Looking for a sociology worthy of its name: Claude Lefort and his conception of social division

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Abstract
The aim of this article is to question the nature of the socio-anthropological approach in Lefort’s thought. The author explores the complex relationship between Lefort and the Durkheimian French school of sociology in four stages: in the first, he shows Lefort as a sociologist ‘worthy of its name’ or, in other words, a sociologist interested in questioning the ‘institution of the social’. In the second, he focuses on the disturbing elements that Lefort introduces: the political and the division into the French sociological approach. In the third stage, he focuses his attention on the sociological approach in Lefort’s way of thinking about democratic society. Finally, he concludes by referring to Lefort’s apparent opposition between philosophy and social sciences – and the errors that this may have engendered – in order to demonstrate the continuity of Lefort’s sociological approach.

Keywords
conflict, democracy, Claude Lefort, social sciences, 20th-century France

Claude Lefort is a respected political philosopher, and yet his influence remains rather concealed. His thinking is often misunderstood by virtue of the fact that he is considered to be simply a theorist of radical, even liberal, democracy. In this article, I revisit a methodological assumption that, I believe, is necessary to understand not only Lefort’s ideas regarding the political institution of the social, but also his way of thinking about representative democracy and its limits. This methodological premise is found in what I

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will call a socio-anthropological approach, or simply a sociological approach. In other words, I am setting aside the scornful invectives against social sciences that characterize Lefort’s discourse in the last decades of his life, in order to focus on the structural role of Lefort’s specific sociological approach.

In 1978, Lefort wrote, ‘There is no sociology worthy of the name, let us keep thinking, which does not carry the seeds of questioning about the being of the social, which does not require deciphering, whatever the object of analysis, the phenomenon of its institution’ (Lefort, 2000 [1978]: 12). At the moment in which he was assembling a series of articles in the book *Les formes de l’histoire*, Lefort felt the need not only to emphasize his notion of a sociology worthy of the name, but also to continue to share the concept. He had to do so, in fact, because the ideas that he had begun to put forward in the late 1970s might have led some to think that he had changed his mind on the issue. I take his assertion so seriously that I question the structural importance that Lefort’s specific sociological approach actually played in his work. By sociological approach, I mean a way of conceptualizing the interrelationship between the individual and the social, the specifics of which Louis Dumont has synthesized best:

> while sociology as such is found in egalitarian society, while it is immersed in it, while it even expresses it – in a sense to be seen – it has its roots in something quite different: the apperception of the social nature of man. To the self-sufficient individual it opposes man as a social being; it considers each man no longer as a particular incarnation of abstract humanity, but as a more or less autonomous point of emergence of a particular collective humanity, of a society. (Dumont, 1980: 5)

For Lefort, this way of perceiving the interrelationship between the individual and the social draws on the work of sociologists and anthropologists, but, furthermore, engages in a special – albeit highly critical – rapport with the composite tradition of the French school of sociology that has its roots in the Durkheimian tradition.

It is, then, a matter of entering Lefort’s *œuvre*, of understanding *œuvre* in the manner that Lefort himself does. In an explicitly confrontational exchange with Foucault, Lefort proposed the idea of *œuvre* as unity that emerges through the interpretation of someone’s thought or, more precisely, of the making of someone’s thought. It is therefore a dynamic unity, a unity shaped by tensions, whose subsequent interpretations constitute sometimes opposite extensions that ultimately would be impossible to distinguish from the original work. One cannot escape the stratified interpretations between the thinker and us; it is necessary to situate oneself in relation to them (Lefort, 2000 [1978]: 238–44). I shall therefore seek to immerse myself in Lefort’s work, questioning its evolution and its echoes in other authors. The aim of this exploration is, however, precise: to question what constitutes, in Lefort’s approach to the political, a sociological approach. I will do so in four stages: in the first, I will show Lefort as a sociologist worthy of the name; in the second, I will focus on the disturbing elements that Lefort introduces into the main sociological tradition with which he conflictingly interacts – that is, the Durkheimian tradition. In the third stage, I will focus our attention on the role of this particular sociological approach in Lefort’s thinking about democratic society. Finally, I will conclude by referring to the apparent opposition between philosophy and social sciences
and the misunderstandings that this may have engendered in scholars’ interpretation of Lefort.

‘Sociology worthy of the name’

Lefort’s interest in sociology and anthropology is well known. Suffice it to recall, by way of example, that at a very important moment in the evolution of his Marxism, he deepened his knowledge in these fields. As he himself reminds us, ‘In 1950–1951, I spent most of my time in the Musée de l’Homme, where I read everything I could get my hands on’ (Lefort, 1996: 841). We could show by very different means the extent to which the sociological approach is central to his questioning of the social. For example, his 1952 review of Fernand Braudel’s *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II* (Paris, 1949) testifies to the role of sociological and anthropological thought in contemporary French social sciences and to Lefort’s own participation in this movement (Lefort, 1952: 122–31). Moreover, through his selection of the first six articles in *Les formes de l’histoire*, Lefort emphasizes the importance that confronting sociological and anthropological traditions played in the structuring of his thinking. I will not dwell here on the essay devoted largely to Claude Lévi-Strauss’s interpretation of Marcel Mauss’s work, even though it is an article of major importance not only in terms of Lefort’s intellectual career, but also in relation to the French debates that took place at the moment that structuralism was born.

Instead, I would like to draw attention to another essay published in 1955 that presents a series of elements that are valuable for understanding the relationship between Lefort and sociology. The title of the essay itself makes this clear: ‘L’aliénation comme concept sociologique’ (Lefort, 2000 [1955]). Lefort seeks to avoid the pitfalls of a debate between a positivist Marx and a metaphysician Marx, focusing instead on demystifying this second reading, in favour of allowing a sociologist Marx to emerge. He does so by choosing a category, that of alienation, precisely because in any definition of alienation ‘there is this absolute connection between a process of alienation and a process of truth’ (Lefort, 2000 [1955]: 79). Yet Lefort’s objective is specifically to explore Marxian thought in order to enable himself to develop a Marxism that, by abandoning all metaphysical coincidence between the real and the rational, proposes a ‘sociological description’ (Lefort, 2000 [1955]: 105). The sociological point of view originates precisely in the abandonment of the idea of a transhistorical rationality, in favour of an idea of rationality that is socially produced and therefore particular to a given society. Alienation can no longer be understood as the deprivation of a true human nature, but, rather, it must be understood within a system of specific significations that, of course, hide their specificity from themselves. Clarifying his objective, Lefort plunges into Evans-Pritchard’s sketchy description of the African society of the Nuers, which constitutes a borderline case. For Lefort, it is a matter of understanding the extent to which we can describe as alienated a society in which both individual identities and wider social relations depend on the cattle at the centre of all social life – of families, work, trade, and self-representations of oneself, to the point of determining the names of individuals. Furthermore, this is a society that also recounts the myth of the cow that, as man’s enemy, decided to exterminate the Nuers by spreading discord. And Lefort
glosses: ‘it would be all too easy to find equivalents in capitalist society’ (Lefort, 2000 [1955]: 95). But, in analyzing the Nuers’ society, Lefort never uses the category of alienation, and he stresses the fact that ‘the Nuers’ society is what it is: its appearance is its reality’. If we can adopt the category of alienation it is not in order to describe how human sociability is mediated by a symbolic role of things but to describe when ‘society exists in the form of the self-contradiction’. At the origin of capitalist alienation are the separation between capital and labour and the irreconcilability between experienced individual labour and abstract social labour.

Through this discussion, Lefort aims to highlight the impossibility of ‘speaking in the absolute of a form of human alienation’: ‘It is within the strict framework of the sociological description that a structure of alienation must appear, or it is by situating oneself within society that one must discover the phenomenon of alienation’ (Lefort, 2000 [1955]: 99). For him, it is then a matter of rereading Marx to differentiate between an alienation that is understood from a sociological perspective, and an alienation that is understood in a metaphysical way. A conception of alienation based on a sociologically absurd opposition between what would be real and what would result from a fictitious attribution of meaning is in fact metaphysical, since every cultural system is but a complex and conflicting system of meaning attributions.

Therefore, the point to aim for lies on another level, one that necessarily remains internal to the given meaning attributions. And, in this sense, the notions of alienation and, consequently, of alienation of labour run the risk of being able to lead only to idealism. Indeed, according to Lefort, it is in the very process of industrial societies’ socialization that the structure of alienation must be sought. In particular, he points to industrial societies’ inability to ensure workers’ identification with the social system through identification with their occupation: ‘we must therefore speak of a society of alienation as a man of alienation, by which we mean the man who is torn apart, doomed to settle down in order to realize himself, but unable to find the universal in the particular’ (Lefort, 2000 [1955]: 108). Lefort can then focus his attention on the intrinsic tension in the Marxian use of the term ‘ideology’. He notes that, according to Marx, ideology is both the inversion of reality and the language of real life, that is, the different languages of the separate spheres of a society that is incapable of recomposing its languages (‘the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc’; Lefort, 2000 [1955]: 109 – Marxian quotation from The German Ideology). The alienation that ideology conveys is to be sought not in the particular aspiration to the universal of any particular language, of any particular ideology, but rather in the impossible composition of these particular aspirations: ‘If error, disguise, lies are possible, it is first of all because society is torn apart and no expression can therefore be adequate’ (Lefort, 2000 [1955]: 109). It is then necessary to overcome the illusion of Marx and Marxism, the illusion of a theory that could ‘reach the objective structure of society, give an explanation of alienation’. Marxism ‘is itself a moment in a society of alienation; it is thought of alienation’ (Lefort, 2000 [1955]: 112). The Marxism for which Lefort pleads is thus the one that adopts a sociological point of view, that leads its interrogation without forgetting its point of view that is internal to a particular attribution of meanings – internal to a divided society.
This text is structured around a demand that Lefort abandoned a few years later: that of thinking of a Marxism that goes beyond a series of limitations, one that is perhaps structurally unsurpassable. But, beneath the showcased perspective, what should be of interest here is the fact that Lefort locates the essence of sociology in the principle that there is no reason in itself. Rather, all rationality is socially instituted in a particular form; all universalization is socially and historically rooted. In other words, Lefort’s adoption of a sociological approach coincides with his stance on a thought of indeterminacy – an indeterminacy that is, however, socially and historically ingrained (see Flynn, 2005: part 3).

From the moment he entered intellectual debates, Lefort pleaded for a sociology capable of taking into account its own presuppositions and thus its limitations. It is surely legitimate to ask whether this defense of a sociology that might be paradoxical (supporting a radically anti-positivist position by appealing to a social science with positivist roots) can be explained by reasons of academic opportunism, so to speak. In other words, we can ask whether his pleas for sociology are of a formal nature, given that Lefort was first an assistant to Georges Gurvitch at the Sorbonne, then a researcher in sociology at the CNRS, at the University of Caen, and once again at the CNRS. If this last question is legitimate, it seems that the answer can be negative only: in the way that Lefort articulates both Marxism and his phenomenological attitude, in the context of the post-Second World War era, it was quite ‘natural’ for him to adopt a conception of society that borrowed from sociology and, in particular, from the Durkheimian French school of sociology, albeit in a profoundly critical manner. In this sense, the questioning that we have just gone through of idealizing Marxism extends, implicitly or explicitly, to sociology, which denies itself by becoming positivist – that is, by adopting the idea of a science that could emancipate knowledge from its perspective, which, necessarily, is socially and historically particular.

The political institution of the social

Thus far, I have highlighted Lefort’s thoughts about a sociology that aspires to an understanding of social dynamics and, to use an expression that recurs in his writings, that questions the mystery of the social. He aims to think about the conditions of a science that is aware of the partiality of its place of observation and, consequently, of the partiality of the content of its development. It is from this aspiration and questioning that Lefort finds a type of theory of the institution of the social in dealing with Machiavelli’s work. It is a ‘type’ inasmuch as, in Lefort’s work, we cannot speak properly of a theory of the institution of the social because Lefort prevents himself, on principle, from systematizing his intuition. It is not by chance that the only work proposing an organic synthesis of what he means by the political institution of the social is the 1971 article that he co-authored with his pupil Marcel Gauchet, according to whom this theory underlies a model for the general understanding of history. Unfortunately, the article was never republished because of an argument between the two men. Without going into the contents of the discussion, I believe it to be especially interesting to note that the dispute concerned the two authors’ theoretical contributions; in other words – and this is what I want to emphasize here – Lefort never distanced himself from this systematic
explanation of the political institution of the social. I think that this article has to be interpreted as one of the logical developments of Lefort’s conception of the political institution of the social. This logical development contradicts Lefort’s other assumptions, such as his need to avoid any all-encompassing theory for understanding human history. We need not be surprised by this tension: Lefort himself teaches us that philosophical thought is intrinsically animated by tensions.

During the 1960s, Lefort used Machiavelli both for overcoming Marxism and for conceiving of the social, and he did so by introducing two elements that the French sociological tradition either neglected or outright denied: politics and conflict — more precisely, the political instituting the social, and division originating in the social. We can try to synthesize this evolution in three stages: (1) Lefort gradually leaves Marxism, thanks in part to his sociological approach or, more precisely, by deepening the sociological approach that characterizes Marxism through his questioning of both economism and idealism; (2) Lefort maintains Marxism’s attention on division, deepening the scope of Marxism to the point of making it a constitutive element, not only of ‘the history of all hitherto existing society’ but of the very possibility that a human society exists; (3) Lefort locates in the political the moment that institutes the social and locates in the intrinsically symbolic nature of power the condition for reconstituting the unity of an irreducibly divided social.

Lefort sees these three processes and defines them through Machiavelli. Indeed, according to Lefort, ‘it is at once in the phenomenon of the division of classes and that of its dissimulation that Machiavelli makes us capable of thinking’ (Lefort, 1972: 725). In other words, Lefort focuses his attention on division, highlighting what he begins to consider to be a dangerous Marxist illusion: the idea that division can be overcome by the revolution of a class that can deny its existence as a particular class due to singular socio-historical conditions and, in doing so, can become universal. However, in this argument, Lefort’s attention also turns to the process of reshaping or concealing division. Moreover, Marxism itself participates in the process of recomposing and disguising division by projecting into the future a final reconstitution, a unity to be regained. In the process of Lefort’s moving away from Marxism, the deepening of his sociological approach leads Lefort, through Machiavelli, to wanting to grasp the dynamic interplay between division and its dissimulation as the condition for the existence of a divided society.

In the Florentine’s work, Lefort highlights the idea of a constitutive division of the social in terms of the tension between two opposing desires. Machiavelli’s primary originality is found in the reversal of conventional ways of understanding the appetites of the two classes: the desire of the ‘Greats’ is to acquire more and more goods, power, and prestige; the desire of the ‘People’ is not to be oppressed, a desire on which law and freedom (the two are obviously inseparable) are thus based. However, this desire is not enough to establish a social order and to reshape division: society can exist only by virtue of an ‘identity without which the social body dissolves’ (Lefort, 1972: 434). The prince must embody this identity, the ‘imaginary community’, and he embodies it by exercising the power vested in him, because its symbolic nature can be revealed only through its effectiveness. The prince must therefore govern the two opposing desires while at the same time reflecting back to society the image that it has of itself as a unit. The social dynamic is thus characterized by a double division: a division internal to the social and a
division between the social and power. This double division can take on an infinite variety of forms, as the history of human societies has shown.

It is well known that this type of theory of the political institution of the social will be mostly a tool for Lefort for questioning modernity, that is, democratic society and its mirror, the intrinsically modern totalitarianism. Modernity is only one particular form of society. The particularity of modernity is political in its deepest meaning: it belongs to the symbolic institution of the social.

But what is the symbolic according to Lefort? The following quotation can help to introduce the answer:

When we speak of symbolic organization, of symbolic constitution, we seek to detect, beyond practices, beyond relations, beyond institutions that appear to be natural or historical facts, a set of articulations that are not deductible from nature and history, but that command the comprehension of what is presented as real. Where classical philosophy operated by distinguishing between ideas and the sensory world, where modern philosophy distinguished transcendental conditions of experience and the phenomenal world, we seek to identify organizational schemes that are not timeless, which do not point towards a pure a priori – the diversity and mobility of cultures are there to remind us – and which are not in time either, since they govern the modes of representation of collective or individual identity, the modes of distinction between self and other, the fundamental modes of communication. (Lefort and Roustang, 1983: 42)

While Lefort never hid his intellectual and personal associations with Jacques Lacan, he explicitly expressed himself against the possibility of reducing his vision of the symbolic to Lacan’s model, evoking a long tradition that dates back to Plato and whose crucial moments are to be found in Machiavelli and La Boëtie. His major reference, however, is Mauss, and in particular ‘Marcel Mauss’s essays on the symbolic fabric of the social’ (Lefort and Roustang, 1983: 42). I shall limit myself to pointing out that Lefort does indeed adopt one of the major aspects of Mauss’s Lévi-Straussian reading. In an extreme synthesis, Claude Lévi-Strauss had highlighted Marcel Mauss’s impasse and had written, ‘Mauss still thinks it possible to develop a sociological theory of symbolism, whereas it is obvious that what is needed is a symbolic origin of society’ (Lévi-Strauss, 2001: 21). As Vincent Descombes put it, ‘The importance of this Introduction is to substitute the symbolic for the sacred of the French School of Sociology. Durkheim and Mauss identified the social with the sacred; Lévi-Strauss identifies the social with language, that is, with a symbolic system’ (Descombes, 1979: 661). Lefort follows Lévi-Strauss in his interpretation of Mauss and in the idea that it is necessary to detect a symbolic constitution, but he does not accept the simplifying tendency of Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism and, more generally, of all the structuralists who declare themselves to be such (see Lefort, 2000 [1951]). Moreover, by thinking of the social in terms of its division, Lefort names ‘the political’ the process of the symbolic institution of the social, and he understands this process as a dynamic of division and of division concealment, wherein power, through its symbolic effectiveness, guarantees unity. To turn this idea into a model of socio-anthropological and historical understanding, Gauchet will have to make it more complex, particularly on the basis of two issues that Lefort
avoids: religion and the nature of the political in stateless societies, that is, societies that lack a power that is separate from society. These two points are not unrelated to the French anthropological studies that Gauchet will be able to articulate in dialogue with the anthropologist Pierre Clastres, who was trained in this tradition but radically innovated it by exploring the political dimension of societies ‘without history’ and ‘without state’. In Lefort’s perspective as well as in Lefort’s language, religion is never clearly defined. When, at the end of the 1970s, he insisted on democratic transition and the importance of the French Revolution, Lefort analyzed this historical turning point by referring to the ‘dissolution of the markers of certainty’ as the precondition for the ‘disembodiment’ of power. At the beginning of the 1980s, in his renowned article ‘Permanence du théologico-politique?’ (Lefort, 1986 [1981]), the complex relationship between the political and ‘markers of certainty’ is analyzed by evoking the category of theological-political, which Paul Valadier does not hesitate to define as being ‘vague’ (Valadier, 2006: note 1).

While Lefort accepts many structuralist presuppositions, the idea of the political institution of the social allows him to avoid simplification. Lefort’s thinking about the institution of the social through the political (and not through a generic symbolic) allows him to overcome three structuralist impasses:

1) The rigid separation between synchrony and diachrony that freezes one’s understanding of societies as given historical realities. The idea of a process of institution that exists in and through conflict forces us to take into account the dynamics of synchrony and, consequently, to move beyond the rigid separation of static synchrony and dynamic diachrony. Every social fact, enacted or existing through the dynamics of division and reconstitution, is also a historical fact. At the same time, this determination to overcome rigid separation may not correspond to a real overcoming of difficulty. For example, the status of certain major historical transitions still needs to be defined more precisely within a Lefortian perspective, starting with a democratic society’s germinal moment, such as that of the French Revolution: is it the result of a rupture? How can one think of a political rupture in its deepest sense?

2) The idea of a pure structure, describable in purely logical terms, in which the relationship between signifiers can be grasped independently of their meanings. According to Lefort’s perspective, there is no structure that is not caught in division, no structure that precedes the social, and no structure that can be dissociated from a process of the institution of the social – that is, from a shared meaning attribution, because meaning attribution is also a process of structuring meanings. Lefort’s idea of a symbolic constitution rooted in division refers precisely to the coincidence between the social attribution of meanings and the particular logic of organizing meanings.

3) The will to objectify meanings and structures. If for Lefort the institution of the social is political, it is because he insists on the role played by the division of the social and on its vital character. The political is what allows society to be both one and divided. This dual character, as well as the political, has a mysterious quality and is part of the essence of the social that remains inexplicable to human
understanding. At the same time, the constitutive and unsurpassable nature of division implies that every individual and collective experience depends on actors’ position with respect to division and on actors’ participation in the dynamics of the divided society. Thus, any desire for objectification is illusory and dangerous. Lefort’s distance from the structuralists does not, therefore, indicate a return to the earlier sociological tradition: the acceptance of the impossibility of a higher point of view over socio-historical facts implies the impossibility of an objectifiable criterion by which to grasp the evolution of human societies.\(^{14}\) If structural anthropology had sought to shift the level of an objective analysis of social realities to the structures (or logical preconditions) of the social, Lefort’s point of view denies the very possibility of applying objective analyses to the social.\(^{15}\)

I believe that these three points sum up both Lefort’s radical critique of ‘real structuralisms’ and his acceptance of a fundamental part of structuralism’s presuppositions in an attempt to conceptualize the social. And this position has remained the same over time: ‘In my early essays I criticized only the objectivist or naturalistic version of structuralism. I remain faithful to this criticism’ (Lefort, 2007 [1978]: 342). The position remains the same even as ‘real structuralisms’ fall into disgrace in favour of a post-structuralist mode that, faced with the disappointing results of simplifications, seeks to grasp complexity by openly neglecting, to use Lefort’s words, the ‘set of articulations that […] command the apprehension of what presents itself as real’ (Lefort and Rous-tang, 1983: 42).

**Lefort’s sociology of democracy**

This desire to understand a society’s conditions of existence and reproduction allows us to measure the role of the sociological gaze in Lefort’s work. We can also appreciate the consequences of this approach in his conception of democracy. We will observe this aspect in particular by drawing attention to three elements that highlight the eminently sociological dimensions of Lefort’s way of understanding democratic society.

1) **The representative nature of democracy.** According to Lefort, democracy is not representative when the conditions for potential direct democracy are absent: democracy is intrinsically representative\(^{16}\) because it is precisely through representation that democratic society assumes the symbolic dimension of power, making its place of power an ‘empty place’.\(^{17}\) At the root of the democratic dynamic is the impossibility of a coincidence between concrete individuals and the abstract figure of the citizen who is equal to other citizens. This impossible coincidence allows, at any time, for the social emergence of a claim for equality from any particular conditions in which it is possible to experience inequality, as has been the case for women, workers, ethnic minorities, subjugated groups, etc. This impossible coincidence is analogous to the equally impossible coincidence between the sovereign People and a heterogeneous set of individuals and social groups. It is precisely in this Lefortian idea of impossible coincidence – and in
the will to grasp its historical articulations – that Pierre Rosanvallon finds one of the major inspirations for his historical and theoretical work on suffrage and representation of the people. This impossible coincidence can be interpreted also in a much more radical way, as Miguel Abensour, Jacques Rancière, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have done, from different perspectives.

2) The consideration of institutions and the need for them. In the democratic dynamic, no institution can escape challenge, including those institutions that are supposed to allow the legitimate expression of challenge. However, democracy develops precisely through the institutionalization of conflict (Lefort, 1986 [1983]: 28), thanks to institutions invested with the symbolic effectiveness necessary to stage social division and reconstruct it. The characteristic feature of democratic institutions is that they are, in principle, totally impersonal. If Lefort’s thought is, to use Gilles Bataillon’s effective formula, a ‘thought of disincorporation’, it is also a thought of the institutionalization of disincorporation. To grasp the importance that Lefort’s sociological approach plays in this reflection on the intractable relationship between conflict and institutions, it is useful to consider his profound distance from Jacques Rancière’s perspective, which turns out to be purely philosophical. The idea that equality is indefinable – which Lefort clearly articulates – is at the very heart of Rancière’s democratic thinking. In Foucauldian language, Rancière places ‘police’ in opposition with ‘politics’: police (or policing) represents the claim to organize society on the basis of a definition of equality that can be only one of inequality and hierarchy; politics is the always-inevitable irruption of the principle of equality that denies any possible specific definition of equality. Politics therefore arises against any established order, against any policing and policy. The distance between Lefort and Rancière, however, is to be sought not solely in the articulation between equality and institutions, but even more in their way of thinking about an equality that is indefinable in history. According to Rancière, the irruption of the principle of equality is transhistorical; according to Lefort, by contrast, the call for equality becomes a foundation of social dynamics in the historical experience of modernity. Rancière explicitly underlines this distance between their two modes of thought: ‘There is really no reason to identify such indeterminacy with a sort of catastrophe in the symbolic linked to the revolutionary disembodiment of the “double body” of the king’ (Rancière, 1999: 100). However, as we have seen, for Lefort the symbolic does not designate a particular aspect of the social but is its constitutive dimension: ‘such a rupture [the advent of democracy] is, in fact, much more than political in the narrow sense of today’s conventional use of the term; and it is only by recognizing the symbolic dimension of the social that it is possible to appreciate it’ (Lefort, 1976: 194).

3) The advent of democracy as a socio-historical dynamic. A democratic society is one that assumes the vital and constitutive character of conflict:

In my view, the important point is that democracy is instituted and sustained by the dissolution of the markers of certainty. It inaugurates a history in which people experience a
fundamental indeterminacy as to the basis of power, law and knowledge, and as to the basis of relations between self and other, at every level of social life [...]. It is this which leads me to take the view that, without the actors being aware of it, a process of questioning is implicit in social practice, that no one has the answer to the questions that arise, and that the work of ideology, which is always dedicated to the task of restoring certainty, cannot put an end to this practice. (Lefort, 1986 [1983]: 13)

Here, the Lefortian understanding of democracy as a form of society shows its sociological dimension and the difficulty it can pose. If one seeks to understand what is meant by ‘assuming’, the following issue clearly arises: according to Lefort, assuming is not the result of self-government or of a will but is a social choice, a subjectless decision, making equality the principle of legitimization and thus undermining the possibility of certainty. Democratic society emerges and is reproduced despite and against the human need for certainties. In other words, the dissolution of markers of certainty and the consequent impossibility for an ideology to impose itself as the definitive explanation together produce the acceptance of conflict in practice. The democratic dynamic is imposed ‘without the awareness’ of those who participate in its initiation and in the construction of democratic society.

On this point, Lefort’s ideas differ not only from most conceptions of democracy, but also from the understanding of democracy held by someone with whom he shared many experiences as well as radical oppositions to Stalinism, to a simplifying structuralism, and (I would say more generally) to ‘political-ideological cretinism’ (Morin, 2011: 192): Cornelius Castoriadis. For Castoriadis, democracy can be only the achievement of a project of autonomy, of a political project that allows for a progressive widening of the reflexive moment, of the political elucidation of social norms. For Lefort, by contrast, democratic society is historically realized ‘without the awareness’ of those who forge it by being forced to deal with radical indeterminacy.

In this regard, we can read the opposing judgments that Lefort and Castoriadis made on the Declaration of Human Rights in the early 1980s. While for Castoriadis it is absolutely absurd to base a project of autonomy on a reference to nature, Lefort draws attention to the dynamic that this declaration triggers beyond the reference to nature. To complete the picture, it would be useful to add two other positions: that of Marcel Gauchet, who, at the same time, developed a critique of the danger posed by a rights policy that denied itself the instruments of real societal action (Moyn, 2012); and the position of Michel Foucault, who introduced the notion of ‘rights of the governed’ in an attempt to go beyond the vision of natural rights’ being independent of the apparatuses of security and governmentality.

Lefort’s argument is articulated through a radical critique of Karl Marx’s critique of human rights (the reference is obviously to the Jewish Question), which will also impose itself as a Marxist cliché: the opposition between formal and real rights. In this critique of a critique, Lefort reverses Marx’s discourse: the opposition between formal and real rights is one that is as theoretically absurd as it is practically dangerous. Rights can only be abstract, and the power of the dynamic they trigger derives precisely from their abstract character. It is exactly the abstract nature of rights and the abstract nature of right-bearer individuals who are, through this abstraction, equal, that shape modern
social conflict: any social group that finds itself not considered and treated as equal will call for equality and claim for new rights. The dynamics of our democratic societies are based on the fact that equality, which has become a principle of legitimation, prevents the freezing of the law, the solidification of knowledge, and the stable filling of the place of power. Most of the time, this process takes place against our own tendencies and will (Lefort, 1981 [1980]).

**Democratic enigma**

I have drawn a portrait of Claude Lefort as a sociologist, whereas when we read Lefort’s writings, especially those from the late 1970s onward, we find numerous – sometimes ferocious – attacks on the social sciences. In an article devoted precisely to the relationship between Lefort and the social sciences, Alain Caillé supports the idea of ‘C. Lefort’s repudiation of the social sciences in favour of political philosophy’ (Caillé, 2010). In my opinion, this is not a ‘repudiation’ entirely but, rather, a change in tone.

We have traditionally seen Lefort distinguish a ‘sociology worthy of the name’ from sociologies that forget to question the nature of the social. An excerpt from an article from the 1960s may help us to understand this distinction and, more precisely, how Lefort characterizes a scientific approach:

> But is it not true that if a sociologist – let us dispense with the use of the term – has something to say about his own democracy that distinguishes him from the first talker who comes along, or from the ideologue or the so-called technician of politics, it is only to the extent that he shakes the evidence at first sight, that he tries to bring back to the light of day the non-knowledge on which it is based, that he endangers the common faith, and first of all that which takes pride in being good? Far from becoming a prisoner of myth because he takes on a troubled representation, he frees himself from it by the mere fact that he assumes the position of the interrogator. Only this position enables him to claim the point of view of science. (Lefort, 1966: 751)

Lefort places at the heart of a sociology of democracy a series of ‘enigmatic concepts’ whose profound meaning cannot be grasped because they are caught up in social division and in the movement of its occultation. In order to understand the events of the present, Lefort proposes an analysis that, necessarily, engages a general questioning of the social and its conditions of existence. At the same time, he refutes any analysis that loses sight of the different levels necessary to grasp reality. Thus, Lefort does not spare himself from blaming ‘false science’, that of disciplinary confinement, on the basis of ‘political sociology’.

Beginning in the 1980s, Lefort’s attacks became increasingly virulent. Their targets remained similar: ‘political science’, ‘political sociology’, or sociologies that cut out their objects by reducing themselves to superficial criticism or technical knowledge. At the same time, we see another change of tone: the criticism of these blindly specialized sciences was increasingly accompanied by an emphasis on political philosophy. If, until the 1970s, Lefort was able to defend without too much definition a reflection on the political and the social that was nourished by dialogue with tradition and socio-anthropological works, he had to face different difficulties from the 1980s onwards:
the confinement of the social sciences within ever-narrower boundaries in which specialization is justified and exalts a misunderstood ideal of objectivity; the hegemony of Pierre Bourdieu in French critical sociology; and the involution of political philosophy, an important part of which seems to have forgotten the conflicting essence of the political. There was, then, something that could be called a tactical retreat: Lefort abandoned the explicit defense of a sociology worthy of the name to concentrate his efforts on the defense of a political philosophy concerned with fuelling a real questioning of the political and that was also, necessarily, a questioning of the institution of the social. Political philosophy also became the place to assume the fact that we are part of the object that we observe and that we change. Paradoxically, the philosopher becomes the one who does not just observe the world but understands it by participating in its transformation. Lefort abandons all hope of conceiving a sociology based on an awareness of division and of the absence of an overview point from which we could objectively observe society, and he does not hide his embarrassment in the face of a sociology that, as a science, denies itself the possibility of taking an ethical-political stance. Lefort’s reaction to Giovanni Busino, in a discussion in Geneva, is telling: he accuses his interlocutor of being ‘too much of a sociologist. Perhaps you have allowed yourself to be too carried away by this ideal of objectivity which is that of sociology’ (Lefort, 2007 [1990]: 653).

Moreover, by the second half of the 1970s, perhaps after the unexpected death of Pierre Clastres (whose importance in Lefort’s career is well known), he no longer saw a sociology or anthropology capable of responding to the challenge of questioning the institution of the social and the political, although he continued to dialogue with the MAUSS (Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste en Sciences Sociales), for example, and with his friend Edgar Morin. In conclusion, the absence of a reasonable hope for the development of a sociology ‘worthy of the name’ led Lefort to stress the need for a philosophy capable of defusing blind specialization and the neo-positivist illusion of an objectifying science that does not take indeterminacy into account.

Lefort reacts with all his strength against the simplism of the ‘New Philosophers’ who, as good neo-converts, start from a superficial critique of totalitarianism and destroy any serious possibility of developing a reflection on politics and on what Lefort has at heart: a radically critical understanding of today’s society that grasps the openness to freedom that characterizes democratic society.

From the same period, Lefort also had intuition, perhaps, of a possible risk for a political philosophy facing the offensive of an American philosophy (of which Rawls was the major representative) that seemed to be able to do without the social, the social’s division, or even the political. Faced with the danger of a political philosophy that makes an ‘original position’ the ideal place to deliberate, Lefort concentrated his efforts on relaunching a philosophy that questions the mysteries of the political and the institution of the social by claiming the participation of any observer in divided society and its transformations. The political decision can be situated only in conflict and in the subjective and partial experience that the actors have of the world.

This choice to emphasize political philosophy does not touch on in depth what, in Lefort’s thinking, is a sociological approach. The silence or even oblivion surrounding the particularity of his own approach, which was nourished by a sociological conception
of the institution of the social, is one of the major causes of misunderstanding Lefort’s philosophical thought. To measure this incomprehension, one need think only of the reductions (in the forms of condemnation or praise) of Lefort’s thinking to a critical liberal position. These reductions are based precisely on the lack of consideration of the interpretation of democracy as a form of society, as a particular form of institution of the social. They do away with a fundamental distinction between different levels: understanding the dynamics of democracy (a historical condition that escapes the actors’ decisions); opposition between democracy and totalitarianism (the need to preserve democratic openness in the face of the danger of a totalitarian closure of the independence of power, law, and knowledge); and participation in conflicts (questioning institutions and their temporary forms).

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**Notes**

1. The paper presented here benefited from discussions at the Circem’s seminar at the University of Ottawa, in November 2015, as well as at the conference ‘Les formes du politique. L’apport de la philosophie politique aux sciences sociale’, organized by F. Callegaro, G. De Ligio, S. Marcotte-Chénard, and V. Ricard, in June 2015, at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociale, in Paris.
2. Furthermore, all translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.
3. For a clear introduction to Lefort’s conception of ‘the social’ and its symbolic nature, as well as for a stimulating interpretation of the progressive evolution of this notion in Lefort’s thought, see Singer (2013).
4. Among the works on this topic, see especially Moyn (2013).
5. See below for more details about the essay ‘L’échange et la lutte des hommes’ (2000 [1951]).
6. Lefort refers to ‘The Nuer, Oxford University Press, 1940’ (Evans-Pritchard, 1940). He reads and comments on this study before its French translation prefaced by Louis Dumont.
7. On the complexity of Lefort’s overcoming of Marxism, see Di Pierro (2020: chap. 2–4).
8. On the deep continuities between Lefortian thinking during its Marxist phase and after the end of the 1950s, see Labelle (2015), which contains a detailed analysis of this article by Lefort. See also Moyn (2008).
9. We should not underestimate the fact that, if Lefort is so sensitive to the need for a sociological interrogation open to indeterminacy, this is also thanks to his profound – or, I would say, constitutive – relationship with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology (which, in turn, is in dialogue with sociological and ethnological studies).
10. The article is a re-working of one of Lefort’s courses from 1966–7 (Lefort and Gauchet, 1971).
11. To capture the continuity in Lefort’s interpretation of Marxism and Machiavelli from a different perspective, see Janvier and Mancuso (2013).
12. Evidently, the main reference is Clastres (1974).
13. However, the reduction of the symbolic to the political obviously poses problems; for a discussion of this reduction (albeit in relation to Marcel Gauchet), see Vibert (2013).

14. In this sense, one could imagine a radical objection to Durkheim’s understanding of the division of labour: can one compare the social division of labour between societies in which the meanings attributed to the principles (gender, age, social hierarchies, etc.) of division and the meaning of labour are incomparable?

15. Marcel Gauchet’s work can be understood as the result of a desire to think in terms of a structuralism of complexity: his idea of transcendental anthroposociology is an attempt to grasp the conditions of existence of human societies and their forms.

16. As written by Sofia Näsström, ‘The question is not whether representation is democratic or not, that is, if it matches up with the ancient ideal of a people ruling itself. Representation is democracy. It is the modern form of popular rule. [...] Lefort cautions against the temptation to restore unity in society. It does not eradicate division, but it leads to the totalitarian image of the “People-as-One”’ (Näsström, 2006: 322).

17. On democracy, representation and disincorporation, see most importantly Lefort (2007 [1988]). Wim Weymans pointed to the omission of this aspect in works on Lefort by proposing to understand it through a comparative analysis of the three major thinkers of the Centre Aron at EHESS (see Weymans, 2005).

18. Claude Lefort directed Rosanvallon’s thesis (dedicated to Guizot) and enabled him to move from the world of trade unions to the world of research, particularly at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. Although it is often implicit, the reference to Lefort characterizes an important part of Rosanvallon’s works. For instance, see Rosanvallon (2011: 91). Here, there is not only an evocation of Lefort in a strategic paragraph, but also an explicit relation to one of his early works (Rosanvallon, 1976).

19. On Abensour’s reactivation of Lefort’s idea of democracy, see for instance Abensour (2011: xxx–xli). Laclau and Mouffe referred to Lefort in their seminal work (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), especially in the last chapter, ‘Radical Democracy: Alternative for a New Left’. The relationships between Lefort and Rancière are complex, not least because Rancière tends to stress his distance from Lefort more than his debts to him. See the following point.

20. In this sense, Rosanvallon’s idea of counter-democracy finds one of its inspirations in Lefort, who is rightly cited in Rosanvallon (2008: 169).

21. In this regard, J.D. Ingram writes: ‘Politics-as-conflict is always necessary to renew politics-as-regime by challenging its limits. This is the view of radical democracy. These two possibilities coexist in Lefort’s conception of democracy, and for the most part he refuses to choose between them’ (Ingram, 2006: 37).

22. For a similar interpretation of Lefort, see the interview with Rancière (2009 [2000]: 166–7).

23. The same points are made in L’Homme en trop where, after his thesis on the disincorporation of the sovereign and the de-substantialization of society, Lefort writes: ‘However, it is no less important to identify the effects of the disjuncture in democracy between Power, Law and Knowledge’ (Lefort, 1976: 195–6). On the disentanglement of law, power, and knowledge, see Lefort (1981 [1980]: 62–7).

24. The historical moment that sums up the turning point is the French Revolution. For an interpretation of the different dimensions of this historical turning point in Lefort’s work, I refer to Flynn (2005: ch. 6).

25. This radical opposition between Lefort and Castoriadis about the conception of democracy is the last divergence of a long series that characterize their friendship, their political camaraderie, and their philosophical contribution in editorial boards. Philosophers and intellectual historians, such as François Dosse (2014), have described the details of their relationships; however, it remains almost impossible to capture the continuous interactions and the mutual
influence between two thoughts that, from a theoretical point of view, were simply incompatible. The conference devoted to the two thinkers in Nanterre, in 2013, demonstrated this impossibility (see the table of contents and the contributions in Poirier, 2015).

26. About Alain Caillé and the idea of opposition and ultimately depreciation of the social sciences, see also Caillé (2011: 28).

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