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THE EMANCIPATORY IMPERATIVE

A Critical Theory of Social Transformation

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I argue for the importance of an emancipatory imperative in political theory. While early 20th century critical theory offered promising resources for thinking about the liberation from social and economic unfreedom, particularly through Antonio Gramsci and the first-generation Frankfurt School, late 20th and 21st century political theory frequently forgoes emancipation as a key aim. How can such an emancipatory imperative be developed and defended today?

In order to probe this question, I interrogate the foundational idea of critical theory as emancipation and enlightenment. While enlightenment can often serve anti-emancipatory ends, so can outright rejections by retreating into the territory of piecemeal reform or even defending the status quo. I bring together Gramsci and the Frankfurt School with important recent advances in feminist work on political affect and critical work on race and colonialism to recalibrate enlightenment in a critical and emancipatory direction, thus insisting on the need for a commitment to emancipation and enlightenment alike.

Through an in-depth critical reading of three wide-ranging influential political theorists – John Rawls, James C. Scott, and Chantal Mouffe – I show how their understandings of enlightenment all contribute to such departures from emancipation. By reconsidering the role of reason and rationalism through the prisms of collectivity, material interest, antagonistic struggle, and affect, I critically recalibrate enlightenment away from its anti-emancipatory and oppressive forms toward an emancipatory enlightenment between hyper-rationalism and anti-rationalism. I then propose a renewed critical emancipation to overcome the problems of political, human, and negative understandings of emancipation. While Rawls is overly committed to an enlightenment understanding of reason and rationalism, Scott is overly critical of these in his anti-rationalism from above. In both cases, this leads the theorist down a path incompatible with emancipation. Mouffe bridges the reason-affect divide and gets closer to the possibility of locating the imperative of critical emancipation, yet by eschewing the importance of material interest vis-à-vis affect she jeopardises the possibility of a transformed world beyond radicalised liberal democracy.

By (re)turning to Gramsci's work on affect and his conception of a secular-political and materialist faith in particular, I develop a vision of an emancipatory imperative better attuned to the politics of affect in a material context. In light of this reconceptualization, I conclude by outlining the role of the critical theorist vis-à-vis emancipatory politics and emancipatory political theory through self-reflexive rearguard legitimation and comradely critique. Such a vision helps develop political theory committed to emancipation today and paves the way for renewed scholarship in the critical theory tradition. I hence add two main contributions to the field: First, I challenge recent attempts to embrace Rawls, Scott, and Mouffe as theorists useful for emancipation through a novel focus particularly on the role of emancipation and enlightenment in their work. Second, I contribute to the contemporary critical theory tradition's debates on the limits of enlightenment for emancipation, in the process advancing debates on the relationship between theory and practice, and the theorists' role in relation to these.

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LAY SUMMARY

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In order to probe this question, I interrogate the foundational idea of critical theory as emancipation and enlightenment. While enlightenment can often serve anti-emancipatory ends, so can outright rejections by retreating into the territory of piecemeal reform or even defending the existing order. I bring together Gramsci and the Frankfurt School with important recent advances in feminist work on political collective emotions and critical work on race and colonialism to recalibrate enlightenment in a critical and emancipatory direction, thus insisting on the need for a commitment to emancipation and enlightenment alike.

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1. THE EMANCIPATORY IMPERATIVE¹

1.1 Background

Enlightenment and emancipation are central pillars of critical theory. In this thesis, I examine how three wide-spanning and influential theorists outside the narrow critical theory universe have dealt with these two pillars: John Rawls, James C. Scott, and Chantal Mouffe. While they offer valuable contributions to an understanding of both emancipation and enlightenment, I ultimately argue that emancipation falls by the wayside for all three in part through troublesome positions vis-à-vis enlightenment. Indeed, this might be symptomatic of a wider absence of emancipatory commitments in the political theory literature.

In order to make this argument, I draw on resources from critical theory broadly construed, especially the work of Antonio Gramsci, who proclaimed during the emergence of interwar European fascism that ‘the old is dying and the new cannot be born: in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear’ (Gramsci 1971, 276). Arguably, new “morbid symptoms” proliferate today, including accelerating climate change, rising global inequality and exploitation, and widespread exclusionary far-right politics. Hence, we might once again be in an interregnum and modest reform insufficient to confront such challenges. In this context, theorising and effecting alternatives to the existing social, political, and economic order is urgent. One part of such work is to develop and defend what I call an *emancipatory imperative*.

My starting point is Neil Smith’s defence of a ‘revolutionary imperative’, which posits that

revolution may, as [C.L.R.] James suggests, come like a thief in the night, but if there is going to be a heist on capitalism, the thief needs to come with a few tools. Some tools are intellectual ideas; others are tools of the imagination about other possible worlds; still others are our human bodies, but most importantly they are social and political organization for a more humane future (N. Smith 2010, 64).

¹ Parts from across the first three chapters have been published as (Slothuus 2021b).

I begin from this challenge of how political theorists can turn ideas into tools and tools into ideas – hand-in-hand with the social and political organisation necessary to contribute to processes of emancipation. In order to do so, I very briefly chart the contemporary political landscape before proposing how a return to critical theory with its twin commitment to emancipation and enlightenment (Geuss 1981) offers a compelling path for crafting these ideas and tools. I then explain how four key literatures help me develop this argument, namely the first-generation Frankfurt School, Gramsci, affect theory, and critical-theoretical work on race and colonialism.

A half-century of neoliberalism successfully hegemonized Margaret Thatcher's slogan that there is no alternative, hollowing out universal social welfare and economic redistribution. Yet the 21st century surge in social movement mobilization (GDELT Project 2019) points to a widespread sense that the existing order does not deliver for the majority and should be overturned. The period following the 2008 global economic crisis became an 'age of resistance' (Douzinas 2013, 6) with the Arab Spring, Occupy, Yellow Vests, Extinction Rebellion, and Black Lives Matter, the latter of which became the largest social movement in US history (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel 2020). Surpassing even all of these, the 2020-21 farmers' movement in India successfully mounted the 'biggest protest in world history' (Pahwa 2020) and won their demands, demonstrating global appetite for emancipatory processes, especially among younger generations (Cassidy 2019; Elkins 2018; Saad 2019).

Despite such movements, most radical left-wing political parties and leaders have either failed electorally (e.g. Bernie Sanders or Jeremy Corbyn) or abandoned radical platforms (e.g. Syriza in Greece). The left seems incapacitated and disarmed, its historical role as the organised movement of the working class melting into thin air such that the most radical left-wing parties propose what a century ago would be little more than social democratic common sense:

the idea that capitalism has a *real* structure which imposes real compulsions on actors, that class is rooted in real relations of exploitation or that labour has a real interest in collective organization – all these ideas, which were the common sense of the left for almost two centuries, are taken to be hopelessly outdated (Chibber 2014, 63-64).

Indeed, ‘the political resources available to working people are the weakest they have been in decades. The organizations of the left – unions and political parties – have been hollowed out or worse yet, have become complicit in the management of austerity’ (Chibber 2014, 63). Mired by the failures of really-existing 20th century socialism, the emancipatory imperative has waned. As a result, organized left-wing politics today operates through either the simulacrum of nostalgia or the melancholia of a failed past – a move from a future-oriented optimism about a better world to a backward-looking nostalgia for that optimism (Traverso 2016).² Such nostalgia relies on an imagined rather than a real past, occupiable by whatever desires are socially conducive in a given moment (Boym 2001). This kind of thinking suggests the left is not only nostalgic for the past but actively feeds on a kind of despair, getting used to losing.

Such despair and defeatism generate a belief in the impossibility or at least implausibility of social transformation and difficulty of imagining what an alternative, more emancipated world could look like. Instead, we continue to live in a world of ‘capitalist realism’ where it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (Fisher 2009, 2). Thanks to the plasticity of capitalism, oppositional forces frequently become co-opted under individualised instrumental rationality, the profit motive, and the virtue of industriousness (W. Brown 2014). The difficulty of imagining and effectuating alternatives leads to a *de facto* legitimization of the status quo, in the sense that ‘because it is supposedly impossible for people to establish a just order, the existing unjust order is commended’ (Adorno 1982, 139).

Partly in response to such lack of control and direction over our own lives, growing political polarisation jeopardises notions of a single, universal reason – as seen for instance with the division over Brexit and Trump (Geuss 2019), as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. Alternative facts, fake news, and the relativisation of truth and reason through conspiracy theory point to the absence of universally held moral and political values and norms, as well as the dissensus of the ruled toward the rulers. Objectivity

² Freud distinguishes mourning from melancholia in that the latter has no definite object of desire (Freud 1957), in other words when the left is melancholic this suggests the past it remembers is in part imagined.

and scientific findings are increasingly disputed (Davies 2019) and the *Collins English Dictionary* selected 'fake news' as their word of the year in 2017 (BBC 2017). Hence, multiple forms of 'common sense' exist contemporaneously, often in tension with one another (Gramsci 1971, 323-333). Common sense understood as *senso comune* (sense-held-in-common) is shared within a community but at odds with dominant and rival visions of sense-making, which helps explain distrust of experts, intellectuals, and politicians.

Yet in the breakdown of universally shared reason and consensus might also lie the seeds for an emancipatory project which wrests itself free from the hegemonic force of dominant power. Even if emancipatory possibilities have been repudiated by the supposed 'end of history' (Fukuyama 2006) and the death of 'grand narratives' including a rejection of 'the emancipation of the rational or working subject' (Lyotard 1984, xxiii), there is always a latent emancipatory potential looming under the surface. Recovering emancipation and dispelling fatalism in this context of a rejection of grand narratives is hard political and theoretical work. Societal hopelessness can be fatal for emancipatory politics by leaving the world as it is because of no imagination of alternatives. Or, even if these can be imagined, fatalism suggests they cannot be effectuated. The centrality of a political faith and hope in the possibility of a world free of domination and exploitation plays a central role in guiding the kinds of struggle necessary to bring it about. Unfortunately, influential strands of political theory have played and continue to play a role in reproducing such non-emancipatory futures. In order to probe this kind of context, I examine how emancipation and enlightenment have been dealt with by three key theorists: John Rawls, James C. Scott, and Chantal Mouffe.

1.2 Emancipation and enlightenment

As I explain in the following chapter, emancipation understood most simply as the liberation from social unfreedom is not a straightforward, uncontested idea but encompasses divergent ideas, which are often in tension with one another. There are various understandings of emancipation which in each their way face problems: In *Chapter 2* I focus on political, human, and negative forms of emancipation and point

to both their appeal as well as, more importantly, their shortcomings. I propose a critical alternative centred around collective processes of structural social transformation rooted in material conditions and an interest in abolishing or overcoming conditions of coercion and exploitation through democratic pluralistic struggle leading to a qualitative increase in freedom. This dispenses with overly deterministic and insufficiently open forms of emancipation. I hesitate to offer specific blueprints with necessary and sufficient conditions. Likewise, I avoid full-blown indeterminacy around which political principles and ambitions to guide emancipation. I explore charges that emancipation might be impossible, undesirable, or unrealistic. I show how, on the contrary, emancipation is possible, desirable, and realistic. Drawing on the literatures introduced here – critical theory, Gramsci, affect, and race and colonialism – I emphasise a material, collective, interest-driven, and antagonistic understanding of emancipation involving political affects, partisanship, comradeship, and solidarity.

Likewise, enlightenment has multiple meanings and is a complicated matter, particularly since it has recently become a political and theoretical rallying call (Pinker 2018). Michel Foucault observed how ‘from Hegel through Nietzsche or Max Weber to Horkheimer or Habermas, hardly any philosophy has failed to confront this same question, directly or indirectly’, namely of what enlightenment means (Foucault 1984, 32). Immanuel Kant defined Enlightenment as ‘the emergence of man from his self-inflicted immaturity’ (Kant 2009, 1), achievable through the private and public use of reason.³ He scorns the unenlightened for their ‘resolution and cowardice’ to remain blissfully ignorant (Kant 2009, 1). Importantly, the origin of such immaturity is the fault of ‘the great unthinking mass’ itself (Kant 2009, 3). For Kant, the solution to this condition is to ‘have courage to use your own reason!’ (Kant 2009, 1). Such enlightenment seeks mental liberation from unjustified authority and leads to a rational and reasonable character (Kant 2009; Porter 1996). Habermas, echoing this view,

³ The original German reads: ‘*der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit*’. ‘*Ausgang*’ means ‘release’, ‘emergence’, or ‘emancipation’. ‘*Mensch*’ means ‘the human being’ or ‘man’, ‘*selbstverschuldeten*’ means ‘self-incurred’ or ‘self-imposed’, and ‘*Unmündigkeit*’ means ‘immaturity’ or ‘nonage’.

even claims that a rejection of enlightenment is a form of ‘neo-conservatism’ (Habermas and Benhabib 1981).

Yet as I explain below, this kind of enlightenment has a thorny and troubled history. I therefore propose a recalibration of enlightenment, taking into account its problematic histories and uses while locating the emancipatory potential in a more tentative commitment to a particular form of enlightenment. I use “enlightenment” in its “lower-case” form in contrast to the historical era of “upper-case” Enlightenment. Upper-case Enlightenment as a historical era is usually dated to around 1715-1789, prefaced by René Descartes’ metaphysical dualism and represented particularly in the French Revolution as well as the flurry of intellectual contributions in Britain at this time (Hobsbawm 1996). While Foucault insists that ‘Enlightenment is an event’ (Foucault 1984, 34), establishing a historically contextual reading of Enlightenment beyond an ethos or set of principles (Foucault 1984, 45), I employ enlightenment as an ethos characterised chiefly by reason, rationality, progress, and universalism.⁴ Lower-case enlightenment thus refers to the broader set of values associated with but transcending this historical era: on such a view, enlightenment is an unfinished project (Habermas 1991) and involves a ‘permanent critique of ourselves’ (Foucault 1984, 34), calling for its recalibration rather than dismissal.

If critical theory is right to posit enlightenment and emancipation as its cornerstones, the outright rejection of enlightenment would imply the jettisoning of critical theory altogether. In other words, these critiques are complimentary of, rather than mutually exclusive to, a critical understanding of enlightenment. I propose such a recalibration by developing a sympathetic critique of enlightenment, moving it away from its colonial dimensions as well as overly rationalist forms toward a specifically emancipatory purpose. I do this by reconsidering the role of reason through the prism of material and affective factors, the concept of interest, and collective forms of antagonistic political struggle. Rather than abandon enlightenment as a consequence of these challenges, the way to maintain the possibility of emancipation must be to supplement

⁴ Reason, progress, and universalism are usually seen as the three key categories (Davidson 2006), with rationality as closely bound up with reason. Other authors add science, particular aesthetic developments, or political values like secularism or the critique of religion. See for instance (Pinker 2018).

it with a qualified embrace of the mechanisms by which affect in human sociality contributes to emancipation.

The major reason for insisting on not just emancipation but also enlightenment is that they are mutually constitutive. Put simply, emancipation is the process of liberation from unfree existence and enlightenment is the process of liberation from false consciousness (Geuss 1981, 75), an idea I develop more comprehensively in *Chapter 2*. In this sense, critical theory contributes to the enlightenment of subjects from false consciousness and the emancipation of subjects from self-imposed coercion, i.e. it simultaneously exposes and changes beliefs caused by coercive circumstances, as well as contributes to removing those coercive circumstances. While debates about the viability of false consciousness as a paradigm of explanation – also termed the “theory of ideology” – continue today, for simplicity I contingently accept the basic idea of a divergence between the “real” and perceived interests of people – which is compatible with Charles Tilly’s critique of the theory of ideology (Tilly 1991, 594), as Steven Lukes points out (Lukes 2005, 10-11). Many of the critiques of the theory of ideology and false consciousness are appealing (Rosen 2013), yet as my argument does not hinge on the extent to which the theory is true, I bracket off this long-standing debate.

1.3 Selection of theorists

I develop my argument through a critique of Rawls, Scott, and Mouffe to illustrate these issues concretely. While Rawls strongly defends enlightenment, Scott strongly rejects it. Simultaneously, there is no theory of social transformation in either Rawls or Scott. Mouffe, on the other hand, is positioned in between with a strong appreciation of a critical recalibration of enlightenment. However, she departs on some of the crucial features of critical emancipation, particularly the material and antagonistic dimensions. Returning to Gramsci can resolve these problems.

1.3.1 John Rawls

In Rawls, a commitment to the enlightenment values of reason, rationality, progress, and universalism and their unifying component of rationalism hampers the possibility of emancipation. I show how Rawls (1980, 1985, 1999a, 1999b, 2001, 2005) embodies a very strong commitment to enlightenment, which poses an obstacle to emancipation. While he can be cast as a 'liberal socialist' who would be in favour of emancipation (Edmundson 2017; Ypi 2020b, 2020a), for instance through a major transformation of the ownership of the means of production, his conception of reason vis-à-vis affect precludes such transformation. His usefulness for a theory of emancipation is therefore limited, indeed he hampers the theorisation of emancipation altogether. I will show that a strong commitment to enlightenment today can stand in the way of emancipation. Emancipation requires processes of social transformation, which Rawls does not theorise. Although he presents a vision of social change that would institutionalise formal equality of opportunity and reduce economic inequality, there is no vision of a transformed human subject – in essence, the just Rawlsian society is populated by *the same people* as those who exist today, only in a reconfigured social context. He depends on a matrix of reason, rationality, and reasonableness that holds people as mostly static beings purged of affects and interests. Recent attempts to cast Rawls as a theorist of emancipation must hence be rejected, in part because of his enlightenment ideas, as I will show.

The possibility of social transformation is limited in Rawls because his barebone notion of a sense of justice twinned with an overly benevolent conception of the existing state is insufficient to guide transformative political action. His limited theory of social change relies on a model of individual agency rooted in a moral psychology of rationalism, reasonableness, and public reason. There is only a limited account of affective investment and none at all of material interest so crucial to political actors, and by not addressing the challenges to enlightenment around race and coloniality, Rawls is unable to generate a convincing basis for emancipation. Turning to Rawls' model of civil disobedience illustrates these problems in practice. I conclude by returning to my alternative understanding of social transformation that centres on struggle: antagonisms in society rooted in divergent material interests, a more

nuanced view of violence, and the central role played by affects like solidarity and faith.

Rawls is an ideal starting point due to currently being rehabilitated by contemporary scholars as a promising source for emancipatory theory. While much ink has been spilled in both immanent and transcendental critiques of Rawls, what sets apart these from more recent contributions around his socialism is that they do not just interpret or critique but *apply* Rawls' work to the contemporary political moment, albeit from a critical distance. This suggests there are seeds of emancipatory political theory in Rawls' work, yet that he does not fully elaborate on these himself. By focusing on the way enlightenment and emancipation feature in his work, I bring a new dimension to the contemporary Rawls scholarship.

Many adjacent theorists could be charged similarly. In Habermas, for instance, there is also a commitment to enlightenment but he ends up further away from emancipation than the (late) Rawls. Moreover, while Habermas' relation to enlightenment has been at the heart of critiques of his work (Fraser 1985; Geuss 1981; Hammer 2018; Jezierska 2011; King 2009), Rawls' enlightenment commitment has not formed a major part of the vast landscape of critique. Even though Habermasian deliberative democracy might be seen as more critically promising, the Rawlsian ditto needs renewed critique (Hammond 2018). Another prominent theorist who likewise attempts to incorporate the concerns of the new social movements into a Habermasian perspective is Seyla Benhabib, doing so by juxtaposing Rawlsian 'liberal dialogue' with a Habermasian 'critical theory of discursive legitimation', where the latter allows theorising *with* the new social movements (Benhabib 1986). Rawls explicitly considers Benhabib's position to be compatible with his theory of justice as fairness, particularly in their shared conceptions of public reason and the public sphere (Rawls 1999a, 142). Yet Habermas' recent problematisation of reason by turning to non-enlightenment conceptions of religion and myth-making as well as Benhabib's critical interrogation of reason (Benhabib 1986) cloud the picture of them as conventional enlightenment-defenders. While religion is not to be counterposed entirely with enlightenment reason, as I spell out in my development of the emancipatory potential in a Gramscian secular-political faith, I draw on Rawls as the more archetypal enlightenment-defender most

clearly showing the problems with an unreconstructed enlightenment grounding of emancipation.

1.3.2 James C. Scott

One might then think that the solution is to depart from this matrix of reason, rationality, and reasonableness, instead turning to a full embrace of anti-rationalism and a rejection of reason. Yet doing so raises a different and equally serious set of issues. I turn to James C. Scott's position on the other extreme vis-à-vis enlightenment (1976, 1990, 1999, 2008, 2009, 2012a, 2013a, 2017). In Scott, the same problem as Rawls emerges but from the opposite end: a too strong departure from such enlightenment values jeopardises emancipatory possibilities. Birthing an entire field of study around 'everyday resistance' (J.C. Scott 2008), Scott is frequently celebrated as the father of resistance, providing hope for social transformation by locating the micropolitics of resistance across a multitude of arenas of the social and political lives of people across the world. Scott attempts to reimagine this as an alternative to emancipation without returning to enlightenment and is suspicious of the possibility that states can form the basis of a better world. He therefore turns to everyday resistance and exodus as the most promising paths for social change. His very strong critique of enlightenment leads him to explicitly give up on emancipation. He departs in radical fashion from the enlightenment commitment of Rawls.

Although his anarchist politics of resistance can secure self-respect and basic survival in an oppressive world, it cannot foster emancipatory change. My claim is therefore not that Scott misapprehends the possibility for emancipation, in other words is internally inconsistent or incoherent, but that his foundation makes such a possibility impossible. In his rejection of rational planning, organisation, and structure – what he calls the 'high modernism' (J.C. Scott 1999, 88ff) of both the capitalist and communist post-war blocs – Scott is overly suspicious of organised political action and commits himself to a pessimistic politics in which there is no escape, no emancipation, no transformation beyond exodus to the uplands. The problem with such upland

anarchism is that eventually you run out of upland, i.e. it is not a universal model for emancipation but only works in highly specific contexts.⁵

Like Rawls, Scott draws up too rigid a boundary between the rational and the non-rational – and situates himself on the other side of the boundary – in order to show that rationality from below is good and rationality from above is bad. Nevertheless, Scott provides the best antidote to the ideal theory of Rawls, grounding especially his early work in ethnographic and archival material to chart the “real” resistance of actual agents. Scott is therefore a suitable theorist to represent the strong suspicion of enlightenment values. The wide-ranging scope of his work means it is possible to chart a long arc of development, whereby his early and later work stand as two distinct yet coherent parts of a larger whole. I thereby contribute to the contemporary Scott scholarship by providing both a meta-level theoretical reflection of the overall contours of his intellectual project, as well as a critique specifically in relation to how and why he cannot ground emancipation, a point he briefly mentions but does not explicitly develop.

Foucault or Judith Butler would be compelling alternatives to Scott. All three share a basic anarchistic suspicion of the state, organised politics, and governmentality – and, arguably, of Marxism (Butler 2015, 2011, 2004, 1999, 2020; Butler and Athanasiou 2013; Foucault 1977, 1984, 2009). Foucault’s critique of the state centres around power, which is an important category for emancipation. While it is not possible to entirely escape the grip of power, Scott flips the Foucauldian script by shifting attention from power to resistance, thereby facilitating a clearer focus on the processes of social change that result from particular constellations of power. This makes him an apt theorist to critique, as a more promising concrete political potential emerges from a closer proximity to grappling with emancipation. In other words, Scott uses Foucault’s framework to propose a critique of Marxism and socialist social transformation, which then has more direct applicability to the political situation of today than Foucault’s –

⁵ While such resistance offers the possibility for low-level subversion and the enactment of self-help (echoing Rawls’ self-respect developed in *Chapter 4*), it does not provide any kind of path for more wide-ranging or structural change.

Scott explicitly laments the disappearance of emancipation, which means it is possible to home in on the reasons behind this.

In contrast to Butler, whose somewhat defensive understanding of politics as primarily the struggle for security, liveability, and dignity, Scott does seem to desire a move beyond this more limited vision – but simply argues it is untenable. Although Butler’s recent work in particular (Butler and Athanasiou 2013; Butler 2015) contains a move toward a more radical edge, Scott reckons more directly with struggles of resistance and strategies for political change, particularly in his critique of the state. Finally, Scott engages directly with Gramsci and the Frankfurt School, which sets the scene well for the subsequent chapter on Mouffe who is a neo-Gramscian, thus facilitating optimal comparison and synergy in a way that focusing on Foucault or Butler would not.

1.3.3 Chantal Mouffe

Having shown how either too strong a commitment or critique of enlightenment lead to a retreat from emancipation even if its theorists might want something resembling emancipation, I turn to Chantal Mouffe (1993, 2000a, 2000b, 2002, 2005, 2013, 2014, 2016a, 2016b, 2018). Mouffe’s post-Marxist left populism traverses the space between enlightenment and its critics while remaining curious about something in the shape of emancipation – even if she is pessimistic about its possibility. Initially writing in a context of emergent new social movements and the demise of organised left-wing parties shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall, Mouffe provides an account much more sympathetic to organised left-wing politics and the importance of capturing state power in order to build socialist hegemony.

Her strongest contribution is to reckon with – as one of the first major contemporary political theorists – the crucial role of affects as socially-held collective emotions in politics and social transformation. This opens the possibility for negotiating between the dichotomy of reason and affect, locating a transformative potential that is not wedded either to a strong affirmation or strong rejection of enlightenment. This makes Mouffe particularly suitable as a bridge from the problems of Rawls and Scott toward a more Gramscian understanding of enlightenment and emancipation. She negotiates

between Rawls' enlightenment-defence and Scott's enlightenment-rejection and is also closer to a commitment to emancipation than Rawls or Scott, suggesting that the middle-ground can help recover emancipation, evident from her important work on the relationship between theory and the politics of social movements. Her strong critique of Rawls' liberal rationalism also makes her a suitable figure after Scott because she navigates past Scott's anti-enlightenment position without recursing to the enlightenment-defence of Rawls. Mouffe is committed to representative politics like Rawls but critical of liberalism like Scott. She is critical of the enlightenment tradition like Scott but nevertheless committed to a hierarchy of reason above passion like Rawls. Concerned with the collective articulation of social identities into forces for political change, this nevertheless relies on a discursive framework and sees politics as a struggle over identities.

By staying within the confines of a radicalised liberal democracy, Mouffe has to resort to a model of coalition-building that relies on discursive moves not sufficiently removed from Rawls' understanding of social change. Her move from antagonism to agonism furthermore suggests that radical democracy is a kind of expanded social democracy, won on the terms of existing hegemonic values rather than a fundamental restructuring of society beyond indeterminate notions of democracy and equality. Although interests are present, radical indeterminacy means they are discursively constructed through identity-formation and -articulation, which can be co-opted by anti-emancipatory forces, and the material basis dissipates from politics and society. While her theorization of affect makes her stand out among critical theorists, she remains trapped within an understanding of politics based around a hierarchical schema with reason and rationality as superior to passions. This poses a problem because she purges the emancipatory dimension of Gramscian materialism and affect. The central role of Gramsci in Mouffe's work is promising for emancipation, yet the disappearance of a materialist perspective and a departure from Gramsci on the crucial points of how to understand the relationship between affect and reason renders her account less promising for emancipation. Therefore, I return to such an alternative toward the end of the thesis.

Mouffe is the most suitable theorist to follow Rawls and Scott because she provides a compelling middle-ground between their enlightenment defence and rejection, more so than most other major contemporary political theorists. Alternatives to Mouffe would be e.g. her collaborator Ernesto Laclau, Toni Negri, or even Butler. Other influential contemporary theorists such as Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, Costas Douzinas, or Jodi Dean all affirm the need for emancipation, revolution, or communism, and thus represent a strand of thinking that maintains the emancipatory imperative. My objective is somewhat different: to see how ostensibly emancipation-friendly theorists retreat or prevent thinking clearly about emancipation. While Laclau has possibly more emancipatory potential than Mouffe, he does not grapple centrally with the relation of enlightenment values vis-à-vis affects or emotions. Indeed, recent cutting-edge work on Laclau critiques the lack of an affective dimension in his work (Palestrino 2021). I do make occasional reference to Laclau's single-authored work, yet focusing on Mouffe is more conducive specifically to my task at hand – how specifically enlightenment intersects and interacts with emancipation, in part because she appreciates affects in her recent work.

Furthermore, Mouffe provides a clearer contrast to Scott than Negri, who – often in his close collaboration with Michael Hardt – is more intimately aligned with Scott on the idea of centralised state power as the source of subordination than Mouffe (Negri 1999; Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004, 2009). Therefore, Scott and Negri would be too close to each other to have both included. As Niklas Olsen and Daniel Zamora point out, both Scott and Negri see the primary goal of theory and politics to be to 'cut the head off the king' (Olsen and Zamora 2019, para. 19). What is more, the kind of politics Negri advocates was immensely popular and spoke to a historical moment before the 2008 financial crisis as well as its immediate aftermath with social movements like Occupy in particular. Negri's work is highly relevant to the alter- and anti-globalisation movements around the Battle in Seattle but does not hold the same promise today (Amin 2014; Callinicos 2001; P. Thompson 2005). In sum, Rawls, Scott, and Mouffe provides the maximum breadth and representation while being comparable on similar dimensions: enlightenment reason and rationality in particular, alongside the way this relates to both affect and in turn emancipation.

1.4 Theoretical framework

To begin, however, I first outline my theoretical framework and the four key literatures I draw on to inform my critique. I read and interrogate Rawls, Scott, and Mouffe through the prism of first-generation critical theory, Antonio Gramsci, contemporary affect theory, and contemporary theory around race and colonialism, which I now briefly outline before turning to some important methodological considerations. While I am not a “card-carrying” Frankfurt School or Gramscian theorist, the line of inquiry I pursue is in the vein of these literatures. However, particularly the former suffers from problems that can be overcome by supplementing with more contemporary literatures around affect and colonialism. In *Chapter 6* on Mouffe, in particular, I bring into conversation Gramscian thought with the contemporary affect literature, which showcases the way in which the former can be supplemented with insights from the latter.

1.4.1 Critical theory

Critical theory is the best starting point for theorising emancipation because at its heart, this tradition has an explicit commitment to emancipation. These ‘are critical times for proposals aimed at transformation and improvement, and thus are propitious times for critical theory’ (Deutscher and Lafont 2017, xiii), where critical theory is understood as ‘man’s emancipation from slavery’ (Horkheimer 2002, 246), building on Marx’s view of critical philosophy as the ‘self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age’ (Marx 1992, 209). Raymond Geuss reworks this to mean that ‘agents are enlightened and emancipated by a critical theory’ (Geuss 1981, 60-61), i.e. a praxis-oriented enterprise that works in synergy with existing social struggles rather than apart from them. The best toolkit for recovering emancipation is therefore critical theory. Here, theory and practice meet in a bidirectional process where theory speaks to struggles, which in turn must cultivate a self-reflective ethos informed by theory.

Broadly speaking, “critical theory” can mean two slightly different things. Upper-case “Critical Theory” usually refers to the narrower tradition of the Frankfurt School, i.e. the

group of theorists who founded the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany, as well as the School's subsequent heirs and followers (Abromeit 2011; Best, Bonefeld, and O'Kane 2018; Therborn 1970). The Frankfurt School is usually divided into three generations, with the first-generation comprising Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse as its most influential figures (Adorno 1970, 1997, 2006; Horkheimer 2002, 2004; Horkheimer and Adorno 2002; Marcuse 1971, 2002, 2013).⁶ These worked from a predominantly Hegelian and Marxist vantage point, seeking to confront the challenges of the interwar and post-war periods of European fascism, as well as address questions of why Europe had not experienced a wave of socialist revolutions like most Marxists had expected. Importantly, the first generation is characterised by a twin commitment to emancipation and enlightenment (Geuss 1981, 2). The second generation led by Jürgen Habermas took the Institute in a new direction, drawing more on Kant than G.W.F. Hegel and focusing on public discourse and deliberation as the basis for achieving a just society (Habermas 1991, 1996). The current third generation of Critical Theory is usually associated with figures like Axel Honneth and Rainer Forst, who focus on issues such as recognition, tolerance, and power (Forst 2011, 2014, 2018; Honneth 1995, 2007, 2009).

Lower-case "critical theory", by contrast, refers to a much wider literature including e.g. critical race, post- and decolonial, feminist, queer, psychoanalytic, and Marxist theory. Such critical theory is loosely committed to the founding insights of the first-generation Frankfurt School, in particular a desire for some form of emancipation, but is not a unified field with a definite set of principles or views. More broadly, critical theory is concerned with questions of power, domination, exploitation, oppression, and the manifold resistances to these. In this thesis, I draw on both first generation Critical Theory and critical theory more broadly, focusing on Geuss' proclamation of the connected aim of emancipation and enlightenment as the cornerstone of such an enterprise. Unfortunately, despite the potential for political theory to contribute to such

⁶ As Staci Lynn von Boeckmann convincingly shows, much of Adorno's work was heavily influenced by his wife, Gretel (née Karplus) yet this is usually unacknowledged or under-acknowledged by both Adorno and the secondary literature (von Boeckmann 2004).

processes, many strands of political theory have given up on such an understanding of emancipation.

I use critical theory as a tool to pry open a ‘problem-space’, i.e. ‘an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs’ (D. Scott 2004, 4). This means identifying and raising a set of problems, mindful of the desirability of being constructive but without the oppressive need for a blueprint style of political theory that gets caught up in minutiae of implementable public policy rather than the big questions of social transformation. To this end, I attempt to dislodge a ‘dead-end present and, on the one hand, the old utopian futures that inspired and for a long time sustained it and, on the other, an imagined idiom of future futures that might reanimate this present and even engender in it new and unexpected horizons of transformative possibility’ (D. Scott 2004, 1).

Critical theory therefore differs from ‘scientific theory’ or ‘traditional theory’ in not just attempting to manipulate the external world in a neutral manner, such as producing a new substance through a chemical experiment, but by asserting that it ought to affect the world through a commitment to freedom and the abolition of unfreedom (Horkheimer 2002, 242ff), in which all humans have at least a *pro tanto* universal interest. Whereas traditional theory seeks enlightenment for its own sake – i.e. that knowledge for knowledge’s sake is desirable – critical theory needs such liberation from false consciousness in order to effect the liberation from unfree existence.⁷ Critical theory is therefore a reflective exercise rather than an attempt at making subjective conditions into objective conditions – as in the case of natural science, such as the subjective observation of physical properties converted into “objective” and “true” laws of nature or axioms. Rather than simply trying to make sense of the world in a disinterested fashion, critical theory is attuned to its own role in such sense-making by contributing to changing the world rather than merely interpreting it, to paraphrase Marx – and implies a different cognitive structure in which the theory is part of the object-domain it describes. Critical theory, then, a) guides human action by enabling

⁷ For a more complex and multi-layered analysis of the various types of reason and its relation to emancipation, see (Bhaskar 2009, 122-150).

agents to determine their interests, b) is a form of knowledge about the world, and c) is self-reflexive, i.e. reckons with its own place vis-à-vis such interests and knowledge (Geuss 1981, 2ff).

Crucially, the process of liberation from unfree existence and the process of liberation from false consciousness require each other. There can be no liberation from unfree existence without the liberation from false consciousness, and vice versa, because unfree existence is partly self-imposed coercion. Following critical theory's conception of ideology as false consciousness, subjects often consent to their domination, reproducing it in various ways and relies on a lack of realisation that it is self-imposed (Geuss 1981, 2ff). Otherwise, agents would recognise that their state of coercion and its self-imposition implies that subjects can undo it themselves. Direct coercion is only a small part of the total set of domination: while there is often very little choice for a factory worker in Vietnam or China or even a precarious worker in Britain whether to acquiesce in their domination, there is simultaneously no state official actively coercing people into work.⁸

Instead, consent constitutes a major part of domination and is not automatically offered – the indirect, non-physical counterpart to coercion is won through struggle. Consent is produced through ideological formations propelled by e.g. the educational system, mass media, and popular culture (Althusser 2005; Gramsci 1971). To be sure, even the dominated are subject to combinations of coercion and consent, and ideology does not flow unidirectionally from dominating to dominated (Guha 1997). Most of the time, ideology and consent are produced unwittingly and unconsciously by socially reproducing the structures necessary for these to emerge and remain, without a clear and identifiable human-made source. Ideology is therefore a structural rather than an individual phenomenon. Critical theory points out that coercion can take more subterranean and ambiguous forms than simply violent state forces getting people to do particular things. Although by no means a panacea, this means that critical theory can induce self-reflection and lead to both realisation of false consciousness and self-

⁸ Such unfree existence goes beyond merely ideology or outright violence into impersonal domination and 'the mute compulsion of economic relations' (Mau 2021), whereby the social (self-)reproduction of economic power is foundational to the very existence of such power.

imposed coercion. Yet the stubborn persistence of domination and exploitation, the ubiquity and pervasiveness of ideological formations, and difficulty in challenging them implies the need for concerted theoretical efforts to explain these.

For my overall argument critical theory therefore offers a promising starting point for its explicit concern with emancipation and enlightenment as well as a commitment to eschewing “traditional theory”. Specifically, the insight that partly self-imposed ideological formations stand in the way of emancipation and the need for reckoning with a strategy for overcoming such ideology is a major question with which theory does and must continue to grapple. However, while the critical theory tradition formulates a dialectic of enlightenment, whereby there is simultaneously attractive and unattractive versions and parts of enlightenment, there is not necessarily sufficient attention paid to the way affect and affective commitments influence the status of reason. In order to fill this gap, Gramsci is the most suited theorist to offer a path for how to attain and maintain hope and faith in the possibility of emancipation, as well as theorising its emergence because he is attuned to the relationship between reason and affect in particular, as well as how emancipatory opinion-formation can come about.

1.4.2 Antonio Gramsci

While the narrower understanding of critical theory is an ideal starting point for my inquiry, particularly in its insistence on emancipation and enlightenment serving as the foundation of my argument, turning to Gramsci offers a compelling explanation and crucial resources for theorising against fatalistic retreat in the wake of the ubiquity of ideological formations and for recovering emancipation. I particularly focus on the underappreciated dimension in his work of secular-political faith and its location between knowing, feeling, and understanding as the foundation for such emancipatory change in Gramsci’s thought. This helps develop the appeal of critical theory found above and protects it from the dismissal from literatures around race and colonialism as I show below. Before turning to the specifics on affect in Gramsci and beyond, let me briefly sketch the overall contours of Gramsci’s intellectual project as they pertain to my argument.

Broadly aligned with the above formulation of ideology in critical theory, for Gramsci dominant forces establish hegemony as the way of marrying coercion and consent through state power to rule over subordinate populations. This amounts to the ‘constitution of the political’ altogether (Thomas 2009, 194-195), ‘as the process by means of which social forces are integrated into the political power of an existing state—and as the path along which the subaltern classes must learn to travel in a very different way in order to found their own “non-state state”’ (Thomas 2009, 195). Dominant forces in society do not simply rule through brute force such as violence but establish certain forms of consensual relations by achieving social reproduction of the socially necessary forms of rule by subordinate populations themselves – in other words, people at least partly perpetuate their own domination.

In this sense, hegemony ensures that “dominant” forces do not really appear as “dominant” at all, but as legitimate, consensual, and fair. Put simply, hegemony is an attempt to combine the idea that productive relations govern people’s lives with the idea that political relations do. Rather than a dichotomous or mutually exclusive relationship, Gramsci and Gramscian approaches point out how they work in tandem (Gramsci 1971, xiii-xv). Hegemony traverses both political society which is ruled mainly by force and what Gramsci calls ‘civil society’, i.e. the private realm which is ruled mainly by consent, although hegemony primarily exists in the latter (Gramsci 1971, 12). Political society and civil society taken together constitute the state, which rules not simply through political will but also through penetrating the aspects of ordinary life such as culture and ideas which hold together hegemony. Political and civil society in this regard correspond quite closely to the Marxist idea of a superstructure, Gramsci points out (Gramsci 1971, 12).

However, subaltern groups are partly impervious to the hegemonic control by dominant groups because various forms of common sense exist in opposition to dominant narratives. Indeed, such a multiplicity of common senses is an ineradicable feature of politics. Common sense refers to the ‘diffuse, uncoordinated features of a general form of thought common to a particular period and a particular popular environment’ (Gramsci 1971, 330). Ordinary people hold such common sense not necessarily because of a set of carefully deliberated principles but because of

habit(us), tradition, or implicit beliefs, and because of a certain secular faith in a certain conception of the world. Gramsci goes on to describe it as 'a conception which, even in the brain of one individual, is fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential' (Gramsci 1971, 419). This suggests that opinion-formation is not just a matter of the force of the better argument but is lodged in a complex web of social relations and affects.

Particularly through an 'organic crisis' where the prevailing doctrines and structures are thrown into question (Gramsci 1971, 178) is such opinion-formation possible for the subalterns. Gramsci explains how the overthrow of dominant power does not necessarily happen in an instant or through violent force but is a long, drawn out process involving both ideational and material components, what he terms 'passive revolution' (Gramsci 1971, 109), which is possible during an organic crisis. He points to the 'molecular changes which in fact progressively modify the pre-existing composition of forces, and hence become the matrix of new changes' (Gramsci 1971, 109), which means that an accumulation of tiny changes can contribute to larger fundamental changes. The insurrectionary fascination with sudden apocalyptic rupture must therefore be disavowed. The establishment of a non-state state, or counter-hegemony, requires both the practice of collective struggle and the proliferation of rival ideas to ground such struggles.

In terms of rival ideas, intellectuals play a key role. 'Organic intellectuals' in contrast with 'traditional intellectuals' (Gramsci 1971, 3-13) fulfil the social function of representing their class relations – a particular class interest and an interest in emancipation – which means they can be teachers, journalists, or occupy any other role in society that allows them to speak with and for the dominated class against the dominating class. Such organic intellectuals remain connected to their class and are not separate from its struggles. Collective struggle and theoretical work can therefore work in tandem with such common sense to realise emancipatory projects through forms of counter-hegemonic power, one of the key ideas developed primarily in the Gramscian literature as opposed to by Gramsci himself, although to be sure the intellectual building blocks of this idea exist already in his thought. Such counter-hegemony is what Thomas above called a "non-state state", in other words the kinds of institution-building that can eventually supplant the state. It should not come as a

surprise, then, that Gramsci sees in organised religion and its artefacts such as faith a key emancipatory potential.

More specifically, thinking with Gramsci on the subject of faith functions as a bridge between overly rationalist and overly anti-rationalist perspectives. The task, according to Gramsci, is to maintain ‘pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will’ (Gramsci 1971, 175), such that sober realism is not allowed to become an anti-emancipatory and debilitating force. Gramsci points out how ‘in the masses *as such*, philosophy can only be experienced as a faith’ (Gramsci 1971, 339).⁹ This helps recalibrate enlightenment away from a simple dichotomy between reason and affect – a crucial running theme across this thesis – and can actively engender emancipation and combat widespread fatalism about the impossibility of such emancipation. Ives claims that ‘faith (especially in the form of optimism of the will) is vital for Gramsci’ (Ives 2004, 9). Going further, ‘all of his writings...are always expressive of...faith’ (Cavalcanti and Piccone 1975, 3).¹⁰ Indeed, ‘at the base of the communist party, Gramsci places a religious faith, albeit a secularised one’ (Adamson 2013, 469).

While Gramsci’s work can illuminate contemporary debates, his thought cannot be transposed without qualification. I aim to ‘put Gramsci’s ideas to work more than to expound them’ (P. Anderson 2017, 3) and to help ‘crack open the hard shell of doctrine’ (Hobsbawm 2011, 341). Gramsci should be at least partly historicised – speaking to a particular historical moment (Morton 2003; Thomas 2009) in order to ‘search for the leitmotif’ in a more overarching sense as opposed to picking out ‘loose aphorisms’ (Gramsci quoted in Santucci 2010, 32). Therefore, I “think” our problems in a Gramscian way’ rather than treat him dogmatically or religiously as a prophet of ahistorical truths (S. Hall 1988, 16).

⁹ Despite a plethora of work on the relationship between faith and politics (Harris 1999; Mahmood 2011; Wydra 2015), the literature on faith in Gramsci is highly limited (Ives 2004, 2009). The very few and limited theoretical treatments of Gramsci’s account of feeling and affect count (Crowther and Villegas 2012; Gilbert 2015; Levinson 2010). None of these consider faith in detail.

¹⁰ The question of religion has ‘received only spotty treatment in the scholarly literature on Gramsci, despite its enormity’, let alone the transition from ‘traditional religion’ to ‘secular religion’ (Adamson 2013, 470). This is particularly curious given how central a role religion plays for him. This ‘neglect of Gramsci’s treatment of religion [comes] as a consequence of a particular bias or an underestimation of religion itself, as irrelevant’ (Forlenza 2019, 1).

By anchoring the way people feel and think in their concrete condition, Gramsci's more materialist-sensitive account of faith offers a promising path for how emancipatory theory can grapple with the affective dimension of the populist surge and the crisis of rationality as seen in the growing distrust of experts and science. Faith is instrumental as a non-religious form of social practice and social knowledge that grounds the desire for emancipation in a commitment unmoved by the difficulty of bringing it about. It is related to affect since it is not only grounded in fully worked-out reasons but also in deeper affective life.

In Gramsci, faith can be wrought free from its illusory religious character and drive forward emancipatory political action. This also helps explain why a turn to faith is generative today where hope has become the dominant concept through which to understand and encourage belief in the possibility of a better world (Moellendorf 2006; Thaler 2017; Webb 2012). Because faith is hard to wrest free from its religious connotations, scholars tend to either reproduce the connection or reject it in favour of a prism of hope. The literature on hope is vast and indeed promising. For example, Jonathan Lear emphasises a hope for something that might not yet be possible to imagine or hope for – a hope beyond hope, for a material reality (Lear 2008, 103) that does not worry about feasibility constraints, instead positing an altogether different world. This fits with a Gramscian understanding of faith because it also involves a commitment to a radical remaking of the world. Yet Gramsci connects this in a broader sense to social transformation and the social bases that ground it. By turning to faith, it is possible to emphasise the necessary affective component of hope. In other words, faith and hope are complimentary.

Gramscian faith involves a conception of a world, including an attitude toward the future, as well as a corresponding norm of conduct that practices this attitude in a social context. The meaning of secular-political faith derives from the corresponding meaning of religious faith, where a secular form is the 'unity of faith between a conception of the world and a corresponding norm of conduct' (Gramsci 1971, 326). The first element suggests that faith is a kind of *Weltanschauung* that structures thought such that divergent interpretations of social life are brought together under the umbrella of a coherent set of beliefs about that world. Thus, it is clear why Gramsci

would suggest that such a conception is akin to religion or ideology. He defines ideology as ‘a conception of the world that is implicitly manifest in art, in law, in economic activity and in all manifestations of individual and collective life’ (Gramsci 1971, 328). Whereas ideology in critical theory is a precondition for the continuation of a dominant social structure, secular faith is not “necessary” in this sense – precisely because it is not necessarily status quo-abetting but can be counter-hegemonic. Faith need not be so all-encompassing, and by virtue of not having hegemonic control of the (re)production of culture and values, activist forms of secular-political faith can exist in a small collective alone, without the need for it to have taken hold more broadly in society.

The second element, a norm of conduct, links to the practical dimension of faith. On this view, faith is not just an activity of having or keeping faith but a relational structure and an ongoing attempt to establish principles that help discern the appropriate practical action in a given situation. This means faith is a form of praxis – the combination of a mental state (thought) and practical activity (action) – and that it exists in the concrete and often thorny reality of social relations, making faith a good example of a political affect. It also hints at the usefulness of faith for motivating political action, because it is not simply a mental state but a practically lodged combination of an emotive state, reason, and the corresponding action of embodiment.

Building on Benedetto Croce’s idealist conception of faith, Gramsci therefore adds the active and practical dimension of social praxis and takes seriously the fundamentally social function of belief for the reproduction of religion and social stability.¹¹ Faith thus plays an active role in the establishment and maintenance of hegemony. Importantly, however, it needs to be practiced and acted upon to gain that sort of stability – in short, Gramscian faith is political. This also means subaltern forms of faith can generate

¹¹ Croce sees faith as thought, chiefly in the form of a conception of the world that through criticism becomes stabilised or solidified into conviction (Frosini 2009), whereby religion is not only understood ‘in the material meaning of the followers of the various religions or restricted to the philosophical adversaries of religions’ but also ‘in that of every mental system, of every conception of reality which, transformed into faith, has become the foundation of action and at the same time the light [*lume*] of moral life’ (Croce quoted in Frosini 2009, own translation). He therefore seeks to emphasise the idealist function of religious doctrine as a mental system bringing people to act once it attains the status of faith.

emancipatory affect to challenge the hegemony of the status quo. Here Gramsci echoes William James who argues that while ‘action seems to follow feeling, but really action and feeling go together’ (James 2009, 45). In other words, it guides conduct, which implies not just the specific action taken but the manner in which this action is taken, suggesting the norm influences the mental state of the agent to produce specific outcomes. A philosophical conception of the world becomes a faith once it ‘has produced a form of practical activity or will’ (Gramsci 1971, 328). Thus, faith is an affective dimension of a philosophy that directs activity rather than simply has an account of it – resonating closely with Marx’s thesis eleven: ‘philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it’ (Marx and Engels 2010, 5).

This secular-political faith, and Gramsci’s thought more generally, is particularly helpful for developing the critique of Rawls, Scott, and Mouffe, because it pinpoints a specific lacuna that all three appear to contain: insufficient attention to the way that affective commitments are not just present but intimately tied to collective action, material interests, and antagonistic struggles. This poses a problem for recovering a commitment to, and disclosing the possibility of, emancipation.

1.4.3 Affect

While Gramsci supplements critical theory with the crucial dimension of affect, it is possible to further expand on his relatively brief reflections by focusing on the contemporary affect theory literature and bringing this into conversation with Gramsci. Emancipation might come about in part through a certain affective commitment to hope and faith, as I have shown above, yet by delving further into the contemporary literature, the central role of reason in social change is destabilised. Rather than the individualising nature of emotion and passion, affect is a *collective* expression of such emotion and passion which can help develop an emancipatory imperative by moving beyond a narrow focus on reason and the force of the stronger argument toward a politics rooted in the feelings of people.

The political affect literature mainly challenges the primacy of enlightenment reason in politics. The often fraught relationship between reason and affect indicates how a dichotomisation into progressive reason and reactionary passion is untenable. Disagreement on the 'most basic assumptions' about affects (Leys 2017, 1) means that the terms emotions, passions, and affects are not always used consistently or without disagreement. I understand emotions as individual states and affects as collective states which motivate action, linking body and mind as well as emotion and reason.

The heightened awareness of the bodily, sensorial, and affective dimensions of social life in contrast with the rational, analytic, and logical dimensions usually associated with the enlightenment constitutes an 'affective turn' (P.T. Clough 2008). The affective dimension of faith, solidarity, and comradeship highlights the need for supplementing rationalist approaches to political action with an appreciation of the generative power of affects and how these sit at the interface of interaction between reasons and emotions. Affects should not be dismissed from politics as liberals would have it as they have generative democratic and even emancipatory roles to play in politics (C. Hall 2005). It is therefore neither possible nor desirable to purge affects from politics (C. Hall 2005, 3-4), despite passion often being delegitimised as insufficiently political precisely because it does not formulate a political demand or participate in political discourse (Mouffe 2014).

Indeed, affects can contribute to emancipation. Anger is often a symptom of social injustice (Nussbaum 2016) and can feed a politics of resistance against domination and oppression and restore the self-respect of marginalized communities, and following Frantz Fanon and Ashish Nandy, the re-establishment of dignity and self-respect on the part of colonized or dominated groups is crucial (Fanon 2004; Nandy 1983), which travels beyond formally colonised situations into current racial hierarchies where self-respect is a key missing characteristic from persons living in such communities (Shelby 2016). In other words, the dominant class exploits the

dominated not just through economic value-extraction but through a concerted breakdown of self-respect, too.¹²

While enlightenment-driven liberal political theory is often guilty of side-lining affects (C. Hall 2002), critical perspectives are better-attuned, particularly feminist approaches (Ahmed 2014; Berlant 2004; P.T. Clough 2008; Gorton 2007; L. Hall 2011; Marasco 2015; Srinivasan 2018). Even prior to this affective turn, feminist theorists have charted the political power of affect (hooks 1996, 21-30; Lorde 1997). However, the affect literature is particularly concerned with recuperating so-called negative affects: anger (Lorde 1997; Srinivasan 2018), rage (Butler 2020; Halberstam 1993; hooks 1996), hatred (Sokoloff 2017), disgust (Miller 1998), fear (Robin 2006), shame (Nussbaum 2006), despair (Marasco 2015), nostalgia (Boym 2001), and melancholia (W. Brown 1999; Traverso 2016). Much work remains to be done on more positive affects in particular.

It is no wonder this affect literature is linked to the feminist literature. The identification of women with passion and men with reason is one of the key strategies employed to subjugate women under a structure of patriarchy (Lloyd 1993). Indeed, the expungement of witchcraft and other forms of female “unreason” was crucial to the development of capitalism (Federici 2004). Not only did early capitalism need to purge society of magic and the occult through a ‘campaign of terror’ (Federici 2004, 102) in order to discipline people into a work-force, witches were particularly identified with womanhood through an affective dimension – a process to ‘conquer – we could say ‘colonize’ the emerging proletariat’ (Federici 2004, 154). This ‘persecution of the witches was the climax of the state intervention against the proletariat body in the modern era’ (Federici 2004, 144), primarily for the witches’ refusal to succumb to the emerging hegemony of reason and rationality. Indeed, ‘once men privatized property, women lost their freedom, coming under the control of men via the institution of marriage’ (Dean 2019, 30; Engels 2010).

The nexus of rationality, reason, and private property thus combines to produce and ossify a patriarchal structure that – in the name of progress and development – keeps

¹² For a feminist critique of the arguably masculinist premise on which this is built, see (Threadcraft 2017).

women subordinated. While reason could ostensibly set women free through an appeal to universal equal rights (Wollstonecraft 2012), in practice such reason did not emancipate from patriarchy, misogyny, and sexism. In some instances, these two processes combine into ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’ (Spivak 1988, 297), i.e. that women’s emancipation in the Global South is sometimes used as a pretext for maintaining Global North hegemony or domination. By appealing to women’s rights, war and violation of national sovereignty through accumulation can more easily be justified.

Hence, the particular way political theorists conceive of the relationship between reason and affect impacts their corresponding accounts of emancipation and the possibility of radical social transformation. Recuperating affect challenges the liberal defence of reason and a critique or even rejection of despair and its neighbouring affects. Audre Lorde summarises this point: ‘The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free’ (Lorde 1984, 38). This means that reason can be the preserve of the dominant whereas affect can be combined with a commitment to an emancipatory politics involving an emancipatory imperative.

This turn to affect should be grounded in a materialist understanding of society. Affect is not a discursive formation but anchored in or co-articulating with the material – this is crucial for an account of interest-based struggle and solidarity. Given the enduring link between enlightenment and emancipation, neither a full-blown defence nor a full-blown repudiation of enlightenment is sufficient to ground emancipation. Against an uncritical embrace of affect as a panacea for the problems of reason and rationalism, emancipation appears difficult to both advocate and pursue without an adequate grounding in *both* reason and affect through attentiveness to affect while doubling down on the materialist dimension.

1.4.4 Race and colonialism

Just as enlightenment values facilitate a renewed side-lining of affect, passion, and emotion, they have been employed for racist, colonialist, and Eurocentric purposes,

which is a major reason why many contemporary theorists jettison enlightenment. A circumscribed, critically revaluated version, however, can be recalibrated. Thus, while the turn to affect recuperates an emancipatory imperative by rejecting the simple dichotomy between reason and affect, reckoning with the critique and defence alike from literatures on race and colonialism bolsters this emancipatory potential because rather than give up entirely as a result of the oppressive historical burden of enlightenment, the scholars I turn to offer a way out that critically recalibrates – rather than rejects – enlightenment.

A major part of the critique of enlightenment thus comes from scholars of race and colonialism who argue that reason, rationality, progress, and universalism can undergird racist and colonialist projects (Allen 2017, 2016; Bhabra 2021; Gordon 2011; Hayward 2012; Hickel 2019; Paget 2000; Plumwood 2002; Vázquez-Arroyo 2017). Here, I use the words race and colonialism to mean theorizing about the politics of colonialism, structural racism, the psychology and culture of the legacy of colonialism and imperialism, as well as the historical aftermath of formal decolonisation, what Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni calls ‘political decolonisation’ from a physical empire (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018) rather than the total (up)ending of a colonial world system and the decolonising of the mind, as Fanonian philosophy proposes.

This critique responds to large parts of the mainstream Western philosophical tradition which employs enlightenment-grounded principles to advocate for exclusionary forms of politics, whereby reason, rationality, progress, and universalism justify colonialism, imperialism, enslavement, and white supremacy.¹³ John Stuart Mill equated colonised peoples with children (Mill 2003) while John Locke justified a capitalist private property regime that facilitated colonial ventures in North America rooted in the industriousness and rationality of the European colonisers (Locke 2016), properties which in his view the native populations did not hold (Arneil 1996; Macpherson 1962). He therefore defended the dispossession of native Americans (Locke 2016). This is tied to the origins of capitalism in forms of primitive accumulation enacted through violence and often large-scale environmental destruction. As Massimiliano Tomba explains,

¹³ Even the post-Holocaust genocides of Bosnia and Rwanda can be seen as expressions of enlightenment practices (Dhawan 2014).

‘initially, European colonialism, through the concept of *terra nullius* [unowned land], denied the indigenous ownership of land. Subsequently, the legal framework was redefined based on the idea that, with the conquest of the New World, the indigenous peoples lost ownership of all lands, so that these people’s legal status changed from being owners to being tenants’ (Tomba 2019, 224) through processes of exploitation and dispossession (Ypi 2013).

Such a framework is not limited to the most reactionary accounts but extends well into mainstream liberal theory, too, often in the name of reason (Arneil 2012; Buck-Morrs 2009; Flikschuh and Ypi 2014; Losurdo 2011; Mehta 1999; Neu 2018). Such liberal theory smuggles in ‘illicit group privilege’ (Mills 2005, 165; see also Mills 2009), meaning that it purports to be egalitarian yet operates through systems of exclusion and domination. From the Valladolid debates over which justification to employ for the subjugation of colonised peoples in South America (Urbano 2020) to the continued use of liberal interventionism in the Global South and the maintenance of white supremacy in the US, colonised and racialised populations are frequently described – implicitly or explicitly – as more driven by passion and emotion than reason and rationality. This then can be an enabling factor in their continued subjugation. In a pernicious way, cultural relativist scholarship seeking to humanise subjugated groups can contribute to their dehumanisation: in positing a difference in kind as to the motivations and actions of subalterns, such difference can become reified (Mahmood 2011; Schielke 2010).

This critique extends beyond liberal theory and into the domain of critical theory, too (Mills 2017, 236). Avoiding an ‘invented or culturally determined ideological framework filled with passion, defensive prejudice, sometimes even revulsion’ in the way Western thought often does about e.g. Islam (Said 1996, 173), is crucial because reason and rationality can be deployed for racist and colonialist ends. The Eurocentrism of the second and third generation Frankfurt School suggests that the central status afforded to progress must be questioned (Allen 2016). This critique has in turn been challenged for maintaining the Eurocentric account of reason and therefore not providing a convincing solution to the Eurocentrism charge (Bhambra 2019; Jay 2018; Sager 2017; Vázquez-Arroyo 2017). The critical challenge leaves critical theory vulnerable

for failing to address growing appreciation of the importance of race, gender, colonialism, and affect in emancipatory political theory. However, Amy Allen takes aim at the second- and third-generation Frankfurt School of Habermas, Honneth, and Rainer Forst while my target is the wider departure from emancipation and the rushed rejection of enlightenment in its critics, and how the retreat from emancipation plays out across political theory outside the narrow confines of Critical Theory.

The problem for critical theory, on such a view, is that ‘the “entanglement” of white Western reason as a whole with white power and white supremacy is...tied to a foundational deprecation of nonwhite reason that will make it difficult to come to an agreement on norms of discursive justification that is satisfactory to both sides’ (Mills 2017, 242). Likewise, ‘Frankfurt School critical theory, despite its seminal insights into the relationships between domination, modern society, and the opportunities for redemption through art as critique, is stunningly silent on racist theory, anti-imperialist resistance, and oppositional practice in the empire’ (Allen 2017, 184). Habermas readily admits that this is the case. When asked about whether the analyses of advanced capitalist countries by him and his co-heirs to the Frankfurt School have anything to say about the colonised world, he is ‘tempted to say ‘no’...I am aware of the fact that this is a eurocentrically limited view’ (Habermas 1985, 104). Thus, Habermas’ communicative action paradigm struggles with the rationality of mythical thought (Paget 2000, 181) and the mythology of enlightenment reason (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002). The recent work of Habermas ‘devotes limited attention to the contradictions of European enslavement and colonialism, as well as their problematic treatment by contemporaries. Habermas instead frames colonial encounters as moments in the learning process, way stations on the path toward moral universalism’ (Bloch 2020, para. 31). The omission of considerations of colonialism and violence thus becomes a major problem for more liberal versions of enlightenment.

As should become clear from this thesis, however, critical theory is not reducible to Habermas, and a more emancipatory, radical, and critical vision of society involves seeking a wider set of intellectual resources in both the Marxist tradition – like Gramsci – and in more recent scholarship on race and colonialism as well as affect theory. This involves ‘shifting the geography of reason’ (Gordon 2011, 100), yet is not a critique in

the vein of the Subaltern Studies project or other postcolonial accounts that emphasise difference and deep contextualism. Instead, it is compatible with Vivek Chibber's argument that the histories of European and Indian class conflict and composition ultimately exhibit differences in degree, not in kind, which challenges the Subaltern Studies postcolonial narrative of a distinct historical path (Chibber 2013). I elaborate on this in *Chapter 3*. Crucially, these critiques point to important problems, yet need not lead to a full-blown rejection of any enlightenment trace nor to a retreat from emancipation.

Yet even with a recuperated critical understanding of enlightenment in light of the critiques from affect and race and colonialism literatures, a few problems remain. Particularly, how I think of emancipation and enlightenment from a meta-theoretical perspective, i.e. whether they are concepts, ideas, practices, or something else altogether. Likewise, self-reflection on the role of the theorist and theory in furthering the emancipatory imperative is required. Having established my theoretical framework, I therefore now turn to these two important methodological considerations that further solidify my vantage point and approach, as well as addressing a few initial objections to my approach.

1.5 Methodology

1.5.1 Concepts, ideas, and practices

On the first point, making sense of emancipation and enlightenment can be done in a plethora of ways, methodologically speaking. Within political theory, two outer positions flank a series of middle-ground positions: the 'definitions-first' approach and the 'deflationary' approach (Thaler 2018a, 125ff). A definitions-first approach, usually relying on a correspondence theory of truth, insists on determining a canonical and foundational definition for reflection on a particular concept. The widespread uptake of the definitions-first approach works from the premise that definitional work is useful because it contributes to the understanding and judgment of a concept, where definitional disagreements cut to the core of debates on basic concepts such as

terrorism, art, or politics.¹⁴ A definitions-first approach either de-contests a term (i.e. attempts to settle the debate) or imbues a term with particular normative content. Definitions-first and correspondence accounts, however, can stand in the way of improving the understanding of a term and using it for productive ends. The narrow focus on definitional exercises might occlude what is at stake in a discussion: its socio-political content, context, and ramifications, and an understanding of how power influences the meaning and use of terms.

A deflationary approach can help overcome such problems by forgoing these often irresolvable disagreements over definitions and utilising a more malleable working definition that allows progress on the understanding and critique of a term. A deflationary approach is less ambitious insofar as it eschews the almost Linnean ambition of classification and systematisation, which eludes the substantively interesting and important dimensions of theoretical work. In political theory, such a working definition is necessarily normatively inflected because it is utilised to further a particular purpose that depends on contested components. While deflation does not reject the importance of definitional clarity, it can overcome definitional deadlock by elucidating particular components that might not only shed greater light on the area of inquiry as a whole but also serve an emancipatory or liberatory goal. Crucially, deflating the definitions-first approach does not imply a disregard for definitions or their productive functions. Instead, it holds that when definitions are sufficiently difficult to de-contest, alternative strategies for understanding a concept and pushing it in a more productive normative and political direction is warranted. A deflationary approach focuses on ideas and practices rather than words, concepts, and conceptions, which can be more fruitful than a definitions-first approach in the cases of emancipation and enlightenment because these arguably defy setting up necessary and sufficient definitional conditions.

Yet the deflationary approach might also face problems. A contingent, indeterminate attitude to ideas and practices runs the risk of further occluding or obfuscate what needs illumination. A critically self-reflexive approach where the theorist employs a

¹⁴ The two approaches resemble the difference between correspondence and deflationary accounts of truth in epistemology (Goldman 1999, 41-68; Williams 1999).

‘kind of linguistic contextualism’, can overcome ‘the quest for a canonical definition’ by shifting attention to ‘the power structures behind various conceptions’ (Thaler 2018a, 245). This is the key to one of the most basic problems faced by the attempt to recover emancipation: when theorists speak of emancipation, oftentimes they are speaking of different things altogether, and when they speak of other terms, oftentimes they are speaking about what could credibly be considered emancipation. Theorists not only use these words to mean many different things, oftentimes a multiplicity of words are used to refer to the idea and practice of emancipation and enlightenment, too. In other words, the complexity works in both directions: across multiple words such as emancipation, mass resistance, social revolution, or radical social transformation, the meaning is often shared: one term can be used to mean a multiplicity of things and one thing can be described using a multiplicity of terms.

Critiquing enlightenment and recovering an emancipatory imperative therefore takes place at the level of ideas and practices rather than words, concepts, or conceptions. This might appear to be a hair-splitting distinction yet has major ramifications for the critique that it is possible to develop. I am not de-contesting and cementing emancipation and enlightenment as timeless, ahistorical, decontextualised, and metaphysical categories; excavating in archaeological fashion a hidden meaning of the terms; or writing a genealogy of their contingent emergence and tracing this to a particular constellation of force and power. Instead, I chart, across a widely spanning trio of theorists, how emancipation has fallen by the wayside with and through a problematic relation to enlightenment.

As will become clear from the subsequent two chapters, emancipation and enlightenment have a wide range of different usages, illustrated across the three chapters on Rawls, Scott, and Mouffe. While Rawls never speaks of emancipation there is a clear emancipatory impulse in his later work in particular with wide-ranging demands for social change to break with the capitalist mode of production. In contrast, Scott explicitly rejects emancipation. Yet despite this rejection, he too is concerned with effectuating a different world and imagining a different way of life free from domination and exploitation. For Mouffe, emancipation falls out of the picture as a realistic aim even if it is desirable, instead settling for a less ambitious project of

radicalisation of liberal democracy. Across these three cases, emancipation as an explicit idea or term features unevenly, which means explicit reference is unlikely to be the best starting point of analysis and critique.

A compelling way to overcome the problem of definitional stalemates is found in John Gunnell's work on concepts (Gunnell 2011, 2014). When 'concept' is invoked this in fact often is used to mean 'word', in the sense that democracy is a word with different ideological meanings rather than a fixed concept (Gunnell 2011, 6, 129ff). Even the notion of an essentially contested concept does not resolve this problem, since concepts are not really essentially contested – conceptions or words can be, but the idea of a concept relies on a shared or stable foundation. Instead, what usually happens is 'characteristic' rather than 'essential' contestation, in the sense that the disagreement is about the shape of the concept rather than its basic "essence" (Gunnell 2011, 131ff). Thus, 'despite all the recent scholarship on conceptual history, there is still considerable incoherence in discussions about words and concepts' (Gunnell 2011, 132). While for a very determinate concept or word like "chair" or "apple" definitional work might be straightforward, thus lending itself well to a definitions-first approach, it might not be useful to do much definitional work for very indeterminate concepts like "democracy", "liberalism", or "emancipation".

Such words with an acute political valence are imbricated in 'the politics of signification' (S. Hall 2006a), i.e. the signifying power of how those words are used has important political ramifications. In such cases, the struggle over definitions and meanings is a question of power – dominant forces have an interest in particular definitions that suit a particular narrative framing. This goes beyond the claims of speech act theory and its idea of 'doing things with words' (Austin 1975). In the case of terrorism, for instance, struggles over definitions take on a crucial function to organize the political landscape by legitimising and delegitimising certain kinds of political action through the politics of signification and naming (Thaler 2018a, 130ff; Skoll 2006). This is particularly pernicious for words that can be mobilised by dominant forces over subordinate groups. However, "emancipation" is not primarily a word of political struggle like "terrorism", "torture", "war", or "migrant", which are strategic words that – in a self-reflexive manner – seek to both describe and change the world rather than used by

the dominant to delegitimise subaltern actors. In short, the politics of signification is a matter of who has the power to signify and name, and transformative possibilities hinge in part on overturning and seizing such power.

1.5.2 Divisions of labour, self-reflexivity, and representation

The way for such transformative possibilities to come about is a complex process that involves grappling with hegemonic and dominant discourses in political theory which side-line such possibilities. Therefore, I focus not just on the most promising and cutting-edge critical theory of emancipation but on influential work outside the narrower scope of the critical theory tradition to investigate how they might be read as symptomatic of a wider departure from emancipation. To be sure, recovering emancipation also involves a more grounded and empirical dimension, but a division of labour between various types of scholarly engagement is required to gain sufficient depth and detail as well as breadth and scope of inquiry. If large swathes of people mobilize for changing society away from the yoke of unjust authority, but the vocabulary, conceptual universe, and normative grounds for emancipation do not readily exist, theoretical work must accompany these struggles. Through a division of labour whereby e.g. social movement studies, sociology, and anthropology study the ground-level realities of specific movements, political theory offers resources for how to recover emancipation and recalibrate enlightenment today through meta-theoretical reflection about broader societal conditions under which political change is possible or impossible. Because of its attention to broad and long-term trends, ambition to grapple with social structures in their totality, and distinctly normative thrust, political theory is a germane discipline in which to ground such work. A metatheoretical and scholarly critique is only a part – albeit an important one – of such an overall research programme.

Even in such a metatheoretical project, critical theory is concerned with the real world – developing an understanding and critique of what exists, as well as a vision of desired alternatives. Such a vision involves a division of labour between philosophy and social struggles:

The transformation of a given status is not, of course, the business of philosophy. The philosopher can only participate in social struggles insofar as he is not a professional philosopher. This “division of labor”, too, results from the modern separation of the mental from the material means of production, and philosophy cannot overcome it (Marcuse 1968, 108).

Critical theory therefore improves the sense-making that might be available to activists and participants in movements. Despite the ubiquity of ideology, there is a danger of simply taking everything “empirical” at face value and reifying it as truth. This is not to say that social agents do not make sense of their own world in very complex ways – quite the opposite. Indeed, Robin Celikates emphasises

how much effort ‘ordinary’ agents make in their everyday practices to negotiate interpretations of situations, justify their actions and respond at least tentatively to critique...these activities are anything but chaotic or disorderly. In situations that are experienced or interpreted as problematic, agents draw on socially and culturally mediated models of argumentation in order to detach themselves from the concrete situation and to engage in an exchange of reasons in which critique and justification are inseparably linked (Celikates 2018, 98).

This raises a question about representation: who is to formulate these critiques and visions, and on behalf of whom, if any?

A compelling solution is the distinction between emancipatory political theory and emancipatory politics, offered by William Clare Roberts (Roberts 2017). While the former ‘analyses public institutions in the name of the universal interest in freedom’, the latter ‘begins from people’s actual desires in order to build support for institutional change’ (Roberts 2017, 747). Emancipatory *politics* ‘speaks to people as if in their own voice, beginning from their own desires and projects, and mobilizing them against the institutions of domination that burden those desires’ (Roberts 2017, 762). Emancipatory *political theory*, on the other hand, involves ‘diagnoses of institutions of domination – which identify laws, norms and practices that invest some people with the uncontrolled power to interfere in others’ lives’ (Roberts 2017, 762).

Emancipatory politics is therefore the kind of practices that seek to directly effectuate political change (e.g. through institutions), whereas emancipatory political theory takes a step back and deals with the very conditions of possibility of such practices. While emancipatory political theory should be attentive to the actual desires of real people, emancipatory political theorists can contribute with a perspective that emphasises the universal interest in freedom from domination and exploitation through debate with other political theorists about how best to instantiate such interest and by legitimating existing struggles that push for such interests. Rather than legitimise specific cases of struggles for emancipation – a very worthwhile endeavour – I focus on analysing and critiquing the kinds of theory that seek to make difficult rather than facilitate such struggles and return to the question of legitimation in the final chapter.

Necessarily, there can also be instances of the inverse where existing struggles can also be criticised and existing political theory legitimated. Yet the major purpose of emancipatory political theory is distinct from “merely” political activism – there is value in a division of labour whereby emancipatory political theorists produce intellectual content, shape education, and provide a theoretical framework for the practical efforts of activists and movements, as I propose in *Chapter 7*. It is true that too often these are distant and that “ivory tower academics” can be too removed from real struggles. However, the solution to this is not to collapse any distinction between the two – rather, the focus of political theory must shift in an emancipatory direction that speaks to the vision of emancipation as one of its paramount concerns. Rather than turn emancipatory political theory into emancipatory politics, a more fruitful approach is to turn political theory into emancipatory political theory. To be sure, the wide-ranging scope of such an endeavour opens itself up to vulnerabilities and limitations. Let me briefly outline some of these and the accompanying rationales for choosing such an approach.

A wide-ranging scope might appear to sacrifice depth for breadth. A lot of contemporary political theory focuses narrowly on the work of a single theorist, concept, or idea. There are merits to such an approach, gaining in-depth insights into the specific contours and limits as well as probing the contemporary relevance of the area of focus. However, if such a specific area is not brought into conversation with

wider discourses and theoretical strands, a problem of isolationism can emerge: speaking only to a narrow audience interested in that theorist, concept, or idea risks a too specific audience willing to engage. A wide-ranging approach insists on the value of entering into conversation multiple theorists across ideological and philosophical boundaries. For example, there is close to no research in political theory that brings Rawls and Scott together. Likewise, although Scott and Mouffe in one sense respond to the same literature, particularly Gramsci and the Marxist tradition, the body of comparative literature involving both is limited. One might retort this is due to their incommensurability or incompatibility for comparison, yet my wager here is that a more compelling explanation is disciplinary siloing, whereby a premium is placed on specialisation and narrow expertise over more speculative work and symptomatic critiques. Yet due to the complex character of contemporary politics, where e.g. simple left-right dichotomies are increasingly unable to offer satisfying explanations in a context of the breakdown of shared reason, wider, systemic approaches can complement the narrower efforts to home in on specific details. An insistence on narrowness runs the risk of eluding attention to the societal, structural, and totalising levels of critique and interpretation so necessary specifically for theorising emancipation.

An offshoot of this point of criticism is a potential incommensurability of the three theorists I critique. Perhaps liberal analytic political philosophy, anarchist anthropological theory, and post-Marxist continental political theory cannot speak to each other. This would be too hasty, however. The experimental and unorthodox character of bringing together under-connected literatures can pry open underexplored overarching themes, contributing to big picture speculative thinking and symptomatic critique that speaks to the broader political context of our times. The demands of theory in times of an “interregnum” include a requirement to analyse and interrogate the totality of how social and political conditions are interpreted across subfields and approaches. By bringing into conversation three very different theorists writing in different theoretical and intellectual traditions I offer a contribution, even if only a small one, to such a task. The two most compelling methodological paths that I nevertheless do not take that achieve this aim are ethnographic political theory and standpoint theory.

Embracing an ‘ethnographic sensibility’ (Herzog and Zacka 2017), would utilise fieldwork in informing theoretical inquiry: ‘to open ourselves up to the possibility that we, as theorists, may have something to learn from observing how these normative issues are raised, discussed and addressed in the thick of everyday life’ (Herzog and Zacka 2017, 18). Bridging the division between ivory-tower abstract philosophy and the struggles of real-world social movements can come about through ethnomethodological engagement on the ground, producing theoretical work that is sensitive to – or even emerging from – the desires and demands of real people. Yet while certain strands of political theory can benefit from escaping a form of abstract moralising that universalises the experience of academics, critical theory is always already embedded in such struggles through its commitment to emancipation. Therefore, the ethnographic sensibility is less relevant here. The division of labour between more empirically-grounded work and more meta-level theoretical work means that these can supplement and complement each other. The collapsing of both into one would be a mistake.

In a similar vein, standpoint theory and social epistemology affiliated with identity politics and intersectionality proposes that individuals have unique insights available only through lived experience of particular identities and their social ramifications (Goldman 1999; Hill Collins 1999). In the Marxist tradition, György Lukács argues that the working class has a unique ability to overturn capitalism and a unique insight into its inner workings through direct experience of its functioning (Lukács 1967), in other words a defence of the standpoint of the proletariat. There is certainly much to learn for emancipatory political theory about what such emancipation should look like and the more detailed reasons for why it ought to come about, and the concrete experience of exploitation and domination must be central to any emancipatory project. However, the universal human interest in freedom from exploitation and domination means that theorizing about it – as long as this is attuned to the contributions from other sites within the division of labour – does not have to be identical to the lived experience of the dominated. Emancipation therefore requires many different contributions, one of which is to intervene on a theoretical level in response to other theoretical contributions, showing how they might impede such emancipation.

I therefore conclude the thesis by outlining a vision of the role of today's critical theorist who is concerned with emancipation, grappling with the lessons learnt from the thesis, including how to negotiate the fraught relationship between reason and affect. The theorist should at once work from the presumption of self-reflexively legitimating existing struggles from a rearguard position, but also contribute a vision of the longer term in the form of comradely critique that challenges existing political theory – even in its emancipatory forms. I develop the idea of comradely critique as a way to negotiate not with those theorists who foreclose emancipation but with those who share in credibly supporting emancipatory visions.

Finally, as a prelude to the following chapter, in which I develop and defend the need for emancipation in political theory today, I want to briefly address the danger that my approach involving a methodological division of labour of using critical theory to understand and critique ideas might appear overly polemical. Although I consider polemical political theory in principle able to be a valuable endeavour for its ability to shake and stir stagnating orthodoxies, I would rather consider my approach as simply within the ethos of critical theory or what could be termed *political* political theory.¹⁵ Such an approach draws on Geuss as well as Lorna Finlayson's methodological intervention which highlights the dangers of a demand for constructiveness, charitableness, and a depoliticised disinterestedness in the subject at hand (Finlayson 2015b).

Finlayson argues that the demand for a worked-out alternative to the status quo serves as a straitjacket on theoretical and methodological innovativeness (Finlayson 2015b, 17-31). Such constructiveness is not automatically bad or wrong, as in many instances it is desirable to propose workable alternatives. Yet, as both Finlayson and Geuss note (Geuss 2014b, 2016; Finlayson 2015a, 2015c, 2015b), critical theory should not be faced with the unduly large burden of proposing fully-worked out policy proposals. There must be a place for speculation, polemics, and negative critique – a point I return to in the final chapter on the role of the critical theorist.

¹⁵ This follows from Finlayson's notion of 'the political is political' (Finlayson 2015b), as opposed to Jeremy Waldron's notion of 'political political theory' as that kind of political theory concerned with the internal politics of political institutions (Waldron 2016).

Specifically on the charge of polemics there need not be a mutual exclusivity between careful, thorough, and rigorous scholarship on the one hand and political urgency and even partisanship on the other (Gouldner 1968; Hammersley 2000; Ypi 2016). By avoiding misrepresentation of other theorists, and by taking seriously their ideas and writings by reconstructing their thought in a fair and transparent manner, a limited dose of caustic critique can help unsettle sedimented thought and bring to light the non-emancipatory dimensions of otherwise ostensibly emancipatory potentiality in particular theoretical work. Indeed, ‘serious and honest polemics’ might even be ‘necessary’ (Basu and Ghosh 1982, 56) for emancipatory theory. The way for such polemics to be “serious and honest” is to avoid mischaracterisation, misrepresentation, and misinterpretation. I seek to avoid this by first carefully and fairly reconstructing each theorist and their arguments before delving into a critique. This is in line with Gramsci’s insistence that, contra Kant, ‘thinking “disinterestedly” or study for its own sake are difficult for me...I do not like throwing stones in the dark; I like to have a concrete interlocutor or adversary’ (Gramsci 1971, x). Similarly, something productive can come out of quite sharp disagreements and criticisms, which should not be limited by a potential “tyranny” of charitability.

The need to read other theorists charitably might be a good *pro tanto* rule yet should not override competing interests such as a commitment to philosophy not just interpreting but changing the world, or for critical theory to contribute to emancipation and enlightenment. Similarly, I eschew depoliticised disinterestedness as an ambition for political theory. While this is a running thread in both Finlayson’s and Geuss’ work, it is most clearly articulated by Horkheimer, as I outlined above. Because of the current political conjuncture being far removed from a world free from exploitation, domination, and oppression, there is a strong need for critical rather than affirmative or traditional theory (Horkheimer 2002, 242). One of the purposes of such critical theory should be to locate an emancipatory imperative, for which it is first necessary to probe in much more detail what I mean by emancipation, a question to which I now turn.

2. RECOVERING AN EMANCIPATORY IMPERATIVE

Despite these methodological specifications, developing and defending an emancipatory imperative appears difficult since emancipation has gradually fallen out of fashion in political theory in the past half-century.¹⁶ Such emancipation might seem unpromising or impossible today after a century of variably failed self-styled socialist experiments, the near-global absence of revolutionary parties in the present, the repeated defeats of even vaguely transformative reformist parties, the demise of social democratic welfare states, extreme-right wing parties presenting the only credible challenge to neoliberalism, and the persistence of capitalist realism about the impossibility of alternatives. Yet these are all the more reason why it is urgent and desirable to theorise this idea. Indeed, Honneth contends that ‘without a realistic concept of the “interest in emancipation” critical theory ‘has no future’ (Honneth 2008, 808). Today calls for a renewed theorization of emancipation; for developing and defending an emancipatory imperative.

Fortunately, critical theorists have recently begun to revive discussions of emancipation (Allen 2015; K.B. Anderson 2013; Balakrishnan 2003; Boltanski 2011; Bromberg 2017; Comninel 2010; Freyenhagen 2018; Gottardis 2014; Haider 2021; Roberts 2017; Rostbøll 2008; J.W. Scott 2012b).¹⁷ Geuss points out how his crucial text that outlines the connection between emancipation and enlightenment for critical

¹⁶ This departure is not confined to political theory. A similar development has occurred in literary studies, for instance: ‘dominant strands...have been mobilized to domesticate, in institutional ways, the very forms of political dissent which these [new social] movements had sought to foreground, to displace an activist culture with a textual culture, to combat the more uncompromising critiques of existing cultures of the literary profession with a new mystique of leftish professionalism, and to reformulate in a postmodernist direction questions which had previously been associated with a broadly Marxist politics’ (Ahmad 2000, 1). The convergence and confluence of such domesticated literary theory with domesticated political and critical theory is an important subject of research but unfortunately beyond my scope of inquiry in this thesis.

¹⁷ Two recent PhD theses that come the closest are (Gottardis 2014; Bromberg 2017). However, Andreas Gottardis follows a Habermasian path that seeks to locate emancipation within a Kantian conception of reason that departs from Marx and does not dwell on the role of passion and affect or consider the critique from the race and colonialism literature. Indeed, Habermas ‘has distanced himself from the radically emancipatory view of freedom, and especially from his roots in the critical theory tradition of ideology critique’ (Rostbøll 2008, 708). Svenja Bromberg, on the other hand, focuses specifically on conceptual analysis of “emancipation” within Marx’s and Étienne Balibar’s work (Bromberg 2017), and while this is a vital contribution, it does not address the issue of a loss of emancipation in political theory more widely.

theory (Geuss 1981) ‘was “*un-zeitgemäß*” [untimely] when it appeared in 1981, espousing views that were about to lose philosophical and political traction in a very serious way’ (Geuss 2014a, para. 9). Honneth contends that ‘there is an atmosphere of the outdated and antiquated, of the irretrievably lost, which surrounds the grand historical and philosophical ideas of Critical Theory, ideas for which there no longer seems to be any kind of resonance within the experience of the accelerating present’ (Honneth 2009, 19). Going further, he claims that ‘with the transition to the twenty-first century Critical Theory appears now to be a form of thought belonging to the past’ (Honneth 2008, 784). As Geuss adds, however, ‘with the current visible collapse of the neoliberal order, though, perhaps it has a chance that was denied it on its original publication’ (Geuss 2016, 84). Indeed, the urgency of radical social transformation calls for renewed affirmation of the continued viability of critical theory as centrally concerned with emancipation. Critical theory of this variant is most certainly *zeitgemäß* today.

However, “emancipation” has no single, universally agreed upon meaning. Peter Wagner asks: ‘emancipation from what?’, ‘emancipation of whom?’, and ‘emancipation for what?’ (Wagner 2002, 33-43) while Marx asks: ‘*What kind of emancipation* is in question?’ (Marx and Engels 1975, 149), demanding theorists to specify in greater detail what they are talking about when they use the term. Honneth calls emancipation the overcoming of ‘dependencies and heteronomy’ (Honneth 2017, 908), i.e. the achievement of independence and autonomy, yet this does not offer much determinate content. The term is best understood as an idea rather than either a philosophical concept or a slogan for political actors. Looking for explicit references does not always yield satisfactory results as its use can be disunified and confusing. In order to recover emancipation, it is therefore first necessary to chart its meaning, various forms, possible critiques, and finally formulate a more critical understanding that is more compelling today than its alternative forms.

I develop the idea of ‘critical emancipation’ (Roberts 2017) as centred around collective processes of structural social transformation rooted in material conditions and the interest in abolishing or overcoming conditions of coercion and exploitation through democratic pluralistic struggle leading to a qualitative increase in freedom.

Such freedom goes beyond simply freedom from interference toward a much more encompassing enabling of the practice of such freedom on equal terms, without a coercive apparatus of exploitation and domination. *Prima facie*, emancipation requires moving past capitalism and not simply the freedom from exploitation but also the freedom to flourish and enjoy; the freedom to pursue authentic affective experiences. Emancipation on such a view is also a moving target as opposed to a dichotomy of either fully realised emancipation or not. Such an idea must embrace both political affects and how these play a fundamental role in both motivating and sustaining (or hindering) social transformation.

In this chapter, I first distinguish and defend emancipation vis-à-vis its two most closely related ideas: liberation and manumission. I then map out the difference between political, human, and negative emancipation, explicating the promises and perils of each. By joining together what can be learnt from each type while critiquing their shortcomings, I ultimately settle for a vision of critical emancipation, which is closest to human emancipation but reckons with the challenge from negative emancipation.

2.1 Emancipation and its neighbours

While emancipation shares ground with neighbouring terms such as revolution, autonomy, non-domination, liberation, and manumission, it is nonetheless distinct. Revolution is better seen as a means to an end – a political strategy that implies ‘effort towards human emancipation’ (Le Baron 2009, 559). It can therefore coexist with emancipation in a symbiotic relationship, although even this picture is complicated by permanent (Trotsky 2010) and passive (Gramsci 1971) forms of revolution which suggest a certain endurance of revolution such that it is not just an event. Autonomy and non-domination refer less to processes than to ideal end-points – although they are also not static. The two closest yet nevertheless distinct ideas are therefore liberation and manumission. In short, liberation is akin to *individual* political emancipation while manumission is akin to *individual* human emancipation. Their location at the individual level is what requires a turn to emancipation.

Emancipation and liberation are often used synonymously and share the quality of describing a process of escaping unfreedom, which is why a focus on words can be unhelpful here. Throughout anticolonial and anti-imperialist struggles of the 20th century, liberation was a common rallying call in the form of *national liberation movements* – e.g. the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine or the Palestinian Liberation Organization. This kind of liberation is more or less synonymous with emancipation. The women’s movement that formed part of the wave of new social movements in the 1960s and 1970s is variably called the women’s liberation movement and the women’s emancipation movement. However, the new social movements arguably helped advance individualism, such that 1968 was about ‘individual liberation’, not collective emancipation (Wagner 2002; Harvey 2008). For instance, Adorno famously chastised the *soixante-huitards* (1968ers) for ‘the danger of the student movement flipping over into fascism’ (Adorno and Marcuse 1999, 132), further arguing that he ‘proposed a theoretical model for thought. How could I suspect that people would want to realize it with Molotov-cocktails?’ (Leslie 1999, 120).¹⁸

Thus, liberation today has slightly shifted in its connotations compared to its anticolonial forms. It is thus now best understood as the freedom from formal and informal individual discrimination and oppression, often based along lines of social identities. This means contemporary usage of liberation is most appropriately thought of as a sub-type of an almost botched emancipation – while it corresponds quite closely to political emancipation, it is more individualistic and less collective; it is emancipation gone awry, receding into securing individual rights in the context of an overall unemancipated structure. Thus, the now anachronistic language of “national liberation” does fall under the umbrella of emancipation, whereas contemporary usage of liberation, for instance in “liberation politics”, often does not.

The most confusing neighbour of emancipation, however, is not liberation but *manumission*. The origin of the term emancipation is, confusingly, in the term manumission. Thus, in the historical literature, manumission and emancipation are

¹⁸ The most authoritative and wide-ranging account of this element of the Frankfurt School is (Kraushaar 1998). For more detail on the disagreement on this between Adorno and Marcuse, see (Slothuus 2021a).

largely used interchangeably (Kleijwegt 2006, 14). In premodern usage, manumission denotes what in the early modern era is usually called emancipation. This confusion is due to manumission and emancipation sharing etymological roots. The Latin words '*emancipare*' (emancipation) and '*manumittere*' (manumission) both contain the root '*manus*' (hand), with the derivative '*mancipio*' referring to a 'verbal contract concerning the handover of ownership' (Susen 2015, 1). The passing from one set of hands to another, literally and figuratively, is thus what characterises both manumission and emancipation in the Roman Empire. Here, manumission referred to the process of gaining freedom from enslavement whereas emancipation referred to the process of gaining freedom from paternal authority.¹⁹

Emancipation in the Roman Empire meant the process of children and women emerging from their condition of paternal subservience into independent adulthood, in other words the move from heteronomy to autonomy within patriarchal and familial structures. A woman could thus be emancipated from her husband or a child could be emancipated from her parents while the enslaved could be manumitted from his master. Since Roman law limited the frequency of such manumission and emancipation, they refer to *individual*, not *collective* or *structural* transformation away from conditions of enslavement or patriarchy (literal or figurative). In its premodern usage, then, emancipation did not apply to the freeing of enslaved people but to freedom from (patriarchal) authority. It was only in early modern history that emancipation came to mean freedom from enslavement.

In the modern era, manumission continues to refer to the process of individuals being freed from conditions of authority, yet it subsumes the Roman understanding of emancipation to mean an individual's freedom from any kind of authority, whether paternal or enslaved. Thus, an individual child, woman, or enslaved, or at most a small group, can be manumitted. Emancipation in the modern usage comes to mean something different to its premodern usage. Now, only larger collectives can be

¹⁹ The "Roman" use of the term has interestingly resurfaced today in the internet age. A quick glance at YouTube reveals most videos about 'emancipation' are teenagers advising other teenagers what to do if their parents are abusive or controlling toward them: 'How to get emancipated', 'Pros and cons of emancipation', and 'Moving out at 17 and getting emancipated' are just some of the titles, which might be symptomatic of the rise of individualism and instrumental rationality.

emancipated. (Modern) emancipation refers to the collective, structural transformation of society away from conditions of authority (Kleijwegt 2006, 15) as opposed to individual freedom while conditions of authority remain unchanged. In this sense, manumission is not a structural transformation but isolated acts of incorporation of previously excluded subjects into the existing structure.

This explains why the ostensible abolition of slavery in the US was an *Emancipation* Declaration and not a manumission declaration. Perniciously, manumission was often preferable to emancipation for the individual because it allowed the previously enslaved to assume a higher social position within an unjust hierarchical social structure, while emancipation created a new social category of second class citizens (Kleijwegt 2006). In early modern usage, emancipation referred to the abolition of the *institution* of enslavement, not simply the enslavement of individuals. This is particularly true in the US context, a country whose entire history and existence is bound up on chattel slavery and its eventual legal abolition. In Europe, emancipation does sometimes refer to enslavement, too, yet this is meant in a more figurative sense. When Horkheimer argues that critical theory aims for emancipating humans from slavery (Horkheimer 2002, 246), he means the *de facto* conditions of enslavement found in the capitalist mode of production with its wage labour and state coercion – in short, the condition of wage slavery and the invasion of a capitalist culture across all aspects of society. Since coercion is at least partly self-imposed through forms of cooperation such as through hegemony or ideology, it follows that emancipation must be a process of *self*-emancipation (W. Brown 1995, 7ff). Yet, ‘we cannot predict its historical trajectory in advance’ (Haider 2021, 21), for which reason emancipation can sometimes be invoked or deployed perniciously to marginalize groups (J.W. Scott 2012b).

With these distinctions clarified, I now move to consider three kinds of emancipation: political, human, and negative in order to show how neither of the three are fully satisfactory for the contemporary era. While political emancipation is unduly individualist and insufficiently radical, human and negative emancipation hold more promise due to their collective and radical character. Yet, the overly deterministic character of human emancipation and the insufficiently deterministic character of

negative emancipation mean they run into problems that what I “critical emancipation” can help overcome.

2.2 Political emancipation

The first understanding of emancipation is the various liberal-juridical models of political emancipation. The most important and influential theoretical contribution to such a theory of emancipation comes from Marx, who distinguishes between political and human emancipation (Marx and Engels 1975).²⁰ The young Marx critiques Bruno Bauer’s call for ‘civic, political emancipation’ (Marx and Engels 1975, 149), claiming that Bauer only wants Jewish emancipation in Germany to mean emancipation from the conditions of being Jewish – i.e. freedom from anti-Semitism in a Christian Germany. This means to be seen as an equal citizen in a Christian state. He points out how what Bauer demands is ‘that the Jew should renounce Judaism, and that mankind in general should renounce religion, in order to achieve *civic* emancipation’ (Marx and Engels 1975, 149). Only by ceasing to be Jewish in a Christian state, and ultimately for that Christian state to cease to be Christian (as opposed to a state with Christians in it), can Jews and non-Christians genuinely enjoy the same freedoms as Christians. In this sense, political emancipation refers to the process of achieving perfection of the existing state without altering its fundamental structure – this is akin to Rawlsian (non-)emancipation, as I show later.

Political emancipation concerns the ability not just of collectives of individuals to gain freedom but for the state itself to be free from influence from its subjects: ‘The limits of political emancipation are evident at once from the fact that the state can free itself from a restriction without man being really free from this restriction, that the state can be a *free state* [republic] without man being a *free man*’ (Marx and Engels 1975, 152). Thus, the power of organised religion over politics, in the narrow representative-institutional sense of the term, is a major obstacle to political emancipation. Politically speaking, once this is out of the way the state has emancipated itself. A crucial

²⁰ For more details on Marx’s account of emancipation as well as his vision of post-capitalism, see (Hudis 2013).

dimension Marx maps here is therefore that the state is not just an aggregate of its members but takes on a life of its own as the representative of bourgeois interests. This means that political emancipation largely collapses into an extension of the freedoms of bourgeois life.

Kant outlines a similar kind of political emancipation. He defines Enlightenment as emancipation from mental constraints in the form of religious delusion in order to avoid conditions of 'nonage' or 'immaturity' which prevent the full intellectual development of morality and moral agency (Kant 1995). Importantly, this is not confined to the ideational level but is made possible through the bourgeois revolutions of the 18th and especially 19th centuries (Hobsbawm 1996). The release of humans from the grip of religious authority was thus only made possible through a kind of transformative process that fundamentally altered the power and organisation of society, as well as the secularisation of Christianity. Crucially, however, this process more or less finished with the democratisation of Christian societies in the 19th and early 20th centuries, whereby ostensibly "universal" suffrage ushered in a new era of popular participation. Yet the means of production did not fall into the hands of the people but at most shifted from the clergy and the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie, and thus did not conclude the democratising push. On a Kantian view, though, the liberation from religious superstition and illegitimate authority meant the freeing of minds and bodies from the grips of premodern forms of thought and the emergence of a fruitful possibility of reciprocity between moral agents (Wagner 2002).

Depending on where one stands, political emancipation is either a finished or an insufficient project. However, even if one thinks the latter, Marx emphasises that political emancipation is a 'big step forward' (Marx and Engels 1975, 155). He vigorously defends political emancipation but claims it should not feature as the end-point: 'political emancipation is not a form of *human* emancipation which has been carried through to completion and is free from contradiction' (Marx and Engels 1975, 152). Political emancipation makes possible the conditions for human emancipation but is not itself a weaker form of such emancipation. Rather, while maintaining the

‘existing world order, political emancipation is at the outer edge of what is possible within a given social order (Marx and Engels 1975, 155).²¹

Political emancipation is therefore closely connected to tolerance and might be perniciously deployed through tolerance by those in power to further entrench their power. Such tolerance often masks a set of power dynamics not visible to the naked eye.²² Herbert Marcuse suggests that tolerance is deployed by those in power to reinforce the status quo (Marcuse 1965). He scorns the liberal-rationalist value of tolerance for masquerading as egalitarian and peaceful when oftentimes it is deployed to maintain an oppressive status quo that works through violence, domination, and force. Tolerance thus is in the service of the powerful. Marx’s famous formulation ‘between equal rights, force decides’ (Marx 1976, 344) foreshadows this problem: even with equal rights, the existence of force and power renders such rights less-than-equal once applied contextually to a messy reality. A good example of this is post-Apartheid South Africa, with formal equality but the persistence of structural domination and exploitation. Against Kantian reciprocity and Lockean tolerance, Marx thus proposes that rights-based discourse is insufficient to found a transformed social structure free from subordination.²³

What is more, tolerance can be deployed in service of intolerance: ‘What is proclaimed and practiced as tolerance today’, Marcuse claims, ‘is in many of its most effective manifestations serving the cause of oppression (Marcuse 1965, 81). The function of tolerance changes from ‘the great achievement of the liberal era’ to being in service of ‘conservative and reactionary forces’ (Marcuse 1965, 116).²⁴ By extending equal rights

²¹ Such language, interestingly, resurfaces in Rawls’ definition of civil disobedience which ‘expresses disobedience to law within the limits of fidelity to law, although it *is at the outer edge* thereof’ (Rawls 1999b, 322, my emphasis).

²² For more on the different manifestations of power, see (Lukes 2005).

²³ For a compelling contemporary critique of human rights discourse, see (Moyn 2010) as well as (Perugini and Gordon 2015). This also gives rise to the literature pushing back against attempts to locate a ‘moral theory’ in Marx. See (Leiter 2015) and (Geuss 2015).

²⁴ The Danish People’s Party used ‘tolerance’ as their main campaign slogan in the 2007 Danish general election with great success. By co-opting the multiculturalist use of tolerance as a main strategy for countering the far right, the party mobilised an otherwise liberal value *against* liberal values, insisting that tolerance is a specifically national, patriotic value but with a subtext of an exclusionary form of toleration that aims to subordinate. However, even more *prima facie* benevolent forms of toleration can

to Jews, for instance, the state broadens its power to facilitate control over an ever-larger segment of society. By co-opting the demand of Jews for emancipation, the state finds ways of dominating its marginalised subjects even when – and sometimes by virtue of – granting formal equality.²⁵ As Brown notes, the

French Revolutionary incorporation of Jews appears inevitable as the logical extension of principles of universal equality and liberty but is fundamentally consistent with the tendency of all European states, starting in the late eighteenth century, to centralize, rationalize, and regularize their power and reach (W. Brown 2004, 5).²⁶

Such tolerance can thereby be a form of power and lends itself well to depoliticization (W. Brown 2006) through downplaying difference and erasing antagonism. Indeed, ‘the relief and reduction of human suffering’ in the form of progressive human rights work – political emancipation – only makes sense as a radical strategy if fatalism of impossibility is accepted: unless reducing suffering is the most that can be hoped for, those concerned with emancipation should struggle for more (W. Brown 2014, 462). In the process, ‘archaic fantasies of collective emancipation—Habermas has explained he no longer uses the term—are being superseded by a nascent geopolitics of human rights’ (Balakrishnan 2003, 123).²⁷

Only those with power can extend tolerance to those who are to be tolerated, highlighting how political emancipation is *given* whereas – as will be shown – a more critical form of emancipation is *taken*. Political emancipation as tolerance and liberal rights is therefore insufficient to ground meaningful and wide-ranging improvements

serve this purpose too, the best recent illustration of which is Jordan Peele’s 2018 film *Get Out* where well-meaning white liberals turn out to be cruel and racist. This is precisely Marcuse’s warning.

²⁵ Relegating e.g. religion to the private sphere helps subordinate groups secure political emancipation yet does not (necessarily) offer liberation from domination. Formal equality in the public domain – e.g. equal access to political office or the labour market does not imply the abolition of racist or other discriminatory structures and sentiments in the private domain. This is why inclusion of Muslims in European culture often takes the form of an implicit assimilationist demand: you will only be accepted once you cast off your Muslim-ness.

²⁶ See also (Hobsbawm 1996, 53-77).

²⁷ While Rainer Forst seeks to synthesise the repressive tolerance thesis of Marcuse and the liberal normative understanding of toleration as a virtue (Forst 2018), this is nevertheless grounded in justice and reason rather than material interests and power.

to the lives of subordinated and dominated groups. Likewise, it does not reckon with power and the nature of exploitation and too easily collapses into mere tolerance of difference and disagreement as opposed to a fundamental restructuring away from conditions of domination and exploitation.

2.3 Human emancipation

The second understanding is human emancipation. Despite the analytic separation of political and human emancipation, social agents do not simply “pick” political emancipation as a clearly defined and laid-out option among a smorgasbord of various emancipations. Although distinct analytical categories and typologies can be useful in teasing out differences, caution must be applied as to the neat separation and tension between them. Nevertheless, while political emancipation merely tolerates, human emancipation involves freedom from exploitation and domination. Human emancipation is substantially more transformative and thus more promising than political emancipation because it has a materialist analysis of human flourishing. Yet its teleology of enlightenment progress renders it vulnerable to on the one hand undue voluntarism – what Gramsci calls ‘adventurism’ (Gramsci 1971, 197) – and on the other hand fatalistic understandings of the inevitability of such emancipation.

Marx proposes human emancipation as a superior alternative to political emancipation. In contrast to political emancipation from the Christian state or political emancipation from religious authority, human emancipation is from the institution of the existing ‘political state’ altogether (Marx and Engels 1975, 149). Human emancipation is understood as social transformation that fundamentally alters the *material* conditions of society. Freedom from exploitation and drudgery, alongside the eradication of systemic oppression is the goal, albeit never finished. Thus, even though human emancipation might not fully eradicate all forms of domination and exploitation, it will remove their material, structural, and systemic bases, and thus help remove them over time. By not just absorbing a dominated group into the dominant society but transforming the very existence of the dominant and dominated groups altogether, human emancipation became a cornerstone in the socialist and communist movements, providing a toolkit for proletarian revolution; a slogan and a theory for

upending existing class relations. This, in turn, requires the sharpening of antagonistic material interests of e.g. class difference, rather than attempting to gloss over them.

Such a change in the material conditions is possible due to – and makes possible – the transformation of the character of human beings. Fostering values like empathy, mutuality, and solidarity is both a precondition and a consequence of such processes of social transformation. Human emancipation, therefore, is not just a fundamental change in formal political processes or social power, but also in the very characteristics of what it means to be a human. In contrast to political emancipation, human emancipation has thus only been achieved once humans embody their species-being (*Gattungswesen*) and where political power is aligned with social power:

Only when the real, individual man re-absorbs in himself the abstract citizen, and as an individual human being has become a *species-being* in his everyday life, in his particular work, and in his particular situation, only when man has recognized and organized his “own powers” as *social* powers, and, consequently, no longer separates social power from himself in the shape of *political* power, only then will human emancipation have been accomplished (Marx and Engels 1975, 168).²⁸

For political power and social power to be aligned means that those who hold political power need to have corresponding social power to organise society. If politics is merely the plaything of the powerful, even if there is formal political equality for all, this does not constitute (human) emancipation.²⁹

The most obvious instantiations – or attempted instantiations – of such human emancipation emerged in 20th century socialism. From the October Revolution in Russia to the Maoist victory in the Chinese Civil War, from Salvador Allende’s Chile to Thomas Sankara’s Burkina Faso, really existing socialist and communist movements

²⁸ ‘Abstract citizen’ echoes Hegel’s conception of abstractions undertaken by ordinary people, which the philosopher clarifies (Hegel 1977). For Marx, this must involve engagement with ordinary people’s struggles.

²⁹ Erik Olin Wright explains the centrality of emancipation to Marxism (Olin Wright 1993). This might seem counterintuitive, considering that at least some interpretations of Marx – notably surrounding Karl Kautsky and Nikolai Bukharin – see the theory of Marxism as being a science of class and a theory of history. Yet Marxism should also be seen as class emancipation (Olin Wright 1993).

across the globe sought to forge a new sense of what it means to be human in a social world. The construction of what retrospectively came to be known as the ‘new Soviet man’ or ‘new Soviet person’ was initially to be characterised by a certain kind of collective as opposed to individual proletarian culture (Soboleva 2017). Its main theoretician, Alexander Bogdanov, spearheaded this idea in artistic (in the experimental art movement Proletkult – a portmanteau of *proletarian culture*), philosophical (the rational organization of nature and society), and scientific (a unified proto-cybernetic systems theory) terms. Leon Trotsky vehemently opposed Bogdanov’s idea of proletarian culture, advocating instead for ‘human culture’ once the classes had been abolished (Soboleva 2017, 70). This points to how human emancipation is not just the universalisation of the particular working-class character, but the transcendence of such terms altogether.³⁰

Such human emancipation resurfaced in an anticolonial setting, too. In 1984, Thomas Sankara renamed the colonially named Republic of Upper Volta as Burkina Faso in order to reflect a new, liberated man: ‘Bourkina [sic] means noble, upright; fasso [sic] means an organized community. Hence, Bourkina Fasso [sic] is an organized community – a nation – that upholds integrity, nobility and uprightness’ (Sethi 1984, 19a). In other words, one of the key aims of Sankara was to transcend the old, colonised mind and create a new beginning of a qualitatively different Burkinabé man, ‘*l’homme intègre*’ (the honest man) (Beucher 2010, 165). Sankara explains:

You cannot carry out fundamental change without *a certain amount of madness*. In this case, it comes from nonconformity, the courage to turn your back on the old formulas, the courage to invent the future. It took the madmen of yesterday for us to be able to act with extreme clarity today. I want to be one of those madmen. ... We must dare to invent the future (Murrey 2018, 10-11).

Such an emancipatory project requires not just legal processes of overturning formal colonial rule but also forging a new mentality and psychology of the formerly colonized peoples, who have been robbed of their culture and identity the colonial powers (Fanon 2008; Nandy 1983). Yet human emancipation as involving the creation of a

³⁰ The descent of the Soviet Union under Stalin into genocidal terror raises questions about the viability of this “new Soviet man”.

new man comes with a series of dangers – including the authoritarian imposition of new values and norms against the will of the people, using the quest for a new man as a pretext for persecution and domination (as in Stalinism), and the potential risk of a masculinist macho ideal.

Only if one were to defend, dogmatically and in rigid orthodox fashion, the failures committed in the name of socialism and communism would it be necessary to depart from human emancipation because of historical experience alone. In order to sidestep this thorny debate, I do not commit to a particular interpretation of such histories. While most of anti-emancipatory arguments rely on some form of disavowing the past, an emancipatory counter-narrative neither remains stuck in the past nor shies away from pointing out the tremendous achievements of really existing socialism: rapidly industrialising peasant societies, extending rights to subordinate groups who were enfranchised much sooner than in capitalist liberal democratic societies, as well as playing an indispensable role in the anticolonial liberation struggles in the Global South.

A different problem with human emancipation is the risk of descending into the kind of moralism Engels warns against in his critique of utopian socialism (Marx and Engels 1975). On such a view, Marxism does not need a normative theory to sustain its appeal because its scientific character implies that contradictions inherent to capitalism will bring about its downfall, irrespective of whichever moral persuasion is undertaken (Geuss 2015; Leiter 2015). Marxist human emancipation is the freeing from exploitation and the fulfilment of the species-being of humans – this implies a qualitative shift in the kind of persons inhabiting the social world rather than simply altering specific dimensions of that world, such as legal rights, or compelling those in power to hand over power through an appeal to their morality.³¹ Likewise, human emancipation is not a moralistic rejection of “material consumption culture” or a return to asceticism.

Yet it also means that the “true” character of humans, i.e. their species-being, is able to flourish in a sense that is not about the scientific prediction about the abolition of

³¹ Such fulfilment of species-being and freedom from alienation is more moralistic than the later scientific socialism found in Marx, yet a detailed discussion of the distinction is outside the scope of my inquiry.

capitalism but a more normative claim about the good life.³² The early Marx, before his purported epistemological break, is close to such a moral view (Althusser 2005). However, this requires an extensive account of human flourishing, which is difficult to offer in a scientific rather than moral sense. By relying on a “true” human nature, human emancipation relies on a naturalistic and essentialist conception of what it means to be human rather than a social-ontological conception that only through social human relations does the character of what it means to be human emerge (Dyer-Witheford 2004).³³ Perhaps there are non-moral, non-essentialist reasons in which to ground human emancipation: the denial of some set of social relations that tend to exist but are not inherent to humanity, for example human fraternity (Cohen 1979) or the possibility of solidarity. Overcoming the charges of undue teleology and mechanistic determinism involves drawing on a wider set of theoretical resources than Marx alone. This also means abandoning a strong commitment to species-being as the pivotal feature of human existence. The young Marx’s view of species-being as human flourishing is overly mythological, teleological, and idealised.

2.4 Negative emancipation

While species-being remains highly relevant today due to the alienating effects of 21st century capitalism (Morgan 2018) – clear e.g. from the sheer scale of psychiatric disorders – theorists have attempted to overcome the naturalistic and essentialist elements of a species-being centred account of human emancipation trapped in enlightenment binaries (Roelvink 2013). Negative emancipation is therefore a radically contingent vision that eschews the undue positivity of political and human emancipation by refusing to specify affirmative elements beyond the desire for a vision of a changed world: it is, in Amy Allen’s words, ‘emancipation without utopia... a queer, heterotopic utopian vision that works by opening up the lines of fragility and fracture within the present that serve as glimmers or anticipatory illuminations of other possible worlds’ (Allen 2015, 525). Allen further explains negative emancipation, partly

³² To be sure, Marx’s doctoral studies on Democritus and Epicurus foreshadow his attention to the good life.

³³ Further problems emerge from this, including the omission of sufficient attention to non-human beings (Johnson 2017).

paraphrasing Foucault, as ‘transforming a state of domination into a mobile and reversible field of power relations, not a positive utopian notion of a Good society free of power relations altogether’ (Allen 2015, 518). Negative emancipation is therefore accomplished once power relations are mobile and reversible. Power still exists but domination does not. For Allen, this ‘heterotopic utopian vision’ is not a utopia after all, since heterotopia is not utopian (Allen 2015, 525), a distinction elaborated further in (Thaler 2017).

The reason to be suspicious of human emancipation is the pernicious uses to which it can be put and that ‘the concept of emancipation itself is implicated in imperialist feminism and homonationalism’ (Allen 2015, 520). Likewise, European colonialism inserted “progress” as a key value in its project, which could lead to jettisoning enlightenment and consequently also (human) emancipation. The way negative emancipation overcomes these two challenges, according to Allen, is through a more ‘precise understanding of the kind of domination in postcolonial, informal imperialism’ which is attuned to local oppressions and does not affirm a ‘positive conception of utopia’. Yet negative emancipation goes further than this: it is not ‘even *thinkable*, in any normative way, as the state after the overthrow of capitalism. Emancipation rather is an ongoing demand, an exigency, precisely, an ethos’ (Wagner 2002, 34). On such a view, a future “emancipated” ‘state does not *actually* exist, as an epoch of political modernity’ (Wagner 2002, 34).³⁴ Allen argues that antinormativity avoids the prescriptivism of the theorist pulling a particular worldview over the heads of subordinated groups. According to this charge, if such prescriptions do not accord with these groups’ own views it is a kind of vanguardist arrogance.

In the view of critics of human emancipation, the demand for foundations is particularly problematic. Ernesto Laclau points out how ‘grounds’ are required for emancipatory discourses, which presupposes the pre-existence of a social identity to be emancipated (Laclau 1996). He calls for going ‘beyond’ emancipation, not ‘against’ it, and concludes that ‘today we are at the end of emancipation and at the beginning of freedom’ (Laclau 1996, 2), a claim echoed in Mouffe’s work, as I show in *Chapter 6*. The contradiction is that emancipation implies the abolition of the subject of

³⁴ See also (Thaler 2022) for more on utopian thinking.

emancipation, which then does not count as emancipation at all: ‘to be oppressed is part of my identity as a subject struggling for emancipation; without the presence of the oppressor my identity would be different’ (Laclau 1996, 17), a point familiar from Hegel’s master-slave dialectic. This suggests that emancipation is a futile demand because it asks of its proponents to dissolve their identities once emancipated, echoing the problems with political emancipation raised above.

Such anti-normativism and antifoundationalism might simply smuggle *another* kind of normativism in through the back door and misrecognise all normativity as bad. Referring to a “queer, heterotopic utopian vision” does not specify what this actually means in practice except wanting to change the world to something different and better without prescribing a course of action or an endpoint. Such indeterminacy refuses to affirm a normative and principled vision of politics thereby lending itself well to co-optation by reactionary forces or simply smuggling in normative principles. This problem also resurfaces in *Chapter 6*. Since negative emancipation, for instance in Allen’s formulation, involves the absence of a positive claim this runs the risk of legitimating any kind of protest or movement.³⁵ In this vein, the power-resistance paradigm emerging with Foucault offers ‘no possibility of emancipation’, just an ‘endlessly shifting constellation of power and resistance’ (J. Holloway 2002, 40), The indeterminacy of resistance likewise runs the risk of supporting emancipatory and reactionary movements alike (K.B. Anderson 2013).

Anti-normativism therefore runs the risk of seeing any kind of power or normativity as ‘fundamentalist’ (W. Brown 2005, 114; Allen 2016). This both makes it difficult to discern between “good” and “bad” norms and runs the risk of simply smuggling in another set of normative commitments after disavowing the original set of such normative commitments. It is not immediately clear how such Foucauldian approaches can escape the charge of infinite regress (Habermas 1986): that the rejection of normativity is merely another kind of normativity, an antinormative normativity. Hence, ‘nothing can serve as a criticism of a final vocabulary save another such vocabulary;

³⁵ In an attempt to celebrate the emergence of a non-European, non-enlightenment political process, Foucault ended up siding with the reactionary clerics of Iran. For a dissenting interpretation see (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016). For the critique of Foucault as a conservative figure, see (Zamora and Behrent 2016).

there is no answer to a redescription save a re-re-redescription' (Rorty 1989, 80). This foretells Allen's scepticism about the place of enlightenment values in an account of emancipation (Allen 2016), however only permits a blunt account of emancipation struggling to generate the basis for transformative political action and social struggle or foster bonds of solidarity and comradeship because it sees power as lodged everywhere and resistance as at most a way of locally rejecting dominant norms.

Because negative emancipation rests on the plausibility of anti-normativism, it can *prima facie* at most generate an indeterminate resistance. Foucault's power/resistance dualism is about practicing freedom *within* existing forms of power, akin to John Holloway's notion of changing the world without taking power, and Scott's anarchist notions of everyday resistance and exodus I problematise in *Chapter 5* (J.C. Scott 2008; J. Holloway 2002). All of these are rooted in a scepticism of the organised politics of Gramsci's Modern Prince, i.e. 'the adequate institutional form of proletarian hegemony', with its requisite symbiosis of theory and practice to instigate it (Bates 2007, 80). These sceptical models are unpromising for emancipation because they overstate the problems with enlightenment values as well as their institutional expressions.³⁶ Likewise, negative emancipation pays insufficient attention to the generative role of political affects like hope and faith in developing counter-hegemonic alternatives. Hope fosters hope, and because part of the success of political action hinges on the faith of its actors in envisioning transformation, having hope and faith can itself make the desired outcome more likely to come about, as a Gramscian reading of these terms shows.

This demise of emancipation resonates well with Wendy Brown's resigned utopianism: 'prying apart an exuberant critical utopian impulse from immediate institutional and historical solutions so that the impulse can survive stumbling, disorientation, disappointment, and even failure and so that the impulse remains incitational [sic] of thought and possibility rather than turning fundamentalist' (W. Brown 2005, 114). Brown further argues for developing a 'utopian imaginary absent a revolutionary

³⁶ The assertion of a qualitative difference between the worlds of domination in the colonial core and periphery often reinscribes the very Eurocentrism and essentialism it purports to erase, as I explain further in *Chapter 3*.

mechanism for its realization...a radical politics apart from left fundamentalism on the one side, and apart from the refusal to reckon with deep social and economic powers entailed in liberal political pluralism on the other' (W. Brown 2005, 114). However, by attempting to bridge the gap between liberal incrementalism and revolutionary socialism, she retreats into the space of 'mourning' and radical contingency so central to figures like Mouffe, as explicated in *Chapter 6* (W. Brown 2005, 112-115), and does not pay sufficient attention to the processes of social transformation needed for emancipation.

The rise of such antinormative or antifoundationalist narratives does not need to undermine the possibility and desirability of emancipatory interest, however. As Nancy Fraser explains, this is a false antithesis (Fraser 1997, 210). The refusal of a movement to legitimate itself in a metanarrative such as the Marxist philosophy of history does not mean that they do not retain an emancipatory interest or cannot have 'emancipatory effects' (Fraser 1997, 210) because the emancipatory imperative is constructed – in part from determinate or "objective" material conditions, but nevertheless ultimately constructed in light of these facts. Indeed, this is where the place for the theorist emerges: to defend, legitimate, and critique social movements that attempt to construct such an emancipatory imperative, as I explain in *Chapter 7*.

Two of the most prominent alternatives to determinate, human emancipation better aligned with negative emancipation are thick description or full-blown standpoint epistemology. Standpoint epistemology here is taken to mean not that social position influences processes of knowing, but its stronger variant as those who inhabit social identity are the only ones who can know about that social identity *qua* lived experience. These are both retreats, however, because they do not affirm political principles based on material interests as the cornerstone of emancipation. Yet it is possible to recover a commitment to emancipation without necessitating a commitment to a crude metanarrative. Thus, while anti- or post-foundationalists like Butler and Mouffe retreat from emancipation, this need not be the case. A way to dispel the criticisms is therefore to say that they only jeopardize some kinds of emancipation, not all.

2.5 Critiques of emancipation

Before turning to formulating my vision of “critical emancipation” to overcome these problems, I now sketch three more fundamental and abstract-level challenges to emancipation today because these may jeopardise the very tenability of an emancipatory imperative. Subjecting critical theoretical ideas to critique is crucial: indeed, “critical theory’ should be all the more welcoming of the critique of its foundational assumptions’ (Mills 2017, 233). Such a critique of emancipation variably claims that it is impossible, undesirable, and/or unrealistic.³⁷ Once these are dispelled, the path for critical emancipation has been cleared.

2.5.1 Impossible?

The first charge against emancipation is that it is impossible. If one is hostile rather than simply fatalistic about its impossibility, one might invoke the horrors committed in the name of socialism and communism. From dekulakisation to the Cultural Revolution, liberals and conservatives alike have historical examples at the ready. Contemporary examples abound too, most commonly seen in references to the failures of the Venezuelan state and perennial debates about the Soviet Union.

Widespread fatalism about the possibility of social transformation is unsurprising following the series of defeats of revolutionary movements, to the extent that the only large-scale promise of revolution today is found in Rojava, the Kurdish autonomous region in north-eastern Syria run along variably anarchist, libertarian socialist, feminist, and democratic confederal lines. Other previously promising cases such as the Zapatistas in Chiapas have persisted but not revealed a path to a radically different world for the majority of the world’s population – in short, they have not been possible to extrapolate or scale beyond their particular context and configuration. This suggests that strategies of anti-statist exodus, as advocated for instance by Scott explained below, might function well in isolated instances but do not provide a promising path for

³⁷ In part because the word emancipation has fallen out of general use, its critics do not always deal explicitly with emancipation. Since the thesis is not primarily a justification for the need for emancipation, but a proposal for its recovery (already presuming it is valuable), the following section is necessarily rather brief.

emancipation *qua* being unable to generate a chain-reaction of movements of emancipation across the globe.

Already foreshadowed in the “amicable” critique from negative emancipation, Benhabib famously claims that ‘postmodernism’ has produced ‘a retreat from utopia’ (Benhabib et al. 1995, 29), grounded in Lyotard’s argument that the rise of postmodernism is characterised by the ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’, including ‘the emancipation of the rational or working subject’ (Lyotard 1984, xxiii) as I mentioned in the previous chapter. The rise of resistance as a key term in political theory further demonstrates this (K.B. Anderson 2013). With Foucault, many kinds of emancipation seem lost. Although Allen retains an emancipatory commitment with reference to Foucault, this is constrained by Foucault’s antinormative focus on all-encompassing power.

However, a wider and more deleterious retreat has taken place since then, not just caused by postmodernism and not just aimed at utopia. The retreat is also a retreat from emancipation, and the source of the retreat is furthermore not just postmodernism – although it plays an important role – but a wider set of strands in political theory. The implications of this are therefore broader than Benhabib’s lamentation. Thus, the liberal socialism, anarchism, and post-Marxism of Rawls, Scott, and Mouffe all buttress the departure from a commitment to emancipation by retreating into discourses of civility, everyday resistance, and discourse-centric conceptions of democracy. These are seen by their proponents as more viable options today and therefore the most worthwhile topics of attention and the most promising avenues for critically inflected theory.

The recomposition of the working class is a major feature here. With the move from industrialism to post-industrialism in the most advanced economies and the emergence of the service and knowledge sectors, Marx’s oft-caricatured proletariat has seemingly fallen out of the picture in the 21st century. The weakening of organised labour, declining union density, social conservatism, and the proliferation of neoliberal subjectivity point to the weakness of the possibility of any kind of worker power that can overthrow the system. Yet as Terry Eagleton points out, the working class has only disappeared if a narrow Global North perspective is used (Eagleton 2018, 175-

176). On a global level, the working class has never been larger than at present. Frequent major strikes and protests among the dispossessed and exploited workers and peasants of the Global South show not just the size of this class but also its political potential and latent power. With movements for racial justice taking centre stage in the US, defenders of emancipation must conceive of how to link these movements to meaningful organised, institutional change. To suggest, however, that emancipation is impossible relies on a fatalistic worldview of lost possibilities and does not accord with the facts on the ground.

This is therefore not sufficient to depart from a commitment to emancipation. If anything, the empirical record shows the necessity of emancipation, *precisely* because of the failures of emancipatory projects. The partly self-fulfilling prophecy surrounding hope and faith as generators of social struggle and transformation means that unless emancipation is genuinely and entirely impossible, it is worth recovering. While the flaws of the Soviet and Chinese experiences might point to the unappealing prospects contained within a Marxist-Leninist or Maoist revolution, which can even be disputed given the rapid economic and social progress of both countries despite starting from low levels of economic development and faced with US imperialism, they do not warrant a rejection of the critical form of emancipation I outline below.

2.5.2 Undesirable?

The second charge against emancipation is that even if it possible, it is undesirable. This is rooted in affirming a different kind of politics. Many political ideologies do not support processes of large-scale social transformation, e.g. limited changes through parliamentary reforms, “change to preserve”, or politics as technical management of the state rather than a site of contestation between divergent values, principles, and objectives, all point to political ideologies that stand in opposition to emancipation. On such a line of reasoning, emancipation is meaningless since capitalist liberal democracies imply a system of general legal and political equality and generalised prosperity, that politics is about preservation not progress, or that politics is the application of correct and objective economic and scientific laws and principles. Whether it is possible and/or realistic is only relevant if it is desirable in the first place.

Otherwise, the task is purely scholastic. For this reason, the above alternative visions can be bracketed off and attention instead kept to those most close to emancipation-as-desirable and focus on their critique.

The more interesting critique from undesirability comes from those who will agree with the need for large scale processes of social transformation but disagree on the grounds of strategy, tactics, and process. Such an undesirability critique is primarily rooted in the view that the revolutions of the 20th century jeopardise the appeal of emancipation. For instance, social democratic and democratic socialist critiques of revolutionary socialism were first and foremost based on a reformist rejection of the process of revolution and thus any kind of emancipation that did not occur through conventional parliamentary majority decisions of elected representatives (Bernstein 1993; Ostrowski 2020). Even if sharing the same normative principles of e.g. freedom and equality, revolutionaries and reformists disagree on social transformation. This suggests that means and ends cannot be neatly separated and that affirming emancipation requires affirming certain kinds of processes that can lead to a qualitatively different future: 'A problem with both crude class struggle and crude theory of revolution, in the past, is that they have separated goal from method instead of incorporating goal into method and beginning to actualize it there' (Le Baron 2009, 566). It is crucial to consider not just the end-state but the necessary processes of getting there.

Even without a historical materialist philosophy of history that necessitates revolution, a more voluntarist commitment to an agency-driven vanguardist dream of revolution might also run up against problems. Thus, the lessons of 20th century left movements shows that emancipation might be either undesirable or unrealistic and therefore should be abandoned as a normative claim. The failure of the 1919 Spartacist Uprising and the 1921 March Action in Germany, both cases of revolutionary communists being crushed by the state (Weitz 1996; Barclay and Weitz 2009), weakened the plausibility of revolution in the most industrially advanced parts of Europe, particularly when twinned with the voluntarist commitments of the Bolsheviks codified in Marxism-Leninism. Moreover, the failures of many communist experiments raise doubts about whether toppling the capitalist world system is even possible. Enzo Traverso charts

the move among revolutionaries from utopia to memory, representing a decline in future-oriented imaginaries and a proliferation of backward-looking, melancholic, and ultimately resigned attitudes to the possibility of radical social transformation. In his words, ‘the ghosts haunting Europe today are not the revolutions of the future but the defeated revolutions of the past’ (Traverso 2016, 20).

2.5.3 Unrealistic?

Thus, perhaps emancipation is practically unrealistic in the current political conjuncture, extrapolating past failures into the future. Even with the recomposition of the working class there might only be limited emancipatory interest or potential in society today. Yet this move is too hasty. First, there is a complex interaction going on between affirmations of theoretical positions and their real-world implications, recalling Hall’s politics of signification (S. Hall 2006b). When someone claims that emancipation is an unrealistic demand they are contributing to the discourse that theorists should develop theory that stays within the realm of the immediately possible as opposed to opening epistemic horizons for what can be possible in the future. Angela Davis poignantly captures this idea: ‘You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time’ (Davis 2014), in line with Sankara’s call for daring to invent the future.

Second, as long as emancipation is conceivably possible efforts should be made toward its realisation. The fatalism of unrealistic-ness is ultimately a variant of the fatalism of impossibility and the rejection of the latter thus works against the rejection of the former, too. A resuscitation of emancipation is more promising: working toward emancipation is itself a condition of its possibility, in line with the ideas around the politics of signification discussed in *Chapter 1*. This follows the melioristic impulse in American pragmatism, most prominently William James (Livingston 2016), whereby acting toward a certain goal is the very condition of possibility of the attainment of that goal. Likewise, in his repudiation of mechanistic and deterministic understandings of Marxism, Gramsci foregrounds the possibility of social change and the necessary connection this has to the will of wanting it to come true. By placing faith in

emancipation, theorists and social movements alike can expand the horizon of possibility for social change.

One way to overcome these charges of being unrealistic is to turn to critiques and accusations of utopianism since they work along similar lines. Negative emancipation precisely repudiates utopian thinking, as Allen demonstrates. The charge of being unrealistic can be answered by changing the kind of utopianism it attacks. Only when utopian thinking is characterised by indeterminacy, wishful thinking, and defeatism is it a problem for social change (Thaler 2022). If, on the other hand, utopian thinking is characterised by concreteness, sober realism, and a critical pedagogy of desire, it can provide resources for social change without being marred by the rejoinder that it is unrealistic. What is more, dismissals of utopian thinking often have either a conservative streak or an anti-communist dystopic liberal streak (Thaler 2017, 677-678), both of which are in direct tension with the desire for emancipation.

What complicates this picture is that realism can also be conservative, however. Many formulations of political realism tend toward conservatism, yet there is no *necessary* connection between the two (Finlayson 2015c). Indeed, realism, conservatism, and pessimism do not need to go together on this view – the problem of being unrealistic does not directly map onto emancipation, and the challenge of being unrealistic is a distinctly political and normative move as much as it is an empirical one. There is no clear connection between theorising the immediate present or the grand long-term and either of these being radical or not. That is to say, while realism can be radical because it addresses immediately pressing concerns, it can also be conservative because it demands urgent short-term stopgap solutions. Likewise, grand theorising – for instance in a utopian key – can also be either radical by seeking a wholesale transformation of society, or conservative by failing to address real-world problems. It can quickly turn into a game that plays politics with people's lives. A better way of thinking about this, then, is in terms of what is urgent and what is strategic. Sometimes realism is strategic, other times utopianism is strategic. The charge of being unrealistic is therefore not *prima facie* a problem for theorising emancipation.

2.6 Recovering a critical emancipatory imperative

Since the above three critiques are not fatal, I can now outline a critical vision of emancipation, building on the lessons learnt from the three models discussed above. Broadly speaking, there are four main components that, taken together, I use to distinguish critical emancipation from these rivals: collectivity, material interest, antagonistic struggle, and affect.

To reiterate, I do not intend these to constitute a *definition* of emancipation. Taking seriously both the deflationary position on concepts and the distinction between concepts and ideas, this is an ethos and idea of emancipation rather than a decontested or incontestable definition. Just as Foucault conceives of enlightenment as an attitude rather than a period of history (Foucault 1984, 39), so can emancipation be considered an ethos rather than a determinate and specific historical *event*. Recalling Laclau, there might not be one but several different emancipations (Laclau 1996) in the plural. Rather than speak of *the* idea of emancipation, this is merely *one* idea among many. It is absolutely crucial for political theorists to engage further in discussion and disagreement about theories of emancipation. Different versions make sense in different contexts. However, the present task is to nevertheless gain more specificity and clarity on the most convincing version rather than leave it entirely indeterminate.

2.6.1 Collectivity

Collectivity is central to a renewed understanding of emancipation. Without collectivity, emancipation becomes a lonely endeavour – learning how to collaborate, coordinate, and act in unison is an important part of how social agents form an emancipatory consciousness. Through comradely debate, discussion, and disagreement, political commitments are sharpened and consciously clarified, a point I significantly elaborate upon in *Chapter 7*. One of the problems with manumission and liberation as well as political emancipation is their individualism. If social transformation is to be radical and lasting, it must involve a central role of collectivity – in a collective, social relations can become more than the sum of their parts, strengthening the durability of such

transformation and moving from moral laudability of the individual to a contagion of struggle on the collective level.

Although there are many forms of individualism (Morris 1991), the kind that stands opposed to emancipatory collectivity is a bundle involving 'equal individual rights, limited government, laissez-faire, natural justice and equal opportunity, and individual freedom, moral development, and dignity' (Lukes 1971, 59). While certain forms of individualism are the precondition for emancipation, i.e. in the sense that each human life has equal moral worth (Macpherson 1962, 2), the idea of possessive individualism whereby the individual is the ultimate carrier of property rights and the ability to wield power over others in order to exploit and dominate them is the pernicious version that stands in opposition to emancipation. On such a view, the individual is seen 'as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them. The individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of a larger social whole, but as an owner of himself' (Macpherson 1962, 3). This is clearly incompatible with the kind of emancipation I advance here, which must be collective because it helps underline how interests align.

Social group membership more broadly plays a major role in emancipatory action because the commonalities in shared experiences of the world as well as how to apprehend social facts are a central part of how group identity is brought about, and consequently how to think about social change (Goldman 1999). Paying attention to local custom, national myths, traditions, and beliefs is essential for the success of emancipatory change as 'rational arguments do not exist in a vacuum' (Ives 2004, 121), which implies the need for proselytisers with whom the subordinate classes can identify – i.e. organic intellectuals speaking to the passions rather than traditional intellectuals. Gramsci's understanding of secular-political faith is a good example of such collectively grounded political affect. Gramsci asks: 'faith in whom, or in what?', answering the 'man of the people' who is in 'the social group to which he belongs, in so far as it in a diffuse way thinks as he does' (Gramsci 1971, 339). The mass of people can have faith 'in themselves', in fact, and 'in their own destiny', but only if the social conditions are right (Gramsci 1978, 57). Thus, 'those peoples who had faith in themselves and their own destinies, and who faced up to the struggle with audacity,

were the ones who saved themselves' (Gramsci 1978, 57). There is therefore always a collective dimension at play in political affect and its relation to emancipation.

Individual acts of resistance or disobedience only play a small part in the larger web of social struggles powerful enough to effectuate emancipation. Thus, even the most iconic moments of heroic individual acts of resistance only become meaningful as part of social movements and organisation. The lone protester confronting a tank in Tiananmen Square, Mohamed Bouazizi who self-immolated in Tunisia, or Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat for a white man on a segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama might stand as heroic individuals but all formed part of larger movements. For dramatic isolated acts of resistance to endure beyond ephemeral flashes in the pan they must have an audience and a movement. As an example, Arundhati Roy highlights how hunger strikes require an audience:

If you're an *adivasi* [original inhabitant] living in a forest village and 800 CRP [Central Reserve Police] come and surround your village and start burning it, what are you supposed to do? Are you supposed to go on hunger strike? Can the hungry go on a hunger strike? Non-violence is a piece of theatre. You need an audience. What can you do when you have no audience? People have the right to resist annihilation (Moss 2011).

Pointing out how the hungry cannot go on hunger strike, collectivity and solidarity are therefore important elements of collective struggle.

To be sure, the pervasiveness of instrumental rationality (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002) in the self-entrepreneurial age of neoliberalism (Lazzarato 2012) makes such collectivity immensely difficult. If societies shape persons as individuals in charge of their own affairs removed from social contexts, collectivity is in tension with this prevailing norm. The breakdown of social bonds, prevalence of social isolation, and the emergence of the 'competition state' (Cerny 1997; Pedersen 2011) in which every social activity is permeated by a competitiveness doctrine point to the difficulty of grounding emancipation in collectivity. Yet, as I discussed vis-à-vis political emancipation, individual liberation is insufficient as the basis for emancipation. The forging of collective bonds is a precondition for emancipation, and encouraging signs have emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic – such as mutual aid initiatives – of a

growing recognition that human sociality must be the basis around which we organize our societies (Dominguez et al. 2020; Springer 2020).³⁸ The instantiation and application of such collectivity can take many forms – institution, party, organization, movement, cell, affinity group, as well as various momentary bonds, yet the specifics of these are outside my concern here. The crucial point is that collectivity is held together by a shared *interest*.

2.6.2 Material interest

Indeed, critical emancipation requires a fundamental change in the material conditions that shape and are shaped by such processes and ideas, not just the mental processes or prevailing ideas of a given society. This involves redeeming certain currently unfulfilled interests. The concept of “interest” I use to refer simply to ‘the fundamental forces, based on the drive for self-preservation and self-aggrandizement, that motivate or should motivate the actions...of groups of people occupying a similar social or economic position (classes, interest groups)’ (Hirschman 2013, 196). In other words, it is about the existence of a specific desired group outcome that goes beyond immediate preference and into the realm of an objective or structural demand for change that relates to the identity of such a group. This does not need to be a narrow conception of interest as the objective interest of society as a whole or one determined in its entirety by the mode of production. There are classical liberal conceptions too, as seen in Adam Smith’s invisible hand for example, which organises market efficiency through a notion of self-interest (A. Smith 1977; Rothschild 1994).

At stake is therefore how various actors define their course of action, in other words what their material interests are. Here, cultural explanations can also be materialist as long as they are accompanied by attention to the economic (Fraser 1998). The notion of interest almost becomes self-fulfilling: “pursuing one’s interests” can cover—to the point of tautology—all of human action while it will more usefully designate a specific manner or *style* of conduct, known variously as “rational” or as “instrumental” action’

³⁸ This realisation also bolsters the argument that reckoning with the role of the state is relevant for emancipatory theory and politics alike. However, a detailed discussion of the state vis-à-vis emancipation is outside the scope of my inquiry. For more on this, see (Rooksby 2011).

(Hirschman 2013, 196). There is therefore an important rationalist element to interests, insofar as actors will want to realise their interests – in the process thinking and acting in ways that achieve this goal. Yet the way interests are mediated by an affective dimension of hope, faith, anger, communal bonds, and so on means they cannot be reduced to solely rational interests.

Interests must therefore be thought collectively because this ensures a basic element of solidarity, blurring the boundary between an individual's interests and others' provided that both are in reasonable proximity to one another vis-à-vis capital and are committed to a shared vision of the world. The appeal of solidarity emerges precisely from acting selflessly and selfishly at the same time. The idea that acting selfishly is bad relies on that selfishness being individualistic and envious. Yet by reconfiguring the way that interest, even self-interest, is simultaneously collective interest, means that acting based on what is immediately wanted can be an emancipatory thing to do. Collectivity is therefore grounded in the possibility of solidarity and comradeship. This is the key to overcoming the challenges posed by difference and disagreement. Overcoming the individualising effects of self-interested instrumental rationality that pervades almost all aspects of society is a major challenge for movements for social transformation. The difficulty of transcending the culture industry and its propagation of an individualising capitalist realism points to how collective agency must be part and parcel of emancipation – but also how they function to prohibit such collective agency.

Historically, interest emerged 'on behalf of emergent capitalism [which] was thus refurbished for a new anti-capitalist utopia' with the advent of Marxism (Hirschman 1987, 4). The emergence of capitalism relied on replacing harmful passions with innocuous interests. The concept of interests, however, is primordial. Yet the narrative of capitalism's triumph as in part secured by the substitution of passion with interest means that the notion of interests should be carefully scrutinised. The way capitalism mobilises interests is as a narrow self-interest in reproducing the system rather than the realisation of an interest in e.g. equality and freedom, human flourishing, pleasure, desire, or justice. This points to the importance of hegemony in preventing emancipation.

The interrelation between the mental and material is crucial here. Understanding interest as shaped if not outright produced by material conditions helps complicate the picture of emancipation as rooted in merely appealing to the force of the better argument. In this sense, materiality jettisons a narrow focus on reason:

while desire and agency are always invested in norms, and must be made sense of within these norms, the same is not true of domination. Our agency may be caught up in our subjection, but this does not vacate the thesis that we have a real interest in being free of domination (Roberts 2017, 749).

Yet it would be a mistake to draw up a sharp division between interest and affect. It is precisely in the critical co-constitution and complex interrelation of the rational and the nonrational – an unstable dichotomy – that I locate part of the emancipatory imperative today. The major problem with reason, as I explain in *Chapter 3*, is eschewing and side-lining affect. Yet it also frequently eschews material interest. Free-floating argumentation bereft of an anchoring in the real-world conditions of life within which such argumentation takes place obscures how opinions and arguments are formed in part through the material conditions they emerge within. Gramsci is acutely aware of this problem, as are the early Frankfurt School critical theorists. As an example, the 1968 emancipation attempts involved

consciousness [that] was marked by some kind of unexplicated Enlightenment faith as regards the aftermath of effective critical action, of the practice of reason. Implicitly, the view was that autonomous, reason-endowed human beings unproblematically organize a free society once the obstacles are removed that stand in the way of such a project (Wagner 2002, 37).

A critical formulation of emancipation must reckon with the obstacles placed by existing power structures – both violent and otherwise – that will struggle with all their might against attempts to overturn existing forces. Attention to materiality helps overcome the threat of disunited people failing to build coalitions for emancipation. Rather than discursively politicise identities and articulate these into a chain of equivalence, as Laclau and Mouffe would have it (Laclau and Mouffe 2001), it is possible to target specifically the material conditions of life for these diverse groups

and use this as a basis for action (Wood 1998) – I elaborate further on this in *Chapter 6*.

Thus, not just interest but the *construction* of interest is crucial for critical emancipation.³⁹ The immediate unity of class interest is not given as a pre-social universal category where class interest is the shared objective of a class of and for itself both before and after a coherent form of self-consciousness has emerged and before and after ideology. It only comes into its full being through the work of organizing and politicising. Gramsci points out how the notion of a historical bloc cuts across class interest – through the workings of religion and traditions, for instance, as well as affects: it goes beyond ‘categories of ownership and nonownership...that are bound by religious or other ideological ties as well as those of economic interest’ (Jackson Lears 1985, 570). Such an understanding is therefore attuned to the decline of the “traditional” working class in the global core and can better appreciate the global peripheral working class as well as the newly recomposed working class in the global core. Class interest is therefore not pre-given but constructed, both economically and culturally, both for the dominating and dominated class (Woolcock 1985, 206).

The affirmation of such a ‘universal interest in freedom from domination’ (Roberts 2017, 762) is possible without fully dismissing the critique of enlightenment from the perspective of race and colonialism (Mahmood 2011) and at the same time not returning to a naturalistic affirmation of species-being. It is possible to bridge this argument with Chibber’s recuperation of universalism I develop below and interest in terms of critiquing the postcolonial tradition, specifically subaltern studies, for misapprehending the condition of the subaltern and in the process emptying the political potential for emancipation. Thus, Roberts argues that there is a ‘false dichotomy’ between Mahmood and Chibber, who each claim that people act on ‘the basis of culturally articulated social norms’ and on ‘reflection and interests’, respectively (Roberts 2017, 762). Roberts therefore speaks to an important aspect of race and colonialism that features centrally in *Chapters 3* and *5*.

³⁹ In Adorno, it is difficult to ascertain what he means is the point of emancipation – the closest is found in *Minima Moralia* where he repeatedly talks about ‘pleasure’ (Adorno 2006).

2.6.3 Antagonistic struggle

The offshoot of attention to interest is that it leads to antagonism not just agonism, because it deals with determining who the subject of such interest is. This point is elaborated in more detail in *Chapter 6*. The existence of divergent and mutually irreconcilable interests is what gives rise to a struggle over whose interests should prevail.⁴⁰ Such struggle is antagonistic because the existence of interest implies incommensurable divergences in what different groups want. Considering the vast deployment of violence by repressive state apparatuses like the military and the police, as well as rapidly growing global inequalities and increasing exploitation, it is unclear how e.g. the interests of billionaires and owners of large multinational corporations can in any way be aligned with the interests of working people. Indeed, racialised and colonialist dynamics further complicate this picture, for instance in the implausibility of aligning the interests of e.g. the Israeli and Palestinian working class when the material conditions of the former depend on the subjugation of the latter.

This rests on questioning the insistence of radical democrats like Mouffe – to whom I return later – that agonism, not antagonism, should govern emancipatory politics. Whereas agonism is characterised by a friend-adversary relation, antagonism characterises a friend-enemy relation (Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Wenman 2013). The friend-adversary relation of agonism does not depend on fundamentally counterposed and immutable interests but sees these as in flux, malleable and articulable, i.e. possible to enunciate, organise, and align in particular ways for particular political purposes. Antagonism, conversely, takes as its starting point the existence of material interests which are irreconcilable – the counterposed interests between capital and labour or their corresponding classes, for example. This has major implications for what kind of political solutions one imagines and proposes. Emancipation, on a critical reading, relies on an antagonistic as opposed to agonistic relationship of struggle,

⁴⁰ If social struggle is merely existentialist desire for action or nihilistic desire for destruction, this easily becomes a reactionary aesthetic proclivity. The Futurists embodied what Benjamin summarised as '*fiat ars, pereat mundus*' (create art even if the world is perishing), a kind of aesthetic death drive central to fascism (Benjamin 1968). Instead, *interest* should ground emancipatory struggle.

without descending into a crude voluntarism whereby agency simplistically trumps structure (Callinicos 1990).

Both agonistic and antagonistic approaches are political ontologies of a ‘scientifically determinable object of political reality’ (Marchart 2018, 4). Following the idea I developed above of interest being constructed as opposed to immutable and naturalistically pre-determined, a similar point goes for antagonistic struggle, which implies that interests are shaped by those who hold them as opposed to mechanically pre-determined:

the idea of emancipation can guide both theoretical diagnoses of institutions of domination – which identify laws, norms and practices that invest some people with the uncontrolled power to interfere in others’ lives – and an emancipatory politics that speaks to people *as if in their own voice*, beginning from their own desires and projects, and mobilizing them against the institutions of domination that burden those desires (Roberts 2017, 762).

This is closely aligned with my overall claim. Recovering a commitment to emancipation thereby both drives forward the possibility and importance of critique, and a rearguard role for the political theorist to start from the vantage point of people’s real desires and interests rather than an idealised set of conditions or even a perfect utopia. To this end, not just political action but political *organisation* for social transformation is required, with institution-building (even if parallel to hegemonic ones, like Gramsci explores), a point recently elaborated by Paolo Gerbaudo in the context of the failures of Corbyn and Momentum to institutionalise its politics in the Labour Party (Gerbaudo 2021). A major challenge is therefore how to move from resistance to social transformation. Necessarily, it involves political organisation, partisanship, comradeship, and solidarity. It also means paying attention to the affective dimension of emancipation.

Crucially, antagonistic struggle implies the kind of collectivity and affirmation of material interest I discussed above. Collective political agency implies that subjects act in ways that are ‘collectively determined and individually justified’ (Süß 2016, 161, my translation), i.e. under a set of material constraints but through their own sense-making of those constraints. Thus, to want a different world is not simply a matter of a

snap of the fingers and suddenly someone else has made that world – it comes about through struggle: the transformation of humans from conditioned by hegemonic neoliberal and capitalist norms of self-entrepreneurship, industriousness, and antagonistic competitiveness involves a change in what it means to be human.⁴¹ US labour movement organiser Bill Fletcher, Jr. reiterates this point: ‘Change and social transformation must be brought about through mass action and mass intervention... a critical proportion of the oppressed and dispossessed must not only be inspired by the conscious radical forces but must themselves understand and embrace the change process that they wish to see play out’ (Fletcher Jr. 2012, para. 31). Likewise, in her essay on turning realist resignation into activist political theory, Lea Ypi suggests that radical disagreement – i.e. antagonism – and motivating political action are key components of such a theory (Ypi 2015), akin to the Gramscian vision of material struggle for interests strongly influenced by affect.

The purpose of struggle is not simply to obtain certain tangible ends but is also an end in itself. As Horkheimer insists, ‘our task is continually to struggle, lest mankind become completely disheartened by the frightful happenings of the present, lest man’s belief in a worthy, peaceful and happy direction of society perish from the earth’ (Horkheimer 2002, 272). These struggles must be concrete, i.e. lodged in the experiences and lives of ordinary people, which implies speaking to feelings, culture, and traditions. They must also be grounded in an appeal to the existing values and principles of people, such that the action becomes a natural extension of the values rather than an external imposition. Affect therefore comes to play a key role in such struggles, for which reason it features centrally in the following chapter. Yet as I have posited across *Chapters 1* and *2*, emancipation is nevertheless predicated upon not just the construction but the ascertaining of interest, which in turn relies on a qualified or reticent embrace of enlightenment principles of reason, rationality, progress, and universalism. In the following chapter, then, I offer one possible avenue for

⁴¹ An upshot of thinking emancipation collectively is the emergence of a challenge from intersectional theory and standpoint theory that I briefly mentioned earlier. Whose collective is speaking? How does an emancipatory movement reckon with internal difference and disagreement? How does it incorporate the claims and concerns of those outside its immediate boundaries – does nature or non-human animals have interests, and if so, how do they feature in emancipation? These are vast questions that mostly fall outside the scope of my present inquiry.

recalibrating enlightenment away from its colonialist undertones and oppressive historical uses toward a more emancipatory form, focusing on affect in particular.

3. RECALIBRATING AN EMANCIPATORY ENLIGHTENMENT

In the previous chapter I outlined various forms of emancipation, ultimately proposing the recovery of a more critical understanding. A major obstacle standing in the way of committing to such a critical understanding is a too straightforward relationship to enlightenment. As I explained in *Chapter 1*, emancipation and enlightenment go together in the aims of critical theory – *prima facie*, you cannot have one without the other. In particular, without enlightenment, you cannot have emancipation. In this chapter, I turn to enlightenment in order to develop a more emancipatory enlightenment, one that embraces a concern with affect in particular, which I develop in part with the help of Gramsci.

I first show why too strong a defence of a particular form of enlightenment that uncritically embraces narrow forms of reason, rationality, progress, and universalism stands in the way of emancipation because it lends itself well to an exclusionary and oppressive kind of status quo-abetting politics. I then consider the key critiques of this form of enlightenment – primarily from the political affect and race and colonialism literatures – and show why a recalibrated enlightenment is more appealing than either a strong defence or a total rejection. I argue that a baseline commitment to the ideas of reason, rationality, progress, and universalism can be retained without falling into the trap of exclusion and oppression that a more expansive commitment might entail. In the subsequent two chapters, I map these outer positions by turning to influential proponents, Rawls and Scott, respectively. I show how both the strong embrace of enlightenment and the strong rejection of enlightenment lead to an anti-emancipatory outcome – a too strong embrace or rejection of enlightenment can be just another instantiation of the departure from emancipation.

By abandoning rationality and reason society is governed by power and morality as seen in the pre-Enlightenment era, which is why I seek to recalibrate rather than fully reject rationality and its enlightenment foundations:

the excess of rationality, about which the educated class especially complains and which it registers in concepts like mechanization, atomization, indeed even de-individualization, is a lack of rationality, namely, the increase of all apparatuses and means of quantifiable domination at the cost of the goal, the

rational organization of mankind, which is left abandoned to the unreason of mere constellations of power, an unreason that consciousness, dulled by constantly having to consider the existing positive relations and conditions, no longer dares rise to engage at all (Adorno 1982, 138).

Like the first-generation Frankfurt School, I 'seek to break it apart and reconceive it dialectically' (Allen 2016, 5) by incorporating its critiques.

Far from a historical concern alone, such enlightenment therefore 'remains a contemporary issue' (Davidson 2006, para. 1). At stake in enlightenment – and the relationship between reason and affect more broadly – is that emancipation can only come about through a process of self-clarification and self-consciousness of domination, exploitation, and oppression. Friedrich Engels claimed that the 18th century 'kingdom of reason was nothing more than the idealized kingdom of the bourgeoisie' (Engels 1987, 591), which implies that one's particular understanding of enlightenment has a major bearing on how emancipation can be effectuated – whether it is emancipatory or anti-emancipatory. If the enlightenment critiques explicated below hold, a major challenge emerges to the very possibility of emancipation and might mean being forever stuck in capitalist realism. The major obstacle to such self-reflexivity, for critical theory, is ideology. For this reason, uncovering forms of ideology at play is a crucial task of enlightenment. The problem is not just how a social structure is stabilised through false consciousness but also that the way theorists conceive of how to overcome such false consciousness must be reconsidered.⁴² The challenge is to navigate between the twin danger of 'the Foucauldian critique of discipline and the Whiggish celebration of progress' (Burgess 2009, 146).

Enlightenment relies on a notion of human progress through universal values, discerned by the faculty of reason. All of these are notions of the modern age (Koselleck 2002, 218ff). Universalism means that norms, values, principles, and truths

⁴² While Susan Manning and Peter France claim that 'the complicated interaction' of emancipation and Enlightenment 'has never been scrutinized in depth' (Manning and France 2006, 9), this is only true for the Enlightenment as a historical event. The broader connection between enlightenment philosophy and emancipation has been at the heart of critical theory from its inception. Thus, a more productive starting point is to shift Manning and France's question whether Enlightenment was a force for emancipation toward whether enlightenment can contribute to emancipation today.

hold across time, space, and persons. For example, the modern idea of universal human rights is grounded in a commitment to universalism (Moyn 2010; W. Brown 2014). Progress comes to mean a philosophy of history that holds humanity to improve along a path of progression whereby advances in technology, reason, and wealth all contribute to a better and better overall world – one with less and less violence, poverty, or misery. In short, progress means the gradual moving forward of society or humanity as a whole.⁴³ This can be found in thinkers like Smith, Kant, Hegel, and Marx alike. A weaker version of progress entails less of a descriptive claim about actual progress happening and simply a commitment to the possibility of such progress, akin to the meliorism of American pragmatism (Livingston 2016). Reason, perhaps the most important (Cassirer 2009), consists of placing a special importance on the faculty of the mind concerned with making logical connections, arguments, and rational decisions – applying the correct means to reaching desired ends.

Among several laudable outcomes, such enlightenment values (lower-case ‘enlightenment’) helped bring down the divine right of kings and the religious stranglehold on the minds and bodies of common people – King Frederick II of Prussia supported by e.g. Voltaire famously embraced enlightened absolutism. In Horkheimer’s terms, enlightenment ‘expresses the belief that the progress of science will finally do away with idolatry’, considering this a form of ‘emancipation’ (Horkheimer 1993, 81). Ushering in an era of proto-popular rule that could challenge the natural order of authority, the term “enlightenment” came to stand for an egalitarian, democratic, and progressive impulse. According to Martin Jay, ‘the positing of a rational sphere of intelligibility or eternal essences beyond or subtending experienced contingency, historical ephemerality, and cultural difference has often been celebrated as one of the decisive breakthroughs of human history’ (Jay 2016, 8).

⁴³ In the Roman Empire and Ancient Greece, progress was a backward-looking rather than forward-looking concept and did not refer to total social progress but was used on a much more specific, local level (Koselleck 2002).

3.1 Enlightenment and critical theory

Enlightenment also offers a powerful vocabulary for thinking about the unassimilable character of the interests of the dominated and subordinated as well as ways of overcoming this. According to Foucault, enlightenment is characterised by the exercise of reason under conditions of voluntary obedience (Foucault 1984, 35-36); yet an emancipatory and critical enlightenment is often a form of disobedience from prevailing norms. The scepticism among critics of enlightenment toward (rational) planning and organisation plays a role in their difficulty in generating the political potential for emancipation. Jay claims that reason is not just a philosophical concept but also a 'norm for human emancipation' (Jay 2016, xi), i.e. providing the moral and political principles for how to achieve emancipation. This does not need to descend into 'discredited idealist metaphysics' (Jay 2016, xi) in which a universalising and transhistorical deflationary definition of reason is frozen in time and preserved forever. Instead, reason can perform different functions. Adorno and Horkheimer's ambivalent and critical account of enlightenment problematises the privileged place of reason in modern thought (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002). In contrast, Habermas relinquishes the insistence on emancipation that characterised his first-generation predecessors, for instance by replacing interest with 'assent [to] norms' (Habermas 1996, 110). A key challenge for the reason-based conception of political action is therefore the ultimate undecidability and instability of discussion and argumentation, which in the end runs up against problems of either identity, incompatible material interests, or some other fundamental antagonism. In other words, 'arguments are relatively ineffectual against appeals to "identity"' (Geuss 2019, para. 3).⁴⁴

A transcendental and overly universalist form of reason betrays the historical specificity of the normativity appropriate for social structures (Geuss 2019) and consequently for emancipation. The problem, which Horkheimer and Adorno already acknowledge, is that such 'enlightenment is totalitarian' (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 4), an all-encompassing principle prohibiting deviation from its norm and viewing 'anything which does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility...with

⁴⁴ However, this runs the risk of falling in the trap of using reason to attack reason, a kind of infinite regress, as Martin Jay points out in his rebuttal of Geuss (Jay 2019).

suspicion' (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 3). Geuss claims that 'one of the central elements of this totalitarianism is the monolithically imposed requirement that human behaviour be construed as articulating verbally expressible beliefs and that means in fact that it be transformed as much as possible into a tacit form of expression of clear and unambiguously formulated "opinions"' (Geuss and Kohlenbach 2005, 29). Reason thus takes on a stabilising and status quo-biased function when its proponents set up standards of legitimation which adjudicate between permissible or impermissible beliefs. In order to be taken seriously in this kind of political arena, it is necessary to both have interests palatable to dominant forces as well as be able to formulate these in such a way that they can be parsed by those who set the standards of discourse.

This anticipates the wealth of post-colonial critiques of enlightenment (Allen 2016, 2017; Bhabra 2021), to which I return below. I develop Roberts' identification of 'grave doubts' about emancipation in recent years 'from postcolonial, post-structuralist and feminist theory' (Roberts 2017, 761). At the heart of the poststructuralist tradition is a 'scepticism towards the emancipatory potential of the Enlightenment' (Brennan 2014, 69). I therefore focus on race and colonialism and (predominantly feminist) debates on affect, given how poststructuralism intersects with both. Indeed, part of my purpose here is to sever this naturalised link to show how these critiques from race and colonialism and affect problematise only certain kinds of reason for emancipation while bolstering others. To this end, Horkheimer points out how

reason today seems to suffer from a kind of disease. This is true in the life of the individual as well as of society. The individual pays for the tremendous achievements of modern industry, for his increased technical skill and access to goods and services, with a deepening impotence against the concentrated power of the society which he is supposed to control. He is ever engaged in modeling his whole existence, down to the minutest impulse, after prefabricated patterns of behavior and feeling (Horkheimer 1993, 359).

In the current moment, reason also suffers from a kind of disease. Being wielded for exclusionary ends and narrow interests of the dominant class, such reason is often anti-emancipatory. Yet the solution is not to abandon reason *tout court*. As Celikates claims, 'any understanding of social practices of critique must be based on the

presumption of the rationality of agents, and on taking seriously their self-interpretations and normative claims, which cannot be reduced to structures that are operative behind their backs without them being aware' (Celikates 2018, 97). This does not mean, however, that rationality is everywhere – it merely means that rationality must undergird the project of emancipation through organisation, planning, and forms of coordinated collective agency. Indeed, the very compartmentalisation into rationality and irrationality is too rigid and does not pay dues to the more nuanced and complex interaction of reason and affect, and the fraught status of enlightenment in critical theory.

Recalling Marcuse's warning against repressive forms of tolerance and the importance of affect highlighted in *Chapter 1*, political action must rely on forms of affect that engage 'the human sensibility which rebels against the dictates of repressive reason' and 'repressive rationality' (Marcuse 1971, 30). Such a critical reformulation of enlightenment thus refers to developing 'the consciousness (and the unconscious) which would loosen the hold of enslaving needs over their [the exploited's] existence – the needs which perpetuate their dependence on the system of exploitation' (Marcuse 1971, 57). Rationality can contribute but not in itself produce emancipation (Marcuse 1971, 4) as the role of the unconscious suggests that this is not a purely rationalistic or reason-driven task. This dispenses with repressive forms of reason and rationality, not with these *in toto*. Indeed, perhaps rational society is 'rational only in its efficiency to "contain" liberation' (Marcuse 1971, 30). An alternative vision requires appeals to the imagination, 'mediating between the rational faculties and the sensuous needs' (Marcuse 1971, 30).⁴⁵ In this vein, 'the radical change which is to transform the existing society into a free society must reach into a dimension of the human existence hardly considered in Marxian theory – the "biological" dimension in which the vital, imperative needs and satisfactions of man assert themselves' (Marcuse 1971, 16-17).

Aware of the limits to reason, the critical theory tradition has hence approached multiple alternative avenues to a simplistic rejection of enlightenment. Most importantly, Adorno locates emancipatory potential in art, and contemporary critics

⁴⁵ This is akin to Heidegger's critique of Kant, who he castigated for failing to see the central role of the imagination in the advance of human thought (Kneller 2007, 95-121).

have done important work on the connection between affect and art (Adorno 1997; Doyle 2013). A related yet different avenue is to focus more broadly on the emancipatory potential of the imagination (Lorde 2017; Mihai 2018; Thaler 2018b). The turn toward fiction, literature, and art among many political theorists is indicative of the search on their part for a more satisfying account of human imagination, motivation, and action than can be provided solely by an overly enthusiastic commitment to reason alone, yet all of these must retain a commitment to a universal human interest.

Enlightenment, however, is also simply an expression of the kind of mythology of imagination: ‘myth is already enlightenment, and: enlightenment reverts to mythology’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, xviii). This raises doubt about the conventional story in which reason, as the representative of enlightenment, is on a gradual march forward – this is present both in the history of progressive liberalism as well as in Hegel and Marx. Indeed, to Adorno and Horkheimer, enlightenment is therefore ‘monotheism’s secularized form’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 89) because it continues a Western tradition of an ostensibly reason-based mastery of nature that nevertheless relies on its own set of mythical, superstitious, or metaphysical principles. This calls for and establishes the possibility of ideology critique of enlightenment and – consequently – of the reason and rationality that ground it. After all, ‘reason serves as a universal tool for the fabrication of all other tools’ in the modern era (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 23). Considering my aim in *Chapter 1* of building tools, it appears reason cannot be fully dispensed with.

While I work from the presumption of ‘a universal interest in freedom from domination’ (Roberts 2017, 762), such interest is nevertheless culturally mediated and inflected. In other words, ‘socially constituted agents, fully embedded in discourse, can still reflect upon norms and identify interests and reasons for acting’ (Roberts 2017, 756). This resists the claim that the only important thing is people’s self-perception or self-understanding of a given practice. In line with Roberts’ point, Audre Lorde points to the need for construction of interest, and the pluralism of interest: ‘to recognize that we move against a common enemy does not mean that we beat the same drum or play the same tune. It means that we are committed to a future’ (Abod 2002). While

lived experience is certainly important for developing an emancipatory politics, it is not equally important for theory because having external or independent standards, like in universalism, can be a prescriptively emancipatory move that helps legitimate social movements and political organisations, and can also help the theorist devise a position from which to do (negative) critique of the existing. Importantly, reason itself rests on a ground that needs myth (or faith, for instance), to be justified in turn. And the progress that reason brings about, for Adorno, is expressed in damning terms as merely the progress 'from the slingshot to the megaton bomb' (Adorno 1970, 320).

3.2 Enlightenment and Gramsci

In order to turn enlightenment political in a way that is not otherwise fully present in the above critical theorists' work, Gramsci explains how reason without affect misses out on the basic motivations of real people. He begins with a characterisation of the distinction between an ordinary person and someone of higher social standing with more fully developed reasons:

The man of the people thinks that so many like-thinking people can't be wrong, not so radically, as the man he is arguing against would like him to believe; he thinks that, while he himself, admittedly, is not able to uphold and develop his arguments as well as the opponent, in his group there is someone who could do this and could certainly argue better than the particular man he has against him; and he remembers, indeed, hearing expounded, discursively, coherently, in a way that left him convinced, the reasons behind his *faith* (Gramsci 1971, 339, my emphasis).

This challenges the idea of reasons reigning supreme in the formation of people's conception of the world. Instead, faith as an affect plays a central role. People, particularly those within the subordinate class, do not always have the best arguments at the ready, but this does not mean they do not have particular political commitments.

The force of the better argument is not always the way to establish politically hegemonic positions and discursive approaches do not capture the entirety of political space. Gramsci continues that the ordinary person

...has no concrete memory of the reasons and could not repeat them, but he knows that reasons exist, because he has heard them expounded, and was convinced by them. The fact of having once suddenly seen the light and been convinced is the permanent reason for his reasons persisting, even if the arguments in its favour cannot be readily produced (Gramsci 1971, 339).

Thus, he does have reasons, and is persuaded by reasons, but these must be twinned with affective commitments and responses. People have deep 'aspirations and feelings' that go beyond mere argumentation and form the basis of a faith-based opinion-formation (Gramsci 1971, 88). Such feelings are 'spontaneous' because they are not the result of a systematic, fully-worked out conception of the world, but rather of common-sense everyday experience (Gramsci 1971, 198-9). They are also not simply the product of vanguard proselytization whereby intellectual elites instil beliefs into the minds of ignorant masses.

Gramsci frequently speaks of 'instinct' to describe these feelings, in other words a set of convictions whose origin is hard to fully account for yet are deeply held and hard to change (Gramsci 1971, 14, 199). The spontaneity of such feelings and the way in which they coalesce in and into social movements should be embraced and inserted into politics (Gramsci 1971, 199). Going further, philosophy should try to actively modify the kinds of feelings held by the many rather than simply receive and relay them in theoretical terms (Gramsci 1971, 346). In other words, neither Gramsci nor I are suggesting that affects govern reasons or that reasons govern affects. Instead, they exist in tandem, sometimes symbiotically and other times in tension.

One way in which new convictions do emerge is through a 'crisis of authority' (Gramsci 1971, 275). When the ruling class rules through domination and force rather than hegemony and consent, the subaltern will have departed from 'traditional ideologies', which stabilised the social structure and secured the superfluity of using force and violence to rule over the population (Gramsci 1971, 276). The emergence of such a crisis occurs either if the ruling class has 'failed in some major political undertaking' or when 'huge masses...have passed suddenly from a state of political passivity to a certain activity, and put forward demands' (Gramsci 1971, 210). This suggests that political action itself can generate further action – therefore the need to try, to act from

the faith that social transformation is possible, and that the only way to figure out whether this is true is to act on it and see for oneself.

Because there will necessarily be a material gap in resources between elites and the people, reason and affect function differently for the two adversaries. Here, one of Gramsci's most central and radical parts of his account of faith comes into play:

Imagine the intellectual position of the man of the people: he has formed his own opinions, convictions, criteria of discrimination, standards of conduct. Anyone with a superior intellectual formation with a point of view opposed to his can put forward arguments better than he and really tear him to pieces logically and so on. But should the man of the people change his opinions just because of this? Just because he cannot impose himself in a bout of argument? In that case he might find himself having to change every day, or every time he meets an ideological adversary who is his intellectual superior (Gramsci 1971, 399).

Opinions are not free-floating but lodged in larger systems of meaning for individuals, whereby even intellectual superiors are not able to simply impose themselves through reasoning. Changing minds is therefore 'not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating and making "critical" an already existing activity' (Gramsci 1971, 330), in other words speaking from the existing affective desires and philosophical reasons given within a particular society, class, or community.

This also points to the importance of common sense, as I explained in *Chapter 1*, as the operating logic of larger systems of meaning. Tradition must be entered into a polemic with historical materialism, and all forms of mass philosophy must be conceived in polemical terms as a form of struggle between competing interests (Gramsci 1971, 345). The views and beliefs of ordinary people are located not just in a web of social relations but in divergent material interests, whether cultural or economic, from the dominant class. Therefore, 'the starting point must always be that common sense which is the spontaneous philosophy of the multitude and which has to be made ideologically coherent' (Gramsci 1971, 421). Working from the actually-held beliefs rather than an idealised norm is more likely to lead to emancipatory

change, as long as this is worked upon by concerted efforts to speak to people's demands and desires. To this end, Gramsci then asks a further question:

On what elements, therefore, can his philosophy be founded? And in particular his philosophy in the form which has the greatest importance for his standards of conduct? The most important element is undoubtedly one whose character is determined not by *reason* but by *faith* (Gramsci 1971, 339, my emphasis).

Crucially, then, affects like faith play an even more important role than reason in motivating people to act, which accords with the idea that affective commitments are not reducible to reason-giving.

Recalibrating enlightenment in light of affect must be done in a materialist way, however. In his discussion of Marx's conception of historical development, Gramsci insists on supplementing a narrowly economic and 'quantifiable' element with an inseparable dimension of culture (Gramsci 1971, 413). Yet invocations of Gramsci often stop short of a further claim present in his thought on this point: that 'passions and feelings' are absolutely central to a theorisation of culture, to the extent that they are 'overriding', meaning 'that they have the power to lead men on to action "at any price"' (Gramsci 1971, 413). Gramsci is cognizant of the power of such feelings, yet he does not elaborate fully on their role in motivating political action. He does posit, however, that they are both a product and a consequence of intellectual acts, which means they structure and are structured by the material and cultural conditions they relate to. This opens the door both for conscious intervention in order to change them as well as a richer understanding of a materialist politics that is better attuned to the salience of affects in shaping political action.

He develops an account of the relationship between knowing, understanding, and feeling as well as how a subject passes through these in each direction (Gramsci 1971, 418). This is a materialist and affective conception of feeling because it is rooted in the connection between productive forces, class, and affects as passions motivating political action. He suggests that while intellectuals might have knowledge in relation to a particular political situation, they do not always have an understanding of it (and by extension, its implications), and usually do not 'feel' it (Gramsci 1971, 418). The people, on the other hand, have a better 'feeling' of politics (Gramsci 1971, 418). He

argues that pedantry is futile in shifting opinions and combating fatalism, just like unbridled passion: 'The two extremes are therefore pedantry and philistinism on the one hand and blind passion and sectarianism on the other. Not that the pedant cannot be impassioned; far from it. Impassioned pedantry is every bit as ridiculous and dangerous as the wildest sectarianism and demagoguery' (Gramsci 1971, 418).

Gramsci thus dissolves the simplified hierarchy of rational argument as superior to affect and consequently establishes a place for a worldview rooted in a secular practical faith that is irreducible to rationalism and that challenges the fatalism of impossibility because even if options seem closed off, the belief in the mere possibility of change is resistant to counter-arguments. Intellectuals are wrong to believe that 'one can know without understanding and even more without feeling and being impassioned' (Gramsci 1971, 418). This poses problems for critique that is rooted solely in enlightenment reason because it does not speak to the heart. Thus, in order for critique to become 'a practice of prefigurative emancipation', it must go beyond the force of the better argument into the realm of 'social practice' (Vogelmann 2017b; Celikates 2018; Vogelmann 2017a). Any practice of critique must speak to the innermost convictions and passions of people, without treating common sense as ignorant or laughable, but rather as a valid basis for social agency. The failure to do this – to reckon with the equal status of reason and passion – is precisely one of the reasons for the failure of liberal establishment politics to maintain its hegemony in the past decade. To this end, Gramsci even goes so far as to say that 'one cannot make politics-history without this passion, without this sentimental connection between intellectuals and people-nation' (Gramsci 1971, 418). Faith, in its problematisation of pure reason, is instrumental in this process. The point is to combine such passion with knowledge and understanding, thereby giving it a voice in politics.

Faith is not just an individual, monadic mental state and activity but a social and collective affect, established through – and establishing in turn – 'mass movements' (Gramsci 1971, 331). This faith should resemble the 'doctrinal unity' of organised religion, specifically Catholicism: 'The strength of religions, and of the Catholic church in particular, has lain, and still lies, in the fact that they feel very strongly the need for the doctrinal unity of the whole mass of the faithful and strive to ensure that the higher

intellectual stratum does not get separated from the lower' (Gramsci 1971, 328). The unity of the higher and lower strata is therefore of paramount importance, ensuring the coherence of the class that seeks to effectuate radical social change, part of which involves 'transforming the whole of civil society' (Gramsci 1971, 328), avoiding simple proselytising from intellectuals to the mass of people and rather bringing together the two.

Gramsci scorns the reductive economistic argument that reduces political activity to 'a permanent state of raw emotion and of spasm' (Gramsci 1971, 416). He emphasises the necessity of practical political action to supplement revolutionary theory and discourse when scorning those who are 'speaking grand revolutionary words while being incapable of taking a step along the road of revolution' (Gramsci 1925, para. 5). Parroting the language of revolution without the requisite accompanying praxis is insufficient. A materialist account of affect combines the commitment to a politics anchored in the importance of how production, distribution, consumption, and accumulation are key features of the political. Radical hope involves hoping for something beyond what can be clearly described or pictured (Lear 2008), involving an affective dimension. Likewise, secular-political materialist faith involves an emotive relation to a future state of affairs beyond what can reasonably be justified or fully imagined in the here and now, and that is at ease with its inability to fully describe and account for this future state of affairs.

The materialist dimension of this can be used to develop a notion of faith as negotiating the complex interstice of reason and affect. For faith to be materialist does not simply mean that it is dependent on economic factors – which it is – but also that it negotiates the space between the economic and the cultural. Faith is anchored in the social practices of real people, whose practices in turn are inflected by structural factors. It can thus function as both an outlet and a source of the feelings and convictions of people, who do not necessarily have a fully worked-out conception of their conditions of life due to the endurance of ideological apparatuses or hegemonic rule. Although Gramsci warns against mechanistic and economistic understandings of social life, he nevertheless grounds both opinion-formation and belief systems in the material – understood as economic *and* cultural – conditions of the particular context. Since the

material has a major impact on the formation and maintenance of power, faith is necessarily inflected by power, too. Dominant ideology will espouse particular forms of faith which strengthen and reproduce rather than challenge existing hegemony. A subaltern faith can challenge these, however.

3.3 Enlightenment and affect

This calls for incorporating affects, particularly political affects, in a critique of enlightenment that can thus help recover emancipation. Rather than explain particular affects and their value in detail, I more generally assert how affects challenge anti-emancipatory dimensions of enlightenment in order to clear the way for recalibrating enlightenment in a critical direction in light of this critique. Embracing some of the lessons of affect theory does not mean a full departure from enlightenment or rationality. It also does not mean reckoning only with affects like hope and comradeship but also more clearly “negative” affects like hate, anger, and rage. Likewise, it also needs to problematise liberal understandings of violence and non-violence which place an affective curb on forms of emancipatory violence through delegitimisation. Avoiding both ‘pure romantic capitalism’ and ‘romantic anticapitalism’ (Murthy 2015, 134), the aim is an anticapitalist emancipation that neither glorifies and reifies everyday practices of resistance nor dismisses them entirely and remains committed to certain kinds of universal interest without descending into discourses and practices of imperialism. Thus, positive affects, too, can stand in the way of emancipatory politics, challenging the notion that optimism is good and pessimism is bad, instead suggesting that pessimism can help dispel an unhelpful notion of progress and optimism that undergirds the status quo as the provider of e.g. piecemeal reform and deleterious interventionist foreign policies (Dienstag 2006, 172-3).

Such optimism can be ‘cruel’ when it aids undesirable ends by insisting on an attachment to a problematic or unhelpful object, i.e. ‘when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing’ (Berlant 2011, 1). Attachment to a political project, for instance, might stand in direct opposition to the possibility of human and individual flourishing if, in the face of repeated defeats or a changed political landscape, that project is simply impossible. The correlate of this is the fatalism of

impossibility, which holds that any significant political change is impossible, even if desired, and therefore there is no point in seeking to change the world. At the other extreme, the fatalism of inevitability – which often can be a form of cruel optimism – is the belief that significant political change is inevitably going to come. While this might seem both promising and reassuring, it can lead to complacency by leading people to subscribe to a mechanistic theory of change in which human agency is unimportant or insurrectionary adventurism that is harmful to movement- and institution-building.

Gramsci's attention to feeling rather than simply knowledge helps clarify the relation between cognitive, intellectual viewpoints and passionate, affective states (Crehan 2016). Although eloquent oratory and rhetoric from intellectuals can serve to momentarily move 'feelings and passions' it is through 'active participation in practical life' that long-term and rooted opinion-formation takes place (Gramsci 1971, 10). Speaking to the common sense of subalterns – and taking people as they are in order to help transform their attitudes – requires attention to what Gramsci takes as synonymous with common sense, namely 'traditional conceptions of the world' (Gramsci 1971, 197). Since tradition plays a key role in the kinds of views people have, 'an appropriate political initiative is always necessary to liberate the economic thrust from the dead weight of traditional policies' (Gramsci 1971, 168). In other words, the politicisation of beliefs is required in order to step beyond the traditionally held views and conceptions of the world or creating what in relation to faith is referred to as norms of conduct. Such political intervention, through a dialectical method, can transform mere conceptions of the world into corresponding norms of conduct, thereby creating a political praxis that political agents can act from and upon to dispel fatalistic resignation.

Such active participation in practical life is superior to the 'abstract mathematical spirit' of rational argumentation and ironclad logic (Gramsci 1971, 10, 201). By turning to the affective dimension of social life, this is a compelling alternative to e.g. Rawls' public reason or Habermas' communicative action. For example, Ives specifically shows (Ives 2004, 134-171) how Gramsci and his concept of faith is useful in critiquing Habermasian communicative action, since discourse-theoretic and deliberative democratic approaches to politics might elude reckoning with the tough questions of

power, interest, and exploitation. In his critique of fascist attacks on democracy, Gramsci suggests that it is through the confluence with ‘material power’ and not just ‘the effectiveness, and the expansive and persuasive capacity, of the opinions of a few individuals, the active minorities, the élites, the avant-gardes, etc.’ that the opinions and wills of people are determined, not just the strength of rational argument alone (Gramsci 1971, 192). Rather than draw a sharp distinction between reason and affect, they are co-constitutive (Crehan 2016).

Reason, material power, and affect thus all play a role in emancipatory change. A critical universalism which is bounded, specific, and enacted can be recovered. Only a particular kind of dematerialised emotivism is a problem, not affect *tout court*. Only if reason is construed in its ‘narrow church’ variety need it be placed in direct contrast to affect (Jay 2016, 9). Narrow church reason sets restrictions on and specifies a set of characteristics that identify reason with for instance ‘logical rigor, calculability, analytical discernment, discursive justification and systematic organization’, and anything outside these it ‘condemns...as ‘irrational’ or at least ‘arational’” (Jay 2016, 9). Drawing instead on the ‘broad church’ variety (Jay 2016, 9), reason and affect are co-constituents of a coherent conception of human motivation and corresponding political action. With a broad church approach reason is not mapped onto rationality, which this opens a space for including affect in an account of reason.

Although embracing affect can enrich accounts of politics with that which cannot be reduced to reason and rationality, these nevertheless need to be undergirded by a sufficiently thick set of material or normative principles to avoid reactionary co-optation and by a set of social facts that specify the contextual conditions under which such accounts can contribute to understanding emancipatory politics. Otherwise, the critique of reason quickly becomes an apology for fascistic or exclusionary tendencies that deplore reason.⁴⁶ Indeed, turning to affect can serve wildly different agendas,

⁴⁶ In the private correspondence between Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, for instance, this question takes centre-stage in their divergent interpretations of the 1960s German student movement. Adorno warns against the temptation of assigning revolutionary agency to the students, who in his eyes are reactionaries acting like fascists, whereas Marcuse is a lot more optimistic on their behalf. For more on this, see my article (Slothuus 2021a) as well as the primary source material (Adorno and Marcuse 1999; Leslie 1999).

including against a variety of discourse-theoretic, logocentric, and rationalist approaches and as a critique of liberal enlightenment.

Affect can be used against approaches that seek to centre not just the spoken and written language as both descriptively and prescriptively fundamental to politics but insisting on a particular version of reason underpinning such a foundation. This can function to dismiss and delegitimise certain types of collective action that does not adhere to a cool-headed reason-giving model of politics. Liberal democracy, the framework within which such dismissal occurs, has a series of exclusionary features realistically preventing a genuinely inclusive and egalitarian project to emerge from within it, and its emphasis on legitimation as the key task for politics means such delegitimization has grave consequences. Turning to affect can help illuminate these liberal democratic blind spots and can perform the opposite function to the first direction explicated above: here, affect serves as a radical claim against a moderate one, not vice versa. The status-quo abetting position is the one affect attacks.

Yet affect can serve as an antidote to liberal enlightenment from both conservative and Marxist perspectives. Edmund Burke, for instance, claims that not reason but feeling drives men (L. Hall 2011) and is sceptical of the power of the reflective reasoning embodied by the French Revolution as opposed to a grounded active engagement within a community (Dwan 2011). He foreshadows points made on this by both Gramsci and Walzer, which suggests that the critique of reason can be undertaken in the service of conservative, Marxist, and liberal directions alike. Indeed, Adorno attacks 'the liberal fiction of the universal communicability of each and every thought' (Adorno 2006, 80), in stark contrast to the later Frankfurt School, thus problematizing the role of reason in politics by emphasizing the un-enunciable, un-articulable, and un-representable dimension of social relations. For Geuss, hiding 'one's affirmation of the given social and economic structures, while trumpeting the opportunities one's philosophy provides for criticizing a wide variety of *individual* flaws, defects and inadequacies' is a highly effective strategy for curbing radical critique and change, and dismisses passion and affect as mindless unsophistication (Geuss 2019, para. 15).

The attempt to erase affect is therefore often a status quo-abetting move that fits with an exclusionary liberal enlightenment narrative. Horkheimer contends that ‘reason is a poor ally of reaction’ (Horkheimer 2002, 271), proposing that reason-driven politics are less prone to reactionary corruption than are affective politics. This is because the emancipatory impulse in enlightenment reason is one of questioning authority and domination. This suggests that affective politics are radical, belonging either to the far left or the far right. Indeed, the equivocation of the two by centrists is a key rhetorical device in preserving the presumed stability of moderates against the threat of sudden political change. For this reason, greater attention to affect can contribute to clarifying a strategy for emancipatory change. Yet affects can also be disarming by dismissing radical politics as passionate in a delegitimising strategy that only those who refuse to engage in ordinary political channels resort to, thereby suggesting they have not, as Rawls prescribes and I elaborate in *Chapter 4*, exhausted all other options. Purportedly, this means they are “unreasonable” and should not be listened to. It can be used as a way of saying there is a qualitative difference in the way subalterns on the one hand and ordinary political subjects or citizens on the other hand engage in politics. It creates a line of division that quickly becomes reified.

Affect can thus be mobilised by both status quo-abetting and -challenging positions, which suggests that affect itself has no inherent normative content and is not normatively or prescriptively bound in a particular direction but must be imbued with such qualities in order to draw political conclusions from it. Similarly, this is therefore not primarily a critique of reason as such – even if an unreserved embrace of reason and rationality is a threat both descriptively and prescriptively to emancipation for its practically implausible and normatively problematic consequences of committing to communicative rationality (Geuss 1981).⁴⁷ Other contributors to the critical theory tradition concur: Franz Neumann argues that ‘the ideal state of reason cannot be the foundation of this improved humanity but must itself be founded thereon’ (Neumann 2017, 628), challenging the status of reason and the problem of foundations while Jay claims that ‘the danger of total disillusionment, in fact, always shadowed measured

⁴⁷ For a sympathetic critique claiming that communicative rationality is less distinct from the means-ends rationality that Adorno and Horkheimer challenge, see (Blau 2019).

efforts to curtail the ambitions of a reason that seemed a bit too excessively “sufficient.” For the revenge of its various marginalized or excluded “others” could unintentionally turn into a wholesale repudiation of reason *tout court* (Jay 2016, 80). For the emancipation of such “others” to occur, the temptation of a wholesale rejection of reason must be resisted.

3.4 Enlightenment and race and colonialism

On such a view, the major problem is that enlightenment and its critique easily become exclusionary and can veer into non-emancipatory, even totalitarian directions (Koselleck 1998). If enlightenment thought conceives of itself as utopian and as having eminent domain over politics, forms of thought outside its auspices can become delegitimised and side-lined in an attempt to rationalise and order thought along principles of reason. Unbridled reason can therefore function not *just* as a liberating force but as a conservative one, too. Oppression leads to certain knowledge about that oppression which is mainly understandable from the point of view of the oppressed (Celikates 2021; Hill Collins 1999). By casting the dominated as naïve and passive recipients of ideology, this reproduces the idea that enlightenment reason is the preserve of the subordinating class. Even if this often comes from a place of sympathy or empathy with the oppressed – e.g. riots as the language of the unheard – this runs the risk of descending into a reification of difference whereby the dominant subject is reasoned and the dominated subject is passionate.

Serene Khader provides a compelling version of how to separate the historical experience of exclusionary liberal Enlightenment from a commitment to certain universal values and principles. Thus, she claims that ‘enlightenment liberal’ understandings of feminism are distinct from a commitment to a universalism that involves ‘opposition to sexist oppression’ (Khader 2018, 100). Khader is at pains to explain how certain kinds of universalism can work in service of forms of oppression while other kinds can be in service of liberation (Khader 2018, 12). She distinguishes between thick and thin understandings of universalism, whereby the thicker type carries the baggage of the oppressive and exclusionary types that have historically been employed by Western powers against colonised peoples and men against

women, for example. While her view might at first sight appear akin to negative emancipation because she considers ‘feminism [simply] as opposition to sexist oppression’ (Khader 2018, 4), i.e. a negative view, she does affirm certain normative principles necessary for women’s emancipation. Thus, the universal interest in freedom, like Roberts outlined it, in this case the freedom from sexist oppression, is an affirmative view that does outline an emancipated world. Decoupling the *necessary* connection between enlightenment and oppression is the key point of her work.

Recall my discussion in *Chapter 2* showing that the ostensibly uncontroversially good principle of tolerance can work in service of repression. Universalism is likewise a politically ambiguous term that can work both in favour of and in opposition to emancipation, as a form of knowledge emanating from the core to maintain an unequal power dynamic to the periphery, in line with centuries of imperialist and colonialist logics, many of which emerge with enlightenment philosophy. Khader concludes that ‘feminism does not require the endorsement of certain objectionable forms of the values of individualism, autonomy, and gender eliminativism’ (Khader 2018, 7, 102ff), developing such a view through her concept of nonideal universalism.

Although Khader helpfully points out this distinction, she nevertheless commits to a kind of nonideal theory that is beholden to the problems with ideal theory which are expanded further particularly in *Chapter 4*. In brief, the problem is that nonideal and ideal theory alike see social change as emanating from morality. Thus, Khader is interested in effecting ‘moral progress’ (Khader 2018, 25). She is committed to finding a kind of political liberation that remains moralistic. One major problem with this is to behave

...like moral sentinels: piously observing and managing the collapse. It’s a liberal-left that no longer believes it can change the world and instead, in the words of Adolph Reed, finds its most important mission in simply “bearing witness to suffering”...their answer is the same — not a revived labor

movement but a new moralism of austerity and self-sacrifice (Kilpatrick 2018, para. 14).⁴⁸

Here, the argument is that in the face of the threat to humanity from both climate collapse and capitalism, moralism will not be sufficient. As I argued above, collective and antagonistic struggle grounded in divergent and mutually irreconcilable material interest is also needed. While this can sometimes deploy moral arguments strategically, it cannot be reduced to morality.

Thus, while Khader's defence of enlightenment is compelling because she successfully shows that it can ground emancipation, she nevertheless does not offer a fully promising vision for emancipation. By remaining in the sphere of moral argument – committed to reason as the motor of social transformation and moral progress as its underlying value – it is unclear whether she fully overcomes the problems of imperialism set out for instance in Allen, as seen above, who questions the residual enlightenment commitment of critical theory to the principle of progress. Hence, not all attempts to defend enlightenment offer a promising path for critical theory.

A more promising version than Khader's moral universalist anti-oppression is found in the work of Chibber. He contends that departures from universalism are unwarranted and 'attempts to save the Enlightenment from capitalism' (Murthy 2015, 117). He insists on the 'cross-cultural validity' of 'certain categories like class, capitalism, [and] exploitation' (Chibber 2014, 64). Even if these are not identical across time and place, and clearly have cultural specificities and peculiarities, they nevertheless share important basic characteristics. Capitalism is marked by uneven *as well as* combined development, embedded in a shared overall structure (Wallerstein 2004). Finding local difference, then, is compatible with universalist analysis that embraces how everyone experiences domination, exploitation, and oppression. This does not mean that local difference does not affect the kind of domination, for example, but it means that there is a baseline content that is trans-contextual.

⁴⁸ Political realists likewise show an appeal to morality is unpromising for grounding a politics that seeks to affect the real world (Geuss 2008; Rossi 2015; Thaler 2017).

Chibber specifies two components of universalism that must be defended: common humanity and the threat capitalism poses to it (Chibber 2014) – this echoes Roberts’ assertion of a universal human interest in emancipation. In the crucial parts of his scholarship, those which determine precisely the basis of his universalism, he is only able to spell it further out as ‘basic human needs – for dignity, for liberty, for basic well-being’ (Chibber 2014, 79). This does not tell us very much. The problem Chibber runs into is therefore one usually associated with the schools of thought he attacks – poststructuralism for example – namely, indeterminacy. Yet he thereby echoes a problem in Rawls shown in *Chapter 4*, namely a very limited normative statement of what it means to be human. Common humanity and basic human needs are never elaborated and could just as well be fulfilled in a social democratic, social liberal, or a host of other forms of polity. Chibber’s sketch of the problems of postcolonial theory as having flushed universalism and therefore emancipation down the drain is overstated. There need not be such a strong tension between the literature on race and colonialism and Marxism, or between Chibber and his interlocutors.

Choosing between liberal universalism that excludes and a particularism that is unable to generate emancipation is fortunately not the only option. A critical universalism can be reconfigured. There is a need for realizing ‘universal liberation’ as the goal of an emancipatory politics (Roberts 2017, 761), which can be further understood as the emergence of a commons or a communisation of that which is private, national, or individual, to the benefit of collectives (Tomba 2019), with a basis in ‘not the individual but rather the common’ (Hardt and Negri 2004, 310).⁴⁹ This is clearly universal, even if it breaks with a liberal exclusion of the other – as in Mill or Locke, both of whom delineate a boundary for liberal principles that excludes racialised groups. Emancipatory politics must therefore speak ‘to people *as if in their own voice*, beginning from their own desires and projects, and mobilizing them against the institutions of domination that burden those desires’ (Roberts 2017, 762), a Gramscian position that embraces context without eschewing universal principles, focusing on affect as a grounding force in emancipatory politics.

⁴⁹ For more on the idea of commoning, see (Zaunseder, Woodman, and Emejulu 2021).

I have shown that while an expansive defence of a particular form of enlightenment is untenable, a qualified, critical defence is both tenable and conducive to the project of emancipation. By insisting on the value of a circumscribed and contingent *emancipatory* enlightenment while emphasising the constantly changing terrain of struggle, the intimate connection to ideology and hegemony, and the broader importance of affects such as hope and faith to ground social transformation, a critical emancipatory imperative is more promising today. I now use these tools to formulate a critique of Rawls, Scott, and Mouffe, to show the problems in practice.

4. JOHN RAWLS: ENLIGHTENMENT AGAINST EMANCIPATION

In order to show the problems that emerge for emancipation from too strong and unreconstructed a vision of enlightenment, I now turn to an enlightenment theorist par excellence who has recently been subject to recuperation in a more emancipatory direction: John Rawls. *Prima facie*, Rawls' later work appear promising for defending emancipation. Yet Rawls is a symptomatic exemplar of how a commitment to a particular form of enlightenment can be an obstacle to realising the kind of emancipation I outlined in *Chapter 2*. Indeed, my starting point is Ypi's conclusion that 'Rawls has very little to say about class politics and the prospects of socialist transformation' (Ypi 2020b, para. 27). This problem involves the absence of collectivity, material interest, and antagonistic struggle, as well as affective commitments to e.g. solidarity or secular political faith. My critique of Rawls is more symptomatic than interpretive – I draw out some broader points from his work to show their wider implications as opposed to offering a close reading that attempts to find the "true" meaning of his works.

In this chapter, I first contextualise Rawls' oeuvre and overall thought. Second, I explain the specific role of enlightenment values in Rawls' thought through his accounts of reasonableness, rationality, and public reason. Third, I probe how far beyond such enlightenment commitment Rawls can go, focusing on the "sense of justice". Fourth, I illustrate the application of this account through civil disobedience and forcible resistance, suggesting their emergent problems for advancing an emancipatory imperative. In the fifth section, I turn to two recent sympathetic critiques of Rawls by William Edmundson and Lea Ypi, showing how even if these are largely compelling, they stop short of a fuller theorisation of emancipation in Rawls, which in the final section I argue is prohibited by the overly strong commitment to enlightenment – particularly reason and rationality.

4.1 A theory of justice as fairness

Rawls' political theory formulates a theory of justice that brings together deontological Kantian ethics, social contract theory, and rational choice theory (Rawls 1999b, xi,

xviii) in an attempt to reconcile liberty and equality. His account is at once a rejection of utilitarianism, libertarianism, conservatism, and Marxism. The theory is driven primarily by a commitment to a particular form of egalitarianism – although as I show below, it is compatible with, conducive to, and perhaps even demanding of a more ambitious and wide-ranging project of upending capitalism even if it does not provide the necessary tools to contribute to such a transformation.

Rawls places individuals in a hypothetical choice situation dubbed the ‘original position’ to choose the principles of justice by which they want their society to be governed (Rawls 1999b, 8). Crucially, they do this without knowledge of anything beyond their most basic human characteristics, in other words they are placed behind a ‘veil of ignorance’ (Rawls 1999b, 118). Two main facts are unknown: First, their ‘place in society’, referring to class position and social status, meaning individuals do not know to which class they belong or where in the hierarchies of society they are located (Rawls 1999b, 118). Second, they are ignorant of the ‘fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities’, referring mainly to intelligence and strength (Rawls 1999b, 118) but evading affect, a key point I return to later.⁵⁰ This means that individuals cannot simply choose based on self-interest (because they do not know what their self-interest is) and therefore will choose based on the good of society as a whole. Individuals will be risk-averse since they want to minimise the risk of ending up at the bottom and will be egalitarian since they want the worst possible position they can end up in to be as good as possible.⁵¹

Once placed behind the veil of ignorance in the original position, Rawls therefore claims that individuals would choose two principles of justice. The first is equal basic liberties, or ‘an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for others’ (Rawls 1999b, 53). These liberties are ‘freedom of thought and liberty of conscience’, ‘the political liberties and freedom of association’, ‘the liberty and integrity of the person’, and the ‘rule of law’

⁵⁰ As Katrina Forrester shows, ‘since his graduate school days, Rawls’s decision procedure had aimed at removing prejudice and irrationality’ (Forrester 2019, 163).

⁵¹ There are a few provisos to this characterisation, including a slight difference between Rawls’ principles of justice, particularly the difference principle, and the distributive principle known as maximin, i.e. maximising the minimum provision. For more on this difference, see (Rawls 1999b, 72-3).

(Rawls 2005, 291). The second principle of justice has two parts, equality of opportunity and that the only permissible inequalities are those which are to the advantage of the least well-off, what Rawls calls the 'difference principle' (Rawls 1999b, 65-66). Equality of opportunity 'means an equal chance to leave the less fortunate behind in the personal quest for influence and social position' (Rawls 1999b, 91). This goes beyond meritocracy, in which individuals are fairly rewarded based on their skills but which does not account for the unequal distribution of skill in the first place. The two principles of justice lead Rawls to a wide-ranging restructuring of society, specifying in his later work how the only two social systems that live up to the two principles are property-owning democracy and liberal (democratic) socialism (Rawls 2001, 136ff). The latter is particularly pertinent as a form of emancipation since it abolishes private ownership of the means of production.

Rawls' theory of justice is a prime example of ideal theory, which has since developed into one of the most widespread approaches in political theory.⁵² Ideal theory theorises 'what a perfectly just society would be like' (Rawls 1999b, 8), beginning with an assumption that 'the nature and aims of a perfectly just society' are 'the fundamental part of the theory of justice' (Rawls 1999b, 8). Ideal theory is therefore concerned with what is desirable in the abstract irrespective of whether it is feasible or realistic. Moreover, ideal theory is usually grounded in a moral normative framework, locating the source of politics in morality rather than vice versa (Galston 2010; Philp 2012; Prinz and Rossi 2017; Rossi 2015). Rawls' ideal theory assumes 'strict compliance' with the principles of justice (Rawls 1999b, 8), thus neither concerning itself with whether it would be feasible that everyone would agree with the principles, nor with whether the real world perfectly corresponds to the decision-making undertaken in the hypothetical choice situation of the original position.

Yet Rawls does acknowledge that in particular situations of injustice, the eradication of which help establish justice, it is necessary to move to 'partial compliance' (Rawls 1999b, 8) and forms of nonideal theory. The counterpart to ideal theory, nonideal theory, relaxes the feasibility criterion, and helps explain how for example civil

⁵² For more on the meaning of ideal and nonideal theory, see (Valentini 2012). For a discussion of the role of nonideal theory in social change, see (Hendrix 2012).

disobedience occurs even in nearly just societies, which I discuss below. The centrality of ideal theory for Rawls is important for my argument because it abstracts from key features of human sociability such as affect and interest, a claim I likewise develop below. Rawls explains how nonideal theory 'is worked out after an ideal conception of justice has been chosen; only then do the parties ask which principles to adopt under less happy conditions' (Rawls 1999b, 216). One of the key reasons for the ideal theory approach is that Rawls distinguishes between two kinds of commitments to justice: comprehensive and political doctrines of justice.

A 'comprehensive doctrine of justice' involves its own 'conception of the good', i.e. judgments of value, such as fundamentally different political values due to religious beliefs (Rawls 2005, 19). I return to the role of a conception of the good and the sense of justice as Rawls' two moral powers below. Certain religious practices might be fundamentally counterposed to a liberal doctrine of justice, and the justification of such practices are only convincing to those who already belong to that religious group. This means that rival comprehensive doctrines are 'irreconcilable' (Rawls 2005, 441). A 'political doctrine of justice', on the other hand, makes possible an 'overlapping consensus' with other political doctrines, such that despite particular disagreements, these do not stand in the way of reaching agreement on the fundamentals in a society (Rawls 2005, 133ff), so-called 'reasonable pluralism' (Rawls 2005, 441). Political doctrines of justice appeal to the 'reasonable' character of the individual (Rawls 2005, 13), in other words the possibility of its 'public justification' (Rawls 2005, 388), encapsulated in the idea of 'public reason' (Rawls 2005, 450), to which I return below.

The way to reconcile divergent views is therefore the idea of an overlapping consensus (Rawls 2005). Rawls seeks to solve the problem of achieving stability in a polity by appealing to the shared convictions that bring together disparate comprehensive doctrines, i.e. not just divergent redistributive political principles but seemingly irreconcilable all-encompassing norms of social conduct. Crucially, the overlapping consensus only applies to a 'consensus of reasonable (as opposed to unreasonable or irrational) comprehensive doctrines' (Rawls 2005, 144). Only those kinds of principles that can be justified to each and every individual in a society are acceptable. What matters is not whether or not a person will *actually* agree (since Rawls is in the

realm of ideal theory), but whether they *could* agree, i.e. whether the principle is coherent with the basic structure of society. The most convincing form of such a political doctrine of justice to Rawls is political liberalism, which seeks a 'stable and just society' of 'free and equal citizens' despite deep divisions by 'conflicting and even incommensurable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines' (Rawls 2005, 133). This idea and Rawls' work more generally hinge on a commitment to enlightenment principles.

Rawls' theory of justice is an appealing defence of egalitarianism against the – then – impending emergence of neoliberalism and growing inequality. The original position highlights the contingency of social formations and the mostly unearned or undeserved place most people occupy in society. He develops a critique of meritocracy as reproducing unearned social advantage and focuses instead on fair equality of opportunity, which more effectively counters the intergenerational reproduction of injustice and inequality. Likewise, Rawls provides an effective counter to the widespread reach of too crude a consequentialism like utilitarianism and the idea of an overlapping consensus appears attractive as a pluralist way to address difference and disagreement especially across religious lines.

The most enticing part of his work for emancipation, however, is the requirement of a reconfiguration of the fundamental property structure of society. While this is not a particularly pressing concern in his earlier work, in his mature work (Rawls 2001), Rawls emphasises that only property-owning democracy and liberal (democratic) socialism can secure the realisation of the two principles of justice and, consequently, instantiate the theory of justice as fairness (Rawls 2001, 136-138, 178). One might then be led to think that this is a promising launchpad for an emancipatory imperative. Yet, as I show below, his particular configuration of enlightenment values contributes to the absence of the possibility of social transformation in a meaningful and substantial sense.

4.2 Enlightenment in Rawls

Having explicated the basics of Rawls' overall theory of justice, I now turn to a much more specific component, namely the way a particular enlightenment conception pervades this theory and consequently helps prevent locating an emancipatory imperative in his work. Rawls does not write explicitly about emancipation or enlightenment except distinguishing political liberalism from enlightenment liberalism through their different position vis-à-vis religion – the former is more amicable or accommodating while the latter is more dismissive (Rawls 1999a, 486).⁵³ While there is little explicit concern with progress, there is a clear progressivist streak to his thought. Rawls is furthermore clearly concerned with universalism, particularly in the development of the scope of the theory of justice in his later work, although he has a fraught relationship to it (Rawls 1999a). Finally, there is a very strong commitment to reason and rationality.

Rawls is well-suited as an enlightenment-defender because at the heart of his theoretical project is a defence and political application of reasonableness, reason, and rationality in particular. Rawls is explicitly considered an enlightenment thinker in much of the literature, even the parts that seek to problematise a simplistic reading of him as a straightforward Kantian or enlightenment liberal (Frazer 2007; Tampio 2007; Taylor 2011). Even when challenging the notion that Rawls is a rationalist enlightenment thinker by placing him in conversation with the sentimentalist strand of enlightenment thinking found in e.g. Smith and David Hume, Michael L. Frazer considers Rawls firmly as an enlightenment thinker (Frazer 2007). Likewise, Nicolas Tampio emphasises that Rawls is clearly a theorist working in the lineage of the enlightenment (Tampio 2007, 87), indeed he 'takes innumerable ideas and strategies from Kant and the Enlightenment and recasts them for his own purposes' (Tampio 2007, 100). For example, Rawls appeals to Kantian 'practical reason' as a way of achieving a 'reasonable conception of justice' (Rawls 1999b, xii, 7). I therefore use Rawls as symptomatic of a particularly strong commitment to enlightenment in egalitarian political theory.

⁵³ In line with my argument in *Chapter 1*, I do not focus on explicit references to enlightenment but on symptomatically drawing out the enlightenment commitments (or rejection) in each theorist.

Following *Chapter 1*, by eschewing a definitions-first approach in favour of an interpretive and critically reconstructive model of theory I read each theorist as symptomatic of a particular ideational space and political practice, not a conceptual history, and therefore focus on the bigger picture of Rawls' political theory. I read his enlightenment framework as borne out of a particular ontological position that unites rationalism, individualism, and a specific understanding of reason which together curb emancipation. I sidestep the question of intent here – my qualm is not about whether Rawls *intends* this framework to curb emancipation, but that the consequence of the framework is to curb emancipation. Turning to his understanding of affect clarifies this in more detail, yet I first chart his enlightenment commitments.

The Rawlsian individual moral subject is grounded in rationality, reasonableness, public reason, and the sense of justice. These all help constitute the Rawlsian subject and his motivations for action.⁵⁴ He conceives of individuals as reasonable and rational persons where an individual's conception of the good is constrained by the moral demands of reasonableness, rather than for instance in relation to interest, production, and domination or in relation to affect and solidarity. Building on Mouffe's critique of the erasure of politics due to undue rationalism in Rawls, it is necessary to further elaborate on this problem (Mouffe 1993).⁵⁵

Rawls claims that 'the kind of stability required of justice as fairness is based, then, on its being a liberal political view, one that aims to be acceptable to citizens as reasonable and rational, as well as free and equal, and so as addressed to their public reason' (Rawls 2001, 185). He develops this conception further in the section on reasonable moral psychology, which is one of the concluding parts of the book. Here, he wants to develop how 'political allegiance is generated', in other words use moral psychology for the purpose of stability, which is not only a 'reasonable moral psychology' but 'a psychology of the reasonable itself' (Rawls 2001, 195). Therefore,

⁵⁴ Rawls speaks in the masculine about his hypothetical individual, which is part of the object of the feminist critique of his work (Okin 1994, 2016). Yet while this does provide further ammunition to my charge of an anti-emancipatory enlightenment notion in his work, my argument does not hinge on such a claim.

⁵⁵ These elements are most clearly developed in (Rawls 1999b) and reconceptualised in (Rawls 2001) For a text playing closer attention to the relationship between (Rawls 2005) and (Rawls 1999a), see (Ferrara 2012).

I now turn my attention to reasonableness as the cornerstone of Rawlsian moral psychology and constitution of the individual subject.

4.2.1 Reason(ableness)

The first crucial enlightenment component that stands in the way of locating an emancipatory imperative in Rawls is the idea of reasonableness, and more broadly reason. Rawls employs the idea of reasonableness to guide his theory of justice as fairness. Already in the Preface to *A Theory of Justice (TJ)* he emphasises that his theory has to be reasonable, highlighting the centrality of this concept for his work as a whole (Rawls 1999b, xi). Reasonableness is a version of reason – the acted-out version of reason, so to say. He defines a reasonable person as being ‘willing to govern their conduct by a principle from which they and others can reason in common; and reasonable people take into account the consequences of their actions on others’ well-being’ (Rawls 2005, 48-49, footnote 41). He clarifies the difference with rationality by arguing that ‘the disposition to be reasonable is neither derived from nor opposed to the rational but it is incompatible with egoism, as it is related to the disposition to act morally’ (Rawls 2005, 48-49, footnote 41).

Being reasonable thus means acting according to principles that allow reasoning in common and taking into account the consequences of one’s actions on others. This combines Lockean toleration and Kantian reciprocity. The reasonable is closely linked not just with reason but also with justifiability and acceptability – a principle is reasonable if it can be justified to others and accepted as such, even if those individuals do not subscribe to it themselves, given that they are ‘rational persons’ (Rawls 1999b, 15-16). Justification – and by extension reasonableness – is therefore a ‘problem of deliberation’, because it concerns the competition between rival political (as opposed to comprehensive) doctrines of justice and must be hashed out through rational discourse between rational persons (Rawls 1999b, 16).

Reasoning in common implies being able to make normative claims based on reason that are acceptable as truth claims to others, even if those others do not agree with them. Those who are reasonable ‘insist that reciprocity should hold within that world

so that each benefits along with others' (Rawls 2005, 50), so a Rawlsian society of reasonable persons is one of Kantian reciprocity, in which individuals propose principles that they know others could be willing to reciprocate. He thereby develops his conception of reason in an applied fashion, focusing on the notion of the reasonable person, claiming that 'persons are reasonable in one basic aspect when, among equals say, they are ready to propose principles and standards as fair terms of cooperation and to abide by them willingly, given the assurance that others will likewise do so' (Rawls 2005, 49). He goes so far as to say that 'rational agents approach being psychopathic when their interests are solely in benefits to themselves' (Rawls 2005, 50). This implies a social dimension to reason and rationality, yet there is no real consideration of the collective and group interest ramifications of such a social dimension. He considers that reasonable persons propose norms that are justifiable, understood as 'those norms they view as reasonable for everyone to accept and therefore as justifiable to them; and they are ready to discuss the fair terms that others propose' (Rawls 2005, 49). What is reasonable is therefore closely related to what is justifiable.

4.2.2 Rationality

Reason and reasonableness depend on rationality. As Quentin Skinner shows, the duty to maximise individual liberty in a self-interested manner is one of the chief aims of the rational Rawlsian individual (Skinner 2007). Rawls emphasises how 'I have assumed throughout that the persons in the original position are rational' capable of making a 'rational decision' (Rawls 1999b, 123). In defining rationality, Rawls explicitly defers to the understanding given by rational-choice theorists Amartya Sen and Kenneth Arrow as the 'standard' one, evading critical questions about the feasibility and desirability of such rationality (Rawls 1999b, 124).

In *TJ*, Rawls defines a conception of 'goodness as rationality', which seems at odds with the conception of goodness as reasonableness in *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement (JaF)* (Rawls 1999b, 347; 2001). Rationality contributes to goodness because it allows individuals to establish their 'self-worth' (Rawls 1999b, 386) and get meaning from pursuing the avenues required to ensure such self-worth, closely related

to his idea of self-respect. Thus, 'a person's good is determined by what is for him the most rational plan of life given reasonably favorable circumstances' (Rawls 1999b, 347). Furthermore, the original position 'is fair between individuals as moral persons, that is, as rational beings with their own ends and capable, I shall assume, of a sense of justice' (Rawls 1999b, 11). Pursuing one's own ends in light of a particular sense of justice, i.e. the skill to judge between just and unjust and the accompanying desire to act in pursuit of justice, is Rawls' understanding of moral rationality. Rationality is therefore in service of the principles of justice and his theory of justice as a theory of the good hence hinges on rationality. He distinguishes the 'thin theory of the good' from the 'full theory of the good', where the former concerns the primary goods needed to 'arrive at the principles of justice' and the latter concerns the good once the principles of justice have been arrived at (Rawls 1999b, 348). Rationality plays a role even in the thin theory of the good because it is one of the few facts known in the original position, which then leads to a situation of rational choice once the veil of ignorance is lifted.

Rationality is hence crucial to Rawls' conception of human psychology: indeed, 'the rational plan for a person is the one...which he would choose with deliberative rationality', which is the 'plan that would be decided upon as the outcome of careful reflection in which the agent reviewed, in the light of all the relevant facts, what it would be like to carry out these plans and thereby ascertained the course of action that would best realize his more fundamental desires' (Rawls 1999b, 366). This suggests that reflection, based on rationality and reason, allows individuals to plot their desired end-goals against the necessary means of getting there, in a direct path.⁵⁶ But since such rationality is straitjacketed by an anti-transformative conception of reasonableness, it is difficult to see how the rational pursuit of justice can lead to emancipation. One of the hallmarks of emancipation is precisely a major change in the distribution of the ownership of property, which implies that at least some of the currently propertied will be less so in an emancipated society. How this will be implemented without struggle – on both parts – is unclear. While rationality in itself can certainly contribute to an

⁵⁶ Even once reflective equilibrium is introduced, this still – or perhaps even more so – relies on rationality.

emancipatory imperative, in Rawls there is limited reflection on how such a pursuit of rational ends is severely hampered in an unjust (or real) society, and little consideration of its intersection with the affective dimension he excludes from the original position and the Rawlsian subject.

The rational and the reasonable are closely connected. Indeed, Rawls theorises the reasonable and the rational together, building on his earlier claim that ‘the Reasonable presupposes and subordinates the Rational’ (Rawls 1980, 530). Rawls claims he ‘does not try to derive the reasonable from the rational....Rather, within the idea of fair cooperation the reasonable and the rational are complementary ideas’ (Rawls 2005, 52). This is because ‘merely reasonable agents would have no ends of their own they wanted to advance by fair cooperation’, i.e. while reasonableness without rationality might affirm the right kind of just principles, it lacks a conception of which ends to pursue and a strategy for how to achieve them (Rawls 2005, 52). Rationality without reasonableness means ‘agents lack a sense of justice and fail to recognize the independent validity of the claims of others’, i.e. it omits a sense of justice that impels individuals to reason their way to, and apply, moral judgments in a fair manner to social questions (Rawls 2005, 52). Put differently, the solely reasonable lacks an idea of what ends they want to get to, whereas the solely rational does not consider what is good for others and therefore lacks reciprocity. It is furthermore too instrumental because it only thinks along means-ends lines. Because social contract theory is concerned with reaching an agreement that is legitimate and fair to everyone, reciprocity is a cornerstone value.

4.2.3 Public reason

In order to instantiate the reasonable and rational in a practical way, Rawls develops the idea of public reason, which helps settle disputes and resolve disagreements on morality and politics (Rawls 2005, 48). In nonideal situations, civil disobedience is a key avenue for lodging such disagreements. Rawls emphasises that the reasonable requires a public sphere in the form of public reason, which is ‘the ideal of democratic citizens trying to conduct their political affairs on terms supported by public values that we might reasonably expect others to endorse’ (Rawls 1999b, 253). The ‘values of

public reason', for Rawls, 'reflect an ideal of citizenship: our willingness to settle the fundamental political matters in ways that others as free and equal can acknowledge are reasonable and rational. This ideal gives rise to a duty of public civility' (Rawls 2001, 92). These values of public reason do much of the required theoretical underlabouring for justifying his account of civil disobedience, his emphasis on stability, and the erasure of emancipatory potential. He thus sees such politics as the performance of civility, the domain of enacting citizenship, and the pursuit of justice.

The way to achieve this pursuit of justice is through public reason, which is public insofar as it is the 'reason of equal citizens who, as a collective body, exercise final political and coercive power over one another in enacting laws and in amending their constitution' (Rawls 1999b, 214). In other words, citizens in a democracy give reasons to one another in an attempt to settle questions of basic justice, with the presumption that individuals will express political principles they know others would be able to agree to in theory. Reason is public when it can be expected to be acceptable to others, i.e. views must be *explained* and *justified* in the eyes of those to whom it is addressed (Rawls 1999b, 216). Rawls explains this as: 'citizens are to conduct their fundamental discussions within the framework of what each regards as a political conception of justice based on values that the others can reasonably be expected to endorse and each is, in good faith, prepared to defend that conception so understood' (Rawls 1999b, 226). In other words, it requires arguing in good faith and in public forums, a view which is mirrored in his account of civil disobedience. He contrasts public reason with 'comprehensive reason', which mirrors his distinction between comprehensive and political doctrines of justice whereby comprehensive reason is a kind of reason that is not made in a way that is potentially acceptable to others (Rawls 1999b, 250). Since public reason also has a 'duty of civility', it requires the combination of reasonableness and a morally grounded duty of civility (Rawls 1999b, 219).

Such public reason is hence an idealised effort to construct arguments in a way that can be acceptable to others because they appeal to shared values – equality, freedom, democracy, and so on, those values that belong to a political rather than comprehensive doctrine of justice. Rawls claims that 'without an established public world, the reasonable may be suspended and we may be left largely with the rational'

(Rawls 2005, 54). This runs counter to a path toward emancipation because it again relies on a heavy burden to justify rather than contest through political action. Put differently, it is in the realm of words and not of political action, which is at odds with antagonistic struggle and an interest-based conception of social difference. If such public reason presumes a rational public sphere without power, domination, and manipulation, and by assuming that reasoned calm debate can settle the score in politics, i.e. that deliberation is the panacea for resolving political conflict, this necessarily implies a faith in the power of persuasion rather than contestation.

4.3 Beyond enlightenment

Given the strong enlightenment components outlined above, Rawls has a limited vision of affect. In this section, I discuss the two most important components, the sense of justice and the few specific affects he does consider. On his own admission, Rawls only elaborates in sparse detail on his account of the space outside of reason, specifically in the form of 'moral feeling' and 'moral sentiments' (Rawls 1999b, 420). These are concretised in his idea of 'moral powers', which is comprised of two parts: a 'conception of the good' and the 'sense of justice' (Rawls 1999b, xii). The conception of the good means the 'particular ends and interests' that their rational plan seeks to redeem (Rawls 1999b, 123). Rawls is trying to devise a rational choice situation in which one would not favour one's family, class, identity group, or discriminate arbitrarily or systematically between others. While Rawls considers the role of envy, affection, and rancour, he ultimately dismisses their importance and does not consider these on a more structural, societal level.

The major component to Rawls' moral powers is the sense of justice. This is the 'skill in judging things to be just and unjust, and in supporting these judgments by reasons' (Rawls 1999b, 41). In other words, it is the ability to distinguish between the just and unjust through practical and public reason, and not a 'sense' like an emotion or an affect, but a skill. Even if such a skill is not entirely rational but bears semblances of an affective dimension, it suggests a more technical function than a description of a rounded human subjectivity. It is a 'moral capacity', according to Rawls, and turns into a 'conception of justice' once it is subject to commonly agreed-upon principles of

justice in the original position (Rawls 1999b, 41). Thus, the main task of the sense of justice is in bringing those principles about, a kind of underlabouring for a fuller and more developed conception of justice. Rawls employs it to develop the basis of his moral theory. In the original position 'the parties are presumed to be capable of a sense of justice' (Rawls 1999b, 125). This is because 'merely reasonable agents would have no ends of their own they wanted to advance by fair cooperation; merely rational agents lack a sense of justice and fail to recognize the independent validity of the claims of others' (Rawls 2005, 52).

The sense of justice grounds agreement and the move from injustice to justice because it provides the motivation to act. Yet this is merely in service of correcting moral wrongs, not grounding social transformation, tantamount to an individualised notion of politics that cannot generate emancipation as a collective, social process of structural transformation away from conditions of exploitation, domination, and social unfreedom writ large. The function of the sense of justice is therefore to enhance cooperation, avoid conflict, and stabilise the polity. It cannot provide the basis for emancipation because again, like reasonableness, rationality, and public reason, it relies on a model of politics that obscures the kinds of fundamental non-moral disagreements that preclude overlapping consensus – based on affects and/or interests. While in a just society such consensus is certainly possible – but does not account for how such a just society can come about without dissensus – in a (deeply) unjust society it seems implausible. Moreover, there are unanswered questions about the basis for deriving the sense of justice as the central characteristic of the person in Rawls, questions which would require a thesis-length treatment in themselves.

The humans in Rawls' theory are characterised by a limited set of affective properties (Solomon 1995). Robert Solomon argues that this amounts simply to 'cosmetic plaster' added by Rawls 'between the structural struts to give his deductive theory some sense of humanity' (Solomon 1995, 300). The three affects he considers explicitly are envy, affection, and rancour, all of which he is at pains to exclude (Rawls 1999b, 466-468). He defines envy as seeking 'to gain relative to [others]', affection as to 'confer benefits', i.e. wanting something good for (particular) others above and beyond what is wanted for everyone else (Rawls 1999b, 125), and rancour means 'imposing injuries on one

another' (Rawls 1999b, 125), i.e. not wanting something good for others above and beyond what is wanted for the general, average person. These are portrayed as emotions held by individuals vis-à-vis other individuals in a sort of Lockean contract situation rather than affects understood as socially held, collective emotions that form part of a complex web of social relations and institutions. In this section on affects, he resorts to rational choice theory jargon: 'put in terms of a game, we might say: they strive for as high an absolute score as possible' (Rawls 1999b, 125).

Indeed, he admits that 'the assumption that the parties are not moved by envy raises certain questions. Perhaps we should also assume that they are not liable to various other feelings such as shame and humiliation' (Rawls 1999b, 386-392). He continues: 'Now a satisfactory account of justice will eventually have to deal with these matters too, but for the present I shall leave these complications aside' (Rawls 1999b, 124). He never returns to these, except to say that self-respect as the rational realisation of one's preferred ends is crucial for the principles of justice (Rawls 1999b, 388) and a discussion of regret and shame, which he conceives in moral and individual terms (Rawls 1999b, 388ff).

Now, there could be a collective dimension to self-respect, an idea that Tommie Shelby advances in his Rawlsian work on racism in the United States (Shelby 2016). Shelby argues that many forms of 'impure' dissent and disobedience to dominant society by Black people in the United States in the ghetto are a symptom of a lack not of respect but of self-respect, i.e. that the dissent is an attempt to restore the absence of self-respect which helps perpetuate structural injustice (Shelby 2016, 252ff). Yet even here there is little concern for divergent material interests and antagonistic struggle. Rather, Rawls and Shelby focus on the restoration of justice in a society that has the seeds of basic justice. Indeed, the focus on self-respect has been criticised because it 'does not adequately comprehend the social reality of self-respect, the deep ways in which equality and inequality in its social bases are decisively shaped by the distribution of economic power and position in advanced industrial society' (Doppelt 1981, 260). Were Rawls and by extension Shelby to grapple more with the deep divisions that are 'decisively shaped' if not outright determined by material forces, the individualist blind spots and limitations of a "reasonable" liberal egalitarianism as a

contributor to emancipatory political theory would come to the fore. The idea of reasonableness has been criticised widely by contemporary theorists (Badano and Nuti 2018; Young 2000) including Mouffe, to whom I return later in the thesis (Mouffe 1987, 2016b).

4.4 Emancipatory traces, non-emancipatory paths?

With this strong place for enlightenment and limited role of affects, such a political theory cannot ground an emancipatory imperative. However, attempts to do so have been made both in Rawls' time and today, which I now show how nevertheless fall short before developing my critique in full. In the years following *TJ*, scholars began casting Rawls as an emancipation theorist because he supports a property structure that goes beyond the conventional extent of a liberal egalitarian redistributive policy (DiQuattro 1983; Grcic 1980; Schweikart 1978). Recently, this argument resurfaces as Rawls being a reticent socialist (Edmundson 2017, 2020), a conclusion that is even 'inescapable' (Edmundson 2017, 15) and that the theory of justice requires socialism (Ypi 2020a). Edmundson claims that while Rawls' 'socialism has to be seen as 'guarded,' 'muffled,' 'reticent,' it is 'nonetheless real' (Edmundson 2017, 121). While Rawls wavers between property-owning democracy and liberal (democratic) socialism, Edmundson suggests that both commit Rawls to a kind of socialism, even if only reticent, understood as 'common ownership of the commanding heights of the economy' (Edmundson 2017, 39). While property-owning democracy allows for limited concentration of private property, liberal socialism abolishes private ownership of the means of production. Edmundson reconstructs Rawls' arguments to suggest that despite Rawls' wavering, only liberal socialism can ensure the principles of justice in practice.

The argument here is that Rawls does not reckon with the deep-seated character of the problems of capitalism. Ypi paraphrases Marx to suggest that Rawls can indeed be marshalled in service of the 'direction to the real movement that abolishes the current state of things' (Ypi 2020b, 2020a). She shows that Rawls admits not paying enough attention to the possibility that welfare-state capitalism would be insufficient to guarantee justice:

if Rawls's agreement with socialist accounts of justice is real, even if reticent, the gap that separates his understanding of politics, including politics taken from a nonideal perspective, from the socialist tradition of reflection on the topic is enormous, and much more challenging to fill (Ypi 2020b, para. 23).

The emergence and reproduction of wealth, power, and class are ostensibly resolved through Rawls' notion of property-owning democracy, in which everyone has a fair share of the property distribution. Both of these would genuinely secure the two principles of justice: on the one hand, fair equality of opportunity and basic equal rights, and on the other hand that any inequality is to the benefit of the least well off. Ed Quish reiterates the crucial question, directed specifically at Rawls: 'what kinds of political strategies and collective action can bring about radical social change?' (Quish 2018, para. 26). Rawls has very little to say about this, leading some critics to reject the possibility of rehabilitating the emancipatory potential of such liberal egalitarianism (T. Smith 2018).

I follow Edmundson's and Ypi's interpretations of Rawls to claim that emancipation cannot be instantiated within his theory due to its enthusiastic defence of enlightenment. Even if "comrade Rawls" is doing emancipatory ideal theory, he does not factor in the necessary political and social variables to be fact-sensitive enough to bring about social transformation.⁵⁷ As I argued in *Chapter 2*, critical emancipation is not a concept with decontested necessary and sufficient conditions but an idea. Thus, the most possible is to gesture toward it, offering partial solutions and proposals. Recall how I conceive of critical emancipation as involving collective processes of structural social transformation rooted in material conditions, as well as an interest in overturning coercion and exploitation through forms of democratic pluralistic struggles for egalitarian social freedom including the freedom to flourish and enjoy authentic affective experiences. Such an idea must therefore embrace both political affects and how these play a fundamental role in both motivating and sustaining social transformation.

⁵⁷ To be sure, the debate around fact-sensitivity and fact-insensitivity is one of the cornerstones of the literature by and on Rawls, particularly in his debates with G.A. Cohen (Cohen 2008).

Curiously, Rawls' account of social transformation has attracted surprisingly little attention in the literature. This is presumably because for more liberal egalitarian ends, it is uncontroversial. For emancipatory ends, however, a vision of social transformation is required. He does not offer a compelling social theory of change or vision of social transformation for getting to such an emancipated future. A reticent socialist vision of the world pared down to exclude antagonistic forms of struggle must present an alternative account of how to achieve the necessary radical changes it proposes. If major changes are required to the property structure there must be an account of how the currently propertied will defend their property against the property-less. Edmundson, sympathetic to Rawls, does not offer a compelling elaboration beyond Rawls' own on the question of social transformation (Edmundson 2017, 186-200). Likewise, while Ypi gestures toward the problem, the brevity of her article precludes any sustained critique. She claims that mainstream political theory is 'surprisingly silent' on the question of 'how to theorize the political transition to a condition of ideal justice' (Ypi 2020b, para. 2). While she is right to point to this problem, she relies on the notion that emancipation requires a chiefly moral foundation.

Rawls theorises a benevolent and non-confrontational type of moral appeal to a kind of socialism that does not reckon with the counterposed interests that are up against each other. Removing 'class interest' is one of the prime goals of Rawls' original position (Forrester 2019, 290). For everyone in society to want the same principles of justice relies on an all-powerful pull of morality (through the sense of justice). However, this cannot action-guide a struggle that goes beyond superficial disagreement and into deep-seated antagonism through divergent interests. The reign of political power and capital means that appeals to morality are not a tenable form of social transformation in real (or even nonideal) circumstances. As Ypi points out, social conflict in a well-ordered society is between citizens who have shared interests worked out through public reason, whereas in a badly ordered society – such as welfare-state capitalism – it is between the 'bourgeois and the militant activist', or between the dominant and subordinate social classes (Ypi 2020b, para. 28).

Part of the difficulty of locating an emancipatory imperative in Rawls, then, comes from an individualist and rationalist understanding of social transformation that does not

reckon with collective antagonistic struggle based around material interests. Even the more sentimentalist re-readings of Rawls (Banerjee and Bercuson 2014; Frazer 2007) concede that he is a rationalist – what they dispute is the weight that should be placed on this rationalism and whether his theory of justice depends on it: ‘there are deep tensions within Rawls’ project and that Rawls’ incorporation of affect into his understanding of the liberal subject is far from uncomplicated’ (Banerjee and Bercuson 2014, 222). My critique does not rest on the appeal of their position since I am not seeking to redeem the appeal of Rawls’ theory of justice, yet I claim that the centrality of his rationalism as well as reason hamper the development of a theory of emancipation in accordance with his demands for changes to the property structure.

My claim is also not whether Rawlsian theory is compatible or incompatible with a theory of affect. Instead, I read it as symptomatic of a wider retreat from a more ambitious programme of emancipation in part facilitated by a strong commitment to enlightenment principles generally. Whether or not the theory of justice depends on or is compatible with a sentimentalist and less enlightenment rationalist reading is in some respects immaterial here. The important point is rather that individuals who might extoll certain emotions in Rawls’ universe do so as individuals and not in any meaningful collective – and consequently affective – sense. Even when Rawls speaks of institutions, such institutions are simply the aggregate sum of their individuals. By focusing on envy he is concerned with interpersonal comparison and competition as opposed to celebrating or at least reckoning with the role of collective interest and collective struggle that seem ineradicable from (capitalist) society.

Therefore, what Edmundson and Ypi do not sufficiently detail is how Rawls cannot bring about emancipation. Ypi points out that Rawls is ‘leaving us in the dark about the ways through which ideal theory is supposed to guide action in the nonideal world’ (Ypi 2020b, para. 26). To this end, she further claims that ‘a topic that certainly deserves further exploration is the relation between Rawlsian public reason as an acceptable standard of political justification and the standards of public justification formulated and invoked by activists in resisting class injustice’ (Ypi 2020b, para. 28). Rawls begins with ‘political proposals grounded on shared reasons rooted in the public political culture of any given society. The question is whether this is an appropriate

starting point for a theory of transition' (Ypi 2020b, para. 28). My answer to this question is no, and I elaborate why below. I do this by first turning to the problem in practice through Rawls' work on civil disobedience and forcible militant resistance. I then delve deeper into how his enlightenment commitments hamper emancipation.

4.5 The problem in practice: Civil disobedience and forcible resistance

In order to explain why reasonableness, rationality, and public reason are an insufficient basis for emancipation in spite of Edmundson's and Ypi's attempted recuperation of Rawls for more radical ends, I detail two component parts of political action for social change in Rawls beyond public reason: civil disobedience and forcible militant resistance. Civil disobedience falls short. Forcible militant resistance, while *prima facie* promising, is incompatible when juxtaposed with the theory of justice and thus simply an artifice to avoid Rawls running into a *cul-de-sac* of being unable to realise justice. In other words, Rawls' lack of a theory of social transformation, as well as his conception of the individual and their psychology, means he cannot ground an emancipatory imperative.

Both civil disobedience and forcible militant resistance sit within nonideal theory. Edmundson correctly posits that 'ideal theory tells us what a just constitution must look like, but it tells us far less than what we would like to know about how we might justly get there' (Edmundson 2017, 190). Rawls therefore turns to nonideal theory to settle the score with reference to three types of societies. These are the 'perfectly-ordered society', the 'well-ordered society' and the worst of the three, what Rawls does not name but Edmundson terms the 'badly ordered society' (Edmundson 2017, 190). Broadly speaking, Rawls' account of social transformation therefore depends on the society in question. Since social conditions are perfect in the perfectly-ordered society, there is no need for civil disobedience or other forms of political action, simply because there is no need for social transformation at large. In the badly ordered society, there is also no real scope for civil disobedience since this relies on a just constitution and legitimate political rule which can adjudicate in a fair manner and incorporate the claims of the civilly disobedient claims into the structure of society. In such a society, the figure of the 'militant' is more relevant for Rawls, as he or she is permitted to

engage in ‘forcible resistance’ (Rawls 1999b, 322). In a well-ordered society, which is more or less synonymous with a nearly just society, however, civil disobedience plays a major role to aid an overlapping consensus.

In the journey toward justice, a crucial task is to move from a ‘modus vivendi’ to a ‘stable overlapping consensus’ (Rawls 2001, 193). Crucially, as Edmundson notes, ‘the overlapping consensus of reasonable political conceptions that figures prominently in *Political Liberalism* must not be mistaken as intended as any part of a theory of transition’ (Edmundson 2017, 193). Thus, while reflective equilibrium and overlapping consensus pertain to changes in the cognitive states of the individual and seek to readjust the wrongheaded normative elements for individuals and thereby stabilise the polity, civil disobedience is a social mechanism for correcting injustices through moral normativism – thinking change comes primarily from changing people’s moral convictions. Civil disobedience is thus only relevant ‘in the special case of near justice’ (Rawls 1999b, 343). Since the original position is a hypothetical and not an actual situation, it does not serve as a mechanism for social transformation other than by virtue of explicating people’s normative commitments.

Rawls defines civil disobedience as ‘a public, nonviolent, conscientious yet political act contrary to law usually done with the aim of bringing about a change in the law or policies of the government’ specifically as a form of ‘opposition to democratic authority’ (Rawls 1999b, 319). This definition sees civil disobedience as containing four main characteristics: publicity, non-violence, conscientiousness, and aiming to change the law.⁵⁸ This is a normative, not just descriptive statement, arguing what features are morally justified not simply what empirically characterises instances of civil disobedience in the real world, and in any case does not refer to real examples (a fact that holds across *TJ*). Rawls invokes civil disobedience in order to explain the problem of partial compliance, i.e. illustrating the nature of political conflict and contestation. Since ideal theory is concerned with desirability rather than feasibility it presumes full compliance from all people. But Rawls acknowledges that sometimes not everyone will agree, even in a ‘nearly just society’ (Rawls 1999b, 319). In a sense, the secondary

⁵⁸ A vast body of literature engages with – and critiques – Rawls’ account of civil disobedience, including (Bleiker 2002; Brownlee 2006; Celikates 2016a, 2016b; Laudani 2013; Sabl 2001; Scheuerman 2016).

objective of his oeuvre is to figure out *how* to get people to agree once he has established on *what* they should – and would – agree. Civil disobedience, then, is the solution to the problem that emerges when there are isolated injustices in the instantiation of the theory of justice and a mechanism is needed to correct them. It helps correct the blind spots of the state failing to act in accordance with the principles of justice. This is a narrow understanding of what civil disobedience does and should do. It does not offer any action-guidance or a sociological theory of transformation from unjust societies or consider systems of domination and interest but casts opposing sides as in fundamental agreement over the principles of justice.

Through being public and non-violent, civilly disobedient acts express fidelity to the law. This in turn reassures the majority population that the act is sincere. Rawls is concerned with permitting civil disobedience only in very specific circumstances. These circumstances involve a democratic, legitimately established, well-ordered, and nearly just society which nonetheless contains ‘serious violations of justice’ (Rawls 1999b, 319). On this model, civil disobedience is limited to cases in which three particular conditions are fulfilled. First, ‘serious infringements of...the principle of equal liberty, and to blatant violations...of the principle of fair equality of opportunity’ (Rawls 1999b, 326). Second, normally (Rawls 1999b, 328) only when multiple attempts to ‘the normal appeals to the political majority have already been made in good faith and that they have failed’ (Rawls 1999b, 327). Third, usually but not always disobeying minorities have to coordinate their disobedience so as to not overload the state with competing claims that have the potential to destabilise the legitimate authority (Rawls 1999b, 328-9).

These rigid qualifications set the scene for why Rawls is interested in civil disobedience: to correct nonideal features in an otherwise ideal setting. The act of civil disobedience thereby serves as a mechanism for regulating and stabilising unjust elements of a nearly just society, as a centripetal force that narrows the gap between the convictions individuals hold, and finally as a solution for liberal and state-loyal individuals in balancing their duty to obey just authority with the duty to oppose injustice without challenging underlying economic and legal structures.

Civil disobedience is here a crucial component of the (im)possibility of emancipation. It is a key driver of the charge that his theory produces a status quo-abetting moderate liberalism: Edmundson argues that 'Rawls's reputation as an apologist for the status quo, and for welfare-state capitalism, derives in no small part from his writings on civil disobedience' (Edmundson 2017, 193). One might be excused to think that civil disobedience would provide the radical edge of the theory of justice precisely because it is a form of extra-parliamentary activism which is usually absent in the theories of liberal egalitarians who are at pains to justify the legitimacy of the state. Yet in Rawls this is quite the opposite. He explicitly theorises civil disobedience as a stabilising mechanism for working out disagreements in an otherwise just society unable to aid a process of social transformation and thus has no place in a struggle for emancipation. Perhaps hoping for civil disobedience to be a significant part of emancipation is naïve. However, my point here is that it is the closest we get to such forms of social transformation in Rawls.

Since Rawls' formulation of civil disobedience pledges allegiance to the existing state and is careful not to upset its legitimacy and power, it cannot serve as a mechanism for social transformation. He is very explicit about this: 'my aim here is the limited one of defining a concept of civil disobedience and understanding its role in a nearly just constitutional regime' (Rawls 1999b, 323). Likewise, 'when the basic structure of society is reasonably just, *as estimated by what the current state of things allows*, we are to recognize unjust laws as binding provided that they do not exceed certain limits of injustice' (Rawls 1999b, 308, my emphasis). This is a strong curb on more transformative change that would reconfigure the very meaning of justice and power.

It is telling that *JaF* has nothing to say about civil disobedience. Even here, he does not correspondingly change his absence of social transformation of *TJ*. In *TJ*, Rawls claims that 'I shall not discuss this mode of protest [civil disobedience], along with militant action and resistance, as a tactic for transforming or even overturning an unjust and corrupt system' (Rawls 1999b, 319). As Edmundson contends:

For Rawls, a welfare-state capitalist society is a badly ordered society...Being badly ordered, a welfare-state capitalist society lacks a just constitution.

Therefore, civil disobedience, which consists in an appeal to a just constitution, is not even possible (Edmundson 2017, 194).

Thus, there is no attempt to use civil disobedience as a tactic for social transformation. For this reason, Edmundson emphasises how ‘those who think Rawls intended the priority of the first-principle liberties, or the justification of civil disobedience, as obstacles to revolutionary action in the transition to a just society have mistaken his meaning’ (Edmundson 2017, 195). Rawls argues that in cases of stark injustice, any means are allowed to overturn the situation. Yet since his definition of stark injustice would let what seems like many kinds of unjust societies off the hook, this is not particularly action-guiding or legitimating for resistance-cum-emancipation. Moreover, many individuals and collectives do not have a voice that will be heard during acts of civil disobedience – or at least not heard fairly. The propensity of for-profit mass media in the service of the dominant class is to paint civil disobedience as extremist, subversive, treacherous, or simply as terrorism, which Rawls does not reckon with in his understanding of civil disobedience, which is characterised as benevolent and ultimately consensual – a form of communication instead of the democratic contestation it is better understood as (Celikates 2016b).

Hence, while some forms of disobedience could in principle serve emancipatory ends, Rawlsian civil disobedience as public deliberation cannot. Christian Rostbøll points this out: ‘Because of their starting point in the fact of reasonable pluralism and the consequences they draw from it, Rawlsian deliberative democrats undermine the enlightenment and emancipatory potentials of processes of public deliberation’ (Rostbøll 2008, 728). He continues by contrasting Rawls’ approach to a more critical deliberation, slightly closer to my vision of critically recalibrated enlightenment: ‘The aim of public deliberation should not merely be accommodation but emancipation. Rawlsian deliberative democrats are so afraid of offending people that they close off the potential of comprehensive deliberation to achieve its emancipatory aims’ (Rostbøll 2008, 729). Each of its components could be critiqued in this way: the demandingness of publicity forecloses oppositional political organising, undue nonviolence casts activists as the origin of violence when they usually respond to rather than initiate violence, conscientiousness moralises political action and sanitises

it away from contentious struggle, and the need for accepting punishment fails to account for the grave injustice in even seemingly just legal systems. There is no space for ripple effects or snowballing whereby small acts of resistance mushroom into larger movements for change, no place for affective commitments of solidarity or anger, and no room for class-based or other group interest. The reason for this is clear: Rawls' civil disobedience is not intended to cause major change, but to restabilise a just polity with 'legitimately established democratic authority' where limited injustices begin to occur (Rawls 1999b, 319).

Since civil disobedience plays a stabilising role, then, it is worth turning to his ideas of forcible resistance and the militant, which hold more promise for emancipation. Even here, however, there is no convincing account of how to realise the principles of justice, which requires processes of emancipation to reach property-owning democracy or liberal socialism. The sections in *TJ* on forcible resistance and the militant are extremely brief. In *JaF*, there is no mention of either of those concepts, suggesting that Rawls did not in fact change his mind on this crucial aspect of social transformation and emancipation after *TJ* despite his more radical vision of the changes required for a just property structure. 'The militant, for example, is much more deeply opposed to the existing political system' than the civilly disobedient, according to Rawls (Rawls 1999b, 322). This is because 'he does not accept it as one which is nearly just or reasonably so; he believes either that it departs widely from its professed principles or that it pursues a mistaken conception of justice altogether' (Rawls 1999b, 322). This suggests that the militant wants to radically change society whereas the civilly disobedient does not. Since freedom from exploitation and domination is clearly not already in place and would require a process of social transformation this implies that civil disobedience is not the appropriate mechanism for emancipation, even on Rawls' own terms.

In contrast to the civilly disobedient, the militant 'does not appeal to the sense of justice of the majority (or those having effective political power), since he thinks that their sense of justice is erroneous, or else without effect. Instead, he seeks by well-framed militant acts of disruption and resistance, and the like, to attack the prevalent view of justice or to force a movement in the desired direction' (Rawls 1999b, 323). This is

somewhat promising, yet Rawls sees the disagreement in terms of a different ‘sense of justice’ (Rawls 1999b, 397). Similarly, since Rawls simply asserts – rather than argues – that any means are justified to overturn a deeply unjust society, he leaves the reader in the dark about any such situation. It is telling that Edmundson’s very final sentence notes that ‘the world has understandably wearied of its most overtly audacious socialists. We ought to be grateful for having one who was patiently reticent in calling us to build the common world that is implicit in how we would want to be treated if we did not know which of God’s or fate’s children we happen to be’ (Edmundson 2017, 199). Precisely at the point where the claim that Rawls is a socialist wanting emancipation becomes interesting, namely in terms of how that should impact the move toward such a society, even Edmundson hits a wall. The absence of explicit grappling with the question of emancipation and the near-absence even in implicit terms, twinned with the underdeveloped and perhaps even impossible task in the secondary literature of drawing out any emancipatory imperative in Rawls, suggests that neither he nor his work is able to generate such a vision of emancipation.

4.6 Enlightenment against emancipation

Thus, given the insufficiency of Rawls’ conception of enlightenment-based political action, I now turn to a critically recalibrated form of enlightenment – embracing interest and affect. This becomes central in moving beyond a merely justice-focused ideal theory toward developing an emancipatory imperative. Since Rawls presumes that moral individuals will work out the best way to get to the principles of justice, which they have agreed in the original position behind the veil of ignorance, he does not need a more contentious theory of social change. The assumption that achieving a given set of moral principles can abstract from the kind of sociological rigour that pays attention to how political parties, social movements, and even infrapolitics bring about social change not (simply) through moral persuasion in writing or debate but through *struggle*: propaganda, everyday resistance, disobedience, direct action, even forms of violence. Against Rawls’ account, civil disobedience – and politics in general – should be seen as a ‘practice of contestation’ rather than either ‘political blackmail’ or ‘the impotent expression of a reformist yearning for cosmetic changes within a given

system' (Celikates 2016b, 37). For example, the denunciation of violence by Rawls delegitimises emancipatory social movements. More often than not, violence on the part of protesters is precipitated by violence from the repressive state apparatus, and so appeals merely to the mercy or morality of state institutions and those in power appears limited.

Likewise, the sacrosanct status of private property in liberalism elevates property damage to a serious form of violence, even if this is part of a political movement for justice, freedom, or equality. In his critique of Butler, Alex Livingston shows how some forms of non-violence can be disempowering: 'The "force" of nonviolence...comes to look a great deal like the pacified portraits of civil disobedience as noncoercive "mode of appeal" put forward by liberals such as Rawls' (Livingston 2020, para. 24), with a preferable path being to build a more nuanced conception of (non-)violence that is attuned to its potential for social transformation – not simply ethical expressiveness. In short, Rawls' emancipation is an emancipation without antagonistic or interest-driven social struggle, and therefore no emancipation at all.

My critique is therefore as much against the application and uptake of a purportedly Rawlsian emancipation as it is against Rawls' (non)emancipation itself. Thinking of reason, reasonableness, rationality, public reason, and the sense of justice as the main drivers of political change shows how Rawls' theory of justice is the hallmark of liberal and statist political action, not the kind of critical emancipation I have in mind. Reason and rationality frequently side-line important aspects of political motivation and agency – affects and interests. This is not to say that subordinate classes are simply driven by mindless passion and incapable of rationality and reason. Instead, the Rawlsian approach is exclusionary and blind to the thorny affective realities of political life. Rawls thus contributes to a tradition that 'virtually dismisses all emotions—including compassion and sympathy—from serious moral consideration' (Solomon 1995, 199).

His view of reasonableness is insufficient for emancipation because it constrains individuals to a fundamentally conciliatory and liberal attitude toward politics (Mouffe 1987; Wood 1998), avoiding the development of the role of affect or interest in politics beyond the barebones of a sense of justice. Since Rawls does not distinguish between

the character of the individual in the ideal, just situation and the unjust, nonideal (let alone real) situation, it is safe to assume that a similar principle of reasonableness will exist there. Reciprocity presumes a baseline of shared values, and even if radical democrats like Mouffe suggest that appealing to basic values like democracy or equality can ground a radical political project, the transition from capitalism to an emancipated future necessarily involves some kind of dispute that goes beyond persuading the opponent – contention and antagonistic struggle. Such transitions have historically involved violence, force, propaganda, deception, and evasion in all manner of ways incompatible with reasonableness, and it is not clear why they should be instantly dismissed.

Indeed, struggles around material interest are antagonistic rather than amicable. This implies a divergence of interest rather than a broadly overlapping shared interest among the entire society. Within a political movement, of course, there is amicability, but this is supplemented with antagonism against those who hold the power – unless of course the movement itself holds power already. Most often, this will be some form of class interest – sometimes expressed as a kind of “status” and often inflected with ideology in the pejorative sense. Direct action and mass mobilisation are therefore necessary for more emancipatory change, as is organised labour:

we are forced to wonder what social agent could serve as a force for more egalitarian social relations. In Europe during its modernization, that agent was the labor movement, in alliance with other non-elite groupings...Certainly, for the vast majority of progressives over the past century, it was taken for granted that the push for democratization would feature laboring groups at its center (Chibber 2013, 152).

Such a view of social transformation is incompatible with the individualism of Rawls. As Solomon explains, ‘the basic unit of almost all of the leading theories of justice, from Hobbes and Rousseau to Rawls and Nozick, is the isolated, autonomous individual. Society is secondary’ (Solomon 1995, 97).

When Rawls does consider “society” as a whole, he understands his contemporary US society to be reasonably just. Katrina Forrester argues that he considered the society he was writing about ‘a basic structure that was nearly just in its constitutional

essentials. It was part of Rawls's story of liberalism, framed as a movement to make a nearly just America more so' (Forrester 2019, 67). This suggests that in the capitalist US of the 1970s, forcible resistance and militant action would not be warranted. Even though during a debate with Brian Barry, Rawls insisted that he did not consider the US a 'just society' (Forrester 2019, 126), this does not preclude him from considering it nearly just. If civil disobedience is appropriate for a nearly just society and forcible resistance for an unjust society, and he is at great pains to explain how civil disobedience can inform democratic practice, this suggests he considers existing US society nearly just. Moreover, he never reckons with the process of transformation required to get to installing the principles of justice – suggesting that the wavering on the real-world facts were not of particular importance, and in any case never addressed head-on in his work.

In a similar contextual vein, the fact that Rawls was heavily preoccupied with constructing a restricted defence of civil disobedience during a time of widespread civil unrest in an unjust society yet not concerned with elaborating in any way on the need for other forms of political action suggests a marginal position – at best – for transformative action. Being confined to less than one page of *TJ* and absent in *JaF*, the discussion of the militant activist and forcible resistance like the point above show how Rawls was unfazed by the need for devising a mechanism of social transformation from unjust to just conditions, let alone a non-moralistic framework of emancipation. He places a large amount of faith in the appeal of moral persuasion and the sense of justice as a kind of invisible hand, gently guiding individuals toward the principles of justice.

What is more, the conception of the individual in Rawls not only applies in cases of a perfectly or nearly just society, but across *all* societies. While he does distinguish, most prominently in *Law of Peoples*, between reasonable liberal, decent, outlaw, burdened, and benevolent absolutist societies, he insists on taking 'men as they are', following Rousseau (Rawls 1999a, 7). This implies that he is not working with an idealised model of the psychology of the individual but seeks to really describe what he thinks the person is like: he works from 'persons' moral and psychological natures and how that nature works within a framework of political and social institutions' (Rawls 1999a,

7). This means that the character reconstructed and critiqued above holds not just for just societies – those where only civil disobedience is permissible – but also unjust societies that need emancipation. Yet Rawls thinks of the individual in terms of a sense of justice only to affect moral and political change in a reason-driven framework.

To this end, Rawls explicitly denounces common sense as a viable basis for justice: ‘There is no reason to assume that our sense of justice can be adequately characterized by familiar common sense precepts’ (Rawls 1999b, 41). Following Mouffe’s critique of Rawls, the rationalism of the theory of justice precludes due attention to affect (Mouffe 1995, 1543). This not only means there is no affect but also no place for the political, if we understand this as the arena of competing interests and conflictual relations between antagonists. This is at odds with the lessons learnt from Gramsci in the preceding chapters and amounts to a moral as opposed to a political theory of justice, in the sense that there is no collectivity, material interest, antagonistic struggle, or affect of note – these are drowned out in the original position by the veil of ignorance and the strong moral precepts that follow from the sense of justice being characterised as a form of moral rationality, devoid of ineradicable antagonistic political commitments.

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have pointed to the problems in Rawls of relying on enlightenment values of reason and rationality in particular to ground emancipation and its imperative. Using the recent recuperation of Rawls as a reticent socialist as an example, I have shown that whether or not Rawls is indeed committed to such an emancipatory vision is immaterial if he is unable to give a convincing account of social transformation. It is possible to engage in a further act of speculative reconstruction beyond Edmundson’s reconstruction of Rawls to suggest that Rawls would indeed endorse a theory of social transformation for socialism. This is highly implausible, however, because his commitment to rationality, reasonableness, public reason, and the sense of justice tie him to a fundamentally moralistic and consensus-driven model of politics purged of all affect and interest which is incompatible with emancipation. Social transformation is

not the pursuit of Pareto optimality but a political struggle between antagonistic forces. Those with power and wealth will not give this up freely.

Once a more comprehensive model of social transformation is accepted, the liberal-cum-socialist argument falls apart. Liberalism can look emancipatory until ideals of justice are supplemented with the necessary processes required to get there. In other words, without struggle, no emancipation. Emancipation requires social transformation in tension with values liberalism cherishes. The suggestion that a particular socialist liberalism or liberal socialism can be conjured up without attention to how it will come about is overly optimistic. Because public reason is unable to generate the kind of social transformation required for his socialism to take hold, the insufficient position of class injustice or class exploitation within Rawls' universe is fatal for the possibility of emancipation.

The problem is not so much a wrong set of normative commitments to moving beyond the capitalist mode of production, but a problem of transformation: emancipation cannot come about through the liberal methods proposed by Rawls. Tony Smith emphasises how 'the normative commitments underlying Marxian social theory and those elaborated by liberal egalitarians [specifically Rawls] broadly coincide' (T. Smith 2018, 341). Yet Rawls wants a market economy, even in property-owning democracy or liberal socialism (Rawls 1999b, 57), which Smith explains is untenable for an emancipated society (T. Smith 2018, 342ff) because markets consolidate, rather than distribute, power – as Rawls, Scott, and Friedrich von Hayek would have it (Hayek 1945). Smith thus concludes that 'a normative social theory for the twenty-first century must contribute in every possible way to this collective process of transformation and radicalisation. It must, in other words, move "beyond liberal egalitarianism"' (T. Smith 2018, 352). One of the reasons for this is because the enlightenment principles undergirding such liberal egalitarianism serve a non-emancipatory stabilising function.

To conclude, as Geuss polemically notes,

The apparent gap which many people think exists between the views of Rawls and, say, Ayn Rand is less important than the deep similarity in their basic views. A prison warden may put on a benevolent smile (Rawls) or a grim scowl (Ayn Rand), but that is a mere result of temperament, mood, calculation and

the demands of the immediate situation: the fact remains that he is the warden of the prison, and, more importantly, that the prison is a prison (Geuss 2014a, para. 6).

In other words, the kind of moral normativism of the conciliatory project Rawls engages in not only mirrors a peculiarly American ideology but can be mobilised to defend an unjust neoliberal world order. Geuss insists *TJ* attempted to 'give a better foundation to American ideology than utilitarianism had been able to provide' (Geuss 2014a, para. 5). As I show in the following chapter, a similar complaint can be lodged against Scott. Thus, neither of these two ostensibly transformative thinkers offers a sufficient pathway to emancipation.

5. JAMES C. SCOTT: ANTI-ENLIGHTENMENT AGAINST EMANCIPATION

In the previous chapter I showed how Rawls, despite ostensibly demanding wide-ranging social change, can be read as blocking emancipation. Wedding politics to a particular anti-emancipatory form of enlightenment twinned with a restrictive understanding of civil disobedience, he sees politics as the exchange of ideas and appeals to dominant morality, achieved by casting a polity as the aggregation of reasonable and rational individuals. This prohibits affective antagonistic politics to radically restructure society. Thus, recent attempts to cast Rawls as an emancipatory figure should be viewed with caution. Yet the problem of a blockage on emancipation and the development of an emancipatory imperative is not confined to the liberal egalitarian tradition.

Turning to the eclectic anarchist James Scott might lead one to expect radically different outcomes because he is highly critical of these enlightenment values, thus providing a good resource for theorising emancipation by contributing to a critical understanding of resistance under capitalism. Influential in anthropology and area studies, Scott has not received much attention in the political theory literature.⁵⁹ His early ethnographic work and later archival and theoretical work celebrates ‘infrapolitics’ (J.C. Scott 1990, 183), i.e. everyday peasant resistance and hidden transcripts to push back against subordination by their masters in the tradition of history from below. This imbues subordinates with agency by insisting on the political power of subordinate rationality and the dangers of top-down rationality. This might at first sight spur optimism about emancipation. Perhaps counterintuitively, however, Scott retreats from emancipation. As I explain in this chapter, the celebration of infrapolitics twinned with an overly suspicious critique of the rational state offers little in the way of a vision of an emancipatory imperative – in other words, his overly dismissive approach to enlightenment stands in the way of emancipation.

⁵⁹ Turning to him sheds light on new debates in political theory that cognate disciplines initiated long ago around resistance, political action, and how these relate to injustices, inequality, and domination, bringing together disciplines which often talk in parallel conversations, or even worse, lag behind each other by several decades, “reinventing” controversies under the guise of disciplinary innovation.

The lack of emancipatory potential reveals itself when reading Scott as a normative theorist. If taken purely as empirical observation of peasant life – and the oppressive dimensions of the contemporary state – his account is quite compelling. Yet in both his own early attempts at transplanting this onto a normative account through a critique of Marxism, as well as the vast secondary literature that takes such a project further, it becomes clear that a political vision grounded in Scott's work appears unable to generate emancipatory political theory. While rooted in thick description, Scott switches into a prescriptive critique of influential accounts of exploitation and domination, particularly Gramsci. Since he is concerned with pushing back against particular theoretical understandings of subordinate politics and seeks to develop a rival theoretical framework to replace them, it would be inaccurate to characterise Scott's work as descriptive. Indeed, he is explicitly committed to normative critique (J.C. Scott 2008, 306).

As with Rawls, I read Scott symptomatically. This means I am not primarily concerned with a close textual reading and contribution to the Scott scholarship, narrowly defined. Since Scott's vast oeuvre spans five decades, a single, unitary argument also cannot be presented as his universal claim. Instead, I treat his work as symptomatic of wider tendencies and developments and use his claims to point to problems. First, I briefly explain Scott's overall thought, distinguishing between an earlier focus on infrapolitics and a later focus on critiques of the state. Second, I focus on how infrapolitics relate to emancipation and enlightenment as a form of rationalism from below. Third, I turn to his critique of the state and characterise this as a strong rejection of enlightenment principles. Fourth, I then relate these readings to current debates about the implications of Scott's work. From embrace by libertarians to scepticism by socialists, Scott is frequently deployed in ideological battles, but these do not pay sufficient attention to a central problem: how he retreats from the possibility and desirability of emancipation, in particular through a problematic conception of enlightenment reason and rationality. Fifth and finally, I develop a sustained critique of Scott's account showing how it cannot generate the emancipatory imperative needed today.

5.1 Everyday resistance and anti-statism

Scott writes explicitly in opposition to the possibility of emancipation: ‘many of the twentieth century’s political tragedies have flown the banner of progress, emancipation, and reform’ (J.C. Scott 1999, 343). Likewise, he laments the ostensible failures of the ‘revolutionary promise’ (J.C. Scott 2008, 350) of 20th century leftism. He carves out an alternative vision based around infrapolitics constituted by everyday resistance and hidden transcripts to celebrate the multifaceted resistances that fly under the radar of the masters they target. These amount to a rejection of ostensible leftist orthodoxy around three key issues: Romanticising anticolonial wars of national liberation, the feasibility and desirability of centralised revolutionary politics, as well as using ideology and hegemony as explanations for non-revolt.⁶⁰

5.1.1 Rejecting leftist orthodoxy

First, he critically reassesses leftist orthodoxy around anticolonialism, suggesting that ‘on the left, it is apparent that the inordinate attention devoted to peasant insurrections was stimulated by the Vietnam war and by a now fading left-wing, academic romance with wars of national liberation’ (J.C. Scott 2008, xv).⁶¹ In his view, these wars simply erected new oppressive hierarchies and bureaucracies to replace the old colonial ones, leaving formerly colonised peoples scarcely more liberated than before. Yet as Vincent Bevins and William Blum painstakingly demonstrate, these liberation movements were the targets of ruthless US-backed counter-revolutionary campaigns that cost hundreds of thousands of lives, particularly among communists (Bevins 2020; Blum 2003, 2013). This challenges the idea that it was simply due to poorly managed and needlessly hierarchical organisation that these nationally liberated countries failed on so many counts. A self-described ‘American *soixantehuitard* [68’er] formed by the Vietnam war’, Scott claims that ‘when the revolution becomes

⁶⁰ He draws chiefly on E.P. Thompson’s and Eric Hobsbawm’s history from below, Pierre Clastres’ anarchist anthropology, Foucault’s critique of governmentality and biopolitics, Ranajit Guha’s problematisation of Gramsci’s hegemony thesis, and Michel de Certeau’s work on the “everyday”. For an overview of these intellectual trajectories, see (Sivaramakrishnan 2005).

⁶¹ This romance can be seen for instance in the long-standing traditions of Third-Worldism and French Maoism, centred around figures like Samir Amin and Alan Badiou (Amin 2010; Badiou 2012).

the State, it becomes my enemy again' (J.C. Scott 2018). He is concerned with peasants in the Global South, not the industrial or post-industrial working class in the Global North – particularly in his early work. To him, emancipatory models of revolution that resonate with “leftists” in Europe and North America, or even with communists in South and Southeast Asia, are unappealing.⁶²

Second, Scott is therefore sceptical of centralised revolutionary politics and organised party politics generally. He suggests that ‘if revolution were a rare event before the creation of such [existing revolutionary] states, it now seems all but foreclosed’ (J.C. Scott 2008, 350). In other words, his problem is with a focus on peasant *insurrections*, which are an anomaly but convenient for leftists to highlight as they fit a narrative of subordinate class power and organisation. Instead, these are merely ‘flashes in the pan’ (J.C. Scott 2008, xvi) vis-à-vis the prevalence of the quiet prehistory of revolt. Scott doubts the revolutionary ambitions of subordinates, suggesting that they ‘are, after all, far less interested in changing the larger structures of the state and the law than “working the system...to their minimum disadvantage”’ (J.C. Scott 2008, xv), invoking Hobsbawm’s familiar phrase. He even contends that revolutionary struggle is ‘the preserve of the middle class and the intelligentsia’ (J.C. Scott 2008, xv), and focuses on those movements ‘with no formal organization, no formal leaders, no manifestoes [sic], no dues, no name, and no banner’ (J.C. Scott 2008, 35) – notwithstanding the fact ‘peasants were so prominently involved in ideologically proletarian Communist struggles the world over’ (Bloom 2013, 234).

Third, Scott rejects Marxist categories of ideology and hegemony (J.C. Scott 2008, 304ff). Though sympathetic to Gramsci’s broader framework, he nevertheless departs from an allegedly Eurocentric Gramscian analysis of politics (Ho 2011). Scott’s emphasis on everyday resistance attempts ‘to try to understand a kind of politics which most people in modern, organized, democratic systems don’t understand; that is the most common form of politics for subordinate groups’ (J.C. Scott 2013b). He claims that the subordinate class is *not* ‘mystified about its situation’ (J.C. Scott 2008, 304), i.e. there is no false consciousness or hegemony. Resistance, then, is a way to

⁶² For several years, Scott was an active participant in the anti-Vietnam War movement, yet for about a year he was, in his own words, ‘in effect a CIA agent’ in Myanmar (J.C. Scott 2013b, 1:11:57).

destabilise this narrative by imbuing peasants with political consciousness that leads them to act in ways unappreciated by said dominant narrative.

5.1.2 Infrapolitics and anti-statism

Scott develops these three critiques of left-wing orthodoxy through two main strands: Infrapolitics and anti-statism. In his early work, Scott uses ethnographic material from the rural Malaysian province Kedah, documenting the forms of hidden resistance that subordinates engage in against their masters (J.C. Scott 2008). He claims that although peasants acquiesce in public, they are acutely aware of their subjugation and resist under the surface in a plethora of ways: through ‘foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on’ (J.C. Scott 2008, xvi). These forms of everyday resistance challenge Marxist accounts of political agency and theories of revolution by insisting that political action happens on a smaller scale than all-out revolt with banners, demonstrations, and organisations. Instead, peasants and other peripheral populations do not acquiesce or contribute to their own domination, as theorists of ideology would have it (J.C. Scott 1990, 72). This brings together E.P. Thompson’s work on peasant agency with Ranajit Guha’s on domination without hegemony, i.e. that peasants do not actively reproduce their own oppression but are dominated against their will (Guha 1997; E.P. Thompson 1968).

Such everyday resistance is complemented by the ideological component of ‘hidden transcripts’ (J.C. Scott 1990, xii). Hidden transcripts exist under the surface of the public sphere in a hidden world of discourse not accessible to dominant classes or the state, in contrast to the public transcripts contained in official documents and public speech. Hidden transcripts take the form of ‘rumors, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes, and theater of the powerless’ which ‘insinuate a critique of power while hiding behind anonymity’ (J.C. Scott 1990, xiii). This celebration of subordinate agency questions hegemonic “duping” in favour of simply undertaking politics by other means in the form of the infrapolitics of hidden transcripts and everyday resistance. Not only is there hidden discourse, there is hidden resistance, too. Everyday resistance flies

under the radar as it relies on the kind of practices not directly noticeable by the powerful.

Everyday resistance and hidden transcripts together constitute 'infrapolitics' (J.C. Scott 1990), which makes up the bulk of subordinate political action and thus challenges the Gramscian narrative of hegemony whereby the subordinated consent to and reproduce their subordination. Scott offers an empirical counterpoint, but in so doing contributes to the theoretical and normative debates around hegemony and ideology, too (J.C. Scott 2008, 304-350). His declared purpose is to offer the resistance compliment to Foucault's work on domination, focusing on personal domination as opposed to Foucault's impersonal domination (J.C. Scott 1990, 21). For Scott, infrapolitics offers a way out of 'the problem with the hegemonic thesis', which purportedly struggles to 'explain how social change could ever originate from below' (J.C. Scott 1990, 78). Thus, Scott flips the question, arguing that 'it is not the miasma of power and thralldom that requires explanation. We require instead an understanding of a *misreading* by subordinate groups that seems to exaggerate their own power, the possibilities for emancipation, and to underestimate the power arrayed against them' (J.C. Scott 1990, 79).

In his later work, Scott continues this argument but moves his focus from celebrating bottom-up everyday resistance to criticising its top-down counterpart – centralised state authority as the dominant social order (J.C. Scott 1999, 2009, 2012a, 2013a, 2017). He seeks to 'understand the logic of modern state power' and how it wields this power to standardise and rationalise all aspects of life in modern societies (J.C. Scott 2017, xi). His critique is couched in the language of 'high modernism', which makes subjects 'legible', i.e. it inscribes certain codes onto them in order for the state to read its population (J.C. Scott 1999, 88). He defines high modernism as the 'sweeping, rational engineering of all aspects of social life in order to improve the human condition' (J.C. Scott 1999, 88). Such high modernism draws on a strong commitment to a particular form of enlightenment centring around progress, rationalism, and the primacy of scientific and technical knowledge (J.C. Scott 1999, 89). Moreover, high modernism purportedly erases the culture, tradition, and history of local places, thus

alienating people from their origins and extending the reach and power of a state bureaucracy that does not serve peasants and other subordinate classes.

The places that escape such high modernism are ungovernable and illegible, especially the global topographies beyond centralised state authority. Scott focuses on the 1 million square mile territory of hilly, mountainous, and largely impenetrable upland Southeast Asia beyond the direct control of lowland or valley central governments and state bureaucracies, the area Western scholars have called Zomia (van Schendel 2002). This allows Scott to focus on the ‘practices of nonstate peoples...who have, until recently, evaded absorption by states’ (J.C. Scott 2017, xi) where centuries of creeping state-led centralisation have driven scores of people to retreat into these more impenetrable locales. He claims that:

the utter institutional hegemony of the nation-state as a political unit has encouraged many ethnic groups in Zomia to aspire to their own nation-statehood. But what is novel and noteworthy for most of this long history in the hills is that ethnic and tribal identities have been put to the service not merely of autonomy but of statelessness (J.C. Scott 2009, 244).

This distinctly anarchist critique of the state celebrates the ability of dominated peoples to evade subordination in favour of non-hierarchy. The goal of statelessness rather than protection by the state is conceivably a kind of liberation from domination, directly in the form of governance – hierarchy and authority are seen as bad in and of themselves, regardless of who is in charge and which outcomes they produce.

Crucial to this evasion of power is the ‘barbarian’ (a member of a nonstate people) who evades such legibility exercises (J.C. Scott 1990).⁶³ By invoking the barbarian and ‘the history of the earliest states’ Scott seeks to debase the development of the state as a necessary part of human existence: ‘there is a strong case to be made that life outside the state—life as a “barbarian”—may often have been materially easier, freer, and healthier than life at least for nonelites inside civilization’ (J.C. Scott 1990, xii). The barbarian retreats to uplands like Zomia to escape state oppression. While

⁶³ This has clear parallels to Hobsbawm’s early work on social bandits and primitive rebels who perform a very similar kind of function in the pre-modern era (Hobsbawm 1959).

Scott's early work imbues peasants with agency against left orthodoxy, his later work pivots toward the state apparatus as the chief source of domination, oppression, and subordination. Particularly, the problem is the imposition of centralised state reason and rationality on subordinate groups, as I expand upon below.

This vision of resistance and anti-statism does in fact offer a lot of promise for a radical critique of the subordination so ubiquitous in existing societies. During a period of time where organised left-wing and socialist politics were at an ebb, revolutionary and emancipatory hopes and ambitions seemed implausible if not outright impossible. In such a context, everyday resistance enabled the construction of an argument that subordinates have a yearning for freedom from their subordination and social unfreedom, and that they practice this on a daily basis. Otto Bauer insisted on precisely this point, namely that

it is not the grand geological catastrophes that have changed the world but the small revolutions in the unnoticeable, the atoms that cannot even be studied with a microscope, that change the world, they amass the power with which they one day release in a geological catastrophe. The small, the unnoticeable, that which we call legwork [*Kleinarbeit*], that is the truly revolutionary (Bauer 1980, 588, my translation).⁶⁴

Such revolutionary legwork is what Scott's account allows us to appreciate and theorise. In this sense, everyday resistance provides a hope and a faith in the never fully extinguished possibility of emancipation. Yet, as I show below, Scott's undue rejection of especially rationality means his theory cannot contribute in a meaningful way to the establishment of an emancipatory imperative. Therefore, I now turn to using the prism of these enlightenment principles to understand Scott's departure from emancipation.

⁶⁴ The original reads: "Nicht die große geologische Katastrophe hat die Welt umgebildet, nein die kleinen Revolutionen, im unmerklichen, nicht einmal mehr mit dem Mikroskop studierbaren Atome, die ändern die Welt, die erzeugen die Kraft, die sich dann in einem Tage in einer geologischen Katastrophe auslöst. Das Kleine, das Unmerkliche, das wir Kleinarbeit nennen, das ist das wahre Revolutionäre".

5.2 Rationalism from below

In his early work, Scott relies on an ambivalent notion of rationality and reason as sources of empowerment, if not emancipation, for subordinates. In his later work, he sees both of them as sources of disempowerment for subordinates and a way for dominant structures to exercise power and domination over subordinates. I discuss his early and late work in turn.⁶⁵

While in his early work Scott might *prima facie* appear as an anti-rationalist, he rejects this, suggesting that he does not portray peasants as ‘dewy-eyed altruists. Nothing could be further from the truth. I described rational behavior...My argument was, in fact, entirely in keeping with what a rational choice analyst would expect...Some commentators described it later as a rational choice argument *avant la lettre* [without the label] (J.C. Scott 2013a, 134). While never explicitly committing to a full-blown rational choice model, he does not distance himself from the description as a rational choice theorist *avant la lettre*, and *Weapons of the Weak* already employs a rationalist understanding of peasant agency: they are ‘quite rational’ and ‘more or less rational’ (J.C. Scott 2008, 37, 326).

Hidden transcripts in particular reveal this kind of reason and rationalism of subordinates. The way they conceive of their domination (and their ability to resist it) relies on a clear understanding of its origins as well as the methods by which it can be resisted – a clearly rationalist logic driven by straightforward reasoning about their subordination.⁶⁶ The insistence on infrapolitics, i.e. practices of everyday resistance

⁶⁵ I take, rather uncontroversially, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (J.C. Scott 1990) as the end of his early work and *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (J.C. Scott 1999) as the starting point of his later work. This means his early work comprises *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*; *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*; and *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (J.C. Scott 1976, 1990, 2008). His later work comprises *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*; *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*; *Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play*; *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (J.C. Scott 1999, 2009, 2012a, 2017) The years of publication are not all first editions, hence the potential appearance of anachronism.

⁶⁶ This speaks to debates in Political Marxism between the historicists like E.P. Thompson and the structuralists like Robert Brenner. For the current state of these debates, see (Knafo and Teschke 2021; Moreno Zacarés 2021; Pal 2021).

and the discourse of hidden transcripts, suggests that peasants rationally calculate this to be the most effective strategy for achieving their ends. These ends are taken to be aligned with the subsistence principle and “getting by”, implying that peasants actually weigh up different strategies and for their desired ends pursue the means they think will get them there, in clear means-ends reasoning. This is an individualistic choice in response to the personal domination each peasant is subjected to and is necessary for dispensing with the Gramscian model of hegemony involving active participation in the maintenance of a system of domination through consent. An individual decides to resist based on their direct relation to a superior who is not an intermediary but the *source* of the domination. Despite Scott’s insistence on the absence of false consciousness and hegemony because subordinates are acutely aware of their own subordination, their understanding of the source of this subordination ends at their immediate superior, i.e. a focus on personal domination (Ho 2011).

Gramsci’s notion of hegemony is Scott’s explicit target. Subordinates contest the official narrative in the public transcript, whereby a rationalist paradigm of action emerges. Within such a paradigm, intentionality plays a key role (Baaz et al. 2017; Johansson and Vinthagen 2014), with the mental state of the actor rather than the outcome determining whether an act counts as resistance. Scott concedes in *Domination* that intent as the marker of resistance individualises the psychological aspect of politics and reinforces a rationalist paradigm of action, thus, ‘the poor in Sedaka work incessantly at maintaining...a particular view of who is rich, who is poor’ (J.C. Scott 2008, 310). If resistance is individual conscious action toward a clearly identified person, this necessarily relies on a paradigm of rationalism and its very high degree of political consciousness to undergird it.

Reason likewise plays a key role particularly for intrapolitics. Seeing hidden transcripts of subordinates as a form of resistance places special emphasis on the spoken word and the reasoned argument.⁶⁷ He combines a study of ‘power relations and discourse’ (J.C. Scott 1990, x), yet hidden transcripts are primarily a form of speech and of

⁶⁷ Practice – primarily in the form of performance – foretells the turn to performativity as a key category of resistance in e.g. Butler (Butler 1999).

discourse – in short, they are ‘forms of symbolic...and ideological resistance’ (J.C. Scott 2008, 304). Because *Domination* is a story about transcripts, it is mainly about what is said. Although gestures play a part too, these can be folded in to discourse more broadly, and Scott is mainly concerned with ‘voice’, ‘talking’, and ‘words’ (J.C. Scott 1990, ix). The text thus connects such utterances in order to provide a ‘diagnostic’ of power (J.C. Scott 1990, ix). The ability of subordinates to accurately identify the sources of their oppression relies on reason-giving and a clear sense of what is going on: there is no mystification (J.C. Scott 2008, 304). Indeed, ‘if, behind the facade of behavioral conformity imposed by elites, we find innumerable, anonymous acts of resistance, so do we also find, behind the facade of symbolic and ritual compliance, innumerable acts of ideological resistance’ (J.C. Scott 2008, 304).

When struggling to explain the tipping point of moving from passivity or acquiescence to resistance, for instance ‘why one slave suffers a beating in silence while another strikes back’, Scott suggests that even though acts of resistance might seem like ‘voluntarism’, they are ‘frequently experienced as essentially involuntary’, e.g. because they are subjectively felt as necessary and without alternative (J.C. Scott 1990, 218). Yet even here, he is at pains to fit the action into a paradigm of rationality because the social bonds of solidarity and collective affect are not considered. Indeed, peasants ‘avoid direct and open defiance against external domination only because they are aware – *rationality* – of their inferior position in the social hierarchy’ (Ho 2011, 43). Likewise, everyday resistance relies on ‘individual motivations and strategic calculations’ (Ho 2011, 50). The anger and rage that makes subordinates turn to resistance is conceived as individualistic; a personal and internal emotion that is not grounded in collectives – in short, there is limited space for affect as collective, socially held emotions.⁶⁸ Moreover, in the attempt to grant subordinates agency, Scott both gives up on the more material and structural factors as well as the affective and “non-rational” ones.

⁶⁸ Granted, the analysis of class relations by subordinates necessarily has a collective dimension to it and the kind of reason involved in infrapolitics is partly a ‘social reasoning’ (J.C. Scott 2008, 171), such that it relies on collective meaning-making among equals against their dominators. Yet this is then negated by the intense suspicion of state rationality in his later critique of the state.

Having established the rational agency of subordinates, next, Scott transmutes his attention to the other side of the equation, namely the form of state rationality that pervades modern life and is the source of many of its ills.

5.3 Anti-rationalism from above

In his later work on anti-statism, the enlightenment principles of reason and rationality become a major problem in Scott's eyes, decisively departing from the rationalist framework and moving to a strong anti-rationalism. This is where the lack of emancipation emerges most clearly. Thus, he remains within a framework of rationalism from below as good and rationalism from above as bad. Two particular elements highlight this: high modernism and *mētis*.

First and foremost, this later work centres on an aversion to 'high modernism' (J.C. Scott 1999, 88). This refers to

a strong, one might even say muscle-bound, version of the self-confidence about scientific and technical progress, the expansion of production, the growing satisfaction of human needs, the mastery of nature (including human nature), and, above all, the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws (J.C. Scott 1999, 4).

This definition explicitly considers high modernism as a form of rationalism, underpinned by the cultural supremacy over the natural so central to the notion of reason (Plumwood 2002). Such high modernism involves 'sweeping, rational engineering of all aspects of social life in order to improve the human condition' (J.C. Scott 1999, 88), and is therefore closely tied up with the enlightenment principle of progress, too. Among the archetypal high modernists, Scott ranks Le Corbusier and Lenin – showing how so-called 'authoritarian high modernism' more often than not is conceived by him as an explicit anti-leftist phenomenon, although he is at pains to point out how it has both left- and right-wing variants (J.C. Scott 1999, 88-9). The problem with high modernism is that it conceives of politics in authoritarian terms, i.e. as an exercise in (illegitimate) authority. As I show below, this is particularly germane

for co-optation by neoliberalism, libertarianism, and defenders of the capitalist status quo.

Like high modernism, Scott emphasises the problem of *mētis*. This Ancient Greek term most literally means ‘cunning intelligence’ and involves a practical set of skills drawing on local knowledge, the closest approximation of which is ‘indigenous technical knowledge’ (J.C. Scott 1999, 313). Such knowledge cannot easily be transplanted and universalised in the way that high modernist enlightenment theorists of progress want. This is particularly evident, to Scott, in schemes of legibility and standardisation, for example,

the creation of permanent last names, the standardization of weights and measures, the establishment of cadastral surveys and population registers, the invention of freehold tenure, the standardization of language and legal discourse, the design of cities, and the organization of transportation seemed comprehensible as attempts at legibility and simplification (J.C. Scott 1999, 2).

These processes lead to centralised state control over populations across a multiplicity of arenas in life.

He laments how ‘the progenitors of such plans [schemes of legibility and standardization] regarded themselves as far smarter and farseeing than they really were and, at the same time, regarded their subjects as far more stupid and incompetent than *they* really were’ (J.C. Scott 1999, 343). This mirrors the overall structure of Scott’s arguments around rationality from below versus rationality from above. Such *mētis* might seem to echo the ideas of common sense and the little tradition found in Gramsci. Indeed, Scott cautiously engages with the ‘little tradition’ of persistent subordinate values and norms despite dominant pressures (J.C. Scott 1977). Yet while for Gramsci these ideas are politically empowering, for Scott they are disempowering – they contribute only very little to an emancipatory imperative.

Indeed, the proposed solution to the problems of high modernism and *mētis* is four ‘rules of thumb’: Take small steps, favour reversibility, plan on surprises, and plan on human inventiveness (J.C. Scott 1999, 345). Small steps involves ‘wherever possible to take a small step, stand back, observe, and then plan the next small move’, i.e. a

form of gradualism (J.C. Scott 1999, 345). Favouring reversibility means ‘to prefer interventions that can easily be undone if they turn out to be mistakes’ (J.C. Scott 1999, 345). Planning on surprises means to ‘choose plans that allow the largest accommodation to the unforeseen’ (J.C. Scott 1999, 345). Finally, planning on human inventiveness means to ‘always plan under the assumption that those who become involved in the project later will have or will develop the experience and insight to improve on the design’ (J.C. Scott 1999, 345). Scott here embraces the work of Hayek: ‘There is a curiously resounding unanimity...between such right-wing critics of the command economy as Friedrich Hayek and such left-wing critics of Communist authoritarianism as Prince Peter Kropotkin... Both had a great deal of respect for the diversity of human actions and the insurmountable difficulties in successfully coordinating millions of transactions’ (J.C. Scott 1999, 344). I now turn to the secondary literature which probes the limits of resistance and anti-statism as emancipation but does not systematically and explicitly consider the problems of emancipation and political agency alongside a critique of Scott’s conception of enlightenment reason and rationality.

5.4 Against the state, against emancipation

Scott’s anti-state critique has been embraced by right-libertarians, illustrating its non-emancipatory role. In a special issue dedicated to *Seeing Like a State* in libertarian think tank Cato Institute’s journal *Cato Unbound*, Jacob T. Levy not only calls it ‘one of the most important books in political science of the past twenty years’ but crucial for the development of libertarian thought (Levy 2010, para. 1).⁶⁹ Scott even produced the lead essay while a series of libertarian commentators responded – considering the compatibility of Scott’s suspicion of centralised authority with free market principles. Although critical points emerge, the overall picture is one of celebrating Scott’s contribution to aligning those two elements (Boudreaux et al. 2010): with Brad DeLong going so far as to say that ‘every economist who reads it [*Seeing Like a State*] will see it as marking the final stage in the intellectual struggle that the Austrian tradition has

⁶⁹ This view is echoed by critical observers: ‘Scott’s anti-state discourse has more in common with views of libertarian philosophers, anarcho-capitalist thinkers and neo-liberal economists’ (Brass 2012, 125-6).

long waged against apostles of central planning' (DeLong 2007, para. 2). DeLong further claims that 'Friedrich Hayek, after all, won the Nobel Prize in Economic Science for making many of Scott's key arguments' (DeLong 2007, para. 5). Indeed, Scott is here read as a major contributor to the neoliberal project of dismantling the state outside its capacities to defend and extend markets and capital. For libertarians and Scott alike, emancipation is understood merely as the liberation from authority, seeing politics as the task of reducing the power of the state as it prohibits and hinders freedom. While Scott is not a right-libertarian, he nevertheless agrees on the basic principle that authority and the state are the main problems in the contemporary world, and that rational planning is at the heart of what makes the state so reprehensible (Singh 2019).

Marxists and other leftists raise concerns about the limited political potential of both infrapolitics and anti-statism, yet the argument that this contributes to a retreat from emancipatory ends is not fully pursued.⁷⁰ Lila Abu-Lughod problematises the retreat from not just 'the overthrow of systems' but even the more limited notion of 'ideologies of emancipation' (Abu-Lughod 1989, 41). She correctly diagnoses the limited emancipatory potential of resistance, arguing that Scott's resistance should only be used as a 'diagnostic of power', not an object to be romanticised itself (Abu-Lughod 1989, 41). If resistance can be found everywhere, it raises questions about whether this is resistance at all – particularly if in most cases it does not erupt or evolve into more explicit revolt. If such resistance is found everywhere, there is little standing in the way of even locating resistance to the resistance, *ad infinitum* – echoing Habermas' critique of infinite regress in Foucault (Couzens Hoy 1986) – by applying scholars' pre-existing moral norms onto subordinates (M.F. Brown 1996, 734).

Furthermore, infrapolitics might not be the best interpretation of the daily lives of subordinates because of the problem of 'ethnographic refusal' (Ortner 1995). There

⁷⁰ The emergence of the academic field "resistance studies", developed by Stellan Vinthagen, draws on Scott and the study of non-violent resistance to develop an empirically-informed inquiry into practices of resistance – often in its everyday sense. Johansson and Vinthagen emphasise 'class resistance', which is more materialist than Scott's version, suggesting that perhaps everyday resistance can be moved in a more revolutionary direction, which might seem closer to what I advocate (Johansson and Vinthagen 2014). Yet Johansson and Vinthagen focus such class resistance on a normative project of nonviolence.

might be another layer of hidden transcripts invisible to the ethnographer – transcripts hidden from the transcriber of even the hidden transcript. If there is a distinction between public and hidden transcripts, this can be applied ad infinitum even to the hidden transcripts. Thus, Scott might only have access to a public version of the hidden transcript and not the full story. Again, the problem of infinite regress emerges. This reveals a problem of the transparency of reason and the ability to reliably trust the rational calculations of political actors, and whether the hidden transcript is simply another inscription by the transcriber of their own biases and convictions.

Forms of resistance against mundane daily phenomena are thereby translated into political acts even if the actors do not claim them to be so – turning the ‘apparently trivial into the fatefully political’, even when there is insufficient evidence to conclude so, as Marshall Sahlins points out (Sahlins quoted in M.F. Brown 1996, 729). The totalising power of the resistance paradigm sees everyday resistance everywhere yet does not account for any further political ramifications in terms of how it could be mobilised or organised. Beyond merely overextending or moralising, everyday resistance focuses unduly on ‘personal domination’ over ‘impersonal domination’ which implies an individualistic conception of politics (Ho 2011, 44). This is because Scott bases resistance on a patron-client understanding of rural politics which individualises the experience of domination to a clear source and clear outlet within the power-resistance paradigm that emerged with Foucault but carried over by Scott, giving up on emancipation and reducing politics to power. It thereby exists on the terms of power rather than seeking to break free from its grip (K.B. Anderson 2013). This is not to say that power can be left behind entirely, but that it should be overturned rather than merely resisted, and in any case, Scott does not theorise the strategies and structures needed to do so.

A different strand of critique is levelled against Scott’s anti-statism. He can be seen as the latest figurehead in the task initiated by Hayek and carried over by Foucault, Toni Negri, and Pierre Clastres who consider the prime aim of politics to be to ‘cut the head off the king’ (Olsen and Zamora 2019, para. 19). Scott’s focus on the oppressive nature of the state and its sovereign head means that the modern state bears ‘family semblance to the schemes of legibility and standardization devised by the absolutist

kings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’ (J.C. Scott 1999, 343). Yet the state takes these schemes much further. As a way of cutting the head of the king in a figurative sense, he is close to libertarian Patri Friedman’s proposal for off-shore sovereign ocean colonies (Lee 2008). Scott too celebrates the openness of oceans, which ‘– like the hills – are open spaces that make it difficult for States to conscript population, tax them or limit their freedom’ (J.C. Scott 2018, final para.). This is primarily motivated by a suspicion of the centralising force of states rather than a concern with exploitation or domination: ‘In the search for alternative ways of conceptualizing social change outside the sovereign model – meaning outside majority rule and the conquest of state power – they sometimes saw, along with neoliberals, the state as the primary, or worst, kind of coercion’ (Olsen and Zamora 2019, para. 19). Scott represents the ‘anti-statist left’, suspicious of institution-building and political organising, whereby ‘the Left’s abandonment of the project of imagining and building collective institutions devoted to creating the good society is a crucial component of our present situation’ (Olsen and Zamora 2019, para. 23).

The state – through pressure from organized labour and political mobilizations – can be a source rather than enemy of emancipation, however. This is not to suggest that only the state offers the outlet for collective institutions, of course, yet it is unclear how Scott’s professed the dismantling of the state can or will contribute to the kind of processes of emancipation I outlined in *Chapters 1* and *2*. In this sense, as Samuel Moyn posits, ‘both anarchists and neoliberals have combined in our time to obscure the fact that, to date, the state has been the most successful technology known to history for imagining and institutionalizing liberty and equality, even though it has often failed and has never worked perfectly’ (Moyn 2017, para. 24).⁷¹ Scott sets the scene for contemporary efforts to dismantle the state – even when this is done in the name of free markets, competitiveness, and (negative bourgeois) freedom in direct opposition to emancipation.

By appealing to the need of a radical restructuring of society but giving up on the idea of revolution, it is unclear how Scott proposes this restructuring to take place. While

⁷¹ This, to be sure, is perhaps closer to the political emancipation I deemed insufficient. Yet the point still holds for a more expansive understanding of critical emancipation.

the state can be oppressive and trample on people's freedom, the argument for its undesirability is hypothetical if not counterfactual: 'Scott's rosy suggestion that life was peachy before bread came is never argued, except by showing the alternative to be terrible' (Moyn 2017, para. 26). The problem here is that Scott is right if the claim merely is that "certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed", as the subtitle of the book suggests. Yet this is a trivial claim – of course not *all* such schemes will succeed, but the point is that Scott does not provide a convincing alternative to the at least occasionally democratising and equalising schemes that states have been behind. In other words, the state might need to be the abstraction within (and against) which to imagine and instantiate collective life, even if the role of that state in an emancipated society is quite distinct from the role it plays in a society of domination and exploitation.

5.5 (Anti-)enlightenment against emancipation

In the previous section, I outlined the key critiques from the secondary literature. I now tighten the screw on Scott to show how, unfortunately, his infrapolitics is equally unable to ground emancipation by developing a series of critiques that build on the extant secondary literature: first, around rationalism, planning, and anti-statism; second, around reason, discourse, and individualism.

5.5.1 Rationalism, planning, and anti-statism

Scott conceives of infrapolitics and its everyday resistance as defensive and reactive, therefore not offering a political project for how to change society. The critique of the state is grounded in a strong rejection of rationality and planning, celebrating a form of subordinate action unable to challenge established power. To be sure, Scott correctly points to the failures of rationalist hubris. Rationalised mass agriculture under capitalism, for instance, has not seemed particularly rational insofar as it can increase outputs but still does not manage to feed everyone. Yet the solution is not to glorify the return to the pre-modern, or the 'primitive' (Hobsbawm 1959), because the problem does not (only) lie with the absence of having a good plan for how to execute a difficult

task but which principles and values undergird those plans. Rational plans are neither inherently good nor inherently bad (Blau 2020). The struggle over these principles and values, and the ability to implement them, is what matters most. In short, the question is a political one. His proposal thus evades reckoning with how to overturn power, a problem that runs deeper than merely an organisational question. Scott's move from the defence of the rationality of peasants to the critique of the rationality of the state is consistent, but wrongheaded: he locates the problem in terms of rationality/irrationality, when the underlying problem is the politics for which such rationality/irrationality is utilised.

Following my argument in *Chapter 3*, a more convincing understanding of enlightenment principles like rationality recalibrates rather than embraces or rejects it. Simply asserting the occurrence of irrationality can in turn bolster the dichotomy between the rational and the irrational (Elster 2016). In economics, too, the turn against rational choice models toward behavioural economics maintains and thereby reifies the rational-irrational dichotomy, a relatively familiar claim in feminist philosophy (Jaggar 1983; Lloyd 1993). Rather than insisting on the irrationality of subordinates or the dupery of an 'ideological aroma' (Gramsci 1971, 336), the problem needs to be reframed away from reinforcing a simple rational/irrational, ideological/non-ideological dichotomy. For both the rational resistance of peasants and the rational domination of the state, rationalism is employed as a curb on transformative political action since this critique of rationalism as the foundation of the modernist narrative of progress ends up with an over-simplified schema of "from below equals good, from above equals bad".⁷²

Such a vertically-determined view of politics eschews any form of organised politics and is difficult to square with the enormous efforts that do go into such organising, especially among the most exploited industrial workers in the Global South. Levels of labour unrest at the point of production is at all-time high levels for instance in China (China Labour Bulletin 2021) and such unrest might be structurally determined insofar

⁷² A similar kind of charge could be put against Aníbal Quijano's decoloniality framework of antimodernity – which is at risk of affirming any kind of antimodernity, even when it is reactionary (Quijano 2007).

as the relations of production shift as producers consolidate and in the process become increasingly vulnerable to organised labour (Kumar 2020). Scott's neglect of this also overlooks the long history of the extent of solidarity beyond the immediate context of the oppressed in one geographical location. International solidarity is a cornerstone of labour organising, social movement-building, and political mobilisation. While the historical failures of such internationalism abound, the internationalist dimension of anti-colonial struggles in the Global South – from Angola to Vietnam, from South Africa to Palestine – cannot be overlooked. In the context of anticolonial wars of liberation that would ostensibly liberate subordinates from domination but merely replaced one form of domination with another, Scott is right to suggest that the new state continued the existence of domination – but the causes of this are more complicated than simply saying the problem is with rational planning. Concerted US intervention and interference, the power of international financial institutions such as the IMF and WTO, as well as domestic comprador bourgeoisies acting as middle-men in the continued exploitation by the Global North all play a role in these processes. Scott thus evades the pertinent question of how to organise against the descent into state domination and falls into a simplistic anti-statism that will happily point out the flaws of state-led modernisation but is less specific on the collective struggles that could help overcome it, and how they could do so.

If peasants really are so rationally inclined as Scott suggests then their ability to plan and coordinate alongside the absence of ruling class hegemony would suggest that even if open revolt is rare there is nothing stopping the planning of long-term struggle and victory, as communist parties have been doing for over a century, often facing and being trumped by concerted efforts by the US to stop them in their tracks (Bevins 2020). Yet the rejection of rational planning and enlightenment progress precludes Scott from theorising this. While outright revolution and rebellion might indeed only be 'flashes in the pan' (J.C. Scott 2008, 28), this risks sliding from the descriptive to the normative by defending a particular kind of anti-emancipatory politics as a result. Emphasising a commitment to 'shared standards' (J.C. Scott 2008, xvii), i.e. common ground on which to build resistant politics, is impeded by Scott's suspicion of structure, scale, size, and planning, preventing going beyond everyday resistance toward theorising emancipation. If his account was purely descriptive, this might not be a

problem, but with the explicit slide into the normative (J.C. Scott 2008, 304-350), it becomes a prescription and value judgment as opposed to an empirical claim alone. By problematising the central role of rationalism and embracing the unruly, affective, and spontaneous dimension of politics *alongside* the carefully planned dimension, it is possible to move to a more generative and emancipatory alternative. Even if such politics is rare or lack a clear path to success in our contemporary context, the persistence of domination and exploitation suggest that any realistic understanding of politics must continue to grapple with the relationship between thought and action, theory and practice, and resistance and emancipation.

Such collective affective politics of solidarity and emancipation involve concrete political action and organising (Dean 2012; McAlevey 2016). The rational-irrational dichotomy, which Scott sees as the central dimension of politics, is thus untenable and goes beyond the narrow attempt to rationally secure self-help or self-respect. By focusing on the efforts of collectives and rejecting *individual* self-interest, through political education and organising, real shifts in power can be achieved. Scott suggests that focusing on the nitty-gritty daily lives of peasants reveals what is obscured by merely focusing on the national and state levels of politics. He is entirely correct that much goes under the radar of such a view. The turn to a focus on the everyday in the literature at the time was indeed welcome. Yet to draw the normative conclusions he does about the viability of organised politics does little to help such a world-view. Fleeing from the lowlands to the highlands is certainly an option in some contexts, but if it does not build a radically different society of equality, non-domination, and non-exploitation – in other words it should involve a process of emancipation – then it is hard to see how this can be a model to be copied by the increasingly dense, urban centres of the world that play host to the majority of its population, including the hyper-exploited urban industrial working class of the Global South.

Indeed, this critique of the state runs counter to emancipation because there is no pathway for ending exploitation merely by retreating to various highlands. Such anti-statism celebrates retreat and exodus, offering little political and critical emancipatory potential for affective solidarity and counter-hegemonic movements. The problem with upland anarchism is that eventually you run out of upland. As Tom Brass points out,

the Zomia narrative ‘mimics all the acts of imperial conquest: a foreign territory is acquired, its resources looted and property seized, and clients are placed upon its throne’ (Brass 2012, 123). Indeed, it is unclear how the same argument could not be made about how escaping to the slums could be a form of emancipation according to Scott’s position (Brass 2012, 130). While Scott emphasises that high modernism and the critique of the state is not a left- or right-wing tendency, today suspicions of revolutionary politics and high modernism are suspicious of the left. Neoliberalism reconfigures and strips the welfare state established through the post-war social democratic consensus, which means that centralised power wielded by the state is looked at with hostility because it is seen as inefficient or wasteful on neoliberal terms. In this context, the depoliticising individualism of instrumental rationality (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002) paralyses collective political action and facilitates neoliberal dismantling of the (welfare) state.

Despite Scott’s caustic assessment of ‘liberal theory’ working from the assumption of ‘unmarked citizens’ (J.C. Scott 1999, 346) such as Rawls’ original position, he ends up in an equally depoliticised place unable to envision how political agency is generated on a structural level. Crucially, this is not limited only to the failed cases of postcolonial state-building, as one might be tempted to think based only on *Weapons of the Weak* but extends all the way through the East Bloc in the Cold War, the establishment of planned cities and towns in the Global North, and political organisation across the globe. Despite rejecting the totalising explanation of grand narratives like modernism or Marxism-Leninism, Scott commits himself to another totalising explanation of the oppressiveness of the state, the liberation found in retreat from its grips, and the dignity-restoring effects of infrapolitics.⁷³ The maxims for avoiding high modernism discussed above are therefore overly formulaic, echoing Rawls’ coordination requirement in civil disobedience, but also prohibit the riskiness of taking a chance, of stepping out into the unknown, and of refusing the status-quo abetting pursuit of politics as usual.⁷⁴

⁷³ On the effects of infrapolitics, Scott comes close to Rawls again. Rawls emphasises respect, especially self-respect.

⁷⁴ For more on the frequent failures of megaprojects, see (Flyvbjerg 2003).

Specifically, rejecting planning for spontaneity need not in itself be a problem for an account of emancipation, but Scott does so in a way that precludes radical social transformation. By tying his critique of states to the role they have played in large-scale planning, he manages to reject both simultaneously. Yet this is a problem when a project of emancipation is understood as the combination of coordinated, organised, and collaborative projects. Spontaneity can lay bare the problems of oppressive structures, but in order to overturn such structures, it appears unlikely that the disparate and defensive actions of individuals will pose a fundamental threat to the existing order. He lauds everyday resistance specifically because it 'require[s] little or no coordination or planning' (J.C. Scott 1999, 29) – but what it means in practice is that such resistance is too scattered and thereby unable to affect the material structure of a society. Such a project might be useful in a Cold War or post-Cold War context of the failures of rationalist planning models – with their hubris of modernist and progressivist thinking. Yet with neoliberalism dismantling the equitable dimensions of state structures, interventions into markets, and protections of core industries and services, the critique of statist rationalist planning ends up serving a different end. For all its flaws and the difficulty of seeing how state power could be seized for radically different ends in a system of global capitalism, it is even harder to imagine how such ends could be achieved altogether outside of it.

Scott therefore ends up supporting a cautious and defensive reformism, bereft of the antagonisms of political struggle. For example, making 'a case for institutions that are...multifunctional, plastic, diverse, and adaptable' (J.C. Scott 1999, 353) is emptied of normative content such that even oppressive orders can fulfil them, and overlooks the ability of such institutions to effect meaningful and radical social change rather than the piecemeal reform Scott ends up defending. He compares the natural world and the benefits of e.g. polycropping over monocropping although it is not clear that this is analogous to how to organise social relations, production, consumption, distribution, and redistribution. Indeed, he concedes as much: 'a *roughly similar* case can be made, I think, for human institutions' (J.C. Scott 1999, 353, my emphasis). Indeed, by insisting on hierarchy and centralisation as the major evils, a non-hierarchical, decentralised yet deeply exploitative order can nevertheless persist, and more importantly there is little reflection on the processes and practices by which such

change can come about. Flexible labour markets, for instance, are often the hallmark of neoliberal capitalism, not of social democracy.

This becomes clear in the concluding paragraph of *Seeing Like a State*: ‘A good many institutions in liberal democracies already take such a form [multifunctional, plastic, diverse, and adaptable]’, suggesting that Scott is now not pursuing the challenge of envisioning a radically different society (J.C. Scott 1999, 357). Romanticising phenomena such as the small family farm does not offer a way out for the majority of the world’s population who live pay-check to pay-check or harvest to harvest. The defensive resistance of retreat does not provide even the contours of a roadmap of how to organise politically. What is more, without the politics of struggle – and the necessary role of collective action that centres around the political affects of solidarity and unity in struggle – it is difficult to imagine let alone enact strides toward a different kind of society and world. Insistence on language like revolution, emancipation, or solidarity can help avoid the slippage into neoliberal anti-governmentality, which might abolish centralised state power but replaces it – akin to the postcolonial state – with a similarly oppressive order.

He explicitly dismisses concerted efforts toward emancipation, insisting that the language of emancipation was used to justify social orders marginally less oppressive than the ones they replaced. This was a consequence of the fact that ‘the social orders they were designed to supplant were typically so manifestly unjust and oppressive that almost any new order might seem preferable’, and that these new orders ‘came cloaked in egalitarian, emancipatory ideas’ (J.C. Scott 1999, 352). However, this is a problematic revisionist version of anticolonial history. By taking aim at the state rather than the interlinked, global economic structure that gave rise to those “unjust and oppressive social orders”, Scott would for instance be unable to explain the immense achievements of e.g. Sankara’s social revolution, which radically improved the lives of millions of people through the improvement of public health and infrastructure and the liberation of women through a concerted, egalitarian state-led project of emancipation, or the many communist movements that wrested power out of the hands of colonial masters and at least attempted to rebuild societies along radically equal lines.

5.5.2 Reason, discourse, and individualism

One reason for this limited scope for emancipation comes from how infrapolitics imbues subordinates with additional agency yet only accounts for their domination in personal and individual terms. The rational-choice model of subordination assumes a too straightforward relationship between the sources of domination and the experience of subordination.⁷⁵ It also effectively blocks any coordinated action. The problem with domination in most of the world today is that its sources are *not* immediately clear – the impersonal nature of finance capital, of climate change, and of militarised border regimes is faceless, outsourced, and divested from individuals – drones, Iron Domes, and automated production will only make this even more the case in the future. The focus on personal rather than impersonal domination does not account sufficiently for the centrality of collective action, struggle, and affects to politics, as well as the structural and ideological nature of domination and exploitation. It is not even possible to trace it in a straightforward way to the rational state. Because the state in part serves to facilitate the market and not merely impose its sovereign will unilaterally, merely focusing on the oppressive nature of the rational state misses part of the target.

While Scott conceives of resistance as an act that might well be undertaken by collectives, this is a collective merely as the accumulation of individuals in an unorganised way: it is not collective action understood as more than the sum of its parts and grounded in solidarity and group interest, but rather the action of collections of individuals with their own rational choice calculus. Indeed, each individual engages in ‘calculated conformity’ (J.C. Scott 2008, 241). Scott draws up an artificial dichotomy between hidden, individual resistance and open, collective resistance. In the final chapter of *Weapons*, even he turns from description and interpretation of resistance toward a broader critique of the paradigm of hegemony. The target for individuals is not ‘capitalism’ but ‘capitalists’ (J.C. Scott 2008, 347), a personalised kind of domination to which individuals respond in turn (J.C. Scott 2008, 347).

Such analysis is affected by structural ideological mystifications such as dominant norms, culture, tradition, religion, and simply to the dominant system altogether,

⁷⁵ A similar argument could be lodged against the Analytical Marxists and the Political Marxists.

specifically in relation to affective attachments. The governing principles of a society, for instance the very commitment to the free and unrestricted agency of ordinary people, are interpellated in different ways by individuals yet together constitute an oppressive cultural force which serves to keep them subordinated, i.e. the impersonal dimension of domination (Ho 2011). In contrast to this, Scott insists that superiors try but fail to hold subordinates in an ideological grip, who actually ‘understand the larger realities of capital accumulation, proletarianization and marginalization’ to which they are subjected (J.C. Scott 2008, 304). This suggests that subordinates make a rational calculation based on an advanced and systematic understanding of their exploitation as relatively free agents (in contractual terms) acutely aware of the sources and consequences of their own domination, and in a way that each person qua their own subordination understands the *system* of domination and exploitation. The structure of the kind of resistance he is interested in does not seem to have the necessary power to establish an alternative social order.

As Jennet Kirkpatrick convincingly emphasises in close alignment with my argument, resistance cannot simply focus on individual, personal, and rational exodus:

resistance should include a discernible concern for the political world and for the shared cause of opposition. Resistant exit ought to reveal an interest in changing common political things, not solely an interest in the self...[but] connected to a larger political cause of opposition...resistance is often not entirely individual but rather is linked—albeit sometimes very loosely—to defiance and to a resistant community. This group can be furtive, fugitive, secret, and organized in a very minimal, haphazard way, but the important thing is that discernible bonds of solidarity exist between those resisting and this wider group. Exits that lack any sort of attachment or solidarity look less like resistance and more like garden-variety exits. Likewise, leave-takings that are clearly deficient in any concern for the political world are not acts of opposition. *Weapons, even those of the weak, have to have an edge to them* (Kirkpatrick 2017, 95, my emphasis).

As Kirkpatrick stresses, such personal, individual resistance is unable to generate a model for emancipatory politics because it is non-extendable: it does not offer a plan for how to generate further and broader struggle.

Indeed, Scott avoids grappling with the Gramscian little tradition's political potential and limitations alike, abandoning this idea very early in his work for the personal patron-client dyad, i.e. the direct form of domination exercised by a patron (e.g. a landlord) over a client (e.g. a peasant leaseholder), which relies on lived experience as its ontological basis. If resistance is merely the lived experience of discrete individuals faced with specific instances of domination which they then choose whether to resist against based on a rational calculation of what is the most efficacious action, then it is difficult to see how such an account could generate large-scale resistance and broader political dissent and, ultimately, organisation. He does not consider the situations where resistance turns into revolt, and their necessary interconnectedness. While he does not rule out the move into open revolt, the normative thrust of his argument in *Weapons* is a launchpad for a theoretical and normative attack on theories of emancipation even if it starts out as a descriptive and empirical argument about the laudability of the everyday resistance and hidden transcripts constituting infrapolitics.

Hence, the problem is not mainly a lack of knowledge, information, or even technology – but about how this is being put to use. As Val Plumwood posits in her discussion of how reason has contributed to impending ecological disaster,

it is not reason itself that is the problem, I believe, but rather arrogant and insensitive forms of it that have evolved in the framework of rationalism and its dominant narrative of reason's mastery of the opposing sphere of nature and disengagement from nature's contaminating elements of emotion, attachment and embodiment...reason has been made a vehicle for domination and death; it can and must become a vehicle for liberation and life (Plumwood 2002, 5).

Even if hidden transcripts provide an important corrective to the narrative of peasant docility and voluntary subordination, they serve an anti-emancipatory function by focusing – even romanticising – a discourse-driven world of talking behind the backs of superiors rather than open confrontation. By turning from everyday resistance to

hidden transcripts and later to anti-statism, Scott gives up on the most emancipatory dimension of his work in the quotidian resistance by the peasant class. This shift from practices to discourses is disarming for the construction of collective interests and emancipation is made difficult by hidden transcripts. Not only do they rely on a discourse-centric account of politics, they are also not anchored in an understanding of antagonism and contestation as the proper sites of politics. Since flight and evasion become the main options for subordinates, this merely leaves others to face the domination and exploitation instead – those who *can* be incorporated into the material structure of the dominant class, such as the urban and industrial segments of the subordinate class. Structuring resistance around discourse would be feasible if such discursive interventions can upend dominant discourses. If resistance merely preserves the dignity of subordinates, it is hard to see how this does not call for one or multiple further steps to clarify the path to emancipation.

The discourse-centric approach thereby elevates reason to an undue degree. Defending the narrative of dignity and self-help as crucial, he mischaracterises Gramsci as a figure who paints subordinates as ideologically duped by their superiors. This runs counter to the interpretation of Gramsci I offered in *Chapters 1-3*, whereby common sense and resistance to dominant narratives are key aspects of subordinate life. These are anchored in culture, religion, politics – and are intensely material, even if their expression is often in less economic terms. Scott does acknowledge the ‘material base’ of the ideological configurations (J.C. Scott 2008, 305), yet the corresponding anti-statism and reason-driven resistance privilege not just the individual or the spoken but also the face-to-face. Domination is laid bare, is directly felt, its sources known, and is an immediate relation between superior and subordinate. But because the model is developed for such situations within conditions of deep-seated, long-standing, or overwhelming subordination in which there is little scope for open rebellion or revolt, it is unclear what wider purchase it has outside peasant relations. Even if the power-resistance paradigm corresponds well to a Malaysian village, this does not by definition imply it holds wider applicability.

While infrapolitics is surely an essential component of subordinate life, it is a politics of sustenance and resilience, of making life liveable. By virtue of hidden transcripts

being hidden, they do not engage directly with the dominant discourse. This need not be a problem, if only there was a strategy of affective and antagonistic subversion to accompany it, yet Scott does not identify or encourage such a strategy. Thus, even though the resistance of e.g. theft and pilfering can help contribute to a slight shift in the material bases of a society, the main purpose of resistance becomes to secure self-help and self-respect (J.C. Scott 2008, 29). Self-help is a cornerstone in the mutual aid principle of anarchism, but if not connected to a larger political struggle, it seems unable to proliferate and generate wider transformation. It becomes an ethics or aesthetics of life rather than a strategy for victory. Likewise, self-respect as a doctrine of resistance is defensive. What is unclear is why his form of political reason as moralistic disapproval should hold much if any political potentiality for processes of emancipation unless it is coupled with extensive reflection on models of organisation – what Roberts calls emancipatory political theory in contrast to emancipatory politics (Roberts 2017) as I explained in *Chapter 1*. Without such models, the rejection of high modernism and its state rationality runs the risk of becoming a project of dismantling the welfarist protections offered by the state rather than developing an emancipatory imperative.

5.6 Conclusion

In sum, rather than provide a pathway to emancipation, Scott's oeuvre curtails such a possibility. By giving up on emancipation, political theory loses its critical edge. Political theory committed to the critical project should either encourage or legitimate transformative forces that seek – or can help seek – the emancipatory ends of ending exploitation and domination. Critically informed political theory can help generate the categories needed to imagine and effectuate such change and such forces. Scott is sceptical of political projects that operate under the banner of emancipation. Yet, the question to be answered, then, is whether everyday resistance and the critique of state power can nevertheless be considered emancipatory?

Thus, Scott does not offer an avenue for theorising emancipation, indeed precludes such theorisation because of the distrust of organised politics, or even politics altogether in the narrow sense of the term. Akin to the problems identified in Rawls,

Scott misdirects his project by taking aim at the state and by proposing a course of subordinate action that does not enable a challenge to established power, but either evades it (Zomia) or simply rejects it only below the surface (infrapolitics). Because he focuses on individual self-help, similar to Rawls' focus on self-respect, Scott overemphasises the individual dimension at the expense of imagining and encouraging collective politics. He focuses on the direct and 'lived experience' of peasants, and only mentions collectives in a hypothetical way that precludes action (J.C. Scott 2008, 44-45). To be sure, this is not an unfortunate omission or an oversight but a deliberate choice. The politics of everyday resistance overemphasises power at the expense of domination. By moving too quickly from the descriptive to the prescriptive in terms of how peasants resist, Scott turns his observations into a more general critique of organised politics.

I therefore now turn to Mouffe as a potential solution to the problematic understanding of enlightenment in both Rawls and Scott because, as will become clear, she has a much more promising understanding of enlightenment partly through her embrace of the affective dimensions of radical politics. However, she nevertheless departs from the critical emancipation of *Chapters 1 and 2*. By returning to Gramsci, I propose a way out of this problem.

6. CHANTAL MOUFFE: AFFECT WITH/AGAINST EMANCIPATION?

In the previous chapter I showed how Scott's conception of enlightenment rationalism contributes to his retreat from emancipation – despite his early embrace of bottom-up rationality, his strong suspicion of state rationality leads to a disarming politics that cannot ground emancipation. Having previously shown how Rawls' conception likewise facilitates a *cul-de-sac* of theorising emancipation, I now turn to a more promising theorist: Chantal Mouffe. Mouffe theorises conflict-driven agonistic democracy, left populism, and neo-Gramscian post-Marxism. Her more nuanced understanding of enlightenment, evident from her embrace of political affects and the emphasis on organisation, takes us a step closer to being able to develop an emancipatory imperative. She is particularly and explicitly critical of Rawls' enlightenment formulation of reason and rationality, in part by developing an account of affect. Indeed, Matthew Jones argues that in Mouffe, 'passions and beliefs are central to an agonistic understanding of politics' (Jones 2014, 23). This makes her a more promising theorist of a critical recalibration of enlightenment.

However, problems remain. She, too, seems to give up on the kind of emancipation outlined in *Chapters 1* and *2*. The insufficiently emancipatory conception of affect is a particular problem. Returning to Gramsci's account of political affect can improve these debates, indeed Mouffe's departure from Gramsci on this particular point is unfortunate. Given the lessons of Gramsci explicated in *Chapters 1-3*, I show how on this crucial point Mouffe departs from Gramsci's promising embrace of passion, feeling, and common sense in a material, interest-driven framework of opinion-formation. While she rejects the fixation on rationality, reason, and reasonableness in both liberal and Marxist theory, she does not sufficiently follow through with this claim. This departure therefore *also* partly emerges from a problematic conception of enlightenment. Her departure from emancipation complicates the possibility of unreservedly embracing her work as the solution to the problems identified in Rawls and Scott. This does not mean that we cannot learn anything from Mouffe; far from it. What it means is that we must go beyond Mouffe's contribution into a more emancipatory terrain by insisting on interest, antagonism, and materiality.

6.1 Agonistic radical democracy

Mouffe questions some of the Marxist tradition's key commitments by developing the idea of agonistic radical democracy. In her seminal text co-authored with Ernesto Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (HSS), they declare themselves 'post-Marxists', meaning both '*post-Marxists*' and '*post-Marxists*' (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 4).⁷⁶ This move is provoked particularly by the emergence of 'the new social movements' (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, vii) and the terminal decline of the Soviet bloc during the time of writing, i.e. the 1980s. Frustrated with the impasse of really existing socialism and the excitement around movements of political emancipation, from the women's movement to the gay liberation movement, (Laclau and) Mouffe sought to theorise the future directions of socialist strategy in a context where 'any social objectivity is constituted through acts of power' and is 'ultimately political' (Mouffe 1995, 1536), such that contestation and political struggle become central.

Among a wide range of influences, Mouffe proposes a radical democratic theory of identity-formation, bringing together among others Carl Schmitt's friend/enemy distinction, Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Ludwig Wittgenstein's ordinary language philosophy, and Jacques Derrida's deconstruction. This displaces the subject of transformation from no longer being the working class toward (a) radically contingent, indeterminate group(s) emerging through discursive articulation and political contestation – struggles over identities thereby take the front seat. For the purposes of my argument here, her later single-authored work which questions the rationalist commitments of 'liberal' political theory, especially Rawls (Mouffe 1987, 2016b) is particularly germane and important. Her political theory produces a thinly normative account centred around radical indeterminacy and discursive contestation. Radical democracy diagnoses the faults of contemporary society in terms of a lack of democratic rule, and that progressive movements therefore ought to push for the radicalisation of existing democratic norms and institutions rather than break with them *in toto*. On this view, freedom and equality can only be brought about through the

⁷⁶ Norman Geras memorably but controversially charged Mouffe with being an ex-Marxist rather than a post-Marxist (Geras 1987, 1988), which generated a flurry of debate in and beyond the *New Left Review*.

radicalisation of the ways they exist in real societies, involving discursive struggle over naming and politicising issues in particular directions (Laclau and Mouffe 2001).

The aim is a radicalised social democracy through democratic law-making. This involves an ambivalent relationship to the liberal tradition: on the one hand, Mouffe situates her contribution among 'left liberals' and is at pains not to 'attack liberal democracy' or to 'relinquish the great contribution made by the liberal tradition to the modern conception of democracy' (Mouffe 1999a, 5-6). On the other hand, she lambasts the failure of liberal thought to embrace the idea of the political, indeed, it is 'profoundly at odds with liberal thought' (Mouffe 1993, 3). She argues for a strategy of engagement, calling her project a 'radicalization of social democracy' rather than its 'total rejection' (Mouffe 2013, 232), dismissing claims for revolution and argues that 'parliamentary politics has a role to play in a radical democratic strategy' (Mouffe 2013, 232). This presupposes political conditions of an expansive substantive democratic regime with the right kind of political equality, and she questions the dichotomy between parliamentarism and the extra-parliamentarism of social movements as a false dilemma. Thus, the opening paragraph of *HSS* celebrates the proliferation of social struggles outside conventional party politics (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 1).

The ambivalence on the question of liberalism and liberal democracy can be resolved by turning to her distinction between liberal democracy and democratic capitalism (Mouffe 1995). While the latter is an economic mode of production with a political apparatus appended to it, the former is exclusively political. In other words, she is 'leaving aside its possible articulation with an economic system' (Mouffe 1995, 1534). She embraces pluralism as the cornerstone of modern liberal democracy since it allows for contestation – the very purpose of politics given her understanding of the political. This distinction between politics and the political, drawn from Schmitt (Schmitt 2007), is central here. Whereas politics refers to 'the ensemble of practices, discourses, and institutions that seek to establish a certain order', the political is the 'the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in all of human society, antagonism that can take many different forms and can emerge in diverse social relations' (Mouffe 1999b, 754). Such antagonism is even 'ineradicable' (Mouffe 1995, 1536).

Politics is always affected by the political, for which reason it is vital to theorise the political. Indeed, politics ‘consists in domesticating hostility’ (Mouffe 1999b, 754) to generate (or feign – following Scott) the existence of consensual socio-political relations in conditions of fundamental or ineradicable conflict – which is nevertheless only a ‘potential antagonism’ rather than an essential antagonism (Mouffe 1999b, 754). The appeal of this understanding of politics – or, to be more precise, the political – is in foregrounding the role of conflict and disagreement rather than the liberal desire for consensus and agreement. The problem is that such liberal agreement is exclusionary, for example grounded in citizenship, nationality, ethnicity, or political beliefs.

Mouffe thus defends an agonistic, not antagonistic, conception of democracy. Whereas antagonism is conflict between friends and enemies, agonism is conflict between adversaries (Mouffe 2013). Democratic politics is characterised by disagreement that can ultimately be overcome and there is no intractable Manichean division of interest like in the Marxist understanding of historical materialism with its fundamentally counterposed, mutually incompatible class interests. The consequences of this are twofold: it privileges discourse and discursive political strategies and sees political conflict as more about communication than coercion. It also follows from the radical democratic vision that *politicisation* is the chief purpose of political action. If interests are not fixed, any issue can be politicised in a particular direction irrespective of the existing political divisions that might exist since these are malleable. This is what leads Oliver Marchart to consider Laclau and Mouffe exemplars of ‘post-foundational’ thinking (Marchart 2018, 40ff).

The political impact of Mouffe’s work hardly can be overstated. Hugely influential in academic circles, its perhaps biggest impact has been on organised left-wing politics. Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, and La France Insoumise in France all rely heavily on Mouffe, in various ways – whether more implicitly or explicitly. More broadly, the entirety of left populist thinking in Europe is tinted by Mouffe’s theoretical framework, such that for example Die Linke in Germany, Enhedslisten in Denmark, and Labour in England under Jeremy Corbyn all contain left populist streaks *à la* Mouffe, not to speak of the Latin American left and which has long been strongly

influenced by both Laclau and Mouffe, pinnacled with the Pink Tide which is currently re-emerging in its second wave – in Peru, Brazil, and Chile to name just a few of its locations (Blackburn 2014; Dybedahl 2020; Errejón and Mouffe 2016; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014; Watts and Bale 2018).

Even its impressive real-world political influence aside, Mouffe's theoretical work holds a lot of positive appeal. The major strength of her oeuvre is in connecting the emergent social movements of the 1980s onwards with an insistence on the need for capturing state power through political organisation and institution-building. Here, she offers a much more promising current than e.g. Negri's autonomist parallelism, which retreats into the flashes in the pan Scott warned against. Thus, the portrayal of the alter-globalisation era of the Battle of Seattle as a victory, in the view of autonomists and anarchists, indicates the problem with not setting roots, building institutions, and corresponding activist and organisational capacity.

In contrast, Mouffe understands the importance of the state and the ability to simultaneously be critical of it and desiring to capture it, what in Marxist-Leninist language was conceptualised as seizing state power to enable its withering away. Likewise, her reckoning in a serious way with affects and passions is a welcome move that helps understand and explain the rise of far-right wing and right-wing populist politics in the dual post-9/11 and post-2008 financial crash era. Indeed, Mouffe is probably the most important contemporary left-wing theorist of affect for which reason she is my present focus.

6.2 Against emancipation?

Yet while there is much to celebrate in Mouffe, who has driven forward left-wing and progressive thinking for several decades, her work simultaneously tracks the gradual decline of Marxist and communist parties, as well as the decline – perhaps re-emerging recently – of Anglophone Marxist scholarship and research. This echoes Scott's non-revolutionary resignation. Thus, Stathis Kouvelakis contends that Mouffe's work is primarily an attack on Marxism, which according to her

deduced as a necessary consequence the existence of a subject endowed with a class consciousness aimed at putting an end to capitalism...Marxism is guilty of “essentialism”, the cardinal term of the post-Marxist critique of Marxism, and thus ever less able to understand contemporary forms of subjectivation and political conjunctures (Kouvelakis 2021, first para.).

Therefore, the primary aim of Mouffe’s post-Marxism or ex-Marxism is a rejection of the role of an essentialist conception of a materially grounded revolutionary subject. In its place stands a discursively articulated new identity, brought about through a radicalisation of liberal democracy.

However, Mouffe’s early work explicitly contains a concern for emancipation (Mouffe 2013). The starting point and, in a sense, overall purpose of *HSS* is precisely to locate the possibility and path to emancipation in the context of Thatcherite and Reaganite neoliberalism, the destruction of the welfare state, and the gradual waning – and eventual collapse – of the Eastern bloc. Laclau and Mouffe explicitly depart, in the dual sense of “to begin from” and “to leave”, the Marxist commitment to emancipation through a combination of ‘bequeathing’, ‘transforming’, ‘abandoning’, and ‘diluting’ the world of ‘classical Marxism’ (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 5). Importantly, Laclau and Mouffe diverge quite widely on the possibility and need for emancipation, as Mark Wenman outlines (Wenman 2003). While Laclau is committed to Marxism, even if only its strongly *post*-Marxist form, Mouffe is better characterised as a radical democratic theorist (Wenman 2003, 582ff). Thus, arguably Laclau remains within the Marxist tradition and Mouffe does not. This is precisely the reason for focusing on Mouffe as opposed to Laclau, because her more recent work departs quite firmly from the more emancipatory dimensions of *HSS*. Indeed, this departure can already be found in the final chapter of *HSS*, which outlines the radical democratic project, since Laclau has pointed out how this was essentially Mouffe’s rather than their joint contribution (Wenman 2003, 582-3).

While she doubles down on the need for emancipation and is attuned to the centrality of struggle by rejecting the ‘widely accepted view that the disastrous failure of the Soviet model forces us to reject the entirety of the emancipatory project’ (Mouffe 2013, 83), she sees the realisation of emancipation as primarily a democratic struggle, i.e. a

struggle of radicalising democracy and the existing elements of its liberal form. She explicitly claims that ‘the emancipatory ideal cannot be formulated in terms of a realization of any form of “communism”’ (Mouffe 2013, xi):

It is the very notion of “communism” that needs to be problematized because it strongly connotes the anti-political vision of a society where antagonisms have been eradicated and where law, the state and other regulatory institutions have become irrelevant (Mouffe 2013, 83).

This is a rejection of the ‘communist horizon’ (Mouffe 2013, 82ff) advocated by rival theorists such as Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, Costas Douzinas, and Jodi Dean (Badiou 2012; Dean 2012; Douzinas and Žižek 2010), because

the emancipatory project can no longer be conceived of as the elimination of power and the management of common affairs by social agents identified with the viewpoint of the social totality. There will always be antagonism, struggles and division of the social, and the need for institutions to deal with them will never disappear (Mouffe 2013, 84).

One of the crucial disagreements, then, is whether antagonism is a product of capitalism or is lodged in any kind of human sociability, regardless of the mode of production. By rejecting totality as a category, Mouffe simultaneously problematises the enlightenment principles as a grounding for emancipation. While Thomas Fossen contends Mouffe has an ‘emancipatory agonism’, this is conceived so thinly that it is not compatible with my understanding of critical emancipation: his is at most a political emancipation since he defines it simply as ‘attempts to redress instances of...inequity, injustice, exclusion, marginalization, subordination, and violence’ (Fossen 2008, 385). On such a view, Mouffe clearly can ground an emancipatory imperative, yet with a more substantive vision of critical emancipation like I developed earlier, she cannot. Indeed, Fossen grants this point, despite her earlier emancipatory framework (Fossen 2008, 387). I therefore do not need to go as far as theorists like Norman Geras who dismisses even the early Mouffe as an anti-emancipatory ex-Marxist (Geras 1988) – I simply begin from the claim that her later work does not contain the grounds for emancipation in the way I conceived it earlier.

In her single-authored work, Mouffe no longer offers an emancipatory imperative along the lines of a totalising analysis of society to be reconstituted in the vein of Marxist theory. Instead, she moves to arguing for symbolic representation of the people, which is about escaping domination such that the oppression along lines of for example social identity come to the fore. This is already evident from the preface to the second edition of *HSS*, where the authors underscore the project as one of departing from an ostensible Leninist bias in (then-)contemporary Marxist thought (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, ix), which they substitute for a post-structuralist analysis (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, xi). In other words, the move from a totalising and universalist understanding of society to a particularist and undecidable one.

She thus sees emancipation as the extension of the ongoing, long democratic revolution. Emancipation, for Mouffe, is ‘a radicalization of democracy’ (Mouffe 2013, 84), in which she rejects the idea of a ‘privileged agent’ (Mouffe 2013, 84) playing out as materially grounded and interest-driven class struggle. Rather, emancipation becomes the radicalisation of existing liberal principles of equality and democracy through coalition-building that can articulate and radicalise such principles in a more liberatory direction beyond the confines of liberalism. The purpose of politics, to her, is precisely to establish such coalitions in order to win hegemony:

We emphasized that the extension and radicalization of democratic struggles will never have a final point of arrival in the achievement of a fully liberated society. This is why the myth of communism as a transparent and reconciled society – which clearly implies the end of politics – must be abandoned (Mouffe 2013, 84).

Yet this would only be a problem – or even necessary – if I were to defend an orthodox or unreconstructed communist position, which I do not. My vision of emancipation is more accommodating and pluralistic without descending into indeterminate discursive articulation as the basis for social change, yet also does not collapse into a hollowed-out socialist vision of emancipation merely as the liberation from the oppression of neoliberalism or similar, as found in e.g. Butler. Indeed, ‘Mouffe understood socialism as an extension and deepening of the values associated with liberal democracy, and not, as it is presented in classical Marxist theory, as entirely antithetical to liberalism

or as a radical alternative to the existing system' (Wenman 2013, 201). This is some distance away from what I have in mind.

6.3 Against enlightenment

In order to probe the ways her vision is more appealing than Rawls' and Scott's, yet nevertheless fall short of the scope I wish to defend, I now zoom in specifically on the role of enlightenment in her work. On the one hand, Mouffe rejects the anti-rationalist anti-statism found in figures like Scott, on the other hand she explicitly rejects the rationalism of someone like Rawls. On the former point, she distances herself from figures like Scott (or Negri) who – as I explained in the previous chapter – locate the obstacle to a better society in the state, formulated through an opposition to organised party politics:

Of course, parties need to be drastically transformed in order to make them more representative of the democratic demands. But they do represent an important arena where the citizens can become engaged in the adversarial struggle and they provide a necessary terrain for the establishment of a truly agonistic politics (Mouffe 2013, 232).

This is a warning against seeing the demise of nation-state sovereignty as a form of emancipation from the negative effects of the state (Mouffe 2005, 109).

This also means that the state must play a necessary role alongside social movements and forms of resistance in effectuating radical social change. She 'take[s] issue with the total rejection of representative democracy' (Mouffe 2013, xiii), instead arguing for a dual strategy of parliamentarism and extra-parliamentarism: 'the [Gramscian] "war of position" requires the creation of a synergy between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary struggles, the working together of traditional political institutions like parties and trade unions with the different social movements' (Mouffe 2013, 232). Such a dual-pronged strategy is more compelling than the too dichotomous statism and anti-statism of Rawls and Scott, respectively. The choice is between an autonomist 'strategy of "withdrawal from institutions"' and her preferred alternative, 'engagement with institutions' (Mouffe 2013, 65), which implies a central role for seizing state power.

Withdrawal frequently involves engagement, which has to sometimes involve real or threatened withdrawal in order to remain effective (McAlevey 2016).⁷⁷

The problem with rationalism, to Mouffe, is that it obscures the ineradicable role of conflict in democratic societies. She rejects thinking of ‘the ideal of democracy as the realization of “rational consensus”’ (Mouffe 2000a, 7), arguing instead that such a rational consensus is precisely the source of – not the solution to – the ills of liberal democracy:

To negate the ineradicable character of antagonism and to aim at a universal rational consensus - this is the real threat to democracy. Indeed, this can lead to violence being unrecognized and hidden behind appeals to “rationality”, as is often the case in liberal thinking which disguises the necessary frontiers and forms of exclusion behind pretences of “neutrality” (Mouffe 2000a, 22).

Rationalism hence depoliticises and works by appeals to an idealist conception of democracy as the gradual process of finding common ground. Such common ground is crucial *within* radical democratic efforts, whether movement or party, but cannot be what grounds the quest for equality, democracy, and liberty.

She takes this point even further, claiming that ‘if there is anything that endangers democracy nowadays, it is precisely the rationalist approach, because it is blind to the nature of the political and denies the central role that passions play in the field of politics’ (Mouffe 2000b, 146; 2002). Indeed, she calls for a ‘break with the category of the subject as a rational transparent entity able to convey a homogeneous meaning on the total field of her conduct by being the source of her actions’ (Mouffe 2000b, 146). To Mouffe, ‘there is no longer a role to be played in this project [modernity] by the epistemological perspective of the Enlightenment’, for which reason the critique of rationalism that emerges from postmodernism must be embraced (Mouffe 1989, 33). She argues that ‘a rationalist approach is bound to remain blind to “the political” in its dimension of antagonism and that such an omission has very serious consequences

⁷⁷ The recent literature on movement parties points out how the boundary between party and movement is porous (della Porta et al. 2017), seen for instance in the 2011-13 Chile student movement, the 2012 Quebec student movement, and the 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. All three saw people engaged in emancipatory politics subsequently run for parliamentary office.

for democratic politics' (Mouffe 2000a, 11). Indeed, a rationalist approach is 'profoundly mistaken' and unable to ground claims of political legitimacy (Mouffe 2000a, 12).

This strand of her thought is a critique particularly of Rawls, in whose work 'passions are erased from the realm of politics, which is reduced to a neutral field of competing interests' (Mouffe 2016b, 226) – yet, as I have shown, even material interests disappear in Rawls. She claims that in contrast to thinkers such as Rawls and Habermas, the critique of 'essentialism' – comprising universalism and rationalism – is precisely what makes possible the 'radical democratic politic' (Mouffe 1995, 1533). In the rationalism of Rawls, Mouffe identifies a 'modus vivendi' approach that seeks to overcome conflict and contestation (Mouffe 1995, 1537). Following her understanding of the political as characterised by ineradicable conflict and contestation, the rationalist Rawlsian approach is a *cul-de-sac*. One of the key motivations for critiquing rationalism is therefore its individualist and liberal inflections which neglect attention to conflict. Rationalism and reason together imply the existence of normative "truth", insofar as a correct outcome can be reached, given a certain set of normative principles. In the case of Rawls, for instance, as I explored in *Chapter 4*, the depoliticising effects of this are clear, which Mouffe argues too.

However, Mouffe does not reject rationalism in totality. She explains: 'this is not to say that reason and rational argument should disappear from politics but that their role must be re-thought' (Mouffe 2000b, 148). Challenging rationality and reason in favour of a more complex and nuanced vision of political struggle that incorporates affect necessarily also involves questioning the clear-cut distinction between reason and affect. The problem is therefore not rationalism and reason *tout court*, but the particular uses to which they are put. This aligns very well with my overall argument around the need for a recalibration of enlightenment. One way of overcoming that undue rationalism is to reckon with the power of affects in politics, a discussion to which I now turn. However, problems persist even when considering affect, as I show further below, namely the insufficient emancipatory potential if such an account is not grounded in a materialist analysis that centres not just struggle or conflict, as Mouffe proposes, but in collective interest and therefore *antagonistic* struggle. Moreover, the

commitment to agonism over antagonism contains a residual reliance on reason in a non-emancipatory way.

6.4 Passions and affects against rationalism

Extending this critique of rationalism, Mouffe rightly argues for the need to incorporate affects in political theory (Mouffe 1993, 2000b, 2005, 2018). In her view, affects play a 'central role' (Mouffe 2000b, 146) and are the 'moving force in the field of politics' (Mouffe 2005, 24), even the 'moving forces of human conduct' (Mouffe 1993, 140). She therefore sets up a dichotomy between rationalist and affective approaches to the political and dismisses the former for the latter, couching her argument in the language not of emotion or affect but passion. 'The mistake of liberal rationalism', she posits, 'is to ignore the affective dimension mobilized by collective identifications and to imagine that those supposedly archaic "passions" are bound to disappear with the advance of individualism and the progress of rationality' (Mouffe 2005, 6). Rationalist approaches thus fail to understand the deep-seated role of passion in democratic politics, simultaneously using this argument to take aim at the undue individualism in contemporary societies, an argument closely aligned with mine.

She criticises mainstream parties for failing to counter the capture of sentiment and passion by the radical right, particularly through a commitment to reason and rational debate:

By limiting themselves to calls for reason, moderation and consensus, many democratic parties are showing their lack of understanding of the functioning of political logic. They do not understand the need to counter their adversaries by mobilizing affects and passions in a progressive direction (Mouffe 2000b, 148).

Thus, democracy cannot be reduced to reason-giving, one of the key problems identified in e.g. Rawls' work too, but must reckon with passions:

A democratic politics needs to have a real purchase on people's desires and fantasies and that, instead of opposing interests to sentiments and reason to passions, it should offer principles of identification which represent a real challenge to the ones promoted by the right (Mouffe 2000b, 148).

To this end, she contrasts passion with emotion, claiming that while emotion is individualist and atomistic, passion is collective. Hence, 'emotions are usually attached to individuals', whereas passion 'with its more violent connotations' implies a politics of conflict giving rise to 'collective political identities' that is more suited to an agonistic conception of democracy (Mouffe 2014, 149). Passion is therefore a collective expression of emotion. In contrast to this dichotomy, there is little distinction between affect and passion, for which reason I use affect similarly to Mouffe's understanding of passion. She will occasionally use the expression 'passions and affects' (Mouffe 2000a, 115; 1993, 95), suggesting there is little to distinguish them. When Mouffe talks about passions, she equates these to 'common affects' (Mouffe 2014, 155), i.e. the kinds of collective emotions that can be found in the political arena. The main reason she insists on passion is thus its conflictual, sometimes even violent connotations.

This might seem somewhat different from the way I accounted for my understanding of affect in *Chapters 1* and *3*. In order to make space for antagonistic encounters, I use the broader term affect instead of passion, whereby affect is anchored in the material as a set of social or collective emotions which contributes to the emancipatory imperative by eschewing a too narrow focus on reason-giving and instead moving toward an affective, passionate, and invigorated politics rooted in the feelings of people, grounded in material factors. Yet, my understanding of affect is quite close to Mouffe's understanding of passion plus a more material dimension.

For Mouffe, passions should be incorporated into politics by giving them a 'democratic outlet', proposing the need to 'channel', 'mobilize' and 'tame' such passions (Mouffe 2000b, 149). This is a crucial point I critique below. To her, such channeling, mobilising, and taming can push affects in a 'progressive direction' (Mouffe 2000b, 148). Appreciating how 'desires and fantasies' play a key role in politics implies rejecting the dichotomy of 'opposing interests to sentiments and reason to passions' (Mouffe 2000b, 148). While she claims passion should be tamed and mobilised, she is at pains to point out how 'the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions or to relegate them to the private sphere' (Mouffe 2000b, 149). For her, the rationalist model of democracy found in Rawls must either be supplemented with or supplanted by an embrace of affect. The point for Mouffe is to mobilise passions

‘toward democratic objectives’ (Mouffe 2005, 30), which requires transcending a left/right divide that conceives of politics in antagonistic, not agonistic, terms. Mouffe does however recently concede that insisting on agonism is not an empirical but a normative move: ‘agonism does not eliminate antagonism; it sublimates it. Clearly, there is always the possibility of antagonism suddenly resurging’ (Errejón and Mouffe 2016, 63).

6.5 Reasserting the materiality of affect

However, accepting Mouffe’s embrace of affect need not involve subscribing to her much more wide-ranging post-modern and post-structuralist position.⁷⁸ While her critical interrogation of enlightenment is promising, it is possible to devise a place for political affect and rationality that combines the two, through collective, antagonistic struggle based around material interests, in part by (re)turning to Gramsci. Having explicated Mouffe’s account of affect, I now briefly consider a few secondary critiques which indicate, yet do not fully extend the problems with this account. I probe how the emancipatory imperative gets lost in her work before developing this idea in the subsequent section by bringing Gramsci back into the picture.

One problem with Mouffe’s understanding of affects within the political is its eschewal of material interest, which, as I explain below, makes emancipation difficult if not impossible. Curiously, one of her strongest critics, Ellen Meiksins Wood – alongside Chibber – is in one way firmly on the same side as Mouffe on questions of political agency vis-à-vis structure (Chibber 2014, 2013; Wood 1981, 1984, 1995, 1998). Wood, along with her fellow Political Marxists, emphasise the importance of social and political struggle in processes of social transformation (Wood 1995, 1998), akin to what I argued in *Chapter 1*. Unfortunately, Marx’s account is able to accommodate fatalists of inevitability, who think political action was largely superfluous because the revolution is inevitable, as well as fatalists of impossibility, who see revolution as impossible, thereby eradicating the central role of struggle. Therefore, the role of

⁷⁸ The position of post-modernism vis-à-vis Mouffe is not straightforward, since she variably embraces and denounces it (Mouffe 2000a, 17). Yet this is not important for my argument.

struggle must be reiterated. Mouffe, rejecting both of these precisely by reinscribing the central role played by struggle, is clear that the 'counter-hegemonic offensive' is a 'complex process' that needs to take place 'in a variety of fields' (Mouffe 2013, 73). Yet she does not specify what role extra-parliamentary political action plays in this regard beyond saying it should be combined with parliamentary struggle. Likewise, Wood rejects the more deterministic strands of Marxist theory for focusing too much on the laws of motion of capitalism as an axiomatic system, instead favouring an agent-centric approach that emphasises struggle, particularly class struggle, while in Mouffe there is no class interest to ground such struggle (Wood 1981, 1984). In Mouffe's work, the target is not so much structuralism as it is objectivist social science (Marchart 2018, 42), yet both question a similar problematic – the tendency to reify certain social structures as beyond collective human malleability.

The agreement between Wood and Mouffe on the critique of structuralism is important, because here Wood demonstrates that Mouffe mischaracterises Marx and Marxism in order to set up a deterministic strawman against which to launch the departure from Marxism into post-Marxism (Wood 1998). Wood's agent-centred Marxism precisely seeks to challenge the structuralist bias in the more economic and deterministic strands of Marxist thinking, a nuance Mouffe does not appreciate (Wood 1984). Yet Marxism is compatible with an appreciation of how race, gender, and other forms of domination are central to capitalism today. What is more, the insistence on class struggle and a more historically grounded approach to understanding the economic system is compatible with an acknowledgement that the continuous recomposition of the working class means that a caricatured late 19th century urban industrial proletariat is not the model for emancipation any longer. Within structural confines, there is emancipatory agency on the part of the exploited and dominated.

Thus, Wood argues Mouffe has dissolved 'the social altogether into ideology or "discourse"' (Wood 1998, 47), where discursive articulations take the place of class interest and class struggle. Mouffe subscribes to the "laws of motion" interpretation of Marx as a technological determinist who has no scope for politics. This is a minority if not misrepresentative reading of Marx and Marxism, yet one that is necessary for Mouffe to dispense with any possibility of social antagonism around class interest and

therefore class struggle lines. Class interest need not descend into ostensible ‘class reductionism’ (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 77) whereby all social matters are *reduced* to class. Wood shows how Mouffe attributes to Marx a presumption ‘that the working class will emerge automatically as a unified political force in mechanical response to technological imperatives, and Marxism stands or falls according to whether this simple determinism holds true – which it clearly does not’ (Wood 1998, 56). In short, only a highly deterministic reading of Marx lends itself to the departure from materialism, class, and interest.

As a case in point of the possibility of an agent-centred account that nevertheless appreciates structural constraints and material factors, Mihaela Mihai improves on Mouffe’s particular understanding of affect. She stresses the need for finding ways to ‘include and fructify’ the ‘potential for collective political action’ of passions (Mihai 2014, 46). Moreover, she claims that ‘any theory of democratic politics that aims to recuperate affect must offer an account of how passions – just like reason – can be democratically engaged and transformed’ (Mihai 2014, 32). This is an improvement on Mouffe because Mihai insists that the issue is not just channelling these passions into rational arguments but also engaging them on a more equal footing with the straitjacket of enlightenment reason and rationality. Mouffe, in her quest to claim the primacy of discursive formations, is unable to account for the thorny and ineradicable complex of affects in mass politics. She is also unable to account for the underlying, structuring, and structured role of hope and optimism in effecting social transformation to begin with.

Turning specifically to affects, Mihai improves Mouffe’s account by arguing for a ‘weak constructivist’ account of affect (Mihai 2014). Affects are then not simply spontaneous and uncontrollable irrationalities but rather enter into a joint process with reasons such that the reason-affect dichotomy is not really a dichotomy after all. She better bridges the gap between reason and passion by departing from a ‘physiological’ approach of a strong dichotomy (Mihai 2014, 37). My argument is precisely centred around Mihai’s key claim, namely that ‘reason and emotion can both serve good or bad, democratic or undemocratic, moral or immoral purposes. Blaming the passion for all that is problematic in the world of politics is, therefore, one-sided and incomplete’ (Mihai

2014, 38). Although Mouffe emphasises the importance of political contestation, she does not extend this sufficiently to the issue of affect. Mihai extends Mouffe's argument to suggest that 'the issue, therefore, is not to eliminate passions, but to encourage citizens to do two things: first, cultivate a passion for democracy itself, and second, work with their passions in view of deciding which of their passionate commitments are compatible with democracy and worth keeping' (Mihai 2014, 42). However, Mihai also does not fully incorporate an analysis grounded in materialism and remains too wedded to Mouffe's radical indeterminacy on questions of the political. The strategy of politicising and extending democracy, without foundations, does not seem able to generate emancipation because it relies too heavily on the kind of reason-giving and gentler politics relying on civility, non-violence, and consensus.

Linked to this, potentially emancipatory politics contained within riots, strikes, or disobedience is on some level unassimilable to parliamentary liberal democratic politics (Clover 2016; Celikates 2016b). In her defence of liberal democratic values as the basis for an agonistic politics, Mouffe commits to an orderly politics that disciplines unconventionally political behaviour to a more moderate mode of engagement that produces more moderate political outcomes. To show and enact that another world is possible, emancipatory politics must be engaged in action that can transcend liberal democracy, not (simply) heal it. Forms of direct action might on the surface appear congruent with liberal democracy yet in practice usually involve a radical imaginary of structural transformation beyond merely legal changes – in short, they follow an emancipatory imperative.

As a key example of such non-conventional political agency I briefly mentioned above, Shelby focuses on forms of resistance in the 'dark ghetto' of poor urban areas in the US (Shelby 2016). He shows how political hip hop is a form of normatively transgressive and 'impure dissent' that has intrinsic, non-consequentialist value as a practice that ensures self-respect and dignity for African Americans amid white supremacy in the United States (Shelby 2016, 252ff).⁷⁹ This echoes Martin Luther King's famous line that 'a riot is a language of the unheard' (Mayer, Thörn, and Thörn

⁷⁹ Theresa Martinez points to rap music functioning as a voice of resistance that heralded the 1992 Los Angeles Riots (Martinez 1997).

2016, 16). Although such hip hop clearly functions on a linguistic level, since it is written and spoken as words, it transgresses the discursive realm both by its performative dimension as well as by not intervening in public reason or an ideal speech situation. There is little attempt at dialogue with dominant culture and politics, or in relation to hegemonic discourses. Indeed, even less linguistic forms of dissent exist as well, like the burning of cars, looting, or arson (Clover 2016; Mayer, Thörn, and Thörn 2016; Sutterlüty 2014). Yet what unites both types is their (intentional) failure to intervene through rational forms of reason-giving within a communicative paradigm. Mouffe is united with Habermas on this point: taming these passions might imply subservience to, or even complicity with, an oppressive order, rather than successful channelling them into a discursive arena that is open to all.⁸⁰

While Shelby points in an important direction, the Rawlsian and liberal non-emancipatory principles undergirding his work imply the need for supplementing or even supplanting his arguments with a more radical and emancipatory alternative. Shelby also does not have a developed account of social transformation. Mustafa Dikeç offers an empirically grounded foundation for such an alternative in his work on the Parisian *banlieues* (“ghettos”) (Dikeç 2007). Just like how interests are in one sense given but in another sense constructed, following Roberts (Roberts 2017), so are resistance and potentially emancipatory politics both given and constructed (Dikeç 2007, 4ff). Dikeç contends that the banlieues are associated with fear, trouble, and the breakdown of social order (Dikeç 2007, 8ff) in which the (sub)urban poor are seen as a threat and menace to dominant society. In Gramscian terms, this is in part precisely because of the unassimilable character of common sense among subalterns who do not simply absorb and reproduce hegemony without resistance. Likewise, Jacques Rancière highlights how the 2005 rioters from the banlieues were not able to articulate their demands in conventional democratic terms precisely because they are excluded from the possibility or opportunity to acquire the presuppositions necessary for entering such a democratic debate (Rancière 2010). Mouffe’s account risks defending a sanitised and orderly politics among procedural or formal rather than substantive equals. For those who are excluded from the political sphere, be it through *de jure*

⁸⁰ For a compelling feminist critique of Shelby, see (Threadcraft 2017).

disenfranchisement (e.g. prison inmates, ex-convicts, non-citizens, minors) or *de facto* disenfranchisement due to structural oppression (on the basis of e.g. class, race, gender, or sexuality), politics – even the political – is not an even playing field and marked not just by happenstance discrimination but by fundamental conflicts of material interests.

The linkage between affective outbursts and material politics means that non-linguistic or non-speech acts are not a ‘normal pathology’ but a ‘pathological normalcy’, to transplant Cas Mudde’s description of the extreme right (Mudde 2010). For example, riots are not an “illness” or extreme outlier but merely a symptom of a “sick” mainstream – congruent with the politics of the mainstream. Riots do not articulate demands but are messy, ambivalent, and not driven by or even able to be channelled into simple rational argument, and the need for hope and faith to maintain a future-oriented and emancipatory outlook in them is key (Pettit 2019). By insisting both on the need for channelling and taming passions as well as the need for granting them a central role in politics, Mouffe ends up with a conundrum difficult to resolve. Either she needs to concede that affects and passions are ineradicable or she needs to relegate them from the position as the moving force of politics.

Indeed, the affective character of revolt and other forms of contentious politics is constitutive of the political: the actions, expressions, and judgments of subordinate populations cannot be performed by the same standard as those of the superordinate or ruling class.⁸¹ The violence of the dark ghetto or the urban social movement frequently ends up characterised as ‘undesirable behaviour’ by those in power (Mihai 2014, 39), whereby affect merely replicates status quo values (Armon-Jones 1986) and delegitimises emancipatory politics – e.g. in the calls for compassion, temperance, or calm compromise. Higher levels of violence both against and by the urban poor suggests that logocentric communicative action is often not a realistic option. Mouffe is too caught up in a strategy of articulation (which presupposes the potential of being

⁸¹ Matthieu Kassovitz’s *La Haine* is probably one of the most visceral artistic depictions of this point in its suggestion that those in the most marginalised positions in society do not have the recourse of discursive enunciation. Here, in the aftermath of an urban riot, three residents of the Parisian banlieues are confronted with police violence, structural and direct racism, and exist in a constant antagonistic relation to the state and the racist segments of their surroundings.

articulated), eluding the possibility that there is an ineradicable remainder, that passion or affect can be reduced, channelled, and tamed, but will always leave behind a remnant. On Mouffe's model this would appear to be the case as well but the way she operationalises affect and passion with post-foundationalism suggests that she has to let go of their central role in the political.

This ties in with the troublesome role of civility in Mouffe's argument. She is worried about deliberative rationalism leading to the 'the crystallization of collective passions around issues which cannot be managed by the democratic process and an explosion of antagonisms that can tear up the very basis of civility' (Mouffe and Martin 2013, 204). Yet this might be a solution, not a problem (Delmas 2018). The most prominent forms of civility have a controversial and debilitating mediating role to play in protest politics and emancipatory struggles (Pineda 2019), despite recent attempts of recovery (Balibar 2015). Getting beyond hegemonic configurations of politics and genuinely seeking emancipation requires dispensing with civility, a pertinent point particularly in relation to Black Lives Matter (Hooker 2016, 2017; Terry 2015).

The problem is that respectability politics upholds a system of respect that is based on a system of power and thereby reinforces that very system even if it tries to challenge it. Indeed, 'by respecting [the formulas of politeness or rules of conduct] homage is paid not to the individual who is the apparent object of respect, but to the social order that makes this person respectable' (Bourdieu 2014, 35). Candice Delmas likewise argues that civility is in fact not a rule of law principle but a law-and-order principle, which is conservative and status quo-abetting (Delmas 2018, 26, 34).⁸² Incivility, not civility, can bring about emancipation because it pushes the limits of what is acceptable rather than simply appealing with demands that can be incorporated into ordinary parliamentary politics (Adams 2017), a claim that is increasingly gaining traction in relation to climate change as well (Malm 2021), in the defence of violence, sabotage, and property destruction.

⁸² Erin Pineda takes this point further in her critique of Delmas (Pineda 2019), as does Livingston (Livingston 2019). A fuller treatment of this specific subject would demand much further engagement, which is outside the scope of the thesis.

Precisely in operating outside the structures of parliamentary politics and the legalistic framework of conventional liberal civil disobedience, emancipatory political actors problematise the reason-giving of both these forms of politics. As Lois McNay contends,

despite the repeated claim that agonist democracy is sustained by ordinary citizen practices, Mouffe reverts to a rigid anti-essentialist logic that cannot treat the former as anything other than an uninteresting positivity or essentialism...The primacy of the “necessary” logic of the political over the inert realm of the social enables Mouffe to close off issues of power that are crucial to her account of agency. She finishes with an account of democratic agonism that is so far removed from the actual practices and dynamics of everyday life that its radical credentials are thrown into question (McNay 2014, 69).

This means that an emancipatory vision of politics must (re)turn to antagonism over agonism and insist on the existence of material interest over fully free-floating anti-essentialism. While Mouffe appreciates the need for a combined effort in both spaces and calls for the articulation of demands that can combine them, she does not sufficiently develop what emancipatory political action means for such articulation. Although she emphasises – even embraces – the proliferation of social movements, her focus on persuasion and discourse and the “channelling” of affects underestimates the short- and long-term benefits and potentials of emancipatory politics. The way it can feed into parliamentary politics, both in terms of providing a pipeline of activists-turned-officials as well as shifting dominant discourses, Overton windows of what are permissible discussions in mainstream politics, and material outcomes, needs to be appreciated.

6.6 With/against emancipation

Following these critiques, it is not conducive to set up too rigid a division between rationality and affect. Political agency is not dichotomously rational or affective and people’s passions are often simultaneously rooted in their understanding of the political and their seemingly rational arguments based on affective desires, hopes and

despair (Berlant 2011; Pettit 2017, 2019). Mouffe invites but does not fully achieve unity in bridging the gap between rationalism and affect. Gramsci has a more nuanced and convincing account of this because he also does not want to eradicate the role of reason in politics, yet his conception of affect (or, in his language, “feeling”) is better anchored in a vision for society and the future. Although will-formation and persuasion are important, such efforts must meet ordinary people where they are, taking into account the particular affective universes they inhabit. I return to him shortly.

Mouffe correctly emphasises the collective dimension of affect yet relegates affects below a defence of liberal-inflected democratic politics which blocks the emancipatory potential of effectuating a radically different world. Indeed, it might outright preclude the very possibility of this kind of transformation because she understates how such a vision of politics is *necessarily* bound up on an uncontrollable set of political affects that cannot be sublimated into discursive democratic demands. While appearing to want such a transformative ‘counter-hegemonic politics’ (Mouffe 2014, 157), her method for transformative politics risks preventing such possibilities: ‘these struggles must unfold within the basic horizon of liberal democratic constitutionalism...it seems clear that her theoretical framework lacks the resources to deliver a credible alternative to neo-liberalism’ (Wenman 2013, 216). The emphasis on furthering democratic institutions is vulnerable to erasing key questions of power, material forces, and structural determination. An undue faith in democratic institutions might appear too optimistic given the exclusionary track-record of liberalism in which the outside is used as a sublimation mechanism for liberalism to export its violence, whether in the form of torture, war, or sweatshops, outside its constitutive inside (Neu 2018; Losurdo 2011). Indeed, even processes of colonialism, incarceration, or urban “regeneration” can serve as ways of increasing profits by reducing surplus populations, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore documents in the case of the Californian prison complex (Gilmore 2007).

Although Mouffe dispels the rationalist dismissal of passion by deliberative democratic theorists, her vision should be critiqued not from a deliberative, rationalist standpoint but from a radical, affective-materialist standpoint because affects cannot be folded fully into the conventional, procedural democratic arena. The deep-seated, perhaps

even ineradicable, intensity of anger, hate, and disdain among subordinates does not lend itself well to discourse on logocentric terms. Similarly, for faith and hope, the structure of how these are attained and sustained might pose an insurmountable problem for a discourse-driven struggle over identification, with which even deliberative democrats are starting to grapple (Mendonça, Ercan, and Asenbaum 2020). Wanting to “tame” those passions by mobilizing them towards democratic designs’ (Mouffe 2000b, 149) is at risk of defending an indeterminate, status quo-abetting position because it only affirms democratic designs. Such democratic designs, if they are home to “tamed” affects, cannot grant sufficient space to how affects are not reducible to discursive demands. Insisting on the ultimate logocentrism of discursive democratic politics, whether deliberative or radical, implies a normative commitment that is at odds with the demands and desires of subordinate and oppressed people, who might not seek to be absorbed into a liberal democratic equilibrium but through massive social transformation secure a better and more just existence (Chibber 2013, 2014). Affects therefore play a key role in emancipatory change because they are irreducible to the demands of procedural democratic systems and thus can challenge such systems altogether.

Mouffe’s proposals of equality and democracy are normatively thin principles lacking specificity: there is hardly a mainstream – or often even fringe – political party which would not at least purport to defend equality and democracy. In other words, all kinds of politics unappealing to a progressive or radical activist or citizen can be justified with reference to equality and democracy. What taming, channelling, and mobilising entail, as well as what democratic designs she has in mind beyond agonism overcoming the friend/enemy distinction of antagonistic politics remains somewhat unclear. Pointing to how ‘the success of right-wing populist parties comes from the fact that they provide people with some form of hope, with the belief that things could be different’ (Mouffe 2016a, para. 16) indicates a concern not only with the more visceral, tangible forms of affect like anger or hate but also hope, faith, despair, optimism, and pessimism. Mouffe claims that the mobilisation of passion should be ‘towards the construction of a “people” so as to bring about a progressive “collective will”’ (Mouffe 2016a, para. 23), which suggests that the indeterminacy and radical contingency of her account means all that it is possible to state without affirming thicker normative principles is the

people/elites relation in a progressive or left-wing sense. But with such a thin conception it runs up against issues like lack of clarity on what kind of left-wing politics this involves, from social democracy to revolutionary socialism – and thus there is little ground for locating an emancipatory imperative here.

Hence, while Mouffe's account is an important starting point for theorising the role of affects in effecting emancipation, a return to Gramsci can help establish an account that is not as radically indeterminate, undecidable, and discursive as Mouffe's. This not only means it can appeal to a wider range of ontological and political positions, but it also appears more plausible in apprehending the role of affects in politics because affect might not be as malleable and free-floating as Mouffe suggests. The linkage to context, tradition, history, place, space, religion, as well as even the thinnest conception of the human psychology would suggest that affects are not fully indeterminate. A materialist account of affect, such as the one Gramsci provides, elaborated in *Chapters 1-3*, does not need to be reductionist, mechanistic, or economistic, but can be nuanced and culturally anchored.

Mouffe moderates Gramsci's more radical account through a vastly more positive view of liberal democracy compared to Gramsci. She retreats into a more politically moderate set of descriptions and prescriptions for social transformation. Yet the post-structuralist, post-modern inflection of Mouffe's interpretation and development of Gramsci's account is not necessary for outlining a productive Gramscian account of political affect. Radical indeterminacy is not a prerequisite for, but rather a particular version of, a radical politics of emancipation and affect. In this sense, mine is an immanent critique because it heeds Mouffe's suspicion of enlightenment reason but radicalises it and does not subscribe to a static or expansive vision of neither human nature nor class reductionism; the chief targets of Mouffe's neo-Gramscian radical democratic project. In another sense, this is an external critique, since the vision of agonism in Mouffe unfortunately carries with it certain capitulatory, reformist connotations and practices that might hinder the establishment of a radically different politics and society.

As I have charted across this thesis and therefore only want to briefly touch on as a reminder, Gramsci explains how subalterns hold forms of common sense in opposition

to the dominating class, rooted in a particular conception of the world. Winning hegemony is not just through opinion-formation rooted in the force of the better argument or articulation but depends on a multifaceted complex of affects and their underlying material social relations. I explained in *Chapters 1* and *3* how faith is a particularly good example of how such affects can generate social change and contribute to the development of an emancipatory imperative, as well as combat widespread fatalism about the impossibility of such emancipation. Thus, his materialist understanding of faith is grounded not just in coherent, rational reasons but has an ineradicable affective component, too.

Such a secular, political, and radical faith plays an instrumental role in a more emancipatory imperative because it challenges the central status of rational argument in the struggle for emancipatory and progressive goals. As a reminder, faith is a type of worldview that brings together divergent interpretations of social life together under the umbrella of a coherent set of beliefs, coming to life through action and in turn spurring further (in)action. Thus, action itself can generate further action. Faith is therefore not just a mental state of having or keeping faith but rooted in social and material relations, which exits the reason-giving of the discursive realm. It is a practically lodged combination of an emotive state, relevant reasons, and the material constraints and interests that give rise to such affects and reasons, following the idea of weak constructivism outlined above. The affects that different people hold are not systematic and fully-worked out – nor the product of top-down vanguardist duping – but result in large part from common-sense everyday experience. The spontaneity of such feelings and the way in which they coalesce in and into social movements should be embraced and inserted into politics.

This is particularly clear from Gramsci's thought on knowing, understanding, and feeling (Gramsci 1971, 418). He conceives of these through a materialist reading of how the economic structure structures particular thought-patterns, the hegemonic status of certain ideas over others, and how it is necessary to appeal to affect. This is closely influenced by class structure whereby those with the monopoly on the means of intellectual production will proselytise and incessantly repeat the kinds of ideas conducive to the maintenance of existing hegemony and domination. While such

intellectuals acting on behalf of dominant forces might hold ‘knowledge’, they lack ‘understanding’ and ‘feeling’ (Gramsci 1971, 418), this stands in contrast to subordinates who have a much more visceral and direct affective relation to the economy and its effects (Gramsci 1971, 418).

He thus dissolves the simplified hierarchy of rational argument as superior to affect and consequently establishes a place for a worldview rooted in a secular practical faith irreducible to rationalism that challenges the fatalism of impossibility because even if options seem closed off, the belief in the mere possibility of change is resistant to counter-arguments. Intellectuals are wrong to believe that ‘one can know without understanding and even more without feeling and being impassioned’ (Gramsci 1971, 418). The views and beliefs of ordinary people are located not just a web of social relations but in divergent material interests. Faith interacts with reason but is neither reducible to physiological emotivism nor to enlightenment reason. Affects do not simply determine reasons or vice versa. Instead, they influence each other, whether as counterforces or mutually reinforcing the other. Faith can thus help establish hegemony and therefore stand in the way of emancipation yet subaltern forms of faith can also help generate an emancipatory imperative to challenge dominant power.

By virtue of not having hegemonic control of the (re)production of culture and values, political faith as a form of common sense can exist subterraneously – beneath the pavement, as the *soixante-huitards* claimed – and erupt into generating full-scale emancipatory revolt. Intellectuals, qua Marx’s thesis eleven, must play a contributing role in this because they can influence the kinds of affects held by subalterns rather than uncritically regurgitate them, an idea I develop further in the following and final substantive chapter through the role that intellectuals can play in generating and sustaining an emancipatory imperative through engaged and self-reflexive rearguard legitimation and comradely critique.

6.7 Conclusion

Although she offers a promising conceptualisation of affect, Mouffe’s conception of democracy is restrictive of emancipatory change and ultimately commits her to an

account of social change that is defensive and reformist. She therefore does not provide the full set of tools sufficient for imagining and effectuating politics beyond the present.

In this chapter, I first outlined the contours of Mouffe's agonistic radical democratic theory before showing how her departure from emancipation and rejection of enlightenment rationality are bound up with each other: the welcome embrace of affect plays a major role here. However, I charted her view of affect as the task of channelling these into democratic designs before showing how this is insufficient by turning to the secondary literature and returning to a more materialist understanding of affect. I located such an understanding by returning chiefly to Gramsci in order to get closer to the recovery of an emancipatory imperative. The take-away picture, given both the lessons learnt from Gramsci, Mouffe, her defenders, and her critics is a picture of a more complex relation between reason and affect, one in which affects are inflected – or (weakly) constructed – through their connection to social relations and material interests.

As Mouffe rightly emphasises, enlightenment reason cannot serve as a panacea for emancipation because it does not consider or take seriously the deep affective ties between people living under an exploitative and dominating system that robs them of their freedom to act according to their desires and human sociability more generally. Critique therefore has to speak to affective commitments that take root through common sense. While this can often take reactionary forms, such as exclusionary nationalisms, affect should not be overcome or channelled into more productive directions (Mouffe 2014, 149; Tambakaki 2014, 7), but a constitutive and generative feature of politics in itself to be embraced.

Such an appreciation of affect challenges the role of the critic, the intellectual, and the vanguard in critical and Marxist thinking because hope, faith, even anger do not simply respond to logical, rational, and reason-giving argument, and vice versa, as reckoning with Mouffe's and Gramsci's work shows. Gramsci emphasises how the mistake of the intellectual, perhaps more pertinent today than ever, is to be

distinct and separate from the people-nation, that is, without feeling the elementary passions of the people, understanding them and therefore

explaining and justifying them in the particular historical situation and connecting them dialectically to the laws of history and to a superior conception of the world, scientifically and coherently elaborated – i.e. knowledge (Gramsci 1971, 418).

This means that intellectuals must be connected not just to the arguments but the feelings and passions of these at the heart of emancipatory movements. Not through “good” external or transcendental reasons elaborated through ironclad formal logic, but through speaking with and to the pre-existing, immanent emancipatory impulses in society, can emancipation come about. Yet such emancipatory impulses must also, following Roberts’ argument on the need for the construction of an emancipatory interest, be constructed – and one of the main purposes of the social function of the critical theorist is precisely to contribute to this process. For that reason, I now turn to a deeper elaboration of what such a contribution can look like.

7. THE EMANCIPATORY IMPERATIVE AND THE CRITICAL THEORIST⁸³

I have shown in the three preceding chapters how key theorists seem unable to fulfil one of the most pressing tasks for political theory today: to generate an emancipatory imperative. This is in part because their particular understandings of enlightenment stand in the way of emancipation. Recalling Roberts' distinction between emancipatory politics and emancipatory political theory, a major task is to think through how political theory can contribute to the possibility and realisation of emancipatory politics. In this final chapter, I therefore turn to exactly that question: In light of the seeming *culs-de-sac* of Rawls, Scott, and Mouffe for emancipation, how might critical theorists develop and defend an emancipatory imperative?

Even the critical theorist can never step fully outside reigning ideology or hegemony despite spending a majority of their time thinking about the diagnosis of the ills of society. Considering the recovery of emancipation through a recalibration of enlightenment, and the application of such a vision to the critique of the three theorists above, what is the role of the critical theorist in emancipatory projects? In this chapter, I propose the role of the critical theorist as being “self-reflexive rearguard legitimation” vis-à-vis emancipatory political actors, as well as acting comradely vis-à-vis fellow emancipatory theorists.

The kind of critique involved in such a role is related to yet distinct from existing understandings in the literature, where critique is understood in a plethora of ways. These include everyday, reason-driven, or problematising (Geuss 2002), constructive or negative (Geuss 2014b), positive or negative (Postone 1996, 90), measuring, disrupting, or emancipating (Vogelmann 2017b), disclosing (Honneth 2000), realist (Prinz and Rossi 2017) or idealist (Rawls 2005), post-foundational (Marchart 2007) or socially grounded (McNay 2014), immanent (Stahl 2013) or transcendental (Kant 1998), social practical (Celikates 2018), radical or contextualist (Thaler 2012), or genealogical (Foucault 1977) critique. Many of these overlap and share a common ground in challenging existing positions and claims. Indeed, Geuss claims that ‘there

⁸³ Parts from this chapter have been published as (Slothuus 2021a) and (Slothuus 2022).

is no *single* invariable notion of “criticism,” which could be the object of strict formal definition, giving necessary and sufficient conditions’ (Geuss 2014b, 70).

The most salient distinction for my purposes is between negative and positive critique. Negative critique starts from what exists and that existing society is already marked by social contradictions, for instance in the relationship between classes or in the way that the environment is exploited leading to catastrophic climate change which then undermines the mode of production. Positive critique, on the other hand, remains trapped within the need for offering concrete solutions to concrete problems in a way that easily collapses into bourgeois morality. If a positive critique ‘criticizes what *is* on the basis of *what also is* and, hence, does not really point beyond the existent totality’, negative critique ‘is not undertaken on the basis of what *is* but of what *could be*’ (Postone 1996, 90).

However, most approaches to critique disagree on the undergirding norms or function of such critique, i.e. what it should seek to do or achieve rather than paying attention to the recipient of the critique:

today’s debate about critique is a debate about the normativity of critique. What norms does critique presuppose, where do they come from, and how can they transcend the contemporary normative horizon?...Lost from sight is the activity of criticizing [and] the activity of the theorists themselves (Vogelmann 2017b, 101).

Such debates therefore pay scant attention to the very act of criticising and what that means. The focus on norms obfuscates the social relations involved in the act of criticising because it abstracts from the context and affective bonds that structure such critique in the first place:

All (theoretical) talk about critique relies on pictures describing the activity that critique is supposed to be. These picture [sic] are not mere metaphors: they orient theories of critique because they subtly predispose how critique is (supposed to be) done and what does not count as critique (Vogelmann 2017b, 101).

In short, the subject of critique and the recipient of the critique matters for how it should be formulated and structured. I now outline four key components of critique for emancipatory political theory and contributing to an emancipatory imperative: engaged self-reflexivity, rearguardism, legitimation, and a comradely approach.

7.1 Engaged self-reflexivity

Self-reflexivity is one of the cornerstones of critical theory. Indeed, critical theory is characterised by a commitment not just to enlightenment and emancipation but also self-reflexivity (Freyenhagen 2018). A critical theory both accounts for its own genesis and anticipates its own use (Geuss 1981), which sets it apart from highly idealised and abstract applied moral philosophy. Yet because critical theorists are not 'beyond ideology' (Fraser 2008, 108) they must be self-reflexive: 'A social theory is a theory *about* (among other things) agents' beliefs about their society, but it is [also] *itself* such a belief' (Geuss 1981, 56). Critical theory happens on a metalevel by being part of the very structure it critiques. There is no truly or fully external critique, in the sense of a view from nowhere: 'If a theory of society is to give an exhaustive account of the beliefs agents in the society have, it will have to give an account of itself as one such belief' (Rorty 1989, 80). If such self-reflexivity is explicit, it means it has a cognitive structure that accounts for the role of theory during the process of constructing such theoretical work.

Emancipatory political theory also does not purport to emancipate agents – the theory is not in itself emancipating. Rather, emancipatory political theory contributes to the project of emancipatory politics, e.g. through Gramsci's appeal to the knowledge, feeling, and understanding already present in subordinate groups. These can contribute to the construction of counter-hegemony, i.e. an explicitly *political* strategy of not just countering reigning orthodoxies of knowledge but also organising against reigning political subordination. While critical theory itself is not emancipation, it both provides tools necessary for agents to undertake their own emancipation by providing the requisite 'knowledge that enables them to emancipate themselves' (Vogelmann 2017b, 104), as well as actively participating in and contributing to the emancipation itself. By severing the distance between traditional intellectuals removed from struggle

and the struggle itself, critical theory can contribute to emancipation. Theory therefore needs to be aware of its own position vis-à-vis existing struggles such that the theorist does not unduly undermine these. In certain circumstances, of course, there is a legitimate basis for critique of existing struggles, a point which is explained in the section below on comradely critique.

Because theory on its own cannot emancipate, the theorist should also be *engaged* (Bates 2007; Boggs 2007). Such engagement demands a certain responsiveness and responsibility (Mihai 2019). While the production of theory itself is a form of engagement, the traditional intellectual removed from struggles on the ground is hard to square with the commitment to emancipation, unless a very strong division of labour is envisaged. Such a division of labour can fall prey to forms of stratification in which the theorist is so far removed that they have little resonance with the activists and movements they purport to support. Returning to aspects discussed in the sections on Gramsci in *Chapters 1* and *3*, the idea of ‘organic intellectuals’ is crucial as opposed to ‘traditional intellectuals’ (Gramsci 1971, 1ff) or ‘independent intellectuals’ (Adorno 2006, aphorism 7 and *passim*) who discern apart from the mass of people, since it avoids the problem of distance. If intellectuals emerge out of movements – movement intellectuals – then they will have an easier (albeit not necessarily easy) time to remain connected with these movements. The critical theorist has independent or external points of critique which can inform the processes of legitimation through ‘consciously critical conduct’ (Horkheimer quoted in Abromeit 2011, 328). Through critical conduct, the critical theorist recognizes their ‘own *active* role in reproducing society as a whole’ without ‘pretension to exist outside or above the material life process of society’ (Horkheimer quoted in Abromeit 2011, 328). Such political judgment is ‘a distinctively *political*, deeply situated and relational affair’ (Mrovlje 2017, 22) and often involves taking a step back and attempting to gain multiple different perspectives.

7.2 Rearguardism

Because the critical theorist is not simply an observer but an engaged participant, some form of leadership is necessary, in the broadest possible sense of the term, including what Gramsci calls ‘intellectual and moral leadership’ as distinct from

organisational leadership or domination (Gramsci 1971, 57). The critical theorist should ascertain and defend principles even if these do not accord fully with the views of the subject of emancipation (Abromeit 2011). According to Gramsci, 'only a very skilful political leadership, capable of taking into account the deepest aspirations and feelings of those human masses, can prevent disintegration and defeat' (Gramsci 1971, 88). A central point, often overlooked in debates on the role of the intellectual, is therefore that leaders have to lead based on the organic and pre-existing 'aspirations and feelings' of people (Gramsci 1971, 88), in short, affect. Such leadership must take those affects already present which cannot always be expressed in a language understood by political elites as its point of departure because the attempt to straitjacket movements into a register of reason-giving can be disarming and deradicalizing.

One way to do this is for critical theorists to occupy the position of rearguard intellectuals. This is a more defensive position that does not call the shots but protects the movement from attacks, i.e. those 'whose position in society renders them politically suited and morally motivated to bring about changes compatible with their ideal requirements' (Ypi 2012, 43). Boaventura de Sousa Santos' conception of rearguard intellectuals explains how they 'contribute with their knowledge to strengthening the social struggles against domination and oppression to which they are committed' (de Sousa Santos 2018, ix). This means stepping away from the limelight of vanguard intellectuals with their risk of condescension and power-grabbing and, without becoming a passive spectator, legitimating and supporting struggles.

Rather than directing these social struggles, the rearguard intellectual therefore uses their social, cultural, and academic capital to defend social movements against reactionary and status-quo biased criticism. The critical theorist is engaged in 'the struggle of which his own thinking is a part and not something self-sufficient and separable from the struggle' (Horkheimer 2002, 216). What really matters here are 'the experiences of large, marginalized minorities and majorities that struggle against unjustly imposed marginality and inferiority' where the critical rearguard theorist should serve the purpose of 'strengthening their resistance' (de Sousa Santos 2014, ix). While this might conceivably be rebuffed by questioning the extent to which this requires

dispensing in full with the enlightenment concepts recalibrated above, ‘the rich Eurocentric critical tradition’ should not be thrown ‘into the dustbin of history, thereby ignoring the historical possibilities of social emancipation in Western modernity’ (de Sousa Santos 2014, 44). What is more, such rearguardism can also be in defence of small, specific groups of activists or organisers as opposed to large-scale movements like de Sousa Santos proposes. Rearguardism also need not necessarily be public, it can privately defend and support those who have put themselves on the line to improve morale and collective belonging. Because rearguard intellectuals qua being self-reflexive can be attuned to questions of exploitation, colonialism, and imperialism, as well as how these intersect with the ostensibly emancipatory potential of enlightenment philosophy, they ought to maintain a healthy distance from the kind of vanguardism that can smuggle in another set of oppressive norms under the guise of emancipation.

However, Gramsci’s organic intellectual can just as well be a vanguard intellectual as a rearguard one. Collective problems should be positioned in such a way that ‘the privileged are compelled to confront them’ (Hayward 2013, 83) but in a way that centres both ‘ordinary’ and ‘extraordinary narratives’ involving ‘collective identity stories’ beyond the quotidian into building collective imaginations and broader political projects (Hayward 2013, 83). By appealing to narrative self-understanding (Velleman 2003) and the often ignored or delegitimised affects of dominated or marginalised people, intellectuals can speak *with* rather than *for* a wider collective. The power of such narratives is a crucial component of how to push intellectuals to become engaged or activist scholars who can form a rearguard.

Implicit in the term rearguard is therefore its collective dimension. In its original military meaning, vanguard and rearguard do not denote individuals but can encompass entire regiments or battalions of hundreds or even thousands of soldiers. In Lenin’s theory of the political vanguard, the political party is centred around the centralised party cadre of experienced revolutionaries. Lenin never considers individuals as vanguards, but exclusively uses the term to refer to collectives (Negri 2014), yet with a strong hierarchy nevertheless. Therefore, intellectual rearguards should not be atomised individuals isolated from the social fabric within which they are situated. Instead, by

speaking to the feelings and understandings that people already have, the collective dimension can be achieved without the arrogance or condescension of a strong enlightenment superiority, a key lesson that Mouffe in particular underscores. In this sense, the rearguard intellectual is thinking with, but sometimes also against (a point I return to in the comradely critique section below), emancipatory movements.

Indeed, Gramsci explains this connection eloquently:

If the relationship between intellectuals and people-nation, between the leaders and the led, the rulers and the ruled, is provided by an organic cohesion in which feeling-passion becomes understanding and thence knowledge (not mechanically but in a way that is alive), then and only then is the relationship one of representation. Only then can there take place an exchange of individual elements between the rulers and ruled, leaders [*dirigenti*] and led, and can the shared life be realised (Gramsci 1971, 418).

In other words, there has to be a close connection and cohesion that is in part governed by the most salient affects felt by the subordinate classes. Deep knowledge of the movements and its participants is required for intellectuals to not simply be speaking from their own subject position but genuinely with the dominated.

Rearguardism therefore also requires defending both really-existing movements and their emancipatory principles from intellectual obstacles. This is why a division of labour and a diversity of tactics is needed, focusing not just on social movements but critiquing existing political theory, too. While some theorists, alongside sociologists and anthropologists, should engage more explicitly and directly with social movements other theorists can fruitfully take a step back and focus on the bird's eye view of social struggles. Rather than conceive of critical theory and theories of emancipation as only possible through grounded fieldwork, metatheoretical work and big-picture thinking is necessary to complement these more empirically-minded approaches.⁸⁴ Social movements and political organizations can therefore learn from critical theory that emancipation should not be forsaken, regardless of the trend toward abandoning

⁸⁴ Adorno and Horkheimer emphasise that the empirical direction of much of the work of the Frankfurt School was a pragmatic choice to satisfy the funders of the Institute (Adorno and Marcuse 1999). See also (Leslie 1999).

emancipation in the theoretical literature. This is therefore also not an empirical claim about the literature positively contributing toward emancipation but the normative claim that it could and should.

7.3 Legitimation

Having explicated the importance of self-reflexivity and the need for theorists to lead from the back by being attuned to the aspirations and feelings of the dominated, this can be undertaken through the practice of legitimation which avoids ‘actionism’ (Adorno 1982, 262), i.e. activism as action for action’s sake.⁸⁵ While the critical theorist should generally applaud action and praxis, uncritically embracing any kind of action without sufficient judgment of its promise must be avoided: ‘The error of the primacy of praxis as it is exercised today appears clearly in the privilege accorded to tactics over everything else’ (Adorno 1982, 268). A frequently fetishistic fixation on actionism, presents a danger in its insurrectionism and immediatism and can lead to political inertia and hopelessness (Adorno 1982). An important task for the critical theorist is therefore to, in comradely terms, warn against the dangers of actionism without falling prey to a debilitating and fatalistic strategy that nothing matters, nothing can change, and it is pointless to try to change the world. Warning against the dangers of actionism is one of the key tasks of critical theorists and can partly be pursued by moving to a concern for legitimation.

At the heart of such legitimation is the existence of dissenting or conflicting interests (Çıdam et al. 2020; Bertram and Celikates 2015).⁸⁶ Recall from *Chapter 2* the importance of the construction of oppositional interests: such interests are not simply pre-given but must be constructed and created. Although Marx is sometimes dismissed as an economistic or deterministic figure, the basis of the construction of interests argument does emerge already in his work, most notably in the *18th Brumaire*:

⁸⁵ See also (Blanc 1972; Bordiga 2014; Featherstone, Henwood, and Parenti 2004).

⁸⁶ See also the debate between Habermas and Rorty on consensus and solidarity where Rorty distinguishes postmodern critiques of ‘the metaphysics of presence’ and ‘Enlightenment rationalism and universalism’ from critiques of ‘bourgeois ideology’ and ‘liberal, reformist, political thought’ (Rorty 1987, 564).

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living (Marx 2002, 19).⁸⁷

The critical theorist depends on a commitment to meliorism, i.e. the possibility of things being different. Rather than affirm a determinate conception of emancipation the rearguard critical theorist can therefore rather warn against cruel optimism and the fatalism of inevitability, as well as the fatalism of impossibility. This then leads to the idea that the theorist is legitimating struggles as opposed to hatching, controlling, or restricting them. The relationship between theory and movement must instead be one of mutual reinforcement. Rather than choosing between a mutually exclusive duality of theory and practice, a philosophy of praxis can and must unify these in a politics that is simultaneously theoretical and practical, or ‘a philosophy which is also a politics and a politics which is also a philosophy’ (Gramsci 1971, 45).

Even when self-reflexive and avoiding vanguardism, the theorist can still be engaged in moralising “management” or direction of potentially emancipatory movements. Moralising applies an external set of distinctly *moral* rather than political principles and impose these on a movement.⁸⁸ To be sure, there can be a space for morality and moralising critique in aid of emancipation when lodging claims in terms of morality is a powerful tool to shift political horizons. However, such moralising should be a critique from the vantage-point of subaltern morality, not hegemonic or bourgeois morality. Therefore, critical theory should begin with the ‘misery of the present’ rather than developing ideal theoretical accounts of a perfect society (Freyenhagen 2018, 8). According to Gramsci, ‘every man...has a conscious line of moral conduct’ (Gramsci 1971, 9), i.e. conceptions of morality that are not simply those of the dominant class. Yet because morality often functions as a kind of class distinction, the dominant class imposes norms and standards (Bourdieu 2000, 41-42). For example, intellectual

⁸⁷ The eagle-eyed reader may have spotted the paraphrase of this in the *Acknowledgements*.

⁸⁸ There is significant disagreement within the critical theory literature on the status of morality and grounding. See for instance (S.K. White 2014).

émigrés to the United States served as a moral elite propagating a particular moral programme thus indicating how morality sometimes governs the life of intellectual production (Gramsci 1971, 20).

Unfortunately, even when moralising critique emanates from subaltern morality, such oppositional morality is nevertheless embedded in hegemonic morality in the sense of the imperfect rule by consent, backed up with the threat (and sometimes exercise) of coercion. In Gramsci's words, 'the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as "domination" and as "intellectual and moral leadership"' (Gramsci 1971, 57). The specifically moral character of theorising is problematic because it runs the risk of reproducing a set of moral principles and norms which are themselves part of the source of the domination itself. One might think that this problem is not exclusive to moralising critique. Yet, morality is by definition the imposition of "good" behaviour through norm-creation as opposed to a struggle over competing interests. Even if these often overlap, emancipatory movements attempt to make life more morally good *and* better aligned with a set of political principles irreducible to the moral dimension.

What the critical theorist *can* do in moral terms, then, is provide moral leadership that legitimates emancipatory politics. Although intellectuals might have a certain set of tools at their disposal that render them important and influential, it does not take a special set of skills to understand and interpret the everyday life of ordinary people. Ordinary people can themselves make sense of their own existence and domination, with local knowledge persisting even when confronted with "better" knowledge from above.⁸⁹ This suggests that culture, tradition, and belonging play key roles in opinion-formation. Yet even organic intellectuals might become co-opted by hegemonic structures: 'a social group dominates antagonistic groups, which it tends to "liquidate"' (Gramsci 1971, 57). Intellectuals should therefore use their particular resources to aid and accelerate social movements rather than control them, thus providing legitimacy against vilification.

⁸⁹ Such critique emerges in part from theology, which ties it back to my insistence on faith. Adorno and Horkheimer present a critique of enlightenment that traces roots at least in part on a religious conception of historical development (Geuss and Kohlenbach 2005). The problems they spell with instrumental rationality is at its heart a religious critique (Bittner 2005). Likewise, Walter Benjamin's messianic redemption is clearly a religious concept (Benjamin 1968).

7.4 Comradely critique

Having explained a vision of the critical theorist as self-reflexive, rearguardist, and legitimating, the second problem to resolve is how the critical theorist should critique both existing emancipatory politics and especially emancipatory political theory which might stand in the way of emancipation by having veered off-course. One way to understand and potentially overcome this problem is through the idea of comradely critique. This term is frequently used in activist circles but has not been explored in the academic literature (N.L. Clough 2014; Das 2017; Gunn and Wilding 2012; Herod 2013). This begins from the figure of the comrade, who is a ‘political relation...for action toward a common goal’ (Dean 2019, 2) characterised by ‘sameness of those on the same side’ (Dean 2019, 71). This does not imply sameness *tout court*, merely sameness in relation to the common goal and is characterised by solidarity and collective action about a ‘shared vision for the future’, strong enough to go beyond ‘one-off actions’ (Dean 2019, 2). According to Dean, ‘addressing another as “comrade” reminds them that something is expected of them’ (Dean 2019, 10).

When critiquing comrades, such critique can be formulated differently than when critiquing adversaries or even enemies. The underlying shared set of commitments means there is a baseline agreement that need not first be defended and protected. Instead, the disagreement can proceed from the mutual presumption of being on the same side; of being comrades. The existence of a shared overall goal or aim, but a disagreement on strategy or the interpretation of this overall goal, means that the critique serves a different function than the attempt to either win the opponent over to one’s own side of the struggle or to emphasise the disagreement so as to make them look bad in public, or some other aim.

We also have special obligations toward those with whom we are engaged in shared struggles.⁹⁰ This means that certain kinds of expectations can be placed on comrades to act in certain ways. In other words, there is a legitimate presumption of treating a

⁹⁰ Michael Walzer famously defended a duty to disobey the law in cases where the *pro tanto* obligation to obey the law conflicts with obligations toward those we are affiliated with in a political or social struggle (Walzer 1967).

comrade like someone who deserves special care and concern. Comrades look out for one another in ways that others do not, and in a way that they do not for non-comrades.⁹¹ This means that comradely critique is not just social but intersubjective because it concerns both the way that critique is delivered and received; it places a certain political responsibility on the comrade to behave and act in particular way (Mihai 2019). Comrades rightfully demand things of each other and should be criticised when they fail. This is in contrast to monadic or monastic individuals who criticise from abstract positions of purported scientific objectivity or traditional theory (Horkheimer 2002, 188). Comradely critique thus helps theorise the thorny subject of disagreement in relation to the need for developing and spreading an emancipatory impulse.

The comrade builds a politics that can abolish the oppressive conditions of capitalist society. While the ally is individualised and atomised, the comrade is collective and cooperative (Dabiri 2021). The purpose is to get your hands dirty and change the world, not wash your hands and be at peace with oneself (Wolf 1982). The partisan has the same aspirations as the comrade but does not focus on the coalition-building of solidarity (Gouldner 1968; Hammersley 2000; J. White and Ypi 2016, 2010; Ypi 2016). Comrades are united in their shared commitment to a particular kind of vision and world that goes beyond mere party affiliation. All it takes to be a comrade is a commitment to and interest in ‘emancipatory egalitarian struggles’ (Dean 2019, 59). Indeed, the comrade ‘affirms something more ambiguous—anyone could be a comrade’ (Dean 2019, 73). Only once it descends into a classification based on nationality, ethnicity, or race is the figure of the comrade no longer useful. Yet when ostensible comrades stop behaving in a way that is conducive to a shared interest in emancipation, they undermine their professed political goals – they stop being comrades. To be a comrade is thus about more than merely shared interest, it also concerns a particular kind of good behaviour – comrades can expect something of each other, a certain kind of solidarity.

⁹¹ The closest approximation among “non-comrades” is possibly in religious collectives with strong bonds of affinity, for example among some Muslims communities (Bayat 2017; Hughes 2017; Mahmood 2011; Schielke 2010).

The comrade is ‘characterized by sameness, equality, and solidarity’ (Dean 2019, 80). This precludes reactionary nationalist movements or far-right groups from claiming the mantle of comradeship because they do not commit to equality. Rather, their entire purpose is to demarcate lines of division and exclusion which perpetuate relations of inequality (Massoumi, Mills, and Miller 2017). Likewise, a confederation of business leaders in capitalist society is not a relation of comrades, because they, too, operate from a premise of exploitation and profiteering at the expense of e.g. workers, nature, or non-human animals. Solidarity implies a reciprocal relationship beyond individual self-interest, such that collective and group interest means the individual is willing to sacrifice certain things for the greater good. This is the basic premise of activism and political organising – devotion to a cause that does not immediately benefit the activist or organiser.

The fact that potentially anyone can become a comrade is crucial, since it means that at any given moment, a non-comrade can become a comrade. Indeed, the comrade is ‘generic, equalizing, and open to any but not all’ (Dean 2019, 80). The implications of this are vast: by treating (at least some) non-comrades as potential comrades, they might more easily be won over as comrades. Dismissing political opponents as fallen from grace and beyond salvation is as politically defeatist as it is uncomradely. Rather, opponents can become comrades through the existence of shared collective interests. Comradeship is not just a working-class relation – even if the ultimate aim for comrades should be emancipation from capitalism.

Furthermore, it is not possible to be a comrade in isolation from others. The comrade is ‘a relation, not an individual identity’ (Dean 2019, 80). Having the “correct” political views is not sufficient for being a comrade. Such views must be accompanied by practice and action. Only through interaction with others does the comrade emerge. This also means that being a comrade – like emancipation – is not a permanent state but a moving target, an aspiration, an ethos in constant flux. Just like how non-comrades can become comrades, a comrade can become a non-comrade by failing to live up to the demands of comradeship. This also moves the comrade away from the identity-based character of the ally toward a genuinely collaborative politics of social struggle which is not about attaining moral purity or virtue but of concrete

material gains. Indeed, Dean distinguishes the comrade from the militant: ‘The militant is a single figure fighting for a cause. That one is a militant tells us nothing about that one’s relation to others. The militant expresses political intensity, not political relationality (Dean 2019, 78). This speaks to the problem with Rawls’ militant as well, who does not necessarily exist affectively among a collective of others. The same holds for the partisan, who is akin to the militant. The comrade is therefore also driven by a kind of affective politics, whereby intimacy and vulnerability are cornerstones (Butler and Athanasiou 2013; Butler 2015; Mihai 2019). These necessarily inflect critique as well, such that the idea of purportedly objective truth is not the aim of critique, rather a different kind of political, affective commitment.

Comradely critique is therefore distinct from a non-comradely ethos of critique. It begins from a position of good faith that emphasises the equal humanity and equal standing of its parties, reiterates points of agreement to show basic solidarity and common purpose, and dispels fatalism and encourages cooperation and action. Comradely critique acts in good faith by emphasising common cause. A good faith critique takes as its central task the shared goal of seeking to end exploitation and domination, and to strive for freedom and equality. Thus, critique, particularly in its comradely form, requires a form of faith. As I have argued throughout, Gramscian faith is productive for emancipatory politics, recently echoed by Pope Francis through the connection between faith and solidarity (Francis 2020), a common theme in the literature on religious social movements and faith-based activism (Thaut 2009). In contrast, Simone De Beauvoir develops the notion of ‘bad faith’ where one might forgo one’s moral responsibility to strive for freedom, and succumb to the harmful expectations of outside society (de Beauvoir 2000). Comradely critique can learn from this because in starting from a position of good faith, it focuses on political truth-seeking and the common humanity and equal standing of both sender and recipient.

Yet even good faith critique faces problems. It runs the risk of missing the affective and partisan elements (J. White and Ypi 2016; Ypi 2016) of such faith. A simple good faith critique is too committed to calm, dispassionate reason and rationality, which does not portray the full picture of why critics engage in criticism – in short, it might need a dose of polemicism (Finlayson 2015b). Sometimes the affective register of

activists and critics means the critique is both more powerful but also not framed in the more conventional rationalist terms. This affective component is all the more reason why good faith cannot be the only criterion by which to formulate comradely critique. Instead, it must be supplemented with a commitment to – and expression of – the equal humanity and equal standing of the involved parties. Once these are incorporated, the affective dimension of comradely critique can become an advantage rather than a disadvantage.

The equal humanity of the parties involved in the critique means that the critic disavows offering final and unchangeable answers as well as the privileging of closure in contrast to continually open discussion and deliberation. By breaking down a hierarchy of the critic being in an epistemically privileged position and reaffirming the equal epistemic and political standing of the two parties, this instantly helps not just deliver the critique but strengthen the comradely bond, too. This breaks with a crude standpoint epistemology and certain forms of intersectionality that are based on the privilege politics of epistemic hierarchies. Dean outlines the problems with this in her critique of allyship, which reifies difference and is based on individual identities rather than shared political purpose (Dean 2019). Epistemic equality is thus not the claim that everyone has equal access to all political truths, but simply the idea that in principle all comrades can bring valuable knowledge and truth-claims to the table irrespective of their social identities. This both avoids reducing oppressed groups to their oppression and avoids a competitive oppression calculus that is not grounded in a shared struggle for emancipation of all.

In contrast to such equal humanity, the prevalence of condemnation and abuse is profoundly uncomradely as they trade in a kind of moralistic politics of activist capital, whereby the social standing of an activist or critic is improved by the sermonic practice of disavowal (Fisher 2013). Allowing others to fail and improve must be at the heart of comradely critique, which is why the critique is never final but constantly open to reassessment (Ypi 2012). Indeed, admitting one's own failures is deeply comradely too. This epistemic humility means that the act of engagement and critique is always already a form of prefiguration of the kind of politics and world comrades want to inhabit. On such a view, comrades are not unique or important as atomised individuals

but gain their identity only by virtue of belonging to a (real or imagined) collective. I can therefore address someone in a comradely critique who I have never met, never will meet, and I might not know much about them as a person. As long as I know they are a comrade – because we share certain kinds of basic political convictions – they are deserving of certain kinds of affinity. In this sense, comradeship can be an imagined relation (B. Anderson 1991). Even when there is a hierarchical relationship, e.g. when the critic is in an inferior position in terms of power, prestige, wealth, or otherwise, they nevertheless can be met on equal terms as equal partners in an exchange. This does not mean that they get a *carte blanche* to level unwarranted criticisms at their superiors, rather it means that epistemic humility is twinned with epistemic equality and emerges from an affective bond of solidarity.

Comrades criticise their comrades by reiterating points of agreement to show basic solidarity, collaboration, and common purpose. A basic principle of solidarity is thus necessary for critique to be comradely. The critic identifies with the object – and subject – of critique a common purpose and a fundamental sense of cooperation and is willing in principle to give up one's self-interested desires and ambitions for the greater good of the cause. This does not mean subjecting oneself to any kind of torment or misery – it simply means putting others first; seeing beyond one's own nose. Perhaps a scathing critique leveraging a position of power is beneficial for one's private gain, or even for one's faction or side to win. Yet this is uncomradely because it breaks with solidarity. Solidarity, in this sense, is the idea of offering something without expecting something immediate in return yet basing this on a shared mutual interest. This separates it from altruism or charity, which are either fully self-disregarding or ultimately self-regarding. Solidarity, on the other hand, is ultimately self-interested insofar as that self-interest is also the interest of others.

Collaboration is crucial here. It would be a mistake to see the kind of solidaristic behaviour and attitude above as a utility maximising instrumental and individual rationality. Only by virtue of collaboration does the figure of the comrade emerge. This builds on the ideas of equal humanity and equal (epistemic) standing. Since the comrade is a social relation, comradely critique is not stored within a person but emerges between people. Akin to Gramsci's notion of intellectuals occupying a social

function as opposed to having inherent qualities, the comrade is only a comrade insofar as they act and think in a certain way. There are no eternal comrades. If someone diverges from the basic commitment to emancipation and the liberation of all and the collective struggle for the expansion of freedom from exploitation and domination, they are no longer a comrade and hence not entitled to being critiqued in a comradely way.

Common purpose means that despite disagreements, certain basic commitments bind together comrades in the longer term. Indeed, through disagreement the equal individual humanity of each participant is reinforced in light of a collective goal of emancipation, which leads to intense fellow-feeling and togetherness that can weather the storm of momentary or occasional disagreements. Such commitment fosters political engagement. While critique from non-comrades can be pacifying and debilitating, leading to bouts of doubt and despair, comradely critique has the opposite function – in line with the points of raising morale I highlighted around legitimisation. The critical theorist has a duty to warn against cruel optimism and if the comrade is tied to a such a cause they should be convinced out of it. This also applies to fatalism more broadly – whether fatalism of inevitability or fatalism of impossibility. Often such fatalistic world-views are chimeras. Therefore, the critical theorist should try to encourage others not to take a totalising view of social transformation as either impossible or inevitable. (Re)inscribing a certain amount of human political agency qua struggle into the process is healthy for reaching such emancipatory goals.

Fatalistic tendencies are commonplace especially during periods of repeated defeats. Such tendencies function as a kind of defence mechanism – the activist might say that the reason for inaction or inertia is the impossibility of social transformation when in fact the real reason is a creeping fatalism caused by successive failures. One way to dispel such fatalism is through a secularised political faith, as explained in *Chapters 1 and 3*. The purpose of comradely critique is therefore not to shut down discussion and disagreement, or even to brush it under the carpet, but to bring it out in the open. The ultimate purpose of this is in part to encourage political action and participation. Although action for action's sake can be futile or even dangerous there is value in theoretically informed political action – *praxis*. Critique is therefore comradely if it

encourages the recipient to do something constructive and productive about the disagreement. If debilitating inertia is the consequence, that does not seem comradely because ultimately the purpose should be to improve the understanding of important oppressions or injustices and the way to resolve them.

What are the alternative forms of critique to comradely critique? Non-comradely critique is simply the kind of critique that does not adhere to the components I set out above: it is not undertaken in good faith, it does not affirm the equal humanity and standing of the addresser and addressee, does not emanate from a principle of solidarity, collaboration, and common purpose, and does not dispel fatalism. Much if not most critique probably falls into this bracket, which highlights that comradely critique is oftentimes an ethos to aspire to rather than a black-and-white tick box exercise or a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. Because comradely critique is not an aesthetic category but a political one, its components are not simply about how to address others but about what kind of principles undergird that communication. In short, it is about interest. A non-comradely critique therefore might jeopardise the common interest of the critical theorist and the emancipatory political actors with whom they act in solidarity.

A stronger and more dangerous problem is actively uncomradely critique. Here, all the components in comradely critique are not just absent but directly or indirectly attacked. There is not just an absence of good faith, there is the presence of bad faith. There is not just a lack of affirmation of equal humanity and equal standing but the overt disavowal of such equality – e.g. through personal attacks or by appeal to superiority. Likewise, the principle of solidarity as the embodiment of common interest is forfeited. Perhaps the uncomradely critique expects something in return, seeks to advance the position of the critic (for social or political capital) as a paramount objective, or simply does not align with a shared interest. Even worse, it might seek self-gratification and self-aggrandizement, such that the purpose of the critique is really not about the concrete matter of disagreement but about improving the social position and authority of the critic. This is particularly rife in an era of neoliberal subjectivity, in which the entrepreneur of the self often engages in forms of social distinction to increase their individual standing or clout (Bourdieu 2000; Seymour 2019).

A different kind of uncomradely critique is the obfuscation of a divergence of interest. For example, when the professional class of activists who purport to act out of a common interest with the working class obfuscate the contradictions between their own class interest and that of the working class. Gramsci warns against both the desirability and feasibility of the imposition of values and beliefs from outside the social group or class with which one is concerned. This serves as a stark warning against the commitment by middle class activists to proselytising the working class, as espoused in vanguardist socialism (Gramsci 1971, 148). Here, activists might be comrades with other activists, but not comrades with workers.⁹² Altogether, the relationship between critical theorists and subordinate groups is complex, multifaceted, and often characterised by tension and problems. Yet theory and action must be thought together – it is not possible simply to have one without the other: that would be either scholasticism or actionism. Overcoming this debilitating fatalism, as Gramsci warns, is a key task for critical theorists even, or perhaps especially, today. Therefore, theory must supplement rather than replace action for an emancipatory imperative to emerge.

⁹² The anti-worker activism of blocking a commuter train to highlight climate change, or when XR equated the radically transformative Labour manifesto with the ongoing rule of the Conservatives during the 2019 UK election campaign point to this problem.

8. LOOKING BACK, PUSHING FORWARD

Having elaborated upon a vision of the relationship between the emancipatory imperative, critical theory, and the critical theorist in the previous chapter, I now conclude the thesis with three main sections: I briefly restate the argument(s) of each chapter. I then consider a series of key aspects and potential objections emerging from the thesis as a whole, which broadly speaking can be divided into conceptual and methodological dimensions.

On the conceptual dimension, I add specificity and substance to some key relationships that have so far remained primarily in the subtext of the thesis but which are important to discuss at least briefly. I probe the relationship(s) between emancipation, Marxism, communism, and revolution. Is emancipation the same as communism? How can emancipation come about – through (or perhaps even *only* through) revolution? These questions concern principles as much as strategies, for which reason I briefly outline the substance of this distinction. Furthermore, I consider the status of interests, particularly in relation to metaphysics and morality. Are interests metaphysical and universal? Are they grounded in morality? What is the epistemic status of interests? Likewise, what is the epistemic status of emancipation and its imperative, i.e. how might we cognitively ascertain and interpret a particular moment in relation to how far emancipatory progress has been accomplished?

On the methodological dimension, I begin by explaining how the lessons of what critical theory can and should do in *Chapter 7* apply to the thesis as a whole. I link together *Chapters 1-3* with *Chapters 4-7*, explicating the relationship between my conceptual and theoretical framework and the critique of the three theorists. Furthermore, I elaborate on why I used a critical approach to interrogate and criticise more status-quo abetting figures, rather than either doing immanent critique of the status-quo figures or simply focused entirely on more critical figures.

1. Restating the arguments of the thesis

The relationship between emancipation and enlightenment is at the heart of the very possibility of critique and critical theory. Without enlightenment, emancipation gets lost because knowledge and understanding of exploitation and domination is part of the condition enabling the overturning of such unfreedom. Yet this need not be the oppressive form enlightenment often takes nor does it need to lead to a limited or oppressive emancipation. Instead, a critical recalibration of enlightenment can ground a critical recovery of an emancipatory imperative for the present day. In this thesis, I have demonstrated how influential political theorists – Rawls, Scott, and Mouffe in particular – do not offer a promising path for developing such an emancipatory imperative, in part through their understanding of enlightenment reason and rationality. I therefore briefly recap the central points of the argument presented in the chapters on Rawls, Scott, and Mouffe before turning to the solution I have proposed.

In Rawls, a strong commitment to enlightenment reason and rationality stands in the way of a path to emancipation, even if one subscribes to the narrative of Edmundson and Ypi whereby he demands wide-ranging socio-economic restructuring. The eschewal of affect and their emancipatory possibilities takes him down a path that blocks any meaningful social change because he does not have more than a barebone account of social transformation – and an unconvincing one at that. He considers envy, affection, and rancour in very brief form, yet his commitment to public reason, rationality, and reasonableness leads him in a direction incompatible with the imperative I am committed to developing.

Scott, in contrast to Rawls, is highly critical of enlightenment. He appreciates the oppressive dimensions of particularly rationality yet ends up defending an anti-rationalist anti-statism that stands in the way of emancipation because it neglects the ambivalent role of enlightenment, which need not be so oppressive as he insists. While everyday resistance offers some promise in reflecting and speaking to the affects of subordinate people, the suspicion of any kind of rational organisation or planning means such resistance cannot become a genuinely emancipatory force. Additionally, his tendency toward a personal, individual subordinate reason in the politics of

everyday resistance occludes the impersonal, structural exploitation and domination of which the critical tradition is so perceptive.

I then moved to Mouffe in search of a more promising path for theorising the relationship between reason and affect, attuned to the critical recalibration of enlightenment for emancipatory ends. She brings us closer to the emancipatory imperative, particularly in her later work on affect, which persuasively critiques enlightenment rationalism without descending into an overly rushed rejection of organisation or planning. However, the eschewal of the material, focus on verbal discursive acts, and commitment merely to the radicalisation of liberal democracy stands in the way of emancipation.

As a proposed solution to these problems, I turned to Gramsci in particular as a key resource for recalibrating a more critical enlightenment and recovering an emancipatory imperative. Gramsci's thought on secular-political faith as an example of how to theorise enlightenment in a critical way proved better attuned to organic values and principles among subordinates. Indeed, Gramsci's vision of faith helps bridge the gap between rationalist and anti-rationalist perspectives on emancipation. In the present moment of affect frequently trumping reason in populist and centrist politics alike, there is simultaneously widespread difficulty about both imagining and effectuating forms of emancipation. Accelerating climate change, rising global inequalities, and emboldened ethno-nationalism means finding ways of solving this problem is both urgent and important.

Beyond hegemony or ideology merely preventing subordinate groups from recognising their oppression, a further problem for political actors wanting radical change is to combat disaffection, despair, and the sense that action is futile because of a deterministic conception of historical development. Crucially, Gramsci sees such political change not simply as the product of adequate argumentation but of the pervasive role of the beliefs held by common people. Therefore, political affect, not just political reason, needs to take centre stage. By learning from religious faith and its role in fostering an active, practical, and hopeful engagement with the world, political actors seeking emancipatory change can combat and even overcome political fatalism.

To do this, I have followed the heed of Stuart Hall, who in his use of Gramsci's thought pries open important contemporary questions. Yet

this is not a comprehensive exposition of the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, nor a systematic account of the political situation...today. It is an attempt to "think aloud" about some of the perplexing dilemmas facing the left, in the light of – from the perspective of – Gramsci's work. I do not claim that, in any simple way, Gramsci "has the answers" or "holds the key" to our present troubles. I do believe that we must "think" our problems in a Gramscian way (S. Hall 1988, 161).

This is preferable to seeing him as a prophet of ahistorical and dogmatic truths. I have therefore strategically approached the problem of waning emancipation *with* Gramsci, enriching wider debates and raising further questions, and prying open a problem-space.

Gramsci is not our saviour. Indeed, I have supplemented his thought with a wide range of further influences – from the first generation of the Frankfurt School to the contemporary political theory literature on race and affect, among many others. So, as Hall continues,

we can't pluck up this "Sardinian" from his specific and unique political formation, beam him down...and ask him to solve our problems for us: especially since the whole thrust of his thinking was to refuse this easy transfer of generalisations from one conjuncture [sic], nation or epoch to another (S. Hall 1988, 161).

Finding emancipatory forms of affect for the contemporary era is therefore both difficult and crucial. As James Baldwin emphasises, 'I never have been in despair about the world. I've been enraged by it. I don't think I'm in despair. I can't afford despair' (quoted in J.S. Holloway 2013, 135). The issue with affect is therefore not how it polarises and antagonises. Indeed, in a world that appears more and more divided, rather than gloss over such division, confronting it head on through the strong convictions and concerted actions of those at the receiving end might very well be the best hope there is for a better world. Yet although affect can serve emancipatory functions, it can also be

mobilised by status quo and reactionary forces for intransigent and polarizing ends (Mihai 2014, 35). Affect is therefore not unequivocally good or desirable. Bad forms of affect have pernicious effects – bolstering exclusionary, unjust, exploitative, and dominating political practices and orders.

I am therefore not claiming that developing an emancipatory imperative is a panacea for humanity. It is merely a small component of the larger emancipatory project of both emancipatory politics and emancipatory political theory, as well as the need for cogent critical political economic analysis and understanding of the sources of exploitation, domination, oppression, and misery in the world today. Indeed, as I already explored in *Chapter 1*, there are limitations to a study of this kind. I address key substantive conceptual and methodological questions before concluding.

This thesis has raised a series of problems and offered critiques of approaches I deem to have gone wayside, yet that does not mean the relevant questions have been settled and the conversation ended. Instead, I intend for this to be a first major part of a larger and longer research journey that continues to grapple with the possibility and desirability of emancipation today. As I mentioned in *Chapter 1*, I open a problem-space rather than enforce a conversation-stopper. The broad character of my inquiry has been ideal for opening such a problem-space and contributing to important debates around social transformation and critical theory.

A corollary of such an approach is the possibly somewhat polemical character of my critique. While I of course have been as scholarly, fair, and honest as possible, there can be value in sometimes veering toward the more forthright when theories or debates run the risk of becoming overly sedimented and stagnant. Through my understanding of the role of the critical theorist today, I see internal criticism between political theorists as being vital, which does not always have to be in a deferential and elegiac form. As Smith contends in the quote in Chapter 1, that the thief who plans a heist on capitalism ‘needs to come with a few tools’ (N. Smith 2010, 64), I have provided the kind of tools that wield a good amount of damage but occasionally pose a danger to the wielder themselves because they leave open the critic to criticism in turn. This is ultimately a methodological choice rather than a challenge with a right and wrong answer.

On the subject of finding answers, a further objection to this thesis is that it is overly optimistic and insufficiently reckons with past failures. In short, it might appear to gloss over the often catastrophic failures of 20th century really existing socialism, for example, and fail to acknowledge what this means for the very possibility of an optimistic emancipatory outlook today. However, my point is not that emancipation is – like an economic doctrine or law of nature – inevitable or not incredibly difficult to bring about. In one sense, this is precisely my point: *because* emancipation is hard work, we should be determined to continue such work rather than give up.

As Cornel West emphasises, not only is there joy in the very act of struggle itself, even the inevitability of multiple defeats need not be discouragement. Quoting Samuel Beckett, West claims that the task is ‘we try again, fail again, and fail better’ (West 2019). In this sense, much can be learnt from socialist organisational politics – even Rawls’ reticent socialism, Scott’s anarchism, and Mouffe’s left populism – yet with the need for a critical distance to evaluate contextually the viability and long-term effects of such action. A key future task is therefore developing a more empirically grounded study of particular movements and how critical theory (and by extension critical theorists) have engaged and should engage with them.

The interplay between theory and practice ought to be one of the key research agendas for critical theory today. Engaging more directly with the empirical and sociological literatures on social movements is necessary to develop the argument further. A key additional question outside the scope of my inquiry is to address the temporal dimension of emancipation more directly. For example, an ethnographically rooted study of specific movements can flesh out the concrete ground upon which theoretical work rests and contributes. In line with my understanding of the rearguard theorist, in future research I envisage a deeper engagement with movements on the ground, either through participant-observation or what Herzog and Zacka call the “ethnographic sensibility” (Herzog and Zacka 2017), which I briefly mentioned in *Chapter 1*. An additional question outside the scope of my inquiry is to address the temporal dimension of emancipation more directly.

2. Conceptual dimension

My understanding of emancipation doubtlessly holds certain affinities with the idea of communism. In this thesis, I understood emancipation as ‘collective processes of structural social transformation rooted in material conditions and an interest in abolishing or overcoming conditions of coercion and exploitation through democratic pluralistic struggle leading to a qualitative increase in freedom’ (page 14). Communism, however, is a more expansive idea involving not just the abolition of the private means of production (i.e. socialism) but also the dictatorship of the proletariat to facilitate the subsequent withering away of the state.⁹³ If communism is taken to mean less than that, for instance by equating it to socialism, then emancipation does indeed seem to overlap significantly. The purpose of invoking emancipation as opposed to communism is that it is possible to subscribe to such emancipation without subscribing to communism, whereas the opposite does not automatically hold: i.e. it is possible to subscribe to emancipation without subscribing to communism. This is not to say that a renewed understanding of communism is in vain – on the contrary, theoretical work to exposit a more contemporary formulation of the idea of communism is an important and ongoing task that several theorists are currently engaged in (Dean 2012; Douzinas and Žižek 2010).

Likewise, emancipation relates to – but is distinct from – revolution. Revolution refers not (only) to a substantive commitment to a particular understanding of social relations but (also) to a theory of social change and a political strategy. Yet revolution covers an expansive domain of various types, including Leninist revolution and Gramscian passive revolution. In a Leninist sense, communism might then be approximated as emancipation plus revolution. Along Gramscian lines, however, the persistence and ubiquity of hegemony means that revolution is not simply the overturning of coercive power but a long process of replacing such hegemony with a counter-hegemonic alternative. Such a vision is closer aligned with the understanding of emancipation outlined in this thesis.

⁹³ This is Lenin’s conventional understanding of communism. (Lenin 2015 [1921])

Although such passive revolution is in Gramsci used to refer to bourgeois revolutions arriving by stealth and without complete hegemony of a situation, it can also be appropriated to mean forms of non-revolutionary emancipatory change. Such change is more gradual than the sudden rupture of grand revolutionary moments, characterised by ‘molecular changes which in fact progressively modify the pre-existing composition of forces, and hence become the matrix of new changes’ (Gramsci 1971, 109). Alex Callinicos calls this a form of ‘revolution without revolution’, a point advanced further by Asaf Bayat in his analysis of ‘revolution without revolutionaries’ (Callinicos 2010, 498; Bayat 2017). If a vanguard party is not present, passive revolution is a compelling strategy for emancipatory change. Conceptual overstretch notwithstanding, Gramsci’s notion of passive revolution is highly relevant for the contemporary moment and serves as one of the conceptual backdrops against which I have theorised about emancipation (Callinicos 2010).

Therefore, emancipation certainly can come about through revolution. Indeed, this might be the most plausible way such processes could ever be initiated and instantiated. Yet it does not follow from the above that emancipation can *only* come about through revolution. The accuracy of that statement depends on the kind of revolution in question. Emancipation can happen without revolution if revolution is taken to mean a strictly Leninist revolution, but revolutionary processes certainly need to feature in one way or another, particularly in the sense of a social revolution as the overturning of existing exploitative and dominating social relations. However, on the level purely of emancipatory strategy, this is not necessary.

Because of the connection between passive revolution as the most compelling form of revolution and its disavowal of vanguardism, this should be tied back to rearguardism. A key task of a rearguard is preventing anyone from falling behind, in the sense of providing legitimation for movements and individuals under fire by the ruling class, whether it be establishment media, the legal system, elected representatives, business elites, or actors from other powerful institutions. Rearguardism can act as a catalyst and conductor for the forging of bonds of solidarity,

in which disparate groups and even individuals are compelled to not just mobilise but get organised in order to mobilise further segments in support of the defence and protection of the group under attack. As de Sousa Santos contends, 'rearguard intellectuals...go on doing what they have always done well: looking back. But they have now received a new mission from us: to care for those of us who lag behind and bring them back into the fight and to identify whoever keeps betraying us at the back and help us find out why' (de Sousa Santos 2014, 2). This protective dimension is key for critical theory as social movements proliferate yet struggle with negative media portrayals and the challenge of creating long-term radical change.

Rearguardism therefore also requires defending both really-existing movements and their emancipatory principles from intellectual obstacles. Such defence should be in the form not (necessarily) of being on the defensive, i.e. in retreat, but in the sense of being *protective*. It can protect existing movements and groups who are under fire from dominant forces. If the rearguard is merely conceived as the final gasp of a dying organism, there is little to be excited about from a strategic perspective here. Yet by reformulating such defensiveness into protectiveness, it is possible to push forward while protecting the rear – combining the most appealing elements of the need for direction and leadership with the underappreciated concern for guarding the supply lines and rear troops of a emancipatory project.

One of the appeals of the rearguardist vision is that it moves away from the troubled history of Leninism and its subsequent problems without disavowing all the appealing components of Lenin's theoretical claims. In this sense, the emancipatory imperative is a critical Marxist category, relatively unmoored by the disfiguration of ostensible Marxism during the Cold War because it does not depend on that historical baggage. Yet by having reformulated the vanguardist project into a rearguardist one, I simultaneously enter the terrain of the relationship between principles and strategies. This subject has recently been reopened by Joshua Moufawad-Paul, who argues that 'revolutionary strategy is under-theorized at the centres of global capitalism due to an either uncritical or unconscious adoption of the strategy of *insurrection* inherited from

the October Revolution in Russia' (Moufawad-Paul 2016, 128). He claims that strategy has fallen out of the picture, a claim that certainly applies with some merit to the field of political theory. My insistence on developing not just an understanding of emancipation but an imperative relies on a turn to strategy as crucial for critical and political theory.

Such strategy is informed by a particular understanding of interests, which I briefly charted in the final sections of *Chapter 2*. The character of interests is not unitary but multifaceted. By this I mean that there is a transhistorical and truly universal component as well as a socially situated and contextual component. On the former, the thesis has worked from the claim that there is a universal human interest in liberation from the most basic forms of social unfreedom – extreme forms of exploitation and domination. Some of this is purely biological – there is an interest in the securing of water, food, and shelter irrespective of social context. Yet parts of such universal interests go beyond this into the more social domain – what Chibber calls 'basic human needs', which means 'for dignity, for liberty, [and] for basic well-being' (Chibber 2014, 79). Clearly a human interest in liberty goes beyond an interest in food and so is more expansive. Geras has convincingly shown how there is indeed basis for human nature in Marx's writings and larger theory: 'The sixth thesis [on Feuerbach, in which Marx discusses human essence] does not show Marx rejected the idea of a human nature. Marx did not reject the idea of a human nature. He was right not to do so' (Geras 2016, 116), a claim echoed by Chris Byron: 'Marx is an essentialist in regard to human nature, but sees human essence as an ensemble of socio-historical relations' (Byron 2016, 375). It would seem there is a basis for a universal interest in Marx and Marxism, yet such interests are not natural or given but dependent on social relations.

On the latter, i.e. the socially situated and contextual dimension of interests, such interests are naturally also related to the particular social world within which they are formulated. When Marx talks about species-being, for instance, this is as a socially situated and contextual form of interest. For fear of confusion, even when invoking

universal human interest, this need not employ the word universal to mean ‘across all time and place in all of human existence’ but can simply mean across place at a given time, or within a particular mode of production, or within a social structure. One example of such universal yet contextual interests is in emancipation, to the extent that humans have a baseline desire to be free from social unfreedom – even if a lack of class consciousness, the fear and use of violence and domination, the pervasiveness of ideology or hegemony, the difficulty of coordinating collective action, and the mute compulsion of oppressive economic relations all contribute to the difficulty of effectuating such emancipation (Lenin 1999 [1902]; Althusser 2005; Gramsci 1971; Rosen 2013; Chibber 2022; Mau 2022).

Likewise, interests are not primarily moral. This is not to say that there are no moral interests, e.g. in being treated fairly or with due respect, but such interests are not primarily the ones I have worked with across the thesis. I have focused instead on *material* interests. Indeed, once interests are taken to be moral, they are in the form of an ought that pleads to those in power. This formed a core part of Engels’ critique of utopian socialism, insofar as it seeks to convince through moral argument that capitalists should treat workers better and so on (Engels 2020 [1880]). What makes interests non-moral is their objective status. The subordinate classes have an objective interest in their emancipation because such emancipation is the prime method to escape such subordination – exploitation and domination, which in turn will lead to the emancipation of humanity as a whole. This is why even those who do not clearly belong to a subordinate class can also have an interest in emancipation, which links to the role of the critical theorist or rearguard intellectual who, unless they are organic intellectuals, stand somewhat outside the material basis of the movement for emancipation they seek to legitimate and protect.

Interests, particularly those which are ostensibly universal, are epistemically hard to ascertain. Comparative anthropological study can confirm some degree of transhistorical universal interests across societies, cultures, and time periods, but otherwise the existence of universal interests are most likely to be assertions. Such

assertions can be backed by examples and narratives, but the ultimate status of interests is hard to prove. The best way to nevertheless do so is to focus on the scientific component of Marxism, namely that there is a structurally determined and objective set of social relations under capitalism which give rise to objective interests. Because capitalism by definition involves the exploitation of some by others, and social domination that makes such exploitation possible and in many cases emerges to have a life of its own, for example in the production of difference (race, sex, gender, sexuality). The mutual reinforcement of these makes emancipation difficult because it must take a multifaceted form that attacks all of these dimensions.

Apart from the question about an objective material interest, chiefly but not only in emancipation, a very important secondary question is thus what the epistemic status of emancipation and its imperative is. In other words, how can agents make sense of such an interest from an epistemic standpoint? Despite his scepticism about the tenability of the interest-side of emancipation, I now briefly turn to Honneth as he offers a convincing explanation for the epistemic side of emancipation. Through cognitive labour as a kind of reflexive self-engagement, subordinates become aware of their subordination. Indeed, Honneth argues that critical theory is ‘nothing but the continuation, by means of a controlled scientific methodology, of the *cognitive labor* that oppressed groups have to perform in their everyday struggles when they work to de-naturalize hegemonic patterns of interpretation and to expose the *interests* by which these are motivated’ (Honneth 2017, 919).⁹⁴ Such cognitive labour is therefore, in Honneth’s words, a kind of ‘social struggle’, echoing a term employed also by Marcuse (Honneth 2017, 919; Marcuse 1968, 108).

The link between the epistemic and concrete or material status of emancipation is crucial. In the understanding of critical theory I followed in this thesis, closely related to that of Geuss, such an epistemic dimension can plausibly be considered similar to enlightenment in my understanding of critical theory as enlightenment and

⁹⁴ My emphasis.

emancipation I have advanced. Honneth permits concretising this task a little further, by outlining two distinct dimensions. First, subordinates must ‘acquire certain understandings and insights that are not straightforwardly available within the dominant epistemic culture’ (Honneth 2017, 918). In line with the more Gramscian understanding of subordination I have employed across the thesis, this involves building counter-hegemonic cultures and projects which do not just ascertain but also challenge a hegemonic structure or, in Honneth’s terms, dominant epistemic culture. This is why critical theorists and intellectuals play a crucial role in emancipation, because without the epistemic dimension such understanding might not find durable and emancipatory outlets. Honneth adds a second dimension here, ‘must gain an understanding of the interests that account for the entrenchment of the existing, institutionally embodied interpretative practice’ (Honneth 2017, 918-919). Interest thus plays a dual role vis-à-vis emancipation: There is not just a need to but even an interest in uncovering hegemonic interests – this is the epistemic interest – and an epistemic dimension to the universal objective (even if contextual) emancipatory interest.

Without a detailed critique of Honneth’s vision, suffice to say that while his redoubling of social struggles as the key site for critical theory as opposed to Habermas’ focus on power, even social struggles is not plausibly sufficient. This is why I have included a wider palette of components: not just epistemic but also *material* interest, which gives rise to social struggle as well as antagonistic struggle because such material interests are mutually irreconcilable. All of this is not individualistic, as Honneth is also wont to point out, but collective, because such material interests are collective and shared across entire social groups. This resonates with my understanding of critical emancipation and a critically recalibrated enlightenment that does not jettison reason, progress, and universalism in their entirety but redirects these in a way that they can be used to combat exploitation and domination.

The combination of these two is also how emancipation links to freedom. I have avoided in-depth discussion of the relationship between emancipation and freedom as this would be a subject worthy of a thesis- or book-length investigation in itself. Yet

emancipation is centrally concerned with freedom of a particular kind. While liberal conceptions of freedom as e.g. negative freedom do not resonate particularly closely with emancipation, Marxist and critical understandings of freedom do. Such understandings take freedom to be not just the absence of formal laws and politico-legal obstacles but a more authentic freedom from exploitation and domination as well as the freedom required to enable human flourishing and the pursuit and securing of interests. In this sense, the various forms of emancipation charted in *Chapter 1* – political, human, negative, and critical – correspond quite well to the function of freedom, as well. A critical understanding of freedom would be more compelling than a liberal one but is outside the scope of the present thesis.

3. Methodological dimension

Having outlined a vision of the role of critical theory and the critical theorist in the previous chapter, one might wonder to what extent such a vision has been applied to those subjected to critique in the thesis as a whole. Am I being comradely to Rawls, Scott, and Mouffe, and if not, is this a problem? Comradely critique strives for good faith; emphasises equal humanity and equal standing; fosters solidarity, collaboration, and common purpose; and dispels fatalism, i.e. contributes to a sense of empowerment and ability to struggle for a better world. Yet these are ideals to aspire to, not necessary conditions for a critique to approach comradeliness. What is more, comradely critique is between comrades, i.e. those who share in a joint political project of emancipation. As I have argued in the thesis, Rawls, Scott, and Mouffe in each their way erect obstacles for the pursuit of such emancipation. Therefore, it is not necessary to apply all the principles to my critique. While some of the components of comradely critique are laudable regardless of the subject of critique, it is supererogatory to expect comradely critique to apply to all forms of critique. This notwithstanding, as explained in *Chapter 1*, I have sought to consistently represent and reconstruct the theorists as accurately as possible, before turning to a more sharply formulated critique in order to unsettle sedimented thought. Mouffe in particular does fit the description of a comrade in many ways, for which reason I have been the most comradely in my critique of her.

A key point in need of further elaboration here is the connection between the first half in *Chapters 1-3* and second half in *Chapters 4-7*. In other words, how and why does the conceptual and theoretical framework fit with the critique of the three theorists? The critique of the second half is only possible by having reconsidered and recalibrated emancipation and enlightenment, respectively, because the critique rests on the foundations laid out in the first half. If enlightenment was unsalvageable such that it should be dispensed with entirely, the very possibilities of the critical project to offer critiques are in jeopardy. Put differently, if there was no way forward for any commitment to enlightenment, it is unclear how emancipation would be possible – because following Horkheimer, Geuss, and many others, they hang together as inseparable parts of critical theory. Without at least a critically recalibrated enlightenment, the very status of critique is thrown into question. Perhaps all that one is then left with is *interpretation*, which would be important in its own right but not sufficient for contributing to emancipation. Instead, the critical recalibration of enlightenment is the very foundation of the critical engagement with the theorists in the second half. By reformulating a commitment to reason, progress, and universalism, not just the critical but the Marxist project are kept alive, their resources used for the critique of an absence of emancipation in large parts of the literature today.

Yet such a critique cannot be done in the abstract without concrete reference points. This is why I have employed a critical approach to interrogate and criticise arguably status-quo abetting figures rather than either developing an immanent critique of these figures, or simply focused entirely on more critical figures. I briefly touched upon this above in mentioning that the “new” theorists of communism – Dean, Douzinas, Žižek, Badiou, and many others – are doing important work to advance the emancipatory imperative. Yet in this thesis I have been closer to negative critique of Rawls and Scott in particular, yet even the critique of Mouffe is in large part negative. Across all three, I have read them as symptomatic of a larger problem of the absence of developing an emancipatory imperative, for at least two main reasons.

First, engaging across the internal boundaries of political theory is generally not done to a sufficient degree. At the risk of oversimplification, Rawlsians mostly discuss with other Rawlsians and critical theorists mostly discuss with other critical theorists. Engaging across these boundaries is important. Such dialogue can foster new theoretical advances and help elucidate the problems with each theoretical tradition. If the purpose of political theory is – cf. Marx and Horkheimer, among many others – to both advance knowledge and understanding of social and political problems, as well as to contribute to the overturning of such problems, then a certain degree of communication and cross-pollination is required. In other words, it is not sufficient to convince those who are already on board with a very narrow strand of thought of the correctness of such a strand. Critical political theory must aspire to do more – to win over those who are not already committed, even if this is no easy task.

One way of doing that is by crossing boundaries. At the most basic level, such boundaries are often porous and ill-defined to begin with. Consider for example the recent work of the Frankfurt School heirs like Habermas and Forst. Is this critical theory, liberal theory, or something else altogether? A one-sentence answer cannot sufficiently capture the idiosyncrasies and nuances of such work. Therefore, it is insufficient to set up a rigid division between “camps” – this is one of the reasons I somewhat hesitated on whether to consider figures like Rawls, Scott, and Mouffe comrades or not. These demarcations are ever-shifting and must be understood in their proper contexts. A simple Manicheanism alone will not settle such typological work.

Likewise, boundaries should be crossed in a disciplinary sense, for instance in the form of “playful world-travelling” maintaining responsibility and responsiveness in the process (Mihai 2019, 589). This resists Edward Said’s notion of “traveling theory” whereby removing it from context and specificity grants theory with additional undue authority (Said 1983). To resist this, Livingston specifies one task of the critic or theorist being to “retrace the distance theory travels, from the historical context of its insurgent reality to its codification as academic orthodoxy. To do so is to resist theory’s

ossification and renew its possibilities as a traveling answer to the questions of the living” (Livingston 2017, 3). In the context of my thesis, I have both retraced the travels of the three theorists by locating their origins and uptakes in the secondary literature, but I have also criticised them for specific uptakes in wrongheaded directions. Thus, part of my criticism has been with some of the reception as much as the original theoretical claims.

Second, such engagement avoids the pitfall of reinventing the wheel, whereby for example political theorists repeat debates taking place in anthropology decades earlier as is in some senses the case with Scott, who has not had a wide uptake in political theory despite earlier similar debates in anthropological theory. To avoid such a problem, going directly to Scott rather than attempting a *tabula rasa* approach to resistance, for instance, is more fruitful because it allows the leapfrogging across the initial debates and allows incorporation of a steady stream of critiques developed over several decades. Repetition and re-invention of old debates under the pretence of the pressures of originality and knowledge production should be eschewed if it merely contributes to the increased social standing of the theorist rather than advance a particular theoretical project. At the same time, even the most influential work in political theory requires constant revaluation and reinterpretation of its social and political ramifications for any given current moment. Due to the importance of contextual understanding – whereby such works respond to particular historical conjunctures and can be read symptomatically given a changing present context of reading. Such engagement with the canon requires careful treading to avoid reifying a potentially unwarranted dominant status of particular texts but must also be done to push back against particularly uncritical readings.

For example, Rawls embodies the outer limits of a kind of left-liberalism that might be able to deliver substantial redistributive gains but does not envisage a transformed social structure. This makes it all the more pertinent to insist on considering his work vis-à-vis emancipation, especially when part of the goal is to foster a degree of dialogue across boundaries. While it is difficult to speak to both Rawlsians and those

who see Rawls as their mortal enemy, just as it is difficult to speak to committed socialist comrades and committed supporters of liberal democratic capitalism, at least some effort must be made to transcend the siloing and insulation of small separate subfields. In the case of Rawls, the recent embrace by socialists should both be commended as an attempt to bridge these divides but also critiqued – and ultimately rejected – for its normative and political implications, namely that Rawls cannot serve as the ground of the emancipatory imperative, and indeed serves as a symptom of its disappearance or absence.

4. Concluding remarks

Let me finish by returning to the problem with such symptoms and to where I began, namely with Gramsci's notion of living through an interregnum: 'The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear' (Gramsci 1971, 276). He posits that

if the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e. is no longer "leading" but only "dominant", exercising coercive force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously (Gramsci 1971, 276).

In other words, the breakdown of the liberal and then neo-liberal hegemonic world-order today can be traced from the lack of faith and belief in conventional narratives. The widespread vaccine scepticism, anti-lockdown protest movements, the rapidly growing climate justice movement, and the labour and social movements I pointed to in *Chapter 1* all suggest a breakdown in the 'traditional ideologies', in 'the form of scepticism with regard to all theories and general formulae...and to a form of politics which is not simply realistic...but which is cynical in its immediate manifestation' (Gramsci 1971, 276). Finding ways of making such scepticism and cynicism be emancipatory is a long project.

The interregnum therefore requires a move away from an instrumental and totalising oppressive rationality toward an emancipatory politics animated and informed by

affect. In order for such a shift to happen, critical theorists must contribute with emancipatory political theory to support emancipatory politics. Traverso's point about the disappearance of future-oriented approaches on the left (Traverso 2016) calls for reckoning with the both debilitating and promising potential of the past and the future alike. Likewise, promising work on the role of the imagination in emancipation is beginning to form (Thaler 2017, 2022) and must be complemented with a deep reckoning with attention to the structural constraints against emancipatory change.

The practice of self-reflective, rearguard legitimization of such emancipatory politics, twinned with comradely critique when these politics go awry, can help generate and sustain emancipatory forms of faith and affect more generally, revealing a horizon of emancipation in which left-oriented futures can emerge. With attention to time, temporality, and the relationship between the past and the future, further research can push such an ambition forward. Gramsci poignantly asks: 'will the interregnum, the crisis whose historically normal solution is blocked in this way, necessarily be resolved in favour of a restoration of the old?...physical depression will lead in the long run to a widespread scepticism, and a new "arrangement" will be found' (Gramsci 1971, 276). The contemporary struggle is over what kind of arrangement that will be. The path ahead for critical theory and the understanding, construction, and pursuit of the emancipatory imperative is labyrinthine and thorny, yet the imperative of making the future arrangement an emancipatory one makes it all the more pressing to push ahead. I hope to have contributed with a step or two to that task.

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