

Discordant harmony: A schema for radically rethinking the institution of democracy

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Abstract:

Examining contemporary “square” citizen movements and the singularity of the political-ritual institution of the Great Dionysia in classical Athens, this paper addresses the possibility of considering radical democracy as an institution, in line with Cornelius Castoriadis’ project of autonomy and as opposed to Claude Lefort’s notion of “savage democracy.” Therefore, a new schema of political thought will be proposed: discordant harmony. This schema aims to pave the way for thinking about the dialectical dynamics of the democratic institution, resulting from its contradictory movements: that of the search for stability in an instituted tradition, and that of critique, that is, the internal renewal of an instituting movement that may lead to insurrection.

Introduction

As a philosopher specializing in Greek antiquity and theater studies, I believe that we could renew our critical attention to the question of radical democracy by focusing on a different perspective from that of contemporary political theory. Rather than entering into a debate with those authors who first used the term “radical democracy” (Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau), or those generally considered part of the same movement (Jacques Rancière, Etienne Balibar, and Miguel Abensour), I start from a connection between two lines of thought that arise from practice, and which belong, *prima facie*, to very different domains.¹ The first comes from the study of social movements—more specifically, those that tend to protest in squares, such as the Indignados, the Tahrir Square and Syntagma Square protests, Occupy Wall Street, and Nuit Debout, all of which reject any form of institutionalization. This goes hand in hand with their rejection of representative parliamentary democracy, and a demand for direct democracy, understood as a “form of life.”²

A number of questions arise from those experiences: Why did those involved in these movements unanimously associate “institutions” with representation—as if a form of institution that did not involve delegating power to representatives were practically unthinkable? Is it not possible to create specific institutions of direct democracy, within our own forms of life, which would make radical democracy stable and therefore sustainable? Doesn’t the “radical” nature—in the etymological sense of the *radix*, the root—of any consequent democracy depend precisely on being “rooted” in every sphere of its citizens’ life?³ In other words, *pace* Arendt,⁴ doesn’t the political sphere within any true democracy necessarily rely on the social—since such “rootedness” allows us to overcome the apparent antinomy between democracy understood as a mere “regime” and democracy understood as a “form of life?”⁵ Could we perhaps even imagine that the “principle” of democracy might be situated elsewhere than in questions of the distribution of power? The central aporia that emerges from these questions is whether such movements can only ever be ephemeral, arising from the margins, or whether one could legitimately desire to place them within a particular framework and timeframe—provided one can “organize without organizations.”⁶

My second line of thought comes from theatrical practice. Every season, theaters stage Greek tragedies. Most of the time, however, this is reduced to the staging of a tragic text, not the performance of a tragedy. As Cornelius Castoriadis put it so strikingly, “Greek tragedy doesn’t exist.”⁷ There is only Athenian tragedy,⁸ because, as we will see, this was intrinsically linked in a

1 The current article should, of course, be situated within the conceptual space of current debates, but the limited space available makes it impossible to carry out this task with the necessary precision. I have decided instead to focus on my original contribution to the debate.

2 See Albert Ogien et Sandra Laugier, *Le principe démocratie: Enquête sur les nouvelles formes du politique* (Paris: La Découverte, 2014). The authors use this term in a Wittgensteinian sense, whereas my own understanding of it is Aristotelian. See Sophie Klimis, “Les puissances politiques du vivre: créer le commun du bonheur, par-delà la sidération de la vie nue,” in *Vie bonne, vulnérabilité, commun(s): Schèmes anciens et usages contemporains*, ed. Olivier Renaut, Sandrine Alexandre, and Haud Gueguen (Paris, Presses Universitaires de Paris Nanterre, 2019), 81–111.

3 I use the term “consequent” for its Kantian resonances, associated with the maxim of judgment that gives one sense of the term “radical”: “which goes to its ultimate consequences.”

4 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), and *On Revolution* (London: Faber, 2016).

5 Sophie Klimis, “Democrazia come forma di vita *versus* democrazia come istituzione: una falsa antinomia,” in *Ripensare la politica. Immagini del possibile e dell’alterità*, ed. Emanuele Profumi and Alfonso M. Iacono (Pisa: ETS, 2019), 213–26.

6 I take this evocative phrase from Collectif Mauvaise Troupe, *Constellations: Trajectoires révolutionnaires du jeune 21e siècle* (Paris: L’Éclat Poche, 2014), 795.

7 Cornelius Castoriadis, *Ce qui fait la Grèce, vol. 1: D’Homère à Héraclite* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), 37.

8 I should add “for us,” given what texts and archaeological traces have come down to us. It appears that there were tragic choruses in Sicyon, a city next to Corinthia, and in Sicily. See Cornelius Castoriadis, *Ce qui fait la Grèce, vol. 2: La cité et les lois* (Paris: Seuil, 2008), 137.

number of ways to the institution of the democratic *polis*. For my purposes, the most important task is re-evaluating the importance of the choruses, which were composed of citizens—in contrast to the heroes, the protagonists of the dramas, who were played by professional actors.⁹ These choruses of citizens were exempt from political duties during rehearsals, up to the final, unique performance in the contest of the Great Dionysia—the annual ritual festival in honor of the god Dionysus, the second most important such event in Athens after the Panathenaeum.¹⁰

This apparently purely contextual fact can only mean one striking thing: in Athens, singing and dancing in the tragic chorus was considered a *praxis* in its own right, with the same political power as deliberating in the Council, voting in the Assembly, or sitting in judgment in the Tribunal. Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet use the metaphor of the “broken mirror” to signify that the fictions represented in tragedies allowed the city to provide a critical “reflection” of itself.¹¹ But we must go beyond this, for a far more troubling question arises: How can the work of bodies and voices be political? How could it be intrinsically linked to the institution of democracy? For us, any connection between grand ritual festivities and some political context inevitably brings to mind the purely ideological propaganda of fascist and communist official “celebrations.” We think of feet marching in lockstep and chanted slogans—in other words, of the homogenization of citizens’ minds. Could it be that another form of “embodiment” played a role as Athenian citizens participated in choruses, one that encouraged the development of critical thinking, deliberation, and making and carrying out considered decisions both individually and collectively—in short, in learning the “practical wisdom” that the Greeks called *phronesis*, and that is essential to democracy? Would it be possible, or desirable, to reinvent such civic rituals today?

My core interest here, then, is a re-evaluation of the ways of making and thinking about the radical institution of democracy, at the intersection of these two practice-based lines of thought. But the topic of democratic institutions has been neglected by theorists of radical democracy, and we have to go back to an earlier generation, to Cornelius Castoriadis, to find a thinker who engaged tirelessly with the question.¹² As a result, my own work follows on from that of Castoriadis. My argument is divided into three parts. I begin by presenting the elements of Castoriadis’ thought that I go on to use. Secondly, I propose a new schema of political thought: discordant harmony.¹³ This offers us a way to think about the dialectics of the democratic institution as a result of its own contradictory internal dynamics: on the one hand, the search for stability in a long-lasting institutional tradition; on the other, critique, the internal revival of an instituting movement, always at the risk and peril of

9 Sophie Klimis, “Les grandes Dionysies d’Athènes: un imaginaire en performance,” *Klêsis* 28 (2013): 8–22. See also Claude Calame, *La tragédie chorale: Poésie grecque et rituel musical* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2017), 39–40.

10 See Eric Csapo and William J. Slater, *The Context of Ancient Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), for all sources on the context of the Great Dionysia.

11 Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 33.

12 See Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), which provided the basic framework for all of his later discussions of the topic.

13 I will focus here on a critical genealogy of this schema, based on my work on the Ancient Greeks. ‘Discordant harmony’ should also be compared with apparently similar contemporary schemas of political thought, such as Chantal Mouffe’s concept of “conflictual consensus.” See *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005), and her most important book, co-authored with Ernesto Laclau, *Hégémonie et stratégie socialiste: Vers une démocratie radicale* (Paris: Arthème Fayard-Pluriel, 2019 [1985]). I must also demonstrate how this schema allows us to get beyond the fundamental aporias of the paradoxical claim that anarchy is the *arkhe* of democracy. In any case, there have been a number of very different versions of this claim. See Jacques Rancière, *On the shores of Politics* (London: Verso, 2020), and Miguel Abensour, “‘Savage Democracy’ and ‘Principle of Anarchy,’” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 28 (2002): 703–27. Abensour’s work was influenced by Reiner Schurmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). For an approach more influenced by Castoriadis, see Stathis Gourgouris, “Arche,” in *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon*, vol. 2, ed. J. M. Bernstein, Adi Ophir, and Ann Laura Stoler (winter 2012), available at <http://www.politicalconcepts.org/arche-stathis-gourgouris/>.

leading to insurrection. I conclude by putting this schema to the test with a re-evaluation of the democratic institution of the Great Dionysia of Athens.

1. Thinking about democracy in line with Castoriadis' "autonomous" approach rather than Lefort's "savage" legacy

Theorists of radical democracy have developed the concept of "savage democracy" inherited from Claude Lefort,¹⁴ Castoriadis' comrade-turned-enemy, with whom he founded and ran *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, both the movement and the journal, until their final split in 1958.¹⁵ As their dispute over how to organize the movement continued, it revealed their opposing views of politics and democracy.¹⁶

Distancing himself from the science of politics, Lefort sought to think instead about the political (*le politique*), describing the event through which the different spheres that characterize modern life (political, economic, religious, and so on) emerge.¹⁷ He believed that the "essence" of democracy, which he described as "savage," lay in the following process:

As soon as there is no ultimate reference on the basis of which the social order might be conceived and determined, the social order is constantly on a quest for foundations, in search of its own legitimacy, and it is precisely the opposition and the demands of those who are excluded from the benefits of democracy that constitute its most effective wellspring.¹⁸

By contrast, Castoriadis is interested in politics (*la politique*), which he firmly identifies with democracy:

In its genuine signification, democracy consists in this, that society does not halt before a conception, given once and for all, of what is just, equal, or free but rather institutes itself in such a way that the question of freedom, of justice, of equity, and of equality might always be posed anew within the framework of the "normal" functioning of society. And in contradistinction to what . . . in every society has to do with explicit power, it must be said that politics [*la politique*]*—not to be confused with court intrigues or the good management of instituted power, which exist everywhere—*concerns the overall, explicit institution of society and the decisions that concern its future.¹⁹

In condensed form, this quotation contains the essence of Castoriadis' argument on democracy. For him, the most fundamental feature of democracy as an autonomous society²⁰ is not equality,²¹ or

14 Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010) and *Essais sur le politique, XIXe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1986).

15 See for instance Abensour, "Savage Democracy," [247–290]; Chantal Mouffe, *Le politique et ses enjeux: Pour une démocratie plurielle* (Paris: La Découverte, 1994); Étienne Balibar, *Les frontières de la démocratie* (Paris: La Découverte, 1992).

16 I do not have the opportunity here to develop the comparison between these two authors' conceptions of democracy. See Nicolas Poirier, ed., *Cornelius Castoriadis et Claude Lefort: l'expérience démocratique* (Paris: Le Bord de l'Eau, 2015).

17 Philippe Caumières, "La Grèce ancienne ou l'émergence du projet d'autonomie," in *Castoriadis et les Grecs*, ed. Sophie Klimis, Philippe Caumières, and Laurent Van Eynde, *Cahiers Castoriadis* 5 (Brussels: Publications des Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis, 2010), 77–81.

18 Claude Lefort and Paul Thibaud, "La communication démocratique," *Esprit* 9–10 (September–October 1979), 34, quoted in Abensour, "Savage Democracy," 707.

19 Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Greek and the Modern Political Imaginary," in *World in Fragments: Writings on Politics, Society, Psychoanalysis, and the Imagination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 87.

20 For Castoriadis, each society establishes itself through the action of an anonymous collective imaginary which creates imaginary social meanings which orient the foundations of its "world." He then distinguishes between

even freedom, but the permanent questioning of inherited institutions, and the possibilities for social creation that flow from this. It is a process that must be conceived as a permanent dialectic between the instituted and instituting dimensions of society. “Inherited institutions” do not mean political institutions in the narrow sense. Rather, the phrase refers primarily to the imaginary, founding meanings of society and the “world” they shape through the values, symbols, institutions, laws, customs, systems of perception, and so on, which are created when we rely on them. Furthermore, such questioning does not come from the margins, from those excluded from power. Rather, its structural possibility must be permanently inscribed in democratic institutions (in the narrow sense) and forms of life, which are thought of as continuous, rather than opposed.

This is why Castoriadis pays so much attention to the funeral oration of Pericles as related by Thucydides. For instance, he emphasizes that, in this idealized portrait of Athenian democracy, Pericles concentrates on a description of the forms of life made possible by the democratic political institution. This is presented, in extremely condensed form, in a famous phrase: “we love the beautiful in our daily lives, and we philosophize without ceasing.”²² For Castoriadis, such incessant philosophical practice primarily involves politics: when he votes in the Assembly, decides on a defendant’s guilt or innocence in the Tribunal, or deliberates with others in the Council, the citizen is forced to ask questions like: Is this law just? What is justice? But this incessant philosophical and political activity—the *ekklesia* met roughly once a week—“spilled over,” so to speak, into all spheres of citizens’ daily lives. According to Castoriadis, the Athenian answer to the question, “What is the institution of society to achieve?” was: “The creation of human beings who live with beauty, who live with wisdom, and who love the common good.”²³

A second quotation fleshes out Castoriadis’ conception of democracy—and, in passing, highlights some of the dead ends encountered by contemporary social movements like *Nuit Debout*:

When we talk about democracy, we shouldn’t simply have in mind an assembly that deliberates and decides consensually, nor the absence of domination, in the factual sense of the term, by a special group. The Greek creation of democracy, of politics, is the creation of an explicitly self-instituting activity of the community.²⁴

Self-institution also means self-limitation. For Castoriadis, there must be safeguards on the permanent possibility of questioning inherited institutions and creating new laws. But this is quite distinct from the enclosure characteristic of heteronomous societies, which bars their members from grasping the limits of their frame of reference and so questioning it. Again, for Castoriadis, self-limitation involves institutions. He gives two examples: *graphe paranomon* and tragedy.²⁵ Surprisingly, however, while he affirms that tragedy is an Athenian political institution, he does not discuss the institutional mechanism itself—the Great Dionysia and the tragedy contest. His entire interpretation of tragedy rests on a few fictional texts that he treats as paradigms, particularly Sophocles’ *Antigone* and Aeschylus’ *Prometheus in Chains*.

autonomous and heteronomous societies. Members of the former are aware of this self-institution, and take it up literally and collectively by “giving themselves their own law.” By contrast, members of heteronomous societies obscure their own founding action by delegating it to a transcendent entity who is understood to be the final guarantor of meaning—God, for instance, or ancestors, or growth and the market within neoliberal society.

21 Castoriadis, *La cité et les lois*, 44, emphasizes that the imaginary of equality, based on which citizens think of themselves as equal (*isoî*) and similar (*homoioi*) first appeared in aristocratic Sparta.

22 This is my own translation of this complex phrase. Castoriadis, *La cité et les lois*, 164–6, translated it with a gloss: “we live in and through the love of the beautiful . . . we ‘philokelize’ inexpensively and we philosophize without weakness . . . which does not imply that we are lifeless, that we have abandoned action and the audacity associated with it.”

23 Cornelius Castoriadis, *Domaines de l’homme: Les carrefours du labyrinthe, II* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 306.

24 Castoriadis, *Ce qui fait la Grèce*, vol. 1, 59.

25 Castoriadis, *Domaines de l’homme*, 298–306.

Therefore, Castoriadis' textualist interpretation is "classical," reflecting philosophers' typical approach to tragedy since the eighteenth century: while his reading of the texts is quite faithful, he instrumentalizes it by deploying his own concept of the "tragic." This is anchored in *hubris*, which is identified, on the one hand, with the *monos phronein* (solipsistic thinking) of one who thinks he can be right individually, without submitting himself to the challenge of debate; and, on the other, with the inability to self-limit—that is, the inability to set limits for oneself, without which such limits only pre-exist as external constraints on our action.²⁶

Castoriadis's textual interpretation of the tragedy also ignores its ritual aspect. By contrast, most of anthropological work on tragedy, while taking into account its insertion in the festival of the Great Dionysia, has viewed it from an essentially ritual point of view, reducing or even neglecting the importance of its political aspect.²⁷ Therefore, in the final part of this paper, I would like to articulate those two perspectives on tragedy in order to be able to show its specificity and complexity: Athenian tragedy was a political-ritual institution, wholly different from modern theologico-politics, which legitimizes power through ritual and wholly divorced from any form of "representation" in the modern sense of the term.

2. Discordant harmony: Critical genealogy and the construction of a schema of political thought

"Discordant harmony" is my free translation of an expression from a fragment of Heraclitus, *palintropos harmoniê*: "Most men do not understand/How the One, differing from itself, is in tune with itself/Swaying harmony/As for the bow and the lyre."²⁸ Recall that *harmonia* designates "the arrangement of mutually adapted elements in a whole,"²⁹ and that the examples of the bow and the lyre refer to a third hidden paradigm, a musical instrument called the joint heptachord, which results from the "invisible" union of two tetrachords.³⁰ The oscillating harmony Heraclitus describes is in general any form of invisible harmony that achieves unity and therefore consonance. It is not a dissonant harmony—that is, one deprived of consonance, one that "remains at division, without achieving union, and so at the *apeiron* (the unlimited), deprived of *peras* (limit)."³¹ The oscillation of this harmonization arises because the processual unification it achieves exerts influence but does not smooth out all differences. Instead, the unification that takes place during oscillating harmonization "counter-adjusts" these differences, as in a mortise and tenon joint: it maintains and even intensifies their tension. The oscillating harmony is "the mobile unity of opposites."³²

Lying between oscillation and dissonance, discord better reflects this idea of a dynamic union of opposites, held in tension and yet somehow united as a whole in and by the very dynamic of their conflictuality. In treating this "image" as a schema, I continue one of Castoriadis' insights, where he presented "the intrinsic relationship between chaos and democracy" as "the schema from which the project of an autonomous society can be created."³³ This relationship is not in itself a schema, *pace* Castoriadis. Rather, it is the unfigurable thing that the schema, as a matrix of images—or, more

26 Sophie Klimis, "Tragedy," in *Castoriadis: Key Concepts*, ed. Suzi Adams (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 205–218.

27 See especially Simon Goldhill, "The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology," in *Nothing to Do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context*, ed. John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 97–129, Florence Dupont, *L'insignifiance tragique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), and Claude Calame, *La tragédie chorale. Poésie grecque et rituel musical* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2017).

28 Fragment 51 DK, author's translation.

29 Marcel Conche, *Héraclite: Fragments* (Paris: PUF, 1986), 403.

30 I follow the reading of Anne-Gabrièle Wersinger, *La sphère et l'intervalle: Le schème de l'harmonie dans la pensée des anciens Grecs d'Homère à Platon* (Grenoble: Millon, 2008), 130–1.

31 Ibid., 134.

32 Ibid., 107.

33 Castoriadis, *Ce qui fait la Grèce*, vol. 1, 56.

precisely, a matrix of representations—must allow us to see and conceive. In Kant’s definition, a schema—for instance, that of a triangle—is not a concept.³⁴ Nor does it correspond to a particular triangle. The schema of the triangle is the non-sensible image of the triangle we have in our minds when we think of a triangle, and whose expression corresponds to the rules for constructing a triangle. It is what allows us to construct the object of a concept in a given space-time. The schema is, therefore, a rule for producing images. In the words of Deleuze, interpreting Kant: the schema of the imagination is a particular “spatio-temporal dynamism.”³⁵ It is the *movement* that inscribes a concept in a given space-time—that is, in a certain form, the schema itself being formless.³⁶ Using Kant’s definition of schemata, I propose that discordant harmony is the schema that allows us to conceive of the intrinsic relationship between chaos and democracy, allowing it to be represented in both institutional and transient configurations.

Before considering the particular case of tragedy, I want to clarify how Castoriadis conceives the relationship between chaos and democracy, and then to ‘modulate’ it—I use this verb for its musical connotation—using the schema of discordant harmony to discuss the relationship between stasis and democracy. Using especially the cosmogony of Hesiod’s *Theogony*, which claims that the organized world (*kosmos*) came into being from a gaping void (*khaos*), Castoriadis asserts that “this is the first imaginary apprehension of the world as senseless, and this absence of any transcendent source of meaning or law or norm liberates the Greeks, enabling them to create institutions in which humans set their own norms.”³⁷ He justifies his strong claim as the middle ground between two logically untenable extremes: if the initial premise, the *arkhe* of the representation of the world, had presented it as intrinsically, absolutely, and wholly meaningful, neither philosophy nor politics could have been invented. The task of the *logos* would have been to reveal the world’s unambiguous meaning in a single system valid once and for all. If we start from the opposite premise, the conclusion is the same: if the Greeks had represented the world as pure *khaos*, they simply would not have been able to invent politics, or philosophy. Consequently, both elements must be put forward simultaneously:

1. There is no social law known or imposed in advance that could be valid once and for all. Rather, the law is to be established against the chaos and hubris of the human world.
2. At the same time, these features do not make it impossible to establish a law—just as what is, is not just nonsense, but sense against a background of nonsense, or permeated by nonsense. We are therefore faced with a task that is not infinite, but interminable.³⁸

It is remarkable that Castoriadis associated democracy with Hesiod’s primordial chaos, the cosmological figure of the senseless, given that the Greeks also conceived and imagined a political figure for it: *stasis*. I take up this idea here, starting from Nicole Loraux’s analysis, and demonstrate that this specific form of conflict, *stasis*—the division of citizens in case of civil war—was the perpetual “repressed” of democratic Athens.³⁹ More precisely, Loraux highlights the intrinsic link between democracy and violence present in its very name: democracy is based on *kratos*, on the power one part of the city exerts over another following its (inevitably violent) victory. Democracy

34 Immanuel Kant, “On the schematism of pure concepts of the understanding,” *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 271–7.

35 Gilles Deleuze, lesson, November 26, 1985, available at : <https://www.cla.purdue.edu/research/deleuze/Course%20Transcriptions.html>.

36 Deleuze gives the example of a claw-scratch as the schema of the lion.

37 Castoriadis, *Ce qui fait la Grèce*, vol. I, 170.

38 Ibid.

39 Nicole Loraux, *The Divided City: On Memory Forgetting in Ancient Athens* (New York: Zone, 2002).

presupposes division, but constantly attempts to mask this through institutional arrangements: for example, the oratory genre of the funeral oration, which, under the guise of eulogizing citizens who have died for the city, promotes a representation of the city as a beautiful, unified totality.⁴⁰

But Loraux also identifies an enigma in the double meaning of “stasis” in ancient Greek, one that offers another approach to the question of the “place” the city gives to such conflict, rather than just treating it as “repression.”⁴¹ *Stasis* is an action noun derived from the verb *histemi*, which means “to stand, to set, to stop.”⁴² It is a synonym of *kinesis*, and refers to movement, even agitation. But *stasis* is also a name for standing upright and immobile. To explain this contradictory double meaning, Loraux turns to Heraclitus’s fragment DK B 125: “even the *kukeon* breaks down if it is not stirred up . . . the mixture [must] be stirred up in order to avoid division.”⁴³ Loraux argues that “with *stasis*, the city as a whole is at stake,”⁴⁴ “the safety of the city implies movement,”⁴⁵ and that “concord is not static . . . as the conflict connects concord to itself.”⁴⁶

Continuing this interpretation, the schema of discordant harmony allows us to see that the paradoxical *arkhe* (in the double sense of foundation/principle and origin) of democracy consists in exhibiting, confronting, and playing out (or replaying), on multiple stages, the dialectical process of *stasis*: perpetual movement from stability to rupture and from rupture to stability, and the constitution of a dynamic immobility founded in division. Using the example of tragedy as a political-ritual institution, I want to demonstrate how the collective elaboration of (explicit or latent) conflict through the “crossing” of *stasis* lies at the foundation of democracy.

3. The Great Dionysia of Athens: A civic ritual to initiate the discordant harmony of the institution/the destitution of the democratic process

The schema of discordant harmony sheds new light on the institutional system of the Great Dionysia of Athens. We thereby extend Loraux’s insight that

tragedy is a genre in conflict . . . we have great difficulty thinking of a conflict as capable of producing . . . [a] strong, whole, and, as it were, indivisible [form]. Thus, in order to avoid conflict we generally choose one side over another In order to show that every purely political reading of tragedy is reductive, I am afraid that I may at times have given the impression that I am merely substituting what is generally called an antipolitical reading for a political one.⁴⁷

Placed under the patronage of Dionysus—the god of the coexistence of opposites, and so of discordant harmony—the Great Dionysia instituted, through an annual ritual, the event of endangering the inherited institution. To show this, I focus exclusively on the tragedy contest.

To begin, I highlight the complex interplay between the role of chance and individual responsibility in the whole process. Some citizens were placed in unusual situations, where they had to make important choices by themselves that affected the whole community. This extreme responsibility was counterbalanced, even jeopardized, by the careful introduction of an element of chance: the eponymous archon, an elected citizen magistrate whose name was given to the year, and who alone

40 Nicole Loraux, *The Invention of Athens: The Funeral Oration in the Classical City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

41 Loraux, *The Divided City*, 104.

42 Ibid., 105.

43 Ibid., 108–111. *Kykeon* was a drink composed of a mixture of ingredients, including wine and grated cheese or barley, water, and herbs.

44 Loraux, *The Divided City*, 108.

45 Ibid., 109.

46 Ibid., 109–111. Translator’s note: We have amended this final quotation from Loraux, *The Divided City* (2002).

47 Nicole Loraux, *The Mourning Voice: An Essay on Greek Tragedy* (London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 80–1.

was responsible for choosing the tragic poets for the competition. But it was by drawing lots that poets were associated with a choregos, a wealthy citizen who maintained the chorus during rehearsals and who paid the expenses for the final performance. Ten citizens were drawn by lot to judge the best poet, who received the prize. But each decided alone, without collective deliberation, and bore full responsibility for his vote. Victory was awarded by drawing five of the ten votes at random: once again, a subtle balance was created between chance and choice.

Through the ritualized use of chance and a relationship between individual and collective regulated by political institutions, these citizens were involved in a process of learning *phronesis*—the practical wisdom that constitutes the highest political virtue—but always risked sinking into *hubris*—the lack of moderation that lies, not in wanting to equal the gods, but in wrongly believing that one can show wisdom by reasoning alone, without acknowledging others' opinions. How can one show *phronesis* in a situation—that is, how can one think, deliberate, and judge in a democracy, sometimes alone, but always with the common good in mind, and always taking responsibility before the community for one's individual choices? These seem to have been the “questions” that the tragedy contest posed “in practice” to a few citizens, and, in theory, to all those assembled in the theater as spectators. Indeed, the common thread of many tragic plots was, so to speak, a *mise en abyme* of the institutional apparatus, or else the reverse. In Sophocles, especially, tragic narratives revolve around the ambivalence between *phronesis* and *hubris*, which are apparently contradictory but inseparably linked in reality—so much so that one can only be wise at the permanent risk of making a mistake and falling into *hubris*.

A second important connection that the schema of discordant harmony allows us to see is that between the polysemy of *stasis* and peace. This is particularly clear in the rituals that preceded performances of tragedies.⁴⁸ The strategoi began by pouring out libations to Dionysus. This was the only occasion when these citizens—the military leaders, and consequently the most important men in the city—performed a religious rite together. We can interpret this rite as a “static” manifestation of the city's power. The movement of *stasis* then began, with a parade of hundreds bearing the tributes paid by allied cities. This was a self-glorifying exhibition of the Athenians' power and audacity “internally.” The orator Isocrates remarks that it likely aroused the hatred of their allies, who were also present in the theater.⁴⁹ But the threat of division inherent in this show of force was neutralized by the parade of war orphans that followed directly after it. Adult sons of any citizen who had died for the city marched in formation. A herald proclaimed that they were no longer charges of the city, and offered them their first weapons. Having displayed their power, the Athenians then showed the human “price.” Through this parade, the city wept for its dead in joyful Dionysian mourning—the cycle of civic life combining the painful memory of the dead with the joyful vision of these young ephebes. As Loraux points out, this parade, which was associated with tragedy, enabled a double *katharsis*:⁵⁰ tears of mourning were transformed into tears of gratitude for the city, and these were followed by tears for the misfortunes of fictional heroes—definitively removing any threat of hatred and resentment on the part of those who had lost a loved one in fighting for the city.

Finally, we find a third manifestation of discordant harmony in the profound alteration of the souls of the members of the chorus in their temporary becoming-woman, becoming-barbarian, even becoming-slave, depending on the characters assigned to them by the tragic plot. The virulence of Plato's attack on the mimesis of the guardians in the *Republic* is an oblique critique of the participation of Athenian citizens in the chorus—something that, to my knowledge, has not been highlighted by any commentator.⁵¹ Plato reveals that it is not so much a matter of imitating

48 In “The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology,” Goldhill was the first to identify these and to describe their importance.

49 Isocrates, *On the Peace*, 82–4.

50 Loraux, *The Mourning Voice*, 18.

51 Plato, *Republic* III, 392c–401b.

something or someone from the outside, as of transforming oneself by becoming it. The choreographed citizens disguised themselves with masks and costumes and forced their voices into the high-pitched harmonies typical of tragedy in order to sing what were traditionally female laments, all the while maintaining the military discipline of the phalanx throughout their dance. In doing so, their souls were running the risk of inner *stasis*: they experienced contradictory affects—the “rational” part felt shame, the “irrational” part an uneasy pleasure derived from their tears—and so experienced the fragility of reason and argumentative discourse, which are so quick to collapse into inarticulate cries. Or, to reconsider the question through Rancière’s philosophy, it may be that these members of the chorus were invited—by the institutional mechanism of civic ritual itself, paradoxically—to create within their democratic citizenry a litigious relationship with itself.⁵²

Conclusion

Discordant harmony crystallizes the idea that democratic society can be “unified,” not in spite of, but rather through, the discord, diversity, heterogeneity, and profound singularity of each subject and group within it. We must see this unity as an endless process of harmonizing these differences, one that will never reach a state of static agreement. Its paradoxical stability is anchored in the clash of antagonistic forces. The *arkhe* of democracy resides in the dynamics of *stasis*: the “stability” of an interminable movement of deliberation, refutation, and criticism—with the constant risk that the conflict “framed” by agonistic institutions may degenerate into irreversible division. In view of contemporary social issues, it is urgent that we invent new, autonomous, civic rituals, institutionalized in such a way as to maintain them in the long term, which would initiate citizens into the complexity of the creation of meaning and its confrontation with chaos, as well as the complexity of common life—the harmony of which can only ever be discordant. Moving beyond ideological entanglements, artistic practices must reclaim the critical and emancipatory force proper to them: to probe and question the imaginary meanings central to our societies, and the fundamental forms of the institutions of language and the family. For the lesson of Athenian tragedy is that learning *phronesis* involves the conflictual harmonization of emotion, imagination, and critical reason. Tragic education is based on a risky wager: that of assuming that political subjectivities can be created by both psychic and corporeal experience of the intrinsic relationship between chaos and democracy—that is, by performing the discordant harmony of the soul’s contradictory faculties. Creating such artistic institutions for training and undertaking the subjectivation of citizens is, it seems to me, a necessary prerequisite for the proper functioning of the agonistic institutions of democratic deliberation and judgment.

52 We can draw an analogy between the relationship of members of the chorus and the women, barbarians, and slaves they played, on the one hand, and what Rancière says about his own relationship with the Algerians whom the French police threw in the Seine in 1961: “Around those bodies, which disappeared twice, a political bond was effectively created, made up not of identification with the victims or even with their cause but of a disidentification in relation to the “French” subject who massacred them and removed them from any count. The denial of humanity was thus constructable within the local, singular universality of a political dispute, as French citizenry’s litigious relationship with itself.” Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 139.