

Reading Simone Weil 'On the Abolition of Political Parties'

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i. Simone Weil on Political Parties

In a pithy article written in 1943, but published a decade after her death in that same year, Simone Weil calls for the abolition of all political parties. She presents normative objections to their very existence. Today many political theorists too recognise limits to the party system. Most begin from an account of current political circumstances – lack of choice, party discipline, global challenges to nation state sovereignty, vitriolic partisanship devoid of substantive difference, dealignment of voters, depoliticisation and cartelisation of parties¹ - and conclude that that the party system is in bad shape. Most however concur with Schattschneider's 1942 claim that democracy is unthinkable without political parties. Weil, however, forces the reader to ask the simplest questions: Why do we take the existence of political parties for granted? Is there any good reason for their existence? Are parties a means or an end? If a means then what end(s) do they serve? Are they best suited to realise these ends? It is deceptively easy to reject her critique of political parties, but I will suggest that there is more to her argument than at first glance. Let me begin with a brief overview of her arguments.

Weil's starting assumption is that the only legitimate reason for preserving anything is its good, the criteria for which are truth, justice and the public interest. She derives her ideal of the good from Rousseau: the general will is true and just. If democracy, as the exercise of the freely expressed, reasoned will of all leads to justice then it is worth preserving. However, neither political parties nor democracy are good in themselves. Democratic elections, can, and do result in disastrous outcomes, as Weil writing in the 1943 knew all too well: 'The true spirit of 1789 consists in thinking not that a thing is just because such is the people's will, but that in certain conditions, the will of the people is more likely than any other will to conform to justice.' (Weil, 2013, 7) The general will is impaired if corrupted by collective passion. It is properly realised when individuals express their free and reasoned will listening to and exchanging reasons which justify different ways of organising public life. Political parties, as partisan, are vehicles of collective passion and violate this ideal.²

¹ See in particular Mair (2013); Whiteley (2011) and also Enyedi (2014) for a somewhat more critical take on the decline of parties thesis.

² Weil is in fact repeating arguments which have a far longer history. Malebranche in his *Treatise on Nature and Grace* (1680) had attempted to resolve a much older theological dispute about God's providence on earth in terms of the General Will. Malebranche held that the General will accorded with God's acts, and these conformed to general laws. The power of providence accords perfectly with the order of the world (as Agamben

On Weil's account parties have three characteristics which distort the realisation of the good: they are machines to generate collective passions; they exercise collective pressure and instil conformity; and their ultimate goal is their own growth without limit. (Weil, 2013, 11) These characteristics mean that political parties are totalitarian in practice and in inclination.

Although they claim to serve the public their interests are always particular. In fact, Weil contends, parties have loosely defined doctrines because in the end the party becomes its own end. The party name unifies a fiction dressed up as a coherent doctrine. In order to realise such nebulous ideas parties perforce must seek more power. How much power though? On the one hand they will face impediments to their goals, but given that these goals are so empty and thus impossible to realise, there is no limit to the power that parties will seek, even beyond the bounds of the nation state. The sole criterion of progress becomes the growth of the party and the ever expanding influence it exerts over members.

How is this influence exerted? First, parties 'kill in all souls the sense of truth and justice' (Weil, 2013, 16) by developing dissimulating propaganda to persuade. Second, members of a party cannot profess views distinct from those of the party nor freely consider the issues at hand, as the collective view must hold sway. They quell the inner light of conscience, and commit individuals to a state of mendacity and inner darkness. (Weil 19) Members of a political party are compelled to lie - to themselves, to the public and sometimes to the party. Weil recognises that such an ideal is impossible to imagine. The truth 'which we desire but have no prior knowledge of... is a perfection which no mind can conceive of - God, truth, justice - [words] silently evoked with desire, have the power to lift up the soul and flood it with light. It is when we desire truth with an empty soul and without attempting to guess its content that we receive the light.' (Weil 22) She equates this possibility with Rousseau's notion of the general will, a will undistorted by particular interests. The problem for Weil is that where parties exist on a national scale they '...ensure that not a single mind can attend to the effort of perceiving in public affairs what is good, what is just, and what is true.' (Weil, 24) The origins of such discipline and mendacity lie in the Catholic Church's attempt over many centuries to control the spread of sects, and in the divisions which followed the French Revolution. Parties act like mini versions of a secular Church. Unity is maintained through the generation of collective passion, a drug which should be banned like those other illegal

notes here Malebranche's theology overlaps with the dominant scientific view of nature as discernible according to rational laws. (Agamben 2011, 265)) Malebranche insists upon the perfection of God's providence while recognising that men will not always act in line with providence. His text is an attempt to reconcile long standing disputes in Catholic theology around the government of the world, and in particular the relationship between sovereign power and economic power, in this case the government of life. The text is crucial to Rousseau's later development of his notion of the General Will, which should be understood in terms of a longer history linking the question of the General Will, back to God's providence and the problem of how men govern each other. Central to this question is that the will of men cannot accord with that of God. Are men then to be viewed as corrupt sinners, condemned in their freedom to eternal hell, or is it possible to imagine God's divine will at work in the world? The question of the political party has a far longer providence one might say than political scientists might like to admit, in this problem of wills at loggerheads with that of the God.

substances which induce intoxication. The partisan spirit induced by such intoxication induces even decent 'men' to persecute the innocent.

For Weil then parties are bad in principle and have evil consequences in practice. They should be abolished. She proposes a system in which potential representatives openly express their views on all issues when standing for election. Parliaments would allow association and disassociation on specific issues. In the public sphere groups should coalesce around particular ideas and the press would never endorse particular candidates or parties. The abolition of parties would cause no damage to the public good but would exert a 'healthy cleansing influence well beyond the domain of public affairs...' (Weil 32) Their abolition would end the intellectual leprosy which reduces politics to opinion.

Let me summarise: Weil argues that parties are evil. They induce collective passion and force members to ignore their inner conscience. They become ends in themselves and seek power for its own sake. They equate their own existence with the absolute good and confuse means with ends. They become propaganda machines instilling discipline on members and mendaciousness among both voters and representatives. In what follows I show why these arguments would be rejected by contemporary theorists. I will argue that there is more here than is immediately apparent. In particular I argue that in rejecting Weil's commitment to the absolute, we miss an opportunity to recast her argument in terms of a democratic excess that no representative system can master, allowing us to reconsider the ideal of the international party. Let me first address why the democratic common sense would simply reject Weil's argument.

ii. The Democratic Common Sense

Weil's defence of a general will, as well as her quasi-religious insistence on the absolute good, read like an archaic palimpsest of Plato, Christianity, Rousseau and Marx all of whom are legible in the erasures of her text. It is a text out of joint with our time. Despite the contemporary range of arguments justifying democracy all converge around a few key themes, a democratic common sense, in contemporary political theory. (*I realise that this is a big claim, but think I can more or less justify it. Certainly the argument here holds for deliberative, liberal and radical democratic accounts.*) This common sense would sneer at Weil's claims.

First other than a few recalcitrant Marxists, most theorists recognise that political claims are contingent. Contingency has ontological status for post-Marxists theorists such as Laclau, while for deliberative democrats contingency concerns all substantive claims about how to organise society. There may be certain quasi-transcendental preconditions for the thinking of

democratic will formation but consensus is never fixed (see chapter 5 in Devenney, 2003) and the best democracies can achieve is a tenuous consensus, open to further challenge, within a set of rules more or less agreed. For Weil such contingency celebrates and institutionalises falsehood. It makes of truth the fleeting promise of a dissimulating politician, to be forgotten when no longer convenient. Politics is reduced to the circulation of, and competition between, different opinions none of which have either normative or ontological priority.

Second the democratic common sense insists upon an (axiological) pluralism. Because all substantive versions of the good life are deemed contingent pluralism is celebrated, against monism. This characterises deliberative accounts, Spinozist versions of the multitude (Hardt and Negri (2000) in particular), liberal defences of multi-party politics and radical democratic accounts of hegemony. Pluralism entails that there is no common good and that consensus about values is partial. Democracies are formal shells which institutionalise this pluralism. There are no *a priori* reasons for privileging one form of life over another, so what in fact prevails is the contingent outcome of political struggle. Weil's reject such a conclusion insisting that even if human beings do not know the good, it is most likely to be realised in the form of a General will under the constraint of the free exercise of reason, a reason which admits of one good, not a plurality of contested goods. Axiological pluralism appears as the only coherent philosophical justification for the existence of competing parties, none of which embody the good, but all of which struggle to represent the public body. I will have reason to question this claim below.

Third, contemporary theory more or less agrees that there is no pre-existing political will. A political will is forged through argument, disagreement and sometimes antagonism. Deliberative accounts foreground the possibility of a consensus premised on an implicit idea(l) of reason. Radical democrats point to the antagonistic nature of political interaction. Michael Saward in his 2011 text *The Representative Claim* also contends that the interests of the represented are neither transparent nor given in advance. He focuses on the constitution of interests through the aesthetic making of the represented. Representative claims are ubiquitous, limited neither to electoral decision moments nor to territorially defined units. Such claims are dynamic rather than static while aesthetic, cultural and political forms of representation overlap in most representative claims. Either way politics concerns the formation of a will which does not pre-exist the process of agonistic deliberation. Parties articulate different conceptions of the general will, persuading voters to identify, and commit, to particular notions of the good. Again, for Weil such arguments are spurious. The general will is absolute, unanimous and in accord with the Good. The articulation of a will through argument and persuasion admits that any political will is a rhetorical construct, and that its existence must be maintained through at very least a minimal violence. The good is not given in advance.

This entails, last, that political subjectivity is framed through argument, antagonistic debate and identification. Politics does not occur under the constraint of unanimity, and nor is the state simply an administrative body implementing decisions which emanate from a political subject already formed. Neither individual nor collective political subjects pre-exist the contingent outcome of political struggles. The political subject is not in possession of itself but is exposed and constituted through the claims of others. Weil by contrast presumes that there is a true subject of politics, a subject not swayed by mere opinion, but reflective of and constituted by the possibility of a general will.

Politics then is contingent; the outcome of any political struggle is not determined in advance; a political will is articulated in the context of a pluralism which is irreducible and the subject has no essential interest, ontologically prior to this articulation. This common sense links unlikely bedfellows – Chantal Mouffe, Jurgen Habermas, Francis Fukuyama, Richard Rorty and Claude Lefort all slip comfortably under these covers. There is though one last feature common to all of these theorists: all accept that even if there is no final justification for the exercise of political power, it must nonetheless be exercised. Certainly there should be limits on the exercise of sovereign power (the people are sovereign!) but once elections have taken place, once the decision is made about who carries out the executive functions of government, then the legitimate laws of the land apply equally to all. Let me make this point in post-Marxist terms: if the play of difference is to make any sense then it must take place within a system of order which give to these differences a meaning. In the nation state this role is played by sovereign, constitutionally defined, power which determines territorial and membership limits, limits constitutive of any demos.

The relationship between this consensus and the justification for the existence of political parties is straightforward. Parties are first and foremost parts –partisans, who compete to represent the majority in plural societies. Parties are justifiable because where there is disagreement over substantive matters a fair system of decision making is required. Thomas Christiano writes:

‘...values allow us to assess the worth of the institutions. The role of considerations of inherent political legitimacy is to define a fair system of collective decision-making when there is disagreement on the substance of the decisions and fundamental interests are at stake. It answers the question: by what right has this decision been made and imposed on all? It determines who has the right to make certain decisions...Members then have content-independent reasons to go along with decisions even if they think them unjust. These reasons are grounded in the right of the legitimate decision maker.’ (Christiano, 2010, 122)

Note how this justification for the existence of political institutions accords with my outline of a democratic consensus above: Christiano distinguishes values from institutions. This allows him to develop a purely formal principle of justification, independent of any content or particular decision. This formal principle recognises that there are fundamental differences of value, that there is agonistic dispute, and that these substantive differences cut across democratic societies. However, if the decision procedures are legitimate then so too is the outcome, even if there are many who think the decision is unjust. Note that for Christiano the content of the decision is not his concern. There is no general will, only a reasoned procedure that results in the making of a sovereign decision, a decision which recognises but elides difference. Following this type of argument parties are justified if, as political institutions, they contribute to inherent political legitimacy. They function to ensure that many voices are heard, they give voice to an array of issues, enabling citizens to act responsibly when choosing. A wide array of parties ensures that the interests and concerns of many are considered and represented. (more to add in here...)

The form that this argument takes accords with many others: distinguish institutions from value; determine a set of values (or theoretical categories) with universal credence; justify or criticise institutions based on the extent to which they realise, enhance or maintain these values. Political parties are justified because they allow for the representation of a range of interests; they organise a public that otherwise might not have a coherent will to express; they act as a transmission belt between institutions and citizens; and they express the pluralism of values and of goods we take for granted. Although it is presented as if value neutral this form of proceduralism – which distinguishes the procedure from all content – in fact already presupposes that difference is a good. It excludes *a priori* any substantive version of the good as universally valid. Before returning to the discussion of Weil's call for the abolition of parties I should note one last thing. None of these arguments justifies the existence of political parties. Axiological pluralism does not in itself justify the party form, nor does the claim that there are a variety of competing goods. Parties are, as Christiano acknowledges, functional, a means to realise the good – the pluralism which presents itself as value neutral. There is nothing about the party form in itself which justifies its existence in normative terms. Parties are not ends in themselves. As a consequence their justification can only ever be a variation on utilitarianism. This requires that as a means they do not violate the ends they serve; and second that they are the best means to achieve these ends.

Weil Reframed

In light of this discussion let me return to Weil and address her argument a little more carefully, reframing each step of the argument.

Weil assumes that there is such a thing as the general will. In a vein reminiscent of Rousseau she associates this will with the divine, recognising that it is beyond the ken of humans. The general will she argues identical in everyone, and is approximated through the free use of reason. Passion motivates crime and parties perforce generate passion, as they become ends in themselves. But this she says is idolatry ‘for God alone is his own end.’ (14) As I have suggested above this is the easiest aspect of Weil’s argument to reject – though not necessarily to refute. If pluralism is axiological then such a claim must appear absurd. Yet this reading is too quick. Weil associates this will with the divine and acknowledges that humans cannot know it. The General Will is in excess of any particular will which claim to express it. Rousseau associates it with absolute democracy, the possibility of a will which is simply the acting out of freedom. As Critchley elegantly summarises it: ‘The core of *The Social Contract* is a defense of popular sovereignty... Popular sovereignty consists in acts of legislation by the general will, where the people determine themselves by themselves and not through the mediation of any monarch, prince, aristocracy or unrepresentative body.’ (Critchley, 2012, 43) Parties are one such unrepresentative body. However we also know that this sovereign act is impossible. Rousseau solves the problem of how to realise such a will by introducing the lawgiver:

‘In order to discover the rules of society best suited to nations, a superior intelligence beholding all the passions of men without experiencing any of them would be needed. This intelligence would have to be wholly unrelated to our nature, while knowing it through and through; its happiness would have to be independent of us, and yet ready to occupy itself with ours; and lastly, it would have, in the march of time, to look forward to a distant glory, and, working in one century, to be able to enjoy in the next. It would take Gods to give men laws.’ (Rousseau, Book II, Section 7)

The general will requires the intervention of a God. Democracy thought in these terms is in excess of its means of representation. To claim to represent it is to commit idolatry, according to Weil. I have surreptitiously included a presumption here – that the general will is compatible with what a true democratic will, the perfect exercise of freedom, might be and that this is impossible for men to represent. The Greek word passed down to us means exactly this: democracy is the exercise of power by the people. This definition is radical in insisting upon only one qualification: recognition that one is of the people. There are no special privileges accorded any particular subject and no delimitation of the people in terms of nation, nationality, class, wealth, gender or any other marker of exclusion. Democracy knows no borders. It disrupts all order and accords the same rights and privileges to all. The democrat does not recognise the immigrant. This excessive element is of the essence of the democratic subject, the people. As Agamben notes, in most European languages this term designates both a nationally defined people, and the poor. The democratic subject in excess of itself is never proper to itself. It challenges the forms of propriety which define the bounds of the proper, the roles, the forms of representation and the borders of the demos. The people

once defined are no longer *sensu stricto* a democratic people because there is no principle adequate to the people, no qualification which allows us to name and demarcate the people.

However, as a form of government democracy requires precisely such principle of delimitation. Aristotle was clear about this. In a democracy the poor, who are the majority, rule. He writes: 'Wherever men rule by reason of their wealth...that is an oligarchy, and where the poor rule, that is a democracy.' (Book 3, chapter 8) In fact who is deemed part of the demos is defined by legal fiat. Reasons may be given but these are never exhaustive and they certainly do not admit of a principle. If this argument is right then representation of the people is a site of antagonistic confrontation in at least four overlapping respects: the clash between parties who claim to represent the people; the attempt to demarcate and define the people; the representation of those who threaten the people – the terrorist, the communist or the immigrant; and the claims of the poor to be the people. The representative excess of the democratic people is intrinsically related to this notion of the 'poor'. (Devenney 2011, 162-164 includes a provisional version of this argument) On what grounds then are foreigners, teenagers, prisoners or others excluded? Read symptomatically Weil's text is an attempt to preserve this excessive democratic general will as possible in democratic practice. This will is impossible to represent yet requires some means of representation. Democracy then presupposes this excessive moment which unsettles established forms of representative democracy. Democracy is always improper.

This brings me to the second element of Weil's critique of political parties. She characterises parties as vehicles for the generation of dangerous collective passions. This is a necessary consequence of what political parties aim to represent. In seeking power they turn to persuasion and use rhetorical means to convince voters to lend their support. Yet Weil's text relies on similar strategies, as she is forced to recognise that humans cannot express this will. Any attempt to represent the will is a metaphoric stand in for the truth, a stand in which is not bereft of affect or of passion, precisely because reason fails to grasp such a divine excess. The General Will can only be expressed metaphorically. She writes: 'Yet how can we desire truth if we have no prior knowledge of it? This is the mystery of all mysteries. Words that express a perfection which no mind can conceive of – God, truth, justice – silently evoked with desire, but without any preconception, have the power to lift up the soul and flood it with light.' (Weil, 2013, 22) Such words would be empty signifiers in the sense in which Ernesto Laclau used this term. All signification, Laclau contends, is structured around an impossibility, an empty place which is the result of 'the impossibility of producing an object which, none the less, is required by the systematicity of the system...the signifier which is emptied in order to assume the representing function will always be constitutively inadequate.' (Laclau, *Emancipations*, 40) Which signifiers take on this role? Weil suggests three – God, truth, Justice – but there is no reason why these should stand in for the General will as opposed to any number of other signifiers, names, parties, or agents. Weil in other words indirectly justifies the existence of competing attempts to represent this impossible will. She admits the necessity of rhetoric and in defending the absolute ends up outlining a far

more systematic defence of pluralism than the banal presumption that there are competing goods.

Weil's second objection looks rather different in this light. Parties instil discipline, police thinking and prevent the free exercise of reason. There can be little doubt that Weil is right, but she has a problem. She is incapable of specifying the difference between the true and the manipulated will. She cannot easily separate out the free exercise of reason from the rhetorical deployment of words about which we have no preconception. The pure light of reason (her phrase) can only be represented by stand-ins. In claiming to represent this sovereign will, in claiming to embody democracy as such, a party or any other representative lays claim to be representative of the democratic ideal. If this is so then any social order is caught in the antagonistic play of parts claiming to represent the whole. Discipline, control, the bringing together of different voices to be represented by one voice – all of this is necessary for a party claiming to embody the true will of a people.

What of Weil's third objection: parties aim to grow without limit and become ends in themselves with no guiding principle other than their own growth? In one sense Weil must be right. A political party exists to contest sovereign political power and, in the final instance, to represent constituents as the embodiment of their democratic will. Given that this will is impossible to represent parties, as Weil rightly notes, aim to extend their power at risk of becoming ends in themselves. However, if the demos is in excess of its means of representation the part will never become the whole. In a state where the place of power is empty, parties compete at the ideological level to persuade and win converts, and do so in order to extend their power. Read in this way Weil's account is compatible with what I termed the democratic common sense above. However, this is to forget her account of the general will as impossible to represent. I return to this in the concluding section, but let me note, too quickly, that this reading is in accord with Laclau's account of representation.

Laclau's ideas are rarely considered in relation to political parties. In theoretical terms he developed an ontological defence of partisanship – though not necessarily parties - in politics. For Laclau any form of representation requires the exercise of power for reasons very similar to those I have outlined in relation to Weil. Not only is partisanship necessary, it is ever present, and political parties are one way of maintaining an agonistic battle over the terms of politics. Partisanship is regulated by agreed procedures and constitutional principles which limit conflict that might otherwise ensue in civil war. Parties both express (Sartori) and shape (Disch) how the people exercise power and who the people are. They have no existence unless 'mobilised into conceiving themselves as and acting as a whole' (Disch 2012, 208) and it is political parties that compete to represent, and give sense to, the people. Parties, as particular, lay claim to the universal, as Laclau might have put it. They unify a variety of demands, claims and protests against the party in power. They select, refine and generalise

presenting a unified front which weaves together these differences and present themselves as if they are not partisans. When articulating universal platforms, they are caught up in the dialectical interplay between particular and universal. In the extreme they may challenge constitutional procedures which limit their claim to embody the universal interest. With rare exception (De Leon et al 2007) this aspect of Laclau's work has not been deployed in the study of political parties. Nor has the importance of antagonism to understanding the conflict between parties. If parties compete to embody the universal, if they mobilise the passions of political subjects, then conflict which cannot be resolved by dialogue or deliberation is inevitable. Not only is it inevitable – it is crucial to any representative democracy intent on vitalising and revitalising its political institutions. Sometimes these clashes require fundamental reformulations of the ground rules within which antagonists engage. To put this point plainly: antagonistic struggle between political parties entails both that the public sphere is not closed down by apparent consensus, and that the ground rules are at stake in the very game they claim to regulate. Why? On my terms because the general laws of men, constitutional procedures let us say, never perfectly overlap with the divine excess which is of the essence of democracy. As odd as it may seem arcane disputes in theology about the representation of the divine general will provide both a genealogy of, and a justification for, continued partisanship (and perhaps parties) in the political realm.

Where does this leave us in respect of Weil's claim that political parties should be abolished? Weil cannot consistently hold to her position if it is based on the idea that parties violate the general will. Laclau is correct to claim that a political will is articulated, not given in advance, and that there is no pre-existing will that acts as a normative regulator of any established political will. However, this conclusion only commits me to the recognition that in any social order the demos is impossible to represent and that any claim to do so is particular. It necessitate neither the existence of political parties nor their abolition.

However, I have ignored one apparently marginal aspect of Weil's argument, which is unaffected by my immanent critique of her account of political parties. Parties, she argues are unnecessary because there are better ways to approximate the general will. If parties are abolished there would still be a system of representation. Those elected will associate and disassociate around particular issues, following their conscience, listening to the best reasons, ignoring all attempts to quell dissent or close down what the public weal might determine. Weil's proposals compel the reader to consider whether or not other forms of representation are better suited to the ideal of democracy, the exercise of power by the people. Perhaps Weil is right: parties narrow political debate; they exclude radical ideas; they operate as fine sieves excluding big ideas and they exaggerate differences in order to justify their continued existence. Given the large number of political scientists who have noted *inter alia* the decline of political parties, their corruption by special interests, the 'dealignment' of voters, the cartelisation of the party system, the professionalization of representatives, and the resource limitations on participation for the vast majority – is it not incumbent on normative accounts

to properly consider the possibilities for a partisan politics without political parties? The history of democratic thought and practice is populated with these alternatives: a lottery to choose parliamentary representatives from every member of the relevant voting population; policies voted on through use of various communications technologies; popular decision making on the allocation of taxation; radical devolution of power and finance to local authorities. These are not the subject of this discussion. However, they point to the need to think beyond a consensus which assumes that the expression of a sovereign democratic will entails the constitutional maintenance of classic liberal rights to liberty, status, legal protection and political autonomy and political parties as preconditions for the formulation of a sovereign and democratic will.

In order to complete this argument though I must follow through on my claim that democracy is in excess of any attempt to represent it, that the demos is always in excess of those who claim to be the people and link this back to the question of political parties.

Democratic Excess and Party Representation

The democratic subject, the demos, is the people. I have been literal about this and simplistic. In a democracy it is the people who, without qualification, exercise power. No special privileges are accorded any particular subject. On this account the representation of 'the people' is necessary but undemocratic. The party form, insofar as it takes for granted who the people are, assumes that it can represent this people. It both institutes and violates democracy in the same movement. Agamben is right then to insist that the concept of the people is born in semantic ambiguity. He is wrong to argue that this is first a bio-political fracture differentiating the integral body politic from the 'fragmentary multiplicity of needy and excluded bodies.' (Agamben, 1995, 30) Certainly this is one consequence of the fracture that constitutes a people in opposition to 'others.' However, he misses the promise of democracy which exceeds this denomination. This promise always potentially propels an established order in directions it would not like to travel, and is the site of tensions which may be read as symptoms of the torsion that this excess introduces in any particular attempt to represent and to discipline it.

This leads me to one final element in my discussion of Weil. At one point she writes: '...the essential tendency of all political parties is towards totalitarianism, first on the national and then on the global scale...because the notion of the public interest which each party invokes, is itself a fiction, an empty shell devoid of all reality, ...the quest for total power becomes an absolute need. (Weil, 2013, 14) Weil was writing in light of the spread of Nazism across Europe, as well as the politics of the third international established in 1919, as an organ of Soviet control over international communist parties. In ideological terms these two versions of internationalism are opposed to each other: Nazism defined itself in terms of nation and

blood. Communism, at least nominally, proposed the end of national distinctions, the abolition of the distinction between the people and their other and imagined a demos without exclusion.³ If democracy is an excessive demand which constantly challenges the exclusions constitutive of the demos perhaps we need too to revisit Weil's condemnation of this ideal? Can we imagine the party form, extended on a global scale, which does away with the divisions and exclusions constitutive of national body politics?

I suggested above that Weil compels us to consider how the democratic ideal – of power exercised by the people without demarcation – might better be realised. In one sense such a sovereign will is impossible to realise. In another sense this impossibility makes democracy excessive to any national system of representation. Laclau, whom I referred to in the discussion above, links the impossibility of representation to a populist politics in which what is at stake is the constitution of a people through the articulation of demands made equivalent, in relation to a common empty signifier, justice or the nation, or equality for example. For Laclau democratic politics is populist in both form and content. I have followed his argument in essential respects in the discussion above. However, I think it requires qualification. Insofar as populist equivalence is tied to national figures of identification, insofar as it requires the definition of a people, it also violates the democratic ideal. The established national imaginary – institutionally and symbolically constitutive of the global political horizon – is relatively young and certainly not the only frame of reference for political parties. In fact political parties have always operated beyond the bounds of the nation state – in some instances because of a common political heritage and ideals (Greens and liberals for example); in other cases working as alliances in regional/continental parliaments; or, as in the instance of the Comintern mentioned above, with a view toward the articulation of a global political hegemony. The ideal of a general will defended by Weil justifies one form of political party: a party which articulates a global vision without limitation. In fact if one wishes to derive a justification of political parties from her account it can only be on the basis that the party articulates a vision without limit which undermines all forms of exclusivity. Such a party would refuse the bio-political nexus that Agamben identifies as central to the definition of a national people. It would refuse to recognise the category of the immigrant, and would seek to establish an ideal long talked about but rarely enacted, of democratic communities linked by association and disassociation with little concern for national limits. Jodi Dean reaches a similar conclusion. She writes:

‘For over thirty years, the party has been extracted from the aspirations and accomplishments it enabled... ubiquitous left dogmatism has turned the so-called obsolescence of the party form into the primary tenet of its catechism. Every other mode of political association may be revised, renewed, rethought, and reimagined, except for the communist party. It is time to put

³ It was not a mistake that one of the main difficulties Stalin struggled with in the 1920s was the representation of so called ‘cultures’ and the question of ‘nationalities’ which had first confronted in his 1913 essay on the nationalities question.

this nursery tale aside and take up the challenge of actively constructing a political collectivity with the will and mass to fight for an egalitarian world.’ (Dean, 2012, 402)

Dean’s vision echoes the ideal implicit in Weil’s notion of the General Will. Unlike Dean I would reject the qualifier communist. For good reason that ideal has been rendered obsolete. But democratic theory cannot do justice to its own history if it refuses to think the party as unlimited, as calling in to being a general will without limit. This would be a radical democratic vision which does not aim to constitute a people, but which questions the infinite varieties of limit placed around that simplest of ideal, the people exercising power, without limit. It is a power in excess of what is, but which has to be presupposed in the very constitution of what is the case. Recall that for Foucault power is not a possession of a sovereign. It is distributed in a capillary like manner across the body politic, through disciplinary and bio-political practices. Foucault reminded us that power is exercised in the very constitution of the subjects we are, that we enact this power, and that this power is distributed and multiplied through the varying dividing practices constitutive of any social order. Power is found in the nooks and crannies of existence. My account recognises that the excessive nature of democratic power means there are no necessary limits to where the demos might question what has become the proper exercise of power. Democratic power is that dangerous excess which inhabits the entrails of our existence as a people, and which respects neither authority, might, violence nor the partial will which any established sovereign state instantiates.

So what form of political party is justifiable if we take this most extreme version of the will presented by Weil? Such a party would be global in scope. It would refuse the bio-political exclusions so acutely identified by Agamben. It would not be populist and nor would it require identification constituted around a leader or an exclusive ideal. It would challenge every established form of power and shine Weil’s divine light in places where the sun has not yet shone. Like Plato’s account of Eudaemonia we could not look directly at such an ideal, but may approximate it in a party form as yet unthought. So should political parties be abolished? Weil gives no good reason to think that in normative terms the political party should be abolished. She does force a reconsideration of other ways to express a General Will, and indirectly contributes to the thinking of a party to come. This party would articulate a vision that is global, without limit, without a people but able to confront those forces which have become truly global and which have encased national political parties in their spider’s web of regulation and reification. The forms of equivalence which escape democratic logics – financial, infrastructural, and securitising constitute political subjects as paranoid, securitised and monetised. Democratic equivalence, in the name of an excessive impossible ideal, would begin to challenge this hegemony in the form of what Derrida once termed a democracy to come, or the New International. Derrida had argued in *Spectres of Marx* that such an international cannot take the form of a party: ‘...it is an *untimely link, without status, without title, and without name, barely public even if ... without party, without country, without*

national community (International ... national determination), *without co-citizenship, without common belonging to a class.*' (Derrida, 1994, 85) Reading Weil I would suggest that just such a party might be thinkable.

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