

Polemos Doesn't Stop Anywhere Short of the World On Anarcheology, Ontology, and Politics¹

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ABSTRACT

Current widespread renewal of interest in ontology—especially in the so-called Speculative Turn—has raised questions concerning the place of the political in the world. This work examines the connections between ontology and politics reintroducing the Heraclitean notion of the *polemos*. I start out looking at how a bedrock view of ontology has been prevalent and yet flawed. Then I introduce an alternative view of ontology and consider it under the lights shed by current tendencies in speculative realism. Finally I present some recent anarcheological work on Heraclitus that reintroduces the idea of the *polemos* in the debate.

KEYWORDS:

Polemos, anarcheology, ontology and politics, speculation

it depends whether our passions reach fever heat and influence our whole life or not. No one knows to what he may be driven by circumstances, pity, or indignation; he does not know the degree of his own inflammability

Nietzsche (2008)

¹ An earlier version of this essay was presented in Ontology and Politics Workshop at Mancept, University of Manchester, in early September of 2011. Part of the inspiration for some of its ideas came from the English riots of August, where fire was always present. The riots showed that politics deals in the inflammable material to be found everywhere. I would like to thank Simon Choat, Paul Rekret, the organizers, and everyone in the workshop for a fruitful discussion. I would also like to thank the ANARCHAI research group at the University of Brasilia for many invaluable insights.

The impact of ontology on politics is itself political. Ontology has been regarded as a measure of fixity surrounding the movement of politics. Often, ontology is thought in connection to the unchangeable and, as such, it provides a frame for any political endeavor. It is thought as the realm of underlying stability, of what exists by subsisting and, often, of the natural. Existence is therefore normally thought in terms of what persists or resists, what underlies all predication. The ontological is related to the substrata, to what ultimately lies underneath, the *hypokeimenon*. As such, ontology is thought as a domain of *archés*. When presented as such, ontology introduces order into politics by encircling it with something beyond any politics. An attitude of avoiding *archés* could then translate into a single-handed rejection of all ontological claims. This essay, in line with the contemporary resurgence of attention to ontology, reclaims the notion of *polemos* as a starting point for an ontology without *archés* and paving the ways for an an-*arché*-ist ontology.

It is often maintained that ontological questions are questions about grounds. Ontology has presented itself as first philosophy, as the realm of basic assumptions, and as stage setting for science, politics and to anything polemic. Ontology, according to this view, is the basis. It is associated to what is naturally so, to what persists *per se*, to what is not up for grabs. As such, it is presented as bedrock. Bedrock is not merely what grounds something else, but also something under which no further excavation is possible—no further archeology, no further search for *archés*, can take place. We could be wrong about what is the ultimate ground—ontological claims are revisable—but if we're not, they carry a sort of necessity in the sense that they go unaffected by anything else they allegedly ground. They are therefore immune to politics (and to anything else non-ontological, for that matter). Ontology is viewed as an enclosed domain and, as such, as unreachable by any political move.

This conception of ontology hasn't, however, gone unchallenged. Since before Aristotle took metaphysical claims to be about *arches aition* (the first causes or the ultimately governing principles)², philosophers have presented different images of the nature of claims about what there is. In fact, Aristotle defended the idea that to exist is to be substantial—what primarily exists are substances³—against a background of claims about what

² See, for example, Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (1924/1953), Alpha, 3.

³ See, for example, Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (1924/1953), Lambda 6, 1071b.5, where he says: *ousiai protai ton onton*. This conception of existence as

flows, what changes and what persists from the philosophers of his time.⁴ Other philosophers such as Hume, Nietzsche, Whitehead, and Deleuze have since put the association of metaphysics with what is impervious to other influences into question.⁵ Their attempts have been to understand ontology not as an archeology and, as such, not as preceding or grounding politics. Criticism of metaphysics—and of the possibility of ontological claims—has also been fuelled by suspicions of this view of them as bedrock. This anti-foundational inspiration claims that if it is inextricably connected to *archés*, ontology should be exorcized.

My strategy, as it will become clearer in the next section, is to rather rethink the connection between *archés* and the political. Recent developments that place ontology and metaphysics again in central stage invite these attempts to reconsider their connection to anything political. An *ontological turn* (in the phrase of Heil & Martin [1999]) has been joined by a *speculative turn* (see Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman [2011]) where questions concerning what exists and how they exist are reclaimed as crucial to a philosophical endeavor. Many reasons can be presented for this current renaissance—including post-humanist takes on politics (see, for example, Serres [1990], Bryant [2011]), exhaustion with the linguistic turn and its variations (see, for example, Heil & Martin [1999], Williamson [2004], Harman [2009]), enthusiasm for modalities—typically through the work of Kripke (1972) and Lewis

(primarily) substantial, was influential in the way, for instance, realist debates were framed. An interesting alternative to the substantiality of reality can be found in Souriau's conception of different modes of existence (2009). It is however not straightforward to fully debunk this Aristotelian connection between subsistence and existence—or between reality and resistance. Latour, as influenced by Souriau as he is, writes in *Ir-réductions* (1984), 1.1.5: *Est reel ce qui résiste dans l'épreuves* ("It is real what resist the tests"). Latour, of course, doesn't commit to any fixed substance but he still thinks of the real as what resists.

⁴ In particular, Empedocles and Heraclitus have hinted towards no privilege of the stable over the unstable. They seemed to have favored the idea that things are in interaction and there are no furniture of the universe unless its pieces all move on wheels.

⁵ Hume, read as contemporary metaphysicians have done—Ellis (2002) or Mumford (2004), for instance, read him as defending the distinctness of all things unconnected by any modal tie, but also Harman 2009 who reads him as a sort of occasionalist -, Nietzsche as portrayed by Haar (1993) where metaphysics is not rejected but deemed at odds with any discourse as discourse presupposes the grammar of predication and Whitehead (1929) and Deleuze (1968) as defenders of the irreducible character of processes.

(1986)—and failures to demarcate metaphysics out of science and philosophy (see DeLanda [2002], Ellis [2002], Brassier [2007] or Protevi [2013]). Ontological concerns have been increasingly present in social science (see Latour, [2012], Viveiros de Castro, (2009)), in feminism (Alaimo & Hekman, [2008]), in sexuality studies (see, for example, Parisi [2004], Ahmed [2006]) and in cultural studies in general (see, for example, Shaviro [2009] and Bogost [2012]). The renewed interest in metaphysics, however, often seems to come with some distancing of political issues that could be a symptom that the bedrock view is tacitly accepted. It is my contention in this essay that this renewal of interest in metaphysics brings about interesting elements to rethink this view. In particular, it opens opportunities to readdress the issue of governing *archés*. I have recently explored the strategy of an *anarcheology*—as the study of the ungrounded, of the inauthentic and of the ungoverned simultaneously (see Bensusan et al. (2012)). In this essay I directly present an alternative view of how ontology relates to politics. They relate in a political way, but their connection is not drawn by *archés* of any sort.

It is important to distinguish grounds—and bedrock—from floors. Recent developments in geophilosophy (Negarestani, [2008], Woodard, [2012, 2013]) have attempted to replace the image of ground with a more geologically informed conception of interdependent strata. Hamilton Grant (2006) has developed a geology-oriented account of dependency, conditionality, and sufficient reason. A sufficient reason for something can only be conceived, in his account, by thinking within nature and the multiple layers left by past events. There is no ultimate ground but ontology is to be conceived as a many-speed process of grounding and ungrounding. Instead of ground, the geophilosophical emphasis is on floor—both constituted and supporting what takes place on it. A ground, but not a floor, is unaffected by what stands on it. But if ontology is a floor, politics can reshape it. If it is a ground, it is oblivious to anything political. The view I propose here is an alternative to bedrock ontology where grounds are the main characters. It does not, however, undermine geophilosophy. In fact, anarcheology and geophilosophy can join forces to free politics (and ontology) from any *arché*.

ONTOLOGY, HAUNTOLOGY, AND BEDROCKS

This is the common image concerning ontology and politics: ontology grounds, politics comes later. Politics is what is up for

grabs, what can be affected by alliances, negotiations, governments, resistance movements, change of rule, revolutions and the balance of forces. Where politics ends, we find a *bedrock*, something that is often predicated as natural, as beyond all political swing. This is where ontology is. A *bedrock* that is never at stake—it is simply present. A bedrock is immune to political fire. The *bedrock view* is not about rolling stones but rather about fixed rocks—those that can ground. It holds that any ontology is to underlie all politics.

Now adopting the bedrock view is clearly a political stance. To be sure, it depends on an architectural decision: here lies ontology; there lies whatever comes on top of it. This architectural plan provides a landscape for orientation and as such it guides political decisions. The bedrock view has ontology as something that grounds, that is stable and fixed once and for all. It defers to ontology what is deemed unchangeable for it is the domain of what is structural, or of what is internally related to reality. Ontology could be no more than the rules of the game of reality—and, surely, the Ur-rules for all the political games. If we adopt such a position, we are left with two options: either there is something like an ontology that precedes all politics or there is no ontology at all.

The first option entails that politics has an outer boundary—the border where things are already determined, where there is a ready-made order or a set of rules for all games. This grounding ontological bedrock can be solid and dense or made of quicksand like some general logical principles (say, that the world satisfies classical logic), but it is a realm of its own, under no jurisdiction of any political agent and subject to its own laws. It means that ontology is safe from any political fire—that it is made of non-inflammable things. A law-like realm of nature, stable and structural, is a common candidate to give flesh to the idea of a *bedrock ontology*. It is an example of a domain that is beyond any political incendiary. Bedrock ontology can be an attractive idea for those who want an end to political dispute—even if it is to be found deep down inside a neutrino.

The second option provided no such closure for politics—it is all-pervasive. However, it allows for the ghost of a bedrock to haunt politics—there is a lack of ontology. This lack is the lack of bedrock—no fire can replace the solid, well-shaped, enduring and clear-edged stone. In this case we are left with a void of ontology, a hauntology, to borrow a word from Derrida, where nothing can be said about what there is because to be is still understood as to

be bedrock. Often, such a *bedrock hauntology* ends up placing politics in people's head and makes most of it depend on human election. Bedrock hauntology refrains from any ontological claims because they could not be anything but something fixed, stable and immune to the influence of anything else. It is therefore impossible to say anything about what there is, as nothing political can really look like bedrock. It is then interesting to consider variations of the move to make politics precede ontology. At least in the context of bedrock hauntology, the move would make it impossible to consider what ontology could follow from politics—as ontology is attached like Sisyphus to a rock.

If the bedrock view is abandoned, the bedrock dilemma—bedrock ontology versus bedrock hauntology—fades away. The common assumption behind both horns of the dilemma is that ontology is some sort of ground, immune to anything else and, in particular, alien to all political dispute. Ontology, if there is any, is bedrock underneath anything political. If this assumption is put aside, ontology needs no longer to be placed as something stable under the political busts; the quest for what exists is placed rather amid political endeavors and not grounding their feet. A different view would then reject the idea of a ground and therefore the friction between politics and ontology would no longer be a matter of priorities. A first possible alternative image is to take ontology and politics to be the same. If this is so, they can either have merely an identity of processes and mechanisms or also an identity of scope. So, for instance, when we talk about a politics of nature—or a natural contract (Serres [1990]), or democracy of objects (Bryant [2011])—we can understand it as describing a natural ontology or we can take it as being both ontology and politics. If we take them to have different scopes, the bedrock image can still find itself vindicated: the politics of nature could be taken as a ground for all other politics.

Instead of a view of ontology and politics being the same, I would like to propose and explore one where they interconnect heavily while nevertheless remaining distinct. The image is that of fire where the difference between what is in flames and what is inflammable is not a matter of substance but rather a matter of *position*. It is the position of the wood that determines where the flames will catch. Inflammability is everywhere but it cannot be measured independently of the relevant circumstances. Politics and ontology intertwine like fire and inflammability. This can seem like the interaction between activity and potentiality (or effects and tendencies, or dispositions and qualities, or execution

and capacity). In fact, the interactions between *energeia* and *dynamus* are akin to the movements of fire: it ignites the inflammable while also affecting the inflammability of things. Ontology is about inflammability, and therefore nothing is safe from political fire. The inspiration can be found in Heraclitus' doctrine of the *polemos* (more below) and its connection with fire. Heraclitus has that "[f]ire in its advance will judge and convict all things" (see, for example, 2009, fr. 66). But fire mingles with spices, he adds, and takes the flavor of them. It is as if political fire can inflame anything; there are things that set the stage for the fire—but they are no less combustible material.

In the fire view, ontology and politics dwell rather in pyrotechnics. The friction between them is no longer a matter of grounding, not even of reversed grounding. But rather an issue of how the inflammable is ignited. It is also no longer a question of territories—whether politics has an outer boundary. It is not that ontology reigns over things (or objects, or events, or intensities) while politics rules elsewhere. There is a politics of things (and of objects, events, intensities). But also, there is ontology of these things too. They are combustible. Ontology and politics get mixed, as fire knows no borders, no scope separations. To be is to take a political stance—it has a measure of inflammability and therefore is political fuel. To be is to be up for political grabs. There is no room for ontology separated from the realm of politics and yet they are contingently distinct one from the other. Ontology is made of combustible materials. As a consequence, nothing is immune to politics and no political outcome ceases to be up for grabs.

When we consider fire—and not bedrock—we escape the issue of grounding. Also, we avoid the subsidiary issues of layers, realms, priorities, mon- or pan-*archy*. Fire spreads by catching from one thing to the next. It is about contact, not about established orders. The non-reckoned inflammability of things lie in their capacity for politics. No order is alien to its surroundings. So, no movement of the planets or constitution of the particles is tested once and for all. It depends on what comes along. And it would be no good to appeal to a general ontology that maps what is possible and what is not. Or rather to postulate all-encompassing laws ruling over what is possible. This would be again to crave for bedrock. Once ontology is placed within pyrology, there is no appeal to an ultimate layer. Unless this ultimate layer can itself be burned.

ONTOLOGY AND POLITICS MEET ON FIRE

In order to flesh out the fire view I will now draw on some ideas developed within the speculative turn. In general, these ideas tend to open spaces to the contingent in ontology. They see the world as made more of interactions and change and less of stability and fixed structures. One could see them as building on the idea of an ontology without much appeal to necessary connections (or necessary beings). They are anarcheological in the sense that they make room for the ungoverned. They can be placed in the fire view because they somewhat contrast with ontologies that appeal to grounds.

A first idea about how to understand the connection between ontology and politics in terms of fire comes from Process Philosophy. Whitehead's (1929) guiding metaphysical idea is that reality has few ready-made items and they recombine themselves in processes that sustain and are sustained. Much of what happens to the characters of the world—the actual entities that form its *dramatis personae*—depends on processes ignited by how things take on others. Souriau (2009) introduced the vocabulary of *instauration*: something exists if and only if it has been constantly brought about by something else. Existing things are in a network or a crossroad of sponsors. And whatever sponsors can also blow things up—supporting alliances can be unmade, standing lifelines could be disrupted, and current networks can be dismantled. Existence is not independent from whatever else exists. Everything is at risk when anything can affect the support of anything else: the existence of something depends on what else happens to exist. As with combustible materials, flames can come from anywhere. Souriau's conception of existence as *instauration* appeals to an act of sponsoring. There is no existence without a sponsor. Existence never stands alone. Therefore, existence is not independent of anything else. One way of understanding the lesson of process philosophy is to think that everything is a creation of something else—everything ends up being implicated on everything else. It is about an interrelatedness of all things, a holism with no sense of whole apart from that of an assemblage of things, of things contingently placed together. Everything is connected to everything through actual alliances and sponsoring networks—and nothing like internal, necessary relations.

Process philosophy makes the vocabulary of ontology very close to that of politics—the processes (negotiations, alliances, tests, etc.) are common to both. Ontology is somehow about the

political transactions among whatever exists—not only human groups but living beings, objects, materials and forces. Latour (1984), drawing mainly on Souriau’s conception of existence, puts forward an ontology of testing procedures. He starts out with a principle of *irreduction*—which he calls “a prince who doesn’t govern”—stating that things *by themselves* are neither reducible nor irreducible to any other thing. For Latour, it follows that reality is what resists *testing* (or rather what has resisted so far). Reality doesn’t get certificated. Further, nothing on its own resists the different test procedures—everything relies on supporting alliances. We rely on the matter of our body, we rely on our tools, they rely on energy transmission, and energy transmission relies on pressure and temperature. Importantly, it is a chain that knows no privileged *ex-nihilo* starting point. There is no reality beyond the processes of negotiation, of crafting alliances and of relying on support. There is no reality beyond what is combustible by the trails of fire—no reality is politics-proof.

The image of ontology promoted by process philosophy is one where there are no transcendent principles or forces (or laws or fixed ingredients) that shape reality. In other words, there is no ontological bedrock. Further, there is no bedrock hauntology as there is no lack of ontology—existence is immanent to what exists. This lack of transcendence is akin to many ways of thinking popular in the twentieth century—including those championed by Heidegger and Deleuze. In contrast with the first,⁶ process philosophy promotes a robust ontology guided by the idea that all things are thrown in the world with no prior purpose or definite transcendent role—a generalized *Geworfenheit*. There is no transcendent element that guides, grounds or gives flesh to what there is. Similarly, there is nothing supporting politics like bedrock—ontology and politics are alike on-fire, the difference between them lying only in what is burnt now and what is inflammable. We can take politics to be the former and ontology to be the latter but there is no constitutional difference between them. Like fire, inflammability is to be tested by combustion (and the power of protective alliances). The difference in inflammability, in any occasion, is what guides the flames.

A second idea to flesh out the fire image comes from geophilosophy, tectonics, and a conception of materialism according to which matter is a vibrant repository of potentialities with a histo-

⁶ It is interesting to compare Heidegger’s word “gestiftet” with Souriau’s “instaurer.” In both cases, it is an act that brings forward existence—an act that sponsors it.

ry of folds and layers. Iain Hamilton Grant contrasts materialism to the many sorts of *somatism* that hold that there is nothing beyond bodies—for instance, Harman's insistence that there is nothing beyond objects (see the debate in Bryant, Snircek, and Harman (2011)). Grant draws on Schelling in seeking a philosophy of nature capable of providing a continuation to a tradition that goes back to Plato's conception of physics where the main focus is ontogenesis and not a physics of all things (objects, already formed structures like bodies or governments or mobs or ideas) as Aristotle would understand it. Grant also finds in Schelling the idea of a natural history that underlies both what exists and what is politically at stake. Natural history is a geology of folds and layers that makes what is possible conditioned on what has taken place in the past—whereas matter is itself unconditioned, *das Unbedingte*, also translated as unthinged. It belongs in a transcendental level, in the sense of Schelling's nature as transcendental, as the condition of possibility for everything. Matter here is inflammable, it is about what can be done with a material that is saddened with potentialities. There is a material element undermining the core of anything—politics is always possible because matter itself has no nature, nature is nothing but history.

Jane Bennett's (2010) vital materialism provides a framework for a political ecology of things. She believes our time and our political concerns are taking us towards matter and objects. The appeal to ecology is itself an interesting element of a taste for fire. Guattari's (1989) seminal concern with how politics emerges from a confluence of an ecology of the *socius*—the practices, the institutions, the habitus etc.—an ecology of subjectivity—desires, fears and management of drives—and an ecology of fauna and flora and objects. The three ecologies interfere in each other, each one of them make the others possible. Whatever takes place in one of those ecologies is echoed and spread through contagion. There is no fixed structure in any of the three scopes, neither is there a hierarchical order between them. Change can come from each of the three realms and spread throughout. Bennett conceives of matter as a repository of capacities for composition that cannot be exhausted by its deployment in any particular configuration of things. Here it is worth mentioning that politics meets ontology in fire at least in some sense in the ontology of plastic put forward by Catherine Malabou (2005). She also holds that there is a common component to everything and holds that this then has a high degree of plasticity; which she contrasts with elasticity: plastic has no archaic shape to which it tends back to,

its form just shrift endlessly. Malabou's ontology of plastic is not presented as a variety of materialism, but it shares with it the idea of a common component that is not in itself determining of anything but, like fuel, carries potentiality. In general, the appeal to matter can be something different than the appeal to bedrock; it could be the basis of a universe with no determinate form. Even though in important senses contemporary materialisms differ from process philosophy, in both cases we can find elements to see ontology and politics meeting in fire. They in fact meet in matter—which is at once ontological and political—but matter is intrinsically combustible. It is fuel lent to what there is; no passive constituent.

A third idea to flesh out the fire comes from absolute facticity as put forward by Meillassoux (2006). While Grant's materialism takes matter as a repository of folds and layers and process, philosophy sees a state of affairs in terms of alliances and resistances actually in place, the thesis of absolute facticity holds that nothing prevents nothing from turning into something entirely other—the ruling principle is the principle of unreason. Meillassoux (2006) argues that we should draw from Hume not a thesis about the limit of our capacity to access the world—correlationism, that maintains that we cannot know (or even think) of anything beyond a correlation between us and the world—but rather simply that there is no sufficient reason for anything. It should follow that everything is contingent, nothing is held the way it is based on needs of any sort, things are the way they are out of no necessity. He argues that instead of embracing a humility from Hume's attacks on how reason (aided or unaided by experience) can reach the world, we should rather proceed to find in the facticity of all things an absolute that reason can attain. All things are factual—this is the only absolute. The absence of grounding precludes the possibility of bedrock of any kind holding and framing political action. Politics and ontology meet in facticity. Here there is no inflammability before the work of fire and everything can catch fire—anything is therefore equally inflammable. There are no more than sudden flames—or rather *ignis fatuus*, those fires that look like a flickering light and that disappear when looked closely. There is nothing beyond the factual combustion of something—nothing but the inflammability of everything.

POLEMOS AND INFLAMMABILITY

The fire view contrasts vividly with the bedrock one. Ontology is

no longer seen as the realm of the ready-made but rather as something that fuels politics while entangled with it. The fire view is made especially plausible if we put aside a separation between politics and nature and regard the latter as equally affected by the stuff politics is made of: disputes, conflicts, contagion, persuasion, alliances, negotiations. Nature is a realm for politics. Nature is full of political agents and it is part of human politics, as the history of technical objects attest. The ontology of inflammability can be seen as the ontology of problems: as such it is simply the landscape where politics takes place. It captures the smoothness, the vulnerability, and the difficulties ahead of any political alliance or dispute. The notion of *polemos*—and its corresponding ontology of polemics—can help understand that.

Heraclitus has arguably worked within the fire view. His fragments (see, for example, 2009) present an image of the world as filled with interactions, flows, and self-animation. Fragment 53 introduces the *polemos* as what made some slaves while making some masters. But the *polemos* is not presented as a *ex-nihilo* creator—but rather also what made some gods while making some mortals. Slavery, but also mortality, is driven by the *polemos*. It bridges together how things are and how we relate to them. It appears as the vulnerability of all alliances. All things come to being through *polemos*, says fragment 80. It is the force of dispute, the engine of all *polemics*. The force of *polemos* is that of disruption that can come from anywhere. It is no fixed *arché* but rather an element of displacement and disturbance that acts as an insurance against any ontology (or politics) of fixed ingredients. It is a force that has no fixed ontological status, no fixed place in any chart of beings. Heidegger (see Heidegger & Fink [1979]) translates *polemos* with a German word for dispute, *Auseinandersetzung*—what moves out to another position. It is an interesting way to portray controversy. *Polemos* is dissolution. It belongs to a realm of displacements, negotiations, disputes, and frictions that stops nowhere short of ontology itself.

I have recently been part of an effort to uncover new fragments of Heraclitus (see Bensusan et al. [2012]). It was an anarcheological effort, in the sense of the construction of a version that contrasts with the settled one. According to this new legend, Heraclitus survived for millennia, but didn't remain fully faithful to himself. He lived to be a world-traveler and aged to cherish his widespread anonymity. Due maybe to his mountain herbs, he had the strength to leave Ephesus for good and to live for millennia. Our work considered his late output, mainly his last texts from

his days in Deir Al Balah, Gaza, before the bombings of 2009. Rumor had it that he was planning a second edition of his book on *physis* to be published in the several languages he then spoke. He used to say that in him lived those philosophers who didn't intend to have a grip on things but who would rather approach things on tiptoes. The manuscript that he was carrying with him in his last years disappeared after the Israeli attack and no more than about two hundred new fragments remained. Some of these new fragments provide an *aggiornamento* of the doctrine that the *polemos* ties ontology and politics together. Heraclitus' account of the *polemos* brings together ontology and politics and encompasses some of the ideas I rehearsed in the previous section. His account is both an alternative to the bedrock image and to all efforts to make politics alien to ontology.

Polemos is presented as a political plot inside everything. It is not something that can be contemplated from the outside as it also acts through our awareness of it. It is thoroughly situated. It is as if Heraclitus were saying that no matter is immune to fire—one can maybe contemplate things from beyond the inflammable, but one wouldn't then be able to breathe there. Among the many ways the *polemos* finds to spread its disruption, our knowledge of it is one of them. He writes:

130.⁷ Whenever something comes about, a *polemos* comes about. Then there is politics.

131. *Polemos* often lies where we don't expect. It lies not only in the catapults, but also in the surprise that meets the *polemos*, in the temptation for *polemos* and in the knowledge of *polemos*.

Polemos cannot be controlled through knowledge because it is present in the very cage that attempts to capture it. Any exercise in ontology takes on a political stance. The *polemos* is the force of resistance against the establishment of realms and dominions. It is a vulnerability to fire and an incapacity to be merely following

⁷ These recent fragments by Heraclitus were found in different versions in different languages. Anarcheology, of course, deals always in a plurality of versions and refrains from trying to single them down. Here I chose one amid different versions of each fragment. The ones marked with a star are considerably different from what was published in Bensusan et al. (2012).

orders. It is the spark of things, rather than what subjects them. Heraclitus has several fragments on the *polemos* and an-*arché*:

138b. The powerful of the time end up claiming that the *polemos* is asleep. It sleeps, but doesn't obey.

155. I keep meeting people that act as if disputes are about poles. Polarization distorts the *polemos*—*polemos* has no poles. Its force lies in the sliding of the poles. . . . only when we get tired, we choose sides.

178.* There are no *archés*. What we take to be *archés* are often no more than the slowest things to change—like a turtle that would hold the world or the laws of nature that would guide the world. Slow things are not always metronomes setting the pace for the orchestra. Often, they are other instruments. *Polemos* can also be slow. It is just about a lack of *archés*—it is an an-*arché*.

198.* . . . [On the other hand,] attachment to *archés* springs from an interest in control: find out who is the boss and cut deals with him. But no empire lasts because no realm lasts. Not even the realm of all things. There is no principle that could rule out any other beginning. Bacteria, worms, and viruses as much as roaches and rats didn't surrender to the alleged human victory over the animal world. Human gestures are themselves full of anomalies that resist the humanizing principle imposed to all things. The humanizing principle is the compulsory adherence on which people are forged out of whoever is born from a human womb. . . . Still, no principle can prevent the monster coming out. All that can be done to keep the monster at bay is to protect the *archés* with armies and leave all the exceptions unarmed.

252. The *polemos* doesn't do anything, but it doesn't leave anything done either.

259.* The *polemos* is no demiurge. It is closer to a blind molester.

Polemos is a capacity to disrupt. To say that it is not in our heads but rather among things is to say that there is no non-slippery

core to anything. Fragment 145 says:

145. It is quite common to exorcise the *polemos* from the world by holding that each thing has its core. A core is a conquered territory where battles have already been fought and everything is properly trained and tamed. In order to persuade us that the world is rid of any *polemos*, we posit a world that has no more things than the ones that seem to be still. And then we can say, with the sort of philosophy that has been most popular in the last centuries, that *polemos* (and all polemics) is in our heads.

In contrast, Heraclitus sees *physis* as *polemos*. It lies in the weaknesses of the arrangements. Disruption is not therefore an incident, but rather what he prefers to see as styles of acting in an ontological plot. He diagnoses what is lost in the interpretation of *physis* as a realm of natural laws:

141. When *physis*, which is *polemos*, was replaced by a realm of laws—and nature stopped being strong to become merely ruling—it became an instrument of order and progress. What was left of the *polemos* itself was then thrown into a realm of chance.

157b.* Nature, but not *physis*, is no more than our scapegoat.

271.* [It often seems as if we are] taming nature in order to tame people. The world is presented as a universe of servitude—a universe of unavoidable servitude. So people fight for concessions. [But, in fact,] they have nothing to lose other than their ontological chains.

There are no hierarchies (no *-archies*) other than the ones determined by the existing alliances, by the current political configuration of things. Here the fire view is clear: politics shapes ontology as much as ontology shapes politics. Heraclitus takes necessity and contingency to be equally up for grabs, not derived from *archés* and not held by bedrocks.

196.* . . . While the river changes, it changes what it drags and what can swim in it. Nothing is necessary or contingent once and for all. The flowing of the river changes not

only what there is but also what there possibly is. No law is immune to flooding. Some of them are just too costly to challenge at the moment.

Heraclitus' conception of the ontological as something that has little to do with fixity in itself and his suspicion concerning the politics of bedrock ontologies are expressed by fragments like the following:

210. While everything is connected to everything, there is no whole

212. Borders are where the war stopped. Being? It cannot be anything but a cease-fire.

213. [They say, someone says] that words are prejudices. So are things.

223. There is *polemos* in the midst of it all.

237.* I hear people asking what the world is made of. It cannot be made of anything but of world, I want to say. They want a list. There are things that cannot be in a list. I guess they are asking for an end point to what can be acted upon. They are asking for the unmovable. I suspect this is because they would like to find a source of activity that makes anything else inanimate. They want to be rid of their possibilities to act. They want to delegate. The world is not made of delegated actions.

277b.* Thought cannot strip off the garments of the world. It is itself a piece of garment. Nothing, not even the world, is ever fully naked—nor is it fully clothed. *Physis* loves to hide itself—it would dread to be fully unveiled. Thought has nothing to do with the naked universe. *Physis*, and the *polemos* that infests it, live rather in the undressing.

The activity of making ontological claims is itself political. It is a political activity—an intervention on how things are. Ontology is not in the description, but rather it is in the performance of describing things. It fits no narrative; it requires rather a gesture, and a situated one. Ontology is not about faithful accounts, but about teasing the world. Heraclitus writes:

222. A friend once explained to me that ontology is politics viewed from above. I never stopped thinking about that. But I feel the vertigo.

147. In the beginning there was no politics. Neither was there *polemos*. Nor was this the beginning.

228.* . . . No description of the world can afford not to stir it. Don't read me as if I am saying that there are *polemos* or *logos* or anything. I don't deal in catalogues. Everything can be ripped apart. When I talk about what there is, I want to unlock something. The unlocking is what matters. What matters is what escapes from one's words.

286. When I talk about the *polemos*, I'm not describing the underground of things, I'm finding one amid many ways to bury them.

286a. . . . I don't do geology, I dig tunnels.

286b. Words are actors. They perform different characters in different acts. They carry through at most a style throughout. *Polemos* is no character in the plot nor is it the director behind the scene—it is no more than a style of acting.

Heraclitus argues against the privilege of substantive nouns over articles, pronouns and adverbs. He also argues against taking the world to be no more than a formal architecture. It won't do to consider the difference between reductionism and non-reductionism, or between monism and pluralism, without considering the difference between saying that everything is a rock and saying that everything is fire. While not in the business of taking everything to be one thing, not even fire or *polemos*, Heraclitus points at the difference between an ontology inspired by layers of rock and one that draws on flames. His gesture would rather mostly be one of asserting the *polemos* as something that cuts across ontology and politics. At the same time, he aims to avoid fire to be thought of as lava which will ultimately solidify and, instead, point at the ubiquitous molten rock.

Fire is not like earth; it spreads, it doesn't ground. In a fire ontology, contagion matters more than support and subjection. It is also about contact: nothing catches fire at a distance. Fire has to

go and spread itself. Fire is a testing procedure that discovers unsuspected distances between things. It unveils empty gaps between fragments assembled by testing the strength of the alliances. Whenever anything relies on anything else, there is a sort of inflammability between them. To rely on something is to entertain a *vinculum*—a bond, a chain, a link. There, ontology and politics meet on-fire.

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