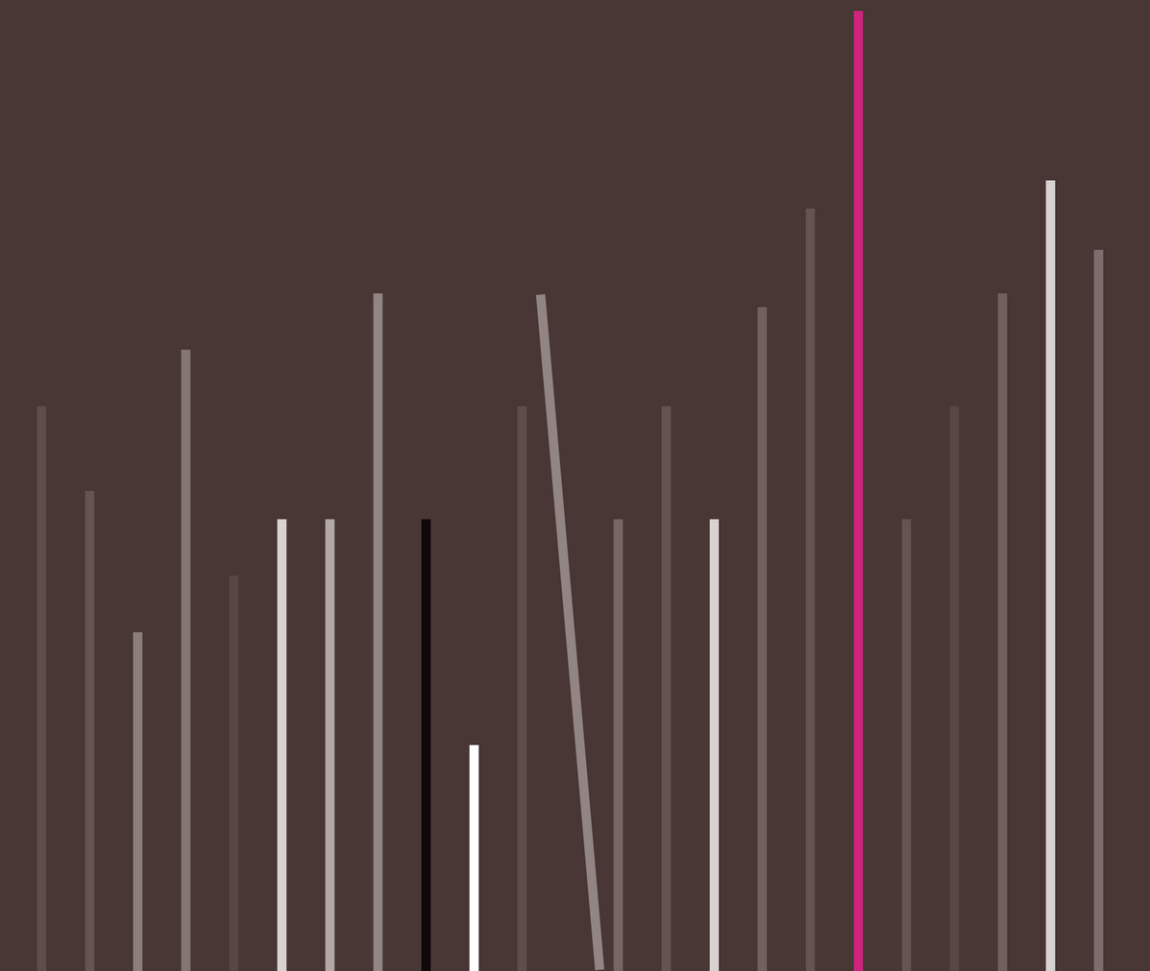




JULIANE REBENTISCH

The Art of Freedom

ON THE DIALECTICS
OF DEMOCRATIC EXISTENCE



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On the Dialectics of Democratic Existence

Juliane Rebentisch

Translated by Joseph Ganahl

polity

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Origins of the Text

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Chapter 3 contains considerations first developed in the following essays: “Kunst – Leben – Liebe: Ästhetische Subjektivität nach Kierkegaard,” in S. Gaensheimer & N. Schafhausen, eds, *Bühne des Lebens/Rhetorik des Gefühls* (Cologne: Walther König, 2006), pp. 15–32.

Chapter 6 contains considerations first developed in the following essays: “Theatrokratie und Theater: Literatur als Philosophie nach Benjamin und Brecht,” in E. Horn, B. Menke, & C. Menke, eds, *Literatur als Philosophie – Philosophie als Literatur* (Munich: Fink, 2005), pp. 297–318; “Demokratie und Theater,” in F. Ensslin, ed., *Spieltrieb: Was bringt die Klassik auf die Bühne?* (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2006), pp. 71–81.

Chapter 7 contains considerations first developed in the following essays: “Zur Unterscheidung von Politik und Polemischem” in H. Blumentrath, K. Rothe, S. Werkmeister, M. Wunsch, B. Wurm, eds, *Techniken der Übereinkunft: Zur Medialität des Politischen* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2009), pp. 99–112; “Erscheinen: Bruchstücke einer politischen Phänomenologie,” in *Demonstrationen: Vom Werden normativer Ordnungen*, Frankfurter Kunstverein/Exzellenzcluster “Die Herausbildung normativer Ordnungen,” Nuremberg; Verlag für moderne Kunst: “Masse – Volk – Multitude: Zur Quelle demokratischer Legitimität,” *WestEnd*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2011), pp. 3–8.

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Introduction:

Aestheticization – An Apologia

From the perspective of practical philosophy, aestheticization is normally viewed as a worrisome phenomenon. The term stands for a crisis that affects our entire life-world. In this context aestheticization does not merely refer to some phenomenon on the surface of society. On the contrary, it is regarded as a crisis because it penetrates the deep structures of the way we understand both ourselves and our political culture. It replaces ethics with an individualistic aesthetic, and politics with the spectacular staging of politics. The concept of aestheticization therefore indicates a profound transformation of ethics and politics, one through which the latter becomes aesthetic and thus assumes an alienated form. Aestheticization means “basically that the non-aesthetic is made aesthetic or is grasped as being aesthetic.”¹ First of all, this suggests a theory of difference. If the process of aestheticization is viewed as a transformation leading to a deformation of ethics and politics, then the aesthetic is presupposed as having nothing to do with the true essence of ethics and politics. Yet the fact that ethics and politics can be aestheticized at all indicates that there is indeed an internal connection between ethics, politics, and the dimension of the aesthetic. The critique of aestheticization, therefore, asserts not only a difference but also a connection. Here the aesthetic does not appear as an external threat to ethics and politics, but as a kind of deformation undermining them from within by hollowing out their normative substance. For critics of aestheticization, therefore, everything revolves around the delimitation and the exclusion of the aesthetic, and yet their discussion of the aesthetic takes place in the realm of the non-aesthetic. In this sense

the critique of aestheticization documents the entry (or re-entry) of the distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic into the non-aesthetic. It does not address the aesthetic as a sphere that confronts the non-aesthetic from the outside, but as a dimension operative within the non-aesthetic. And once this dimension is recognized, it changes everything.

In the following I will address what is in fact at stake in the ethical-political rejection of the aesthetic. This also means recognizing that “the aesthetic” in no way indicates a unified phenomenon in the context of the respective discourse; instead, it functions as a general concept for a whole range of phenomena as diverse as pleasure, taste, irony, distance, mutability, cultural diversity or “colorfulness,” staging [*Inszenierung*], rhetoric, and semblance. The purpose of this investigation is not to derive a consistent concept of the aesthetic from all this. Any attempt to do so would be questionable for two different reasons. First, given the ethical-political interest underlying the critique of aestheticization, one can and should not foreclose the possibility that the term “aesthetic” might in some cases only be used as a rhetorical tool for excluding certain elements from ethics and politics which are not aesthetic in the original sense of the term. Second, a one-sided discussion of what gets dismissed as aesthetic in the critical discourse on phenomena of aestheticization would not be sufficiently inclusive, despite the diversity of the topics addressed. Upon closer inspection, we can see that the critique of aestheticization in no way condemns all aesthetic practices. For precisely where it rejects clearly aesthetic phenomena such as the theater, it also defends other aesthetic practices seen as conforming to given conceptions of ethics and politics. The critique of aestheticization therefore clearly represents a specific intermingling of ethical, political, and aesthetic motifs. In order to analytically untie this knot, we do not need, at least not in the first instance, to discuss all the seemingly aesthetic phenomena addressed by the critique of aestheticization. Instead, we need to take up the ethical-political problems motivating this critique and explain the systematic context within which its various motifs appear. The following investigation will thus not primarily address aesthetic theory but practical philosophy. Its aim is to awaken skepticism about the one-sided, negative definition of the transformation of ethics and politics that goes by the name of aestheticization, and to explore its productive meaning for the understanding of both these spheres.² In this sense, the following is intended as an apologia for aestheticization – an apologia, that is, for the ethical-political right of the “aestheticizing” transformation of ethics and politics itself.

A systematic discussion of the problem of aestheticization is more important than ever, not least due to the current relevance and radiance of this concept in recent discussions on so-called postmodernism. The “aestheticization of the life-world” is one of the most prominent formulations employed over the last two to three decades in order to find a tangible concept to capture the visage of contemporary Western societies. It is associated with the claim that the typical member of such societies is a *homo aestheticus* for whom aesthetic criteria such as taste, pleasure, and shaping have become so decisive that their effects can be seen in nearly all spheres of life. Even two decades ago, this finding seemed so obvious that the philosophical discussion of the matter focused solely on how to evaluate this fundamental shift: One side saw the rising domination of simulacra, which degrade contents into mere images, actions into performances, and self-understandings into poses.³ The other side defended a generalized constructivist relation to self and world, which manifests itself in the freedom to shape ever more spheres of life.⁴ However, the philosophical debate over the status of a supposedly obvious societal development remained unfounded as long as it was still possible to question the actual scope of this development.⁵ As a result, attempts to empirically substantiate the thesis of the aestheticization of the life-world quickly came in for criticism. For instance, Gerhard Schulze’s thesis of an “experience society”⁶ brought about by affluence was accused of falsely generalizing a phenomenon located in the more privileged part of society.⁷ Today, the parameters of the debate seem to have shifted: A much more prominent role is played by studies that show that aesthetic motifs such as creativity, spontaneity, and originality are no longer a sign of a sphere of freedom lying beyond the necessities of social reproduction, but have become an important productive force in their own right within the capitalist economic system. According to this research, these motifs have turned into crucial social demands representing an increase of constraints rather than freedom.⁸ In any case, sociology seems to have become the central location for serious debate on how to appropriately describe, explain, and evaluate the crucial position of aesthetically connoted criteria both for individuals and for the organization of society in Western democracies. Yet as relevant as these debates may be – and I will return to the current state of this debate at various points⁹ – I believe that philosophy has been wrong to retreat from them. After all, the diagnosis of aestheticization implies an assumption about the genuine, undistorted essence of ethics and politics, which is not a mere empirical but also a systematic question. The specific approach of philosophy in the context of contemporary

diagnoses, however, can only become fully visible once we turn away from the business of diagnosing the present and turn to the history of philosophy. For the concept of aestheticization was already established in the first half of the twentieth century, which makes it relevant not only for postmodernism, but also for the theory of modernity. In fact, the discussion of aestheticization goes back even further. Contrary to the impression raised by recent debates, therefore, aestheticization in no way represents a merely contemporary problem; and traditionally the concept is much more philosophical than is suggested by the largely (cultural) sociological character of the current discourse. In fact, the philosophical discussion of the challenges posed by certain aesthetic motifs for the understanding of ethics and politics even goes back to antiquity. The history of practical philosophy is a history of crisis-diagnoses which have sought to combat the invasion of the aesthetic and its disintegrating effects into the spheres of ethics and politics. This is true despite the fact that the concept of aestheticization was not always employed explicitly.

At first sight it may seem remarkable that the ethical-political critique of various figures of the aesthetic shows up at extremely significant points in the history of practical philosophy. This demonstrates that the problem of aestheticization is anything but a marginal problem which, in line with the currently typical subdivision of philosophy, could be banished into a separate sphere called aesthetics. Instead, the problem shows up in places where core concepts of practical philosophy themselves are at stake. Conversely, the significance of discussions on the aesthetic in the philosophical tradition reveals the systematic burden that the current aestheticization discourse must bear – at least, that is, when it takes itself seriously. Without a reflection on the long history of this discourse we will hardly be able to adequately bear the load. If we neglect to do so, the claim that the “aestheticization of the life-world” represents a new phenomenon and a new epoch will remain questionable. Without a detailed discussion of the problems that practical philosophy has historically ascribed to “the aesthetic,” our judgment of current developments will be in danger of either merely carrying over old prejudices into the present, for example by criticizing a supposedly novel domination of simulacra, or we will end up becoming a part of an old problem rather than a part of the solution, for example by becoming proponents of a supposedly new, constructivist relation to ourselves and the world. Therefore, the postmodern philosophical debates on the suggestive formulation “aestheticization of the life-world” are also philosophically unfounded. In order to clarify the philosophical assumptions that at least indirectly influence these

debates, we require a historical and systematic discussion of the history of the philosophical critique of aestheticization.

As I have already indicated, this history begins in antiquity, or more precisely, with Plato's critique of democratic culture in *The Republic*. Plato mistrusts the "colorful" plurality of life-forms in a democracy, as well as the "dazzling" democrats that have learned from (theater) poets that it is possible to adopt several roles in life. He even sees a major problem in the fair appearance of democratic culture and its privileged life-form. For according to Plato's diagnosis, the logic of appearances constitutes the essence of democracy itself: The ethical commitment to the good gets replaced by an aesthetic stylization of existence, while good government (i.e., government that is committed to the good) gets replaced by an uncontrolled spectacle that seduces the people. For Plato, this logic is a small, dangerously subtle step on the path from democracy to tyranny. What is astounding about this antique diagnosis is how familiar its central motifs are even today. Indeed, they were adopted in the philosophical discourse at the beginning of modernity (around 1800) and have continued to play an important role into the twentieth century and beyond. Along with the growing political importance of democracy, the influence of the critique of an aestheticized democratic culture established by Plato has grown as well, regardless of whether we are dealing with a fundamentally negative or positive stance toward democracy. But why does Plato, of all thinkers, prove to be the decisive source when it comes to the problems of modern democracy, or rather the problems associated with its aestheticized culture? After all, the model of democracy in antiquity cannot be applied to modern democracies; just as the antique arts, which Plato criticized for their subversive influence on morals, can scarcely be equated with modern art forms. Nevertheless, it is no accident that modern philosophical thought on the matter draws on the work of Plato.

Plato invented a type of critique which would become so crucial for modernity that, despite the obvious differences between antiquity and modernity, a good deal of conceptual effort has been undertaken in order to pick up on this type of critique. Plato connects his analysis of various forms of government with his investigation of – to put it in modern terms – forms of subjectivization. The connection between government and self-government takes on greater significance in modernity, even though the organization of the state is no longer regarded as mirroring the soul, as is suggested at several points in *The Republic*. However, if we take a closer look at Plato's account of the constellation of government and self-government, we will find it to be far more interesting and complex than what is suggested by

the customary reading of his work. For there is in fact a third point in this constellation. Government and self-government are not merely similar to each other, they form in fact an analogous unity via their respective relation to a value that is central to both. In the case of democratic culture, this is the value of freedom. Unlike Plato's claim that the ideal state mirrors the soul, his thesis on the relationship between ethics and politics has remained crucial to the modern critique of aestheticization. The key to the modern debate on aestheticization is likewise the problem of freedom. If the diagnosis of aestheticization refers to democratic culture – sometimes more explicitly, sometimes less – then the freedom that defines this culture is the systematic problem with which it is both ethically and politically concerned. The concept of democratic freedom, therefore, not only refers to the kind of freedom which is realized in political institutions and procedures. Rather, in the context of the critique of aestheticization, democratic freedom in this political sense is grasped as a culture of freedom that concerns the conduct of life as a whole. The question at hand is how to theoretically grasp what it means to be a free subject, and in which societal form this freedom can best be realized. In the framework established by the problem of freedom, there is a close connection between the topics of the subject and the state, self-government and government, ethics and politics.

The very fact that such a historically influential philosophical discourse is concerned with the critique of an aestheticization of the democratic culture of freedom already indicates that addressing this discourse will allow us to gain insights into the constitution and the tensions of democratic freedom usually overlooked or brushed aside by the justifications of democratic freedom, which are generally blind to the dimension of the aesthetic. But such tensions are also overlooked by republican thought in the tradition of Friedrich Schiller, which celebrates the aesthetic as a figure of unity and reconciliation both in an ethical and a political sense.¹⁰ As this book will show, it is precisely in their rejection of – or skepticism about – the close relation between the culture of freedom and the problem of its aestheticization that critics of aestheticization display a very precise sense of the risk and the challenges of such a culture, which makes their work conceptually fruitful for an *apologia* for aestheticization. In other words, the critique of aestheticization proves to be a remarkably productive resource for the project of redefining the meaning of aestheticization for the ethical-political understanding of the democratic culture of freedom. This is the standard by which any attempt at a positive account of the changes in the understanding of ethics and politics that go by the name of aestheticization will have to measure

itself. To the extent that the ethical-political legitimacy of an “aestheticizing” transformation of ethics and politics can be defended within the framework of the problem of freedom, it will be necessary to demonstrate this by means of a critique of the critique of aestheticization. This entails the examination of both the way the critique operates as well as of its prerequisites. In each case we will have to ask, what is rejected as an aestheticization of the understanding of freedom for ethical and political reasons, and is the rejection plausible? Which understanding of freedom is ethically and politically defended, and is this understanding immune to critique?

Regardless of whether the critique of aestheticization associates the problem of “aestheticized culture” with democracy itself, thus fundamentally rejecting the latter, or whether aestheticized culture is viewed as a danger to which democracy needs to immunize itself – in both cases the point of dispute lies in the understanding of freedom that is associated with aesthetic motifs. What is called the aesthetic is usually a form of freedom that contradicts social practices, their normative orders, and the corresponding identities or roles. It does so by giving private motives – moods, pleasure, taste – such clear priority over conformity to a given social order that they come to dominate the way that individuals determine their own lives. The understanding of freedom around which the debate on aestheticization revolves questions the constitutive connection between the social and the individual good – the claim that the latter can only exist in and through participation in the former. Critics of aestheticization fear that a privatistic model of freedom, if it succeeds in establishing itself in society, will have a disintegrating effect on the political community. At best, social bonds will be replaced by “aesthetic” relations; and where there are no longer any social bonds, the staging of community becomes a politically decisive force. Yet the staging of community, as critics of aestheticization go on to argue, does not create community. On the contrary, not only does it barely conceal the fact that it is only necessary because the collective has been undermined from within by the aesthetic self-understandings of its (non-)members, but it is only capable of producing a community to the degree that it simultaneously establishes a divide between those who produce the community and those who – again in the form of moods, pleasure, and taste – experience it. The political community thus disintegrates into a spectacle and an audience.

Because of aestheticization’s supposedly disintegrating effects, the aesthetic form of freedom has been denounced as “degenerate freedom” (Plato) or as “caprice” or “arbitrariness” [*Willkürfreiheit*] (Hegel). In order to dispel the danger that aesthetic freedom poses

for the political community, critics of aestheticization all seek to show that this form of freedom represents a self-misunderstanding. On this view, aesthetic freedom not only represents a “degenerate” form of freedom from the perspective of the political community that needs to be protected from its effects. In order to really strike at the corresponding understanding of freedom, it must also prove to be deficient in places where we would not usually seek out its effects on the community, i.e., in the life of individuals. According to critics of aestheticization, it is already at this level that the freedom claimed by the individual vis-à-vis the social order turns into unfreedom. This must be proven, therefore, with respect to the dazzling types, those who have “mastered the art of living” [*Lebenskünstler*]. If it can be shown that the incongruence between individual and social good, which becomes visible in aesthetic existence, leads to unfreedom, then the critics of aestheticization will also have shown why the further effects of this life-form on the community must be combated. The effort to preserve the social order is then not for the sake of the order, but for the sake of the freedom of its members.

In this history of the philosophical critique of aestheticization, very different conceptual presuppositions have been employed in order to deliver this proof. And it is here that the gap between modernity and antiquity also becomes particularly visible. Whereas Plato employs a metaphysical conception of the good, Hegel points to the constitutive role of social practices for individual freedom. Therefore, Plato formulates his critique in the name of a conception of the good that is as problematic as it is metaphysical, and according to which there is an objective, individual, and social good, making any actions that contradict this good a form of alienation from the good. However, since Hegel’s objection to the romantic ironist, this critique has taken the shape of a reference to the constitutive role of social practices for the unfolding of individual freedom. Without question, this last remark is still justified today. It captures extreme constructivist positions that reduce the possibility for shaping one’s own life to a question of individual ethics,¹¹ as well as all those who argue that Foucault’s demand “not to be governed like that”¹² refers to the entirety of life – just as if a life beyond all social determination were desirable or even possible. Not only is everybody always involved in social practices, any understanding of the self requires social recognition in order to be realized.¹³ But this can only count as an objection to all the dazzling figures that stand at the center of the critique of aestheticization if their lives necessarily entail a repression of the constitutive role that the social world plays in the self-understanding of the individual. That, of course, can be disputed.

As I will show in the following, by associating “aesthetic” freedom with freedom from the social *in toto*, the critique of aestheticization conceals another, more productive interpretation: The distance from the social – as is often made especially visible by the self-transformations undergone by *Lebenskünstler* contrary to the expectations of society – does not necessarily entail a kind of distance from all social determinacy that is as abstract as it is imaginary. We could also grasp this distance in a different way: not as a *model* for the life of the subject, but as a productive *element* of it. Referring to aesthetic existence, to dazzling life-forms, does not mean demonstrating and defending abstract freedom from the social, but rather the mutability of the social. The aestheticization of freedom would then no longer stand for the misunderstanding of a kind of freedom *from* the social in a kind of non-dialectic opposition to freedom *in* the social. Rather, it would express the tension at the heart of every individual’s life. Whoever lives within the misunderstanding of solipsistic self-production is just as unfree as those who have never had the experience of distance from themselves, their social roles, and the corresponding expectations. It is only possible to mediate between both sides of this tense relationship if we grasp them as elements in a process in which we can change both ourselves and the social practices of which we are a part. As will be shown in more detail, this mediation demands an art of freedom, which goes beyond a mere craft [*Handwerk*],¹⁴ and thus beyond the idea that self-determination is to be conceived as a kind of skill we can first learn and then master.¹⁵ For the subject performing such an art must always call itself into question in the course of this process. The changes in the self are not brought about by a meta-subject standing above the subject’s own social identity. Instead, it is rooted in the immediate experience of self-difference, which compels the subject to reconceive of itself, its self-understanding, and the meaning of its subjectivity from a distance.

The dialectic determination of freedom in the sense of an antagonism at work in the heart of this concept, which connects the capacity for subjective self-determination with an aspect that has “not yet been subjected to the centralizing authority of the consciousness,”¹⁶ does not imply abandoning the normativity that necessarily characterizes ethics and politics. On the contrary, it is only because individuals in their lived interaction with the world can end up in a relation of difference to themselves, and thus also to their roles as participants in social practices, that the normative question about the individual and social good can be raised at all. The experience of such difference, in other words, is a necessary condition for the self-determined

appropriation or transformation of the social practices by which we are always already determined. Recognizing the possibility of such questioning as a good in itself, and thus also the possibility of changing given determinations of the good, means giving this possibility priority over every substantive determination of the good.

The form of government that has integrated the possibility of questioning given determinations of the good into the concept of the good itself is – as Plato clearly recognized – democracy. It is the only form of government in which it is allowed to publicly criticize everything, to publicly call everything into question – including the shape of democracy itself. Because it remains open, despite all the risk involved, to re-determinations of the good, and thus to the possibility of a more just order, democracy remains – to cite Jacques Derrida’s now famous formulation – “to come.”¹⁷ Yet this is not meant, as Derrida is often misunderstood, as an eternal suspension until the arrival of a coming messiah of democracy. On the contrary, our determinations of the good are all that we have for realizing our freedom in the here and now. Democratic openness to future events does not mean openness for the sake of openness; nor is this a fundamental criticism of normative determinations in general. Rather, it emphasizes the possibility of their historical revision. For precisely this reason, democracy, to cite a formulation of the French theorist of democracy Claude Lefort, is the “*historical society par excellence*.”¹⁸ We could also say that the democratic culture of freedom is moved both politically and ethically by that dialectic at the core of the concept of freedom defended here. The point of defending the motifs of freedom that have been hastily rejected or condemned in advance by critics of aestheticization does not, therefore, merely mean defending an “aesthetic culture” that is somehow desirable for democracies, as if this were some mere cultural addition. What is at stake is nothing less than the understanding of the ethical-political structures of freedom in general.

Yet due to its insight into the historicity of the good, democracy also has an internal connection to what has been criticized as the “aestheticization of the political.” We can argue plausibly that participants in social practices are always potential non-participants, and thus also that members of society are potential non-members, such that the meaning of social practices can be called into question at any time. If this is the case, then the immediate result will be a critique of pre-political conceptions of the order and unity of the political collective. Neither the order nor the unity of the community can merely be presupposed, rather its character is revealed to be a political determination. Furthermore, this means that the unity of the

community, along with the order within which it is grasped, must be politically created, produced, and staged. Because democracy knows neither order nor unity beyond political representation, it not only stands in clear opposition to Plato's anti-democratic conception of the natural political order. Instead, it also concerns the idea of collective self-government, an idea that is central to the modern understanding of democracy – and this has far-reaching consequences. For if it is true that the self of collective self-government cannot be assumed to be a unified will, but must first be brought forth by political representation, then this means that the *demos* of democracy can never exist beyond the separation thereby established between representatives and the represented, producers and recipients, the rulers and the ruled. The *demos* can therefore never exist outside relations of power and domination; it never exists as such. At the same time, however, this is precisely the way that democracy preserves its openness to the future. For the democratic answer to the problem of sovereign power does not consist in concealing the latter, but in exhibiting it and thus exposing it to an examination of its legitimacy. This is the whole point of a democratically understood “aestheticization of the political.” On the democratic political stage, the representatives of the *demos* must justify themselves before those whose will they represent; they must face a heterogeneous audience whose members always potentially have or develop alternative conceptions of the democratic general will, which can ultimately be asserted publicly as a (countervailing) power in opposition to the currently prevailing conception.

Of course, a defense of the aesthetic – in this context it would be more specific to say the “theatrical” – dimensions of democratic politics faces a particularly daunting challenge posed by those critics of aestheticization who are resolute defenders of democracy. Indeed, the issue of aestheticization and democracy has been historically addressed from very different perspectives on democracy, which reveals a further distinction between the discourse in antiquity and modernity: For Plato the democratization and aestheticization or theatricalization of the culture represent one and the same process, whereas the modern theory of democracy, at least in the Rousseauian tradition, is guided by the opposite intuition, seeing aestheticization or theatricalization as a perversion of democratic culture, and thus as a threat of decline against which democracy must be defended. The surprising similarity between the critical motifs found in Rousseau's defense and Plato's critique of democracy is, however, highly informative. It shows us the anti-democratic features of Rousseau's image of the democratic community and thus plays into

the hands of an argumentation that defends the dimensions of the aesthetic – with and against Plato – as a constitutive element of democratic life.

If we are to defend the aestheticization of the democratic culture of freedom both ethically and politically, we cannot merely impose this defense on the anti-aestheticization discourse from the outside; rather we must demonstrate the implications of this critique by means of a critique of the critique of aestheticization. The discussion of this critique is relevant not only because it points out the connection between ethical, political, and aesthetic motifs in the discussion of the understanding of democratic freedom, but also because it addresses a whole series of (partially related) problems: weakness of will, evil, indifference, forgetfulness-of-self, reification (of the other and of the world), opportunism, charismatic rule. These are all problems that an apologia for aestheticization must address if it does not want to become yet another symptom of the ethical-political problem diagnosed by critics of aestheticization. The discussion of the critique of aestheticization not only gives depth and contours to a corresponding concept of freedom, it moves us to develop such a concept in the first place. For the rejection of aestheticization, as I will demonstrate with reference to selected historical examples from the tradition of this critique, reveals deficits that can only be removed by a dialectic concept of freedom.

We now have a rough idea of the road map for the following chapters. In part I, I will reconstruct and critique the motifs of Plato's critique of aestheticization and democracy often employed by modern critics of aestheticization. The subsequent parts address the ways in which the modern discourse has responded to Plato and the problems he raised. On the basis of the connection between ethical and political arguments reconstructed in part I, part II will present the modern responses, not as they arise chronologically, but rather how they correspond to the logic of Plato's system. Thus I will first address the question of what it means to live a life in freedom before turning to the concept of democracy essentially linked to this ethical problem. This connection has remained crucial for modern critiques of aestheticization as well, though it has been accentuated in different ways, emphasizing either a theory of subjective freedom or of democracy. For this reason, part II will initially address those modern critiques of aestheticization that depart from the problem of subjective freedom. Here the critique of romanticism proves particularly relevant, for various motifs found in the Platonic critique of the aesthetic life-form and its underlying understanding of freedom emerge in altered form in the critique of the romantic ironist. Even at this early stage – in

the discussion of the relation between irony and ethical life (Hegel), as well as between irony and individual (Kierkegaard) or political (Carl Schmitt) sovereignty – numerous links to the issue of democracy and democratic political culture emerge. The latter stand at the center of the discussion in part III, though not without reference to the theory of freedom. One of the aims here will be to give a more precise definition – with regard to the politics of representation – of the “aestheticized” notion of democratic culture defended in this book and to distinguish it from other constellations of aesthetics, ethics, and politics. In this context we will have to discuss Rousseau’s positive vision of the Republican festival, which he opposes to the theatricalization or the aestheticization of the political, as well as the relation between Walter Benjamin’s famous critique of the “aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism” and the general line of argumentation found in the tradition of the critique of aestheticization. In conclusion, I will take a look ahead and distinguish the previously developed understanding of democratic culture from a contrary tendency that currently goes by the name of “post-democracy.”

However, the close referential connection between ethical and political motifs we find in all three parts indicates that the structure of the book, contrary to Plato’s system, is merely for heuristic reasons. For the defense of the “aestheticizing” transformation of ethics and politics also concerns the relation between the two. Whereas Plato gives priority to ethics over politics – the arrangement of the political order that is to ensure a good life for all follows from the knowledge of what suits the individual – the order of reasons now enters into a different constellation. The point is not merely to stand this hierarchy on its head, not to put politics before ethics, but to dissolve the hierarchy of ethics and politics from the perspective of a dialectic of freedom that penetrates both spheres alike, though each in a different way.

PART I

An Antique Diagnosis of a Crisis

The Provocative Beauty of Democracy: Plato

For Plato, as for all classical philosophers, “politeia” does not so much characterize a community’s constitution as it does its way of life. This way of life, however, is said to depend on what counts as its highest good.¹ According to the classics, this is what ties together the different perspectives of ethics and politics. Plato claims that in a democracy with its corresponding way of life or – as we would call it today – culture, this supreme good bears the name of “freedom.” Therefore, the true object of Plato’s reflections on democracy, for which he uses Socrates² as his mouthpiece in Book Eight of *The Republic*,³ is the idea of freedom that is constitutive of democratic culture. Although – as Plato has Socrates observe coolly – some might regard democracy as especially colorful and perhaps even as the “fairest regime” (Rep 557c) given that it allows for ethical diversity and the freedom to choose one’s own way of life, it is nevertheless second bottom in Plato’s hierarchy of forms of government, just above tyranny. For Plato, democracy’s fair appearance is misleading, and he argues that the democratic “thirst for freedom” (Rep 562c) necessarily leads to unfreedom. It privileges the desires, thereby undermining rational judgment, destabilizing the will, and producing individuals who are weak in every respect – even politically. Plato condemns the man who is “well disposed toward the multitude” (558c) as a man of dazzling weakness and the colorful diversity of democratic culture as a sure sign of its decline. Democratic aestheticization is consequently a harbinger of tyranny.

This is not a diagnosis to which we will readily agree. However, even in the context of an apologia for democracy and its beauty, we

are well advised to examine the concept of democratic freedom in the contrasting light of a radically opposed position. For it is often the case that those who seek to banish a concept from our practical and theoretical consciousness have a particularly strong sense of its implications.

1. Freedom and Indeterminacy

Curiously enough, Plato's investigation of democracy focuses on freedom rather than equality, though he does not provide any further justification for doing so. Instead he has Socrates quote democrats' self-understanding, i.e. the widespread opinion that freedom constitutes democracy's highest good (Rep 557b and Rep 562b). He begins his discussion with an empirical observation of the self-understanding of democratic culture that is implicit in democratic discourse. He views the democratic principle of equality as a mere corollary of *exousia*, i.e. democratically granted freedom, according to which one has the "licence...to do whatever one wants" (Rep 557b). This license is granted to all persons regardless of their status or birth, to "equals and unequals alike" (Rep 558c). Democratic equality has no substance and is not founded on similarities; it is entirely formal, applying to anyone and everyone living in freedom. Yet Plato's first objection concerns the implication that anybody can invoke the principle of democracy in order to speak in its name. After all, *exousia* implies the permission to speak freely, even for those who seek to persuade and seduce the masses.⁴ This necessarily creates an opening that can be exploited by charismatic figures who equate their own will with that of the democratic community as a whole, thereby presuming to have authority and potentially subverting the dominant authorities. In a democracy, as Plato has Socrates explain, nothing is obligatory. The democratic idea of freedom compels nobody to exercise authority or to submit to it against their will. People need not fight in wartime, and they may wage a private war in peacetime. They need not be forbidden from holding political or judicial office (Rep 557e). In a democracy, even citizens punished with death or exile can be pardoned (Rep 558a). In principle, anyone who wishes to found a state can simply pick and choose a constitution at will, as if they were in a "bazaar" (*pantopolion*). Given the freedom (*exousia*) it allows, democracy can entail "all species of regimes" (Rep 557d).

It is striking how topical this classical diagnosis remains even – or perhaps especially – today.⁵ Hardly any state today would not claim to be democratic. The modern age has not only witnessed