

Political Horizons in America

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Abstract: In this paper, I go back to French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's influence on Claude Lefort's theory of democracy in order to offer a revised understanding of political regimes as coexisting and competing horizons of politics. These horizons develop from differing positions regarding the political enigma of the institution of society—its staging, its shaping, and its making sense of itself. A theological understanding of such political institution of society will be described as fundamentally voluntaristic, while an epistemic understanding will be described as, in its radical iteration, potentially totalitarian. This theorization is triggered by an interpretive perplexity: what happened to the United States in the aftermath of 9/11, in its War on Terror, in its committing of the supreme international crime of aggressive warfare, in its embracement of a massive policy of executive, global targeted assassinations and of a white nationalist, xenophobic politics? Is the theologico-political horizon becoming once again dominant in America? Is the epistemic, plutocratic regime taking over instead? Are they coordinated in their effort to undermine an egalitarian understanding of the American republic? These are the interrogative driving forces behind this investigation.

'Horizons' is a metaphor that has taken on increasing importance ever since Nietzsche used it in his celebrated 'God is dead' passage [...] Since Nietzsche's time, 'horizon' has assumed a life of its own. It became a central philosophic concept in the phenomenological tradition – in Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and in Gadamer's ontological hermeneutics. [...] I use it to call attention to what always seems to be receding but nevertheless orients one's thinking. [...] The use of the plural 'horizons' is important because I do not think that there is a single all-encompassing ethical-political horizon... but rather an irreducible plurality of horizons. (Bernstein 2007, p. 10)

French philosopher Claude Lefort, an author inscribed in a tradition that could be called 'political phenomenology', is one of the central figures of contemporary political theory's attempt to distinguish "politics" from "the political." Against those who rush to idealize the latter and despise the former, however, he used to assert that it is not a fact lacking in signification that modern

societies have identified a field of action, together with a series of institutions and practices, as something to be called “politics.” But, what is that signification? Or, better put, what does it mean that it does not “lack signification”? The phenomenon of modern society’s identification of a sphere of social life as politics does not lack signification because the gesture signals in the direction of a historical contingency that reveals the appearance of a general form of the institution of society, i.e. the appearance of a form of the political as such. The intertwining of politics and the political that is characteristic of modern democratic societies for Lefort shows a particular way of society’s confrontation with the enigma of its own institution, but a particular way of doing so that acquires a very important general meaning. Taking as a point of departure the recent and current American political experience, here I will offer a theoretical perspective that will attempt to give new life to this intertwining of politics and the political.

In order to achieve this, I will make use of some aspects of the phenomenological tradition and its notion of “horizons”. Why would it be useful to reactivate the notion of horizons—or that of “regimes”, as I will alternatively also use here, but in the sense Jacques Rancière¹—gives to the term? Because a horizon works, as it is suggested by the phenomenological tradition, as a background, as that *something* that nevertheless is not seen as such but rather offers the contrast that makes the contour of another *something* appear. The notion of horizon works as a hermeneutic device that signals in the direction of an organizing background that distinguishes the visible from the invisible and the thinkable from the unthinkable. Nevertheless, this notion establishes these distinctions in such a way that the invisible and the unthinkable are not invisible and unthinkable in themselves but only contingently so—i.e. against the contrast of *that* horizon, in the context of *that* regime. Horizons render some things visible and invisibilize others, they render some problems thinkable and push others to the realm of the unthinkable. This performative relation between horizons and visibility and thinkability is at the center of the relation between politics and the political that Lefort identifies at the heart of modern societies: it is conflict—the conflict between competing horizons in my words—rather than sheer “unity” that holds contemporary democratic societies together.

This is not all that the notion of horizon offers, however. Horizons not only contribute to the conflictive and contingent demarcation of the visible and the invisible and the thinkable and the unthinkable but also work as *compasses* indicating dissenting and competing *possible* directionalities. A horizon operates as a principle, or as a devise, that identifies a goal that could never be reached but that nevertheless organizes the action. A horizon establishes the coordinates that guide the *sense*—both “meaning” and “direction”—of that that is seek. This horizon institutes, or rather contributes to the institution of, practices and rules, discourses and expectations, interactions and

predispositions, that contribute, in the context of a field in which other horizons also intervene, to the generation of the plurality of perspectives that give political consistency to the social field as such. The idea of a field as instituted by an indeterminate encounter of mutually competing and decentering perspectives follows closely from the late work of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964,) from whom Lefort also borrows in developing his notion of the political as the general shape of the flesh of the social.

This is why the fact that modern societies have identified a particular field of politics at the heart of the more general social field does not lack significance. This identification instituted a space of conflict precisely at the center of the social, a field that nevertheless requires a kind of unity in order to be at all. It is this space of conflict that, structured as a staging of contrasting horizons, offers alternative, contingent organizations of the visible and the invisible, the thinkable and the unthinkable. These alternative organizations of the visible and the invisible are the ones that are now clashing in a particularly meaningful way in contemporary America. Interrogating the general meaning of this particular clash of horizons is the main purpose of this text.

The Horizons of Politics

My starting point will be a theoretical and interpretive perplexity, the one triggered by America's response to the terrorist attacks of September 11th of 2001. This perplexity, denied or ignored by many but experienced by some, could be summarized by a question: what kind of society is America today, or what kind of society is America becoming?

According to Lefort, the general meaning of the particular form of society (modern democracy) instituted by the identification of a sphere of practices and institutions as politics is that it disentangles the exercise of political authority from the legitimacy of the law, as well as both of them from the generation of knowledge. This disentanglement of power, right and truth takes place as a result of a symbolic mutation in the status of power: the exercise of political authority is now contingent, no longer in continuity with a substantive natural or supernatural source of legitimacy. For Lefort, this lacking of an unquestionable center of authority is one with the multiplication of different spheres of autonomy, and this enables the legitimacy of the permanent questioning of the limits of the legitimate and the illegitimate. He summarizes all this under a characteristic phrase: modern democracy is characterized by the dissolution of the markers of certainty.

This dissolution of the markers of certainty leads to the embracement of a fundamental uncertainty regarding what is (should be or will be in the future) considered to be just or unjust, true or false, desirable or undesirable in social life. This embracement of uncertainty, however, is not the end of history—it is a contingent, historical achievement, and it is (a positive) achievement only

from the point of view of certain horizons as they are presented here. For Lefort, it is the historical crossroads of the dissolution of the markers of certainty with particular critical circumstances—such as the devastation of a war, the implosion of an economic system or the radical dislocation of certain aspects of social cohesion—that could lead to the rejection rather than the embracement of uncertainty regarding the sources and legitimacy of law, power and truth. Under such critical circumstances, it is a different horizon—that of a conflation of the exercise of authority with what ought to be the law and what should be considered to be the truth—that becomes attractive: a source of restored, now totalitarian, certainty. These are the circumstances threatening democracy under modern conditions. For Lefort, religion is no longer symbolically available, neither as a source of collective certainty nor as the place where society manages to stage, shape and make sense of itself as a unified entity. The theologico-political form of society, characteristic of the pre-democratic *ancien régime*, was in fact the one in which religion offered such a unifying stage, something Lefort theorized borrowing from Ernst Kantorowicz's figure of the King's two bodies (1957).

As it could be seen, this theorizing of democracy as a form of society in which the staging, shaping and making sense of society for itself is intertwined with the identification of a sphere of social life as politics as such, contrasts with two alternative regimes. This game of contrasts conforms what could be described as a typology of forms of society: modern-democratic, theologico-political and totalitarian. On the one hand, the theologico-political regime is seemingly left behind by the democratic revolutions of the end of the eighteenth century and the broad social, egalitarian changes taking place in the nineteenth. On the other hand, the totalitarian political form becomes a permanent specter that, starting in the twentieth century, threatens democracy from the perspective of a radical, ideological restitution of certainty. This typology outlined a narrative in which modern democracy replaces the theologico-political, Christian monarchy. A consequence of this replacement—but, of course, also a *cause* of it, since such reversibility is at the heart of all social life—was the activation of equality as a generative principle of society.² In turn, this activation triggers the aforementioned generalization of the dissolution of those markers of certainty so characteristic of the *ancien régime*: naturalized hierarchical relationships; identification of a fixed, supernatural source of legitimacy; the populating of the invisible with images of that naturalized hierarchical visible (Lefort 1986). This generalization of uncertainty regarding the status of the political entity as such, together with the same uncertainty extending to the relations between its members, under certain extreme circumstances, leads to the emergence of the totalitarian fantasy—that of the reestablishment of a radical unity of the social. In Lefort's model, these are the "others" of modern democracy: a theologico-political past and the totalitarian menace of a possible future.

Assuming the hermeneutic productivity of this typology, the questions posed by the theoretical and interpretive perplexity inaugurated by America's response to 9/11 thus follow: Could we legitimately say that today's America has restored a theologico-political regime? This question would make sense if we were to *only* take into account elements such as the relevance of the Christian horizon in America's understanding of its "war on terror" as a religious war against Islam or if our interpretation were to be overwhelmed by the fascination shown by some sections of American society for Trump's providential leadership style. Many interpreters have labeled this leadership style as "populist", but I would describe it as "voluntarist" instead. Trump's leadership style seems indeed driven by a desire to restore, by a mere leap of faith, a hierarchical, pre-democratic order, defined by the unambiguous economic and cultural supremacy of a white identity; an identity that has today become a minority among many others. *Make America Great Again* truly meant and means *Make America White Again* and *Make America Christian Again*.

Many analysts of American politics have been mesmerized by the overwhelming support shown by evangelical voters for somebody—let us put it this way—whose lifestyle does not seem to closely follow the evangelical understanding of a pious life. The reasons behind such support, however, are rendered possibly more understandable if we consider that the theologico-political horizon is more than ready to welcome a voluntarist, providential leader claiming to be capable of willing back into reality a substantive and Christian identity relentlessly undermined by the modern dissolution of the markers of certainty. History, however, never repeats itself and it seems it would be more misleading than illuminating to describe the current American political situation as an already successful, completed transition toward a theologico-political form of society in Lefort's sense. Other horizons are probably as, or even more, active in contemporary America than the theologico-political one, as testified, culturally, by the increasing diversity of American society, and, politically, by the strong democratizing force behind the Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter movements or the Bernie Sanders candidacy in 2016.

Alternatively, then, have the United States become a totalitarian society instead? This question would only make sense from a perspective that reduces the category of totalitarianism to a multipurpose label, applicable to any society or regime we dislike enough—or want to denounce for instrumental purposes. It is true that contemporary America has not only used but also publicly, and often proudly, justified a significant number of policies associated with totalitarian regimes: torture, disappearances, aggressive warfare, indefinite detention camps, summary executions, and show—although at the same, paradoxical time, mostly secret—trials. A more nuanced and multidimensional analysis, however, would quickly dissuade us from choosing to describe the United States along such totalitarian lines (Wolin 2008). What thus becomes apparent is that to give affirmative answers to these questions would

be, at a minimum, a rush to judgment. This fact should lead us to consider the need for a re-elaboration of Lefort's typology of forms of society or political regimes. This re-elaboration might be capable of allowing us to make sense of the double phenomenon: on the one hand, the growing tension developed, since 9/11, between large segments of American society and the features associated by Lefort with modern democracy. On the other hand, the fact that these transformations have not produced a society that could be reasonably called—at least not yet—either theologico-political or totalitarian.

The central element of this proposed re-elaboration is the observation, already implicit in the aforementioned interpretative hesitations regarding the status of contemporary America, that these regimes (theologico-political and totalitarian), rather than as self-contained and alternative forms of society, shall be seen as *horizons* in the already stated sense. This means that the voluntarist/theological and, as I will explain later, epistemic/totalitarian regimes outline both directionality and contrast rather than complete forms of society. These horizons make possible different meanings and identifications, expectations and institutions, all of them coexisting and in conflict with each other at any given time and place. More specifically: although it is true that the egalitarian dissolution of the markers of certainty seems to be one of the most salient characteristics of those societies that experienced the so-called secularization of its institutions, practices and beliefs, what seems problematic is to conceive the theologico-political horizon as having been definitively left behind in modern times. Similarly, it seems also problematic, or at least insufficient for interpretive purposes, to consider the totalitarian horizon as only a potential but not always actualized threat to democracy, rather than as a permanently operating ideological presence—sometimes more, sometimes less so—during times nonetheless fundamentally democratic.

Thanks to this re-elaboration, we could now say that the theological horizon of politics, a horizon that grounds its legitimacy claims in an external and constituent source of authority, does not disappear once it is displaced by the democratic revolution. Rather, it is relegated and temporarily subdued in its capacity to delineate the limits of the visible and the invisible and the thinkable and the unthinkable. As we just saw, however, the theologico-political horizon does not need to be literally theological; it just requires the constitution of a voluntaristic incarnation of a “willed truth”—the notion is Merleau-Ponty's (1955)—as the locus of the exercise of political authority. Regardless, it does not exclude the possibility of being literally theological, as we also just saw and is testified by the current existence of multiple religious fundamentalisms at the global stage or even the strength of political Christianity in the particular case of the United States. In short, the theological horizon of politics needs only to be fascinated with the gesture of incarnation. What this means is that it structures itself around the idea of a radical exteriority—*ex nihilo* is the usual formulation—of a will, either that of God, a Nation, or a

substantivized People idealized as One and indivisible, capable of being materialized and fully represented at the heart of society.

In turn, the epistemic horizon of politics rejects the existence of an external, *ex-nihilo* will that could somehow materialize itself as a voluntaristic politics at the heart of society—but it complements this rejection with an equally absolutist vision of the social, supposedly anchored in some kind of infallible knowledge, usually in an economic-determinist way. In its radical form, the epistemic horizon of politics is totalitarian, since it claims to be in possession of a knowledge of the social that could legitimately collapse the spheres of power, law and truth in a single agent. The epistemic regime is, in this sense, also prey of the fantasy of incarnation; only that it invokes a different source of legitimacy to that of the theologico-political regime: not a “willed” but a supposedly “known” truth. The epistemic horizon of politics, however, does not need to exist only in its pure or radical form. In its less revolutionary and more reformist versions, it still claims an access to a truth of society that ought to be protected from both the contingency of democratic conflicts and the challenge posed by the voluntaristic horizon. As opposed to the later, for the epistemic horizon the institution of society is not the result of an external, voluntaristic will but it unfolds organically in such a way that it could be known from a rational, epistemic view of the social.

The institution of society that this epistemic horizon claims to have access to is potentially transparent and spontaneously organized—particularly if those processes known to be central to the social organism are not artificially obstructed or distorted by initiatives or agents external to its “natural” logic. Of course, these external elements could be either the contingency and polyphony of democratic politics or the voluntaristic irrationality of a populist leader. According to the epistemic horizon of politics, polyphony and irrationality unnecessarily impregnate social life with ambivalence and opacity. Thus the epistemic-political regime, understood as horizon and not as a complete and self-contained form of society, is not entirely deactivated during those times and places in which no political actor is capable of successfully claiming for itself an absolute and final knowledge of the workings of society—it remains a permanent, sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker, threat to the democratic separation of the spheres of power, knowledge and right. In brief, the epistemic horizon of politics is as fascinated with the logic of incarnation as the theological one. Only this fascination is not a voluntaristic but a rationalistic one—it is now not faith in the will of the Nation, the People, or God that must be subtracted from the contingency of the democratic conflict but some kind of technocratic or normative—in the end ideological—knowledge or know how.

Finally, these antagonistic horizons of politics—the theological and epistemic ones—tend to clash violently in political life, or even cancel each other out in the public debate. This is not what always occurs, however, since it is

not unusual for them to find themselves on common ground when battling a third horizon, one that is perceived from these mutually exclusive perspectives as unacceptably ambivalent and destabilizing. It is not hard to see at this point to what horizon it is that we are referring to: the lefortian horizon instituted by modern democracy's dissolution of the markers of certainty, one that I suggest shall be called *aesthetic* due to its embracement of an irreducibly multi-perspectival and plural understanding of society. In this it is that resides the radicality of the democratic, aesthetic regime: against the theological and epistemic horizons, it is born out of the embracement and thus institutionalization of both a practical *and* philosophical insight regarding the enigma of society. This insight could be summarized using two notions outlined by Merleau-Ponty in his posthumously published manuscript *The Visible and the Invisible*: hyper-dialectics and hyper-reflection. Society unfolds in time (dialectics) and we have access to it from a plurality of perspectives (reflections,) but neither time nor the plurality of perspectives can be exhausted. Society cannot be accessed completely or in simultaneity—neither practically nor philosophically (Merleau-Ponty 1964). This is the insight embraced and institutionalized by the aesthetic, democratic regime of politics. This democratic horizon, as Lefort suggested, has been hegemonic in the West since the French and American revolutions, followed by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' increasing generalization of the generative principle of equality. Nevertheless, this hegemony, as I have already stated, is no end of history, since both the theological and epistemic horizons recede but do not disappear from the ongoing (hyper)dialectics and (hyper)reflection of societies' staging, shaping and making sense of themselves.

The aesthetic horizon of politics is thus the one that seeks neither the institutionalization of the will of the Nation, the People, or God, nor that of a certain and definite knowledge of the social, but of indeterminacy itself. This claim may sound ungraspable and abstract at first, but it is the most practically grounded of philosophical insights. How else could we define a political regime characterized by the institutionalization of a periodic and plural change such as modern democracy if not as dominated by a horizon that implicitly or explicitly abandons the expectation of an absolute—regardless of the voluntaristic or epistemic origin of its claim—certainty on the nature and fate of society? (Bernstein 2005) The aesthetic, democratic horizon of politics thus seeks the institutionalization of the assumption that there is neither final, irrevocable decision on, nor definitive solution to, the enigma of the institution of society. Of course, the aesthetic regime of politics never fully accomplishes its horizon, since that outcome would require the complete disappearance of the competing theological and epistemic regimes, something if not impossible at least currently inconceivable—and even probably undesirable. For the aesthetic horizon, society is unlimited and periodical³ and, as we stated, can be grasped neither completely nor in simultaneity. The aesthetic horizon of

politics does not fully eliminate the theological and epistemic claims of certainty, but is nonetheless the one that manages to institute, in a contingent way and with no guarantee of perpetuity, what Lefort has called the democratic dissolution of the markers of certainty.

The advent of Trump's America

I have already suggested what the motivation for this re-elaboration of Lefort's typology is: the perplexity generated by the transformations occurred in America, in the aftermath of 9/11, regarding human rights, international law and the separation of powers, and the nonetheless difficult utilization of the Lefortian model of forms of society as an adequate interpretive framework. A model that is, at the same time, so useful for critically identifying such transformations in the first place, since it historically identifies the democratic regime with the emergence of human rights as a generative principle and with the disentanglement of the spheres of power, law and knowledge, precisely the institutions of modern democracy more radically threatened by post-9/11 America's political developments.

Of course, what happened to the United States with the so-called war on terror is not the only problematic feature of its contemporary political life. Although from the perspective of this analysis there is more continuity than discontinuity between the 9/11-seemingly-distant-past and this present of a Trump presidency, it is undeniable that the unfolding process requires further interpretation. With that goal in mind, I will now pose my attention on the most recent events of American politics. Let me thus suggest we engage in an exercise of thought and use our memory, which is a form of our imagination, and go back to November 8th of 2016. Let us imagine ourselves standing once again on Election Day, when the United States, with a strong sense of expectation, were waiting for the moment in which the combination of demographic data and exit polls would start feeding the television networks' desire to "call" states for one or the other party before anyone else does. This imaginary "time right before" is a methodological device that might be precisely the right one to favoring a necessary "bracketing"—as the phenomenological tradition suggests—of all we already know happened and, more importantly, all the reasons we think we know were behind that happening. This exercise, I suggest, is the right one to engage in some reflections on the meaning of all that preceded the event. The reason why this imaginarily, methodologically remembered time might indeed be the right time is because events reveal as much as they hide. They cancel out innumerable possible futures, opened up by the preceding events; and by choosing one of them they tend to make us believe that the other possible futures have been *entirely* cancelled out. That is not the way time unfolds, however. Time is an ocean (Arendt 1968, Braudel 1995): it has hidden currents, sedimented sands, surface waves and tsunamis. The event,

however, by hiding and revealing—no visibility could operate otherwise—will not only make us believe that the other “possibles” have been entirely prevented but will in fact contribute to the permanent, or quasi permanent, sedimentation of a good number of those very possibles. Installing ourselves at the time right before the event worked its magic and gave birth to a new set of possible futures—the set that challenges the United States today—allows us to better consider what had taken place in the 2016 election cycle before the actual event of the election.

The first necessary observation about the 2016 presidential campaign is that it was the most *political* election in a long time—i.e. the one that most explicitly staged the relationship between politics and the political so characteristic of modern democratic politics. It is true that, for anyone who was following, the election seemed to have been about anything but politics: race, sex, gender, manners, likeability—or, rather, *dis*-likeability. Regardless, and leaving aside the obvious fact that all these matters could be political in their own right, the election was the most important, strictly political event in a long time. By “political” I mean, as suggested in the first part of the article, an event that contributes to fundamentally changing the way a society perceives, structures, and thinks about itself, in the Lefortian sense of the political (1986). In the fundamentally political year of 2016, events continually shook the highly choreographed and orderly pattern that was so characteristic of recent American elections. Until the first of the two big October surprises that probably upended the campaign for good—the “Access Hollywood” tape and the later-aborted FBI’s “reopening” of the email case against Hillary Clinton—events, independent of the campaigns, seemed to be the only thing that could help Trump win the election. This was due to a sort of elective affinity between Trump and events: since the primaries, Trump’s campaign seemed to be uniquely capable of responding to them—and not only because of its narrative of fear and decline, as we will see in a second, and thus its interpretation of terrorist attacks, racial conflict, etc. as signs of a decline that had to be stopped—but also because of the very nature of the candidate himself. The campaign’s horizon was clearly a voluntaristic, theologico-political one.

Clinton’s campaign, on the other hand, heavily scripted, “steady and tested” as it claimed all along to be, seemed less capable of responding to the uncertainty generated by ongoing events. For the Democratic candidate, the country seemed to be a kind of well-oiled machine, a more or less predictable machine, a machine sufficiently on course and heading somewhere more or less predictable and good—not too good but good enough—and thus in the need of someone savvy, someone who knows how to operate the machine. Its horizon was undeniably epistemic. Not that Clinton’s campaign did not invoke the irrationality of fear, however. But the fear it invoked was not the fear of what will continue to happen *unless* American society does something about it—Trump’s fears—but the fear of what would happen *if* it

did something about it. *Been there, done that* seemed to be Clinton's motto. Trump's fear, on the other hand, was the fear of accepting, or of being forced to accept, things not as they are but as they are becoming, things as they are both in imagination and in reality, in that amalgam of being and becoming that reality is. Fear became indeed the central driving force of the 2016 election as approached by both the Trump and Clinton campaigns: fear of having forever lost the romanticized America that some—mostly, but in no way only, the white lower and lower middle class males—think they once had; and fear of losing the also romanticized America that some—mostly, but in no way only, the urban and suburban, both cultural and economic, elites—think they have had until just today.

Let us now zoom in into another decisive moment of the campaign: the Republican and Democratic Party conventions. Playing with the central slogan of Trump's campaign—Make America Great Again—during the Republican Convention, the slogan of the final night was "Make America *One* Again". This slogan was not about unity; just as the reference to "greatness" in the central slogan was and is not about accepting today's multicultural America and making it great. The central slogan was about restoration of white supremacy, thus making America white, homogeneous, "great" again. Along the same lines, "Making America *One* Again," was not about the unity in diversity, the democratic unity of the aesthetic horizon, but about the purifying unity that comes from purging the body-politic from its alien elements. America can only be *One* in an imaginary, or better put, in a fantastic—either theological or epistemic—way. Being, or becoming—or becoming again—*One* is a telos posed by both the theological or epistemic horizons, but unavoidably in conflict with the aesthetic one as we saw above. The desire of building a wall between the US and Mexico has the same clash of horizons as its background. It is not about being safe, great, one or white again—or, to put it better, it is not about either of those dimensions isolated from the others. It is, rather, about creating a fantastic image of America in which contingent and very much relational and historical dimensions such as safety, greatness, unity or, of course, the color of skins, are regarded as substantive, absolute, and capable of determining a national identity from a voluntaristic or even an ideological-disguised-as-rational perspective.

The problem is that the fear expressed by the Republican slogan cannot be solely attributed to the instituting power of the voluntarist and nativist campaign of Donald Trump. How disingenuous are members of the Republican Party—and even of the Democratic Party, who tried, and astonishingly continues to try, to underline this perspective for political gain—in claiming that Trump is some kind of an anomaly for a Republican Party that represented democratic tolerance and plurality until he came along. The establishment in both parties talked, and still talks, about the optimism of Ronald Reagan, the compassionate conservatism of George W. Bush, the welcoming

of immigrants by contemporary Republicans... This narrative is hardly sustainable though: Reagan backed every dictatorship or right-wing dirty war in Latin America that served his foreign policy goals; Bush committed the “supreme international crime” of aggressive warfare and violated human rights by abducting, torturing, and killing an indeterminate number of suspects of terrorism; and the most recent Republican presidential candidate before Trump, Mitt Romney, together with Ted Cruz and most of those other candidates competing with Trump in the 2016 primaries, were all openly in favor of forcefully deporting millions of undocumented immigrants. The horizon of a white nationalist and racist critique of democratic liberalism from the right has been developing for years within the Republican Party and, no matter what the fate of Trump’s presidency finally is, white nationalism will probably not go away and will remain a strong horizon in American politics either inside or outside the Republican Party.

Finally, and in order to offer a summarized vision of the political dynamics of the event, let me say that two more things happened to the Republican and Democratic Parties during the 2016 election—and thus to the political self-institution of society as a whole, since political parties are currently part of its central locus, i.e. of the sphere of life identified as “politics” by the political form of modern democracy. In the Republican Party, the establishment failed to coalesce around a single, conventional and anti-insurgent candidate; among Democrats, the establishment managed to succeed in preventing Bernie Sanders, the democratic-socialist from Vermont, from taking over the party. What the future of these successes and failures might bring remains to be seen, but what Trump achieved in the Republican Party and Sanders might have failed to achieve in the Democratic one were mostly relative re-configurations of the internal forces already existing in both parties. On the Republican side, the Party, having been since Reagan an alliance of the dominant theological (political Christianity and white nationalism) and epistemic (economic neo-liberalism and foreign policy neo-conservatism) horizons, has experienced a shift in the specific weights of both fractions. Today, the theological horizon seems to outweigh the epistemic one. Still, most neo-liberals and neo-conservatives remain part of the Republican coalition, waiting-and-seeing how the times unfold.

On the Democratic side, things are shaking as well. Since the New Deal and the Civil Rights Movement, the party has become the coalition behind the current hegemonic democratic horizon—of a regime that the constitutionalist Bruce Ackerman calls the “Modern Republic” (1991). The Modern Republic’s main feature being the move from a State and a civil society mostly concerned with a reluctant *recognition* of equality—the regime born in the Reconstruction—to a State and a civil society dominated by the active *promotion* of equality. The Democratic Party was, for decades, structured around a plural and egalitarian aesthetic horizon of politics. This structuration faced

a crisis in 2016, a crisis in which the egalitarian and the identitarian understandings of plurality clashed against each other in the primaries in the forms of Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton's candidacies respectively. The Party is still in the middle of a battle between its two branches, the establishment increasingly dominated by an epistemic horizon that frames the problems of contemporary America in terms of undeniable truths and technocratic knowledge against the irrationally of the willed truth of Trump's white nationalist America and the insurgent, progressive branch dominated by a rainbow coalition of egalitarian, aesthetic actors that seek to further institutionalize the democratic horizon of politics.

Permanence of the theologico-political?

Allow me to close by revisiting the famous Lefortian question on the permanence of the theologico-political (1986)—a question that is at the center of the articulation between his theorization of the political and what I propose here to call the horizons or regimes of politics. Lefort's "answer" to that question, was, of course, yes and no, since the permanence of the theologico-political, like any permanence in a social life that is always an amalgam of continuity and discontinuity, is always also a metamorphosis. This metamorphosis of the theologico-political manifested itself in the manner of a secularization of the idea of God in that of the People, the Nation or the Homeland. These new figures of the theological horizon of politics still attempt to offer a definitive account of the unity of the social body; a unity that is, in a democratic context, nonetheless unavoidably indeterminate and always open to contestation and reconfiguration.

According to Lefort, the modern dissolution of the markers of certainty gave birth to what he calls a society without a body (1986). This lacking of a body—a body in the sense of an organism with naturally established functions and hierarchies—means that the unity of the social is now the always precarious outcome of a permanent auto-schematizing activity (Merleau-Ponty 1964), an activity performed by a permanently reflexive, reversible society that is both subject and object of itself.⁴ Confronted with the aforementioned features of this new form of society, Lefort asks: "What conclusions are we to draw from this brief incursion into the theologico-political labyrinth?" And he answers: "That we must recognize that, according to its schema, any move towards immanence is also a move towards transcendence; that any attempt to explain the contours of social relations implies an internalization of unity; that any attempt to define the objective, impersonal entities implies a personification of those entities." (1988, p. 254) To what he finally adds: "If, however, we look back at the democratic society which began to take shape in the nineteenth century [...] do we not have to agree that the [theologico-political] mechanisms of incarnation were breaking down?"⁵

When I propose to reestablish the Lefortian regimes as coexistent horizons rather than as forms of society I am referring precisely to this observation: to the deactivation, but only relative and precarious, of the theological horizon of politics. The theologico-political horizon has, in the past decades and even centuries, become subordinate to both the epistemic and the aesthetic ones. That fact is undeniable. What we must also understand, however, is that this horizon could—and in fact often is—reactivated. Is it really so difficult to imagine a theorization and interpretation of the politicization of Islam along these lines, when Islamism, as a political ideology rather than a religious belief, reacts against the dissolution of the markers of certainty forced by globalizing forces upon ever larger territories? Is it really so difficult to imagine a similar theorization and interpretation of political Christianity and the white identity in the United States, also threatened by a perceived uncertainty regarding its dominant position in social life? It is in this web of conflicting political horizons that the contemporary world in general and the United States in particular should be inscribed. The reason why millions of people voted and still support Trump is because he offers a perfected version of what the Republican Party has promised to deliver for decades: a restoration of the lost markers of certainty, a dismantling of the modern, egalitarian republic. This does not mean, however, that it can or will necessarily succeed in restoring the eroded markers. Quite the contrary, we could say, since in a context still hegemonized by the unstable-stability (Merleau-Ponty 1960) of the aesthetic, democratic horizon, the assertion of an absolutist will cannot avoid having a radically destabilizing impact.

To conclude, there is another conflict of horizons, already mentioned in passing, which I want to refer to—the conflict between the epistemic and the aesthetic horizons of politics. Today, the epistemic horizon is dominated by an articulation of the invocation of an economic knowledge of the social with a plutocratic occupation of the place of power. This amalgam of plutocracy and epistemic horizon is what the Occupy Wall Street movement denounced, and also what triggered the Bernie Sanders uprising within the Democratic Party. This plutocratic epistemic horizon sees itself as taking human existence beyond the uncertainties and messiness of actual democratic politics, and sees itself as capable of silencing the political polyphony that makes “rational” economic and social development impossible. The current epistemic horizon could not be more different from its main previous iteration—the Marxist explanation of social life and its materialization in State policies and political practices and institutions. The new plutocratic epistemic horizon, radically different as it is in content to its predecessor, still fully shares with it a common presupposition: that of a perfected answer to the enigma of human co-existence. I do not know if American democracy, or to put it more modestly, the American Modern Republic, will survive the current Republican Party’s theologico-political assault on its institutions and practices—its assault on

its relatively pluralistic and egalitarian organization of the thinkable and the unthinkable, of the possible and the impossible. If it does survive it, however, another challenge to the Modern Republic will nevertheless remain intact or even probably will even probably be the relentless erosion of equality by the epistemic horizon of neoliberal politics.

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Notes

- 1 In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Jacques Rancière (2004, p. 46-7) explains in which way his aesthetic regimes—the ethical regime of images and the representative

and aesthetic regimes of art—do not fully abolish each other at the time of their becoming historically dominant but, on the contrary, remain as competing regimes of identification at any given time. This is a claim similar to the one I will outline in this paper, using alternatively the notion of horizons or that of regimes of politics.

- 2 Lefort attributes the notion to Tocqueville (Lefort 1992).
- 3 Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges (1996) says this about his Library of Babel—the universe—but it could very well be applied to the open-ended character of the aesthetic horizon's understanding of social life.
- 4 These are the characteristics that Merleau-Ponty first (1960, 1964), and then Lefort (1986), attribute to the “element” of flesh—the way of being of bodies, language, and society at large.