

Introduction

The Legacy of Miguel Abensour

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French political theorist Miguel Abensour (1939–2017) has yet to be fully discovered in the English-speaking world of political philosophy. Despite his influence in utopian studies and democratic theory, only a fraction of his work has been translated into English,¹ and the emerging secondary literature reflects this situation. Consequently, major gaps still mar the reception of his thought, including his approach to political philosophy and his critique of totalitarianism. The present reader seeks to fill these gaps and open new pathways inspired by him in contemporary political theory. This endeavor begs, of course, the question “Why?” Why does the Anglosphere require yet another “French Theorist”?² Is there truly a need for Abensour’s thought today? The answer to these questions rests upon his desire to provide a fresh approach to thinking politics and to his fidelity to elements of political thought that are too quickly evacuated from our politics, elements such as the impact of totalitarianism on politics today, the relationship between emancipation and utopia, and the presence of insurgent forms of democracy, which are among the core themes of the works translated here for the first time in English.

Two inseparable projects govern Abensour’s approach to political theory: on the one hand, a radical critique of all forms of domination and, on the other, a desire to conceptualize the political as the realm of freedom and emancipation. For Abensour, both projects are to be undertaken together to avoid the double trap of an evacuation of conflict from politics and the reduction of politics to a form of domination. In other words, a politics of

emancipation requires a “ruthless” critique of domination coupled with an analysis of politics as the domain within which human beings experience freedom and equality. While this approach does have eminent forbearers, notably Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Karl Marx, Hannah Arendt, Claude Lefort, and Cornelius Castoriadis, such a project is not widely shared. Indeed, Miguel Abensour’s political theory has always been somewhat *out of season*.

For example, early in his career, while some political theorists were justifying the “Dictatorship of the Proletariat” on behalf of the French Communist Party,³ Abensour was quietly working with other heterodox thinkers, like Pierre Clastres, Claude Lefort, and Marcel Gauchet, on the “untimely” notion of “voluntary servitude” in Étienne de La Boétie’s thought.⁴ The untimeliness of Abensour’s work is exemplary. Instead of following trends, Abensour sought to open other horizons in political theory. By doing so, he offers us a valuable lesson, namely, that political theory can and should free itself from the chains of fashionable thought. With the possible exceptions of Jacques Rancière and Étienne Balibar, who remain likewise steadfast in their commitment to emancipation, Miguel Abensour’s approach to political theory is distinctive within his generation of thinkers in France. As such, it deserves to be pursued, renewed, and expanded.

An Intimate Encounter with a Tragic Century

Miguel Abensour’s trajectory was unique, and it began with the catastrophic events of the twentieth century. Born into an Algerian Sephardic Jewish family in Paris in February 1939, Abensour discovered at a very early age the perils of total domination. After the occupation of Paris by National Socialist Germany in June 1940, his parents fled the capital and sought refuge in a small village in the Pyrenees Mountains in free zone France. There, the young Abensour rapidly learned that some people should not be spoken to while others could be trusted.⁵ When a contingent of SS officers visited the village looking for more Jews to detain, Abensour recalled having taken cover under a truck with his mother: the sounds of the SS’s perfectly polished boots still resonated in his ears some seventy years later. The trauma of this initial experience of totalitarian terror was, however, mitigated by the kindness and solidarity of the peasants of the village. Indeed, when circumstances became too dangerous, Abensour’s parents could count on the help of locals to hide the young Miguel for days and even weeks at a time. Abensour himself acknowledged that his unrelentingly critical stance towards

domination derives from this direct contact with the tragedy of his times. Yet Abensour's willingness to consider politics as the realm of emancipation must equally be seen as a consequence of his unique childhood.

Abensour's lived experience of another political tragedy contributed to his wariness of the "normal" politics of postwar France: the Algerian War (1954–1962). Abensour spent a part of the summer of 1957 in Oran, where he was able to witness firsthand the ethnic hatreds in the city and how Algerians suffered daily the humiliations inflicted upon them by French colonizers.⁶ In Paris, Abensour was revolted by the massacre of Algerian demonstrators by the national police under the orders of a former Nazi collaborator, Maurice Papon, on October 17, 1961. Beaten or thrown in the Seine River, more than two hundred people were killed by the French *forces de l'ordre* that day. Abensour described the period of the Algerian War as nothing less than "nightmarish" in France: the French socialists renounced the emancipatory project by participating in the "pacification" of Algeria, the French Communist Party approved the Soviet repression of the uprising in Budapest in 1956, the "counterrevolutionary" Constitution of the Fifth French Republic was adopted, and General de Gaulle returned to power in 1958.⁷

For Abensour, it is only with the period immediately following the end of the Algerian War that the nightmare began to dissipate, thanks to a "return of the repressed,"⁸ that is to say, a return of the question of a politics of emancipation. The events of May 1968 played a decisive role in this return. With May '68 the "fraternal disorder" that characterized revolutionary moments reemerged. Such a disorder rests upon the joy of acting in concert with others, the freeing up of public speech, and the return of public happiness through the extension of the realm of the possible. The most important consequence of this "fraternal disorder" was, for Abensour, the destruction of the monopoly on leftism held by the French Communist Party and the concomitant emergence of an anti-bureaucratic and radically democratic left. While the former represented the Jacobin-Leninist tradition, the latter embodied the communalist tradition of the Parisian *sans-culottes* and the Communards of 1871, but also of the workers councils of early twentieth century Europe. The central legacy of the "lovely month of May" is the reappearance of an emancipatory politics in the form of democratic action that goes beyond the limits assigned to it by electoral and parliamentary politics, as well as by the modern state.⁹

It is during this period that Abensour began his long career as a university professor (1962–2003) at the Université de Dijon, followed by

the Centre national de la recherche scientifique, where he completed his *thèse d'état* on utopia under the supervision of Charles Eisenmann and Gilles Deleuze. Received at the very top of the first French state qualifying exams in political science (*agrégation*), Abensour subsequently taught at the Université de Reims. In 1990, he became a full professor at the Université de Paris 7–Denis Diderot. Throughout this period, Abensour was an active member of experimental scholarly journals oriented towards emancipatory politics, such as *Textures*, *Libre*, *Passé-Présent*, *Tumultes*, and *Prismes*. In 1973, he also became the editor of a groundbreaking book series, “Critique de la politique,” at Éditions Payot, later Payot-Rivages, before moving it to the Éditions Klincksieck in 2016. His series notably published the members of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, as well as the work of a new generation of French political thinkers, such as Pierre Manent, Étienne Tassin, and Géraldine Mulhmann. A devoted teacher, Abensour created in the late 1970s a graduate program at the Université de Reims in political theory taught by the rising stars of political thought in France: Claude Lefort, Pierre Clastres, and Luc Ferry lectured or gave conferences at Reims in the context of Abensour’s program. At the instigation of Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida, Abensour became the president of the prestigious Collège international de philosophie (1985–1987), where he thrived as the architect of epochal conferences, such as the Martin Heidegger colloquium held at the Collège¹⁰ and by ensuring a curriculum that focused on philosophical matters beyond what “salaried philosophers”¹¹ taught in the august halls of French universities.

Alongside these intensive and time-consuming intellectual and scholarly engagements, Abensour maintained a sustained rhythm of publication, initially in the form of articles and, as of the mid-1990s, of books. The present reader proposes a selection of some of the most important of these publications, in providing a somewhat systematic introduction to the oeuvre of a thinker who refuses systematicity.¹² In this direction, the book follows the central themes that structure his work: (1) the return of political things, (2) the critique of totalitarianism, (3) critical-utopian political philosophy, and (4) utopia, democracy, and emancipation. By way of an introduction, we propose a contextualized analysis of the issues and problems of each section and offer an overview of Abensour’s perspective on politics. For the readers who wish to read Abensour directly, they may skip this introduction, or come back to it once they are done reading the original. For the readers seeking elements of context to better grasp Abensour’s perspective, we hope that the following pages will be illuminating.

Which Return? Challenging the Tradition of Political Philosophy

In France, Abensour is recognized as one of the instigators of the “return of political philosophy.”¹³ To stake out his contribution and to understand his challenge to the dominant “return” of the field, we need to turn to the specific context of this return. By the 1950s, in both the Anglophone and Francophone world, there was a seeming consensus¹⁴ that political philosophy was, if not dead, in its death throes or in need of euthanization.¹⁵ This was the result of a change in the methods of political research. With the rise of Weber’s fact-value distinction, logical positivism, and structuralist Marxism, political thinking was dominated by scientific methodologies that eschewed value-orientations.¹⁶ Political phenomena were thus subject to a “scientization” and “sociologization” that undermined the project of classical political philosophy, which sought to draw normative distinctions between political regimes in service of finding the good life.¹⁷ While the growth of scientific methodologies did not eliminate interest in political philosophies or theories, thinking about them was reduced to explanatory and, more specifically, causal modes of inquiry using allegedly neutral social science methods. On the one hand, studies focused on the structures and circumstances under which particular political ideas emerged, outside of value-judgements and within purportedly neutral modes of causal explanation that reduced such ideas to a moral relativism.¹⁸ On the other, where inquiries were not reduced to causal explanation, they were limited to either historical forms of literary criticism¹⁹ that were divorced from the present or philosophical inquiries into the logical use of concepts.²⁰ Ultimately, political philosophy was either destroyed in the name of science or reduced to an obscurantist historical endeavor. If it retained the previous modes of grand normative theorizing, it was seen as drawing on discredited modes of reasoning, making it not merely unscientific but anachronistic.²¹

Yet, within a few decades, political philosophy made a miraculous recovery as normative assessment burst back into political discourse. The frequently cited catalyst for this resuscitation in the Anglo-American world was the 1971 publication of John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*.²² Rawls broke with political thinking’s dogmatic slumber by turning to an account of distributive justice, provoking vigorous debates about normative questions and how societies ought to be ordered.²³ This was not limited to philosophy and elicited a return to normative inquiry in political science, economics, sociology, and other fields dominated by social scientific methodologies.

Less explored than its Anglo-American counterpart, the return of political philosophy in France was sparked by internal forces. While Claude Lefort's work and his 1983 call for a "restoration of political philosophy"²⁴ appear to have played a leading role, events over the preceding decades opened a pathway to political philosophy. Centrally, during the mid-1970s, French intellectuals "discovered" totalitarianism insofar as it became central to understanding politics. Democracy, understood as the polar opposite of totalitarianism and seemingly a stagnant catchphrase since the nineteenth century, was subject to normative inquiry. At the same time, French Marxism was experiencing a theoretical and practical crisis, undermining the political import of the structuralist Marxism that had played a leading role in the eclipse of political philosophy. In these contexts, political philosophy offered normative tools that could fill the void.²⁵

We cannot simply situate Abensour within this return of political philosophy. Indeed, in "What Kind of Return?," he differentiates two opposed returns: "return *to* political philosophy on the one hand, return *of* political things on the other."²⁶ The return to political philosophy revives a neglected or forgotten academic discipline, intent on rephilosophizing and legitimizing "normal politics." Consequently, Abensour deems it a "restoration," playing on a double signification: the restoration of an academic discipline "as if nothing had happened" in the interregnum; the restoration of the established order through a new intellectual legitimation. As an intellectual exercise, this return represents a diversion that distracts from political events in the present that challenge the status quo. The return of political things embraces such events: "It is no longer the interpreter who chooses to turn to a provisionally erased discourse to bring it back to life, but it is rather political things that are irrupting into the present, interrupting the forgetting that affected them, awaiting a response."²⁷ Thus, rather than the return to an insular academic discourse legitimizing the established order, the return of political things refers to the emergence of events in the here and now that draw into question that very order on the basis of the needs of humanity. Such an irruption opens the questions of the nature of politics itself.

Leading figures in the French return to political philosophy—what can be termed the historical liberal school associated with Pierre Manent and Marcel Gauchet—took a critical distance from the Rawlsian analytical paradigm, which centered on a philosophically abstracted account in which reason contemplates the meaning of justice by itself, divorced from politics and the realm of discussion.²⁸ Through this procedure, Rawls displaces politics "by remaindering—punishing, ostracizing, concealing—the moments

of dissonance and otherness that disrupt”²⁹ the order established by abstract reason. Challenging the abstraction contained in this form of “pure” or “ideal” theory, the historical liberal school developed a historically contextualized understanding of the liberal tradition, returning to its genesis in the work of Alexis de Tocqueville, Benjamin Constant, and François Guizot. Yet, this school undertook a similar restoration and displacement, attempting to normalize and stabilize the liberal democratic order. In Gauchet’s words: “Two centuries of historical change have not added a single basic principle, a single fundamental rule, to those we have known since the eighteenth century.”³⁰ By going back to a sacrosanct vision, it confines democracy to a bygone era and its bare institutional framework, occluding other forms of democracy that have challenged it in the intervening two centuries.³¹ Certainly, the French return to liberalism also emerged in relation to totalitarianism. But it did so only as a means of further legitimating liberal democracy as the sacrosanct contrary of totalitarianism. In these respects, it reiterated the general response to totalitarianism that was limited to, in Samuel Moyn’s words, “defining an aberrant regime for the sake of ratifying a liberal democratic norm and of stigmatizing the ‘totalitarian enemy.’”³² Consequently, the historical liberal school succumbs to an uncritical endorsement of liberal democracy, culminating in a triumphant proclamation that, despite needing to be managed and administered, liberal democracy is the inescapable horizon of all politics.³³

Political Things and the Critique of Totalitarianism

“We were expecting a tumultuous theory of freedom, but we ended up with a fainted-hearted theory of moderation, or even worse, normalization,” writes Abensour.³⁴ As he argues in “Modern Political Philosophy and Emancipation,” political philosophy and modernity express a mutual crisis. Addressing this crisis requires reasserting the *political* status of political philosophy against the normalization of the existing order. In turning his attention to political things that challenge normal politics, Abensour adopts a phenomenology of the political, attempting to understand the return of political things “unclouded by philosophy.”³⁵ As he argues in “Hannah Arendt against Political Philosophy?,” classical political philosophy, starting with Plato, presents an opposition between philosophy (the *vita contemplativa*) and politics (the *vita activa*). Rather than representing an objective mode of knowledge, philosophers adopted a corporate gaze that reflected a “disdain

for human affairs” and asserted the domination of those who know over those without knowledge. This inaugurates the sovereignty of philosophy and philosophical knowledge over politics, whereby the latter is subject to a new form of domination (the command-obedience relationship) in which philosophy dominates and commands the world of human affairs.

In the manifestoes to his “Critique de la politique” book series, Abensour asserts the need to rethink politics through the critique of domination that emerges from the return of political things, namely, emancipatory social movements challenging gods and masters. This begins with “a conversion of the gaze” such that one can “relearn to see”³⁶ against philosophy’s clouding of political vision. Rather than the gaze of the philosopher looking down on the realm of politics and dismissing the many, it requires writing “about politics from the side of the dominated, those who are from below and for whom the state of emergency is the rule.”³⁷ Elsewhere, Abensour refers to this as “the choice of the negligible”³⁸—those excluded and neglected—which entails resisting or refusing the totalizing tendencies of classical political philosophy. In service to its contempt for the dominated, classical political philosophy imposes a totalizing logic on the people via the sovereignty of philosophical truth over the polis. This philosopher’s gaze structures the narratives of identitarian totality contained in the end of history narratives, which demand a normalization of the existing order devoid of alterity or change. The choice of the negligible would allow the gaze to see otherwise,³⁹ opposing assimilation into the totality and allowing the dominated and politics to appear in their singularity.⁴⁰

Through this changed gaze, political things return and draw into question so-called normal politics. Abensour argues that the events spurring this return of political things for his generation were the Algerian War and the experience of totalitarianism. The Algerian War illustrated the oligarchic and authoritarian tendencies of France’s purportedly democratic regime,⁴¹ showing that liberal democracies were not merely founded in inequality and violence but depended upon their continued deployment.⁴² Indeed, far from being an open regime, France’s liberal democracy sought to suppress challenges and it showed its inability to come to terms with political things except through legitimation of the established order and authoritarian repression of dissent.⁴³ On the other hand, the inability to inquire into the internal dynamics of liberal democracy’s oligarchic and authoritarian tendencies was justified precisely by its attempts to situate itself as the peaceful alternative to totalitarianism. Hence, liberal democracy was treated as unquestionable.

At the same time, totalitarianism was not grasped as a fundamentally unique phenomenon and was instead reduced to another iteration of tyranny or authoritarianism. As Abensour argues in “On a Misinterpretation of Totalitarianism and Its Effects” and “On Compactness: Architecture and Totalitarian Regimes,” totalitarianism represents a unique form of domination that discloses the nature of politics, precisely through its attempt to suppress the possibility of political things. In elaborating on this in “On a Misinterpretation,” he challenges the “politicization” thesis, which sees totalitarianism as an excess of politics or a maximal politicization of life. Such a claim is predicated on the division between private and public and sees totalitarianism as invading or saturating the private sphere, making it public or political. This leads to the conclusion that we need to rid ourselves of “politics,” which can be nothing other than domination. Against this, Abensour argues that the politicization thesis confuses politics with totalitarianism’s transformation of everything into an ideology driven by a single-party imposing itself on the social order. He cites Rousseau to the effect that “everything depends radically on politics.” Far from signifying that “everything is politics,” this suggests a connection between different instances in the sense that society is instituted and thus shaped through its interrelation with the political and vice versa.⁴⁴

In developing his understanding of the political, Abensour draws on Claude Lefort’s concept of “the political institution of the social”: the idea that all societies are instituted and “politics,” far from being derivative or causally produced by something external to it, has a heterogenous and indissoluble character. Lefort distinguishes the political, as a realm of conflict and social division (the originary division of the social), from politics, as society’s means of holding itself together and representing its unity or wholeness.⁴⁵ As Abensour elaborates: “the social and the political form an indissoluble couple, inasmuch as the political, as the ‘leading framework’ of a mode of human coexistence, is a response, a position-taking in relation to the originary division of the social, a division that is of the very being of the social.”⁴⁶ Ultimately, the social is not a homogenous, stable, or determining entity and politics is not something that stabilizes a preexisting social.⁴⁷ Rather, the social is instituted and, in being so, is not subject to an external logic but is constantly in the process of being shaped and giving meaning to collective life, which emerges out of division and plurality. As James D. Ingram explains Lefort’s formulation: “politics in the broad sense involves not only the shaping (*mise-en-forme*) of collective life, the

self-production and reproduction of society, but also the staging (*mise-en-scène*), the self-representation and interpretation of those relations. Only the two together, collective relations and actors' understandings of them, give (objective) form and (subjective) meaning (*mise-en-sens*) to society.⁴⁸ Building on this, Abensour understands a political regime as a way of life, which distinguishes different regimes “by the mode of generation and the representation of power” they enact, which connects the form of government to “the ways of living in a society,”⁴⁹ including the institution of social bonds. Pace the politicization thesis, Abensour refuses to confuse the criticism of a *particular* institution of the social—and one predicated upon a novel form of domination—with political institution in general.

In explaining the political institution of the social, Lefort argued that democracy institutes itself while acknowledging the gap between society and its self-representation in the political. On the other hand, totalitarianism refuses this gap, representing society as self-same and attempting to eradicate alterity through terror and violence.⁵⁰ As Abensour argues in “On Compactness,” this raises the question of the social bond and what image of society totalitarianism mobilizes. Politics exists where “paradoxical bonds of division can be formed” via a relationship of “friendship-freedom” constituted by “all ones” or a plurality and being-together within difference that acknowledges the singularity of individuals.⁵¹ But totalitarianism’s image of society and its correlative social bond is based on an identitarian totality or a fused homogeneity that eradicates plurality and individual singularity. Consequently, totalitarianism aims to suppress both the space between subjects and the public space where they can appear. Hence, it aims at “compactness” or compression of space and subjects. Compactness involves the “elimination of all in-between space and therefore also all political space for creating the new,” ultimately opposing “the *porous* or *porosity* that, thanks to an incomplete fabric, would open up spaces of liberty, or rather spaces celebrating the marriage of liberty and play.”⁵² Totalitarianism enacts the movement of a compact and fused mass “that presses together individuals” to establish the movement of “all One” as a “unitarian totality.”⁵³ This requires both the erasure of the space between individuals to produce an internal homogeneity and the production of a “*residual* space” that ejects or rejects “the ‘parasites,’ the ‘waste’ that it is best to eliminate because they may damage the integrity of the body.”⁵⁴ Uniting the compact mass as an all One allows for their mobilization via the heteronomous power of the party-leader that seeks to create the compact mass and mobilize it through “scenes of substitution,” which act as a simulacrum that replaces autonomous

action. Given all of this, Abensour draws the conclusion that totalitarianism is a nonregime, because it blocks “the constitution of all political bonds as well as the constitution of a space between humans within which their double quality of being-for-freedom and being-for-beginning can appear.”⁵⁵

Towards a Critical-Utopian Political Philosophy

After the experience of totalitarianism, Abensour posits not merely the rediscovery of the political as an ineradicable domain of human life but, in its aftermath, the need to “reconstruct the political sphere that remains the condition of possibility of a new experience of freedom.”⁵⁶ This does not equate with a normalization of liberal democracy. Rather, Abensour sees the emergence of post-totalitarian liberal democracy as colonized by the vestiges of the totalitarian experience in the continued apoliticism or extinction of politics that emerges with neoliberalism, which displaces politics by reducing it to a form of corporate governance or technocratic management of the economy.⁵⁷ This ignores or suppresses the return of political things, which irrupt in the here and now precisely “in the moment that totalitarian domination breaks apart” expressing “the need for politics”⁵⁸ against such apoliticism or anti-politics. Reconstructing the political requires recreating the conditions of possibility of political action and political space, including new social bonds capable of mobilizing democratic subjects and expanding the spaces within which they might appear.⁵⁹

In “Hannah Arendt against Political Philosophy?,” Abensour explores what this new mode of politics entails by sketching out an exit from the constrictions of classical political philosophy. Classical political philosophy enacts a series of transformations that destroy political action. This begins with the reduction of the *polis* to the *oikos*, which transforms “politics” into a means to the reproduction of life. Such a reduction carries within itself the transformation of action (understood both as “to begin” and “to act”) into the command-obedience relationship, modeled on the relations of domination found in the household. The resulting politics institutes an inegalitarian order reducible to a means-end framework in which some command and others execute. Finally, classical political philosophy places an emphasis on the unity of the *polis*, undermining the ontological condition of plurality. Rediscovering politics—recreating the space of politics—requires recuperating the political possibilities that have been effaced by these transformations. Hence, it starts with the notion of philosophical wonderment

and the possibility of action, as a new beginning and, more specifically, as a heroic birth of acting-in-concert.

Building on this pathway, “For a Critical Political Philosophy?” presents a systematic account of Abensour’s critical-utopian political philosophy.⁶⁰ Critical-utopian political philosophy focuses on two areas of inquiry—the nature of servitude-domination and the possibility of emancipation—in the service of answering “the political question *par excellence*” posed by Spinoza and La Boétie: “Why do people fight for their servitude as if it is for their salvation?”⁶¹ Indeed, natality and politics do not emerge out of nothing; they confront the situation of the existing world and its forms of domination and attempt to institute new social bonds in the service of emancipation. But, in considering a domination-emancipation coupling, Abensour confronts an intellectual impasse between critical theory, with its focus on domination, and a political paradigm, with its focus on emancipation. The problem lies in reducing politics to a binary opposition whereby politics becomes a domain of domination *or* emancipation,⁶² without accounting for the interconnection between the two. To overcome this, Abensour undertakes a process of salvaging each perspective by drawing them into a critical constellation to transcend their unilateralisms.⁶³

The critical theory of the first generation of the Frankfurt School undertook the project of unmasking domination in all its forms. This begins with the claim that the distinction between domination and exploitation cannot be collapsed nor can the political simply be derived from the economic, such that the transformation of the economy would eradicate domination. Even after economic revolutions, domination can remain untouched. The connected claim is the need to understand that human societies have been constituted by the political division between dominant and dominated groups or between those who command and those who must obey. While this takes on economic forms, it is not reducible to them, and domination constitutes a more expansive understanding of these relations. Domination has three overlapping levels. First, the domination of nature, including the reduction of nature to an instrumental object to be used and dominated for human purposes. Second, the domination of humans by humans, including—but not limited to—the control of human labor in the process of dominating nature. Third, the domination of internal nature, such that human subjects become acclimated to the system of domination through the internalization of existing social structures. This last form is central, as critical theorists see domination as being interiorized via “the complex interplay taking place between culture, stable institutions, and the psychic or interior apparatus.”⁶⁴ But here we find critical theory’s unilateralism: in breaking with Hegel’s and

Marx's developmental unfolding, it sees "permanent domination, its regular repetition in history," abridging the possibility of emancipation and veering towards catastrophism. On the one hand, this catastrophism emerges in critical theory's tendency to eschew the question of emancipation in favor of the critique of domination.⁶⁵ On the other, it appears in the association of politics with domination, which internalizes the politicization thesis and the idea that "emancipation consisted not in the establishment of a free political community but in the liberation from politics."⁶⁶

Against this, the political paradigm returns us to Lefort's account of the political institution of the social and the idea that all societies are instituted. The heterogeneity of the political indicates not its insularity but its irreducibility to, and lack of causal determinacy by, other spheres of life or by the march of a heteronomous metaphysics. As a result, the political paradigm refuses to associate politics with domination. Arendt is symptomatic. In her analysis of the Greek *polis*, she situates domination not on the side of politics but in the private sphere of the *oikos*, which is subject to multiple forms of domination-servitude (master-slave, husband-wife, father-children). By contrast, politics is associated with freedom from the realm of domination and found outside, in the realm of equals (*isonomia*) in the *agora*. Hence, Abensour argues, the political paradigm asserts a difference or antithesis between domination and politics: "where there is politics, that is to say the experience of freedom, domination tends to disappear; inversely, where domination reigns, the political is effaced from human experience and becomes the object of a project of destruction."⁶⁷ Freedom becomes possible again through the political, after totalitarianism's attempt to destroy the conditions of politics as freedom. But the political paradigm succumbs to its own unilateralism insofar as it "forgets" or "occludes" the fact of domination—it presents politics-freedom outside of domination, as though it occurs without tensions. Indeed, while recognizing totalitarian domination, after its disappearance the political paradigm risks viewing political space in idealized terms, without domination and conflict, as though regression were not possible. By ignoring the fragility of politics and emancipation, the political paradigm threatens to fall into an irenicism: in seeing politics as operating within a smoothed out, peaceful space, the political paradigm regresses into a linear intersubjectivity that effaces plurality through regression into consensus, ignoring domination and the unruly nature of political things in their challenge to the status quo.

Refusing the binary between these two positions, Abensour's critical-utopian political philosophy instead chooses "the option of articulation" asserting a permanent dialectic between domination and emancipation, with

domination eliciting the irruption of political things that attempt to break its hold. This begins with the distinction between politics and totalitarianism, such that politics and emancipation are not separated, or politics and domination are not reduced to the same thing. Rather, politics involves the possibility of freedom as the institution of new social bonds predicated upon plurality and the opening of political space. But, in order to avoid the simplistic binary of totalitarianism-democracy or totalitarianism-freedom, Abensour acknowledges that political forms are subject to degeneration: that friendship-freedom is always threatened by the fragility of the political. Hence, against the political paradigm's presentation of the political after totalitarianism, democratic regimes can regress into new forms of domination that are not totalitarian. At the same time, against critical theory, we must acknowledge that far from being an iron cage, the political can be reinstated against domination, opening new possibilities of emancipation. Ultimately, then, domination is not a single thread running throughout history: "Domination is rather thought as a complex dimension, historically specific, historically recurrent in the life of human beings, but which can be transformed, which ought to be transformed by them."⁶⁸ Abensour sees the domination-emancipation couplet as a permanent dialectic at the center of political existence, with new instantiations of domination reopening in projects of emancipation that challenge domination.

A Politics of Emancipation: Democracy and Utopia

For Abensour, the two lynchpins of emancipation are democracy and utopia, which represent modes of reinstating and reopening the political in the face of domination's repetition and its attempt to close political space. With the 2011 translation of *Democracy against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment* and E. P. Thompson's influential overview of Abensour's concept of the "education of desire" in the postscript to the 1976 edition of Thompson's *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*,⁶⁹ democracy and utopia are the most familiar elements of Abensour's work to anglophone audiences. But, given the lack of English-language translations of most of his work, a full reception of his contributions to thinking democracy and utopia has been stunted, producing gaps in the secondary literature.

While much of contemporary democratic theory has focused on the institutional procedures of democracy, Abensour contributes to the radical democratic turn⁷⁰ by theorizing democracy as a mode of action that con-

stantly challenges hierarchically imposed modes of order via permanent contestation.⁷¹ In elaborating his theory of insurgent democracy in *Democracy against the State*, Abensour posits a fundamental antagonism between the demos, as the originary and indeterminate political subject, and the State, as an institution controlled by the Few who wield power over the demos. Ultimately, the State is a reified, hierarchical, heteronomous institution and relation (an all One)⁷² that portrays itself as the universal representation of the people while holding them in subjection and fostering passivity. Against this oligarchic order, Abensour understands democracy as an insurgent action that blocks or ruptures attempts to efface the demos's indeterminacy. In the process of blocking, democracy opens an antagonism between the all One and all ones, seeking to institute an intersubjective space via "the passage from power *over* human beings to power *with* and *between* human beings, the *between* being the place where the possibility of a common world is won."⁷³ This distinguishes the sovereign power contained in the State as a relation of command-obedience from "the bond of division" as a horizontal relation of being-together. But, remaining attentive to the "Machiavellian moment," insurgent democracy acknowledges a permanent antagonism at the heart of political life, embracing the temporality of any political experience and the dialectic of emancipation, which battles both the old regime and the new state *in statu nascendi*.⁷⁴

"E. P. Thompson's *Passion*" presents a case study of insurgent democracy and its form of plebeian politics. Indeed, Abensour reads Thompson not simply as a historian but a "political writer," whose account of "culture, ethics, and modes of sociability and solidarity could not be dissociated from the *political resistance* the working class put up against other classes." This political inflection on class—class as constituted by and in the moment of struggle—sought to combat deterministic elements that stripped the working class of agency. More specific to insurgent democracy, Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* shows how these forms of struggle emerge "*outside power*" in attempting to institute new modes of life and human collective action. This begins with the production of a plebeian public sphere, which constitutes not the entrance of the "uneducated people" into the public sphere, as Jürgen Habermas argues, but the attempt to produce another type of public sphere rooted in a different culture. This egalitarian and inclusive plebeian public sphere emerges in spaces of working-class existence, challenging the dominant discourse and its constitutional embodiments that seek to exclude the working class. At the same time as they challenge their exclusions, the working class formed new modes of solidarity and mutuality, beginning with

the announcement of the London Corresponding Society “That the number of our Members be unlimited.”⁷⁵ Challenging the appropriation of power by the propertied classes, English plebeianism sought not merely to end the exclusivity of the public sphere, but to multiply multiplicity—to open “the search for diversity” in refusing “any homogenizing unification.” But this also involves expanding the plebeian public sphere or challenging the “strict separation of the political and the social” in seeing “the places of production as one of the places for expressing the political.”

Thompson’s introduction of Abensour’s work on utopia to anglophone audiences, and the subsequent adoption of Thompson’s reading by Raymond Williams⁷⁶ and other leading figures in the field of utopian studies, led the education of desire to become a foundational idea,⁷⁷ helping to inaugurate the idea of “critical utopias.”⁷⁸ While critics portrayed utopia as tantamount to totalitarianism in closing off the space of the political,⁷⁹ they largely focused on “blueprint models” and the attempts to construct a “perfect” and harmonious world. Against this, Abensour discerns the emergence of a “new utopian spirit” after 1848, which internalized plurality and temporality and adopted a “heuristic” mode of thinking.⁸⁰ As a result, the function of utopian texts shifted from portraying ideal worlds to aiming at the “education of desire”:

The point is not for utopia . . . to assign “true” or “just” goals to desire but rather to educate desire, to stimulate it, to awaken it—not to assign it a goal but to open a path for it. . . . Desire must be taught to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire otherwise; it must learn to shatter the dead weight, to alleviate the weakness of appetite, to liberate the firebirds of desire, to give free reign to the impulse of adventure.⁸¹

Ultimately, utopian texts aimed to open something beyond the given by inspiring the desire for a better world, as well as inspiring the subjectivities that could create it. Moreover, against the monological imposition embodied in blueprint models, the new utopian spirit maintained a dialogical core that sought to provoke a conversation about freedom and justice via nonhierarchical social bonds attuned to plurality and difference.

Because Abensour’s work on Morris remained untranslated until 1999, the understanding of the “education of desire” in the Anglo-American context remained wedded to Thompson’s account. But, as Christine Nadir argues, Thompson’s reading led to a serious misinterpretation reproduced

by subsequent scholars: they viewed desire merely as the driving force of utopian aspirations, ignoring Abensour's central political contention that attempts at emancipation produce new forms of domination, with emancipation and domination forming a persistently oscillating pair. Not only did Abensour reject seeing desire as a panacea for utopia,⁸² he argued that the desire for emancipation could produce the desire for domination.⁸³ Abensour develops this point in "The New Utopian Spirit." The new utopian spirit internalized the dialectic of emancipation in an attempt "to identify the blind spots of emancipation, or the centers or nodes in which this reversal takes place and the repetition begins."⁸⁴ Abensour situates this blindspot in "the fear of the outside" or "the fear of otherness," which drives utopian thought towards closure. While avoiding this regression requires that we "act *as if* the catastrophe was a permanent threat," it also requires refusing the ontologization of this judgment, which would establish the permanence of catastrophe. Ultimately, against closure, utopian thinking must retain an *écart absolu* (absolute gap) embracing the idea that something else is possible—including utopia's utopia, or its transformation via the permanence of utopian striving.

We can link this to "The Utopian Conversion," which explores how desire is educated as part of the process of what Tom Moylan refers to as "becoming utopian"⁸⁵—the production of a utopian subjectivity. The basic idea contained in the education of desire was that one needed to be taught to desire otherwise and to desire utopia. This conversion to utopia (or towards a utopian disposition) is necessitated by the established order, which appears as a "crushing force" that renders resistance "unthinkable, if not by acts immediately accused of 'madness' or 'crime.'"⁸⁶ While Abensour's work on Morris focused on how literary texts enact such a change, "The Utopian Conversion" expands this⁸⁷ in seeing two other means of being detached—via doubt and separation—from this oppressive established order. The first means, which Abensour draws from Levinas, is the phenomenological epoché that, in bracketing or interrupting the established order, gives "life to silenced voices, suppressed by the world's knowledge."⁸⁸ This involves both reopening lost horizons and turning to the intersubjective realm of proximity or the other against the sovereignty and primacy of the I. The second means, which Abensour draws from Benjamin, is the dialectical image. While this begins with the analysis of collective dreams of classless society, it requires a critical gaze to avoid falling into myth. Hence, Benjamin's dialectical image involves a moment of psychoanalytic deconstruction and interpretation, as well as the awakening that can herald a revolution via the interpenetration

of Old and New. Drawing this back to embracing alterity as a means to avoiding the dialectic of emancipation, the alterity of the other and the nonidentity and recurrence of the image of the classless society act to disrupt or challenge utopia's regression into the sovereignty and identity-thinking that would capsize into new forms of domination.

Beyond the formal separation of utopia and democracy, and against accepted *doxa*, Abensour undertakes another articulation, between democracy and utopia, asserting their interconnection in theorizing emancipation as a democratic-utopian project.⁸⁹ Their seeming contradiction lies in the fact that democracy is a “form of political institution,” while utopia appears to be “apolitical, even anti-political, insofar as it is a search for a harmonious, reconciled society, to the point of getting rid of the political.”⁹⁰ Abensour sees democracy and utopia as having overlapping emancipatory projects, namely, the attempt at establishing a condition of nondomination. But each does so through a path that can help to correct the other, allowing for a process of “democratizing utopia” and “utopianizing democracy.”⁹¹

In “The New Utopian Spirit,” Abensour argues that utopia must distance itself from “the image or myth of a reconciled society, of a social world in full harmony with itself.” The new utopian spirit emerged after 1848 through an internalization of democratic plurality, challenging the substitutionism and authoritarianism of previous utopias. By internalizing democratic plurality, the new utopian spirit turned to a dialogical mode of utopianizing, which preserved the indeterminacy and intersubjectivity at the heart of the democratic project. At the same time, democracy must be utopianized to avoid regressing into normal politics, a tendency that emerges with the binary pairing totalitarianism–democracy in which any form of the latter is justified by virtue of not being the former. Abensour raises this concern in “Letter from a ‘Revoltist’ to Marcel Gauchet, Convert to ‘Normal Politics.’” He argues that Gauchet endorses a singular revolution, the founding of democracy as an institution from below. But Gauchet then severs the connection between democracy and revolution or revolt. Ultimately, democracy is the outcome of a revolution but then becomes normal politics, allying itself with reaction and counterrevolution and, in rejecting any further revolutions, closing the utopian gap in presenting society as reconciled with itself. Against this, Abensour asserts the need to inflect democracy with a utopian element, preserving alterity and continual innovation—the preservation of the absolute gap—so that democracy never coincides with itself, challenging its own foundations in being remade to establish new modes of democratic-utopian life that, against pacification or instituted forms, expand the realm of nondomination.

Ultimately, the democratic-utopian is a permanent insurgence that demands continual transformation towards nondomination.

Abensour's emphasis on this permanent insurgence has been the most frequently criticized element of his work. On the one hand, insurgent democracy has been subject to a criticism that is directed at radical democracy as a whole: it is episodic or "revoltist," tied to negativity without (or without theorizing) a positive moment and thus incapable of concerning itself with the creation of an institutional infrastructure. In other words, it produces a dualistic binary between insurgence and institution, privileging forms of disruption.⁹² On the other hand, critics have argued that Abensour's work on utopia, and critical utopias in general, place an emphasis on unmasking or exposing the ideological contours of existing societies without positing an alternative model or new modes of living, emphasizing merely the new values that would be abided by, such as plurality and openness. This reduces the utopian project to a disruptive ideology critique that refuses a positive content or even to distinguish between "good" and "bad" utopias.⁹³

These lines of criticism fail to grasp the methodological articulations—between critical theory and the political paradigm, and between democracy and utopia—that inform Abensour's thought. Hence, the claim that his work only theorizes disruptive negativity ignores that, against critical theory, the political paradigm demands that we think the possibilities of emancipation beyond the critique of domination. Insurgent democracy embodies this in demanding forms of political objectification and the production of new modes of life and horizontal social bonds, which is specifically connected to the influence the tradition of council democracy and its institutional forms have exerted on Abensour's work.⁹⁴ Moreover, the utopian moment of Abensour's thought supplies a positive content beyond the negation enacted by the demos. As Abensour states: "Utopia reconstructs the social destroyed by capitalism and the state, multiplying small communities 'behind the state's back' and against the state in order to remake the social fabric, to reconstitute it, to remake the social bond."⁹⁵ Even beyond notions of "small groups" or "laboratories of utopia," "The Utopian Conversion" asserts that revolution, and the everyday practices that contribute to it, are weapons of utopia, as seen in the French Revolution, which exhibited a utopian epoché that suspended the symbolic markers of the Ancien Régime, allowing for the flowering of "fraternal disorder"—"the open experimentation of a new being-in-the-world and a new being-together."⁹⁶

Turning specifically to the problem of institution, we need to keep in mind that Abensour's work is informed by another articulation, this

time between insurgency and institution. Critics have called into question Abensour's emancipatory project because of its insurgency. Yet, radical politics confronts the opposite problem: it can become "formal" (or "normal") rather than "extraordinary,"⁹⁷ which tends towards political alienation in depriving the demos of agency. Insurgency arises precisely because of the lack of democracy—it emerges against institutions of domination, as well as against normal politics. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Abensour sees institution as giving experience "a sustainable dimension" that produces "a creative, innovative (in the Bergsonian sense) duration."⁹⁸ Thus, institution constitutes not so much a resistance to change as a "launch pad" towards action, including resurrecting the originally insurgent quality of democratic institutions.⁹⁹ The "Letter from a 'Revoltist'" further elaborates this dynamic. Abensour challenges the accommodation to normal politics for accepting "institutions with openly authoritarian tendencies" as democracy becomes a framework and a state-form. This represents a de-utopianizing of democracy, which allows for authoritarian regressions. Ultimately, insurgency is necessary to expand democratic space against the order of domination, both old and new—and precisely because of the threat of new forms of domination, such insurgency must persist. In these respects, Abensour emphasizes insurgency as both a utopianizing of democracy, which never lets democracy stagnate into a framework, and democratizing of democracy, which seeks to constantly expand the horizontal relations of being-together in new spheres.

Far from lacking a "positive" framework or rejecting institutions, Abensour sees the democratic-utopian as a persistent project, never identical with itself and thus reemerging in time and space precisely because—against closure or the dialectic of emancipation—emancipation is partial, alternating between fulfillment and defeat. Every overcoming must therefore be subject to critical interrogation to ascertain the need for subsequent emancipatory forms against authoritarian regression and the passivity of normal politics. This preliminary quality is modeled on Theodor Adorno's negative dialectics: negation without regressing into an identity thinking that would occlude difference. Ultimately, Abensour acknowledges all action as contextual and situated in time, subject to an interrogation of its own conditions of possibility—with each instantiation being the condition of possibility for new instantiations. As Morris writes in *A Dream of John Ball*: "Men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name."¹⁰⁰