

**Master thesis Political Theory**

Robin R. Buijs (s2817047)

9235 words

**THE EMPTY SEAT OF POWER**

**On the identity of the people, democracy and totalitarianism**

Submitted on 10.01.26

Supervisor: Drs. Jesse Doornenbal

Second reader: Dr. Marco Verschoor

## Abstract

Claude Lefort conceptualises democracy as a society that is built around an indeterminacy, in which power originates from ‘the people’. He argues that there is an inherent risk of democracy turning into totalitarianism, which can be accommodated for if a symbolic representation of the identity of the people is created that can allow for substantive differences. Based on the theories of Habermas and Mouffe, this thesis aimed to determine how we must think about this identity-shaping process. The conclusion is twofold. On the one hand, an analysis of Habermas’ theory of deliberative democracy shows that his focus on rationality results in a substantial image and a totalitarian conception of the identity of the people. On the other hand, an analysis of Mouffe’s theory of agonistic pluralism shows that a shared recognition of unsolvable conflict does offer a symbolic legitimisation of power that can accommodate for the risk of totalitarianism.

## Introduction

What is democracy? While many people know that it is a form of government in which ‘the people’ are ultimately in power, not everyone agrees about what this means. In contemporary democracies the people – although they legitimise political power – are not the ones that actually govern. Instead, they are represented. This indirect form of democracy has its challenges, as currently distrust leads to the erosion of political consciousness and citizens consider democracy to be more and more ‘undemocratic’ (Loose, 2021, p. 25). To understand these issues, we must go back to the normative foundations of democracy, and (re)determine how we think about the identity of the people and how it should be represented.

The concept of representation has been part of an extensive contemporary debate between political theorists, but is not something that is connected only to democracy. In fact, it has a much longer and extensive history. To understand the conception of representation from before the introduction of democracy, one first has to look at the difference between *the political* and *politics*. Instead of politics, which simply refers to the practices and institutions that structure the organisation of government, the political is something much more fundamental (Habermas, 2020, pp. 204-209; Lefort, 2024, pp. 82-83; Mouffe, 1999, pp. 754-755). The political is the symbolic structure which shapes a political community and legitimises the hierarchy and power relations present in society. Or in other words, it can be seen as the lens through which society sees itself. Historically, the political was structured around the theological-political consensus that power originated from God. Later, due to secularisation,

God was (partly) substituted by another transcendent institution, namely Reason. According to Lefort, both God and Reason were so-called absolute, other-worldly origins of power. On earth, this power was incorporated into the person of the monarch, who *represented* this transcendent origin (Lefort, 2024, pp. 92-93). In short, society was structured around the central belief that all power came from God or Reason and that this power was embodied on earth by the monarch, who managed the relation between people and institutions that were legitimised by this transcendent source.

Later this symbolic order changed, as the French revolution led to the idea that all citizens have individual freedom and are equal before the law (McKay et al., 2017, p. 623). It established representative government and democracy, revolving around the central thesis that all citizens should have a say in political decision-making. This development changed what was understood as the origin of power, as it was now derived from 'the people' instead of an other-worldly concept like God. Although power is legitimised by them, the people cannot be objectively defined (as the original other-worldly origin of power could), which results in the fact that the identity of the people cannot easily be represented as 'one whole'. Lefort argues that this means that the 'seat of power' is empty, because the believed origin of power cannot be embodied by one person anymore (as was the case for the absolute power from God, which could be embodied by the monarch). This is a fundamental change, because the political now revolves around the central belief that power in a democracy is based on a non-absolute, unfixed and ever-changing identity of the people. This has important implications, because the fact that the identity of the people is unfixed means that the power it legitimises cannot be absolute. This is because only a fixed and absolute perceived origin of power can legitimise absolute power (Lefort, 2024, p. 101). Lefort argues that this means that in a democracy the seat of power has to remain empty to safeguard the indeterminacy at the core of democracy. However, this indeterminacy is also the weakness of democracy, because the seat of power can be filled with someone that does not recognise the heterogeneity in society, but conceptualises the identity of the people as something homogenous (Loose, 2024, p. 237). This conception would subsequently legitimise absolute power. Identities that are not believed to be part of the recognised fixed identity of the people can then be suppressed. Lefort calls the inherent risk to the indeterminacy of democracy the 'totalitarian temptation'.

According to Lefort, the goal of representative democracy is therefore to be able to represent the unfixed identity of the people, to accommodate for the risk inherent to democracy to become a totalitarian regime. This offers some challenges. Firstly, how can identity be unfixed? Originally, identity (or in his words 'the soul') has been conceptualised by Plato as

‘uniform, indissoluble, unvarying and constant in relation to itself’ (Gallop, 1975, p. 29). This means that in this case, the identity of the people to some extent has to stay the same, because if it changes, can we still say that it is the same thing as before? This leads to the question how the thing that defines what ‘the people’ is (identity), can be ever-changing and unfixed. Secondly, how can an unfixed identity be represented? For something to be represented, it has to be defined. But how can something that is ever-changing be defined (without making it something static)? This leads to the question how democracy can both make sure that the identity of the people remains unfixed, while at the same time capture this identity to be able to represent it. Although Lefort’s theory explains the importance of these questions, he remains vague about how they can be answered. We therefore look at the political theories of Jürgen Habermas and Chantal Mouffe, who – although they both believe that there is no such thing as a fixed general identity – have very different conceptions of the identity-shaping process and subsequently how the political institutes society.

First, Jürgen Habermas’ conception of the identity-shaping process. He argues that the general identity of the people is constituted through rational deliberation. To understand this, we first have to look at the identity of individuals. Habermas believes that this individual identity is twofold: it is both based on how someone personally wants to live their life, but also on the individual’s responsibility in a bigger community (Rummens, 2005, pp. 98-99). Habermas calls this *intersubjectivity*, which means that despite their own values and opinions, individuals are also able to rationally relate to other individuals (Habermas, 2020, p. 81). This leads to a shared belief in a so-called ‘moral-us’, which makes that individuals understand that they – besides their own identity – also cooperatively have to arrive at a general identity. They subsequently constitute this general identity through deliberation: a process of rational debate in which individuals try to understand each other and find a consensus (Habermas, 2020, p. 99; Rummens, 2005, pp. 101-102). In other words, ‘the will of the people’ is constituted because individuals are able to relate to their own and other people’s identities, and because they together can constitute a shared, general identity. Power is legitimised by this general identity, and it is the function of the democratic system to enable the above explained deliberative process and consensus-formation, by ensuring orderly forms of communication and democratic procedures (Habermas, 2020, p. 84).

Second, Chantal Mouffe’s conception of the identity-shaping process. She also believes that individuals have their own values and opinions and attaches even greater importance to these than Habermas. She argues that – although people have a need for cohesion – the pluralism in society is too big for there to ever be something as one general identity. Instead,

there are many different group-identities, which profile themselves through their conflict with each other (Loose, 2021, p. 238). This means that there can only be a ‘moral-us’, within the context of an ‘us-them’-dichotomy. In other words, the political is characterised by unsolvable agonism between different identities, because the constitution of a general identity is only possible if other views than the hegemonic collective are excluded (Mouffe, 1999, p. 754-755; Mouffe, 2008, p. 25). Different groups agree upon this belief, but also acknowledge that – although their differences in opinion are unbridgeable – they are still part of just one political community. They are opponents, not enemies, and it is the function of the democratic system to allow for peaceful transitions between hegemonies (Loose, 2021, p. 246). All in all, it is therefore not the substantive (temporary) consensus that legitimises power, but only the shared recognition that all conflicting parties are legitimate participants of the democratic process (Mouffe, 2008, pp. 27-28).

In the above, we have seen that the French revolution has led to a shift in the conception of representation and the introduction of the empty seat of power, which has to be filled by representing the people. To accommodate for the risk of totalitarianism, representative democracy has to accommodate for an ever-changing identity of the people, while at the same making sure that this unfixed identity can be represented. This leads to the question how we must think about the identity of the people as something unfixed and ever-changing. To be able to offer an answer to this new situation, I use the theories of Habermas and Mouffe, who have formulated two fundamentally different views about the political, the identity-shaping process and subsequently what or who needs to be represented. Ultimately, both theories present their own conception of the identity of the people and how this legitimately can be represented, in a way that accommodates for the risk of totalitarianism. Building from their theories, this thesis analyses different conceptions of the identity of the people and aims to determine how a legitimate model of representative democracy can mitigate the possibility of totalitarianism.

The research will be structured as follows. In the first chapter, I will elaborate on the distinction between the political and politics and their relation to democracy and totalitarianism. I will then explain Lefort’s conception of the political as the ‘empty seat of power’ and use this to further explain the risk of totalitarianism and what this means for the representation of the identity of the people. In the second and third chapter, I will further investigate Habermas’ and Mouffe’s respective views on the identity-shaping process. I will do this by connecting them to Lefort’s theory and each other and subsequently determine if Habermas’ and Mouffe’s conceptions of the identity of the people are able to mitigate the risk of totalitarianism. Finally, I will come to a conclusion about what Lefort’s, Habermas’ and

Mouffe's theories teach us about the identity of the people, democracy and the risk of totalitarianism.

## 1. Lefort on democracy and totalitarianism

Whereas political scientists generally emphasise the major empirical differences between democracy and totalitarianism, Lefort points to their connection, arguing that democracy already contains the risk of totalitarianism. In the introduction I already explained that totalitarianism arises if the heterogeneity of the people is no longer recognised. For this reason, the identity of the people – as origin of power in a democracy – must not be fixed in a *substantial* image, because this would make *substantive* differences impossible. The identity of the people must therefore be considered as a process, but Lefort remains vague about what this process must look like. In this chapter, I will therefore further discover why the identity-shaping process is so important and show how Lefort's conceptions of politics, the political and totalitarianism leads to the conclusion that a *symbolic* representation of the identity of the people is necessary to prevent politics from becoming only a battle of private interests. Ultimately, the question Lefort's theory leads to is how there can be a non-substantial symbolic representation of the identity of the people that allows for the substantive differences in society.

To be able to understand the difference and relation between the symbolic and substantive identity of the people, I must start by explaining the difference between politics and the political. Next, I will argue how the risk of totalitarianism lies in the creation of a substantial identity of the people, which leads to the collapse of the levels of politics and the political. Afterwards, I will elaborate on how this risk can be accommodated for and conclude with the notion that this leads to an apparent paradox in Lefort's theory, because the identity of the people must be considered as heterogenous, while it remains possible to represent it as unified.

### 1.1 politics & the political

Lefort argues that every society is a political society, meaning that it is the result of an underlying symbolic structure. This conception is different from that of political scientists who focus only on empirical politics and regard politics as a societal phenomenon – distinct from other societal phenomena as the juridical or economics – revolving around relations between different groups (Lefort, 2024, p. 82). They argue that these phenomena together are society, which can be studied and reconstructed by developing terminology to describe its institutions, relations and activities. However, Lefort argues that by focussing only on empirical phenomena, these political scientists ignore that society is not objectively instituted.

In his biggest critique of political science, Lefort argues that the fact that something like politics can be defined as a distinct social phenomenon has a political meaning, because this

distinction is only possible because we live in a certain form of society (Lefort, 2024, pp. 82-83). There is an underlying symbolic structure (the political) that constitutes society, which means that there is no such thing as a self-evident societal reality. However, it is also not the case that the political is an all-defining structure (Loose, 2024, p. 132). Instead, the political manifests itself *in relation* and dialogue to the society it constitutes. This relation is threefold. Firstly, the political *shapes* society ('*mise en forme*'), in a simultaneous movement of appearance and concealment (Lefort, 2024, p. 83). On the one hand *appearance*, in the sense that the process through which society is shaped as one, becomes visible in a distinct place where political activity happens (politics). On the other hand *concealment*, in the sense that in this process of shaping society as one, the political conceals itself as the underlying symbolic structure of society. But although the political is not visible in reality, one has to remember that there are no structures, relations or dimensions in society that are not shaped by it. Secondly, the political *gives meaning* to society ('*mise en sens*'), as it enables the possibility to distinguish between reality and imagination, true and false, just and unjust, permissible and forbidden, normal and pathological. In other words, the political allows for a perception of reality as a coherent experience (Lefort, 2024, p. 83; Loose, 2024, p. 143). Thirdly, the political *stages* society ('*mise en scène*'), because society always contains a quasi-representation of itself, whether it is monarchic, democratic or totalitarian. This means that society has a determinable – although not physical – place through which the relation between society and the political can be understood (Lefort, 2024, p. 83; Loose, 2024, p. 122). This place is what Lefort calls the *seat of power*, which must be understood as the symbolic legitimising dimension of power that can never identically be met by a contingent societal institution. This is because the political will always remain transcendent to real-life political power (Loose, 2024, p. 40).

Now that we understand the relation between politics and the political, we can look at what this means in the case of democracy. As mentioned in the introduction, power in a democracy derives not from an absolute, other-worldly origin like God anymore, but is derived from *the people*. As the people are heterogenous and cannot be embodied by one person anymore, this shift leads to an unsolvable indeterminacy that forms the core of democracy. The loss of an absolute origin of power results in what Lefort describes as the *empty* seat of power (Lefort, 2024, pp. 91-94). However – as I explained above –, the seat of power is still the place through which society shapes, gives meaning and stages itself. As a conception of the political is still necessary for the institution of society, democratic society can only legitimise itself through the creation of a symbolic conception of power that lies outside itself (Braeckman, 2013, pp. 228-229; Van der Putte, 1987, p. 407). To summarise, the loss of the determined

structure of the *ancien régime* and the introduction of the people as the origin of power have resulted in the fact that democratic society has to generate the symbolic legitimisation of political power *itself*. This image is created through the representation of the identity of the people, which functions as the symbolic image distinct from and external to society that is necessary to legitimise political power on the level of the political.

### 1.2 the risk of totalitarianism

In the above, I explained how Lefort's conception of the relation between politics and the political resulted in the conclusion that in a democracy, the identity of the people needs to be represented to create a symbolic image that can legitimise political power. But why is this so important? According to Lefort, it is precisely the distinction and relation between politics and the political that makes a democracy possible, because totalitarianism arises if the gap between society and its symbolic representation disappears (Braeckman, 2013, p. 529). To be able to understand this, one has to know that Lefort argues that the loss of the determined structure of the *ancien régime* means that 'the beacons of certainty' are lost. This results in the fact that the legitimacy of power and therefore the structure of society is constantly rediscovered based on the political discourse (Lefort, 2024, p. 97). The risk is that power will only be legitimised on the level of politics, meaning that the shared conception of the political is lost and the conflict between individuals becomes extreme. This leads to the fragmentation of society. Instead of substantive conflict about different values, individuals would focus only on their private interests and politics would become only the battle between these private interests. Lefort argues that this would increase the temptation of totalitarianism, as a conception of the *one people* could overcome the fragmentation of society and resolve the uncertainty inherent to democracy (Lefort, 2024, p. 97). This would mean however that the people are not anymore considered as politically united through all their divisions, but as just *one being* (Loose, 2024, p. 105).

The main point of the risk explained above is that to deal with the indeterminacy at the core of democracy, a conception of the identity of the people is always necessary to legitimise political power. Without a symbolic conception that can allow for the substantive differences in society, the identity of the people becomes *substantial*. This conception would subsequently disregard all societal differences and offer one totalitarian image of society, which would also make substantive discussion at the level of politics impossible. Lefort's conclusion is therefore that to accommodate for the risk of totalitarianism, it is not only important that the heterogeneity of society is visible. It is also important that political power is legitimised by a

conception of the political and a symbolic representation of the identity of the people as a – albeit unfixed and ever-changing – *whole*. In other words, because the conception of the political determines how society shapes, gives meaning and stages itself, it is also this conception of the symbolic representation of the people that can make sure that the heterogeneity in society does not lead to fragmentation (Van der Putte, 1987, p. 408). However, this way to accommodate for the risk of totalitarianism does lead to an apparent paradox. On the one hand, the identity of the people must be considered as heterogeneous, as it should allow for substantive differences between individuals. On the other hand, the identity of the people must also be considered as unified, because the symbolic representation of this identity can prevent it from becoming substantial (which would make substantive differences impossible).

All in all, Lefort argues that the representation of the identity of the people must be considered as a process, in which the seat of power remains empty but is only temporarily filled through the representation of the identity of the people. As political power constantly searches for its legitimization, the identity of the people is discovered through a never-ending confrontation between different values, interests and opinions (Lefort, 2024, p. 101). In this way, society itself creates a symbolic identity that is subsequently used as the foundation of political power in that very same society. Subsequently, politics and the political remain distinct, but also in relation to each other. The problem is however that Lefort remains vague about how the identity-shaping process can overcome the apparent paradox of heterogeneity and unity. One might believe that this happens through the election process, but Lefort disagrees. He argues that in the election process, the image of society as a whole comes into being by splitting it into individual votes, which means that at the moment we create an unifying image of the people, we do so by fragmenting society and simply aggregating the pieces (Lefort, 2024, p. 95). According to Lefort, political representation is therefore not so much about the aggregation of individual preferences, as it is about ‘the establishment of a political stage’ (Lefort, 2024, p. 102). This stage – albeit not directly – reflects what happens in society and presents how every individual relates to ‘the people’ in the same way (Lefort, 2024, p. 95). This is – in contrast to elections – not only empirical, but creates a process through which it infinitely can be attempted to come to a symbolic, non-substantial identity of the people that can legitimise political power. However, Lefort is still not clear about what this process should look like, which is why I will use next chapters to explore if Habermas’ and Mouffe’s conceptions of the identity-shaping process offer a way to think about the identity of the people that can accommodate for the risk of totalitarianism.

## 2. Habermas on the identity of the people

In this chapter, I will explore if Habermas' theory offers a conception of the identity of the people that can accommodate for the risk of totalitarianism. As we have seen in the previous chapter, this means that – to allow for heterogeneity and substantive differences in society – this identity of the people must not be fixated in one substantial image. However, we have also seen that there is a need for a symbolic representation of the people, to prevent politics from becoming only a battle of private interests.

To be able to determine how Habermas' conception of the identity of the people relates to the theory of Lefort, I will start by explaining how Habermas views the individual identity. I will show how his conception of the political revolving around rationality and intersubjectivity leads to his argument that a general identity of the people can rationally be constituted through deliberation. Subsequently, I will argue how Habermas' conception of the symbolic identity of the people is not able to allow for substantive differences, because the foundation of the symbolic identity in rationality makes it substantial.

### 2.1 the deliberative process

Habermas argues that the rationality of the people allows not only the identity of individuals to be shaped, but also the general identity of the people. To be able to determine if his conception can accommodate for the risk of totalitarianism, I must first further explain his view on the identity-shaping process as a deliberative process.

Habermas argues that the individual is unique in its identity, but that it is also part of a constituted general identity of the people, which makes that it is able to participate in a political community. To understand this, we must first look at the identity of the individual. Habermas' conception of the individual identity is that it is both a result of its environment, but also a result of the individual's ability to take control of its interaction with others (Habermas, 1992, p. 183; Rummens, 2005, pp. 89-99). He conceptualises the political around the idea that people are rational, meaning that they – when faced with political issues and challenges – are able to determine what they want, must and ought to do (Habermas, 2020, p. 78). Although every individual has their own conception of the good life that they want to pursue, they are also able to rationally relate to other people's identities. Habermas argues that the individual forms its own identity by trying to come to a mutual understanding with others (Habermas, 1992, pp. 152-153). This is possible because individuals always act in a space of reasons and offer motivations for their wishes and actions (Habermas, 2020, p. 99). Habermas believes that this means that their rationality is visible in their day-to-day interactions, because people always

claim mutual validity for their argument and try to solve disagreement with attempts to specify and rationally justify their positions. This does not mean that individuals persist in their argument, but rather the opposite, as they adjust their position based on the deliberation. In other words, people are able to look at things *intersubjectively*, which means that people can come to mutual understanding and form and adjust their identity through deliberation with others (Habermas, 2020, p. 81).

Based on the rationality of the people, Habermas develops his theory of deliberative democracy by comparing republican and liberal democratic theories and identifying a middle ground. On the one hand, the liberal perspective offers the *legitimisation* of political power as the most important goal of the identity-shaping process. In this case, the government receives a mandate from the people and should justify its use of power to the people. On the other hand, the republican perspective shows that it is not just legitimisation, but that through the identity-shaping process the political community itself is *shaped*. In this case, the government does not only receive a mandate from the people, but functions as a part of a self-governing political community. Habermas subsequently combines these perspectives and comes with the rationalisation of political power, which means more than legitimising political power, but less than shaping it (Habermas, 2020, p. 83). He makes a distinction between a *communicative power* and an *administrative power*, of which the former is shaped through a democratic procedure and is subsequently used to legitimise the latter (Habermas, 2020, p. 54). In other words, the identity-shaping process leads to the formation of a communicative power that programmes (shapes) and checks (legitimises) the reflexive administrative power in an ever-ongoing interchange.

The core of Habermas' argument is that the identity of the people is not something abstract, but that it should be considered as a part of the forms of communication through which people form their political opinions (Habermas, 1996, p. 232; Habermas, 2020, p. 78). He establishes a view of the identity-shaping process as a deliberative process, which focusses not only on ethical discussions (focused on self-awareness of a political community), but also on moral discussions (focused on questions of justice) and negotiations (focused on political questions about interests and values) (Habermas, 2020, p. 78). This process takes place in a *public sphere of political opinion-forming*, in which people can cooperatively find solutions for political problems (Habermas, 2020, p. 94). As I explained earlier, Habermas argues that people are rational and able to look at thing intersubjectively, which means that they do not simply try to convince each other in line with their individual interests, but that they transcend from their own perspective and focus on the interest of society as a whole (Habermas, 2020,

pp. 83-84). Individuals must take an informed position on political topics and adjust this position throughout the process of deliberation, while the terms of communication make sure that all relevant information, questions, themes, arguments and counter-arguments can be collected so the result of the deliberative process is fair to everyone (Habermas, 2020, p. 98). This means that the identity-shaping process can only lead to a communicative power if all stakeholders are included in the deliberative process, equal opportunities for participation are guaranteed and the process is transparent (Habermas, 2020, p. 98).

## 2.2 Habermas & Lefort

In the above, we have seen that Habermas argues that the identity of the people is rationally constituted in a deliberative process. The communicative power that is formed in the public sphere, rationalises the administrative power to make political decisions. If we look at this conception of the identity-shaping process through the lens of Lefort, we can argue that on first account, Habermas seems able to overcome the apparent paradox of heterogeneity and unity. In line with Lefort's argument, Habermas seems to offer a symbolic conception of the people as rational beings, which allows for their substantive differences and prevents politics from becoming only a battle of private interests (because people focus on coming to mutual understanding and consensus). As he argues that rationality and intersubjectivity only acquire meaning in the deliberative process, he makes sure the identity of the people does not become substantial, because both the individual and general identity must keep on developing in a never-ending process.

The reasoning above seems plausible, but a main point of critique is that Habermas' conception of rationality is an interpretation of the political that is too essentialist. Because is it not the case that in an attempt to allow substantive differences between individuals, rationality – as the symbolic identity of the people – leads to a consensus which results in a (substantial) image of the people as one? One can argue that Habermas' focus on rationality means that the identity of the people is no longer able to remain latent. Lefort stressed that the loss of the determined structure led to an irreducibility of the structure of society, something that Habermas seems to undo with his focus on rationality. To understand this argument, one has to remember that before the French Revolution – as I already mentioned in the introduction – reason was also used as an other-worldly institution that structured society in an absolute manner. On the one hand, it is the case that Habermas' conception of rationality is slightly different, because it is not only the power embodied in the person of the monarch that structures society, but the rationality of all individuals. Furthermore, this rationality is no longer only

transcendent, because as it only acquires meaning in the deliberative process, it becomes part of the forms of communication. On the other hand however, this remains problematic from the perspective of Lefort, because it makes that society cannot take an external position to reality out of which it can critique itself (Lefort, 2024, p. 93). The fact that all people are rational and give expression to this by participating in the substantive process of deliberation means that the origin of the understanding of the structure of society lies within society. This creates a society that cannot tolerate dissent, because it is completely and unquestionably in agreement with itself (Loose, 2024, p. 164). Subsequently, the representation of the identity of the people becomes substantial, because the rationality that allows for this consensus is not symbolic, but grounded in society itself.

In line with the argument above, Mouffe formulates another point of criticism. She argues that Habermas' conception of rationality does not only eliminate the symbolic dimension of the identity of the people, but thereby also excludes a part of the people. She states that Habermas 'falsely legitimises the democratic procedure based on the presumption that their decisions represent an impartial standpoint that is equally in the interests of all' (Mouffe, 1999, p. 747). Mouffe believes that an impartial outcome is impossible, because the democratic process has not been constituted impartially. Instead, the legitimisation of the structure of society and politics is not agreed upon by everyone, but is based only on a *hegemony*: an invisible dominant cluster of collective interest and values (Loose, 2021, p. 238; Mouffe, 2008, p. 41). This means that what might be perceived as an objective procedure is ultimately political as it excludes interests and values of the non-hegemonic groups, which makes consensus impossible. The fact that Habermas does not recognise that consensus means that other views than the hegemonic are excluded, makes that the hegemonic character of society therefore remains *hidden*, because – although the structure of society is only built upon the dominant cluster of interests and values – it is presented as if it is neutral and accommodates for the entirety of the people. Mouffe calls this the convergence and mutual collapse of objectivity and power (Mouffe, 1999, pp. 752-753). Subsequently, she argues that that this removes the possibility of conflict *within* politics, because if people are unable to constitute their own identity based on a conflict with others, they are also unable to identify themselves with political group-identities (Mouffe, 2008, p. 78). I will elaborate on Mouffe's conception of the identity-shaping process in the next chapter, but for now it is important to know that the loss of a group-identity will result in an attempt to overcome this emptiness and to create an image of their identity themselves. However, this image is no longer built upon a difference about interests and values, but on the distinction between the *people* and the *elite* (Mouffe,

2008, p. 79). This elite has to be defeated, because they are corrupt and trying to keep the people from power. The distinction between group-identities is subsequently no longer based on substantive disagreements, but on a division between good and bad, resulting in the fact that these newly constituted groups are not just opponents, but have become enemies (Mouffe, 2008, pp. 27-28). In other words, Mouffe argues that Habermas' focus on consensus has not eliminated the conflict in society, but has moved it from within the democratic procedure to the outside.

To summarise all the arguments above, Habermas' symbolic representation of the identity of the people is too fixated for Lefort and Mouffe, because rationality is grounded in the consensus that is achieved through the deliberative process. In this way, Habermas turns what should be symbolic into something substantial, which facilitates the risk of totalitarianism.

### 3. Mouffe on the identity of the people

In this chapter, I will determine whether Mouffe's theory offers a conception of the identity of the people that can accommodate for the risk of totalitarianism. In her criticism of Habermas, we already saw that she believes that politics is constructed upon a hegemony and that Habermas' denial of this hegemony results in the fact that a division between good and bad arises, which destroys the political community. Mouffe therefore offers an alternative conception of the identity-shaping process, in which it is not tried to come to consensus (because this is impossible). Instead, she argues that the conflict should be visible, so it can be accommodated for within the democratic procedure. The question is however if her conception does meet Lefort's criteria to accommodate for the risk of totalitarianism (as described in the first chapter). In other words, does she offer a non-substantial symbolic representation of the people that allows substantive differences, but also prevents the fragmentation of society?

Before I can answer the question above, I must first explain how Mouffe views individual identity as the result of opposition to other identities. Afterwards, I will show how the antagonistic relation that arises from this opposition can be transformed into agonism. This will be followed by a description of the tension between individuals and the political community and how this leads to the risk of totalitarianism. Lastly, I will use Habermas and Lefort to determine if Mouffe is able to overcome this risk.

#### 3.1 agonistic pluralism

As explained earlier, Mouffe believes that conflict should be present in politics to be able to come to an image of the identity of the people. However, she even goes one step further and argues that this conflict is also essential for the formation of identity altogether (Mouffe, 1999, p. 752). Therefore, to be able to understand Mouffe's alternative conceptualisation of the identity-shaping process, we first have to understand how she conceptualises the identity of individuals.

Mouffe's conception of identity is non-essentialist, which means that the identity of an individual is not fixed, but constantly developing. She argues that identity is based on a 'diversity of discourses among which there is no necessary relation but a constant movement of overdetermination and displacement' (Mouffe, 1992, p. 28). This overdetermination and displacement happens in relation to a so-called *constitutive outside*, meaning that one's identity can never develop on its own. One's identity is therefore – as I already mentioned in the introduction – constituted in relation and opposition to other identities in the form of an *us-them dichotomy* (Mouffe, 2008, pp. 24-26). Identity for Mouffe is developed through a never-

ending process, because every time the individual is confronted with the constitutive outside, its identity adapts and changes. In time, group-identities are formed upon shared interests and values, who profile themselves in opposition to other group-identities. Although it is essential, this need for differentiation between group-identities is also risky, as there is always a possibility that the us/them dichotomy will turn into one of friends and enemies (Wenman, 2013, p. 193). Mouffe labels this – in line with the work of Carl Schmitt – as *antagonism*, which arises if ‘the other’ is no longer only different, but is perceived as someone who threatens our identity or existence.

The goal of politics is to defuse the potential antagonism that is present in human relations and to transform it into *agonism* (Mouffe, 1992, p. 30; Mouffe, 1999, pp. 754-755). This counters the threat of extreme forms of conflict between identities, by the simultaneous recognition of the unsolvable risk of antagonism and the usage of the democratic procedure to transform hostility into more constructive forms of conflict (Wenman, 2013, p. 197). To describe how this conflict happens within democratic institutions, Mouffe follows the reasoning of Elias Canetti, who argues that the democratic process is not about rational deliberation, but about determining the strength of various groups through voting in parliament (Mouffe, 2008, pp. 29-30). It is the choice to vote instead of fight/kill that makes that different identities become opponents instead of enemies and turns antagonism into agonism. Subsequently, this offers all group-identities the opportunity to oppose each other in an organised way that does not destroy the bonds between them. Other identities than the hegemonic collective, can now – although they are not in power – try to democratically substitute the hegemony by their own (Mouffe, 2008, p. 29). This last point also relates back to Mouffe’s criticism of Habermas that I explained earlier, because his focus on consensus did not offer this opportunity.

It is important to realise however that the transformation of antagonism into agonism makes a political community possible, but that it does not resolve the conflict between different identities. This remains impossible, because – according to Mouffe’s understanding of identity – different identities need each other as constitutive outside to develop, which means that without conflict there cannot be something like identity at all. This has far reaching complications, because it means that the identity of the people cannot be substantive, but only symbolical. The identity-shaping process is therefore not aimed at overcoming the conflict in society, but at the enabling of a political community through the creation of a symbolic ‘we’ that can accommodate for the substantive conflict between group-identities. In other words, the identity of the people that legitimises political power is a common political identity of

individuals who – although they disagree about the organisation of the political community – accept submission to authoritative rules of conduct so they are able to share a common symbolic space (Mouffe, 1992, pp. 30-31). The most important rule is that the freedom and equality of all members of the political community must be guaranteed (Mouffe, 2005, p. 38). Furthermore, the conflict between groups cannot be suppressed by ‘imposing an authoritarian order’, because political decisions are considered as only a ‘temporary result of a provisional hegemony that always entails some form of exclusion’ (Mouffe, 1999, p. 756). This hegemony can be changed, which makes sure that the image of the people that is used to legitimise political decisions never becomes fixed, but is constantly reestablished. This happens through the participation in the democratic process of all, because it precisely the continuous choice to engage in confrontation under democratically regulated conditions that establishes and shapes the political community (Mouffe, 2008, p. 29).

### 3.3 Mouffe & Lefort

In the previous section, we have seen that Mouffe’s conception of the political is that of unsolvable conflict between group-identities. The shared conception of agonistic pluralism makes that the people accommodate for this conflict peacefully, by considering each other as legitimate participant of the democratic process and the choice to sustain the political community. Through this continuous choice, the symbolic identity of the people is shaped, but is the recognition of agonism upon which this identity is built enough to prevent the fragmentation of the people?

To be able to answer this question, we must keep in mind that in Mouffe’s theory, there remains a constant tension between the ever-ongoing constitution of the group-identity (which happens through conflict with other identities) and the ever-ongoing constitution of the political community and the legitimisation of political power (which happens through the acceptance of the position of other identities). Mouffe argues that the symbolic unity is strong enough to overcome this tension and prevent totalitarianism. Even if political power is substantively built upon hegemony that excludes other identities, the recognition of this fact makes that ‘no limited social actor can attribute to herself the representation of the totality and claim in that way to have the “mastery” of the foundation’ (Mouffe, 1999, p. 752). One can argue however that Mouffe’s reasoning is still too vulnerable to the risk of totalitarianism, precisely because it is only a *recognition* that prevents totalitarianism. This gives a major responsibility to especially the dominant group to find the balance in the tension, because they are able to suppress other identities. As it is only a choice, they can also at some time choose to resolve the tension by

letting go of the political community and only focus on their own interest and values. This would mean that they can disregard other non-hegemonic identities and lead to the absolutisation of their identity in a totalitarian regime.

It is however the question if the argument above – however understandable – is possible if we follow Lefort's conception of the symbolical, because it follows a reasoning that separates politics and the political. In this reasoning, people live in a reality of conflicting identities and purposefully *choose* to adopt the idea that a political community needs to be formed (and other identities are therefore also legitimate participants). This makes the conflict a given, but the need for a political community a choice. However, Lefort argues that the political shapes and gives meaning to society, which means that the symbolical is a lens through which society can understand itself. In this case, the belief in the need for a political community is both a way to understand the relation between different identities and simultaneously shapes these relations. This means that the transformation of antagonism into agonism is no longer just a choice (which can be reversed), but actually results from the political. In other words, although the tension between the development of identity and the establishment of the political community is still not resolved, it is no longer a possibility to choose to let go of the political community and subsequently oppress non-hegemonic identities.

Based on the above, we can conclude that there is no contradiction between Mouffe's conception of agnostic pluralism and the formation of the political community. However, this still does not answer the question whether the recognition of agonistic pluralism is enough to legitimise political power. One can still argue that agreement to disagree is not enough to sustain a political community. I will illustrate this argument based on Habermas' critique of Mouffe's theory. He argues that in a democracy, political power is only legitimate if the people consider themselves the origin of political decisions (Habermas, 2020, p. 233). They do not only need to participate in the process that leads to the decision, but should also be convinced by reasons that appeal to their rational judgement (Demirci, 2026, p. 36). This means that – although the unsolvable conflict between group-identities is not a problem for the process of opinion formation – it cannot be the case that political decisions about values and justice are not agreed upon by the entire people (Habermas, 2020, p. 235). However, the conflict about these issues is precisely what Mouffe believes is unsolvable in her conception of agonistic pluralism, because it is what constitutes identity. From this perspective, Mouffe opposes Habermas' arguments by stating that it is not all values that should be agreed upon, but that there should only be consensus that 'freedom and equality for all' are necessary for a political community (Mouffe, 2005, p. 38).

Despite the fundamental disagreement between Habermas and Mouffe, we can determine that from the perspective of Lefort, Mouffe is able to accommodate for the risk of totalitarianism. This is because her idea of the shared recognition of agonistic pluralism offers the symbolic representation of the people that can allow for substantive differences. Mouffe and Lefort also both agree that the political community can only discover its identity through a confrontation between internal opponents with different interests and values, but that this does not lead to fragmentation as long as it happens within the democratic procedure (Lefort, 2024, p. 101; Mouffe, 2005, p. 38). Furthermore, it is not only the case that Mouffe states that different groups should not take authoritarian decisions that lead to totalitarianism, but the fact that the political also shapes relations in society makes sure that the dominant group cannot sacrifice the political community to further only their own interests. Subsequently, Mouffe's theory struggles with the same tension between heterogeneity and unity as Lefort, but offers a plausible way in which this can be accommodated for.

## Conclusion

So, what is democracy? Based on Lefort's conception, democracy can be considered as a form of society that revolves around an indeterminable origin of power. It is not just an empirical form of government, but a society built upon a conception of the political as the empty seat of power, meaning that the people – in contrast to the other-worldly origin of power in the *ancien régime* – do not offer an absolute structure of society. Through the representation of the identity of the people, democratic society itself creates a symbolic legitimisation of political power that allows for substantive differences within politics. In this way, the heterogeneity does not lead to fragmentation and the subsequent search towards a substantial identity. In short, Lefort argues that – to accommodate for the risk of totalitarianism – the people must be considered as heterogeneous and their identity must remain unfixed and ever-changing, while it simultaneously remains possible to represent the identity of the people in a unified image that can legitimise political power.

Based on Lefort's arguments and an analysis of the theories of Habermas and Mouffe, this thesis aimed to determine what the identity-shaping process must look like to deal with the paradoxical nature of democracy and to be able to accommodate for the risk of totalitarianism. The main difference between Habermas and Mouffe lies in the way in which they tried to accommodate for both heterogeneity and unity. On the one hand, Habermas' theory of deliberative democracy showed that a focus on rationality leads to the absolutisation of the representation of the people. His essentialist conception of identity transforms the unified image of the identity of the people from something only symbolic into something substantial. This means that the substantive consensus – as the outcome of the deliberative process – is therefore not a representation of the identity of the people as a whole, but only a totalitarian conception of it. On the other hand, Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism showed that a shared recognition of unsolvable conflict is able to accommodate for the risk of totalitarianism. Although this means that a non-substantive representation of the people is used to legitimise political decisions, the prevention of authoritarian decisions and mutual recognition of freedom and equality seems to be enough to prevent a substantial image of the identity of the people. In this way, heterogeneity does not lead to fragmentation and a political community can exist. Subsequently, if we compare how the theories of Habermas and Mouffe accommodated for the risk of totalitarianism, we can conclude that Mouffe's theory fits better into the framework of Lefort. In opposition to how Habermas substantialises identity, Mouffe's explicit focus on the political as only a symbolic legitimisation of political power, makes that society is structured in a way that allows for substantive differences and preserves the indeterminacy of democracy.

Another conclusion of this research is that – unsurprisingly – the identity-shaping process heavily relies on one's conception of individual identity. As explained in this research, the individual identity marks the beginning of the conceptualisation of the identity of the people and is therefore of paramount importance for the understanding of the structure of society. For example, Mouffe's idea that identities can only be constituted in opposition to a constitutive outside of other identities means that substantive consensus is never possible. Furthermore, Habermas' belief in rationality and intersubjectivity makes that society cannot be considered as agonistic, because as all people are rational, they will always be able to come to mutual understanding. This research has shown that the identity of individuals determines the possibility of a general identity and therefore the conceptualisation of not only politics, but also the political. However, Habermas' and Mouffe's theories are built upon completely different conceptualisations of identity and subsequently the identity-shaping process, which means that this study did not compare two theories in a most-similar way. Further research can therefore be done to determine whether a conceptualisation of the identity-shaping process is possible that can accommodate for multiple different conceptions of individual identity. Or, if we look the other way around, if one conceptualisation of individual identity can lead to different ideas about the identity-shaping process.

The different conceptions of the identity of the people and subsequently of the identity-shaping process also suggest that Habermas and Mouffe have different conceptions of the political – something that I also mentioned throughout this research. In the second chapter and in the conclusion above, I explained why Habermas' focus on rationality is too essentialist to accommodate for the risk of totalitarianism. One could therefore criticise this thesis by arguing that Mouffe's conception of agonistic pluralism is essentialist as well. On first account, this seems to be valid, because Mouffe's conception of the political as antagonistic (and the shift to agonism) is what ultimately determines the structure of society. However, one must realise that Habermas' essentialist conception of the political was problematic because it led to an image of the identity of the people as one (in the form of substantive consensus). Although it might be true that the conception of the political as antagonism is also essentialist, this does only emphasise the importance of society's heterogeneity (and in that sense prevents the image of the people from becoming substantial). This means that it is not *per se* the essentialist conception of the political that leads to totalitarianism, but its effect on the image of the identity of the people. Subsequently, although the criticism that Mouffe's conception is no less essentialist than the one of Habermas might be valid, it does not have an impact on the outcome

of this research, because it does not directly have to do with a theory's ability to accommodate for the risk of totalitarianism.

Lastly, there is one important limitation to this research that should be discussed, which is interestingly enough also a result of Lefort's theory. As I mentioned throughout this thesis, Lefort argues that our perception of politics and the political is the result of the exact symbolic structure that we try to study. This means that I – as researcher – am also influenced by the structure of the society that I live in, which means that in the words of Lefort my 'thought struggles with matter that contains its own interpretation, the meaning of which is constitutive of its own nature' (Lefort, 2024, p. 84). As I cannot leave this historically determined framework, I also cannot compare it and determine to what extent this has influenced this research. However, because it is impossible to study democracy without being influenced by the framework of the society we live in, this should be no reason to disregard the outcome of this study and its contribution to our understanding of the identity of the people, democracy and totalitarianism.

## Bibliography

Braeckman, A. (2013). Neoliberalisme en de symbolische institutie van de samenleving: Lefort en Foucault over de staat en 'het politieke'. *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, 75(3), 525-551.

Demirci, M. D. (2026). Consensus and agonism in democratic theory: comparing the approaches of Habermas and Mouffe. *The Journal of Social Science*, 10(19), 30-47.

Gallop, D. (1975). *Plato. Phaedo*. Clarendon Press Oxford.

Habermas, J. (1992). *Postmetaphysical thinking*. Polity Press.

Habermas, J. (1996). Deliberative politics: a procedural concept of democracy. In J. Habermas & W. Rehg (eds.), *Between facts and norms: contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy* (pp. 226-253). MIT Press.

Habermas, J. (2020). *Over democratie*. Boom uitgevers Amsterdam.

Lefort, C. (2024). *Democratie & totalitarisme*. Boom uitgevers Amsterdam.

Loose, D. (2021). *Democratie op wankele bodem. Over de politiek en het politieke*. Brussel & Boom uitgevers Amsterdam.

Loose, D. (2024). *De lege plaats van de macht. Claude Lefort over democratie & de totalitaire verleiding*. Boom uitgevers Amsterdam.

McKay, J., Hill, B., Buckler, J., Crowston, C., Wiesner-Hanks, M. & Perry, J. (2017). *A history of western society* (12th ed.). Bedford/ St. Martin's.

Mouffe, C. (1992). Citizenship and political identity. *The Identity in Question*, 61, 28-32.

Mouffe, C. (1999). Deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism. *Social Research*, 66(3), 745-758.

Mouffe, C. (2008). *Over het politieke*. Uitgeverij Klement.

Mouffe, C. (2009). *The democratic paradox*. Verso Books.

Rummens, S. (2005). Deliberatie en vrijheid: de normatieve kern van Habermas' democratietheorie. *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, 67(1), 95-122.

Van der Putte, A. (1987). Macht en maatschappij: CL. Lefort over democratie en totalitarisme. *Tijdschrift voor de Filosofie*, 49(3), 395-433.

Wenman, M. (2013). Agonism and the problem of antagonism: Chantal Mouffe. In M. Wenman (eds.), *Agonistic democracy: constituent power in the era of globalisation* (pp. 180-217). Cambridge University Press.