TIME’S UP FOR HABERMAS AND LACLAU?
DEMOCRACY, POLITICS, AND POLITICAL TIME

by

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents .................................................................................................................. 2
Abstract / Résumé .................................................................................................................. 3
Acknowledgments .................................................................................................................. 4
Dedication ............................................................................................................................... 4
1. Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 5
2. Time, Space, and Politics ................................................................................................. 6
   2.1 Space .......................................................................................................................... 6
   2.2 Time ........................................................................................................................... 7
   2.3 Politics of Time ......................................................................................................... 8
3. Adam’s Theory of Time ................................................................................................. 12
   3.1 Overview: Temporality ............................................................................................ 13
   3.2 Overview: Time Frame ............................................................................................ 15
   3.3 Overview: Tempo ..................................................................................................... 18
4. Time and Laclau’s Agonistic Democracy ....................................................................... 21
   4.1 Laclau’s Agonistic Democracy ................................................................................. 21
   4.2 Temporality .............................................................................................................. 24
   4.3 Time Frame .............................................................................................................. 27
   4.4 Tempo ....................................................................................................................... 30
5. Time and Habermas’ Deliberative Democracy ............................................................... 33
   5.1 Habermas’ Deliberative Democracy ....................................................................... 33
   5.2 Temporality .............................................................................................................. 36
   5.3 Time Frame .............................................................................................................. 38
   5.4 Tempo ....................................................................................................................... 41
6. Time and Democracy ....................................................................................................... 43
   6.1 Power as Temporality .............................................................................................. 43
   6.2 Democracy as Time Frame ..................................................................................... 45
   6.3 Power and Political Time ......................................................................................... 49
7. Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 54
Works Cited ........................................................................................................................... 56
Abstract / Résumé

This thesis explores the relationship between time (temporality) and politics. Featuring analyses of Barbara Adam’s multidimensional theory of time, Ernesto Laclau’s agonistic account of radical democracy, and Jürgen Habermas’ theory of deliberative democracy, this thesis presents two main arguments. The first, which borrows from scholarship outside of democratic theory, is that political time(s) is political because it is constructed, plural, and determines the exercise or reproduction of power. This argument is illustrated with a second, namely, that changing the tempo of either Habermas’ or Laclau’s political time frame would render the latter incompatible with how each theorist understands democratic politics. This reveals the political value of political time frame and, hence, time. Combined, both arguments suggest that conceptualizations of democratic time should be of utmost concern to political and democratic theorists alike.

Cette thèse explore la relation entre la temporalité et la politique. Basée sur la théorie multidimensionnelle de la temporalité de Barbara Adam, la théorie d’Ernesto Laclau à propos de la démocratie agoniste radicale ainsi que la théorie de Jürgen Habermas sur la démocratie délibérative, cette thèse présente deux arguments principaux. Le premier, inspiré des savoirs s’éloignant de la théorie démocratique, à savoir que la temporalité politique est un aspect politique puisqu’il peut être construit, au sens plural et déterminant dans l’exercice ou la reproduction du pouvoir politique. Cette relation s’illustre également avec un deuxième argument, qu’en changeant le tempo du délai politique comme l’indique la théorie de Habermas ou de Laclau rendant ainsi incompatible la façon dont chaque théoricien comprend la politique démocratique. Cela révèle la valeur politique du délai politique et, par conséquent, sa temporalité. Combinés, ces deux arguments suggèrent que les conceptualisations de la temporalité démocratique devraient être la plus haute préoccupation pour les chercheurs politiques et démocratiques.
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To my family and friends—thank you for sticking with me (as always) through thick and thin.

Dedication

To Mum.
1. Introduction

“Democracy cannot be just if it is not just in time.”¹

Over the following pages I will attempt to justify the claim that political time is political. Though critical theorists are perhaps comfortable with this claim, few democratic theorists have applied a temporal lens to theories of democracy. I’d like to bridge these two traditions so to show why democratic theorists should be interested in the political value of political time.

This project is divided into roughly four parts. I argue in chapter two that time, like space, is political, that it has political implications, and that it is therefore worth examining. In chapter three I outline what Barbara Adam presents as three components of time, temporality, time frame, and tempo. In chapters four and five I make use of these in mapping the time of Ernesto Laclau’s theory of hegemonic democracy and Jürgen Habermas’ theory of deliberative democracy. I show in chapter six that, not only are these two times political times (because in both cases what is “changing” is the basis for political power), but that they also have political implications (because in both cases time frame specifies how power is exercised or reproduced). This serves to confirm my argument that political time is in fact political.

¹ Thompson (2005, 259)
2. Time, Space, and Politics

I’d like to begin by exploring what a politics of time entails, and why it is relevant. But since both space and time are political, and since some may find the former more intuitive, I suggest that we start with the political value of space.

2.1 Space

Descartes, Newton, Marx, Einstein, Foucault—these are just some of the thinkers who have contributed to what is a long history of intellectual work on space. I do not have the space here to outline this (but others have; see Jammer 1969; Soja 1990). I also cannot here retell the story, dating from the late 1970s, which human geographers have been telling about space—one that now serves as the basis for a transdisciplinary literature on space. For our purposes it will suffice to outline two key themes emerging from this literature.

The first is that space(s) is socially-constructed. Prior to the “spatial turn” (e.g. Soja 1999) of the late twentieth-century, space was often treated as an empty container for objects, people, places, and processes (Lefebvre and Enders 1976; Lefebvre 1991, 93-4, 238; Aminzade 2001, 54; Martin and Miller 2003, 144-5). Since the late 1970s, however, scholars have repeatedly argued that space is produced materially and discursively through the interaction of (spatially-situated) people (Massey 1992, 71, 283; Allen 1999, 199; Martin and Miller 2003; Dikeç 2005, 181; Howarth 2006, 116; Butler 2009, 319; for critics see, e.g., Dikeç 2005, 172; Howarth 2006, 108). Space, according to this view, can be configured in ways that enable or constrain action.¹

The corollary of this, however, is that the social is spatially-constructed (Lefebvre 1991; Massey 1992, 70; Aminzade 2001; Martin and Miller 2003, 147). If space refers to socially-constructed structures, and if these determine at least to some degree social relations, it follows that space configures social relations. This presumably underpins the claim, for instance, that capitalism (and the plurality of ways in which it shapes human interaction) presupposes particular

¹ For instance, as Giddens (1976), quoted in Aminzade (2001, 54-5) puts it, “structures must not be conceptualized as simply placing constraints on human agency, but as enabling.”
conceptions of space (such as space as neutral and objective) and spatial orderings. Space is thus structure that, as Giddens (1984) puts it, is “simultaneously the medium and the outcome of social action” (as quoted in Aminzade 2001, 54-5; his emphasis). And so, if critical theory is to take space seriously, it must approach it from the perspective of “the subject and its practices” (Howarth 2006, 116). This is why at least one scholar has theorized a notion of “spatial injustice” and why a particularly well-known one has insisted that it is “beyond dispute” that “relations of inclusion and exclusion” are (re)produced in “spatial practice” (Lefebvre 1991, 294).

I will return to discuss political implications later on. For now we can see that space is something different or at least more extensive than what most of us assume it to be. In short, space is the “product of interrelations” (Massey 1999, 8) that in turn shapes those very interrelations. I will now make a similar claim about time: that it is produced by and produces social relations.

2.2 Time

I will not attempt an exhaustive overview of scholarship on time, especially when others have done so. I instead suggest that we begin, not by engaging in metaphysical discussions of time (e.g. Hawking 1996; Sider 2003; Sider, Hawthorne, and Zimmerman 2008), but by focusing on recent social scientific accounts of time, especially those overlapping with the literature on space. I’d now like to do with the former what I’ve already done with the latter.

There are several claims worth outlining. One is that clock time is at best one view of time—specifically, time conceptualized as linear, indefinite, predictable, uniform, and standardized (e.g. Lefebvre 1991, 95-6; Adam 1998, 70; Ermarth 1998, 356; Urry 2002, 17). Presupposing this claim are two more: first, that time is socially constructed, a claim that has been widely

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3 As just one example, Dikeç (2002) argues for a notion of “injustice of spatiality” that focuses on the “processes that produce space and, at the same time, the implications of these produced spaces on relations of domination and oppression” (96).
4 See Nowotny (1992) and Schedler and Santiso (1998) for useful surveys of scholarship on time and the social sciences.
endorsed by contemporary theorists of time (see, e.g., Adam 1990, 40-42; Raedeke and Rikoon 1997, 147; Adam 2000, 126, 133; Hassan 2009, 232-333; Urry 2009, 180-1); and second, the fact of “pluritemporalism,” that is, of the “plurality of different modes of social time(s) which may exist side by side” (Nowotny 1992, 424; see also Urry 2009, 180). Now these theorists do not appear to deny an ontological or categorical status to time (which is also what we saw with space). They simply make the claim that, as Nowotny puts it, “[e]vents’ occur, but they are also interpreted and given meaning in order to make sense” (1992, 438). Hence scholars’ accounts of capitalist, clock, and biological times, for instance, or Nowotny’s (1992, 426), Ermarth’s (1998, 356-7), and Urry’s (2009, 180-1) argument about the putative naturalization of clock time.

But this leads us to a fourth feature of time: that it constructs the social. The logic here parallels what we saw with space. Human beings are located in time (and space), so temporal (spatial) constructions—which ascribe a particular structure or meaning to our situatedness—reinforce or undermine relations and in a sense determine social relations. Helpful here is McKerrow who, drawing on Soja (1990) and Munn (1992), claims that “[c]ontrol over time” is a “medium of hierarchic power and governance,” precisely because time, like space, is a “symbolic process” that is “fully implicated in engaging, constraining, producing, and maintaining discursive practices” (1999, 272). Consider as just one example of this the capitalist commodification of labour, which itself arguably presupposes (e.g. Wilson 1999, 174-5) or at least is co-eval with (e.g. Adam 2000, 136-138; Urry 2009) the internationalization of clock time. And so, though it is perhaps an open debate the degree to which the temporal “configures” the social, scholars have asserted at least a causal link between the two.

Thus far I have been outlining claims offered by human geographers and critical theorists about time and space—namely, that both exist but are framed and contextualized, which in turn serves to shape social interactions. So far so good. Yet since power may operate in and be reproduced through interactions and practices (institutionalized or not) (see, e.g., Agnew 1999, 177), there must presumably be a political dimension to time (and space). I explore this possibility next.

2.3 Politics of Time

By now it should be clear that a substantial number of scholars treat time and space as having political value. Yet this scholarship does not, on my reading, offer a precise account of what
renders time political. This perhaps explains Dikeç’s call (2005) for scholars to resist treating as axiomatic the claim that “space is political”—a claim, he insists, that actually needs an argument. I suggest that the same can be said of time. And so, before drilling down to a more substantial account of time, I’d like to outline the general logic behind the claim that time is political.

To establish time as political we need a notion of political time; in other words, we need an answer to the question, what renders time constructs political? Note that this is conceptually different from the claim that “politics unfolds in time,” which underpins a growing and important literature on time, causation, and political mechanisms and institutions (see, e.g., Pierson 2004). What I am instead interested in is how theories of politics articulate political times and how these times come to shape how power is exercised or reproduced; this is why I opened with the claim that “political time is political.” Why is this the case? As I will now argue, a political time is political if this time, which is itself articulated through an account of politics, determines to some degree how power is exercised or reproduced.

There is a growing consensus that humans are located not in one overarching time but a plurality of them (Urry 2009, 180). From this it follows that any so-called “objective” (or clock) time—if it indeed exists—must co-exist with “subjective” conceptualizations of time(s) (Grzymala-Busse 2011, 1273). Either way time is inextricable from change, stasis, and order, because stasis and order presuppose and are presupposed by their opposite—change—which itself takes place in time (Adam 1990, 9). Time, if representing such a vessel, can thus be understood as the “medium” or “environment” in which things happen (Grzymala-Busse 2011, 1273). In lieu of a metaphysical account, for the purpose of this thesis I will treat time and change as synonymous.5

Assuming that this is justified, we can begin to make better sense of what has been claimed about time thus far. For change is everywhere. We see and recognize change in each and all of us, and we exist alongside change and within it: biological change; change in our ideas, attitudes, and knowledge; climate change; social change; political or electoral change; change stemming from a nuclear explosion—the list goes on. Moreover, change is not only everywhere but is intrinsic to our social ontology: every thing and organism is in a time(s), and these weave through society.

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5 This does not capture all that can be said about time, of course; it does, however, provide us with a manageable and (it is hoped) useful temporal approach to democratic theory.
These times can be contextualized and given meaning. In other words, change is framed. Take globalization, for instance, and the various ways that phenomena usually associated with it (such as the increase in technological connectedness) have been and are framed, both positively and negatively: for instance, as the (temporal) “speeding up” or (spatial) “flattening” of Earth. And so objects, organisms, and phenomena change in a material sense, which humans have mediated access to—that is, which we frame.

What has been claimed so far would support an account of time as social. It is not yet enough to conclude that time is political. As such, we need to amend the claim that “time constructs determine social relations” to include “in ways that allow or deny the reproduction or exercise of power.” I hope to show this in my later discussion of Habermas’ and Laclau’s articulation of political times—of time constructs that determine the exercise and reproduction of power.

In the meantime, consider the example of liberal democracy. According to Schedler and Santiso, government pro tempore (see, e.g., Linz 1998) is based on “time rules” that “define the temporal structures or the timetables of democratic politics, its time budgets, its points of initiation and termination, its pace, its sequences, its cycles” (8). As just one example of time rules, term limits clearly proscribe the powers of some while granting power (or opportunities to hold it) to others. Yet term limits are political in other ways. For instance, they may be specified in constitutional documents (which arguably give previous generations undue political power over contemporaries or future persons7), or they may contribute to the “revolving door” between government and industry (Linz 1998, 33), or they may be responsible for the ongoing failure of liberal democracies to respond at a national level to the issue of climate change (Adam 1998, 121). And so in each of these cases term limits, which are related to the political time of liberal democracy, affects who gets to exercise power and how. (The requisite next step would of course be to examine particular accounts of liberal democracy to see how each theorizes term limits.)

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6 Defined, say, in generic “power-over” terms (such as “when A affects B in a manner contrary to B’s interests” (Lukes 1974, 30 as quoted in Allen 2014) or “power-to” terms (such as Arendt’s power as “the human ability not just to act but to act in concert”) (Arendt 1970, 44 as quoted in Allen 2014; see also Habermas 1977).

7 This possibility is nicely explored in Thompson (2005).
If correct, our premises—that theories of politics articulate political times that may determine the reproduction or exercise of political power—gesture at the politics of political time. Having outlined this argument and the literature on time as both socially-constructed and –constructive, it should be evident why this discussion is relevant to political and democratic theorists: because embedded in their theories are implicit or explicit constructions of political time that determine the exercise or reproduction of power. I will revisit this in chapter six.
3. Adam’s Theory of Time

Assuming both that time is constructed, and that temporal constructions shape and are in turn shaped by social interactions, we can now attempt to identify some of these constructions’ key features, which should in turn allow us to isolate potential implications of time from the perspective of democratic theory. Yet to identify these constructions we need a theory of time.

There exist a plurality of accounts of time, many of which are overly metaphysical or complex for our purposes. Of those remaining, some precede the spatial turn, while others lack an underlying theoretical framework. It is for these three reasons that it is worth exploring Barbara Adam’s multidimensional theory of time, according to which time(s) is created, associated with relations of power (e.g. 1990, 109), and to be understood as multidimensional, that is, as “affect[ing] socio-environmental life on a multitude of levels and through choreographed clusters of temporal characteristics” (2000, 135). With a view to the latter, Adam offers a detailed typology of these dimensions, which she claims can help theorists to work through the “temporal complexity of socio-environmental existence” (2000, 137; see also 1998, 11, 24-59).

In the remainder of this thesis I will refer extensively to this typology, which I turn to next. We may not accept the way she arrives at it—we might dispute, for instance, her claim that her theory of social time is more coherent than others’, such as that of Anthony Giddens or George Herbert Mead (2000, 135; see also 1990 ch. 1)—nor must we accept the typology itself. It surely has its flaws and limitations, as must her general account. Nevertheless, both merit a central position in this preliminary study because together they comprise at the very least an accessible and systematic theory of social time (which is quite rare). I will attempt to show that it can also provide some specificity to what we saw last section and serve as a useful tool for identifying temporal constructions in Laclau and Habermas’ theories. In short, I will make use of Adam’s theory because it helps open up space for interrogating the linkages between politics and time.

In the remainder of this section I will explore temporality, time frame, and tempo, three of the temporal features under the first dimension of time that Adam theorizes. In focusing exclusively on these to the neglect of the other two dimensions (rhythm and past, present, and future) I admit adopting only one aspect of what Adam calls the “timescape perspective” (e.g. 1998, 11). In this case I believe that the move is justified. For reasons of space I can only explore and apply the
most important temporal features Adam theorizes. Regardless, through temporality, time frame, and tempo I can indirectly assess the features of the other two dimensions (my interpretations of time frame, for instance, will make use of certain notions of rhythm). And with regard to the third dimension specifically, though it is possible to analyze Laclau and Habermas’ theories according to her notion of past, present, and future, it is unclear how productive this approach would be. For instance, as the proceeding discussion will reveal, it is plausible to claim that Habermas’ theory of deliberative democracy presupposes a citizenry that has internalized a largely-unquestioned shared history or that Laclau’s agonistic theory of democracy mandates an substantial orientation to the future. Yet these claims themselves would hang on a proper understanding of the very “time” (“temporality”) of these theories and the way in which Laclau and Habermas frame them. This conceptual work must come first.

3.1 Overview: Temporality

Let’s begin with the feature of temporality. (Whenever possible I will use “temporality” to refer to this feature; the terminology is clunky but prevents confusing it with “time”).

At its most basic, temporality refers to the change in things, events, processes (2000, 136) and organisms (1990, 40). According to Adam, this “time of change” is the “forming of form” and the “naturing and socializing of nature” (2000, 136) and thus seems to apply to those things, organisms, events, and processes that inevitably or ultimately undergo change in some material or physical sense. To illustrate this Adam invokes various examples of temporalities, such as cars rusting, processes of growth and decay, ageing (2000, 136), and morning routines like getting ready for work (1990, 27). Each of these “events” denotes change.

These events unfold in a particular way. Adam claims that the time of change is “unidirectional and irreversible,” that it is a kind of “unalterable temporal direction” in which there “can be no un-being or un-becoming” (1990, 40). By irreversible I take Adam to mean that change in the object itself cannot be reversed; it is impossible, for instance, for “ashes to turn back into burning logs and to re-attach themselves to the living trees they came from, for baked cakes to separate themselves back into their ingredients, for people to get younger and artefacts to get newer not older” (1998, 42). On my reading Adam uses unidirectionality and irreversibility synonymously. For instance, that there can be “no un-ageing, no undying,” and “no un-birth” (1995, 22) is one
way of describing change as unfolding in a single direction, as having a “beginning and an end” (1990, 167). In short, temporality denotes irreversible change in things, events, and processes.¹

These qualifications may strike some readers as strange. Contra Adam, it would seem quite plausible to claim, for instance, that the change in one object—say, a person dying—cannot be unidirectional because it evidently produces or at least catalyzes changes in other objects. Though I cannot appraise this objection here, on this view Adam would seem to hold an atomistic or heavily contextual view of time. This seems to be the case. At one level there is a “flow of experience” that is unidirectional and irreversible (1990, 27). Yet she insists that all temporal events “have time within them.” These events, which are “fundamentally contextual, directional, and irreversible,” may at times appear to “recur chronically and in a seemingly unchanged way,” but only because they have been “abstracted from their context” (1990, 26-7). Adam uses temporality to refer to precisely these events.

One advantage in applying Adam’s notion of temporality to democratic theory is that it can help us identify objects undergoing change. More specifically, it allows us to isolate the temporally-relevant object(s), and how they change, as per a particular theory of politics or democracy: like elections, in the case of liberal democracy, or (as we will soon see) intersubjective norms in Habermas’ deliberative democracy, or social identities in Laclau’s agonistic politics. Moreover, assuming that we accept this feature and its place within Adam’s typology, temporality can help show why the literature on democracy, capitalism, and technology² might be partly incorrect to

¹ Crang (2005) presents a different reading of Adam’s account of temporality, which he claims signifies “duration or brevity, in other words how long a specific event or action lasts” (213). But this goes against what Adam claims in the various works of hers cited here, so Crang seems to have misunderstood Adam’s account of temporality and time frame. Unfortunately I cannot verify this because he cites a conference paper by Adam (2002) that I cannot access.

² In addition to those cited above, consider other explicitly political accounts of temporal interaction: for example Wolin’s (1997) well-known statement of “political time” being “out of synch with the temporalities, rhythms, and pace governing economy and culture” (¶2), or the lesser-known Rosa (2009), who claims that politics, if to regulate technology and economy, “must either keep up with their accelerating pace or seriously infringe on their autonomy, virtually ending functional differentiation” (105), or Schedler and Santiso, who argue that politics must increasingly scramble to “keep pace with the heartbeat rhythm of high-speed systems, such as technology or capital markets, that always threaten to leave political actors behind” (1998, 11; my emphasis).
present the temporal disjuncture between these three as reducible to differences in “speed.” It is likely true that our access to the “changes” denoted by temporality is at best mediated. Fortunately, by presenting temporality in conjunction with time frame (which we will see next), Adam has left room for articulating a discursive approach to the “time of change.”

3.2 Overview: Time Frame

I’d like to turn now to another dimension in Adam’s typology, time frame. According to Adam, time frames are frames “within which we organise, regulate, and structure our daily lives” (1990, 30). As temporal structures, time frames impose regularity and predictability, which in turn enable “us to plan our lives” (1990, 30). Time frames can be of

a natural cosmic kind such as years, seasons, moons, days and tides. Alternatively, they can be of an embodied kind, such as cycle of reproduction, digestion and cell renewal. Finally, they can be of a cultural kind, [...] in the form of calendar and clock time where years, months, weeks, hours, minutes and seconds constitute the frames within which social activity is conducted. (2000, 136)

In other words, time frames take the form of either a natural, an embodied, or a cultural cycle. The biological process we call “ageing,” for instance, can be understood as the link between

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3 Adam presents capitalism and technology as temporalities proper, while many others (e.g. Chesneaux 2000, 411-415; Meadowcroft 2002, 172; Scheuerman 2004, 3, 45; 2009, 296-7; Hassan 2009, 168-9, 188; Rosa 2009, 105-106) present them as different tempos or paces (presumably under one all-encompassing time). I suggest that Adam offers the more plausible view. Insofar as there is indeed no one time, the temporal reduction of globalized capitalism or technological advancement to mere tempo is to elide other significant temporal features of these systems, which could serve to limit possibilities for critical social theory. Consider Scheuerman (2004). After outlining the temporal challenges to contemporary democracies, he claims that “the core features of social acceleration represent irrevocable facts of contemporary existence,” and that liberal democracy should therefore undergo “institutional reforms” so leave it “better adept at grappling” with the fact that “[s]ocial speed is here to stay” (187-8; my emphasis). Adam’s account of time gives us the tools to critically examine claims such as these.

4 We cannot describe these changes without also framing them. Adam claims to want to avoid dualistic thinking, such as natural vs. social (e.g. 2000, 125-7), but this, it seems, is undermined by her description of temporality as the “naturing and socializing of nature” (2000, 136; my emphasis).
birth, childhood, adulthood, old-age, and death. As an example of an embodied cycle, this life cycle represents a particular time frame of a particular temporality (Adam 1998, 76).

For Adam these are two different temporal features. In the last section we saw that temporality refers to irreversible change; in this form it is abstracted from any social context and is in some substantial degree “beyond language.” Yet through language it is possible to contextualize or assign alternate meanings to objects and, in this case, change. On my reading this is what time frame represents. To recall a concrete example: “ageing” refers to a biological process—to some kind of unidirectional and irreversible change—but should also be understood as “passing through intricate networks of overlapping sociotemporal processes which constitute the total experience of ageing in everyday life” (Weigert 1981, 216 as quoted in Adam 1990, 99). I don’t have space to appraise the rationale for delineating these two features, nor Adam’s account of time frame itself. Nevertheless, given what we’ve seen, for the remainder of this thesis I will use “temporality” to refer to irreversible, internal change and “time frame” to a social conceptualization of a temporality, to a “framework of observation” (1990, 41). This aligns with how we might conventionally describe “frame” as a “social context determining the interpretation of an utterance” (OED). Together both dimensions give us time, that which is both “reckoned and measured as well as […] used as a measure” (1990, 103).

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5 See Adam (1990, 155) for her justification for sidestepping “the complex philosophical debates about the existence of reality outside language.” She concludes: “We can accept that for us to be able to talk and think about time necessitates our putting it into words. If this is all that is being expressed, it is not very much; if it equates reality with the symbol, it goes too far. There is no need to deny that all humans formulate meanings symbolically or that this is a fundamentally social process. There is an urgent need, however, to appreciate that time is an aspect of nature, and that nature encompasses the symbolic universe of human society. Once we recognise ourselves as bearers of all the multiple times of nature, and once we allow for nature to include symbolic expression, the gulf between the symbolic knower and nature as an external (unknowable) object can be dispensed with. The mutually exclusive dichotomies of nature and culture, subject and object become irrelevant.”

6 For instance, Adam (1990, 156): “Biologists have dispelled the idea that only humans experience time or organise their lives by it. Waiting and timing in nature presuppose knowledge of time and temporality, irrespective of their being symbolised, conceptualised, reckoned, or measured. Yet, once time is constituted symbolically, it is no longer reducible to the communication of organisms or physical signals; it is no longer a mere sensory datum.”
Let’s consider two further examples of time frame, starting with liberal democracy, which Adam claims has two temporal features (1998, 109). The first, that of temporality, refers to a theory of political change in which elections play a pivotal role—the “time of the election,” as she puts it. Elections generate unidirectional and irreversible results and thus arguably denote change and the forming of form. This stands in contrast to the second feature, the “time-frame of election cycles,” by which Adam seems to mean that the time of liberal democracy is typically framed in terms of four- or five-year periods and recurring “promises to the electorate” (1998, 109). In short, for Adam two of the temporal characteristics of theories of liberal democracy is that they (a) describe change in political power that is (b) measured according to the election cycle.

Clock time may also include two categories: it may denote a trajectory of change or a framing of this change. Earlier I outlined literature presenting clock time as one among many possible times. It follows that there must exist in the world some object, event, or process that changes in a linear, predictable, uniform, and standardized way, that is, in ways scholars have associated with clock time; perhaps the expanding universe is an example of this. It is also possible, however, that “clock time” also represents a particular framing of time. We can see this in the above quotation from Adam. We can make a similar claim against Urry, who presents clock time as reversible and bidirectional; apply Adam’s typology to this and it would seem to denote a time frame, not (or, at least, in addition to) a temporality.

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7 In which clock time is “Newtonian, based on the notion that time is absolute. [...] Such absolute time is invariant, infinitely divisible into space-like units, measurable in length, expressible as a number and reversible. It is time seen essentially as space, as comprising invariant measurable lengths that can be moved along, both forwards and backwards” (Urry 2009, 181).

8 To see why, consider four additional features of clock time that he lists (2009, 185-6): clock time as (1) a “very large number of small, precisely measured, and invariant units” and “a resource to be managed”; (2) the “scientific transformation” of “mathematically precise and quantifiable measures” into something “reversible” and polydirectional; (3) a system of measurement making “widespread” use of devices such as “clocks, watches, timetables, calendars, schedules, [... ] bells, deadlines, diaries, alarm clocks”; and (4) detached from social practices and the “apparently natural divisions of night and day, the seasons and movements of life toward death.” All of these features (and perhaps some other time-disciplining ones (1990, 185-6)) indicate time frame: (1) and (2) give us an idea of what clock time as a particular framing of time consists of, while (3) shows how this time frame is operationalized, and (4) gestures at its difference with other time frames and cycles.
These examples should show that “time frame” and “temporality” are conceptually distinct. It may in practice be difficult to strip a time(s) down to its constituent parts while maintaining the distinction between the two temporal features; we can start to see this with Adam’s account of liberal democracy. And it is likely true that more conceptual work on temporality and time frame is required. Nevertheless, Adam’s primary motivation for delineating time frame and temporality is to be able to separate out the “natural” and material from the social aspects of time.\(^9\) Though I cannot justify this here, this motivation seems correct.

### 3.3 Overview: Tempo

The third and final temporal feature that I’d like to explore is *tempo*. Compared to her claims about temporality and time frame, Adam’s account of tempo is obscure and scattered. We can nevertheless outline the general idea.

“Tempo,” Adam claims, “is the speed and intensity of actions, processes of change and transformations” and “indicates, for example, how fast innovations are introduced to a system which, in turn, has an impact on the scale of the effects” (2000, 136). Though this is the clearest explanation she offers, we can draw on other parts of her typology to help flesh this out. For one, we know that tempo is a feature under the first dimension of time, which presumably means that it must relate to or come to bear on temporality. Evidence justifying this includes tempo’s aforementioned link to “processes of change” and “transformations.” It is also plausible that tempo relates to temporality because Adam presents tempo as “contextual” (1998, 40) and the inverse of the “decontextualized” clock or industrial time frame.\(^10\) On my reading tempo denotes the speed and intensity of change.

Yet tempo cannot only presuppose temporality; it must also presuppose time frames. Only when change has been framed in terms of a certain cycle—cultural or otherwise—can we talk sensibly about the “speed” and “intensity” of change. This further fleshes out the above interpretation of time frame: in addition to temporality (which denotes change), time frame must incorporate

\(^9\) As another example: “there are time aspects which pertain exclusively to human social contexts. But these, as we have seen, need to be distinguished from the more universal principles of time that are to be found throughout nature” (1990, 154).

tempo. Adam does not state this explicitly. However, given (a) that speed and identity must surely presuppose the rhythmic concepts of “duration” and “instantaneity” (for how can we discuss speed without making a claim about \textit{durée}?!) and (b) that, as she claims, the “duration-instantaneity continuum” signals the “degree of expansion in time along the time-frame or past-present-future axis” and “could be considered a sub-category” of either of these (2000, 136), tempo can plausibly be assumed to (c) both require and supplement time frame. If this is correct—that tempo is only one component of a much more complex temporal picture—then it confirms my earlier suggestion that the handful of scholars\textsuperscript{11} whose engagement in a politics of time has only extended as far as issues of speed may, in fact, be missing the mark.

Two final points. Adam’s claim about the duration-instantaneity continuum suggests not only that tempo is essential to time frame but that she leans on the dimension of “Rhythm” in order to flesh out tempo. I’ve just suggested that “duration” and “instantaneity” are explicitly tempo-ral concepts, although the others (including sequence, repetition, simultaneity, beginnings, ends, pauses, and transitions)\textsuperscript{12} are presumably required in order to make claims about the speed of time—time, of course, framed in a particular way.

Nevertheless, on my view Adam’s account lacks an explicit discussion of the methodological basis of tempo. A crucial question, and one that she seems to neglect, is precisely \textit{how} speed or “intensity” is to be measured; probably through a particular time frame, from what I have seen so far. Yet isn’t speed relative to other speeds? If so, and if Grzymala-Busse is right that tempo is “the frequency of the ‘subevents’ in a larger event” (2011, 1282; emphasis removed), it might presuppose other time frames and temporalities. Conversely, it may be possible to compare two temporalities—say, the ageing process of a human being vs. a frog—based on the start and end points for each process. Yet aren’t temporalities fundamentally contextual? And wouldn’t this

\textsuperscript{11} Consider these works and their titles: Virilio’s \textit{Speed and Politics} (1986); Chesneaux’s “Speed and Democracy: An Uneasy Dialogue” (2000); Scheuerman’s \textit{Liberal Democracy and the Social Acceleration of Time} (2004) and “Citizenship and Speed” (2009); Hassan’s \textit{Empires of Speed: Time and Acceleration of Politics and Society} (2009); and Rosa’s “Social Acceleration: Ethical and Political Consequences of a Desynchronized High-Speed Society” (2009).

\textsuperscript{12} See Adam (2000, 136).
mean that any comparison of tempo or timing must presuppose some kind of common time frame—e.g. clock time—in order to avoid the charge of comparing apples and oranges?

To this last puzzle I offer a partial solution in the final chapter: the tempo of a politics, I argue, can be measured according to the particular tempo required by the framing of this politics. This will not help us to solve all of the ambiguities in her account. It will nevertheless justify us using her account to identify the implications in differences in the “speed” of two theories of democracy and to offer some basic claims about what this might mean for each’s claims about democracy. I turn now to the first of these two theories: Laclau’s agonistic democracy.
4. Time and Laclau’s Agonistic Democracy

In chapter two I reaffirmed the political import of time, and in chapter three I explored a possible conceptual framework that could ground a political-temporal analysis. I would now like to apply this framework to Laclau’s theory of democracy.

4.1 Laclau’s Agonistic Democracy

All objects exist in time, space, and—according to Laclau and Mouffe\(^1\)—a “discursive space.” In the latter, objects take on or are ascribed a particular meaning via discourses, which are social constructs that are enforced and reinforced by material practices and institutions.\(^2\) On my reading, these objects of discourse include anything that can be discursively-constructed, including people, inanimate objects, events,\(^3\) and subject positions (e.g. capitalist, white man, ecologist). Since these discursive objects have no inherent meaning, Laclau claims that the overall network of signification—and the discursive objects within this “social field”—is “overdetermined.” Said differently: no identity can be absolutely self-referential because it must be crafted vis-à-vis a demarcated Other—an outside, a what-it-is-not—in order to be identity (e.g. 2005, 141; 2007, 31). And so no discursive object can have stable meaning. This feature of overdetermination applies to the objects of discourses, as well as discourses themselves (Laclau and Mouffe 2001 (hereafter “HSS”), 146 fn 20), which can replace other discourses in the more general “field of discursivity.”

This leads us to two central concepts in Laclau’s theory of agonism: articulation and hegemony. Articulation denotes the production of a discourse (HSS, 113), while hegemony refers to the

\(^1\) For the purpose of this thesis I will be focusing on Laclau, and not Laclau and Mouffe, because of significant differences between these two thinkers; see Wenman (2003) and Howarth (2007) for an overview. I will nevertheless draw significantly from their co-authored Hegemony and Socialist Strategy.

\(^2\) More specifically, discourses are “structured totalities articulating both linguistic and non-linguistic elements” (2005, 13). See Laclau and Mouffe (2001, ch. 3, esp. 105-114).

\(^3\) Such as an earthquake or a falling brick, both of which are “event[s] that certainly exist[], in the sense that [they] occur[] here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of ‘natural phenomena’ or ‘expressions of the wrath of God’, depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive condition of emergence” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 108).
practice of uniting diverse social groups, struggles, and hence discourses in a totalizing fashion against what is constructed as an enemy.\textsuperscript{4} Articulation takes place in any society; all social identities are discursive and constructed in the form of us-them distinctions. Hegemony, by contrast, is only possible under conditions of modernity where there is both a proliferation of contested us-them distinctions and the realization of this precariousness, of the fact of discursivity. Only in this context can a discourse attempt to supersede other discourses so to order the entire field of discursivity in the form of a hegemonic discourse.\textsuperscript{5} Hegemony is Laclau and Mouffe’s term for the contingent, ultimately failed attempt at totalizing meaning.

Hegemony became possible only under conditions of modernity. Laclau and Mouffe claim that only with the French Revolution did liberal-democratic ideology emerge to denaturalize power relations,\textsuperscript{6} which in turn enabled relations between subjects to be seen as precarious and open to discursive revision (HSS, 154-159). As they put it, this “democratic revolution” signalled both the decline of a form of politics for which the division of the social into two antagonistic camps is an original and immutable datum, prior to all hegemonic construction, and a transition towards a new situation, characterized by the essential instability of political spaces, in which the very identity of the forces in struggle is submitted to constant shifts, and calls for an incessant process of redefinition. (HSS, 151; original emphasis)

\textsuperscript{4} The specific mechanism at play here: In pre-modern societies, there were relatively-few subject positions, and us-them distinctions were manifest (HSS, 171). In modern societies, however, not only is there a proliferation of subject positions, but many of these positions are discursively-unstable, which obscures us-them distinctions and (what Laclau claims are) the boundaries internal to society. When one of these relations of power is “activated”—when it comes to be regarded as an oppressive relation—the oppressed within this particular struggle unite with other oppressed persons, themselves belonging to particular struggles, against the manifest oppressor. In the process two things take place. First, each of the social agents of these diverse groups and struggles divests part of its own individual identity qua member of these in order to assume a role as an equal member in the emergent struggle (HSS, 63). Second, all of the social agents in this equivalent chain come to be represented by a single agent, the latter “representing […] a universality entirely incommensurable with it” (HSS, xiii).

\textsuperscript{5} Or “nodal point” (1990c, 28), in Laclau’s terminology.

\textsuperscript{6} They claim that only vis-à-vis the discourse of democracy did there come to exist a “discursive ‘exterior’ from which [a] discourse of subordination c[ould] be interrupted” (HSS, 154). This “‘democratic revolution’ […] designate[s] the end of a society of a hierarchic and inegalitarian type, ruled by a theological-political logic in which the social order had its foundation in divine will” (HSS, 155).
In other words, this point marked the ascendancy of the notion of relations of subordination (i.e., us-them, discursive orderings) as neither grounded in divine will, nor immutable, and thus as representing oppressive, illegitimate relations. The emergence of “democracy” thus undermined the idea of society as naturally hierarchic. It also enabled the reconstruction of struggles between subject positions as collective struggles against oppression.

Consider neo-liberalism, for instance. According to Laclau and Mouffe, this hegemonic articulatory practice entailed the creation of a new “system of equivalences” that “unif[ied] multiple subject positions around,” in this case, “an individualist definition of rights and a negative conception of liberty.” Exemplifying the “displacement of the frontier of the social,”

[the] series of subject positions which were accepted as legitimate differences in the hegemonic formation corresponding to the Welfare State are [now] expelled from the field of social positivity and construed as negativity—the parasites on social security (Mrs Thatcher’s ‘scroungers’), the inefficiency associated with union privileges, and state subsidies, and so on. (HSS, 176)

What differentiates this hegemony, however, is that those on the Left have become resigned to the idea of society as “beyond” the economic struggle of left vs. right and thus relinquished an aspect of their own particular identities. And so there has been a move to the center. But no center, no totality, no “full positivity,” is possible, according to Laclau; every discursive object has an outside that prevents stable meaning. For this reason he and Mouffe argue that a “credible alternative to the neo-liberal order” is indeed possible but must feature the unification of various subjects against the neo-liberal hegemonic order and the re-articulation of the normatively-desirable values of freedom and equality (HSS, xvi-ii). Only then can there be an “extension of the democratic struggles for equality and liberty to a wider ranger of social relations” (HSS, xv).

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7 As they write, “[t]he usual justification for the ‘no alternative dogma’ is globalization, and the argument generally rehearsed against redistributive social-democratic policies is that the tight fiscal constraints faced by governments are the only realistic possibility in a world where global markets would not permit any deviation from neo-liberal orthodoxy. This argument takes for granted the ideological terrain which has been created as a result of years of neo-liberal hegemony, and transforms what is a conjunctural state of affairs into a historical necessity. Presented as driven exclusively by the information revolution, the forces of globalization are detached from their political dimensions and appear as a fate to which we all have to submit” (HSS, xvi).
Hegemony, articulation, discourse—these concepts are relevant today. The stated purpose of HSS, first published in 1985, was to flesh out a theory of hegemony which might inform a political strategy for a fragmented and disillusioned Left. Now much has changed in the intervening thirty years. In the preface to the 2001 edition, Laclau and Mouffe insist not only that the discursive conditions for hegemony remain, but that the powerful co-optation of the Left (evinced by their disavowal of us-them distinctions) renders the potential for counter-hegemonies especially ripe. And so Laclau and Mouffe claim that their theory of hegemony offers a promising explanation of contemporary political phenomena which can serve in the struggle for radical democratic politics. Without commenting on the theory itself, in the very least it seems that the discursive conditions for hegemony obtain in our time.

This brief exposition establishes the essentials of this account. It will soon become clear that Laclau and Mouffe do not offer a full-fledged theory of democracy approximating in scope what Habermas offers, nor do these two theories of democracy share much in common (as we will see). Regardless, Laclau, in presenting a consistent set of claims about democratic politics, and by tracing its history and potential future trajectory, offers what might be plausibly called a “theory” of democracy. To this theory we can now apply Adam’s account of time.

4.2 Temporality

I’d like to begin with temporality. As outlined above, this important temporal feature denotes unidirectional, irreversible change. Can we identify this kind of change in Laclau’s theory?

We must first disqualify the obvious contender, hegemony, which cannot denote temporality. This is for two reasons. First, hegemony is not foundational. Though essential to his diagnosis of contemporary politics and to his account of how the Left can challenge the current dominance of neo-liberalism, hegemony is only a type of articulatory practice, which matters because it requires additional discursive conditions, which do not always obtain. Despite Laclau’s identification of agonistic politics as hegemonic (1996, 59), hegemony isn’t the central

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8 For Laclau and Mouffe’s comparison of their account and Habermas’, see HSS (xvii-xviii).
mechanism. Further, even if this were the case, every hegemony configures multiple discursive objects, which suggests that it is multidimensional—and not a temporality.9

Recall that the discursive conditions for hegemony (object discursivity and the democratic revolution-inspired realization of this discursivity) include articulation, which is the production of discourse. And recall that what enables articulation is the overdetermination of meaning, the fact that all discursive objects are “dislocated.” The foundational status of articulation and dislocation suggests their plausible candidacy as the “time” of agonistic democracy.

Let’s turn first to articulation. Reasons for treating it as the temporality of agonistic democracy might include the putative fact, for instance, that it structures the “social field” (denoting change) and that it “always consists in the construction of new differences” (denoting unidirectional change) (HSS, 113-4). There are also strong reasons against this reading. For one, the articulated identities of discursive objects (such as subject positions or discourses) can be reconfigured; “freedom” and “liberty,” for instance, can and have in history come to signify different things (HSS, 168-177). Second, Laclau explicitly presents articulation as a practice that halts change, change being understood as the overdetermination of meaning.10

The other candidate is dislocation. Denoting the overdetermination of identity, dislocation is not just “structure[’s …] failure to achieve constitution” (1990c, 47) but also a specific phenomenon or “event” (1990c, 73) that produces a gap in meaning and hence has a “constitutive nature.” As Laclau writes,

radical indeterminacy does not manifest itself through a cancellation of all determinations […] but through a subversion of all determination, […] through the assertion of its presence in a context that destroys its own possibility. (1990c, 79; my emphasis in bold)

9 Articulation also involves the fixation of a number of meanings, yet on my reading it is always described by Laclau from the atomistic viewpoint of individual objects of discourse. Said differently: articulation produces a single discourse, while hegemony is the bridge-building between discourses. Hegemony, insofar as it represents multidirectional change, can’t be temporality.

On these terms dislocation is precisely the opposite of articulation. Whereas articulation entails a discursive ordering, dislocation by contrast “opens different possibilities and expands the area of freedom” (1990c, 47; original emphasis). Dislocation thus denotes both the impossibility of stable signification and the possibility for re-articulating discursive objects.

There are three plausible reasons why we might treat dislocation as the time of agonistic democracy. First, since the meaning of all discursive objects is “overdetermined” or at best temporarily stable, dislocation seems to represent a necessary process, one that all discursive objects have to undergo. It thus exemplifies Adam’s characterization of temporality as the “forming of form, the naturing and socializing of nature” and “invisible productive power […] bringing forth the visible form of nature” (2000, 136). As we will see, the same can be said of articulation which, similarly, is necessary in order for discursive objects to have identities at all. A second, related reason is that dislocation allows for these objects to assume new meanings. Just as how pregnancy gives way to children and winter to spring-time growth (Adam 1990, 75), dislocation catalyzes the emergence of new from pre-existing meaning. In a word, without dislocation there would be no discursive object.

A third reason is that dislocation is both unidirectional and irreversible. At first glance the reverse explanation seems plausible: that the overdetermination of the discursive field disrupts identities which in turn sustains that very quality of overdetermination. Yet Laclau describes dislocation as a unique moment,11 a new event, a “sudden intervention originating from an absolute outside that bears no relation whatsoever to the previous situation,” as the “intervention of a new and identifiable force, rather than the result of the deterioration of a pre-existent reality” (1990c, 73). This “sudden intervention” presupposes the pre-existence of alternate meanings, so presumably dislocation cannot represent an entirely “new” force. Yet it is precisely because these meanings can only be overwritten by subsequent dislocations that suggests that dislocation unfolds in a singular and irreversible direction.

For this third reason to hold true requires a particular interpretation of dislocation. If the latter unfolds in a single instance across multiple identities, then subverted meaning—one of its effects—could evidently be read as reversible via subsequent acts of dislocation or articulation.

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11 See HSS (106-7) for a discussion of the differences between “moments” and “elements.”
What is instead required is a micro perspective on dislocation, one focusing on the unidirectional and irreversible change in particular discursive objects. I believe that there is textual evidence for this reading, namely Laclau’s disavowal of world-historical narratives,\(^\text{12}\) as well as his repeated insistence that all identity is constituted by limits.\(^\text{13}\)

Despite these justifications, however, the fact remains that dislocation presupposes articulation. The latter is a necessary condition for discursive objects to have meaning—*overdetermined* meaning—and so without it it is unclear how subject positions could exist. The two reasons I suggested earlier for why articulation may not be the best candidate for agonistic “time” still apply; articulation aims precisely at (a) halting change through (b) reversible hegemonic discourses. Nevertheless, both claims can be shown as irrelevant, the first insofar as articulation is recognized as indeed a “pause” in time but a crucial one that enables discursive practice; the second insofar as articulation is viewed through a parochial lens.

So the time in Laclau’s agonist politics is articulation-dislocation, and Adam’s account helps us to identify and isolate it. But how is this very time framed, and how quickly does it unfold? This is what I turn to in the remainder of this chapter.

### 4.3 Time Frame

I argued above that for Adam time denotes internalized, unidirectional, and irreversible change while time frame, which can be of three different types, denotes social conceptualizations of this change. I would now like to show that the “time” of agonist politics can be framed as per a cultural identity cycle.

This has several components. By identity cycle I mean the production of a discursive object’s meaning or identity, and I will follow Laclau’s lead in restricting discussion to subject positions

\(^{12}\) By this I mean Laclau anti-essentializing approach to world history. He claims, for instance, that “[h]istory cannot be conceiv[ed] [...] as an infinite advantage towards an ultimate aim” but instead as representing “a discontinuous succession of hegemonic formations” (2005, 226; my emphasis) for which dislocation is clearly a necessary condition. See also *HSS* (191-2).

\(^{13}\) Pure openness (or “pure difference,” in Laclau’s words) would not only itself be a kind of suture (e.g. 2005, 153 or 2007, 26-27) but would also make the category of identity a logical contradiction (e.g. 1990d, 90).
and their identities. By a “cultural” cycle I assume what Adam seems to: a socially-constructed cycle with no connection to natural, cosmological, or “embodied” objects or phenomena. Combining these two components gives us a socially-constructed cycle based on articulation and revolving around the identity of a discursive object. In view of the foundational roles of articulation and dislocation in Laclau’s theory of hegemony, this cycle consists entirely of the articulation or re-articulation of (dislocated) identity. It is through this particular frame that we can make sense of the unfolding of agonist politics over time.

This interpretation is justified because it coheres in general with Adam’s claim that time frames, or at least cultural ones, “constitute the frames within which social activity is conducted” (2000, 136). The relevant “social activity” here is politics. Laclau uses “politics” or the “political” to denote the various ways in which a social identity or any other object can be constructed in discourse, such as through a hegemonic articulation, which explains why it is because of dislocation “that politics is possible at all” (1996, 59; see also 2007, 44) and why “any subject is, by definition, political” (1990c, 61). Now Laclau is most interested in hegemony, a particular type of articulation that manifests in modernity. Hegemony nevertheless presupposes identity as discursive since “there is politics because there is subversion and dislocation of the social” (1990c, 61). And so, if politics is being framed, then dislocation and articulation is the frame.

We should also interpret this cultural cycle as following a particular trajectory that begins with a dislocated identity and ends with its articulation or re-articulation. The reason for this is simple: dislocation cannot be overcome. All discursive structures, including those manifestly “closed” and “complete,” are always and already dislocated, existing as they do in an overdetermined field where objects of discourse or discourses themselves can always be re-articulated. Articulation—or “politics”—is the attempt to overcome this “constitutive split of all concrete identity” (2007, 15), which is why politics is the business of “myth”-creation (1990c, 61-67) and why accepting

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14 I believe that it is justified to plug Laclau’s claims about the “political” into Adam’s claim about “social activities” because the “social” for Laclau denotes something like the discursive field, while his “political”—i.e. the construction of hegemonic alliances—appears much more like an “activity” taking place within this field.

15 As he claims, politics refers to the “strategies of […] filling” the “universal ground” that is really “just an empty place” that “can be partially filled in a variety of ways” (2007, 59).
any vision of society as an inclusive whole would thus be to misunderstand the “game”\(^\text{16}\) of politics (Laclau’s charge against the contemporary Left). This is compatible with his view of (modern?) history as “a discontinuous succession of hegemonic formations” (2005, 226) and of “democratic politics” as a “succession of finite and particular identities which attempt to assume universal tasks surpassing them” (2007, 15).

My claim that it is dislocation not articulation that is foundational is clearly incompatible, however, with Laclau’s anti-foundationalist approach. If identity cannot be wholly determined or “closed,” nor (as we will see below) can it be “open” or wholly overdetermined. Both scenarios rely on a “mythical” idea of closure, while the second, in particular, would also render the idea of discourse itself superfluous.

Yet I don’t understand how Laclau can offer an anti-foundationalist theory without engaging in foundationalism at least to some degree. He certainly tries; this may explain, for instance, why hegemony is a “relation” (e.g. 1996, 59), why politics is an “ontological category” (e.g. 1990c, 61), and why there is no “politics of poststructuralism” but, instead, “a certain intellectual climate, a certain horizon that makes possible an ensemble of theorectico-discursive operations arising from the intrinsic instability of the signifier/signified relations” (1990a, 191; my emphasis). Nevertheless, and in view of this “intrinsic instability,” I submit that Laclau offers at least one foundational claim, namely, that all identity is dislocated in at least some minimal way. If so, we can rightly treat dislocation as the basis for “the opening of new possibilities” (2007, 65). Accordingly, my interpretation of the time frame of agonist politics should stand.

At this point two objections are possible. The first concerns my positing of identity as both the subject and object of time frame, a dual role that one might suggest is problematic. Yet this requires that my interpretation undermine these temporal features or the distinction between them, which doesn’t seem to be the case. Moreover, it is unclear why these two distinct features can’t “share” this content; elections, for instance, play a dual role in Adam’s view of liberal democracy, which we have seen (in §3.2) follows a “time of the election” that is “bound[] by the

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\(^{16}\) Laclau (2005, 153): “it is as the essential undecidability between ‘empty’ and ‘floating’ – which we can now reformulate as the undecidability between homogeneous and the heterogeneous […] – that the political game is going to take place.”
time-frame of election cycles” (1998, 109). Also relevant here is Adam’s claim that a “frame [...] is not external to the action but is instead constituted by the event” (2000, 136; my emphasis). If this is correct, and if articulation-dislocation is an “event,” then identity can be simultaneously the subject and object of time frame.

One might also claim that agonist time is best measured instead with another concept in Laclau’s account, like antagonism or hegemony. But recall that two of its central planks are dislocation and articulation. And so, regardless of which discursive object is most central to this account, dislocation as a “condition of possibility” and articulation as the seizure of this possibility together denote the time of agonist politics.

4.4 Tempo

Having considered time and time frame, I would like to turn to the tempo of agonist politics.

But first, consider another possible objection to my previous argument. With the articulation of dislocated identity as the yardstick for measuring agonist time, one might claim that I have read into Laclau an overly-parochial (and unjustifiable) conception of time frame. On one hand, for him the key mechanism is hegemony, which happens infrequently, at least compared to articulation. Yet hegemony also presupposes the dislocated and articulatory nature of the identities making up a hegemonic alliance. As such, one might claim that, by focusing on a secondary aspect of his theory (articulation/dislocation instead of hegemony), the time frame I have read into Laclau’s agonistic politics represents the wrong yardstick, one that will produce incorrect measurements of agonist time as fast-paced and frequently-reiterated (especially compared to the framing of democracy as per the quinquennial election cycle, for instance).

17 Laclau also describes temporality as event, and articulation as the halting of event: “dislocation is the very form of temporality. And temporality must be conceived as the exact opposite of space. The ‘spatialization’ of an event consists of eliminating its temporality” (1990c, 44). Laclau and Adam’s use of the same language works for my claim.

18 And it is also happening increasingly infrequently, according to Laclau, because of the greater difficulty in establishing “equivalential chains” between subject positions. The more the internal distinctions, the harder it is to “divide” society through a hegemonic articulation.
It is unclear, however, if this is a strong objection to my reading. For one, the time frame must be based on dislocation and articulation, not hegemony; only the first two are compatible with Adam’s account and my application of it to agonist time. Second, Laclau does not seem to specify any temporal requirements for articulation. He instead suggests that there is no regularity to either it or dislocation; for instance,

in so far as no specific content is predetermined to fill [a] structural gap, it is the conflict between the various contents in their attempt to play this filling role that will make the contingency of the structure visible [...] [This] relation between the concrete content and its role as filler of the gap within the structure is purely external – that is precisely where the contingency lies (2007, 92-3)

or, as he and Mouffe claim about this “relation of exteriority,”

the relational moment, in order that [it] may be one of strict exteriority, it is necessary that no conceptual specificity should be attributable to it. (Otherwise, such specificity would become a structurally definable moment. [...] ). In other words, the relation of exteriority can only be thought of as pure contingency. (HSS, 51; my emphasis in bold)

But can the putative fact of constitutive outside really generate “pure contingency”? I don’t see how. If all “outsides” or limits are entirely precarious, then both articulatory and dislocatory practice would be impossible; as Laclau himself puts it, a “discourse in which meaning cannot possibly be fixed” can be “nothing else but the discourse of the psychotic” (1990d, 90). And so a quotation like the latter suggests that for Laclau some degree of fixity in meaning is possible—and perhaps necessary. Aside from this, however, there may not be any other temporal requirements for articulation or dislocation, which if so would undermine the objection.

A third justification for an interpretation of time frame that produces a reading of agonistic time as fast and frenetic is that such an interpretation aligns with the normative aim of HSS. Recall that that work outlines a theory of hegemony that Laclau and Mouffe want to see inform a Left-wing, counter-hegemonic struggle against neo-liberalism. Hegemonic struggles may at first glance seem “slow.” Yet recall that behind every hegemonic articulation is the alteration of all the identities of those involved in the equivalential chain. There is thus no incompatibility
between the time frame I have suggested and a *micro* perspective on the counter-hegemonic “equivalential displacement of the egalitarian imaginary to ever more extensive social relations.”

This also holds with what may be a general theme running through at least some of their works that identity change is normatively desirable. It cannot be so fast as to produce (as Laclau and Mouffe might put it) “pure contingency” in structure. However, within these bounds, the faster and more frequently in which articulation unfolds (each time with a different identity), the more often social identities can be rebuilt and, hence, serve the ontological fact of structural openness. Laclau and Mouffe (1990, 125) claim, for instance, that the “first condition” of a “radically democratic society” entails “accept[ing] the contingent and radically open character of all of its values.” This is not a society “in which the ‘best’ content dominates unchallenged but, rather, one in which nothing is definitely acquired and there is always the possibility of challenge” (2007, 100). Laclau’s account of identity, power, and emancipation may also be relevant here.19

I have devoted space to considering this objection because my reasons for dismissing it might perhaps provide some indication for how we might determine the tempo of agonist time. The second objection—about the lack of formal temporal requirements for articulation—suggests a quasi-empirical answer to this question; the third—about the value of unfixity—a normative one. Combined both suggest that, framed in terms of the identity cycle, the time of articulation-dislocation may be fast and frenetic, regardless of whether we focus on discursive objects or discourses themselves. Both are located within a field of meaning and so, lacking evidence to the contrary, Laclau’s claims about the radical undecidability of (always-failed) meaning, and about keeping open the potential for challenge, apply to both.

This marks the end of our initial temporal analysis of Laclau’s theory. Using Adam’s account of time I have outlined the temporality, time frame, and tempo of agonistic politics, which together form its time, yet it is still unclear why this is a *political* time and—a separate question—why it is political. I will revisit these questions, and Laclau’s theory, in the final section.

19 Laclau claims that the “constitution of a social identity is an act of power” (1990c, 31; see also Barnett 2004, 510) and that “power is the very condition of emancipation.” These, combined with the putative unfixity of *all* identity, means that for Laclau “there will be a plurality of powers” and “as a result, a plurality of contingent and partial emancipations” (2007, 101). This could form the basis for an argument about how emancipation (at least as Laclau understands it) depends on turnover in identity, the former potentially increasing in step with the latter.
5. Time and Habermas’ Deliberative Democracy

In this chapter I apply Adam’s theory of time (chapter three) to Jürgen Habermas’ theory of deliberative democracy. I’d like to begin with a broad overview of the latter.

5.1 Habermas’ Deliberative Democracy

At the core of this theory is an account of discourse ethics, consisting of several components.

One of these is validity claims.¹ For Habermas, human beings make claims about the world, through speech acts, that can be assessed for their objective (epistemological) truth, subjective truthfulness (the actor’s sincerity), or intersubjective rightness.² (This thesis focuses exclusively on the latter.) Habermas claims that by presenting a (“validity”) claim that expresses a statement about a norm in the intersubjective world, one simultaneously offers reasons that can be appraised by others. The acceptance or rejection of these reasons determines the normative rightness of a claim (e.g. 2007, 109). Moreover, since claims to intersubjective rightness express “an interest common to all those affected” (1984, 19), legitimate or “valid” norms “meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in a practical discourse” (2007, 66). This is Habermas’ discourse (D) principle.

This is also where “lifeworld” becomes relevant. In Habermas’ interpretation, lifeworld is a kind of cultural reservoir that “supplies members with unproblematic, common, background convictions that are assumed to be guaranteed” (1987, 125). This latent “taken-for-granted” knowledge supplies some of the background information required in order to appraise claims (1987, 126, 90)—a crucial point that we will return to. By raising a validity claim that problematizes what was previously an unproblematic moral norm, participants enter into practical discourse, that is, “into a process of moral argumentation” where they “continue their communicative action in a reflexive attitude with the aim of restoring a consensus that has been disrupted” (2007, 67; see also 1984, 19). The normative claim, once (and if) discursively redeemed, is then “retransform[ed]” from a “rationally acceptable assertion[] into [a] performative certaint[y]” (2003, 253; 1984, 100) and thus back into lifeworld knowledge. Again,

¹ For a precise definition see, e.g., Habermas (1984, 38).
² Although there may be a fourth kind of truth; see Devenney (2009, 139).
note that lifeworld is constituted by sedimented knowledge of rightness that, as a collection of “situation definitions,” is necessary for appraising thematized claims to rightness:

[...] from a perspective turned toward the situation, the lifeworld appears as a reservoir of taken-for-granted, of unshaken convictions that participants in communication draw upon in cooperative processes of interpretation. Single elements, specific taken-for-granteds, are, however, mobilized in the form of consensual and yet problematizable knowledge only when they become relevant to a situation. (1987, 124)

In other words, lifeworld thus acts both to enable the discursive redemption of validity claims and as holding tank for new or reaffirmed, consensus-backed moral norms.\(^3\) Both functions are crucial for discourse ethics (but see Devenney 2009, 140).

The giving and taking of reasons also thus enables the regeneration of lifeworld, which consists of three components—society, culture, and personality—that serve the essential functions, respectively, of social integration, renewal of cultural knowledge, and identity-formation (1987, 137). According to Habermas (1984, 86), these can be regenerated and sustained over time only via “communicative action,” that is, through the “interaction of at least two subjects capable of speech and action who establish interpersonal relations […] and] seek to reach an understanding about the action situation and their plans of action in order to coordinate their actions by way of agreement.” The alternative to communicative action for coordinating action is “strategic action,” the influencing of another actor’s behaviour “by means of the threat of sanctions or the prospect of gratification” (2007, 58). This takes place via “delinguistified media” such as money or power (1987, 154).

It is advantageous for participants to engage in strategic action because in doing so they can avoid the “costs of dissensus” (1987, 263) characteristic of communicative action. Strategic action is increasingly valuable in modern societies where the rationalization of lifeworlds\(^4\) has

\(^3\) As Habermas claims, “norms and experiences […] can occupy a double status—as elements of a social or subjective world, on the one hand, as structural components of the lifeworld, on the other” (1987, 134-5).

\(^4\) See, e.g., Habermas (1984, 340): A “disenchanted,” or rationalized, lifeworld requires that intersubjective agreement—necessary for lifeworld reproduction—be reached on the basis of “communicative achieved understanding” (instead of “normatively ascribed agreement”), which increases the cost of action coordination.
led to an increase in “systemic complexity” (1987, 155), the “need for reaching understanding, the expenditure of interpretive energy, and the risk of disagreement” (1987, 263). Unlike communicative action, however, strategic action cannot secure lifeworld knowledge. Money or power “simulate some of [language’s] features,” such as “the structure of raising and redeeming claims,” yet other features are “not reproduced—above all, the internal structure of mutual understanding which terminates in the recognition of criticizable validity claims and is embedded in a lifeworld context” (1987, 263). As action coordination in modernity becomes more costly, “new social structures” or subsystems (e.g. economic or governmental-bureaucratic) emerge to provide a way for actors to “sheer off from an orientation to mutual understanding, adopt a strategic attitude, and objectify normative contexts into something in the objective world” (1987, 154). These subsystems, on one hand, remain rooted in lifeworld contexts⁵ that they, on the other, do not regenerate. The result is that the “independent imperatives” of these subsystems “turn back destructively upon the lifeworld itself” (1987, 186) such that, in the end,

systemic mechanisms suppress forms of social integration even in those areas where a consensus-dependent coordination of action cannot be replaced, that is, where the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld is at stake. In these areas, the mediatization of the lifeworld assumes the form of a colonization. (1987, 196)

A partial solution to this problem is offered in Between Facts and Norms (1996, [hereafter “BFN”]). Recall that law, as constitutive of the society component of lifeworld, ensures social integration (80-1). Habermas argues that modern law can “stabiliz[e] behavioural expectations […] if it preserves an internal connection with the socially integrating force of communicative action” (84), which can be accomplished by combining the discourse principle⁶ with action norms “that appear in legal form” (108, 121; see also Flynn 2004, 436). The result is a “principle of democracy,” which holds that “only those statutes may claim legitimacy that can meet with the assent of all citizens in a discursive process of legislation that in turn has been legally

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⁵ This is because, as Habermas (1987, 154) puts it, lifeworld is a “subsystem that defines the pattern of the social system as a whole.” Other subsystems have to be “institutionalized” and “anchored in the lifeworld.”

⁶ “The discourse principle is intended to assume the shape of a principle of democracy only by way of legal institutionalization. The principle of democracy is what then confers legitimating force on the legislative process” (BFN, 121).
However, in order to secure this discursive process, and in particular the communicative power of a citizenry ("opinion-formation"), a system of rights is needed (128), for otherwise binding legal decisions made at the political level ("will-formation") will lack a necessary degree of legitimacy (because participants will not have had free and equal access to deliberation). With rights secured on the basis of a principle of democracy Habermas believes he has a compelling account of will- and opinion- formation in modern, democratic societies.

5.2 Temporality

Earlier I claimed that articulation and dislocation represent change in social identities and thus the temporality of agonistic democracy. What about the temporality of deliberative democracy?

Recall "lifeworld." As outlined earlier, lifeworld is essential to Habermas’ account of speech acts and validity claims, of the dangers of independent subsystems, and of law as a legitimate means through which to ensure social solidarity. It is of course not the only important component in his theory. Yet lifeworld matters: as a necessary condition for discourse ethics (e.g. 1987, 262), as a normative justification for a discourse theory of law, and as an intersubjective bank of changing cultural knowledge. The last of these is most relevant here. Nevertheless, and more importantly, all three indicate that the “time” of deliberative democracy should be associated with lifeworld. And more specifically—in order to meet the criteria of temporality I’ve adapted from Adam—this time ought to be denoted by the questioning and stabilization of lifeworld knowledge.

Before turning to these criteria, recall that lifeworld is constituted by three components—culture, society, and personality—which correspond, respectively, to cultural knowledge, intersubjective norms, and personal competencies. Yet recall also that lifeworld does not merely consist of sedimented knowledge: it also furnishes “situation definitions” that participants draw upon when they assess validity claims to truth, rightness, and truthfulness. Indeed, as Habermas claims, “in the light of an actual situation”—when a norm is questioned—the “relevant segment of lifeworld acquires the status of a contingent reality that could also be interpreted in another way” (1987, 131). There thus seem to be two layers to lifeworld; one constituted by a sedimented, inaccessible web of presuppositions, the other an actual segment of this lifeworld that is made

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7 This principle stems from (D), which presupposes (U). See Habermas (2007, 65-66).
accessible for participants. On my reading, questioning (“thematization”) prepares questioned norms for practical discourses (which we know takes places against the backdrop of lifeworld), and stabilization denotes the integration of discursive outcomes (back) into lifeworld.

One criterion is temporality denoting change. Since deliberation presupposes stabilized lifeworld knowledge, and since a key stage in deliberation is the questioning of lifeworld knowledge, change in lifeworld knowledge presupposes a degree of stabilization and questioning. Now Habermas evidently theorizes other “changes,” the most important of which are the complexity of modern mass society (e.g. 1987, 160) and the “disenchantment” with law (e.g. BFN, 42). Yet even these two changes are intimately tied to lifeworld.⁸

A second criterion is temporality as the “naturing and socializing of nature.” Despite some ambiguity concerning “nature,”⁹ I suggest that the questioning and stabilization of lifeworld knowledge fulfills this. Two signs that lifeworld is a “natural” object undergoing change are, first, the fact that deliberation presupposes lifeworld and, second, that in his detailed discussion of the rationalization of lifeworld he seems to treat the change in its structures as historically inevitable. Moreover, he explicitly claims that human speech has as its “telos” mutual understanding;¹⁰ by implication there is a kind of naturalness to lifeworld. In short, then, it seems that the questioning and stabilization of lifeworld knowledge is precisely (to recall Adam) the “invisible productive power that brings forth the visible form of nature.”

It also satisfies another criterion of temporality, unidirectionality/irreversibility. I argued in the previous chapter that dislocation and articulation are not polydirectional. Similarly, in terms of Habermas’ deliberative democracy, once a claim to rightness is made, the relevant aspect of lifeworld knowledge can be questioned or stabilized (via deliberation), but not both, either simultaneously or sequentially. Why not sequentially? Because participants in deliberation bring

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⁸ The first is synonymous with lifeworld structure, which simultaneously drives the second.

⁹ Presumably Adam is referring to those things, events, and processes that are intrinsically dynamic and unstable, which would render language—not lifeworld—relevant here; after all, Habermas himself claims that “[r]eaching understanding is the inherent telos of human speech” (1984, 287) and that “communicative reason […] is inscribed in the linguistic telos of mutual understanding” (BFN, 3-4; see also Habermas 2007, 67, 163). However, because reaching understanding requires lifeworld, it seems that an obvious consequence is that the latter is “natural,” too.

¹⁰ See previous footnote.
“new” claims and perspectives to the table, and so, if deliberation leads to the stabilization of a particular intersubjective norm, this norm will be qualitatively different from what was originally questioned. The same is true with the reverse: a stable norm does not remain the same after being questioned precisely because in doing so the (future) participant in deliberation raises a unique validity claim. In short: this change is unidirectional and irreversible because stable lifeworld knowledge changes when it is questioned and questioned lifeworld knowledge changes when it is stabilized. And so, given that questioning and stabilization both satisfy the above criteria, I suggest that they represent the temporality of deliberation. So much for the claim that deliberative democracy is atemporal.11

Contra my reading, one might argue that the most relevant change in deliberative democracy is associated with deliberation, which is confirmed by trends in the critical literature on Habermas. I would nevertheless argue that, despite being treated as interchangeable, the “questioning and stabilization of norms” offers more precision and conceptual clarity over “deliberation.” This is also why I distinguish questioning from stabilization; even though each presupposes the other, each is a distinct side to change in lifeworld knowledge.

In short, I have proposed a reading of the temporality of Habermasian deliberative democracy as the questioning and stabilization of lifeworld knowledge. I have not specified much else yet—such as whether questioning precedes stabilization, or vice versa. While Adam’s account of temporality helps us to identify what is changing, we need time frame to contextualize, measure, and make sense of this change. I pursue this next.

5.3 Time Frame

Earlier I proposed that, just as how the temporality of liberal democracy can be measured as per a quinquennial election cycle (according to Adam), that of agonist democracy can be measured

11 See, for example, Schedler and Santiso (1998) and Palonen (2008). Palonen (2008, 103) calls Habermasian deliberative democracy a “variant of a-temporal politics” that relies “on the [sic?] discussion without considering the scarcity of time,” while Schedler and Santiso claim that within a democratic set-up the “Habermasian regulatory, limitational idea of an ideal consensus encounters, among others, temporal obstacles. […] Politics, after all, does not only mean to talk, speak, argue, and negotiate, but also to act, to decide” (1998, 9).
as per the identity cycle. How might we frame the temporality of deliberative democracy? The answer: according to a norm cycle.

Two brief notes to begin. First, because lifeworld knowledge—that is, the “vast and incalculable web of presuppositions that have to be satisfied if an actual utterance is to be at all meaningful, that is, valid or invalid” (1987, 130)—represents the core of discourse ethics, it should serve as the basis for this cycle; after all, lifeworld is “the horizon within which communicative actions are ‘always already’ moving” (1987, 118). Second, that this is a norm cycle aligns with Adam’s account of time frame and is also suggested by the fact that lifeworld regeneration is one of Habermas’ arguments for a discourse theory of law (BFN, 25-27).

As with the time frame of agonist time, this norm cycle has a start and an end point. The cycle starts with stable lifeworld knowledge (which, as we have seen, is the outcome of past deliberative processes). Once a claim to intersubjective truth is raised, a “situation definition”—that is, a “segment of lifeworld contexts of relevance” (1987, 122; emphasis removed)—is demarcated from the non-delimited lifeworld “reservoir of taken-for-granteds […] that participants in communication draw upon in cooperative processes of interpretation” (1987, 124). These “taken-for-granteds” are “sedimentations of formerly actually present experiences that are bound to situations” (Schutz and Luckmann 1973, as quoted in Habermas 1987, 128). This stable lifeworld knowledge can be “put to the test”—but only a narrow portion at a time, and only after being individually problematized by a claim to intersubjective truth (1984, 100). This questioning represents the end point in the cycle (that will reiterate).

There is a reason for this particular set-up of the cycle: reversing the start and end points would implicate at least two norms or two subsets of lifeworld knowledge—not one—and this would contradict my earlier argument that temporality pertains to norms or lifeworld knowledge taken individually. Moreover, as I argued earlier, a norm cannot become questionable or stabilized, either simultaneously or sequentially, without a change in content. There is a difference, though: the end point of this cycle is not a fully questioned norm, but rather one that is being questioned, an important distinction for ensuring that we remain aligned with our earlier argument. This cycle can frame temporality only if it assumes the same “scale” the latter assumes.
Now this particular ordering of the stages would seem to contradict Habermas’ claim that argumentation is a “continual process of definition and redefinition” (1987, 122) and one in which “participants […] feel their way from one occasional commonality to the next” (1984, 100-101). On the basis of these claims it could be argued that the norm cycle should begin and end with stabilization, yet note here how Habermas refers to a single, continual process—the “communicative practice of everyday life” (1984, 17)—and not to particular norms or subsets of lifeworld knowledge. These claims do not lend textual support for my reading of time frame. They do, however, suggest that there is a time frame, and that lifeworld knowledge changes. Consider a lengthier version of two quotations cited earlier: as Habermas puts it,

> every new utterance is a test: the definition of the situation implicitly proposed by the speaker is either confirmed, modified, partly suspended, or generally placed in question. This continual process of definition and redefinition involves correlating contents to worlds—according to what counts in a given instance as a consensually interpreted element of the objective world, as an intersubjectively recognized normative component of the social world, or as a private element of a subjective world to which someone has privileged access. (1987, 121-2; my emphasis)

He also claims that

> [s]tability and absence of ambiguity are rather the exception in the communicative practice of everyday life. A more realistic picture is that drawn by ethnomethodologists—of a diffuse, fragile, continuously revised and only momentarily successful communication in which participants rely on problematic and unclarified presuppositions and feel their way from one occasional commonality to the next. (1984, 100-1; my emphasis)

On my reading these claims point to an ongoing process of communicative action—or, alternatively, a re-iterated norm cycle. And though prima facie my interpretation of time frame may differ from what Habermas seems to be saying here, this is unproblematic because my focus is on individual norms or subsets of lifeworld knowledge, whereas Habermas’ seems to be describing communicative action qua one continual process.
By now I have hopefully justified my interpretation of the norm cycle as the time frame of norm questioning and stabilization. I’d like now to consider the tempo at which this unfolds.

5.4 Tempo

A temporal overview of Habermasian deliberative democracy would be incomplete without a discussion of its tempo—more accurately, of the tempo of the norm cycle.

It may be impossible to identify an exact speed. For instance, from the perspective of lifeworld, there are both descriptive and normative reasons why time is and should be slow: lifeworld must be largely stable at any given time (1987, 132), and lifeworld offers a congealed collection of past deliberative outcomes. Both claims, however, are moot given that time frame pertains to a particular norm or subset of lifeworld. From this perspective questioning and stabilization are perhaps both fast, at least in relation to what would be a glacial-like transformation of lifeworld over time. Indeed, perhaps the tempo is instantaneous insofar as questioning and stabilization serve merely to convey norms from lifeworld to deliberation (“practical discourses”).

Yet there is little textual evidence for why this must be the case. It is plausible that Habermas would claim that such change might be slow in order to maintain a particular balance between lifeworld stability and questioning. Between two norms, one controversial and one enjoying near-universal support, surely the first will require a lengthier process of deliberation and reason-giving and –assessing than the second, yet apart from this there is no clear reason why the tempo of their stabilization or questioning would differ.

Thus far there also seems to be no clear interpretation of the tempo of this time’s time frame. Compare this with the typical characterization of deliberative democracy as slow. Scheuerman, for instance, argues that a “slowness” inheres in deliberative democracy due to its internal requirements of thorough, noncoercive reason-giving and appraising (2004, 201). Charging partisans of deliberative democracy with having either “little to say about temporality” or “quaint and anachronistic” ideas about the “temporal presuppositions of deliberative democracy,” he further claims that there is a “misfit between the relatively slow-going temporality of liberal

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12 Scheuerman footnotes the second part of his claim, yet it is unclear which thinkers he has in mind, given that he refers only to Sunstein, and in particular a piece of his the relevance of which is unclear.
democratic politics and the modern state system” that highlights “a main source of the fragility of deliberative politics” (200). Rosa (2009) echoes this and suggests, further, that the “deliberate and democratic political shaping of our society and form of life [...] may be becoming obsolete in the late modern ‘acceleration society’” (106).

These claims seem unjustified, for two reasons. First, deliberation is not a temporality, and so can have neither an associated time frame nor a tempo. Second, even if deliberation were a temporality, it is unclear why it would necessarily be fast or (in this case) slow. Like dissensus, consensus does not presuppose a particular tempo; reasons can be appraised very quickly or slowly, depending on the issue. (This also applies to agonism, except that dislocation and articulation can be read as having a fast time frame given Laclau’s claims about democracy and dislocation.) If questioning and stabilization is identified as a time and if the relevant tempo is linked with this and not with lifeworld writ large, it becomes clear that questioning-stabilization isn’t necessarily slow. However, once we frame the temporality of deliberative democracy in terms of the questioning of stable norms—which is what I have attempted just now to do—another possibility emerges: that this cycle and temporality should or perhaps must be slow in order to carry out a thorough and uncoercive deliberative process and, perhaps less plausibly, to guarantee a largely-stable lifeworld. These reasons may be more or less persuasive. I will consider them in greater detail in the following chapter.
6. Time and Democracy

Having analyzed the time, time frame, and tempo of these two theories of democracy,

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<td>Ch. 5.2</td>
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<td>questioning and stabilization</td>
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<td>time frame</td>
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we are now in a position to return to our original question: what makes political time political?

My overall claim in this chapter is that theories of power presuppose an account of political time. Drawing on the chapters on Laclau and Habermas, I begin by revisiting and expanding on the notion of political time. The central “time” or “change” of each theory is political, I claim, because it is intertwined with each theorist’s understanding of power, to which both assign a democratic frame. Having done this I turn back to my central claim that political time constructs shape the exercise or reproduction of power. Showing how modifying the framing of deliberation (for Habermas) and hegemony (for Laclau) could undermine the putative democratic quality of their theories of power, I argue that this consequence serves as evidence that political time is, in fact, political.

6.1 Power as Temporality

In chapters four and five I applied Adam’s multidimensional theory of time to Laclau and Habermas’ accounts in order to identify what can be interpreted as the temporality, time frame, and tempo of each. With this work done we can now begin to outline two distinct political times.

Recall that time is synonymous with change, which unfolds, and which we frame. For example, our bodies experience change, which we frame in different ways (think, say, of the idea of the “life cycle”). The particular change I’m interested in here is political change: change that’s political, on one hand, because it relates to how power is exercised or reproduced; political change, on the other, because power ultimately applies to or is exercised by humans, their institutions, and their practices, all of which are situated in time, not outside it. If these two components indeed comprise political time, then the latter is not merely something that happens
“naturally” but is also—precisely because we need to make sense of this change—framed and timed. Adam’s theory of time gives us the vocabulary for articulating the different constructs that make up a political time, which we have already seen (§3.2) in her analysis of liberal democracy.

But to return to Habermas and Laclau, in order to identify the political times they offer, I need to situate what I argued is the temporality of each’s account within each’s overall theory of politics. Earlier I was more interested in ensuring that these two key “changes”—articulation-dislocation and questioning-stabilization—met Adam’s criteria for temporality. Having shown this much, I can now confirm that these two changes represent political temporalities.

Take Habermas, for instance, for whom power and modern law are intertwined.\(^1\) He argues that the latter is “the medium through which communicative power is translated into administrative power” \((BFN, 150)\).\(^2\) Indeed, on his proceduralist understanding of law, legal norms are “based simultaneously on the threat of external sanctions and the supposition of a rationally motivated agreement” \((BFN, 8; my emphasis)\). As such, political power, which entails “making legally binding decisions” \((2007, 214)\), and which is presupposed by and established through law \((BFN, 132-4)\), is ultimately legitimated by the “shared convictions” of citizens acting in concert \((BFN, 51; see also Habermas 1977)\). I will revisit the legitimacy of modern law when I turn to Habermas’ democratic time frame. But for now simply note what I mentioned in chapter five: that for him law ensures social integration, which is necessary for lifeworld reproduction.

The connection here to temporality should by now be clear. The questioning or stabilization of norms is “political,” on Habermas’ terms, because political power consists in making laws, and laws are based on norms. Change in norms thus signals not just a temporality but a political temporality, one which, as I argue below, he tries to frame with an account of democracy.

Laclau also offers a theory of politics, so presumably he must also offer a political temporality—in other words, an account of power that is tied to some “natural” change. This is in fact the case.

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1 For a discussion of the connections and differences between “power” and “law,” see \(BFN\) (ch. 4, esp. 137-144). See also Shabani (2003, 114).

2 “By ‘law,’” Habermas writes, “I understand modern enacted law, which claims to be legitimate in terms of its possible justification as well as binding in its interpretation and enforcement” \((BFN, 79)\). See also Habermas (2007, 214 fn 214) for his discussion of the differences between law, politics, and morality.
For Laclau the basis of political power is not to be found in law, but in identity. As he clearly states: since “the constitution of a social identity is an act of power […] identity as such is power” (1990c, 31). The rationale for this intertwining of power and identity is revealed in his account of power relations as everywhere, among everyone, and ineradicable (Torfing 1999, 161; see also Laclau 1996, 52). A “relation of oppression” between social agents is sustained by and reproduced through discourses, which are orderings of “linguistic and non-linguistic elements,” because it is through these constructs that us-them distinctions, which in this case are antagonistic, are given meaning. Identity and power are thus co-eval. This is not to say that he denies accounts of power as power–over or power–to. It is instead to say that these would be secondary processes, taking place only after identities have been discursively articulated. Articulation and dislocation are political, then, for they create identity, which denotes political power, which is a necessary condition for politics (see §4.3).

Adam claims that temporality refers to irreversible and natural “forming of form.” Identity change and norm change both satisfy these criteria. Moreover, because of the linkages between (what Laclau and Habermas describe as) political power, on one hand, and identity and norms, on the other, it seems clear that these two temporalities must be political temporalities. On my reading this is what these theorists are describing when one presents a history of the democratic revolution and of the emergence of particular discursive conditions while the other explains the “disenchantment of world” and how law came to be separated out from lifeworld.

These theorists would likely agree that humans are located in political temporalities. Yet the (political) change of norms and identities only makes up part of a larger temporal picture. As such, I’d like to turn to the political, specifically democratic, time frame offered by each theorist.

6.2 Democracy as Time Frame

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3 As claimed in HSS, “the practice of articulation […] cannot consist of purely linguistic phenomena; but must instead pierce the entire material density of the multifarious institutions, rituals and practices through which a discursive formation is structure” (109).

4 For instance, in HSS, the subordinative relationship is described as “an agent [being] subjected to the decisions of another – an employee with respect to an employer, for example, or in certain forms of family organization the woman with respect to the man, and so on” (153).
I argued in chapters four and five that Laclau and Habermas frame change in identities and norms according to an identity and a norm cycle. Given that time frames denote attempts to structure temporal phenomena—to assign order to change—these two cycles represent particular conceptualizations of how identities and norms change or should change. Said differently: it is clear that they change, but what precisely it means to “change” is specified by these two cycles.

If change in identities and norms is political, then by extension their time frames are as well; if the constitution of identity, for instance, denotes political power, then surely an interpretation of the constitution of identity must also implicate political power. This seems to be the case. More specifically, I suggest that time frame here represents a democratic reading ascribed to identity and norm change. Each of these cycles is intertwined with each theorist’s account of democracy.

But first we must reconsider what it is that makes both theories theories of democracy. Let’s begin with Habermas. There are at least three reasons why, for him, deliberative politics are democratic. For one, laws are democratic insofar as they are grounded in norms that can secure the acceptance of all individuals affected by them. This is roughly his (D) principle, which is derivative of his (U) principle, which states that a norm is valid insofar as the “consequences and the side effects its general observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of everyone’s interests” could be accepted by “[a]ll affected” (2007, 65; his emphasis). The rationale behind (U) is that the use of language presupposes a desire and willingness to cooperate with others, without coercion or the use of force, in the search for intersubjective truth (2007, 88-89). This is why “valid norms are in the equal interest of all persons” (BFN, 460) and form the basis of legitimate law in modernity (2007, 66). Laws are justified, however, not only with moral reasons but with ethical and pragmatic as well (BFN, 460), which is why Habermas recasts (U) in the form of (D), which holds that valid norms must be accepted by all those affected “in their capacity as participants in a practical discourse” (2007, 66; original emphasis; see also 2007, 86). Discourse ethics thus purports to render politics democratic because the former ensures that the latter is grounded in norms that have secured consensus.

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5 See BFN (459-60) for a more extensive discussion of the difference between (D) and (U). As he claims, “[w]hereas the democratic principle is applied only to norms that display the formal properties of legal norms, the moral principle—according to which valid norms are in the equal interest of all persons—signifies a restriction to the kind
From this two further reasons can be derived. For one, as an exercise in collective political decision-making, deliberative democracy is based on the idea of public reason. As he puts it: “[p]ractical discourse,” as a “communicative process *simultaneously* exhorting *all* participants to ideal role taking,” represents “a public affair, practiced intersubjectively by all involved” (2007, 198; his emphasis). This reminds us of what Hannah Arendt called the “enlarged mentality” (as quoted in Benhabib 1996, 72).

A second reason deliberation is democratic is because it requires a “system of rights” (*BFN*, 110) that Habermas insists is necessary for ensuring that all citizens can participate equally in democratic politics (*BFN*, 121-131). These rights, which Habermas groups into five categories,⁶ are those that “citizens must confer on one another if they want to legitimately regulate their interactions and life contexts by means of positive law” (*BFN*, 122). And we have seen that this legitimacy stems from norms satisfying the (D) principle.

These reasons comprise what on my reading is Habermas’ democratic framing of norm change. At first glance it seems plausible to object that, since the potential for a cooperative search for truth is inherent in language, *all* norm change is democratic and hence represents a temporality; as Flvybjerg (2004, 2) puts it, deliberative democracy presupposes an image of “homo democraticus.” Yet despite this purported link between consensus and language, deliberation over moral norms is only possible under strict conditions of modernity—only then have of discourse in which *only* moral reasons are decisive. The moral principle does not specify the type of norm, whereas the democratic principle does not specify the forms of argumentation (and bargaining). […] W]hereas moral discourses are specialized for a single type of reason, and moral norms are furnished with a corresponding mode of normative validity that is sharply focused, the legitimacy of legal norms is supported by a broad spectrum of reasons, including moral reasons” (460).

⁶ These are “[b]asic rights” (1) “that result from the politically autonomous elaboration of the *right to the greatest possible measure of equal individual liberties*”; (2) “that result from the politically autonomous elaboration of the *status of a member* in a voluntary association of consociates under law”; (3) “that result immediately from the *actionability* of rights and from the politically autonomous elaboration of individual *legal protection*”; (4) “to equal opportunities to participate in processes of opinion- and will-formation in which citizens exercise their *political autonomy* and through which they generate legitimate law”; (5) “to the provision of living conditions that are socially, technologically, and ecologically safeguarded, insofar as the current circumstances make this necessary if citizens are to have equal opportunities to utilize the civil rights listed in (1) through (4)” (*BFN*, 122-123; his emphasis).
lifeworlds become sufficiently internally differentiated to allow for individuals to appraise validity claims from a hypothetical perspective. So though the potential for the cooperative search for truth is present in language “from the beginning,” only in modernity can the moral-hypothetical perspective—the apex of communicative rationality and deliberation—be assumed by participants. This serves as further evidence that deliberative politics represents a particular framing of political change.

The same can be said about Laclau’s agonist politics, though this politics is democratic for very different reasons. At first glance these reasons are difficult to ascertain; one could be forgiven for thinking that democracy and hegemony are antithetical given that his and Mouffe’s works, as they put it, “foreclose[,] any possibility of a final reconciliation, of any kind of rational consensus, of a fully inclusive ‘we’” (HSS, xvii). Yet we will see that Laclau dismisses not the general idea of democracy but rather a particular understanding of it. Hence the subtitle to HSS: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics.

The “democraticness” of this theory originates in democratic ideology. As I outlined earlier (§4.1), Laclau and Mouffe claim that the democratic revolution marked the transmutation of notions of “liberty” and “equality” into a lens (or, more accurately, a privileged though mutable discourse) through which to view (construct) social relations. Elsewhere I have expressed my scepticism of whether any theory of democratic politics can be adequately based on a democratic

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7 See, e.g., Habermas (2007, 163): “The sought-after moral point of view that precedes all controversies originates in a fundamental reciprocity that is built into action oriented toward reaching understanding. This reciprocity first appears in the form of authority-governed complementarity and interest-governed symmetry. Later it manifests itself in the reciprocity of behavioral expectations that are linked together in social roles and in the reciprocity of rights and obligations that are linked together in norms. Finally, it shows up as ideal role taking in discourse and insures that the right to universal access to, and equal opportunity for participation in argumentation is enjoyed freely and equally. At this third stage of interaction, then, an idealized from of reciprocity becomes the defining characteristic of a cooperative search for truth on the part of a potentially unlimited communication community. To that extent morality as grounded by discourse ethics is based on a pattern inherent in mutual understanding in language from the beginning.”
discourse, at least on a post-structuralist view. Regardless, despite this, and despite some other caveats, Laclau believes that politics can be democratic at least insofar as the (right) discourse of liberty-equality is extended (hegemonically) such that a maximum number of social relations are constructed according to it. And we have seen that hegemony presupposes identity change.

The rationale for democratic hegemony as a political time frame, not temporality, should now be clear. If politics concerns the articulation and dislocation of—i.e. change in—identity, and if the hegemonic-democratic variant of politics presupposes a particular kind of identity change, then democratic hegemony denotes an interpretation of how identity change could (and should) take place. Laclau’s insistence that the discursive conditions for hegemony obtain only after the democratic revolution, itself predated by the processes of articulation and dislocation, is evidence of this. In advocating a democratic framing Laclau advocates a type of identity change.

And so both theorists’ accounts of democratic politics each contain a temporality and a time frame. These two components combine in each case to form a political time, that is, a set of time constructs that represent a political time or change (such as that of identity change, for Laclau, or that of norm change, for Habermas) that is framed in a particular way. In this case both are democratic political times, and though we may not always be able to delineate power from democracy as I have done, doing so is justified in at least these two cases.

6.3 Power and Political Time

With this work done, we can now turn to the final task of showing that these political times are in fact political—that is, that they specify a configuration of power. I suggest that we can begin by

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8 See Taylor-Conboy (2012), where I argue that his account of “democratic ideology” serves as a weak foundation on which to build a theory of democracy precisely because this ideology, as a discursive nodal point, is contingent and revisable.

9 For one, democracy is something to be aimed for, but not something that can be wholly achieved (e.g. 1990b, 173; HSS, 167, 188); the latter would entail a wholly-inclusive “we” that, as we know, Laclau thinks is impossible. Second, because this discourse is entrenched but not entirely immutable, its values can be discursively-articulated in different ways, so democracy requires a certain construction and operationalization of democratic discourse.

10 Recall that “radical and plural democracy” is “nothing other than the struggle for a maximum autonomization of spheres on the basis of the generalization of the equivalential-egalitarian logic” (HSS, 167).
outlining the impossibility of simultaneously modifying the time frame of these political times while also maintaining the “democraticness” of each theory. By modifying the tempo of the identity and norm cycles we render them unsuitable for democratic politics. This conclusion—plausible only because of the intertwining of democratic politics and time frames—shows how we might justify the claim that political time is political.

The rationale for modifying the time frame of power is precisely that this framing determines how mere temporality is interpreted and then used to justify a particular configuration of power. This reminds us of Laclau and Mouffe’s claim that earthquakes and flying bricks are both actual events since they occur in some basic sense, but they are also events that are interpreted—as, say, acts of God, or natural events (HSS, 108). The same applies in the case of political change. There just is change in norms and identities, according to Laclau and Habermas, who also frame these changes. Regardless of the motivation for framing these changes (or any change), without these frames temporality would be irrelevant—mere sensory data, as Adam would say. It is for this reason that framing determines in the ultimate instance how power is exercise or reproduced. Modifying it should consequently reveal the political effects of political time.

Assessing this is admittedly a difficult task. We cannot draw any legitimate conclusions from a comparison of these time frames because they are based on different temporalities (and so we would be comparing apples and oranges), nor is it entirely clear how best to modify these frames so to produce both the most analytically-useful results and to leave undisturbed as much as possible the original political times Habermas and Laclau theorize. Yet these challenges are surmountable. Since tempo partly comprises time frame, modifying tempo should also modify time frame—but not temporality. As such, I suggest that one way of showing that political times determine the exercise or reproduction of power is to alter the tempo of these two cycles.

The scholarship on power, politics, and speed suggests that there is indeed something politically-relevant about tempo. Paul Virilio, for instance, whose classic text (1986) represents one of the first well-known articulations of a link between (political) time and power, asserts that modern society is driven by speed. His claims are explicitly about the accelerating tempo and associated violence of the modern state, but the implications for democratic inclusion are clear. Similarly, Chesneaux (2000), summarizing Virilio, claims that politicians and other elites have “access to
the highest level of speed” and can therefore “acquire even more wealth, more power, [and] more prestige,” which in turn exacerbates inequalities, which “hardly works to the benefit of democracy” (412-3; emphasis removed).

In contrast, some scholars have recently argued that a fast tempo may actually serve democracy. Take Connolly. He claims that, because democratic politics is sometimes slow, the high-speed imperatives of global capitalism often assumed to undermine democracy may in fact be doing so (2009, 263). He nevertheless suggests that slow democratic time might also reinforce closed, dogmatic worldviews and ways of life. Consider his response to Virilio:

But what if the compression of distance through speed has effects Virilio records while some of those effects also improve the prospects for democratic pluralization within the state and a cosmopolitanism across states that speaks affirmatively to issues of ecology, peace, indigenous minorities, the legitimation of new identities and rights, and the protection of old rights? […] (2009, 263)

In other words: the acceleration of time may increase prospects for democratization. Scheuerman (2009, 303) also makes this case. Now both theorists (I think mistakenly) treat time as objective. And I cannot here assess if speed is really an “ambiguous medium,”¹¹ as Connolly asserts. Of note here is simply that there is scholarship on tempo and the exercise or reproduction of power, which aligns with my argument that configurations of power, at the very least Habermas’ and Laclau’s, presuppose time frames and temporalities (§3.3), which are inextricable from tempo.

And it seems that tempo and the democratic time frame of Laclau and Habermas’ accounts are closely connected. Take the case of the norm cycle, for instance, which has a strong negative relationship to tempo. Habermas repeatedly insists that the only legitimate force in discourse ethics is that of the “better argument,” which means that only on the basis of truth does legitimate deliberation commence or conclude. Now claims about speed may weave into appraisable reasons for or against claims to intersubjective truth. Yet discourse ethics is nevertheless

¹¹ Note that Connolly here does not seem to use “medium” as Adam does.
inherently anti-temporal, which is itself a claim about tempo; cue the literature, cited earlier, presenting Habermasian deliberation as “timeless.”

The inverse case is that of the identity cycle, which has a necessary and in this instance positive relationship to tempo. More specifically, Laclau’s democratic politics likely requires a rapid and frequent change in identity. Now this cannot be said about a single hegemonic discourse, which by itself presupposes only that pre-existing identities can be reconstructed. Yet hegemony is plural, and counter-hegemony demands a turnover in identity that arguably takes place quickly, if not at breakneck speed. Nowhere do Laclau and Mouffe offer any explicit claims about the speed of articulation and dislocation. However, as I argued in §4.4, I believe that several of their claims about democracy (for instance, about the extension of democratic struggles to more and more relations, or about democratic society as not one in which “the ‘best’ content dominates unchallenged but, rather, one in which […] there is always the possibility of challenge”) support a “fast” reading of identity change. If this is the right reading, without a rapid change in identity it is likely impossible to secure the kind of counter-hegemonic democratic struggle that Laclau and Mouffe urge. In both cases, then, each theorist’s account of democracy imposes a particular tempo(ral) requirement on time frame.

We can reaffirm this link by anticipating the political consequences of altering the requirement. Take the identity cycle, for instance, which features a fast tempo; slowing down and rendering more infrequent the articulation of a dislocated identity would undermine counter-hegemon(ies), thus allowing what is in fact provisional identity to be hegemonically-fixed. This is the essence of Laclau’s charge against the contemporary Left. Habermas’ norm cycle offers two more examples. Since deliberation appears entirely evacuated of tempo, we can consider a norm cycle that is either fast or slow, but in either case the questioning of a norm would conclude or commence on the basis of something other than the force of truth. Indeed either way tempo might represent what he calls “external or internal coercion” (2007, 89). Modifying the (seemingly non-)tempo of the norm cycle would produce rushed or restrained deliberation, both of which are contrary to democracy as Habermas understands it.

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12 See §5.2 fn 11.

13 According to Chambers (1996, 187 fn 30), “[e]xamples of external coercion are threats and bribes; examples of internal coercion are psychological pressure, rhetorical manipulation, and deception.”
The clear difficulty in modifying these two time frames without simultaneously undermining the
democratic configurations of power theorized by Habermas and Laclau offers, I believe, strong
evidence for the argument that a political time articulates or assumes a particular exercise or
reproduction of power. If a political time wasn’t political then changing the time frame would
not impact the configuration of power. Change the framing while maintaining the temporality,
however, and neither theory appears consistently as one of democratic politics. It turns out that
political time is political, after all.
7. Conclusion

I began this thesis by suggesting that political time is political—a claim frequently asserted but rarely examined. In an attempt to outline how the exercise or reproduction of power is tied to political change, I outlined Barbara Adam’s multidimensional theory of time (ch. 3) which, with its temporal features of temporality, time frame, and tempo, helps us to distinguish change from framing of this change. I then applied these three features to Laclau’s theory of hegemonic politics (ch. 4) and Habermas’ deliberative democracy (ch. 5) in order to identify the time of each. In the final chapter I argued that included within these two political times are (political) time frames that specify a configuration of power. And so political time is political.

The argument that I have tried to make here, if successful, might seem obvious or irrelevant: political power evidently changes over time, theories of politics obviously include accounts of such changes, and so clearly these accounts will themselves be political.

Part of my purpose here has been to confirm these claims. Yet I have also wanted to clarify what it is precisely about theories of politics that is political, something which the emerging though underdeveloped literature on time and democratic politics has yet to do, at least on my reading. For several reasons it is something it should do. For one, distinguishing time frame from temporality allows us to analyze these components both in isolation and together. For instance, only once we identify norm change and the norm cycle can we argue that the lifeworld (qua largely static mass of congealed norms) may enable but also significantly slow down the norm cycle, and so norm change too (which is intertwined with power). And so applying something like Adam’s theory of time to political theory may allow us to show how a certain time frame cannot guarantee certain political outcomes. The import of this alone would justify this project.

There is another likely benefit, however, though one I have not explored here: distinguishing the different temporal constructs embedded within a theory of politics puts us in a better position for comparing multiple theories of politics or, in the very least, multiple times. Most of the literature on democracy and time (or at least speed) already does this, but not particularly well, as shown above (see, e.g., §3.1 fn 2-3). Making more precise the claim that political time is political helps us, for instance, to avoid thinking of the temporal difference between liberal democracy and globalization as exclusively one of speed (see §3.1). Similarly, it could help reveal ways in
which we might theorize a deliberative democratic model that with a different framing of norm change is more attuned to, say, the temporality imposed by climate change. Or perhaps this temporality can be in fact compatible with the quinquennial election cycle of liberal democracy.

I can’t explore any of these claims here. If my argument that political time is political is successful, however, it should allow us to explore these ideas with the confidence that power is indeed affected by how we conceptualize time.
Works Cited


