

**Toward an Ethos for Democracy**  
The Early Bakhtin and Habermas on Democratic  
Procedures

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10/9/2023

Thesis for obtaining a “Master of arts” degree in philosophy  
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I hereby declare and assure that I, Sidney de Laat, have drafted this thesis independently, that no other sources and/or means other than those mentioned have been used and that the passages of which the text content or meaning originates in other works - including electronic media - have been identified and the sources clearly stated. Place: Nijmegen, The Netherlands, date: 10-9-2023

## **Abstract**

Procedures form an integral part of modern-day democracy. They make sure democracy is organized properly and fairly, and exist to prevent arbitrariness. However, there has been a tendency in democratic theory to consider procedures only legitimate because of their inherent rationality. This tendency, present in thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas, runs counter to the idea that, in a democracy, the *demos* is the foremost source of legitimacy. I argue that Mikhail Bakhtin's *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* can be used to articulate a more democratic relationship between people and procedures, as his notion of the *act* demonstrates how an ethical, emotional engagement is present in everything we do, including following procedures, and that having some sort of *ethos* is thus unavoidable.

## Introduction

It is hard to imagine modern-day democracy without procedures. As anchors that both secure and guide democracy, procedures ensure democracy is stable, 'fair' and not subject to the arbitrariness of the masses or the whims of individual politicians. They may range from petitions and the regulation of protests, to the voting process in which the entire (eligible) population elects their representatives. As populations have increased in size and diversity, procedures have been instrumental in accommodating the growing variety of interests, desires, opinions and beliefs present in any society that is no longer able to feasibly operate a "direct" democracy. This success notwithstanding, procedures can only serve a democracy if they are, themselves, democratic. If democracy is about the "people" wielding "power", then the people must themselves be involved in the procedures governing democracy. In short, they must have a democratic character.

Over the past decades, however, political theory has been characterized by a tendency to take procedures as extraneous to the concrete populace. In such cases, procedures are only considered legitimate insofar as they have a rational character and ensure rational outcomes. The tacit consent of the people is presupposed in these theories, as any democratic participant would – according to this argument – reasonably desire the most rational outcome as this would align with his/her own interest. However, going along with what is rational, *simply because* it is rational, cannot be a guiding principle of democratic government, as those who constitute the subject of democracy and democratic government – the *demos* – are then no longer the source of legitimacy of the procedure and are no longer present in the operation of the procedure. A notable exponent of this type of thinking is the political theory of Jürgen Habermas and his "procedural popular sovereignty".

To demonstrate the fundamental problem of the viewpoint expressed above, this article shifts its focus from the 'usual suspects' in the realm of political philosophy, to one of the earliest works of the Russian philosopher, literary theorist and linguist Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975): *К философии поступка / Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. (1999) The philosophy Bakhtin provides us with in this text gives us ample opportunity to reflect on the relationship between the people and democratic procedures. Bakhtin's notion of the *поступок / act* helps us to think of democratic participation as *more* than just following rational procedures. It gives us a critique of a notion of procedures Habermas gravitates towards and helps us think about democratic

participation in terms of a (democratic) *ethos*: as the unavoidable ethical disposition we have toward our environment and, therefore, procedures.

If Bakhtin's earliest work is often overlooked, the potential political-philosophical significance of this work is even more of an afterthought. In this very early, unfinished, manuscript, Bakhtin showcases himself mostly as a metaphysician, phenomenologist and critic of contemporary culture, not as a political thinker. But Bakhtin was ambitious, and intended to include a chapter on the "ethics of politics" (Bakhtin 1999, 54). However, he never started or finished it, or perhaps it was written, but lost.

To give credence to the argument outlined above, this first section of this paper is dedicated to addressing both the terms 'democracy' and 'ethos' to lay the groundwork for any further investigation. Working definitions of both are offered. In the second and third section, an overview of Bakhtin's and Habermas' theories is given, and the various threads which unite and separate these thinkers are woven. In the fourth section, Chantal Mouffe's critique of Habermasian procedural democracy and her championing of an *ethos* serve as a stepping stone to the fifth section, where the Habermasian view is criticized in Bakhtinian terms and countered by an elaboration of Bakhtin's notion of the *act*. Here, the paper argues that democratic participation cannot be achieved without the actual presence of the democratic subject, that procedures can only be democratic if they are emotionally and volitionally *acknowledged* by the (democratic) subject, and that conceiving of democratic procedures in purely rational terms amounts to a denial of the unavoidable fact of our act-performing nature, which makes us engage with our (political) environment every day, everywhere.

Engaging with the early Bakhtin in this way is fruitful because of two reasons. Firstly, conceiving of Bakhtin as a thinker who gives us a potential novel way to engage with the political has been far too neglected in Bakhtin scholarship. This paper aims to correct this lacuna and showcase how Bakhtin scholarship may profit from a more daring approach to the early work of Bakhtin. Secondly, the field of (agonistic) democratic theory also has much to gain from taking Bakhtin seriously, as Bakhtin reveals to us, in his own radical way, to what extent 'universalisms' are contradictory to our concrete, actual life. This casts doubt on any project which grounds democracy in universal, eternal truths, and is thus critical of the idea that the project of democracy can somehow be "finished".

What Bakhtin uniquely adds to this debate, is his phenomenological approach, and his insistence on the primacy of concrete, lived experience. This distinguishes him from a

thinker such as Mouffe, who – even though critical of Habermas – is closer to Habermas in methodology than Bakhtin, as she uses a more traditional style of reasoning and arguing.

## 1. Democratic Ethos

### 1.0 Navigating Democratic Theories

The field of democratic theory is a treacherous one, as there is a lot of disagreement as to what democracy is, or should be. Any research related to democracy therefore inevitably runs into methodological obstacles, and choices have to be made. Why choose one definition of democracy over another? What facets of democracy should be considered crucial? And which one are of a secondary nature? This is not a weakness, but a strength, as democracy and democratic theory flourishes when a variety of viewpoints are considered. That is why, for the purpose of this article, I take recourse to specific definitions of democracy and (democratic) ethos best suited to the task I have presented in the introduction. For a basic, cursory, definition of democracy, I am inspired by both the etymology of democracy and the view of Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl. For the purposes of this article, their definition provides a conceptual framework that proves useful.

### 1.1 What is Democracy?

Whether we are talking about direct democracy, constitutional democracy, representative democracy, deliberative democracy, agonistic democracy, or parliamentary democracy; democracy is not a uniform endeavour. Democracy as a concept, style of governance, practice, way of life, or *ethos* has many faces. Therefore, to pretend that each of the various and numerable articulations of democracy share some sort of neutral, underlying, and singular definition of democracy – of how the people may wield power – on top of which they add, subtract, extrapolate, or interpolate, their own idiosyncratic modifications, is naïve at best, and dangerous at worst, as the appeal to a perceived, single, ‘true’ definition of democracy encourages exclusionary practices to those who do not meet the requirements of the supposedly proper definition of democracy. Democracy has a variety of meanings to a variety of people and cultures throughout history.

A working definition is nonetheless required if we are to reflect on democracy and the potential of a democratic ethos. The word *democracy* comes from Greek, and its etymology reveals democracy as the power (*kratos*) of the people (*demos*). The conception of who constitute the people may vary, as does the power the people may wield, but the skeletal structure of what democracy is about makes itself known here. In contemporary democracies the *kratos* of the *demos* is mostly enacted via the election of representatives by citizens. As Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl (2009, 4) formulate it – taking inspiration from Robert Dahl’s notion of “polyarchy” – contemporary political democracy is defined, in generic terms, as a “system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives.”

They add however, that if a democracy is to stay afloat it also requires procedures. In this respect they, as we will see further on, reveal themselves as being on the same page as Habermas. These procedures exist to guarantee and respect civic rights and the “rule of law” (Schmitter, Karl 2009, 8). Without such procedures a political order cannot be considered “democratic”. This does not mean democracy is exhausted in procedures, but rather that they are a necessary requirement: “These procedures alone do not define democracy, but their presence is indispensable to its persistence.” (Schmitter, Karl 2009, 8). I agree with Schmitter and Karl, as well as Habermas that procedures are necessary to guarantee certain rights and freedoms in a democracy to, for instance, avoid dangerous populist outbursts and abuse of power by elected representatives. But I depart from both Schmitter and Karl, and Habermas because of their suspicion of the idea of a democratic ethos. As I argue in chapter five, some sort of ethos is necessary in a democracy if it is to be democratic at all. Surely, we require some idea of what a (democratic) ethos is, or could be.

## 1.2 Defining Ethos

The idea of an *ethos* (whether this be a *democratic* ethos or not) has been articulated in a variety of forms and by a variety of figures throughout the history of political thought, and under various names. Thinkers such as Machiavelli (*vivere civile*), Jean Bodin (*mœurs*), Montesquieu (*vertu*), Hegel (*Sittlichkeit*), Charles Taylor (*agapē*), and Derrida (*hospitalité*) have each formulated a variant of *ethos* to suit their philosophical reflections on the relationship of people *vis á vis* each other and / or *vis á vis* the state. Common to each of

these articulations is that *ethos* is conceived as a certain *disposition*, a propensity to act in a certain way. As such, *ethos* should not be seen as synonymous with *ethics*. This disposition is often a *prereflexive* one, one present before, or regardless of, any conscious, rational reflection. It is something of a *habit, custom, or second nature*. As a consequence, the idea of an *ethos* is closely related to ideas of identity and personhood; of what kind of person somebody is or wants to be, or rather, what kind of *people* we are or want to be.

### 1.3 Defining Democratic Ethos

If we are concerning ourselves with a democratic *ethos* then, we are speaking of a certain disposition or propensity to act in a democratic way, that is, to act in accordance with the ideas of democracy and make it a part of who we are as people. Thus, a democratic *ethos* amounts to a habitual desire to participate in democracy as a second nature. The definition of democratic *ethos* used in this paper is based on the works of Alessandro Ferrara and Chantal Mouffe, with a cursory definition of democratic *ethos* provided here by Ferrara, and later on, in chapter four, an investigation of Mouffe's reflections on a democratic *ethos* as a counter to Habermas' theory.

A relatively recent elaboration of democratic *ethos* can be found in Alessandro's Ferrara's *The Democratic Horizon: Hyperpluralism and the Renewal of Political Liberalism* (2014). Here, the idea of a democratic *ethos* obtains on a central role, as Ferrara considers the renewal of a democratic *ethos* as an important strategy to counter those theories of popular sovereignty that try solve the "crisis of democracy" by posing a vision of democracy based solely on *procedural* criteria. To bet on procedures as the way to properly design a democracy is a risky endeavour according to Ferrara, as one may end up in a situation where every formal parameter of a democratic procedure is satisfied, yet deprived of any substantial meaning. In such a case, we are merely emulating democracy, and this may, in practice, produce "elections without democracy": a description Ferrara uses to refer to the situation that sparked the Arab Spring (Ferrara 2014, 4).

For this reason, we need to take recourse to the idea of a democratic *ethos* to make democracy palpable to its subjects. At its core, such an *ethos*, Ferrara argues, "underlies and enlivens the procedural aspects of democracy" (Ferrara 2014, 5). It makes sure people adopt and stick to procedures not just because of the *format* of these procedures, but also because of a substantial engagement (Ferrara 2014, 5). What is required is a solid *democratic culture*, i.e. an *ethos*. A democracy without a democratic culture amounts to



nothing but a “mere going through certain democratic motions” (Ferrara 2014, 44). Or, as Ken Hirschkop (1999, 275) puts it: “Democracy may have to be more than politics in the strict sense to succeed as politics in the strict sense.”

## 2. Mikhail Bakhtin

In *Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy* (1999), Hirschkop sees the potential for democracy as more than “politics in the strict sense” in the works of Bakhtin. Unfortunately, however, Hirschkop pays little attention to Bakhtin’s early work; *Toward a Philosophy of the Act / К философии поступка*. Barring one brief subchapter, Hirschkop is mostly concerned with Bakhtin’s other works, such as *Rabelais and his World / Творчество Франсуа Рабле* and *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity / Автор и Герой Эстетической Деятельности*. Nonetheless, Hirschkop’s brief engagement with *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* is useful, as Hirschkop convincingly connects Bakhtin’s critique of Modernity to one of the most pertinent problems haunting liberal, constitutional democracies: taking rational, legal norms, rather than moral ones, as the source of obligation. Hirschkop – drawing from Max Weber – points out how *purely legal* norms cannot obligate. If a democracy is to be authoritative or persuasive from a moral point of view, it needs to translate the material changes classical liberalism brought about into something more meaningful than a temporary advantage. Mere law is not a source of moral feeling (Hirschkop 1999, 151-152).

Hirschkop’s reading of the early Bakhtin creates a fertile soil for thinking about Bakhtin as a philosopher we may study in order to learn something about political ontology. Unfortunately, Hirschkop’s reading of the early Bakhtin in this respect is quite brief and confines itself to relating Bakhtin’s notion of “theoreticism” to the moral vacuity of classical liberalism. That is, Hirschkop does not go beyond a *critique*, only using Bakhtin’s philosophy as a whip to dish out the beatings. I intend to cultivate this soil further by deepening, extending, and extrapolating from Hirschkop’s fruitful engagement with the early Bakhtin to drawing close attention to a central notion in Bakhtin’s early philosophy: the act. However, to achieve this, it is necessary to understand the philosophical framework within which Bakhtin develop his philosophy.

## 2.1. The World of Life and the World of Culture

The red thread throughout Bakhtin's treatise is his analysis of contemporary culture, most notably his critique of the crevice – characteristic of modernity – between the “world of life” and the “world of culture”.<sup>1</sup> These “worlds” do not refer to concrete places, but are two ontological categories Bakhtin employs to describe the way we encounter Being. Modernity, for Bakhtin, is defined by the disconnect between these two worlds.

The “world of life” refers to the absolutely unique, non-repeating and concrete experience of my existence. It refers to the realm in which I live, breathe, create, think, act and die. It is *my* world, because from the unique spatiotemporal configuration I inhabit – which *I and only I* (can) inhabit – no one has access to the unique, non-repeating and concrete experience of *my* life, nor do I to that of any others (Bakhtin 1999, 40). So, as I am writing, I am sitting on a chair, behind a desk and staring at a screen, and no-one else has, or will in the future, sit at the same chair behind the same desk and stare at the same screen at the same time, and in the same way, as I do now. In the world of life, everything happens once and only once. As such, the Being of life is not a static entity, but an ongoing process, a continuous becoming; it is “Being-as-event” [*bytie-sobytie* / бытие-событие] (Bakhtin 1999, 40, Бахтин 2020, 76). Bakhtin writes:

I occupy a place in once-occurrent Being that is unique and never-repeatable, a place that cannot be taken by anyone else and is impenetrable for anyone else. In the given once-occurrent point where I am now located, no one else has ever been located in the once-occurrent time and once-occurrent space of once occurrent Being. [...] That which can be done by me can never be done by anyone else. (Bakhtin 1999, 40)

The absolute uniqueness described above makes us *answerable* beings according to Bakhtin, and to be answerable is to acknowledge one's own unique participation in Being-as-event (Bakhtin 1999, 40). Answerability [*otvetstvennost'* / ответственность], however, also entails acknowledging my *non-alibi* in Being. That is, I cannot delegate my being unique and answerable by purporting to be ‘elsewhere’ (as one would do if one has

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the text, Bakhtin uses a variety of terms to describe the same phenomena. For instance, the “world of life” is also referred to as the “historical actuality [of a given act]”, whereas the “world of culture” is also referred to as the “content/sense aspect [of a given act]”.

an *alibi*), as I cannot *not* occupy *this* unique place at *this* unique time (Bakhtin 1999, 95). Or, put differently: I cannot be anyone else but my unique self. We are ‘condemned’ to be unique, to participate uniquely in the world. This condemnation is also described by Bakhtin as the “concrete ought” (Bakhtin 1999, 75).

The “world of culture” is an altogether different world. Whereas life refers to ever-changing, continuous and non-repeating ‘Being-as-event’, culture is Bakhtin’s description for static, *objective*, Being [*bytie* / бытие]. For Bakhtin, culture does not just refer to the artefacts we create (such as pieces of art), but also – as Soboleva (2010, 13) points out – to “semantic facts”. These include theoretical and practical ideas / representations [*Vorstellungen*], such as laws of nature, values, and various ethical norms (Soboleva 2010, 13). This may seem odd, as we are used to a demarcation between “hard” scientific facts and “soft” ethical values, but for Bakhtin these both belong to the same category insofar as they both consist of generalizable, theoretical, and abstract statements. In short, culture refers to the entirety of theoretical propositions and valuative judgements (e.g. “The pressure of a gas is inversely proportional to its volume” or “Thou shalt not steal”).

The world of Being is deeply a-personal and therefore *alien* to my own life. Whatever may happen in my life – my birth, sickness, happiness, misfortune or death – is of no consequence to the world of objective Being. Whatever happens, objective Being stays equal to itself, whether I exist or not (Bakhtin 1999, 9). Newton’s laws were *valid in themselves* long before Newton discovered them, and continue to do so long after Newton’s death. However, this truth [*istina*/истина] did not yet exist as *cognized* truth (Bakhtin 1999, 10).<sup>2</sup> That is, as truths incorporated in the fabric of Being-as-event. They were not yet truths that are *participatively thought*.

Participative – or, “unindifferent” – thinking [*uchastnoe myshlenie* / учащенное мышление] is the way we are *involved, engaged* or *interested* in non-repeating Being as concrete and unique persons (Bakhtin 1999, 44, Бахтин 2020, 79). It is about not detaching the products of our performed acts (which belong to the world of culture) from

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<sup>2</sup> In the Russian language, both *istina* [истина] and *pravda* [правда] translate to the English word “truth”. However, each word carries their own connotation. *Istina* refers to a ‘objective’ or ‘scientific’ truth, the type of truth one would find in Plato’s realm of Ideas. *Pravda* on the other hand, refers to a more situational truth; truth as the “right” or “just” thing to do in a given circumstance (being *true to a situation*). In many respects, Bakhtin’s early philosophy is about the tension between *istina* and *pravda*, as Bakhtin tries hard to marry the existence of objective knowledge with the situational demands we find ourselves in in the unique circumstances of our life. For further reading on this subject, see Vasylychenko, Andriy. 2014. “Istina.” In *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, edited by Barbara Cassin, 513-515. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

said performed act (which is enacted from the world of life), but rather to “relate both of them to the unitary and unique context of life and seek to determine them in that context as an indivisible unity.” (Bakhtin 1999, 19, footnote). When thinking participatively, things are *with us*, and not *opposite* to us. We incorporate them into our concrete existence, the existence we breathe our first and last breath in. Unfortunately, our contemporary times are characterized by a lack of participative thinking, and, as a consequence, life / Being-as-event and culture / objective Being do not meet.

## 2.2. Theoreticism

This “non-fusion and non-interpenetration” (Bakhtin 1999, 3) between the world of life and the world of culture has invoked a crisis in philosophical thinking, a crisis that is characterized by what Bakhtin dubs “theoreticism”. Theoreticism is used to describe a variety of practises, each of which is characterised by the abstracting from my unique, answerable self, and thus pretending ‘as if I did not exist’ (Bakhtin 1999, 9). Or, as Sandler (2015, 170) aptly puts it, theoreticism refers to “a broad array of philosophical approaches that only recognize the reality of objective content, and remain necessarily blind to the particularity of the deed.”

In other words, under theoreticism, the world of culture (objective Being) tries “to pass itself off” (Bakhtin 1999, 7) as the *entire* world and, as a result, becomes utterly detached from the world of life (Being-as-event). As a consequence, objective Being becomes a sort of loose cannon, as it is governed by, and develops according to, nothing but its own inherent laws. This development is already problematic in contemporary technology, as technological apparatuses

... are perfected according to their own inner law, and, as a result, they develop from what was initially a means of rational defense into a terrifying, deadly, and destructive force. All that which is technological, when divorced from the once-occurrent unity of life and surrendered to the will of the law immanent to its development, is frightening; it may from time to time irrupt into this once-occurrent unity as an irresponsibly destructive and terrifying force. (Bakhtin 1999, 7)

Besides the dangers of a “terrifying, deadly and destructive force” irrupting into Being-as-event in the guise of technology, theoreticism is also the root of a danger that is far more penetrating: the debasement of *meaning*.

Meaning, for Bakhtin, is the area where objective Being (culture) and Being-as-event (life) meet. Or, to be more specific, how *we* – as answerable, concrete persons – bring these two together. It is because *we participate* in Being and incorporate Being into the fabric of our concrete, non-repeating existence, that things become *meaningful* to us (Soboleva 2010, 14). However, if the world of objective Being becomes transcendent to our life and becomes something *opposite* to us, as is the case under theoreticism, it can, as a result, no longer be prescriptive to us (Soboleva 2010, 13), it can no longer be an authentic source of obligation (Hirschkop 1999, 50). The merely objective is an inadequate source of meaning and, therefore, obligation.

Bakhtin is chiefly arguing against Kant’s formalist ethics here, as, according to Bakhtin, Kant’s categorical imperative “determines the performed act as a universally valid law, but as a law that is devoid of a particular positive content: law as such, in itself, or the idea of pure legality, i.e., legality itself is the content of law.” (Bakhtin 1999, 25). This critique is very similar to Hegel’s critique of Kantian ethics formulated in *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (Hegel 2020, 162-163). Pure law, the law *as such* is not, and cannot be, an authentic source of meaning and, therefore, obligation. The categorical imperative may be universal and justified from the perspective of theory (as Bakhtin admits), but what is necessary is the transference of this theoretical universal validity to the context of “that unique Being in which we live and die” (Bakhtin 1999, 8). This is something the “empty demand for legality” (Bakhtin 1999, 26) of formalist ethics cannot provide.

To understand this relation between meaning, obligation, the objective and the subjective, Bakhtin employs the example of undersigning a contract. If I sign a contract, such a contract consists of various stipulations which oblige me to do so-and-so. These various stipulations constitute the ‘objective’ content of the contract. However, as we have seen, the objective content *as such* does not possess any obligatory force. The simple fact that a contract stipulates that I must do so-and-so does not constitute any *genuine* commitment to these stipulations. And thus, Bakhtin writes: “It is not the content of an obligation that obligates me, but my signature below it – the fact that at one time I acknowledged or undersigned the given acknowledgement.” (Bakhtin 1999, 38). The signature, my *actual* and *realized* acknowledgement of the objective content of the

contract, is the source of my engagement, my participation, and my obligation. Note that Bakhtin is not talking about the formal act of writing a signature, as any signature can be forged, coerced or written in jest (Sandler 2015, 169). Rather, the signature serves as a “stand-in” for my *actual* acknowledgement of the objective content (Sandler 2015, 169). Bakhtin writes:

What compelled me to sign at the moment of undersigning was not the content of the given performed act or deed. This content could not by itself, in isolation, have prompted me to perform the act or deed – to undersign-acknowledge it, but only in correlation with my decision to undertake an obligation – by performing the act of undersigning-acknowledging. (Bakhtin 1999, 38-39).

It is critical to note that the act of “undersigning-acknowledging”, is not steered by, or the result of reason, but, rather, inexorably saturated by an *emotional* and *volitional* tone. Bakhtin wants to emphasize that whatever I do, I cannot act neutrally toward the world. I cannot avoid having some sort of attitude toward whatever I occupy myself with. This is evidenced by the mere fact that one cannot pronounce a word without any intonation, as “intonation follows from the very fact of its being pronounced.” (Bakhtin 1999, 32). Everything I experience is intonated by my emotional disposition. Thus when I acknowledge something (i.e. bring together Being and Being-as-event), and thereby acknowledge the *value* of something (say, a contract), I do so via the *emotional* and *volitional* disposition I carry toward it in its entirety, and this disposition cannot be exhausted by reason. Thus Bakhtin writes: “No content would be actualized, no thought would be actually thought, if an essential interconnection were not established between a content and its emotional-volitional tone, i.e., its actually affirmed value for the one thinking.” (Bakhtin 1999, 34).

It is important to emphasize that Bakhtin is in no way opposed to the existence of objective Being / the world of culture, nor is he in any way against the progress of culture (in the form of science, art, technology). Rather, Bakhtin is extremely wary of the dangers of how the uncurbed spread of objective culture may encroach upon, and dominate, concrete, non-repeating life. In the next chapter, Habermas’ assessment of to the same

type of problem is explored, as the specific type of “procedural popular sovereignty” Habermas propagates becomes the focal point of a critique in Bakhtinian terms.

### 3. Jürgen Habermas

#### 3.1. Lifeworld, System and Lifeworld Colonization

It is relatively straightforward to manoeuvre, using the general overview of Bakhtin’s early ontology presented above, from Bakhtin’s critique of “theoreticism” to a critique of procedures as the chief source of democratic legitimacy. However, to accomplish this, it is necessary to know *what kind of* proceduralism we are arguing against. Though procedural theories of democracy share a common belief in procedures as one of the proper tools to organize democracy, they diverge greatly in locating the *source* of these procedures. As I announced in the introduction, I intend to only focus on Habermas’ theory of “procedural popular sovereignty” to demonstrate the weaknesses of procedural notions of democracy, as Habermas’ theory is perhaps the most (in)famous, robust and meticulous of those theories emphasizing the importance of procedures in democracy.

To be sure, Habermas’ and Bakhtin’s concerns share great resemblances. Habermas, in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, distinguishes between “lifeworld” on the one hand, and “system” on the other. The result is a conceptual framework reminiscent of, though definitely not identical to, Bakhtin’s distinction between “Being-as-event” and (objective) “Being”. For Habermas, these terms refer to the ways we must analyse contemporary capitalist societies (Habermas 1992, 118). Moreover, Habermas worries about a phenomenon he dubs the “colonization of the lifeworld by the system” (Habermas 1992, 318). A process which echoes Weber’s critique of bureaucratization and, by extension, Bakhtin’s notion of “theoreticism”. To understand Habermas’ colonization thesis and the way in which it relates to Bakhtin, the terms “lifeworld” and “system” require clarification.

The lifeworld is the stock of knowledge that supplies us with a background of unproblematic, shared, and unshaken convictions we consider to be guaranteed (Habermas 1992, 124-125). This background is unproblematic, as the beliefs that constitute the lifeworld are uncontested. As such, the lifeworld is a world bereft of utter surprises and may be characterized as a “reservoir of taken for granted” (Habermas 1992, 124).

Habermas asks us to consider a particular situation. Imagine a building site; an older, experienced construction worker asks of a younger, relatively new construction worker

to fetch some beer for their break. When the senior worker makes said request, a variety of shared and common beliefs are brought to the fore, namely A.) a *spatial* framework which supposes that there is a store nearby enough to fetch beer, B.) a *temporal* framework which supposes that breaktime is nearing, and C.) an informal *group hierarchy* according to which a senior worker may instruct a junior worker (Habermas 1992, 121). Because the workers share these beliefs, the situation is understood and unproblematic to the workers.

In the lifeworld, participants seek to reach mutual understanding and coordinate their tasks together on the basis of their shared background of uncontested convictions (Habermas 1992, 135-136). This process of achieving informal, mutual understanding is what Habermas describes as “communicative action,” and is a source of social integration and solidarity (Habermas 1992, 137). Said mutual coordination via “communicative action” functions, at the same time, as an agent for the cultural *renewal* or *reproduction* of said lifeworld, as social integration helps to connect new situations with existing ones. Thus, Habermas writes:

In coming to an understanding with one another about their situation, participants in interaction stand in a cultural tradition that they at once use and renew; in coordinating their actions by way of intersubjectively recognizing criticizable validity claims, they are at once relying on membership in social groups and strengthening the integration of those same groups; through participating in interactions with competently acting reference persons, the growing child internalizes the value orientations of his social group and acquires generalized capacities for action (Habermas 1992, 137).

Besides conceiving it as *lifeworld*, society may also be characterized as a self-regulating *system* (Habermas 1992, 151). Like the lifeworld, society as *system* is a source of social integration. However, in contradistinction to the lifeworld, social integration is not achieved via the informal, unforced, and mutual coordination of persons, but via autonomous, norm-free, and objectified mechanisms that integrate “agents and their actions behind their backs” (Hartmann 2019, 251). In contemporary capitalist societies, these mechanisms are the *bureaucracy* and *economy*: the predominant subsystems



responsible for regulating social relations according to *power* and *money*, respectively (Habermas 1992, 154). As a consequence of a systemic view of society, *strategic*, rather than *communicative* action dictates social relations, as the underlying logic of power and money is not one of consensus or solidarity, but a *purposive-rational* one, intended to achieve one's own interests, rather than working together (Habermas 1992, 183).

Under ideal circumstances, lifeworld and system complement each other. They exist as quasi-independent entities that influence one another. For instance, systemic mechanisms serve to ease the burden of communicative action in contemporary society, as it is increasingly harder to solve issues via mutual understanding in a society that is ever-growing and increasingly complex. Coordinating mutual understanding via communicative action is prone to disagreement and is time-consuming. System mechanisms therefore help to steer action – integrating agents “behind their backs” – in a way that is less burdensome to communicative action (Jütten 2011, 705).

However, as societies develop, so does the system. Once norm-free systems – such as the market – are established, they tend to run their own course and develop in a way that is increasingly disconnected from the lifeworld. They become “objectified” and emerge as a thing one perceives in the third person, or as an object of study for the (social) sciences. As a consequence, systemic mechanisms become increasingly nonsensical from a lifeworld-perspective (Hartmann 2019, 252). This “uncoupling” – as Habermas dubs it – of lifeworld and system becomes especially worrisome once it metamorphosizes into a situation where the system *colonizes* the lifeworld from the outside (Habermas 1992, 330-331).

Colonization is the term to describe the process where the objectified subsystems – economy and bureaucracy – encroach upon the lifeworld to such an extent that the forces of communicative action – characteristic of the lifeworld – are suppressed. A process Habermas describes as akin to “colonial masters coming into a tribal society” (Habermas 1992, 355). Here, the “uncoupled” and “hypertrophied” system forces itself upon the lifeworld from outside and subordinates it to the media of *money* and *power* (Silva 2019, 36). This process favours communicative action over strategic action, and as a consequence, erodes the lifeworld (Habermas 1992, 392).

As communicative action generates social integration, solidarity, and cultural reproduction, the erosion of communicative power boils down to losing social integration, solidarity and cultural reproduction. As a consequence, a variety of societal ‘pathologies’

occur (Habermas 1992, 142-143). Chief among these pathologies is a loss of meaning: “In such cases, the actors’ cultural stock of knowledge can no longer cover the need for mutual understanding that arises with new situations. The interpretive schemes accepted as valid fail, and the resource ‘meaning’ becomes scarce” (Habermas 1992, 140).

### 3.2. Procedural Democracy

To cope with the dangers colonization poses to communicative power, Habermas wants to propagate a notion of popular sovereignty robust enough to buttress communicative power, safeguarding it against the encroaching (sub)system(s) of economy and bureaucracy. According to Habermas, such a notion of popular sovereignty depends upon *democratic procedures*.

Central to Habermas’ notion of a “proceduralized popular sovereignty” (Habermas 1994, 7) is the idea that democracy is a discursive practice concerning the political opinion- and will-formation of citizens. This discursive practice arises from the informal area of shared and unshaken convictions, also known as the lifeworld, and is responsible for the generation of communicative power (Habermas 1996, 151). However, to assure the successful generation of communicative power in public discourse – and to prevent encroachment by the system – the political opinion- and will-formation of citizens needs to be anchored in democratic procedures. Thus Habermas writes:

Read in discourse-theoretic terms, the principle of popular sovereignty states that all political power derives from the communicative power of citizens. The exercise of public authority is oriented and legitimated by the laws citizens give themselves in a discursively structured opinion- and will-formation. If we first view this practice as a problem-solving process, then it owes its legitimating force to a *democratic procedure* intended to guarantee a rational treatment of political questions (Habermas 1996, 170).

Procedures are a way to process and regulate public discourse, and to ensure that the democratic decision-making transpires on the basis of the better arguments and the best information at hand (Habermas 1996, 170). In other words, they ensure the *rationality* of the democratic process. They function as the mediator between the informal and “free-

floating” opinion-forming processes of the lifeworld, and the systemic, purposive-rational requirements of economy and bureaucracy. As a consequence, procedures ensure that communicative power is not colonized by the latter two. In fact, proceduralizing communicative action amounts to an “empowerment” of communicative action, Habermas argues, as it enables communicative power to be translated into administrative power (Habermas, 1996 150, 299).

As a guarantor of rational results in democratic discourse, procedures are described as “subjectless” forms of communication, ensuring that any achieved results in public discourse are reasonable in quality (Habermas 1996, 301-304). The result is a notion of popular sovereignty characterized as “anonymous”, since political opinion- and will-formation does not transpire via physical and concrete interactions among people (the type of interaction present in the lifeworld), but via “reasonably structured deliberations and decisions” in the shape of procedures (Habermas 1996, 136). Habermas also describes this as the “*higher-level intersubjectivity* of processes of reaching understanding” (Habermas 1996, 299).

In this view of democracy, sovereignty is not centred around any singular entity, but dispersed, and the physical presence of the associated members is not required. Rather, the “self” of the self-organizing community “withdraws” into procedures; the sluices for the rationalization of public discourse (Habermas 1996 486, 301).

#### 4. Chantal Mouffe

Habermas’ answer – constituting popular sovereignty via subjectless procedures – would be unacceptable to Bakhtin, as the recourse to rational procedures amounts to the very predominance of objectivity over concrete existence both Bakhtin and Habermas purport to avoid. However, before we continue to use Bakhtin’s early philosophy to argue against Habermas’ theory, we must turn our gaze to the work of Chantal Mouffe, whose critique of Habermas serves as a suitable stepping-stone to Bakhtin’s notion of the act.

In *The Democratic Paradox* (2009), Mouffe argues that Habermas’ theory is inadequate as a theory of democracy, as it is founded on a rationalistic framework. Even though Habermas is interested in a consensus that goes beyond a “mere agreement” by emphasizing democratic procedures, the nature of said consensus is nonetheless a *rational* one. Mouffe finds this problematic, as a consensus based solely on rational discourse produces a political field where issues and grievances are only admissible and

legitimate if they can exist within the confines of rational public debate (Mouffe 2009, 88-93).

This has to do with the distinction Habermas – drawing heavily from Kant – makes between the *moral* and the *ethical*. For Habermas, the ethical refers to (existential) questions of *self-determination*, *self-understanding*, and *self-realization* (Habermas 1996, 95). These are substantial, personal questions, having to do with one's own life project. They concern questions of the "good life" and are concerned to, for instance, some one's religious views or *Weltanschauung*. In public discourse however, we cannot just throw our personal beliefs into the debate, as the vast number of quasi-sacred beliefs in society precludes any consensus in public discourse. For this reason, Mouffe writes, Habermas relegates them to the non-public arena (Mouffe 2009, 88-89).

Instead, what is required to generate communicative power in public discourse are not the ethical, subjective and personal viewpoints oriented to one's own good, but a shared *moral* discourse based on "equal respect for each person and equal consideration for the interests of all" (Habermas 1996, 97). Such a moral discourse is a universal and rational one, where one adopts a perspective freed of any egocentrism (Habermas 1996, 96-97). From the moral perspective, participants aim at producing – by the way of procedures – universal principles that every party can agree to (Mouffe 2009, 88-89).

For this reason, Habermas also has a dim view of the idea of a political ethos, as he considers an ethos to be an ethical overburdening to its citizens, being the result of equating political participation with being *virtuous*. According to Habermas, having an ethos means that to participate in the political community, individuals need to satisfy the expectations of the ethical norms of said community, which Habermas considers to be too great an ethical burden upon individuals (Habermas 1996, 278-286, 487).

However, the distinction between the 'ethical' and the 'moral' – i.e. between the 'substantial' and the 'procedural' – is untenable to Mouffe, as procedures are not 'neutral'. Procedures are not just rules grounded in certain universal principles and then applied to a variety of particular situations. We accept and go along with procedures because they are inscribed in shared forms of life and agreements in judgements, and this – not their supposed rational nature – serves as the source of their legitimacy. In short, procedures require ethical commitments (Mouffe 2009, 97). This realization forces us to

...acknowledge something that the dominant liberal model is unable to recognize, namely that a liberal-democratic conception of justice and liberal-democratic institutions require a democratic ethos in order to function properly and maintain themselves. This is, for instance, precisely what Habermas' discourse theory of procedural democracy is unable to grasp because of the sharp distinction that Habermas wants to draw between moral-practical discourses and ethical-practical discourses (Mouffe 2009, 69).

Instead of privileging rational discourse in our notions of democracy and popular sovereignty, as Habermas does, we should be aware of the crucial role played by passions and emotions in securing commitment to democratic values (Mouffe 2009, 95). This requires us to reimagine the "democratic game" and consider that it can be played in a variety of ways, rather than reduce this diversity to a uniform, rational-universalistic model. This is best achieved by fostering a democratic *ethos*, as the notion of an ethos leaves room for a variety of ways to "play" the democratic game and envision democratic citizenship (Mouffe 2009, 73). This is how we guarantee that democratic procedures are *meaningful* to us, rather than empty and bereft of any meaning.

To advance this endeavour, Mouffe invokes the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose philosophical project provides the tools to rethink commitment to democratic values and discard the rationalistic, Habermasian, theory of democracy. Wittgenstein's notion of *family resemblance* and his critique of rationalist-universalistic theories serve as a basis for a new way of theorizing the political (Mouffe 2009, 60-61). From this, we can learn that

...what Wittgenstein's philosophy exemplifies is not a quest for certainty but a quest for responsibility, and that what he teaches us is that entering a claim is making an assertion and is something that humans *do* and for which they should be responsible. This emphasis on the moment of *decision* and on *responsibility* enables us to envisage democratic politics in a different way because it subverts the ever-present temptation in democratic societies to disguise existing forms of exclusion under the veil of rationality or of morality (Mouffe 2009, 76).

However, rather than continue Mouffe's reading of Wittgenstein here, I argue that Bakhtin's philosophical project is just as capable of introducing a "new way of theorizing" akin to Wittgenstein, and also neatly ties into the same quest for *responsibility* and *decision*. Bakhtin's notion of the act, a pivot in his early manuscript *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, points to the idea of a (democratic) ethos and to a new way to conceive the political. Moreover, Bakhtin does so in a *phenomenological* fashion, thereby giving a fresh approach to an existing debate. Firstly, however, a reflection on why Habermas' solution to "colonization" is unacceptable to Bakhtin is required, in order to lay the foundation for Bakhtin's answer.

## 5. Toward a Democracy of the Act

### 5.1. A Bakhtinian Critique

In many respects, Mouffe's treatment of Habermas gravitates toward a caricature, as Mouffe's reading, at times, seems to reduce Habermas' deliberative project to a crude proceduralism. Whereas Habermas uses terms such as "acceptable" to describe how participants should experience the outcome of procedures, Mouffe paraphrases Habermas by writing of procedures producing "interests which can be *agreed* by all participants, thereby producing legitimate outcomes" (Mouffe 2014, 89) [emphasis mine, SdL]. Habermas's project however, is not just about procedures, but concerns itself with a larger deliberative endeavour in which procedures play a prominent role. For this reason, I agree with Mouffe's diagnosis of the myopic rationalism present in Habermas's notion of "procedural popular sovereignty", but do not wish to reduce Habermas' thought to a mere proceduralism, but rather intend to criticize this aspect of Habermas' theory to shed light on a general, pervading issue in predominant conceptions of democratic procedures.

Seeking to escape the encroachment of objectifying forces through *rational* procedures is nonsensical to Bakhtin, as it is precisely *rationality* that is part of these objectifying forces, i.e. objective Being. If we take the dichotomy between a prereflexive, concrete world of life (Being-as-event), and the rational, objective world of systemic mechanisms (objective Being) seriously, we must concede that the potency of a colonizing system is in no way lessened by introducing *even more* rational procedures. Procedures are part of the system. It would be the same as trying to tackle a flood by breaking the dikes, hoping the

water behind the dikes can flush the floodwater away. For this reason, Bakhtin would demonstrably consider Habermas' theory as just another exponent of theoreticism.

Even if we suppose that procedures are not colonizing *in themselves*, one can argue that procedures can, in the end, *become* colonizing. That is, how can one preclude that procedures – as the *media* through which political opinion-making takes place – do not become *commercialized* or *bureaucratized* themselves? In a capitalist society, procedures can become embedded in systemic mechanisms that operate according to the logic of *money* and *power*. For instance, a national election debate may be broadcast by a commercial television network. The interests of a commercial television network are first and foremost the generation of profit, most likely via the generation of views or the inclusion of sponsors. As such, said network may be more interested in creating an engaging, polemic spectacle, than in making sure the debate proceeds according to those rules conducive to a rational outcome. It may prefer to make something sensational rather than a serious debate.

Another characteristic of theoreticism Habermas' theory displays is this: procedures constitute “subjectless” forms of communication; a notion which is concurrent with the idea that theoreticism operates according to the view “as if I did not exist” (Bakhtin 1999, 9). Theoreticism is only interested in the world of objective Being, that is, the residual world I am left with whenever I abstract from my concrete self. Such a denial of my own existence in the realm of politics would be incomprehensible to Bakhtin, as the theoretical world (objective Being) cannot offer any criteria for a practical life, as “it is *not* the Being *in which I live*” (Bakhtin 1999, 9). It is not the world in which *I* act, *I* perform and *I* do things. Thus Bakhtin writes:

Any kind of *practical* orientation of my life within the theoretical world is impossible: it is impossible to live in it, impossible to perform answerable deeds. In that world I am unnecessary; I am essentially and fundamentally non-existent in it. (Bakhtin 1999, 9)

If democracy is supposed to be the *kratein* of the *demos* (and not the *kratein* of *logos*), our notion of democracy cannot take my non-existence as a point of departure. In democracy, those who constitute the *demos* must be present in *actuality*, not just in abstraction or theory. The people need to participate, not just “go along” because the rationality of a

procedure (for whom the actual existence of the people is extraneous) demands them to go along.<sup>3</sup> A child can “participate” in a game or some sport because their mother, teacher, or any other authoritative figure may demand of them that they do so, but this is not actual participation, it is the mere following of orders. *Actual* and *real* participation cannot be achieved when democratic procedures are exhausted in rational and “subjectless” terms, transcendent and apathetic to my concrete, non-repeating life. Procedures may be very correct theoretical constructions, but none of their correctness necessarily says anything about whether they are *valid to me*, whether they are *of value* to me. Therefore they cannot, *in themselves*, be a source of commitment: “Veridicality alone is not enough for the ought-to-be [act, SdL]” (Bakhtin 1999, 5). This is what happens under (Kantian) formalist ethics, and it also is what a (Habermasian) formalist popular sovereignty gravitates towards. To acquire value *for me* in procedures, we need something else, something not originating from the confines of objective, systemic mechanisms.

In short, colonization cannot be vanquished by means that themselves arise from the same stock colonization is made of. Whenever the means to counter colonization do not themselves stem from the realm we are supposed to protect from said colonization, colonization sneaks in through the backdoor. For this reason, Habermas is not radical enough for someone like Bakhtin. Habermas is astute enough to recognize the danger of how objective, systemic mechanisms may overwhelm and colonize the world of concrete life, but stops short of giving a solution that definitively leaves behind from the objective world. Bakhtin writes:

All attempts to surmount – from within theoretical cognition – the dualism of cognition and life, the dualism of thought and once-occurrent concrete actuality, are utterly hopeless. Having detached the content / sense aspect of cognition from the historical act of its actualization, we can get out from within it and enter the ought only by way of a leap. To look for the actual cognitional act as a performed deed in the content / sense is the same as trying to pull oneself up by one's own hair. (Bakhtin 1999, 7)

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<sup>3</sup> The word “need” should not be read here as a type of external force, as this is precisely *not* the point I intend to make. The “need” is the product of a sort of “habit” or “custom” people acquire from being part of a shared community with a shared *ethos* as to how to “play” the democratic game. An *ethos* which may differ from community to community.



## 5.2. The Act

According to Bakhtin, we cannot escape theory using theory – as then we would continue to think in only theoretical terms and end up with theoreticism – and thus need some sort of “leap” to connect Being to Being-as-event and give meaning to the objective structures we find ourselves in in our life. This “leap” is the *act* [*postupok* / поступок].<sup>4</sup> The act is a complex notion in Bakhtin’s early philosophy, because it does not refer to some sort of abstract principle of practical philosophy with a particular theoretical content (Soboleva 2010, 16) that would have to be identified or applied in a variety of situations and contexts, but to a continuous, ever-present (ethical) practice whose importance and foundational status we have lost sight of in modernity.<sup>5</sup> Or, as Hirschkop (1999, 149-150) formulates it, Bakhtin is not concerned with a distinct sphere of ethics which one would apply to independent fields such as politics, but with “the absolute pre-eminence of the ethical reality which endows all spheres of action with meaning and purpose.”

For this reason, it is somewhat contradictory to write about the act, as Bakhtin argues that one cannot disclose the act in theoretical, objective terms, as the act is precisely that which is *before* theory. However, discussing the (performance of an) act in theoretical, objective terms is inevitable whenever we begin to think, speak or write about it. It is something, *primordial* and *prereflexive*, and whenever we begin to think, reason or discuss the act, we pass from the *pre-reflexive* to the *reflexive*, and enter the world of culture, i.e. objective Being. Bakhtin writes: “Once-occurrent uniqueness or singularity cannot be thought of, it can only be participatively experienced or lived through” (Bakhtin 1999, 13). The act is the unity of both *content / sense* (the content of a thought I may have, or the content of what I may write) and a *historical actuality* (the performance of said act in a given, absolutely unique, non-repeating spatiotemporal framework). Whenever we write of the

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<sup>4</sup> In the Russian text the word “act” is referred to as both *nocmynok* [postupok] or *nocmynok-akm* [postupok-akt]. Both the English “act” and “deed” are used in various secondary literature (as in this translation of TPA) to translate *nocmynok*. Both do not capture the meaning of *nocmynok* as aptly as, for instance, the German word *Handlung* does, but I argue that “act” is – in the context of Bakhtin’s early philosophy – the superior translation as “deed” may also refer to some sort of contract, a connotation anathema to Bakhtin’s philosophical project.

<sup>5</sup> The root of such a (mis)understanding may lie in the fact that grammatical articles (“the”, “a”) do not exist in the Russian language. Speaking of *the* act is thus an effect of the English translation. Unfortunately, the introduction of “the” gives the impression as if we are dealing with some sort of abstract, technical principle (e.g. “the Good”) whose presence is of a incidental nature in our world, rather than something primordial that is present in everything we do.

act, we do not have the act in its *entirety*, but are only dealing with its *content / sense*, as the unique moment in which the act was performed has already passed.

At its core, the act is the actualization of my unique participation in Being-as-event. As such, my act is an *answerable* act, as the act discloses my existence as once-occurrent, non-repeating, and unique, i.e. as *answerable*. The answerable act is the way my actual engagement with the world takes form. Note, for instance, the semantic relation (in English) between “act” and “actual”. The same relation is found in “deed” and “indeed”, or, Dutch “daad” and “daadwerkelijk”. Acting, doing or performing something is about truly making something *happen* in the world, about something being the case as the act is performed. It is something I do constantly, as every thought and feeling of mine is an act, and my life can be characterized as an uninterrupted performing of acts. As such, my life can be considered as a single complex act I perform (Bakhtin 1999, 3-6). Therefore, I cannot *not* act, just as I cannot *not* be answerable, as even the (attempted, futile) denial of my *answerability* would nonetheless constitute an act. Bakhtin writes in summary:

Participative (unindifferent) thinking is, in fact, the emotional-volitional understanding of Being in its concrete uniqueness on the basis of a non-alibi in Being. That is, it is an act-performing thinking, a thinking that is referred to itself as to the only one performing answerable deeds.  
(Bakhtin, 1999, 45)

Answerability, participative thinking, emotional intonation, the concrete ought; all of these terms meet each other – and are implicated – in the performance of an act, as acting is the most fundamental way in which I exist. The act is the primary ontological category for Bakhtin. I exist *first and foremost* as an acting Being, and through the performance of acts I think *participatively*. Participation that is intonated and coloured by the emotional stance I take in relation the object of my act, whether that be a tree, book, person, or an area of culture. This is what we do as persons and cannot avoid doing, as even the act of absconding said ontological factum is still an act and constitutes an engagement with the very world I purport to reject.

As the vehicle of participative thinking, performing an act is how I connect the world of life and the world of culture into a single whole. Via the performance of acts theoretical propositions, ethical imperatives, or socio-cultural norms are woven into the fabric of my

concrete, non-repeating life as Being-as-event, rather than being transcendent, and thus nonsensical, to my life: a demand, but one which does not, and cannot oblige me. For this reason, the act is the source of *meaning*. It is source of how things are *to* or *for* me, rather than *opposite* or *next* to me.<sup>6</sup>

Recalling the example of the signing of a contract, signing captures precisely, and serves as a metaphor for, what the act is about. The act is the *actual performance* of signing the contract with my signature (and not *just* the material existence of my signature), whereby I signify my *commitment to* and *acknowledgement* of the stipulations of said contract. The mere *content* of my act (i.e., the content of the contract) cannot obligate me to do anything, and the only way the contract acquires *meaning to me* is when I bring said content “in correlation with my decision to undertake an obligation” (Bakhtin, 1999, 38). This is why the act is the meeting point of the world of life and the world of culture. Bakhtin writes:

An act of our activity, of our actual experiencing, is like a two-faced Janus. It looks in two opposite directions: it looks the objective unity of a domain of culture and at the never-repeatable uniqueness of actually lived and experienced life. (Bakhtin 1999, 2)

What is presupposed in the performance of an act is a deep understanding of the particularity of the concrete, once-occurrent event *as it is happening*. Whenever I act, I act in accordance with, I act *true to* the event. I *respond* to the event as much as I *act* in it; an event that is, at the same time, the result of previous acts by myself or others. Bakhtin also describes this relation as “faithfulness” [*vernost’* / *верность*] to the event (Bakhtin 1999, 38, Бахтин 2020, 74). The act – in its very *performance* – “somehow knows, somehow possesses” the uniqueness and particularity of Being-as-event and “orients” itself in said Being (Bakhtin 1999, 28). As a result, the event becomes *clear* and *distinct* to me. Not clear and distinct in the logical or conceptual sense – as consisting of universal moments constituting the *objective* or *material* aspect of the event – but in the sense of having an intuitive, pre-theoretical, pre-reflexive understanding of the event.

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<sup>6</sup> Here, the similarity between Bakhtin’s and Heidegger’s thought is clear, in particular in regard to Heidegger’s distinction between *Vorhandensein* and *Zuhandensein*. The relationship between the philosophies of Bakhtin and Heidegger has so far broached by only a few authors (Soboleva (2014)).

One can compare this to the non-theoretical understanding we have of minute changes or nuances in someone's facial expression or body language. In these cases, we have an immediate understanding of the mood or emotional disposition of our interlocutor, and do not need to take recourse to any universal theory or abstract scheme. That is why the performer of an act does not experience – to give some examples of overt universal, theoretical thinking – primates from the species *Homo sapiens*, a blue atmosphere above their head consisting of various gases and aerosolised droplets of water, or trees of the genus *Quercus*, but rather:

He sees clearly *these* individual, unique persons whom he loves, *this* sky and *this* earth and *these* trees [...] and what is also given to him simultaneously is the value, the actually and concretely affirmed value of these persons and these objects. He intuits their inner lives as well as desires; he understands both the actual and the ought-to-be sense of the interrelationship between himself and these persons and objects – the truth [*pravda*] of the given state of affairs – and he understands the ought of his performed act, that is *not* the abstract law of his act, but the actual, concrete ought conditioned by his unique place in the given context of the ongoing event. (Bakhtin, 1999, 30)

In other words, I am intimately habituated to my environment: I engage with my environment, which consists of persons, organisms, or objects that are of some sort of value to me. In this environment, I intuitively grasp what is required of me, because the event is not something abstract which I approach from a third-person view, but something in which I am fundamentally a part of.

### 5.3. The Act and Ethos

The acknowledgement of the world of objective Being through the performance of acts serves as a foundation for reflecting on the notion of a (democratic) ethos. That is, if firstly, performing an act means incorporating that which is objective and transcendent to our life into the fabric of our life as Being-as-event, thereby making it *of value* to us, and secondly, an ethos is the glue that connects not just the participants of a community together, but also connects – in the shape of a habit or custom – these participants to the

various objective, rational, procedures regulating democratic discourse, then Bakhtin's notion of the act comes close to a notion of (democratic) ethos. If, according to Ferrara and Mouffe, democracy can only properly function if there is an ethos that 1.) accounts for the crucial role of emotions in order to 2.) "enliven" and "underlie" the procedural facets of democracy, then Bakhtin's early philosophy is able to satisfy these criteria.

As a consequence, having some sort of ethos is unavoidable, as we cannot *not* act. An ethos is presupposed in acting, and acting is an ontological fact of our existence. As such, having an ethos becomes not a question of a second nature, but rather a *first nature*. I cannot participate *sans* ethos, as I am continuously engaged with the world via the performance of my acts. This does not mean that we are always necessarily in agreement with the objective constructions surrounding us in society, but rather that we are always somehow *engaged* with them, whether positively or negatively. We always ascribe some sort of value to our environment. I may vehemently disagree with the election procedures governing my country, but by disagreeing, the procedure is nonetheless incorporated into the fabric of my life as Being-as-event. It does not stop being valuable to me, but only does so as a negative value. Likewise, I may choose to retreat into a faraway forest, because I scorn society, but despite my negative estimation of society, society is nonetheless implicated in my decision to reject it.

Therefore, the reason for taking Bakhtin's notion of the act seriously as the source of a democratic ethos is not that Bakhtin gives us some sort of a ready-made ethos to use as clear-cut, step-by-step instructions to organize democratic participation, but rather it is that Bakhtin discloses how we cannot exist, cannot participate in a democracy, without some – whether positive or negative – ethical disposition. Moreover, such an interpretation of Bakhtin demonstrates how the opposite view – the one espoused by Habermas – helps to feed negative feelings toward democracy and its procedures, as the very denial of such an ontological fact, by "pretending as if I did not exist" in procedures, ends up as a source of democratic resentment. Habermas' rejection of a democratic ethos is understandable, but runs counter to our existence as act-performing, participating, persons.

Participation in democracy is not a dispassionate "going along" with rational procedures because they guarantee that public discourse proceeds on the basis of the "better argument" and the "best information". Rather, participation is a continuous *practice*. I participate because *I* decide, because *I* choose to do such and such. I am

perfectly capable of conforming to the stipulations of a rational procedure because it presents the better argument, but not because it is, *in itself*, the better argument. Rather, I act in accordance with the better argument because I *value* the better argument, because the better argument is *meaningful to me* and because I desire to make it part of my concrete existence. The world of the better argument “in itself” is entirely foreign to me: it is not a world where I exist, and thus not one where I can participate in democracy. This is what theories such as Habermas’ fail to account for.

## Conclusion

At the outset, this paper introduced one of the most prevalent issues facing democratic theory. That is, what should the role of democratic procedures be in a democracy? Procedures are part and parcel of contemporary democracies, making sure that democracy is properly regulated and not subjected to mass craze, subjective whims, and arbitrary decision-making. However, despite being a *prima facie* safeguard against such dangers, the salvatory recourse to procedures may itself become dangerous when procedures are exhausted in rational terms.

The evidence of such a danger has already been investigated in the work of Jürgen Habermas who, despite his acute awareness of the hazards facing modern-day democracies and his rigour in trying to counter these hazards, cannot help but fashion a procedural theory of democracy which, upon closer examination, has an *undemocratic* character. What Habermas does, is locate the source of popular sovereignty in rational and universal procedures, which means abstracting the concrete, actual subjects from their concrete, once-occurrent spatiotemporal place, turning them into a theoretical postulate rather than something actual and existing. This makes democracy the mere “going along” with procedures *prior* and *despite* my existence. Democracy is then the *rule of the logos*, instead of the *rule of the demos*.

Procedures must be more than rational and universal if they are to be truly democratic. What is necessary is something that makes procedures, which are indispensable in modern-day democracies, not just *valuable in itself* (which amounts to a contradiction in terms), but *valuable to us*. For this reason, we need to turn our gaze to the idea of a (democratic) ethos, as a habitual, prereflexive disposition to act in a certain way, in order to ponder the ways we can commit to democratic procedures.

To achieve this goal, this paper has engaged with Mikhail Bakhtin's early, unfinished manuscript from the 1920's: *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Even though Bakhtin was no political thinker, the ontology he presents in this unfinished work – pivoted on the notion of the *act* – helps us realize that democratic procedures require some sort of shared, emotional commitment via the performance of acts if they are to mean anything. Acting is an ineluctable part of our existence and it means having a ceaseless engagement with the world around us, whether in a positive, or a negative sense. Bakhtin helps us discover that procedures do not have any meaning if they are not *for* the demos and that democratic participation must require *more* than just rational precepts. This is what it means to have an ethos, which is an indispensable facet of any democracy.

This brings Bakhtin close to the agonistic democratic theory of Mouffe. However, whereas Mouffe uses a more “classical” reasoning to argue that we need more than “just” rational procedures in order to have democracy, Bakhtin uses a phenomenological method, and takes recourse to our concrete experience. Here, the added value of incorporating Bakhtin in this debate is disclosed.

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# Research Proposal



## 1. Title

Rethinking Action: Ethics, Politics, and Agency in Bakhtin and Arendt

## 2. Summary

Hannah Arendt and Mikhail Bakhtin have both been studied extensively over the past decades. Unfortunately, however, despite their various shared concerns and themes, a thorough study of the relationship between their work has been wanting. Both share an interest in the notion of action (Arendt) or acting (Bakhtin), and these concepts are key themes in their work, reflecting deeper ontological realities, namely “the political” (Arendt) and “the ethical” (Bakhtin). This research aims to investigate the relationship between Arendt’s notion of “the political” and Bakhtin’s notion of “the ethical”. In particular the ways these respective concepts may complement each other to fashion a renewed notion of (political) *agency*, in order to answer the disenfranchisement and apathy people experience in present-day democracies. To achieve this, the research begins with a conceptual analysis of the terms “the political” and “the ethical”, dissecting the terms and relating Arendt’s and Bakhtin’s use of these ideas to existing and previous scholarship. The study then aims to enter into a comparative analysis of Arendt and Bakhtin, identifying key themes between the two authors, most notably the notion of action/acting and the sub-themes that emanate from it. From this, the research enters into reflection on the inherent interrelatedness between ethics and politics, investigating how both are a constitutive part of a broader and necessary practical orientation which may be described as a new, more democratic, notion of agency.

## 3. Description

### 1. *Background/Status Quaestionis*

Over the past decades there has been an increasing apathy or disdain towards institutionalized politics in present-day democracy. The sentiment that politics has no bearing upon actual, concrete existence is a common one, evidenced by the rise of numerous populist figures capitalizing on this public disdain, the decreasing voter turnout in Europe since 1979, and the increased presence of activist groups which operate outside the bounds of established institutions, such as Extinction Rebellion or Black Lives Matter. The professionalization of institutionalized politics, the unchecked marketization

and bureaucratization of various areas of public life, and the surge of new, invasive, and complex technologies have led many people to experience a lack of (political) *agency*. Because (a form of) political agency of (the) people is a core tenet of democracy, the perceived absence of such agency forces us to reconsider the implicit conception of agency present in present-day democracy, and review alternative conceptions of agency. To this end, two thinkers in particular prove valuable: the Russian philosopher, linguist, and literary theorist Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975) and the German-Jewish born philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt (1906-1975).

For many decades, these two thinkers have enjoyed great and continued popularity. Bakhtin, who attracted a frenzied surge of attention by scholars (mostly from the social and literary sciences) in the West during the rediscovery of his work in the 1980's and onwards, continues to hold sway in a variety of disciplines, leaving behind a legacy consisting of concepts such as *carnavalesque*, *chronotope*, *dialogism*, *heteroglossia*, *polyphony*, and *utterance*. Works such as *Rabelais and his World*/Творчество Франсуа Рабле (1984/1965), *Problem of Dostoevsky's Poetics*/Проблемы поэтики Достоевского (1984/1963), *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity*/Автор и Герой Эстетической Деятельности (1990/2020) and a variety of other works have cemented Bakhtin as one of the preeminent thinkers of the twentieth century. Likewise, the work of Arendt has become an indispensable part of the 'canon' of political theory ever since her first publications. Her writings, which encompass *Love and Saint-Augustine* (1929), *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), *The Human Condition* (1958), *On Revolution* (1963), *The Life of the Mind* (1977), and other books, essays, and writings, span an eclectic breadth of themes that cannot be reduced to "just" political philosophy, but concern "practical" philosophy in the broadest sense.

Despite, at first sight, a superficial disparity in the thought of these two thinkers, a closer investigation of the works of Bakhtin and Arendt discloses a substantial overlap in themes and shared concerns. Both were indubitable critics of *Modernity*; fearing that the new political, economic, and cultural systems are overwhelming those specific areas of human existence considered irreducible dimensions of our life. In Arendt's case, this dimension is "the political", whereas for Bakhtin this is "the ethical". For both authors, it is these irreducible realms where uniquely human agency takes place, in the shape of *action* (Arendt) or *acting* (Bakhtin). And thus the loss of either "the political" or "the ethical" means a loss of agency. Therefore, understanding how Arendt and Bakhtin may

co-contribute to a renewed notion of agency, requires an understanding of “the political” and “the ethical” respectively.

## 2. Research Question

The goal of this research project then, is to address and investigate the aforementioned closeness present in the works of Arendt and Bakhtin in order to reconceptualize (political) agency. For this reason, the research project aims to answer the question:

*To what extent can the notion of “the ethical” in the philosophy of Bakhtin and Arendt’s notion of “the political” complement each other in order to conceive of a renewed notion agency.*

## 3. Aims

### *Part I – Taking Stock of the Concepts*

In order to properly answer the research question, the research is divided into several parts. **Part I** is dedicated to investigating the terms “the political”, and “the ethical”. To be sure, the idea of a distinct sphere where politics takes places dubbed “the political” is not a widely accepted one, nor one necessarily attributed to Arendt. Arendt used the word “the political” on occasion, but never defined it (Arndt 2019, 47). Regarding Bakhtin and “the ethical”, this is even less so the case, as – barring works such *The Ethical* (Wyschogrod, McKenny 2003) – “the ethical” as a distinct, fundamental sphere is a rather undeveloped concept compared to “the political”. Moreover, Bakhtin never used the word “the ethical” as conceived here.

The use and attribution of such fundamental concepts is a strategy gathered from Olivier Marchart, who in *Post-Foundational Political Thought* (2007) uses this conceptual framework in order to position a breadth of authors, including Arendt. This research emulates this strategy by positioning Arendt’s theory within the various debates regarding “the political”. To achieve this, the research investigates notable authors on this topic, such as Carl Schmitt (2005, 2007), Ernesto Laclau (1999), Chantal Mouffe (2005, 2007, 2015), Claude Lefort (1988), Jean-Luc Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe (1997), and Paul Ricœur (2007). In the case of Bakhtin, the same task is required, but concerning “the ethical”. Here authors such as Hegel (2020), Levinas (1969), Jankélévitch (2004), Ricœur

(1992), Badiou (2002) are presented, and the extent to which their works espouse the idea of a distinct, fundamental sphere of ethics is examined.

This strategy not only relates Arendt and Bakhtin to a broader discourse on “the political” and “the ethical” and aids in contextualizing their work, but it also underscores the unique ontological framework both operate from, and clarifies what is at stake for them in their notion of either “the political” or “the ethical” *vis-à-vis* other authors. For instance, in Arendt’s case, how her “associative trait” of “the political” distinguishes her from Schmitt’s “dissociative trait” (Marchart 2007, 38-44).

It must be stressed though that throughout the study, this research refrains from treating Bakhtin as a representative of “Western” philosophy, as such an approach erases the unique philosophical and historical Russian context Bakhtin inhabits. Due to Bakhtin’s popularity in the West, he has, at times, been treated as some sort of “honorary” Western thinker and, as such, has been rashly incorporated into the European “canon” of thinkers. While such a strategy is not entirely without merit, as Bakhtin’s philosophy carries a broad and universal appeal, there is much to be gained by tracing the threads that connect Bakhtin to the philosophical tradition of the country of his birth and most of his life. The research hopes to demonstrate that Bakhtin’s thought is not just a product of an engagement with (neo-)Kantians, Nietzsche, Husserl, Bergson, and Scheler, but also with Russian thinkers of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century such as Herzen, Dostoevsky, and Shestov. Inevitably, such a strategy also requires an investigation of the role of Eastern Orthodoxy in Bakhtin. To achieve this the, research refers to previous scholarship on the subject, undertaken by, among others, Emerson (1990, 1991), Contino and Felch (2001), Coates (2005), and Kelly (1998, 1999). Moreover, an engagement with texts in Russian, such as *Философия поступка: Самоопределение личности в современном обществе* (Tulchinsky 2020) becomes necessary.

## *Part II – Comparing Arendt and Bakhtin*

The next step, constituting **Part II** of the research, is to enter into a comparative analysis between Arendt and Bakhtin. To this end, the sub-themes constituting “the political” or “the ethical” in Arendt and Bakhtin are examined. To achieve this, the research addresses the entire oeuvre of these two thinkers, but in particular Bakhtin’s early work (as the notion of “the ethical” is the most pronounced here) constituting *Toward a Philosophy of the Act/К философии поступка* (~1924), and *Author and Hero in Aesthetic*

*Activity/Автор и герой в эстетическом событии* (~1923), and Arendt's *Saint Augustine and Love* (1929), *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), *The Human Condition* (1958), and *The Life of the Mind* (1977) and. One theme in particular features prominently in both Arendt's and Bakhtin's work, and constitutes an overlap between a great deal of their work. This is the theme of *action* (Arendt) or *acting* (Bakhtin), which serves as the *vehicle* for agency in their respective theories. For this reason, a focal point of the project is a comparison between these related concepts.

The connection between *action* in Arendt and *acting* in Bakhtin is an obvious one, but one which has been overlooked nonetheless. For both thinkers, action or acting refers to an unique facet of our existence whose meaning has slowly disappeared with the rise of Modernity. For Arendt, as articulated in *The Human Condition* (2018) and *The Life of the Mind* (1981), action (together with labour and work) is part of the *vita activa*, whereas *thinking, willing, and judging* belong to the *vita contemplativa*. For Bakhtin however, writing in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (1999), acting *includes* thinking, willing and judging, as Bakhtin does not constrict what may be considered an "act". In both cases, action or acting describes a fundamental engagement with the world and functions as the way in which we *appear* and make our existence known to the world. But here, too, the overlap is not complete and nuanced distinctions remains. Whereas action presupposes *plurality among people* in Arendt's theory, in Bakhtin's philosophy acting presupposes *plurality in a single person*. Through action we disclose how unique and multifaceted *we are*, through acting I disclose how unique and multifaceted *I am*.

Closely related to action/acting is the notion of natality, which features prominently in both thinkers. The unique characteristic of both action and acting is that it creates something completely, utterly new. For Bakhtin this is a result of the ontological fact that each of us inhabits a unique spatiotemporal configuration which no one else can occupy. As a result, everything happens once and only once, and every act brings forth something utterly novel: "That which can be done by me can never be done by anyone else" (Bakhtin 1999, 40). Likewise, Arendt strongly emphasizes the creation of a new beginning as being fundamental to (political) action. Politics, for Arendt, is the creation of new beginnings.

Because the notion of action/acting features in such a prominent way in Arendt's and Bakhtin's theories, it is necessary to trace the roots of the concept of action/acting in the history of philosophy in order to gather from which – or against which – tradition Arendt and Bakhtin develop their key concepts. The obvious suspect here is Aristotle, whose



distinction between *poièsis*, *praxis* and *theoria* has been of immeasurable influence in Western philosophy. However, here too, Russian thinkers who have taken up the same topic have to be addressed, for instance such as Vladimir Solov'ëv, indubitably the most systematic Russian philosopher of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who takes up the Aristotelean distinction of *poièsis*, *praxis* and *theoria* and incorporates it into his own theological-philosophical project. In this way, the historical Russian philosophical context – from which Bakhtin, whether consciously or unconsciously, draws – is addressed further.

*Part III – Taking Inventory: Towards a New Practical Philosophy, Towards a New Agency*

**Part III** of the study functions as an inventory of the reflections from Part I and Part II and investigates how Arendt's and Bakhtin's respective notions of "the political" and "the ethical" complement each other: to what extent are they able to address the lacunae of the other and to what extent do their emphases help or hinder them in their philosophical projects. The expected result of these reflections is a reconceptualization of agency that can neither be entirely reduced to politics, nor to ethics. Instead, it aims at pointing at a broader "practical" philosophy. The research questions whether the distinction between politics and ethics is a productive one, and this is reflected in the concept of agency the research puts forward. Attention will be given as to whether a refigured notion of agency could have the potential of empowering democratic subjects to a greater extent than the conceptions of agency present in present-day democracy.

## **4. Methods**

### **1. Conceptual Analysis**

The focus of this research is quite concept-heavy and therefore **conceptual analysis** constitutes a key aspect of the research. This is particularly true of Part I, where the research engages with the notions of "the political", and "the ethical". Dissecting these concepts into their constituent parts is a complex endeavour, most notable "the political" and "the ethical", as they are descriptions of fundamental categories, being the "stuff" that politics and ethics is, or should be, about. Nonetheless, a lot can be gathered by investigating counterexamples (i.e. what does *not* constitute "the political" or "the ethical"), how these terms are *used* in existing scholarship, or by tracing their etymology. Moreover, these terms do not exist in a vacuum and are the product of certain historical, sociological, cultural and philosophical contexts and environments. Because research

cannot exist in a vacuum, such conceptual analysis necessarily takes place within the confines of the research's pre-established conceptual framework as espoused in Part I.

The use of conceptual analysis is also necessary in Part II, where a variety of terms, concepts and notions present in Arendt's and Bakhtin's oeuvre are brought to the fore. Terms such as *action, acting/[the] act* [поступок], *working, labour, natality, outsidedness* [вненаходимость], *givenness* [данность], or *oughtness* [долженствование]. Here, too, special consideration should be given to the backgrounds of these two thinkers. Bakhtin wrote in Russian and this should be taken into consideration when discussing his idiosyncratic jargon as meaning of his terms should be traced to their Russian roots, whose nuance may be lost when their English readings/interpretations. A good example of this would be distinction between the Russian *istina* [истина] and *pravda* [правда], two words which both denote *truth*, albeit differently.

## 2. Comparative analysis

An important methodology employed in Part II and Part III after the necessary concepts have been elucidated in Part I, is **comparative analysis**. The goal of the research does not just require a thorough analysis of the relationship between the work of Arendt and the work of Bakhtin, but also between Arendt, Bakhtin and the various authors that have contributed to a development of the concepts "the political" and "the ethical". At the start of a comparative analysis is the task to place both Arendt and Bakhtin within a shared framework in order to make a comparison possible, without erasing the distinguishing characteristics of their philosophies. To this end, the reference to and comparison with previous scholarship on "the political" and "the ethical" is necessary. An important *tertium comparationis* here, is ...The notion of *natality/initium* constitutes as an important *tertium comparationis* here, as the human ability to start something utterly new is what unites the thought of Arendt and Bakhtin.

## 5. Scientific and Social Relevance

There are a variety of reasons as to why this research is of both scientific and societal relevance. Firstly, the research is of scholarly value as the connection between Arendt and (the early) Bakhtin has been understudied. In fact, the study of the early Bakhtin has only recently become a budding field of research, which makes investigating the relationship between the early Bakhtin and Arendt a novel undertaking that adds new insights to our

understanding of both. Moreover, studying the politico-philosophical implications of Bakhtin’s early work has been something many scholars have either consciously or unconsciously shied away from. Thus, considering the potential of using Bakhtin to think about political ontology opens up a vast amount of opportunities.

The research is relevant from a societal point of view because the research addresses a pertinent societal issue, namely the perceived loss of (political) agency in the public sphere. This is a issue to be taken seriously, because the loss of agency of democratic subjects means an erosion of democracy, where the “people have power”. A refigured, empowered notion of agency can aid in reinvigorating democratic participation and counter exclusionary practices that keep marginalized groups outside of the bounds of political power.

Lastly, the research carries further societal relevance insofar as the study aids in acquiring a deeper understanding of the Russian intellectual tradition by investigating not only the work of Bakhtin, but also the Russian philosophical background which informs Bakhtin’s thought. The need to acquire a more thorough understanding of the cultural and historical background of Russia has never been more pressing.

**4. Keywords**

Action/acting, agency, the political, the ethical, phenomenology,

**5. Timetable**

Year	Activities	Product
<p><b><u>Year 1</u></b>  <b>Sept 2024</b>  <b>- July 2025</b></p>	<p><i>Primary</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Develop tentative definition of both “the political” and “the ethical”</li> <li>- Compile literature on the topic of “the political” and “the ethical” and provide an overview. Note recent contributions to the field.</li> </ul> <p><i>Secondary</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Continue study of Russian language</li> <li>- Attend conferences. For instance the annual conference of <i>The Arendt Circle</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Part I of the research</li> </ul>

<p><b><u>Year 2</u></b>  <b>Sept 2025</b>  <b>- July 2026</b></p>	<p><i>Primary</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Create a shared framework to work out the concepts of <i>action</i> and <i>acting</i></li> <li>- Engage with Arendt's and Bakhtin's notion of <i>action/acting</i>. Address subthemes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Natality/Initium</li> <li>o "The Social"</li> <li>o Working/Labour, Thinking/Willing/Judging</li> <li>o Outsidedness/Givenness</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><i>Secondary</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Possible visit to Bakhtin Centre in Saransk or other relevant research institutions.</li> <li>- Continue study of Russian language</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Part II of the research</li> <li>• Paper for publication (edited chapter of thesis)</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Year 3</u></b>  <b>Sept 2026 -</b>  <b>July 2027</b></p>	<p><i>Primary</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Enter into comparative analysis between the two thinkers.</li> <li>- Identify lacunae, overlap and discrepancies between Arendt and Bakhtin in their notion of <i>action/acting</i>.</li> <li>- Summarize: examine the idea of a shared project as an answer to the challenges of "Modernity".</li> </ul> <p><i>Secondary</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participate in/organise conferences</li> <li>- Continue study of Russian language</li> <li>- Possible visit abroad</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Part II/III of the research</li> <li>• Paper for publication (edited chapter of thesis)</li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Year 4</u></b>  <b>Sept 2027 -</b>  <b>July 2028</b></p>	<p><i>Primary</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Work toward a conclusion/introduction</li> <li>- Reflect on the usefulness/relevance of a distinction between "the political" and "the ethical"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Part III of the research</li> <li>• Introduction of the dissertation</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Theorize on the potential of a new way of approaching “the political” and “the ethical” that goes beyond a binary</li> <li>- Relate how such a new approach may aid in reconceptualizing “agency” and how such a notion of agency may latch onto existing debates.</li> <li>- Rewriting, editing, correcting the PhD as a whole.</li> </ul> <p><i>Secondary</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participate in/organise conferences</li> <li>- Continue study of Russian language</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paper for publication (edited chapter of thesis)</li> <li>• Conclusion of the dissertation</li> </ul>
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## 6. Summary for non-specialists

Over the past years, many people experience as if they have no influence over politics, despite being part of a democracy. This is what might be described as a loss of (political) agency. This is an interesting development, as politics, as well as ethics are both inescapable parts of our life. The sidewalk we walk on, the supermarket we enter, and the money we use to buy our groceries are just as much “political” things as the elections we partake in every so often. Likewise, ethics shares the same omnipresence, as whenever we do something in our life, when we talk to strangers on the street, help our friends, or choose to buy something instead of just steal it, we are concerning ourselves, whether consciously or unconsciously, with acting in a way we consider to be “good” or not. There are numerous theories on how one should order society (politics), and there are also numerous ideas on what the “right” thing is to do in a given situation, or how one achieves the “good life” (ethics). The question then is what is common to these theories. What is common to the first question that makes it “politics” in the strict sense, and what is common to the second question to make it “ethics” in the strict sense? In other words, what are “politics” and “ethics” about? What is the “stuff” that politics and ethics are made of? This is the question of what is “the political” and what is “the ethical”.

These are fundamental questions many authors have previously engaged with. Noteworthy among these are the German-Jewish thinker Hannah Arendt and the Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin, who have each developed their own, unique, conception of “the

political” and “the ethical” respectively. For Arendt this has been a continuous theme throughout her entire oeuvre, whereas for Bakhtin the theme of “the ethical” is most pronounced in his early works *Towards a Philosophy of the Act* and *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity*. Both thinkers formulate their theories against the rise of Modernity: the historical, mostly Western, phenomenon whereby via Enlightenment values such as reason, science and technology an ideal of “progress” is supposedly achieved. Both Arendt and Bakhtin are fearful that the continued growth of the mechanisms of Modernity lead to the erosion and erasure of either “the political” or “the ethical”.

These spheres of existence are of value to Arendt and Bakhtin, as both, “the political” and “the ethical” are the place where people partake in *action*. It is the domain where – our uniquely human – agency is found. Action is a uniquely human endeavour and it is via action that we present ourselves to the world and make ourselves known as people. Action is what is fundamental to us, and the loss of action is an inevitable loss of who we are as people, and of our agency. Action thus serves as both the key concept to their respective notions of “the political” and “the ethical”, as well as the source of their views on “agency”, and serves as what connects the theories of Arendt and Bakhtin. For this reason, it is worthwhile to investigate the connections between these thinkers, as such research has of yet not been undertaken, and may help us think about how agency can be retaken in the public sphere. In particular, how may Arendt’s idea of “the political” complement Bakhtin’s notion of “the ethical” and vice versa, as both refer to a specific notion of human agency, but their emphasis is divergent.

This means investigating the terms “the political” and “the ethical” and discovering how these relate to other articulations of the same concepts by various authors. It also means figuring out where the theories Arendt and Bakhtin overlap, and where there is a shift of focus present. From this, the research hopes to see how the fundamental ideas at work in Arendt and Bakhtin may be used to point to a broader understanding of action – and as a result *agency* – that envelops both “the political” and “the ethical”. As a result, the research questions to what extent a distinction between “politics” and “ethics” is a productive one.

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## 8. Curriculum Vitae

### a.) Education

2019-present

**Research Master Philosophy – Social and Political Philosophy and Ethics – Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen**

*Thesis title: “Toward an Ethos for Democracy: The Early Bakhtin and Habermas on Democratic Procedures”*

*Relevant courses*

- Russian Religious Philosophy: Aleksand Men' and Others
- Political Philosophy in Russia: Solov'ëv, Kropotkin, Frank, and Kollontai
- Religious Philosophy of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy by Igor' Yevlampiev

2016-2019

**Bachelor in Philosophy (cum laude) – Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen**

2017-2019

**Faculty Honours Programme – Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Sciences**

Project on the relationship between form, content and style in *From the Other Shore/C mozo bepeza* by 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian philosopher Alexander Herzen.

### b.) Academic experience

***Student Assistant***

10/2021-01/2022

**Student Assistant Department of Practical Philosophy**

*Radboud University Nijmegen*

### ***Teaching Assistant***

4-6/2021 & 4-6/2022      **Teaching Assistant Philosophy of the Management Sciences**  
*Radboud University Nijmegen*

### ***Editorial Experience***

10/2020-9/2022      **Writer and Editor of Splitsstof**, student-led Philosophical Journal of the Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen

10/2020-9/2022      **Review Editor of Splitsstof**, student-led Philosophical Journal of the Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen

### **c.) International experience**

10/1-05/03/2022      **Scholarship from the Dutch Institute in St. Petersburg (NIP)** for research on the Master thesis related to Russia

8/8-25/08/2018      **Summer School in St. Petersburg** on Russian language and culture, organised by the Dutch Institute in St. Petersburg (NIP)

30/6-8/7/2019      **Summer School in Moscow** “Styles of Philosophy” organised by the Radboud University Nijmegen and the Moscow Higher School of Economics

### **d.) Other relevant experience**

3/2022-14/2022      **Co-organiser and host** of the Splitsstof Symposium on ‘Metamorphosis’

## e.) Output

### *Splijstof*

De Laat, Sidney, and Janneke Toonders. 2021. "Filosoof op de arbeidsmarkt: Lev Avitan, de noodzakelijke idealist." *Splijstof* 49, no. 3 (June): 37-46.  
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De Laat, Sidney. 2022. "Status Quaestionis: Nina de Boer." *Splijstof* 50, no. 2: 45-50.

De Laat, Sidney. 2022. "Tarkovsky's Andrei Rublëv: A Dostoevskian Hero." *Splijstof* 50, no 2: 9-14.

De Laat, Sidney. 2021. "Status Quaestionis: Juriijn-Timon de Vos." *Splijstof* 49, no 2: 71-79

De Laat, Sidney. 2021 "Filosoof op de arbeidsmarkt: Janneke Horlings." *Splijstof* 49, no 4.

De Laat, Sidney. 2014 "The End of Phenomenology." Review of *The End of Phenomenology: Metaphysics and the New Realism*, by Tom Sparrow. *Splijstof*, 2022.

## f.) Language Skills

<i>Dutch:</i>	Native speaker
<i>English:</i>	Fluent
<i>German:</i>	Good command
<i>Russian:</i>	Working knowledge