6 Constituent power and the state in the 1990s II

they sowed their isn’t they reaped their same
sun moon stars rain

e e cummings

6.1 Introduction

The present chapter discusses how the active left in the nineties practised indirect action. It outlines what was done by a range of groups, working to effect changes through the proper, pre-established channels in representative democracy. Thus, chapters five (which dealt with direct action) and six (the present chapter, dealing with indirect action) are complementary accounts of how the active left worked in the nineties.

Accordingly, this chapter is about people who cared about some issue or issues in the public sphere, and made representations to state and corporate actors requesting them to do things about the issue(s). Activists who take that path can be found canvassing public support for their cause, and petitioning those who are in positions of command. (The petitioning ranges from putting polite requests to the powerful, to putting demands – and now and then an ultimatum – to them.) For these activists, the canvassing of public support, and the petitioning, both work as an adjunct to their exercising of the right to vote. They are part of the attempt that a citizen can make to get results by acting within the system as it stands, which is to say, within an accepted fiction of the Lockean social contract. People cede authority to parliament and the executive arm of government, and then get along as best they can with whichever bodies consequently turn out to wield power. Increasingly, it is at ‘the big end of town’ that the bodies wielding power are found: rich list investors, and corporate executives and boards. Staying within the Lockean social contract, people may try by various means to nudge the powerful into changing their ways.

Section 6.2 lists some of the better-known groups in the active left that practised indirect action in the nineties, and outlines how they campaigned. It leaves open the question of whether they were upholding any definite form(s) of democracy, a question that is taken up later in the chapter. One aspect that the section does bring out is this: the indirect action groups laboured not just to shape state and corporate behaviour on a national scale, but also to achieve things in international relations and in global affairs. The move into day-to-day global networking was a qualitative change in indirect action, and its enabling condition was the structural change in economies that was discussed in chapter four (section 4.2).
Putting the matter of economics to one side, sections 6.3 and 6.4 raise a question of will and opportunity in the shaping of the indirect action. The focus of these two sections is the quandary that faced social democrats and left liberals, once the centrist project was established as a global affair (as set out in section 4.3 above). There was no longer any clear difference in ends, or in principle, or in values, between the major political parties. As a result, the electoral contest for office was a game of manipulating the public images of candidates and programs. It was a cynical affair. Social democrats and left liberals had in the past helped to sustain the Lockean-liberal fiction of the social contract, waiting for the day when it could be replaced with a better system. Their willingness to play along with that fiction was severely tested, as they had to come to terms with the endlessly looping cynical politics of global centrism. It was now becoming plain that only one compact would ever be on offer, viz a compact to uphold a stage-managed sham of a social contract. Did it then make sense to ‘go along to get along’ – even though that would imply there was informed consent to the appallingly self-serving charade? Or was it better – in light of the intractable stuntsmanship – to call it a day; to disengage from the master cynics, and move into the extraparliamentary left?

Section 6.5 refers to the record of indirect action in the nineties (it draws on the material in section 6.2). The record attests that some social democrats and left liberals took it upon themselves to transform the dilemma spelt out above. They did not go to the ‘extreme’ of joining, or forming, direct action groups. They opted instead to bear with representative democracy, giving their consent under duress to this form of rule. Crucially, it was open to them – or so they dared to think – either reactively or actively to enter into the game of pretence that was the Lockean-liberal social contract. They would try the active mode. It was a try-on of indirect action, and while not the real thing, it just might make a real difference in outcomes.

Section 6.5 notes that, whereas the centrist project counted on a ‘soft power’ of the interior to assure the petering out of political struggle, there was no petering out. Instead, the centrist project gave way to agonistic democracy, which is a transformative practice brought about through institutions of state, at the same time as it shapes those institutions. The transformative practice works at micro and macro levels, and places freedom ahead of cohesion. Hence, it disrupts bodies claiming to be stable and self-identical. It also produces a subjectivity that actively enters into games of pretence. The resulting politics entails playing along with master cynics’ pretence to legitimacy, but in such a way as to restrain the master cynics’ power.

Finally, section 6.6 looks back on the indirect action discussed in the earlier sections, setting it alongside the direct action covered in chapter five. A picture emerges of a three-part response by the active left to the centrist project. One of the parts comprises activists who knowingly and actively feign acceptance of the social contract. The ‘legitimacy’ of state rule, due to the feint, masks what constituted power is, namely, an encroachment on freedom. But the feint also keeps legitimacy teetering on a knife-edge, and that can be of real help in restraining constituted power. Hence, the activists concerned are exercising
constituent power; despite (and because of) appearances, they have not submitted to constituted power.

Conclusions from the chapter are stated in section 6.7.

6.2 Indirect action: who was doing what, how, and why

Themes, groups, methods, and program

Leftist groups that practised indirect action in the nineties were agitating about a wide range of issues, all of which fitted into certain themes, which were broached by the new social movements in the seventies. Each theme was about the need to remedy a species of ill (calamity or injustice).

Perhaps the most glaring ills, in this context, were pressures on the natural environment: air, water, and climate; forests; biodiversity; and non-renewable resources. There were, of course, other kinds of trouble besides: the stark contrast between the life of the cosseted few, and the daily hardship faced by people living in impoverished regions and countries; war and militarism; nuclear technologies; human rights violations, by state authorities, by private militias and by corporations (for instance, businesses running prisons, and using prison labour); lack of protection for workers’ and consumers’ rights; socially dominant groups’ prejudices toward people, and violation of their rights, based on differences in cultural and subcultural heritage, gender, religion, sexuality, and age cohort; and ill-treatment of animals.

Within each of those eight constant themes, there were flashpoint issues that were specific to the times. The topics of high-profile United Nations initiatives give some indication of the flashpoints. Take the environment. Climate change; ecologically sustainable development (ESD); forests; and biodiversity; those were four big things of the nineties, looming large in the 1992 ‘Earth Summit’ in Rio de Janeiro. In the seventies and eighties, the main environmental worries had been air pollution, pesticides in the food chain, and the lack of effective legal protection for environmental values in the oceans. Also, in the seventies and eighties, a need to mend global North-South relations had been at centre stage. The task was spelt out in the First Report of the North-South Commission (the Brandt Report), which was presented to the United Nations Secretary-General in 1980. A widespread desire connected with that task was vented through the pop spectacle of Bob Geldof’s ‘Band Aid’ initiative, which began in 1984.

Within each of the themes, and across all of them, new flashpoints tended to emerge as time passed. In some cases, this was due to progress that had been made in treating particular problems (eg laws to protect air quality, and systems to hold the parties accountable when activities and mishaps at sea cause environmental damage). In other cases, new technologies came along, or the geopolitical situation moved on, or cultural change occurred; some or all
of those shifts gave rise to new abuses of power, or caused previously hidden ones to begin to be reported.

To make this account less abstract, it may be useful simply to name some of the groups that pursued indirect action in the nineties, in Western countries. What follows is a short-list of groups which attracted significant numbers of supporters, and which had both a national presence and to some degree a global presence. Association for Taxation of Financial Transactions in Order to Aid Citizens (ATTAC); Fifty Years is Enough; Jubilee 2000, also known as Drop the Debt; Focus on the Global South; Global Exchange; Amnesty International; Fair Wear or Fair Labor Association; Baby Food Action Network; Aid Watch; Organs Watch; Council of Canadians; Public Citizen (USA); Critical Shareholders; Cultural Survival; Greenpeace; Oxfam; The Wilderness Society; Food First Information and Action Network; Human Rights Watch; International Forum on Globalization; Alliance for Democracy; National Labor Committee (USA); New Panther Vanguard Movement; OpenAir Market Net; Peace Through Inter-American Community Action; People Against the IMF; Rainforest Action Network; Raze the Walls!; Service Employees’ International Union; Stop Corporate Welfare Coalition; United Students Against Sweatshops; Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. Some of the named groups had good relations with labour organisations and/or religious organisations, from which they drew support (financial and in kind).

The named groups – and the many other groups standing with them on common themes of concern and flashpoint issues – used a range of group methods to press for action by governments and corporations. The main methods were:

− meeting with party politicians and candidates

− e-mailing and writing to politicians, and subscribing to politicians’ e-briefs

− swelling the numbers in forums and rallies, where political parties and corporations are invited to provide speakers

− writing articles and letters to be published in the media, including mainstream and alternative media (such as indymedia, Znet, and rabble); also joining Internet listservs, and posting material on to additional networks

1 I have drawn up the list of groups, based on information given by Amory Starr, in (Starr, 2000). That source is a useful compendium of facts. It names numerous activist groups in addition to the ones listed here; and more can readily be found by following links between sites on the Internet.

Starr carves the beast – the movement of movements – in a particular way. She identifies fifteen issues-based movements, and she assigns each issues-based movement to one of three headings, each denoting a distinct ‘mode of struggle’: Starr’s three modes are ‘contestation and reform,’ ‘globalization from below,’ and ‘delinking, relocalization, sovereignty.’

I do not find that carve-up compelling, and I am using another which is more useful for the present purpose. I discern not three but two modes of struggle, namely direct action (covered in my ch 5) and indirect action (the present chapter). I observe both those modes of struggle, operating side by side, in activist campaigns on each one of eight constant themes, during the last quarter of the century. Various flashpoint issues arise under each of the themes as time passes.
letterboxing and calling public meetings and attracting media attention, to create pressure for the calling of government and parliamentary inquiries into relevant topics; and then, generating submissions to the inquiries

c consumer boycotts and pickets (eg boycotts of Nestlé products, and Fair Wear pickets outside sporting apparel chain shops)

c civil disobedience, undertaken with respect for life (not always with respect for property)

c third party non-violent intervention (TPNI), which restrains state authorities, and private strongmen, from using violent means to quell grassroots actions (TPNI includes four types of activity: escorting agitators who are at risk; forming human shields, by bodily standing to form an unarmed blockade between opposing combatant forces; observing/monitoring the incidents that occur in the attempted suppression of dissent, from crowd control to the handling of whistleblowers; and actively modelling non-violent behaviours in the midst of a fracas)\(^2\)

pro bono legal work, for immigrants sans papiers and asylum seekers, for whistleblowers, and for victims of political repression (eg detention, assault) at the hands of the authorities

funding ambassadors for particular causes, or peoples, for instance, delegates from associations of garment assembly workers in the South, or from the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan, or from displaced peoples seeking recognition of their nation-states – the peoples of Palestine, Western Sahara, Bougainville, or pre-independence East Timor

fund-raising and contributions in kind (eg collectively produced quilts) to help in meeting basic human needs – food and water, shelter, health, education, and media outlets – thus removing obstacles faced by the oppressed in speaking for themselves and escaping their oppression

\(^2\) TPNI derives from certain landmark people’s struggles for freedom, notably the campaign led by Mahatma Gandhi to decolonise the Indian subcontinent, the US civil rights struggle of 1950s and sixties, and the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa (Lakey, 2002). TPNI also owes something to the student rebellions of the sixties: the chant, ‘the whole world is watching,’ was first used by activists at the 1968 US Democratic Party Convention in Chicago, where Mayor Daley had ordered police to quash street protests by firing with live ammunition if required (Chaloupka, 1999: p 191). Peace Brigades International, a TPNI group, provided volunteer escorts for local activists in El Salvador and Guatemala in the early eighties, and later in Sri Lanka; when violence was expected in the 1990 elections in Nicaragua, volunteers came from other countries to act as observers/monitors (Lakey, 2002).

In the nineties, observing/monitoring involved not just carrying cameras and notebooks, but having access to facilities that were set up by indymedia to upload to the world wide web and publish, in real time, verbal reports and images of campaigns and incidents. As Michael Shapiro has pointed out, bearing witness as a form of political intervention drove the response of outrage at the Los Angeles Police’s beating of Rodney King in the early nineties. That one beating was emblematic of many (Shapiro, 1997: paragraphs 48-49).
volunteer or non-profit distribution services for small agricultural producers/growers in the global South (e.g. providing retail and mail order outlets in the North, for small growers’ tea, coffee, and craft items)

- demanding a voice for non-government organisations in state and multilateral institutions, notably the World Bank, to democratise the institutions.

The indirect action groups pursued a sequence of goals, forming a five-stage program, which was first drawn to attention by international relations researchers, Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink. The stages were:

1) issue creation and agenda setting;
2) influence on discursive positions of states and international organizations;
3) influence on institutional procedures;
4) influence on policy change of “target actors” which may be states, international organizations like the World Bank, or private actors like the Nestlé Corporation; and
5) influence on state behavior.  

I am curious as to whether the indirect action groups boosted any specific form(s) of democracy. They may have done such a thing either by design, or unwittingly. I take up the question of a transformative impact on democracy later in the chapter (sections 6.5 and 6.6). For now, I simply note that the groups’ labour on the five-stage program, whatever outputs and outcomes it produced, was labour that did not evince prefigurative community. Indirect action is like that. It yields no sense that we, as the bodies actively taking part in the work, within those very bodies can form – and do form, here, now, and autonomously – the democracy of our desires.

**Change in transport and ICT, as an enabling condition**

To round out the account of the indirect action groups and their deeds, I need to bring into focus what was, at the time, a novel aspect of their achievement, though it no longer strikes one as novel. As the above account shows, the indirect action groups did more than make an effort to shape state and corporate behaviour on a national scale (within the democratic state). They also worked to achieve things in international relations and global affairs.

There is irony, or perhaps it is just clawback, in the new, international and global phase of indirect action. The new phase was enabled by certain changes, some of them in the transport sector of economies, and others in the information and communications sector. The said changes were part of the structural shift in economies that I discussed in chapter four.

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And, far from welcoming that structural shift, indirect action groups at the time had generally denounced it, and had fought to stop it and reverse it.

In brief, Thatcherite industry policies in the 1980s forced airlines to reduce their business costs. Employees’ working conditions worsened, and the airlines, airport and air navigation sector shed large numbers of workers. Cost savings were passed on to customers, to increase load factors. All of this was done because of pressure on the airlines in capital markets. But it made air travel affordable for people of modest means, and among many other things, that enabled people to form transverse links between activist groups, across long distances. High-level contact was no longer needed to arrange actions and programs that spread across national borders.

On the heels of the airline industry changes, there were reforms in a similar vein for providers of infrastructure and services in the telecoms sector. The industry restructuring, in time, spurred the spread of mobile telephony and the use of low-cost digital devices for switching and transmitting signals. The move from analogue to digital was key to cheaper prices for telephone users and to the convergence of information processing and communications, or ICT.

Meanwhile, a new form of connectivity came on stream in the shape of the Internet. By the late nineties, there was significant uptake, in Western countries, of e-mail and the services that are sometimes called narrowcasting: the online pushing and pulling of text, sound, and images. A presentation of facts and analysis, prepared by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service in the wake of N30 (Seattle), offers the following assessment of the role of the Internet in organising leaderless campaigns:

Creating the foundation for dramatic change, the Internet has had a profound impact – in part by enabling organizers to quickly and easily arrange demonstrations and protests, worldwide if necessary. Individuals and groups now are able to establish dates, share experiences, accept responsibilities, arrange logistics, and initiate a myriad of other taskings that would have been impossible to manage readily and rapidly in the past. International protests and demonstrations can be organized for the same date and time, so that a series of protests take place in concert. The Internet has breathed new life into the anarchist philosophy, permitting communication and coordination without the need for a central source of command, and facilitating coordinated actions with minimal resources and bureaucracy. It has allowed groups and individuals to cement bonds, file e-mail reports of perceived successes, and recruit members.4

In sum, low cost travel and telephony, and the massed blooming of media spaces and networks due to ICT, gave rise to a mass internationalisation (or globalisation) of the left. There was a melting away of the resource barriers that had previously curtailed the making of contacts at grassroots level. Likewise, sparked by ICT, there was a new throng of producers and distributors of the inputs – in the form of data, ideas and affects – that fuelled political

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campaigns, and a new array of audiences for those inputs too. In comparison, the Socialist International had always been an affair of, and for, oligarchs.

When political theorists discuss democratisation as a process, there are certain models that come to the fore. One of those models is diffusion, from one people to another, and from state to state. Changes in transport and communications may have boosted diffusion; they may have helped to spread activists’ efforts to hold governments accountable to the public. But there are arguments on the other side of that proposition too. There have been some anti-democratic effects of the structural shift in economies (taking the structural shift as a whole, including the changes in transport and communications which are a vital part of the shift). Scholars in history, media studies, and international relations have brought those adverse effects to light, under the rubric, ‘a new Middle Ages.’ The point is that non-state actors wield new power, and their doing so injects new uncertainties into relations between states, and into economic and social transactions conducted within states. The consequences are a mix of good news and bad.5

The writings just mentioned go into some unresolved issues about the link between nationalism and modern democratic states, specifically, how each tends to shore up the other. The two often work as one in an unholy alliance, with nationalist-inspired ressentiment serving as the glue that gets dabbed on as needed to achieve a conscious unity in the state.

But is it true that if you want a democratic state, you must have the unholy alliance? The answer, as I see it, and as I argue in the rest of this chapter, is that it depends on which form of democratic state is created. Thinkers who probe the linked dynamics of political struggle and subjectivity are the best source of advice on how to keep the unholy alliance in check. Names of thinkers that spring to mind in that connection, besides Deleuze and Guattari, are William E Connolly, Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek.

The rest of this chapter draws on Mouffe’s and Laclau’s writings, and to a certain extent on Žižek’s. It also resonates in part with Connolly’s writings on the ongoing task of pluralising democracy, a task to which Connolly suggests one needs to bring an active neuropolitics.6

I share in Connolly’s respect for the work of Deleuze and Guattari, especially those passages in their writings that heighten one’s awareness of rifts in time. In addition, my claim, in a later chapter of the thesis, that a particular film works like a ‘boot camp’ for the spectator brings me close to Connolly: it parallels his emphasis on film technique in the practice of ‘arts of the self.’

5 To give two major instances of the bad news: there are the many ghetto-like export processing zones and maquiladoras in the new global economy; also, in the thriving underworld of organised crime, fortunes are being made through the trafficking and imprisonment of living bodies in a shadow economy. The relevant sectors of the shadow economy are the migration and labour services sector (slave labour is supplied for agriculture and the sex industry), and the medical sector (there is trafficking of human organs).

The concept of a new Middle Ages was created by the French historian and essayist, Alain Minc (Minc, 1993); see also (Morley, 1998), (Cerny, 1999), and references therein.

6 (Connolly, 1991), (Connolly, 1995), and (Connolly, 2004).
My path diverges from Connolly’s in this respect: that I set down what activists were doing in the 1990s, and I use some found materials, as it were, to build a story involving democratic rule that fits what some of the activists were doing. Connolly’s project is rather different. He works at persuading his readers to espouse immanent naturalism, and to practice the arts of the self in accordance with that move. He takes the view that his project, if it is taken up by others as he suggests, may give rise to a form of democracy that will be embraced by ‘a large number of citizens in a variety of subject positions’.7

As I have said, in the present chapter I link facts about activists’ practices to a story about democratic rule and political cynicism. In the two chapters that follow, I then show how that story inflects a selection of films from middlebrow cinema, a popular ‘medium’ which becomes, at times, a training space. The story that I tell in this chapter, and then trace through certain middlebrow films of the nineties, is designed to affirm that a form of democracy much like that envisioned by Connolly was already emerging in that decade. Agonistic democracy is here; it is no academic pipe dream.

6.3 The centrist project and paranoid fantasy

‘Why Americans hate[d] politics’ …

I have discussed how post-fordist economies helped to shape our 1990s democratic states. Major shifts in the transport and communications sectors led to an altering of tensions between nationalist sentiment and internationalism; that was part of the picture. But there is also a question of will, or rather a question of affect, which I now explore. In broaching it, I start by revisiting and commenting on some scenes from the centrist project as it unfolded in the US.

Once the centrist project was in place as a global affair, there was no substantive disagreement between the major parties, nor between leading politicians, on policies. There was practically no gap between them as to ends (that is to say, in their convictions as to the things government can and should achieve); nor was there much difference in the principles and values they actually espoused, setting aside what they merely claimed on that score. The contest over the holding of office was to be, from then on, purely a contest in making and breaking the public images of candidates, in relation to the job of governing the state. The name of the game was to spin the cleverest, slickest, meanest line as to what was going on that was important to government, and which party’s candidates were the most fit to handle it. It was, above all, a match where each major-party machine tried to show it had a disciplined team under a leader who was likeable, wise, shrewd, tough on ‘the enemy’, and capable of running a government.

7 (Connolly, 2004: p 172).
To stay in the game, major parties and big business routinely hired specialist staff, and issues management firms, whose tasks were to see to the massaging of information and the marketing of policies, programs, and leaders. The intensive massaging and marketing helped in the doing of deals with stakeholder groups, and in working up news angles and show-happenings (in effect, stunts) that would be grabbed by the mass media and would mesmerise marginal voters.

Nowhere was the above more obvious than in the US. A useful part of the record is a renowned, feature-length documentary film that was made on the conduct of the 1992 US election campaign. The War Room (1993) probes behind the scenes to show the working of the team around Governor Clinton. It shows, in effect, the beginning of a contest, which lasted several years, and was fought on both sides of the Atlantic. The contest was to be quite a messy matter of politicians and parties vying for popular support. The aphorism that sums it up is this: ‘May the man who’s hired the best spin-doctor win.’

The spin contest fanned political cynicism. Yet, it was not meant to be that way. The man who had urged the centrist project of the nineties on US politicians was E J Dionne, a columnist for the Washington Post, and author of a best-seller titled Why Americans Hate Politics. Just when plans were being put together for the 1992 campaign, Dionne’s book put a case for the US to clean out the trickery and showmanship from the national political contest. Dionne argued that the way to do that was to drop the charade of the warring ideologies, the right and the left. Politicians were doing their country a disservice, argued Dionne, in that they cynically used rhetoric connected with that charade to win public support.

What Dionne did not say, or not in so many words, was that, as a rule, the rhetoric would work by appealing to many voters’ paranoid fantasies about an evil ideology. The evil thing loomed as a power behind the scenes and pulling the strings, with persons in high places involved in the subterfuge. Like it or not, almost anybody you cared to name was potentially involved – if not as a cynic (and hence a knave, working for the master trickster), then as a fool.

Dionne wrote that it was high time politicians let go the 1960s mind-set of warring ideologies. They owed it to the public, he said, to drop the outdated rhetoric, and to put forward instead scientific analysis of the merits and demerits of proposed government policies and programs.

Taking as a case in point Jimmy Carter’s presidency, Dionne discussed in his book one of the elements in its unravelling. Carter had used strong and impassioned language, not dispassionate logic, in trying to get the people to embrace his program for turning around the

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8 There are also four popular fiction films that deliver insights into the efforts of Bush (senior) to keep the public on side, and the Clinton campaign to win the public over. The fiction films are Bob Roberts (1992), Dave (1993), Wag the Dog (1997), and Primary Colors (1998).

9 (Dionne, 1991).
country’s dependence on imported oil. The energy program, declared Carter, would bring back a strong US economy, and it must be taken up by the people of the US as a life or death struggle, ‘the moral equivalent of war’.

The energy strategy had misfired in the political arena, and according to Dionne that was because of a cynical move by Carter’s opponents, including disaffected Democrats. They saw a chance to frame Carter as a failure and a charlatan. So it was that Carter came to be seen as an incompetent economic manager, whose hyperbole on the energy program was a cynical ploy to mask his fumbling and stumbling in the realm of economics.

William Chaloupka, writing about US politics as a brew of affects in which cynicism looms large, has weighed up the episode of the energy program. He provides its epitaph, which serves as a general warning about cynicism in politics:

Cynicism – from citizens, partisans on both sides, and the journalists who told the story – blocked the formation of a coalition strong enough to repair the mess.10

… and it was not so easy to effect a ‘cure’

Governor Clinton and his team were favourably disposed to Dionne from the start, and they tried acting on his advice. In fact, the successive Clinton teams over the campaign and the two terms in office were increasingly avid centrists. Thus, in Clinton’s speeches one finds: ‘The choice we offer is not conservative or liberal. In many ways it’s not even Republican or Democratic. It’s different. It’s new. And it will work.’ And: ‘When we put aside partisanship, embrace the best ideas regardless of where they come from, and work for principled compromise, we can move America not left or right, but forward.’11 And forward it was, up and over ‘a bridge to the twenty-first century,’ to use another of Clinton’s catchphrases. He and his team were building the bridge to fulfil the desires of their countrymen, and it would be a bridge, too, for the world over which they now ruled.

It is obvious that Dionne’s advice was being implemented in half-measure. The ideology is duly renounced, but rhetoric is going strong.

In political contests for leadership, with a mass electorate, it was ever thus. To succeed, the candidate needs to make most voters believe that, but for him and/or the party machine he stands for, there would be forces afoot that would cheat those voters of their due honour or wealth. In other words, appeals to some or other shared paranoid fantasy are a fixture in representative democracy. Often the appeal is made by a candidate, or by a politician in office, quite cynically, which makes that person something of a knave. If the appeal to a

10 (Chaloupka, 1999: p 92).

As to Carter’s energy policy, it has been vindicated by events. Reducing the US’s dependence on imported oil actually was an issue of peace or war, in a sense. The energy program would have stood in place of war, in that it would have led people to develop and adopt peaceful means of handling the global problems whose roots are in the US and its Middle East (ie the Middle East understood and treated simply as an object of US foreign policy).

11 (Independent Nation, 2004).
shared paranoid fantasy is not a cynical ploy, all those involved are in the grip of forces they
do not understand at all.

Viewed in that light, Clinton’s election campaign in 1992 worked by tapping into
people’s feelings that President Bush I – a man on whose watch the economy had faltered –
did not deserve a second term in the White House. That is how Clinton defeated Bush; then
things quickly took a different turn. During 1993, several scandals broke around the
Clintons: marital infidelity and womanising (Gennifer Flowers, Paula Jones, and other
women); using the power of the office of president to try to cover up those scandals
(‘Troopergate’); cronyism and scapegoating (the White House travel office scandal, and the
suicide of a legal adviser who was taking the rap on that for Mrs Clinton); the appointing of
Zoe Baird, who had employed immigrant labour illegally, as Attorney-General; and the
attempted cover-up of the Clintons’ past questionable dealings in the Whitewater matter.
Added to all that, the high-profile health care project, which was being run by Mrs Clinton,
was not working out well.

A published account of Clinton’s first term as president, in the words of one of his
closest political advisers, reveals something that is relevant here.12 It would appear that the
Clintons’ (re)actions in the White House were, in part, the product of a paranoid fantasy they
harboured. The couple often talked about Clinton-haters that (they believed) had been out to
get them from the word go. The conjecture that the Clintons nursed such feelings is borne
out by a series of flawed decisions and actions they took, in a spirit of fear and
ressentiment.13

To make the point about the Clintons’ paranoid state is not to deny that there actually
were Clinton-haters, that is to say, persons and groups who made it their business to publicise
and prolong scandals involving the Clintons. The adage that applies here is, ‘Just because
you’re paranoid, doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you’ – as some cynics in the nineties
were fond of saying.14 Thus, the Clinton adviser’s account supports a reading of the whole
affair as an instance of victims bringing on themselves the very thing that they fear. The
Clintons’ paranoid fantasy turned out to be pivotal in creating the actual mess, and embattled
position, that they found themselves in at the end of the first year in office and through the
next year.

12 (Stephanopoulos, 2001: passim).

13 One notorious incident occurred in January 1994. In discussions about how to handle the Whitewater issue, Mrs
Clinton rounded on White House adviser George Stephanopoulos, in front of other staff. She hotly rejected his
advice. Then she shouted accusingly at him, with a ferocity she did not try to conceal – though ‘[he] felt sorry for
her too, because you could just see there was so much fear in her eyes.’ She denounced him as secretly being one
of the Clinton-haters right from the start of the election campaign (Stephanopoulos, 2001).

At least two nonfiction conspiracy exposés on the Clinton years have appeared in book form: Jeffrey Toobin’s A
Vast Conspiracy: The Real Story of the Sex Scandal That Nearly Brought Down a President (New York:
Touchstone, 2000); and Joe Conason and Gene Lyons’s The Hunting of the President: The Ten-Year Campaign
to Destroy Bill and Hillary Clinton (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2001). The latter was turned into a feature-
length nonfiction thriller film, of the same title, released in 2004.

14 One of the people who said it was the character Fox Mulder, in the popular television series, The X-Files, which
was part of the nineties zeitgeist. I touch on The X-Files, in discussing the nineties cycle of conspiracy thrillers,
in the last part of the thesis (ch 7).
The actual Clinton-hating group drew from its own wellspring of paranoid fantasy. Commenting on the Zoe Baird affair, the Clinton adviser says:

I think what it [the furore over Zoe Baird] tied into more deeply or as deeply was that this crowd that is coming in is kind of an elite crowd who have a sense of entitlement. They're allowed to live by one set of rules, and everybody else has to live by another. And I think that's where the real political power came from.  

(He is referring to the real political power arising from public anger over the Zoe Baird episode, a power that the Clintons’ political foes wielded with strong effect.)

Then, as the health project faltered (by September 1994 it had clearly failed), the wellspring of ressentiment delivered more. Among the causes of the health project’s failure was the fact that the Republicans were able to create a widely held perception of the project as socialist. The spin runs like this: ‘Those sly Clintons! They win the election by promising to fix what was wrong with the economy; and, no sooner are they in office, than they begin to show their true colours as socialists. They are out to rob the US of its freedom. It has to be stopped before it goes any further.’

The Republicans’ scare tactic that helped to scuttle the health project is a standard ploy. It is an appeal to a paranoid fantasy about government as an enemy of freedom. The US, from its inception, has had a segment of its people primed for a kind of cynicism, close to paranoid cynicism, about constituted power. The actual experience of the sixties, the Nixon years, and then the Republicans’ political rhetoric in the Reagan years, had driven home the message that government was not what it seemed. Again, to recognise the scare tactic as an appeal to the entrenched paranoid fantasy, is not to say that government statements can be taken at face value. (Just because you’re paranoid, doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you.)

### 6.4 More scenes from the centrist project

**Try triangulating**

Due to the series of scandals and the failure of the health project, the 1994 mid term elections were a severe blow for the Democrats. But not so for Clinton. Unbeknown to his White House staff, late in 1994 the President had begun to consult closely with an outside adviser, Dick Morris. The Clintons and Morris went to extraordinary lengths to hide from their White House advisers the fact that Morris was dispensing advice, which the president

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15 (Stephanopoulos, 2001).
16 For over thirty years from its date of issue, a published collection of essays by Richard Hofstadter was the canonical work in this area. It paints a picture of the leaning of segments of the public toward conspiracy theories, and shows that such leanings have been an enduring feature of US politics (Hofstadter, 1966). There is a turn of century critique of Hofstadter’s work (see (Knight, 2002)). The critique, however, is aimed at Hofstadter’s wholly negative appraisal of paranoid style in US politics: it does not take issue with his evidence showing that the style is there.
was accepting. The subterfuge was yet another symptom of the Clintons’ paranoid state: they felt they had to hide their moves because the Clinton-haters had infiltrated the White House advisory staff.

Clinton took on board from Morris a plan for re-election in 1996, and the plan was built on a general move called ‘triangulation’ (I abbreviate that to ‘the t-move’). The t-move involved the President disowning the Democratic Party, while counting on being able to bring the Party around and receive its endorsement in the next presidential race. Disowning the Party gave Clinton a free hand to adopt policies and rhetoric that would be big vote-winners, even if they were Republican policies and rhetoric. A new name was then needed for people who voted Democrat because of the resulting eclectic mix of policies – they were called ‘new Democrats.’ People who voted Democrat in spite of the t-move became ‘old Democrats.’ They had no choice in the matter of renaming.

Thus, after the Democrats’ abysmal showing at the 1994 elections, Clinton picked up the Republicans’ war on crime and war on drugs. That included a crackdown on teen drinking and marijuana use (Clinton was clean; as he said in the ’92 campaign, he had never inhaled). Clinton had promised, as part of his New Covenant, that welfare would become ‘workfare’ in a well-running economy. What he delivered was Republican-style welfare reform, when he changed his stance of veto and signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. A media campaign, which went with the reform, met its mark: soon nobody was more reviled than men whose families were in need of welfare support. These men were criminalised. The role of scapegoat, played by the ‘welfare queen’ since the Reagan era, now passed to the ‘deadbeat dad.’

Certainly, the t-move helped to deflect the Clinton-haters’ casting of Bill and Hillary in the role of undeserving cheats, ensconced in the White House and out to destroy American freedom. Clinton’s switch from being reactive to being active in constructing the targets for people’s shared paranoid fantasy, helped to get him over the line for a second term in office. His good leadership in the wake of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing also boosted his chances, while the Republicans may have lost votes by having to disown the anti-state extreme right. Another factor was Mrs Clinton’s complete withdrawal from the work of governing; at the time, she was a political liability for her husband.

The global centrist project, as it took shape in the US, was being exported from there to Britain. James Carville and Stan Greenberg are US-based media, polling and campaign strategists, who crafted the Clinton campaign in 1992. Carville, Louisiana bred and known as ‘the ragin’ Cajun,’ gained a high profile from his work in that campaign. The pair also

17 When leaving phone messages for Clinton, Morris would use a code name. He worked by night, in a part of the White House where nobody on the president’s staff would catch sight of him. He typed speeches for the president, with the president then re-writing the material in his own hand, and presenting it to his staff as something he came up with by himself. The President’s staff deduced gradually what was going on (Stephanopoulos, 2001).
acted as advisers in the process by which the British Labour Party became New Labour in the mid nineties, and won office in 1997.  

If triangulating is the answer, what was the question?

Whilst the trappings of representative democracy were kept up, a transformation was starting to occur. The major parties were not becoming obsolete, so party loyalty still counted for something. But it did not count as an aid in upholding particular values or ends in governing the state. Thanks to the loyalty of their members and ‘rusted on’ voters, the party machinery was useful as a tool in what was becoming a show contest, neatly summed up by activists of the left in a mock slogan for the 2000 US election campaign: ‘Billionaires for Bush (or Gore).’ Along the lines of a house system at school, the major parties played a role in raising funds, and in soliciting contributions in kind. Among the latter contributions were legs and hands to do volunteer mail-outs and handing out of fliers; fingers at keyboards to distribute e-bulletins; and volunteer bodies to make up the live audiences, claque-style, in the televisual spectacle of appearances by the party’s leader or presidential candidate.

As stated above, one function that major parties were not needed for was partisan work, that is, helping to bring to bear any social values, or ends, in government. Centrists said that proposals for government policies and programs would be put to the public in such a way as to bring the public at large into the decision-making. The proposals’ scientific merits were to be made clear to a lay audience, including information for the audience to use in the weighing up of uncertainties. (The commitment was not always honoured; that is shown by the rhetoric and scapegoating that went on, in promoting Clinton’s policies during 1995 and 1996 – see above.)

Now, if there really were to be a contest of proposals, fought according to rules of scientific argument with suitable translation into the language of a lay public, we would no longer have an adversarial process. (Science relies on peer adjudication and collaboration, which take place within the discipline supplied by a collegial system for each field of expertise.) Let us suppose then, for the sake of argument, that proposals for government policies and programs were to be evaluated on their scientific merit, with the lay public doing the evaluating. There would be a system for convening panels of lay evaluators, and for hiring persons properly trained in science, and in science communication, to act as facilitators. That is how deliberative polling (Fishken polling) is intended to work.

In that case, legislatures with parliaments made up of elected representatives would be redundant. States would still need a means of deciding which proposals to put forward for evaluation at a given time. But what is wrong with letting that be handled by large corporations, just as they press their case with politicians and top bureaucrats today, using think tanks, professional lobbyists, hosted get-togethers, and so forth? If centrists were

18 (McCullough and collective (wikipedia), 2004)
serious about a process guided by science, with no showmanship or euphemisms, they would come clean about corporations’ being able to outdo other groups in the contest to put this proposal or that one on the agenda. And, since it would be a real stretch to call the resulting arrangements ‘constitutional democracy,’ that term would need to be replaced, and a new doctrine propounded.

The contradiction I have pointed out, in the centrist project, does not reflect badly on deliberative polling per se. A system of government that relies on deliberative polling in some shape or form might be a good thing, if it insisted that people speak for themselves, not have their voice channelled through any assembled ‘representatives.’ People could autonomously create groups and choose delegates to carry out defined tasks, and the groups would be able to recall the delegates … But that system is absolute democracy, as discussed in chapter five, and it is nothing like the centrist project.

Despite its defects, the centrist project of the nineties put in place a fake representative democracy that might have had (and it may yet have) a positive future. The key to that future, I argue in the next section, is agonistic democracy.

6.5 Agonistic democracy

Prologue: a perceived nadir of political struggle

The study of the structure of political cynicism in the late twentieth century owes much to Peter Sloterdijk’s Critique of Cynical Reason. Sloterdijk saw, early in the piece, the manner in which cynicism would take hold, as leftists coped with a tide of setbacks after 1968. Sloterdijk insisted that the cynicism would not be remedied through any process of learning, or deducing of truth.

Countless numbers of people are no longer prepared to believe that one first has to ‘learn something’ so that things will be better later. In these people, I believe, a suspicion is growing […] that things must first be better before you can learn anything sensible. Socialization through schooling, as it takes place here [in West Germany], and in Western societies, in general, is a priori stupefaction, after which scarcely any learning offers a prospect that things sometime or other will improve. […] Basically, no one believes anymore that today’s learning solves tomorrow’s ‘problems’; it is almost certain rather that it causes them.

In all, Sloterdijk’s critique showed that it would take some kind of defiance of logic to unblock the pathways in political struggle.

Taking their cue from Sloterdijk’s work, in the nineties Alan Keenan and William Chaloupka saw a need to dissect political cynicism as a problem for the left, particularly in

20 Ibid., p xxix.
Chaloupka notes that there was growing concern, at least among political liberals, about a ‘spiral of cynicism’ in the US. Too often, men in high office were cynics-in-power (Sloterdijk’s term is ‘master cynics’). They won office, and stayed in office as long as they could, by exploiting the faith that was placed in them by some of the people, and by simply counting on compliance from a host of lesser cynics. Many of the lesser cynics were so-called reflexive cynics: people who were ill at ease as cynics, but who felt that the master cynics left them with no choice but to ‘go along to get along.’

An increasing segment of the electorate accepted master cynics as a fact or a law of political life. They cynically refused to believe things could be otherwise. The catch-phrase, ‘Everybody knows,’ signalled that the people were exploited and could do nothing about it, but make no mistake, they knew it: they were not fooled. The attitude was rife with regard to organisational politics in the world of commerce and public sector bodies, as well as the politics of running for office and governing. From dogged determination not to be fooled, it is a short step to wig cynicism, a ‘jumbled, postrationalist, unreal aesthetic of weird causation and bent social dynamics.’

That is why, for some people, it had been natural to respond to President Carter’s actions and rhetoric by viewing them cynically and hence ‘reading’ Carter as a cynic trying to cover up his faults. By responding cynically, those constituents were exercising a certain kind of power: if nothing else, they at least had the power to perceive any ruler as a cynic, in their own image. And that power was relished, since it was on the cards they would otherwise have turned out to be suckers, used and disdained by master cynics.

The spiral of cynicism was leading to a nadir of political struggle. The dynamic of master cynics, reflexive cynics (sometimes called ‘average’ cynics), and wig cynics was ‘absorbing all that it comes in contact with and constantly enlarging its empire.’ With people being prepared to ‘read’ Jimmy Carter, for instance, as a master cynic, the spiral no longer needed master cynics to keep it going: it needed only rumours of master cynics, and the average cynics and wig cynics would do the rest. And Sloterdijk was right about this: once in the spiral, logic and knowledge would not get you out. It was a question of either having, or not, a will to escape.

I contend, in this key section of the thesis, that agonistic democracy offered a way out of the spiral of cynicism. Specifically, I claim the following: that the activist groups whose work I outlined in section 6.2 were practising agonistic democracy; and that in doing so, they showed a people’s will to escape the spiral of cynicism.

21 (Keenan, 1998) and (Chaloupka, 1999).
22 Chaloupka, op. cit., p 86.
23 (Lehman, 2000: p 46). The term ‘wig cynicism’ is from Chaloupka, op.cit. (To wig, or to wig out, is a verb in US English; the English expression is to flip one’s lid.)
24 (Lehman, op. cit.).
Agonistic democracy: or, freedom as political struggle

Agonistic democracy is fed by, at the same time as it fosters, a linked dynamic of political struggle and of subjectivity. That dynamic transforms cynicism from a reactive gesture into one that works actively, with people becoming practised in the channelling of a ‘power of the false’.

In defining agonistic democracy, it is best to begin by pointing to several things it is not. It is not government of the people, by the people. Nor is it, in any simple sense, governing with the consent of the people – it may knowingly wink at some social contract, but it does not posit one as bedrock. It is not even rule in the interest of the people irrespective of their consent. It is not a form of rule at all: it is a practice. The practice is brought about through institutions of state, where those institutions are themselves adaptive outcomes of the practice. It is a transformative practice, and it occurs only where, underpinning the institutions of state, there is recognition that freedom cannot be had with harmony.

Granted, most states do have, or they can easily acquire, effectual means for achieving internal harmony. Dissent and confrontation within the state’s borders can be forestalled. For the sake of accord, most people will negotiate; they will submit to arbitration and conciliation; and they will compromise. Those means of keeping the peace will be most effective in a culture that is accepting of relations of subordination: for instance, parent and child, employer and worker, debt-holder and debtor, cop and citizen. And, with people-trafficking now a growth industry, slave-owner and slave can be added to the list. Harmony is also attained through the setting up of gated estates, which happens as it were perfunctorily; and, when securing a gated zone, we are culturally well disposed to the use of the latest technical devices. By a combination of all the above-mentioned means, which together form the soft power of a state over its own interior, cohesion and harmony can be attained.

The point is that, while the harmony and cohesion that the soft power produces may create a strong state, this state’s strength can bring only victories that vindicate a hemmed-in way of life for the people. The state may even have proper channels for taking issue with established procedures of negotiation and so on. That is all very well, but if the state

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25 In presenting agonistic democracy, I give as succinct an account as I can. My account draws on many sources, chiefly the expected ones: (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), which offers at p 153 a concise definition of the authors’ ‘democratic revolution’; (Mouffe, 1993); (Laclau, 1996); (Žižek, 1999); (Mouffe, 2000), especially the chapter on Carl Schmitt and the paradox of liberal democracy; and (Butler et al., 2000). Two additional and important sources are (Machiavelli, 1997) and (Machiavelli, 1999), which together put forward an enduring case for agonistic democracy (see note 29 below).

26 (Deleuze, 1990/1983: p 263). I have more to say on agonistic democracy’s working as an escape route from the spiral of cynicism, by virtue of a power of the false, in ch 8.

27 I take the term ‘soft power’ from the International Relations (IR) literature, where states’ soft power is the influence they can bring to bear (on other states) by dint of economic factors, cultural diffusion, and palatable values and ideology. Soft power is an adjunct to the kind of power that stems from states’ military capabilities (hard power). Joseph S. Nye, of Harvard University’s Kennedy School, invented the soft/hard power phrasing (Nye, 1990). (IR commentaries on soft power and hard power echo Machiavelli’s figure of a creature that is both a lion and a man, but the fox is overlooked in the IR commentaries.)
massages people to the point where the contesting of such procedures occurs only through the proper channels, then the people’s critical freedom is at risk. A people’s critical freedom is their freedom to become whateverbody they are. There is always some body politic – a partbody politic or a bodypart politic – that will not fit through proper channels.  

In chapter two of the thesis, I developed a particular manner of presenting Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts that have to do with critical freedom. Expressed in the terms I used there, critical freedom is the freedom of a fluidly organic whole to continue being fluidly organic. To have that freedom is quite a different thing from being free as it is understood in conventional liberal thought: critical freedom is something other than being at liberty as an individual to act according to one’s formed desires, defend and promote one’s interests, and pursue one’s chosen goals. Experiencing critical freedom, one adopts a sceptical stance toward humanist norms of justice, liberty and progress; one applies instead the precepts of exerting active rather than reactive force, and striving for self-mastery.

It deserves to be more widely recognised than it is, that Machiavelli pioneered the concept of a people as a fluidly organic whole. Hence, he made it possible for a people to see itself as a subject of critical freedom. On a close reading, the Discourses on Livy and The Prince put a case for a realm governed by agonistic democracy, which would give rise to a people possessed of critical freedom. What Machiavelli commends is not a static form of rule, but a transformative practice that takes up and dissolves three conventional binary disjunctions. The three binaries that he dissolves are: good versus evil; self-reliance versus trust in providence; and frankness (or, to put it in today’s parlance, keeping it real) versus feigning.

Sweeping aside those three binaries, a people can live so as to experience its critical freedom. The people are led, then, to live by three pragmatic principles of conflicted-self-rule, that is, three guiding principles for the agon of becoming a demos in power. The principles are: prudence in dealing with others; daring to seize from fortune what is necessary to you; and dissembling, in circumstances where you deem that your critical freedom depends on it. The three principles are axial to a creature that is woman, lion, and fox, living as a fluidly organic whole.

In sum, agonistic democracy does not snuff out critical freedom in the interest of cohesion. It founds the state precisely by affirming that freedom. Thus (re)founded, the state affirms that people will never consent to relations of subordination as in a statically organic whole, and that they will work to transform those relations into struggles in the political sphere. The refounded state thrives on a frontier that will remain unpacified, that will not be

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28 The term, ‘critical freedom,’ was first used by James Tully, in his work on the possible renewal of a form of constitutionalism pre-dating European Enlightenment (Tully, 1995). Tully explored how jurisprudence in settler states could act as a catalyst in that renewal. Patton takes the discussion of critical freedom further. He shows that it is the freedom a body experiences along its lines of flight, as Deleuze and Guattari would put it (Patton, 2000: pp 83-87). Patton’s remarks on critical freedom inform my work.

29 The explicit allusion to a creature that is (wo)man, lion and fox appears in (Machiavelli, 1999: s XVIII). The threefold creature plays as a subtext throughout the two works – I present the close reading that brings out the subtext in (Kang, 2002) (currently being revised for publication in Theory & Event).
domesticated. It does not dig a territorialised land. Indeed, it shuns the ‘civilisation’ whose ‘practices of place […] turn land and “natural resources” into finished, exchangeable goods.’ The refounded state turns down those practices, and instead it grows ‘relationships […] invented in the process of confrontation.’

**Micro components of freedom as political struggle**

How does a polity cohere at all, where there are always sides or tendencies at war with one another? How do sides become party to the conflict over relations of subordination, and remain fused together?

It needs to be understood that the warring part(ie)s are not toe-to-toe as in a boxing ring. How can I put it: it’s a jostling, a balletic melee, of nobodaddies with wouldbedaddies. Together the sides make up whole bodies, plural, in the making. They are parts that cannot be fitted together to form any static whole or wholes. Each of the part(ie)s to the conflict is an unfinished, active project – a parbody politic – and those active projects are locked together in such a way that each blocks the other’s path to finality or totality.

The same quandary besets a person, as a subject caught between cohesion and freedom. The process is discussed in Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* and in the seminar of Jacques Lacan. A subject is a quasi-larval accretion of subjectivity, with its exertions – and here I adopt Lacan’s imagery – taking place under the gaze of the Other (‘the big Other’). The figure of the Other is order incarnate; the Other shows itself as a properly articulated whole. It provides a pattern or master – in early Lacan, the figure is the subject’s mirror image – for the ongoing ‘organ-isation’ of the subject. Organ-isation is the process that gives rise to the subject as a more or less well-fitted-together consciousness of an organism in

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30 The words in quotation marks are from (Shapiro, 1997: paragraphs 12 and 60).

In her book, *Dances With Strangers*, historian Inga Clendinning gives an insight into the relationships that states governed by agonistic democracy grow. She writes of the society and state that Australia might have become, as of the late the late 1700s, had the then newly arrived British been worthy of a small event. That event was a dance they did (or tried to do), when attending a corroboree of the Australians on whose shores they had fetched up (Clendinnen, 2003). Sadly for Australians, it turned out that no one in power was worthy of the dance.

31 The struggle is balletic in the full sense of the first entry for ‘ballet’ in the Oxford English Dictionary (second edition, on compact disc), which reads:

*A theatrical representation, consisting of dancing and pantomime, originally employed to illustrate dramatically the costumes and manners of other nations, but now for the most part regarded as an artistic exhibition of skill in dancing.* (italics added here)

The idea of a nobodaddy comes from a published collection of three novellas, titled *Nobodaddy's Kinder* (Nobodaddy’s Children), by twentieth-century German experimental writer, Arno Schmidt (Schmidt, 1995 /1963Ger).

32 My account of the dynamic of subjectivity draws upon *A-Œ*; (Holland, 1999); and (Lacan, 1981 /1973Fr: pp 203-276). As an aside, I note that the ancients envisaged a dynamic that is broadly similar to the one discussed here: the Neoplatonists held that the mythic encounter of souls with their reflection in the mirror of Dionysus was the genesis of human subjectivities (Büll, 2001a). In discussing the matter of impostures, my guide is Žižek, especially (Žižek 1999) and (Žižek, 2001).

I should make one thing clear, concerning Lacan. In some scholarly circles, notably within film studies, Lacan is treated as if he were one of the psychoanalytic fraternity, peddling myths of capture in the Oedipal web. The Lacan that I know, in his remarks on ‘separation,’ foments escape from the Oedipal web.
its surrounds, along with a surplus or remainder (the unconscious). The organ-isation makes the subject what it ‘is’ by blocking the making of all that it might otherwise have become.

The dynamic of subjectivity does not cease at that point, however. In so far as the subject is conscious of the blocking effect, and senses the (putative) gap or void it leaves in the subject, the organ-isation causes a feeling of alienation in the subject. Lacanian separation is the subject’s passage to the other side of the alienation. The so-called separation occurs if and when the full import of the copycat deal strikes the subject: it dawns on her that the Other must likewise be undergoing organ-isation. The Other, then, is engulfed with the subject in the same dynamic. The subject grasps that there is no privileged origin of organ-isation; rather organ-isation starts from every point where it is occurring. (At that juncture, the subject, or analysand in the psychoanalytic context, realises she is on a par with the analyst, and that sense of parity ends the ordained clinical relationship; hence the term ‘separation.’)

Upon separation, if there is anyone who can toy with the subject’s organ-isation, well, the subject can. Twigging that the ‘order incarnate’ is an imposture, the subject might nod in its direction with a knowing wink, and creatively bring it into the balletic melee of the sides – the nobo- and wouldbe-daddies. Separation thus expresses critical freedom; in the language of Deleuze and Guattari, it unblocks lines of flight.

6.6 For us to ‘become what we are’

I think of the dynamic of political struggle and subjectivity – the spirit that fuels, and is fuelled by, agonistic democracy – as a person. My thoughts turn to Dante’s Divine Comedy, and I call her Bea. She belongs to a future people, and they to her.

If politics, for the left in the nineties, ‘is’ locked in a spiral of cynicism, agonistic democracy and its Bea are dancing each other out of there. They are showing the rest the way too. The ‘Beas’ know that each type of state is an imposture – whether it be a social democratic state or a liberal constitutional state. What matters is how much a state encourages and provokes its people in their active use of the imposture. A Bea in the people’s midst (or bonnet) shows that the body politic is part-conscious of the imposture that is the state. A Bea’s presence shows, too, that some parts of the people are working to have everybody ‘become what they are’ – despite, and because of, the impostor-state.

‘Become what you are,’ which is an aphorism from Nietzsche, sums up a certain conception of becoming and will.33 Political scientist Alan B Wood, in an essay on the

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33 “What does your conscience say? – ‘You shall become the person you are.’” (Nietzsche, 1974: Book III, Aphorism 270). The original reads “Was sagt dein Gewissen? - ‘Du sollst der werden, der du bist.’” The aphorism is sometimes rendered in English as ‘You must become who it is that you are.’ Also, ‘Become who you are.’
movie *Gattaca* (1997), notes that the conception informs that film. ‘According to this conception of becoming and identity,’ writes Wood,

becoming precedes identity, and who you are is who you become rather than the reverse. In this understanding, potential is only revealed at the end, and it is the actual that creates the potential retroactively rather than the potential creating the actual. One’s ‘true’ identity is not to be found in a hidden code, but in the actions and events making up one's life. This is not to say that the biological, ‘the social’ and other ‘involuntary’ and trans-individual ‘actants’ are not involved. It is, rather, to say that we should see these types of elements as belonging to this assemblage of becoming (without, however, being fully reducible to any single assemblage), and not see them as elements of Being transcending and determining this becoming. (To properly understand the distinction being made, we must resist focusing on transcendentalized contests between different abstract elements such as determination vs. free will or body vs. spirit, and instead focus on the different modes of relation between these elements that these different conceptions of becoming project.)

With that, the thesis reaches a point where I can sketch how certain strains of activism on the left related to one another, in the nineties. The figure on page 135 diagrams the relationship.

The figure is based on activists’ particulars – their observed practices, and their evinced attitudes to state power – as reported in chapter five and the present chapter. It shows a three-part response to the imposture that was the (neo-)liberal constitutional state.

− A part of the active left rejects the state, and takes direct action – this is the extraparliamentary left.

− A part – consisting of Beas – knowingly and actively keeps up a pretence of accepting the social contract; it wears a ‘mask of obedience.’ This part takes indirect action by way of the practices listed on pages 115-117 above. Beas are cynics, who play ‘non-cynic’ in that they make submissions to parliamentary inquiries, they meet with and write to politicians, they engage in third-party non-violent intervention, they claim the protection of their rights under the law, and so on. The indirect action actively uses ‘legitimacy’ (the fiction of legitimate rule) as a restraint on cynics-in-power.

− A part guilelessly accepts the social contract. That is to say, it believes liberal (and republican) rhetoric about covenants, and it consents to state rule. It takes indirect action, viewing that action as a legitimate and worthwhile adjunct to exercising the right to vote.

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(Wood, 2003); the terms that Wood places in quotation marks are from (Latour, 1999). *Gattaca*, directed by Andrew Niccol, is a story about the use of genetic engineering to match persons to what will be their assigned tasks or niches in society.
The dynamic charted here is informed by deleuzoguattarian concepts, which I presented in chapter two of the thesis. Both the extraparliamentary left and the Beas are exercising *constituent power*; they form *subject-groups*. The other activists are captured by *constituted power*. Together with people who are not politically active, they are caught in a *subjugated group*.

In reading the diagram, one needs to keep in mind that the conditions it expresses are not static. Movement has to be read into the static drawing. So, there are no individual subjects, each of whom sits quite stably in a fixed spot, either in a part of the active corpuscle or in the surrounding sea of impassiveness. Instead, as a subject, one is smeared across the fields of constituent and constituted power – much as, in an atom, electrons are smeared in a series of orbits around a nucleus. I am trying to convey here that subjectivity is a metastable state (condition). What condenses as actual subjects, always produces a remainder or supplement in each subject. A remainder is an illicit sliver of otherness, now and again disrupting, if ever so slightly and fleetingly, what claims to be a stable, self-identical being. All of this is worth setting down, the better to express the transformative impetus, which the three parts in action, indexed in the diagram, bring to the state.

It remains to look into what actualised the cluster of practices discussed in chapter five and in the present chapter. The concepts with which I am working imply that some event of rupture, or differenciation (see chapter three), occurred. In the event, people brought into being the distinctive three-part corpuscle of action, and so the active politics of people living under state rule was renewed (it was actualised anew). Exploratory remarks on the event of rupture – seen through the prism of a mass art, namely cinema – comprise the next two chapters.

### 6.7 Conclusion

This chapter complements the discussion in chapter five of leftist direct action in the nineties, by examining leftist indirect action in that decade.

The indirect action had eight ongoing themes, based on the need to mitigate various ills. The ills addressed were: pressures on the natural environment; poverty and greed; war and militarism; nuclear technologies; violations of human rights; scant rights for workers and consumers; racist, patriarchal, heterosexist, ageist, and other oppressive conduct; and ill-treatment of animals.

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35 As noted by Shapiro in his critique of neo-Tocquevillean laments about civic engagement, blacks in the US donned a mask of obedience and mimicked whites (for instance, in black people’s dances such as the cakewalk, the precursor to ragtime). That by no means signalled blacks’ acceptance of their treatment by whites ([Shapiro, 1997; paragraph 21]). Shapiro cites (Wyatt-Brown, 1988), which is an article on the subject of blacks’ mask of obedience).
Figure: Agonistic democracy – parts in action (1990s)

Notes:

1) The parts in action make a corpuscle. Surrounding it, there is a kind of apathy about politics – the subject votes in elections, or does not vote, and that’s that.

2) Beas (see main text) create the segment of indirect action where the subject pretends to be acting within the Lockean social contract. They wear a ‘mask of obedience.’

3) The figure does not show citizens’ activism of the right. The active right’s mode of interaction with constituted power is not studied in this piece of research.
Various groups were engaged in work around those themes. They were able to interconnect their actions, and to do so in a non-hierarchical manner and on a global basis as well as regionally and locally. (The global spread was due in part to structural reforms in transport and communications, which yielded improved services and lower prices.)

The groups’ practices ranged from petitioning elected representatives in parliaments, to producing material for publication in mainstream and alternative media, to consumer boycotts, and systematic third party non-violent intervention, and much else besides.

Looking beyond the material cause and the efficient cause of the indirect action, there is a question of the will to be genuinely active in the political sphere. The global centrist project of the nineties challenged that will in a particular manner. There was a sustained attempt at using soft power to ‘disappear’ political antagonism.

People were exposed to an ongoing campaign by politicians to win over, and to retain, public support by the clever use of spin. The search for an edge in the contest of spin led politicians to tap into veins of ressentiment and paranoid fantasy in the public imagination. Using spin also entailed talking with stakeholder groups, the better to gauge how to go forward with proposed government initiatives. That was a prelude to determining side payments and launching slick marketing campaigns for the initiatives. The object was to smooth away resistance, to reduce political antagonism to the level of trivia. And if that was achieved via a deepening spiral of cynicism, in response to the extravagant use of spin, then so be it.

The indirect action of the nineties was non-trivial, which shows that the centrist project failed in the use of soft power to ‘disappear’ political antagonism. The indirect action drove home the point that within society, there will be some form of conflict over the exercise of authority, no matter how adept people and groups may be in stating what is wanted and in reconciling their differences. There will be discord, social as well as psychogenic, over relations of subordination.

This chapter looks upon agonistic democracy as a transformative practice, rather than a form of state rule. It is a practice that sets up a dynamic of political struggle and subjectivity. The dynamic, in turn, explains how the centrist project, with its spiral of cynicism, did not capture the active left. The dynamic produced a three-part response to the imposture that was the (neo-)liberal constitutional state. Activists wearing a ‘mask of obedience’ and playing ‘non-cynic’ form one of the three parts; and I call such activists Beas, after Beatrice in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

When evaluating the activist dynamic discussed in this chapter, I use four of the concepts presented early in the thesis (chapter two). The four concepts are constituent power, constituted power, subject-groups, and subjugated groups. As set down in the figure on page 135, those concepts serve to map the quality of power channelled through each of the three parts in action described here.
Another set of concepts, which includes the circuit of inscription, witnessing, and memory-animation (chapter three), has some bearing on the final part of the thesis. It motivates a connective move, which links the plight of the ‘average’ cynic with a cycle of films from the mainstream cinema of the nineties.