchecked by the legal order. Desperate times call for desperate (that is to say despotic) measures, and since, according to Schmitt, all genuinely political moments are desperate ones, what is required and hence justified is unbound political authority. Or, as he summarised it neatly in his 1934 essay *Der Führer schützt das Recht* – the ruler upholds the law, because it emanates from him (insofar as that not only decides what counts as law but also how it will be enforced).²⁵⁵

As Huizinga suggests, Schmitt in effect refuses to consider the enemy ‘even as a competitor, or opposing player in defining the ‘friend-enemy’ distinction as central to the realm of politics.’²⁵⁶ Rather, he literally becomes a mere obstacle to be moved out of the way. Huizinga here points to the German *Gegenstand* (opponent), the root of which ‘Gegenstand’ has the twofold meaning of *opposition* as well as ‘object’.²⁵⁷ This has important political consequences. In effect, it goes beyond the truism that in warfare, as in political struggle, frequently the basic rights and conventional laws are trespassed. Rather, it means to place the adversary outside of the realm of the ethical altogether, which dehumanises the other not only in consequence – by degrading her, or trespassing her rights – but dehumanises *in principle* by refusing to consider her as an ethical agent, someone who merits ethical consideration as such (even in a minimal sense). Because to admit this would be to allow for the possibility that one may come to an agreement with such an individual, which is what the principle of *Homo Ludens* would suggest. Therefore, Huizinga categorically refuses Schmitt’s political theory as a ‘dehumanising phantasm’.²⁵⁸ The reduction of politics to struggle and all struggle to existential conflict is to make the extremity the norm and to caricature the human ability to reconcile social differences ‘politically’, that is through peaceful means. Huizinga admits that ‘the political’ is

²⁵⁵ Carl Schmitt, ‘Der Führer schützt das Recht’, in *Positionen und Begriffe*. pp.xx-xx.

²⁵⁶ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p242.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

a site of contestation but refuses to accept that this implies we remain inherently hostile towards our opponents, nor that such hostility should show itself in such stark terms. As I will discuss below, such a vision of politics as struggle can only result in one conclusion: the dissolution of play and with it the eradication of the opposing player.

Already in 1935, in his *Shadow* Huizinga came to understand that such a theory of the ‘autonomous’ (self-legitimizing) amoral state, as he described it, was one of the gravest dangers that faced western culture. As I highlighted above, Huizinga’s reading of Schmitt rejects the ‘friend-enemy’ distinction for the simple reason that it refuses to consider the other as an ethical agent and hence rules out the possibility of ‘meaningful interaction’ with such an agent. All in all, for him, this thesis would ultimately collapse upon itself thus revealing its hidden, core premise, which is the admission of the ‘might is right’ principle.²⁵⁹ Put differently, Huizinga understood the grave dangers both conceptually *and practically* in mistaking Schmitt for a mere critic of political liberalism, for his ultimate end was not the resolution of liberal politics, but the ground for politics itself. As the Dutch historian put in a passage worth citing in full:

Now, unfortunately for this theory, every community, even those of animals, is based on the mutual trust of beings who could eradicate one another. A society, of people or of states, which lacks mutual trust, cannot exist. A state, which flies ‘not to be trusted’ on its banner, as the theory of the Amoral state suggests-if the world would actually come to embrace such ideas-would ultimately only be possible through the exercise of pure domination of all others together. In this way, the consequences of absolute national autonomy would lead back to the phantasm of universal statism!²⁶⁰

Following Huizinga’s line of reasoning as I have tried to explicate it, the logical conclusions of Schmitt’s argument would be continuous struggle for (world) dominance over all others, and would ultimately result in the dehumanisation and potential disappearance of any other players within the field of play. Such a politics would only end in disaster, either through collapse, or

²⁵⁹ Johan Huizinga, *Shadow of Tomorrow*, p369.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., p383.

worse, the destruction for the general conditions for politics itself as playful activity, namely, the existence of a communal ethos, political institutions, and ultimately fellow players. In its refusal to consider politics in terms of play – as specific practical articulation of a wider human capacity to regulate social conduct to foster political order – would end in the destruction of politics as play. The *modus vivendi* of such a political order would necessarily be institutionalised distrust and it is in this spirit he calls Schmitt's thinking a 'dehumanising phantasm'

Very simply put, Schmitt locates the core of 'the political' where it ends for Huizinga, and rejects the possibility that at the heart of this struggle, adversaries might consider each other as players in a contest, rather than adversaries in existential battle. For Schmitt the purpose of politics *is* battle and battle is justified solely in light of its end, which is to overcome the adversary. Huizinga understood very well that Schmitt dehumanised politics by essentialising political conflict and that *if* put into practice endangered the more general conditions of politics itself as playful activity. Schmittian theory was dangerous not only because it did not engage with play but was positively hostile to the very notion of politics as playful practice – and to humans as political players.

4.5 Beyond *Homo Ludens*: The Contemporary Relevance of Politics as Play

Huizinga develops his political theory of play in response to the crisis of the 1930s. However, what is the broader relevance of his analysis of politics as play for our contemporary understanding of politics? We can distil a number of important political lessons that exceed Huizinga's own focus on the specific problems of his age. The general idea here is that, although Huizinga himself does not flesh out the full implications of his understanding of politics as play we can distil from it a number of lessons that are valuable in developing a contemporary 'political theory of play'.

Before we analyse the possibilities of Huizinga's conception of politics as play, it is useful first to reconsider briefly some of the problems others have identified with it. From the perspective of politics, the most important critiques have been that Huizinga's conception of politics as play is basically conservative in its implications: it remains elitist, and displays a scepticism of mass (democratic) politics. Perhaps more fundamental is Adorno's claim that to approach culture and the political realm through the lens of play is itself a form of ideology, because it embraces an idealised focus on a unified past, and on social coherence more generally, at the expense of the actual existence of social conflict and division. However, I argue that a political theory of play needs to be restricted neither by an inherent conservative bias, nor remain negligent of actual political conflict per se. The point in developing a normative political theory of play is not to 'resolve' the difference between the coherence of the model and the conflict-ridden complexity of political reality. Rather, it offers a framework for the analysis of the conditions wherein political parties can battle out peacefully their disagreements and develops an argument as to why we should care about politics as play-activity.

Huizinga's analysis of politics as play helps us to explore a number of 'negative' lessons in relation to several dominant trends in contemporary political understanding. First, he qualifies the modern fascination with political autonomy and the liberal fascination with individual rights. This is by no means to say that individual rights do not matter but rather that when we focus too much on individual rights, we lose track of the fact that rights are largely exercised and upheld through everyday interaction *between* individuals. Autonomy is an important political virtue, but contemporary liberals do not always take sufficient stock of the fact that we always develop our autonomy in relation to other individuals. In other words, autonomy, whether legal or political, always requires others.

This closely relates to a second trend in contemporary political theory, which is so pervasive as to be shared by most political outlooks: an interest in and positive estimation of

political pluralism. Particularly in its recent iterations this takes the form of a ‘sceptical pluralism’, which embraces political plurality but is sceptical of the political institutions that make it possible. As we saw above, for Arendt political theory begins and ends with the recognition of the plurality of human beings. Similarly, for Gadamer, play becomes a model to accommodate and bind different registers, voices and modes of practice. Political liberalism starts from the ‘fact of pluralism’ and the requirement of the defence of individual rights against their infringement by third parties and the government.

Interestingly, more recent confrontational approaches to politics, whether inspired by Foucault, Derrida, or by contemporary agonism, all share this estimation of political pluralism, not just as a *social fact* but also as a positive *political norm*. At the same time, because these approaches emphasise critique over consensus and struggle over agreement, they remain skeptical about the robust shared political institutions required to maintain such a diversity of political viewpoints. Democratic agonists such as Mouffe are right to consider competition as a positive expression of democratic political plurality, which must be cultivated rather than stifled in rational consent.²⁶¹ However, they often remain relatively silent about the type of political institutions that would promote this goal. What sets Huizinga apart from this approach is that whereas agonists have drawn from the Schmittian critique of liberalism, Huizinga himself developed his conception of political agonism in stark opposition to the German thinker.²⁶² It is precisely in this stark confrontation that it becomes apparent that to engage the Schmittian critique of liberalism remains politically dangerous precisely because Schmitt rejects the very pluralism which contemporary agonism seeks to defend. Secondly, although Huizinga shares with more recent agonist thinkers the importance and productive capacity of political competition, he is more explicit to argue that political competition must be limited by

²⁶¹ Chantal Mouffe (2005). *On the Political*. Abingdon/New York: Routledge.

²⁶² Ibid. (1999). *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*. London: Verso.

and develops against a background of shared basic values.²⁶³ In short, Huizinga's political theory of play allows us to appreciate that political plurality identifies a political norm as much as a social reality. This means that politics without robust shared political institutions is antithetical to political pluralism; a fact easily ignored when we focus on the autonomy of individual players, or when we approach politics mostly through the lens of conflict.

The focus on autonomy, and the fascination with 'sceptical pluralism' help to identify an important third negative lesson Huizinga draws out. Politics as play requires a balance between politics as play – that is, as shared expression through dramatic performance – and politics as game – or, politics as competitive interaction between players. Play without competition tends to lead to a politics of enforces social unity of expression, which crowds out other voices. Political games without shared play generate competition without end, where the goal to win over the other becomes the central purpose of political interaction. In this light, it is unsurprising that Huizinga identified two important political dangers to the political landscape of his day: utilitarianism tends to reduce all politics to competition within the economic sphere of material exchange. Fascism on the other hand, collapses all political diversity into a desire for perfect social harmony. In the present context it also highlights the important tension in modern politics between two conceptions of democracy, one emphasising democracy as competition between plural interests, the other considering democratic sovereignty as the collective singular expression of 'we the people'.

Beyond these 'negative' qualifications of some of the dominant tenets in our contemporary political landscape, we can also identify a number of 'positive' lessons from Huizinga's conception of politics as play.

²⁶³ Jason Edwards (2013). 'Play and Democracy: Huizinga and the Limits of Agonism.' *Political Theory*, Vol. 41(1): pp. 90-115.

First, is his expansion of the notion of *fair play* beyond that of the liberal idea of rational consent.²⁶⁴ Here, *fair play* is restored to its full original sense of the word as a hallmark of the activity, not just a criterion of the rules of the game, as we often find in liberal theory. *Fair play* expresses itself in and through the activity of playing as mutual engagement. Although this refers in part to an ethical understanding of acting out of positive regard for fellow players, it also highlights a positive estimation of skill and enjoyment expressed in practice; that is, of the game ‘well played’. Crucially, not only is everyday interaction the purpose of fair play, it is also the only locus where it can be practiced.

A further positive lessons we can draw from Huizinga’s analysis of play is the central importance of a shared playing field, and the role of playing in maintaining it, and the relation between the political realm and other realms of social interactions. The playing field is important both because it sets up the actual game, and because it offers a space where players can cultivate the activity. However, part of that activity tends to the maintenance of the playing field: through playing we cultivate the requirements for the practice of the game and the skills and ethos requires to sustain it. This is an important insight because it appreciates the importance of political institutions on the one hand, yet accepts that ultimately what sustains these and keeps them in place is the activity they facilitate. Unlike the rationalist approach I discussed in chapter one, Huizinga argues it is not the case that if you put in place and thereby ‘fix’ the rules, the game will look after itself. Reversely, without a shared ethos – or shared commitment to playing – no formal institutions will retain their regulatory capacities. At the same time, the political game identifies and offers a site to negotiate peacefully political differences and competing viewpoints, and as such offers a common good that cannot be taken for granted.

²⁶⁴ The classic expression of this remains Rawls’ conception of justice as fairness, which is expressed in terms of fair play. As I discussed in chapter 1, fairness here is primarily understood in terms of rational agreement on procedural rules. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 461-462.

Moreover, Huizinga allows to reconsider politics in relation to and embedded within a wider tapestry of other social activities. Although the political realm remains somewhat distinct from other realms of human practice, at the same time it is never completely separate from them. This matters because it allows us to explore analogies with other models of social cooperation beyond the political realm. This becomes particularly important where politics itself becomes a mechanism of social polarisation, for instance, when it seeks to articulate political differences rather than commonalities. Thus, in contrast to Schmitt's emphasis on the radical autonomy of politics as activity, Huizinga reconnects it to other domains of social practice, which in turn may serve as inspiration to organise political cooperation between social adversaries.

However, there is one important, final lesson that we can draw from Huizinga's conception of politics as play: that is to play, or to be played. In other words, we cannot take for granted either the existence of the political realm itself, or our participation within it. Here we are again reminded of the dark clouds of political domination and violent conflict that hang over *Homo Ludens* as a product of the late thirties. Regardless of the utility of the analogies between Huizinga's political age and our own, which have become fashionable as of late, his conception of play reminds us to heed the conditions that make politics as play itself possible.

So, what could the adage play, or be played entail within the context of our democratic politics? Initially that competition is a democratic virtue and maintaining it a mechanism to allow for representation and contestation of diverse political viewpoints. This is closely related to two pervasive trends in contemporary politics, first the danger of the oligarchisation of democratic politics and second the danger of oligarchy for politics.

Oligarchisation manifests itself in the conscious activity of limiting participation and the rejection of democratic plurality in favour of a dominant viewpoint. Moreover, it reveals itself in the subtle and not-so subtle redefinition of the rules of the game to suit the interests of

wealth. Here, we can point to worrying trends not only in the legitimization of campaign finances but also to the establishment of fiscal legislation in western democracies which introduce distinct and often favourable tax regimes to specific corporate interests. Fundamentally, oligarchy offers an alternative to democratic politics altogether: it rejects the democratic norm of political equality by introducing new hierarchies of status. It also transforms the realm of democratic politics into a bargaining game for the exchange of material interests. This not only entail the ‘inner’ transformation of a shared democratic ethos, but more basically a reduction of the political playing field itself as a site where we can negotiate our political differences.

Conclusion.

The Prospects and Challenges of Politics as Play.

In this dissertation, I have done two things. First, I have tried to show the salience of approaching politics as play activity by highlighting and developing four approaches to game and play in 20th century political theory, which also raise a number of issues important for 21st century politics. This requires us to make the transition from play and game as metaphor to politics as playing within the political game. Second, I have put forward and developed one particular conception of politics as play, building on Huizinga's contributions to our understanding of play as a central impetus of a wide variety of social practices, including politics. In this final part, I want to take stock: what *conclusions* can we draw from the story by briefly revisiting the key lessons identified in the previous chapters. What *implications* do these have for our understanding of politics as play? And, what are the *challenges* to this political approach that we should keep in mind?

State of Play: Conclusions

First, I will briefly discuss a number of general conclusions in relation to the thesis I have developed. This will help to identify more specific conclusions in relation to each chapter below. A central idea throughout this research has been that we should shift our focus from play and game as metaphor and analogy towards playing as activity. This shift in emphasis, or this 'turn to play', allows me to do two things. First, to reveal and develop an interesting but

relatively neglected undercurrent in 20th century political theory. To this effect I have retraced four different accounts of the idea of politics as a game beyond the exercise of sovereign control. Secondly, I have put forward a particular version of politics as fair play, which draws on Huizinga's argument about the importance of play as impetus for a wide variety of cultural practices, politics included.

This account proposes a conception of politics that is different in tone and emphasis from two influential conceptions of politics: technocratic rationalism on the one hand, and agonist struggle on the other. What these polar opposites in the political spectrum have in common is that they understand politics primarily as the management of conflict and social diversity. As a result, in rationalist and agonist politics there is a focus not only on the game as a setting at the expense of the activity, but also on a specific *understanding* of the political game as a set of procedures and mechanisms to manage conflict. Interestingly, as a consequence both also suffer from a scepticism towards meaningful collective action, albeit for different reasons: technical rationalism as exemplified by game theory eschews meaningful interaction for functional exchange, agonism tends to see collective action as the manifestation of the dominance of particular social groups at the expense of others.

The conception of politics as play that I have put forward in chapter four not only redirects our attention to politics as playful activity, but also helps us to reconsider the political game beyond these instrumental terms. Whereas rationalist and agonist conceptions of politics separate the setting of the game from the activity it helps to make possible, my conception seeks to reconnect these two again. As a consequence, the game becomes the setting for the practice of play as meaningful and skillful engagement with others for its own sake. In other words, the aim of the game is to *play well*, but part of what this consists in is the effort to keep the game going.

In chapter one I started my inquiry with the ambitious recurring attempts to transform the unpredictable and frequently dangerous uncertainty of politics into the dynamic but regulated setting of the game, in an approach I have called Rational Play. I traced how initially the game figured as a model of risk management through the translation of uncertainty into quantifiable risks, which can be calculated and used for prediction. This in turn promised to offer a rational decision-making tool for strategic players to make well-informed decisions in the face of multiple possible outcomes that are also affected by other players who pursue their own objectives. Game theory constitutes the most recent systematic example to establish such rational grounding through the calculation and systematic management of risk, within a dynamic, competitive environment. Finally, I suggested how the game in this rational approach is a model to pacify the political realm through the translation of unstable, unpredictable passions into calculable interests. That is, to make politics more like a calculated game of gains and losses, thereby making it at once more dynamic *and* more manageable, and hence less volatile. This constitutes the utopian dimension to rational thinking in its belief that genuine conflict be pacified in and through the model of the game as ritualised competition between parties who can calculate and pursue their private interests.

The particular attraction of this gamelike approach to politics (particularly from the mid-70s onwards) is that it promises to create the possibility of dynamic management which offers people more leeway in their choices, thereby yielding greater productivity and flexibility of social outcomes. That is to say, these outcomes are open-ended as long as they fall within the general framework of the game and thereby allow for political governance. However, an important lesson is that rational play – rational predictability through the model of the game – only works when the conditions of interaction can be carefully controlled, and when (playing) the game remains relatively isolated from external influences. Game theory, for instance has been successfully used to optimise the bargaining strategy of governments in the auctioning of

frequency rights for broadband service providers. Also, as we saw with Hardin, it allows us to identify collective action problems that may trigger free riding.

However, it has been markedly *less* successful when applied on a broader, more complex scale, such as the determination of nuclear strategy, or organisation of economic markets as we witnessed during the 2008 Financial Crisis. This is the case for the simple reason that although you can set up the economy as a game, i.e. introduce a *level-playing field*, promote *competition* and so forth, it is impossible for any single player or arbiter for that matter, to control all risks through the mechanisms of the game. Risk management is reflexive in that it produces its own new risks which remain beyond the direct orbit of systemic control. Instead, the Financial Crisis showed the distinct limits to treating the economy as a rational game that can be coordinated through the carefully managed ‘freeplay of supply and demand’ by government administration. In the case of the Financial Crisis we saw interaction between players, where they not only changed their relative position *in* the game but undermined the very integrity *of* the game itself to the detriment of society at large. The process of securisation which saw banks take every more ‘calculated’ risk eventually put the entire financial system – and the economy at large – in jeopardy. In short, rational play not only overstates the capacity to manage complex systems through their organisation into a rational game but also reduces politics to little more than the technical cybernetic management of society.

Therefore, in chapter Two I offered the model of Aesthetic Play, which presents a contrasting and corrective approach to rational play. I argued that whilst trying to capture the rational dimensions of political life can be helpful, it is in particular vital to think about the type(s) of political interaction you desire to maintain. In other words: aesthetic play offers a contrasting, non-rationalist vision of politics as *play-activity* in its own right. Both Arendt and Gadamer consider politics more as an reflection and extension of the everyday practice of a common way of life, than merely as a mechanism to attain public ends. Both see play in politics

foremost as an expression of freedom and as the embodiment of the desire to engage with others peacefully in a non-coercive setting. Moreover, they suggest that the emphasis on human rationality is not only as misguided but also neglects the importance to recognise and value the plurality of human experience in the political realm. What makes it possible for people to coexist in a complex world is for Arendt and Gadamer not so much due to a capacity for practical rationality, but rather through the shared aesthetic practices we inherit: role models, historically developed performances, embodied norms and ultimately the infrastructure of the largely given physical and social lifeworld around us. They also stress that politics as aesthetic play is a specific activity, which is best understood as the enjoyment of engagement with others, more so than through the practical gains it may generate.

Yet, aesthetic play tends to neglects the degree to which *political* institutions are an intrinsic part of this infrastructure, and also to what degree these are liable to inhibit free interaction by limiting access to politics, enforcing dominant norms, or highlighting specific voices at the expense of others. Still, this said, aesthetic play does help us to appreciate the importance of symbolic, aesthetic representation of overlooked voices in the political realm. For examples, the French novelist Édouard Louis has recently, and forcefully, argued how both contemporary French literature and particularly French politics have neglected the voice of the working poor in French society. In reaction, his novels are a powerful, loving, yet unromantic and frequently brutal engagement with the social and moral trappings of a post-industrial French working class in decline.²⁶⁵ Stories like his remind us that aesthetic representation through novels and art can play a powerful role in reinserting in politics many perspectives that are overlooked generally, and offer public voices to those frequently unheard. A related powerful political lesson here of aesthetic play is that since any society will generate its losers, political elites not only do well to take them seriously but also must recognise the validity of

²⁶⁵ E.g. Édouard Louis, (2018). *The End of Eddy*. London: Penguin; Ibid. (2019). *Who Killed my Father*. London: Penguin.

their distinct experience, as well as policies that tackle them. To neglect such voices by labelling them as ‘deplorable’ is not only to consider them as a social-economic class beyond salvation but also enforces a normative rejection of their lifestyle and political views as elements to take seriously. Still, aesthetic play tends to focus too much on social harmony, which risks overlooking political conflicts of interests. We need to complement this view with the more critical conception I have called Critical Play.

From Derrida and Foucault, as the main advocates of Critical Play, we learn that freedom of individual players frequently coincides with the rigorous enforcement of social conformity and stultifying norms as products of elite consensus. Therefore, they point to the inherent potential of *power play* in the exercise of social control not through coercion but rather through the pervasive yet broad acceptance of claims to authority. In addition, both thinkers warn us against the desire to view society as a logical, coherent and neatly hierarchically-organised whole. They also encourage us to be sceptical of any institution that presents itself as a final authority on social or political matters. Derrida holds that it is precisely this core belief – that maintaining social order requires the existence of a central authority who makes final decisions – which has led historically to violent attempts to maintain social harmony by clamping down on dissenting voices. Therefore, his advocacy for the play of *différance* ultimately boils down to the recognition of conflicting human plurality, as well as the creative possibility to develop ever new configurations of texts, ideas, and ultimately people, and to reject claims to necessity. This is expressed in the idea(l) of ‘free play’ as the open-endedness towards ever new configurations and the rejection pre-determined outcomes. Foucault has used the example of how competition came to be understood as a fact of life, rather than as a collectively (self) imposed social and political norm.

Critical play allows us to understand and evaluate existing political institutions against possible alternatives and also to turn political subjects into liberated, emancipated *players*, who

in their rejection of the status quo carve out a space for the expression of their own political views and social aspirations. To put it differently, to reject necessity is to start ‘playing with’ alternatives, which is both liberating and politically powerful because it allows for the creative exploration of new modes of political engagement. The recent examples of Citizens’ Assemblies in Ireland and Iceland are just one way in which public issues can be discussed and put on the political agenda by a wide cross-section of the population. Similarly, the Belgian author David van Reybrouck has experimented recently with the G1000, a citizens’ platform to discuss pressing social issues where participants were selected on the basis of sortition.²⁶⁶ Another example would be participatory budgeting, which gives local citizens the opportunity to participate in the allocation of municipal budgets.

Derrida offers us as another important implication of critical play, namely the suggestion that we should stop thinking about single – and singular – answers to political problems. Rather, we require multiple responses as well as playful engagement with each of these, because we cannot take for granted in advance what may work or not. Indeed, a useful implication for the way we conceptualise political freedom is that to be free means not to be tied to a that is future already largely determined by previous political decisions, since this would rob one of the possibility to consider meaningful alternatives at critical junctures in a political community’s existence.

Still, political issues like global climate change, mass migration, or urbanisation are not just issues waiting to be examined critically and deconstructed. Rather, they are daunting social realities that require concerted political action, as well as ambitious reconsiderations of the way we organise politics; they need the sort of creative analysis that informs political action, rather than collective pessimism or political scepticism.

²⁶⁶ <http://www.g1000.org/en/index.php>, last accessed 5-10-2019.

Therefore, in chapter Four I offer the perspective of Cultivating Play, both in response to and to further develop the insights developed in the previous chapters: this chapter asks: How do we maintain and cultivate the shared *play-ethos* that ultimately connects new players both with each other, and with political playing-field that already exists and requires creative adaptation to new circumstances? Aesthetic play already identified the enjoyment of mutual engagement as a political goal to strive for in its own right; however, I suggest that in addition politics as play also requires the creation and maintenance of the appropriate institutions and the proper conditions of play. This includes, the scope and size of the playing field, the rules of play, the skills necessary for players to participate, and finally the play ethos. In other words, it suggests that politics as play requires the cultivation of a practice, which in turn requires a playing field that is maintained in and through the activity of playing. In other words, politics as play means both the stylised practice that makes possible the interaction between a diversity of social players, and the institutional maintenance of the playing field on which this practice takes place.

This suggests that there is nothing inevitable about political outcomes but that we should recognise the historical instances and opportunities where parties manage to peacefully negotiate their differences as important accomplishments. Moreover, the best way to attain this is precisely to develop the rules and games for different social groups to practice these skills. As I pointed out above, Gadamer forcefully reminds us that a conversation does not require agreement for us to take an interest in other perspectives; an important lesson at a time of increasing social-economic stratification *and* ideological polarisation. However, as I argue in my reconsideration of Huizinga's work, this also requires that we think critically about the types of political organisations which may help to open up a playing field where contestants can take on the role of mutually engaging players to help bridge these social divides. A recent set of initiatives for instance have tried precisely to bridge this gap by bringing people across the

ideological divide into contact with each other. *Bridge the Divide* for instance is an organisation that seeks to bring into direct conversation American youths from across the increasing ideological divide.²⁶⁷

In short, with cultivating play we can trace a middle ground between the technocratic ‘there is no alternative’ rationalism still prevalent in current politics and the critically engaged yet politically sceptical, struggle-orientated agonist approaches to politics: it allows for competition between viewpoints but also sees part of that competition directed at the cultivation of a shared playing-field for present *and* future players to enjoy. Particularly in a time of increasing social polarisation and scepticism of politics it is important to identify the alternative of skillful dialogical action that stays clear from the bargain model of rational technocracy on the one hand, and the power play that pervades agonism on the other.

From Gamelike to Playful Politics: Implications

What implications do these combined conclusions hold for our understanding of politics as play? Here I identify a number of lessons we can draw from the analysis of politics as play I have presented in this thesis:

Beyond Sovereignty. Each of the four approaches seeks to move beyond and develop alternatives to sovereignty as the top-down political exercise of authority. This squares with an important broader trend in 20th century politics: the reconsideration both of the requirement, and the desirability of, the state as a central agent in the organisation of public life. We have encountered a number of different arguments and analyses for the rejection of politics as state sovereignty. As we saw, the different perspectives on play have diverging reasons to reject the paradigm of sovereignty: for neoliberals and their emphasis on rational play it spells the social-

²⁶⁷ <https://www.bridge-the-divide.com/>, last accessed 5-10-2019.

democratic attempt to seize the state to restrict individual freedom and promote redistributive justice; Arendt and Gadamer lament its technocratic, rationalist conception of politics. Foucault and Derrida suggest that the paradigm of sovereignty both presumes and requires constant centralised control: for the state to be able to regulate society, it has to have constant access to all relevant data in order to survey the territory and offer predictive analytics about what might happen. However, in time, the logic of state surveillance has thus developed into a surveillance state, which is monitoring anything from traffic flows to crime prevention via big data.

What all of these critiques share is the idea that the exercise of sovereign authority is aimed at controlling outcomes by regulating players. This form of control is non-reciprocal in its relationships with subjects, restricts the capacity of players to engage freely with each other, and fosters acting in the spirit of distrust rather than of trust. The perspective of politics as cultivating play allows us to rethink political relations as engagements in play-activity. This allows us to find a balance between the scepticism about the contemporary state as a facilitator of public services, and the observation that can become a complex of institutions wielding immense social and political power over us as subjects.

From Game to Play. This feeds into another implication: that to reconsider politics as play is also to move beyond mere ‘procedural’ gamelike models of politics. From Aesthetic Play onwards, we moved from the gamelike to a ‘playful’ conception of politics as the activity of playing well as of a mutual practice in its own right. In other words, it signals commitment to a way of life rather than merely a set of binding rules that facilitate practical interaction. As we saw, this requires a playing field, players’ engagement, as well as a play-ethos which is both expressed in and practiced through the activity of playing. However, as I have tried to show through my reading and development of Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* the cultivation of the conditions of playing –the institutional arrangements, the skills required, *and* the spirit they embody – requires constant practice and vigilance on our behalf. Still, beyond Huizinga’s

historical concern with the preservation of High Culture, we should acknowledge that at times to preserve the play-ethos we have to experiment with new modes of play and introduce new players to the political game. Indeed, that is when the creative dimension of play becomes salient politically: collectively experimenting to find new ways to foster mutual interaction.

Game Design Matters. Consequently, game design – how you set up the rules of play – matters greatly in at least two ways. For one, the rules of the game determine both the purpose of playing, such as whether the aim is cooperation or competition, but also structure the principal possible outcomes. Secondly, as we found out through the notion of gamification, games tend to shape and affect not just how players act but also how they come to understand their *own* actions in light of the game. This makes gamification powerful but also potentially dangerous and requires us to think carefully how games transform the conduct of those engaged. We also have to ask whether this transformation is motivated by utilitarian concerns, or rather to foster mutual interaction and ownership of the game. Still, because games establish political relations rather than merely reflecting already existing ones, we can also think about playful settings that bring together different parties who would not ordinarily interact (or offer new roles to existing parties). This is particularly relevant in contemporary society which sees a plurality of viewpoints, age-groups and individuals from various political backgrounds interact on the political stage.

Player Emancipation. Yet, a setting alone is not enough, playing also requires skills, which are practiced in and through play-activity. However, to become a player in your own right through the enjoyment that comes with the full exercise of one's capacities in interaction with others also requires the development of such skill and positive involvement with others in playing. As I argued in the Introduction, the ideal of the emancipated player as someone who can develop her full potential and share their capacities with others can be traced back at least to Schiller, and arguably earlier to Renaissance humanist attitudes towards human excellence.

This remains an important normative political ideal to strive for but one that in contemporary politics debates has largely been overshadowed by a liberal focus on individual rights on the one hand, and a narrow emphasis on welfare distribution in social-democratic politics on the other. Important as these political goals may be, neither addresses the traditional idea that political emancipation aims at the full development of human capacities – and our enjoyment of them – in the engagement with others. Politics as play suggests that it is in and through the enjoyment of play with others, that we come to develop our full capacities.

Beware of Power Play. This emphasis on playing well in turn always requires vigilance against any manifestation of power play. That is, the relation of the exercise of authority with its justification by privileged political players in their attempts to alter or uproot the game, or limit participation. Recent examples of this are the eradication of limits to campaign finance as a result of the US Supreme Court ruling in *Citizens United*, which held that donations are constitutionally protected by the Constitutional First Amendment on free speech. This effectively sedimented the important requirement of wealth as a precondition for the successful pursuit of democratic office. Similarly, recent constitutional changes by the Fidesz-led government in Hungary have made it significantly more difficult for opposition parties to attain parliamentary representation.²⁶⁸ In both cases, changes to the game aim to limit player participation. Politics as play may not always be able to prevent *power play*; however, it does help us to clarify what it means politically, and to identify it whenever it occurs.

Fair Play. I have argued that Huizinga offers us a conception of politics that revolves around *fair play*, or the basic idea that politics can be viewed as the cultivation of mutual engagement as a practice we engage in for its own sake. The implication here is that most of us want to resolve our social differences peacefully and equitably. To redefine fair play in this way

²⁶⁸ Zack Beauchamp (2018). 'It Happened Here: How Democracy Died in Hungary', Vox, September 13, 2018. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/9/13/17823488/hungary-democracy-authoritarianism-trump>, last accessed 5-10-2019.

offers two important implications. First, it moves beyond the limited liberal understanding of fair play as mere agreement on procedures. Not only are such procedures already an expression of a commitment to politics as play, moreover it also reveals that, although rules are constitutive of playing, their full meaning is revealed in the activity they facilitate and make possible. Second, this idea of fair play offers a rejection of a core claim embraced by both the critical Left and the (New) Right as part of their shared rejection of liberalism: namely, that at bottom, politics revolves around the conflict between incompatible political viewpoints. However, that conflict, rather than the peaceful resolution of social difference, should be at the heart of our understanding of politics is an ideological rather than merely a conceptual claim. Consequently, it is not one we need to accept on face value.

The Prospects of Politics as Play: Challenges

What are the challenges to the model of politics as play? What happens when some of the basic conditions for its cultivation – such as a common (level) playing field, shared ethos and player engagement – themselves may be at stake? Therefore, in this section I identify three challenges that affect not just contemporary politics in general but also the pursuit of politics as play more specifically. These are: the tension between politics as ‘mere, play’ and as existential ‘end game’; the increasing tendency of what I will call the ‘gamification of the lifeworld’; and finally, the basic tension between commitment to a ‘level playing field’, and the economic imperative of ‘game changers’.

Mere play, or Endgame? A first such challenge to politics as play considers the issue what happens when the political game itself is perceived to be at stake. We can call this the tension between politics as ‘mere’ play, and politics as endgame, or politics considered as decisive geopolitical struggle. Simply put, adherents of politics as endgame such as Schmitt, accept the basic idea of culture as play – or a set of common values and practices which aim at

the preservation of a cultural way of life. However, they hold that precisely because culture must be defended, such practices require a robust political defense against rival worldviews which seek to replace a domestic culture with their own. In such instances, we have to put aside the niceties and courtesies of *fair play* in order to make way for the proper engagement with politics as battle; a conception of politics we saw embodied in Schmitt's *Grossraum*-politics. However, this vision of politics as endgame between rival civilisations is not just cautionary relic of the past. Schmitt's intellectual heirs of the New Right, who in recent years have regained prominence throughout Europe, tell a very similar story, namely that of a European civilisation under siege from political decadence within and from mass-migration without, with political elites doing little to prevent either. However, just to reject this tenet as a form of *cultural philistinism*, or as a political fringe, as has been the dominant strategy until recently among cultural and political elites, does little to dispel the efficacy of this political message. This means that a defense of politics as play must also develop a political rejection of the radical politics of endgame as a conflict between civilisations.

Gamification of the Lifeworld. A second, less drastic, but arguably more pervasive trend is the increasing gamification of many aspects of our everyday experience. In chapter one, we saw that gamification means the use of game elements in non-game contexts. A central underlying motive here is to use the game for external, productive purposes. This represents a shift from playing as mutual activity in its own right, to play as a mechanism to manage and optimise (social) outputs. This trend comes in two guises: the subtle and not-so-subtle uses of gamification to bring about undesirable social outcomes.

A not-so-subtle form involves the direct political application of gamification to maintain social control. A clear example of this is the system of social credit (or *Sesame* as it is called), recently rolled out as a pilot by the Chinese government. This uses a totalised form of the competitive game as a model of social control by incentivising social obedience through a

system of punishment and rewards. These are offered by governmental agencies, as well as by third parties such as fellow citizens and companies, and relate to anything from social housing, through visa and job applications. The clear aim is obedience through permanent self-management in light of constant social surveillance. However, what makes this a *game* is not just its gamified, virtual interface, or its use of a competitive reward system. Rather, it is that the sovereign government sets itself up as the arbiter that merely seeks to enforce common rules of play and keep score within an otherwise free field of social interaction. By implication, the social credit game enforces social control through competition and makes government control more intrusive, yet also more covert. Most importantly, it turns social life into one big game – albeit one with existential stakes – but simultaneously makes all social interaction into exchanges subject to a utilitarian calculus of punishment and reward.

This direct use of the game as a model of political control has its counterpart in the more subtle form of *profitable play*, which aims to increase productivity through gamification and ushers in the gradual abolition of the distinction between work and leisure. We can trace this use in the more obvious form of gamification as a business model, or strategy to increase profit as I discussed in chapter one. However, a more widespread manifestation of this trend is that individuals in contemporary society are increasingly invited to see themselves as players in pursuit of their own life-plans, engaged in the game to maximise their potential. Consider the Nietzschean ideal of the player as someone in the playful pursuit of self-set goals. With the disappearance of sovereignty as top-down control on the one hand, and the critique of traditional ideological conceptions of the common good, a core aspiration in contemporary western societies is to become a player in this regard. That is, an autonomous agent who is not only free from external interference but also in charge of their own goals. Byung-Chul Han has inventively suggested that this social change coincides with a transition from the individual as a *subject*, who is ruled by the sovereign maxim ‘I should’, to the individual as a *project*, who is

guided by the imperative ‘I can’.²⁶⁹ The relevance of this is that although outwardly this emancipated player enjoys the freedom to play, she is still driven by an inward logic of self-maximisation. Interestingly, in this game of life as a project of self-development, competition derives not just from the constant comparison with others but ultimately from competition with one’s *own* conception of *oneself* as a player who utilises every moment in the optimisation of her pursuits. However, within the individualist productive economy of *profitable play* there is no room for the idleness and fun of ‘just playing’, let alone for the pursuit of politics as play.²⁷⁰

Level Playing Field, or Game Changers? A final challenge I want to explore is the structural, and intensifying competition between two rationalities at work in modern society: one relates to the efforts to maintain a *level playing field*, the other – that of *game changers* – drives global market integration. With the rationality of *level playing field* I mean the conception of politics as public activity to debate, decide upon and enforce rules equally binding to all within a common legal-political field of play. Its fundamental aim is to keep politics open, by i) maintaining a public realm of decision making, ii) upholding a legal regime of equality, where universal rules are equally binding for all; and iii) maintaining broad participation.

The rationality of *game changers* on the other hand, is the strategic imperative to innovation that drives market globalisation. Here, the simple idea is that the best way to beat the competition is to transform the character of the game you’re playing; or to put it properly, to beat the competitor by removing the condition of competition. Economic theory holds that this drive to innovation leads to superior goods, at lower prices for consumers. However, the political relevance of this rationality is that it upsets not just in individual markets but rather

²⁶⁹ Byung-Chul Han (2015). *The Burnout Society*. Trans. Erik Butler. Stanford: Stanford University Press. pp.8-9.

²⁷⁰ Consider the current prevalence of ‘life hacks’, challenges, and other motivational tools to improve our (productive) lives. If we cast our net even wider, we see a similar dynamic at work in the tendency to turn everything into a fun ‘experience’ and thereby to turn experience itself into a profitable business (a phenomenon we see at work anywhere from museums and tourism, to commerce and shopping, as well as in the advent of the TED-talk as the paradigm of engaged public speaking). This is a phenomenon that Han elsewhere has aptly called the ‘gamification of capitalism’. Ibid. (2017). *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and Technologies of Power*. London: Verso. pp.49-54.

constitutes an underlying dynamic of market integration in general, which frequently has disruptive social consequences for local communities. The point is that both rationalities are at work simultaneously, yet also develop in contradictory directions (preservation and disruption). This is for the simple reason that whereas the rationality of maintaining a level playing field is primarily local, political, rights-based, and preservative, the rationality of game changers instead, is increasingly global, driven by economic utility, and fundamentally transformative in character. The collision between these two rationalities will not only have ramifications for our conception of politics as public activity, but also for the viability of politics as play.

In other words, this collision may not only have as a consequence the proliferation of multiple playing fields, but also generate limited access to, and unequal participation in these fields. Simply put, due to the rationality of game changers we may end up with political playing fields which are neither very ‘level’, nor very ‘common’ to begin with, and which offer differentiated and limited participation to a plurality of players.

What makes this collision problematic for our understanding of politics as play? For, one because it advantages some players over others, which in turn allows them to *game the system*. That is, to use the legal-political framework against itself for private gain. It is legally possible, yet contrary to the idea of fair play. Consider how the current global tax regime favors the companies who have access to it (whereas local citizens do not). Moreover, this has also generated an undesirable competition between states to offer a favorable investment climate to multinational companies in order to offset losses in tax income. The net result has been that legal innovation has come at the expense of political preservation. In this case, the playing field is neither ‘level’ nor public in character, because different – and *inequal* – tax regimes apply to different parties *within* the same domestic jurisdiction. Moreover, this differentiation by law has also diminished the capacity of democratic politics to act as the arbiter of this playing field. However, problematic as this example may be, we can still understand it from the perspective

of the transition from government to governance, and the resulting shift from direct control and public service provision, to ruling through the enforcement of framework conditions. This has changed the strategy rather than the scope of government.

However, what happens when innovations external to the political realm may lead to the privatisation not just of aspects of government but rather to that of the political domain, and of politics *itself*, as public activity? We take for granted that politics is by and large a public activity, with at least some engagement, participation and public discussion about shared issues. However, Jamie Susskind has argued recently that (market-driven) technological and digital innovation have a capacity to transform the way we debate, decide upon and enforce matters traditionally, which are reserved for the public realm of democratic politics by putting these competences into the hand of (private) third parties.²⁷¹ The advent of what Susskind calls the ‘digital lifeworld’ coincides with the increasing application of algorithms to all domains of social life.²⁷² This sparks a concern that ‘code is law’, because in an algorithm-driven society, those who own, write and maintain ‘the code’ (the algorithms directing autonomous systems) will effectively be able to control social behavior.²⁷³ If public debate increasingly takes place online, and online platforms (such as for example Facebook and Google) are private, the responsibility of regulating public debate increasingly fall in the hands of parties who are informed by a risk-averse fundamental interest in profit, rather than in upholding free speech. Similarly, digital technology based on machine learning is already applied to the preparation of minor court cases; however, because such systems often learn by analysing existing data, which often reflect social biases, this may in practice lead to unjust outcomes.

²⁷¹ Jamie Susskind (2018). *Future Politics. Living Together in a World Transformed by Tech*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²⁷² This is just one significant ‘external’ driver of political change in the 21st century, consider there are several other contenders, e.g. from changes in energy resource matrix, to the local distribution of climate change effects, as well as the secular trend of urbanisation.

²⁷³ Let alone the even more fundamental problem that if actions are algorithm-driven, and algorithms themselves change all the time through autonomous machine learning (basically, that the script changes as a result of a constant evolutionary process of self-learning), fundamental legal-political concepts such as ‘responsibility’, ‘judgment’, and ‘agency’ are called into question.

To summarise what in reality constitutes a highly entangled complex of issues: the rationality of game changers as exemplified by market-driven digital innovation has the potential not only to change the scope and commonality of the political (level) playing field but also to transform the public activity that we call politics. This also has important implications for the conception of politics as play I have developed here. The point is not that play will disappear but rather that its performance will increasingly take place on a proliferation of different playing fields – partially competing, partially overlapping – each with each domain ruled by its own rules, ethos and mores. This may enforce limited access to as well as differentiated participation to play; some players will become exceedingly skillful due their privileged access, others much less so. Arguably, most important, what could be eroded is the ideal of politics as play, with its emphasis on broad participation and engagement by players in a mutual (public) activity for its own sake. As such, one thing remains as true for us today as it was five hundred years ago for Machiavelli – *To play, or be played. That is the question.*

However, as Huizinga reminds us, part of the answer must involve a joint commitment to the art of playing *well*.

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