

**Martín Plot.** *The Aesthetico-Political: The Question of Democracy in Merleau-Ponty, Arendt, and Rancière.* Bloomsbury Academic 2014. 184 pp. \$120.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781441196637); \$39.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781501319648).

In a concise book of only four chapters, Plot offers an original contribution to the conceptualization of democracy. By synthesizing a very specific set of ideas found in the tradition of political phenomenology and contrasting this synthesis with the ideas of Carl Schmitt and Jürgen Habermas, he provides a model for understanding the novel characteristics of democracy understood as tied to an aesthetico-political regime.

While Plot announces a study of Merleau-Ponty, Arendt, and Rancière, his actual point of reference is Claude Lefort. As the inheritor of political phenomenology, a reader of both Arendt and Merleau-Ponty, and the author of the essay ‘The Question of Politics,’ ‘political phenomenology’s democratic manifesto’ (102), Lefort centralizes the ideas developed by the authors named in the subtitle. His focus on Lefort even leads Plot to fail to read Rancière for his own contributions, taking from his texts only a few ideas understood through Lefort’s positions. That said, Plot does not purport to offer a full reading of the authors studied or a comparison of their positions. Instead, he finds the common ground among the authors and uses contradictions within and between their texts to offer insights of his own.

Lefort’s work is thus his point of entry into the other texts; his ambivalence on the meaning of ‘regimes’ allows Plot to create a stricter dichotomy between forms of societies and regimes, that is, ways to legitimize political authority. While the names of ‘democracy’ and ‘totalitarianism,’ among others, are reserved for the former category, it is the latter that is the object of the greater part of the analyses. In the theologico-political regime, an appeal to the outside of society lends legitimacy to the rulers, a function that is occupied by knowledge and the claim to a full understanding of the nature of society in the epistemologico-political regime. In contrast with the Ancien Régime and with totalitarianism, which are respectively associated with the appeal to transcendence and to knowledge, democracy is associated with the aesthetico-political regime. The main insight and contribution to political philosophy of this book is that these regimes are ‘horizons for the configuration of collective life’ (18). While forms of society may change, the three regimes continue to exist as competing forms, *gestalts*, or ideal-types.

Plot invites us to favour the aesthetico-political regime because of its lack of closure on itself. It is the site of hyperdialectical processes, where exchanges are mutual and plural and have no end; of a hyperreflection, where principles and values compete and force their continual redefinition; and of an experience of reversibility, where each person can find herself in the political position occupied by others. In addition to these characteristics found in Merleau-Ponty’s development of the aesthetic mode of coexistence, Plot draws on Arendt to display its open, spontaneous, and plural character. The indeterminate nature of action, following these characteristics, makes it revocable and ambiguous (69). The aesthetico-political is thus the regime that allows for action and uncertainty, rather than the certainty of decision, as in the case for Habermas’s non-totalitarian, epistemological model of stable politics based on consensus (58). This regime is also the closest to democracy: ‘In a democratic polity, disagreement and opposition, struggle and conflicting understandings, should be assumed to be permanent facts. Societies institutionalize electoral and decision-making processes when they have (aesthetic-politically) assumed that the change of opinions is a *permanent datum* of the flesh of democracy, and because if the moment of decision were not periodically fixed, we would expect societies to continue either permanently deliberating – if our side is in the minority – or make binding decisions at any time –

if our side happens to coincide with the circumstantial majority of opinions' (50). Democracy consequently appears as the regime that allows for the questioning, proper to an aesthetic mode of coexistence and action, of politics, of what is perceived to be taking place, and of any consensus on what is to be done.

In favouring the aesthetico-political regime, Plot clearly takes a position against the Republican Party in the United States, because of its reliance on theological and epistemological legitimacy, but also against the Democratic Party, in its failure to meet the demands of democracy and of aesthetico-political legitimization (107). Yet the aesthetico-political is not in and of itself a guarantee of freedom and equality, even as it fosters them and, through them, democracy. Indeed, it is open to two kinds of closed action (89). Whereas ideology in action seeks to create agreement to values, thus undermining the indeterminacy of action and democratic coexistence, kitsch in action seeks to find agreement through what pleases the people, in a manner that perhaps respects indeterminacy to a small extent, yet undermines it by simply repeating what is already known to please the majority.

To these pitfalls of contemporary politics, Plot opposes an action which, as in art, does not know what its outcome will be. This action seeks above all to redefine boundaries, redefine what can be seen and felt, and redraw alliances. Drawing on Rancière's notions of the dissensus and of the division of the sensible, Plot thus outlines a politics that would create equality through the constant redefinition of social divisions and of the markers of certainty. However, a more developed treatment of democracy, which would pay more attention to institutions (without shifting the focus toward the more procedural philosophies Plot rejects), is needed for this line of argument to be entirely convincing. At the moment, his approach to democracy oscillates between this emancipatory politics that is pit against an epistemologically or theologically organized state and a celebration of electoral, parliamentary politics that simply regrets that parties do not play their full role in properly democratic politics (78).

A word of caution is needed in approaching this book: the reader should forget about its subtitle. The specificity of the philosophies offered by the authors Plot studies is almost entirely lost; Merleau-Ponty, Arendt, and Rancière did not think what he suggests. His treatment of Merleau-Ponty can serve as an example. Plot dismisses Merleau-Ponty's political philosophy to focus on his work as an aesthetic theorist and philosopher—the latter role being artificially separated from the possibility of thinking about politics (40). He consequently casts aside an entire section of Merleau-Ponty's body of work without paying attention to what it was—specifically, what Merleau-Ponty had rejected in his earlier texts. In doing so, he merely follows Lefort's judgment that Merleau-Ponty's true contribution was his ontology, and that his later thought overruled his earlier texts. He also falls into the common trap of dismissing any discussion of communism as dealing with communism—and in doing so, appearing dated and misled—as opposed to dealing with political life itself through a discussion of communist ideas. Plot also overstates Merleau-Ponty's later praise of parliamentary democracy (30), creating a position out of an interim political commitment to the principle of truth.

This criticism takes nothing away from the deep understanding and familiarity Plot demonstrates of his source materials, or from his deep engagement with the literature in the endnotes. Indeed, Plot finds ideas that intersect across the thought of four philosophers to draw out promising elements for the understanding of political life. He develops the beginnings of a new philosophy out of the unthought and undeveloped consequences of their contradictions and innovations. The criticism points instead to a matter of presentation and structure: Plot's own philosophical innovation is constrained by the organization of ideas following the model of a study of existing philosophies. In truth, the book offers a genesis, among philosophical figures, of a

philosophy. Plot only outlines it here, and we can read *The Aesthetico-Political* as an introduction to a future, even more original, body of philosophical work. As it stands, not unlike Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*, it serves as a summary and point of reference for thinking, but leaves us wondering what might come next.

**Jérôme Melançon**, University of Regina