

# *Introducing Claude Lefort: From the Critique of Totalitarianism to the Politics of Democracy*

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## Author's Introduction, 2007

In 1998, Claude Lefort received the Hannah Arendt Prize given by the City-State of Bremen and co-sponsored with the Heinrich Boell Stiftung of the German Green Party. I was asked to deliver the Laudatio before a mixed public consisting of political figures, university faculty and students, and a general public. As the Laudatio is not a typical American form of oral presentation, I had a great deal of difficulty in constructing the attached talk to fit within the constraints of the occasion. In this English translation, by Eunah Lee, I have taken the liberty of smoothing out the written presentation, adapting some points to make them clearer (or more problematic, as it sometimes seemed necessary). The original text was published in the monthly journal, *Kommune*; a stripped down version (dropping the formalities of addressing the Sehr geehrten officials who were present), from which this translation was made, was published in a pamphlet edited by the Bremen Boell Stiftung under the title *if Politik und Moderne, Band IV*, under the title 'Von der Kritik des Totalitarismus zur Politik der Demokratie,' pp. 17-22.

I have resisted the temptation to update this nearly ten year-old text, which seems to me to stand on its own. It should be noted, however, that Lefort has just published a thousand-page collection of his hitherto un-collected writings that cover a period of 60 years as *Le temps présent. Écrits 1945-2005* (Paris: Belin, 2007).

## Laudatio, 1998

As an American brought to Germany to deliver the Laudatio for Claude Lefort on his reception of the Hannah Arendt Prize of the city of Bremen in 1998, what can I say about Claude Lefort, a political thinker from France? Germany and France have been bound ever more tightly by a healthy friendship; intellectual and political elites of both countries have nurtured good relations with one another, and the political axis between Germany and France functions smoothly.

Against this background it is perhaps surprising that the works of Claude Lefort, while exceptionally influential for many people in France, remain almost unknown in Germany. It seems to me that this obscurity has to do with three characteristics of the German intellectual landscape of the last thirty years: (1) The deep-seated resistance against the critical analysis of totalitarianism, which plays a central role for Hannah Arendt as well as for Lefort. (2) The attempt by political and moral theorists to develop a certain 'guarantee' of democracy that would avoid the tragedies of the recent German past. (3) The dominance of a so-called 'sociological mode of thought in the German intellectual atmosphere,' an intellectual atmosphere which cannot stand the Lefortian concept of the political. I will talk about this last point more closely later on, but for now one can point simply to the influence of the systems-theoretical approach of Niklas Luhmann among German political thinkers. As for the first two, the German experience of fascism, coupled with a strong post-war anti-communism that reserved the concept of totalitarianism for the Soviet Union, explains the refusal to take seriously this aspect of Lefort's work. And, of course, the restored democracy of the post-war West, and then the unification with the former East, did not encourage a critical attitude toward the potentially self-destructive aspects of democracy.

To begin my introduction to the explanation of the awarding of this prize, named for Hannah Arendt, let me start with my first experience of reading her work. I read her essay *On Revolution* for the first time as a young 68er. I doubt whether I understood Arendt's book correctly in those days. After all, in America as well as in Germany, we lived in an age where radical youth wanted to taste a forbidden fruit – Marxism – which we identified with revolution. The other day, when I took my old edition of *On Revolution* from the bookshelf, I had to admit to myself how many blind spots were reflected in my marginal notes. At that time I was utterly incapable of understanding the broader political framework within which she was functioning. Obviously what mattered more to me then was changing the world ... before I understood it – an error that expressed an over-eager, if not naïve, reading of Marx!

I mention this personal experience, because it was only after I came to know Claude Lefort in the early 70s and began to understand his critique of totalitarianism that I was able to reread and understand Hannah Arendt. What I found in Lefort's critique was not only the critical confrontation with the Marxism that the New Left had wanted to adopt, but also a presentation of the inner logic which had driven us young radicals in the direction of Marxism. Lefort showed me the seductive power

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of the attempt to imagine ‘the’ revolution as the overcoming of all social conflicts and, still more, to understand this overcoming as the realization of human history. Finally, through this acquaintance with Lefort’s thought, I became conscious of how radical my own representations of democracy were, and yet why I – like him – still continued to read Marx again and again. At that time, our SDS was not called ‘Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund’ (Socialist German Student Union), but ‘Students for a Democratic Society.’ Though we all have to come of age at some point, we don’t just abandon our youth and its passions.

In other words: Claude Lefort first gave me the keys to read Hannah Arendt anew and understand her better. That Lefort receives tonight the Hannah Arendt Prize for Political Thought is fully justified because he –like Arendt – teaches his readers to think further and to reflect anew. Like Arendt, Lefort draws out and stresses the newness of the new and presents it in a convincing way. That is why Lefort wrote in the subtitle of his book on the Italian politician and thinker, Niccolò Machiavelli, *Le Travail de l’oeuvre*, that an authentic work (oeuvre) does not let itself be fixed, but ‘goes on working.’

Probably you are thinking to yourself: Although these are beautiful metaphors, what does he really mean by them? Let me make my suggestive descriptions of the work of Claude Lefort more precise. At the end of his book on Machiavelli, he stresses that his work has to do with, ‘the experience of politics here and now.’ But what does politics mean for Lefort? He distinguishes between two meanings of the concept ‘politics’ – first, everyday politics; and second, the political, which produces, or as he says, ‘institutes’ the symbolic conditions that articulate the framework in which everyday politics takes place and makes sense. In order to further elaborate on these two meanings of politics, let me present several stages in the life of Claude Lefort, and at the same time clarify the range of his critique by using the example of totalitarianism.

As a high school student in occupied Paris, Lefort studied with the esteemed philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, with whom he became friends and whose posthumous works he later edited. Through Merleau-Ponty’s mediation, he was able to contribute articles to the leading French intellectual journal of the time, *Les Temps Modernes*, edited by Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre. However, after a critical argument with Sartre over the evaluation of Stalinism, Lefort ended his participation in *Les Temps Modernes*. Already in 1948 he had been a co-founder of an anti-Stalinist group, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, which he also left in 1958 after

a polemic with its co-founder, Cornelius Castoriadis. Lefort's intellectual and political work during this first period played an important role among some of the leaders during the May events in 1968. It was grounded in his critique of the bureaucratization of the Soviet Union. This critique led to an early analysis of totalitarianism in 'Totalitarianism without Stalin.' Although Lefort still supported the idea that there could be a revolutionary proletariat, he was one of the first in the French intellectual landscape – at that time still shaped by Marxist ideas – who challenged the theoretical legitimation of the so-called 'leading role' of the communist party in making the socialist society. But he did not stop with the critique of Stalinism and orthodox Marxism. His thought developed further, beyond the critique of bureaucracy.

After leaving *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, Lefort worked for nearly 15 years on his book about Machiavelli. Agreeing with this significant thinker of the Italian Renaissance, he stressed the indeterminability of the political, and particularly the importance of the symbolic institution of meaning (which is not simply the reflection of a material infrastructure). Consequently, the political is never just the reflection of reality. Rather, what is taken to be real in a given society first receives its significance through the political institution of meaning. From this insight into the nature of the political, it follows for Lefort that the political is always historical, that modern societies are in principle open to the new, and that any attempt to truly embody power and thereby to annul the symbolic institutionalization of power leads inevitably to the temptation of totalitarianism. In other words, although there are class struggles – or one could say more broadly, fundamental social conflicts – any effort to resolve them once-and-for-all in the framework of a single self-identical social order logically leads to a despotism, which may call itself enlightened, yet in actuality is the first step toward totalitarian rule.

The understanding of the symbolic or institutionalizing function of the political and the impossibility of justifying the political by recourse to scientific, ethical or moral foundations led Lefort no longer to speak of the social but rather to recognize it as the socio-historical. Only if one considers the social, or society, as a historical form, is it possible to understand new political events not simply as resulting from a continuity of what previously existed (and thus as not really new), but as contingent historical events that transform the nature of the political. This insight leads to the understanding of the symbolic function of the political as creating a space for the invention of the new. From this perspective, Lefort saw the events of May 68 in France, the emergence of new social movements in Europe, or the

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human rights movements in East Central Europe, not as the logical consequences of earlier historical experiences, but as a sign of the indeterminability of modern politics.

This analysis of the political provides the theoretical foundation of Lefort's critique of totalitarianism. Totalitarianism is a modern phenomenon, which is not comparable to classical tyranny. In totalitarianism, society is violently atomized – or if one wants to use a German concept, it is '*gleichgeschaltet* (coordinated)'. The source of power, of right, and of knowledge becomes embodied in the party. This party, in turn, claims to represent the true essence of society. Lefort's critique of this claim is formulated most pregnantly in his analysis of Solzhenitsyn's novel, *The Gulag Archipelago*, which he insists to be not 'merely' a novel. With Solzhenitsyn, he deciphers the imaginary world of the revolutionary, who understands himself as an organ or an agent of society, an impersonal instrument of an imaginary 'world spirit.' The revolutionary is a '*bien pensant*' – the 'politically correct' agent who thinks the good in order no longer to have to think about the complications of a world, and not to have to experience the indeterminability of society and the always possible emergence of the unpredictable new.

The analysis of totalitarianism leads Lefort also to a modified understanding of democracy. Whether he analyzes the early stages of democracy already present in humanism, in the Italian city-states, or in the French or American revolutions, the uniqueness of democracy consists in the fact that – in contrast to totalitarianism – it never succumbs to the temptation of embodiment. In democracy, differences, conflicts and particular interests are not only legitimate, but are in fact necessary. This means that 'the' democracy exists just as little as 'the' revolution existed. Democracy is the ferment of the new; it is essentially historical and cannot be defined by any single trait. In this assertion, Lefort's argument is fully compatible with Hannah Arendt's idea of 'the right to have rights' in so far as Lefort is asking for the justification of such an essential right. That right is neither a natural nor a positive or statutory right; it is a politically instituted right. However, such a right cannot be fixed once and for all, since it can degenerate into mere formality or become the naked expression of current relations of power. Therefore democracy can never be secure in itself: the rights which underlie democracy can appear as merely formal, or as the disguise that hides social divisions while science can be interpreted as a merely ideological reflection of current power relations. In short, the indeterminability of democracy leads to the temptation to see totalitarianism as the realization or the embodiment of democratic ideals.

After 1989, and then the dissolution of the Soviet Union, totalitarianism seems to be completely dead and democracy, in contrast, seems to have ultimately prevailed as a political form of society. However, those who have read Lefort, would not simply talk about 'democracy'; nor would they easily talk about any fixed 'form of society.' Lefort's reader would ask where this form comes from. It comes, Lefort would answer, from the political: democracy as it presently exists represents the symbolic institution of the political, and as such, it can be lost again. It gets lost, for example, when the divided, plural, democratic society submits itself to an arbitrary unification, to an artificial embodiment; when the society negates its own indeterminability and sets its historicity in stone. When concrete politics, or existing state, becomes identical with the political, its historicity and its modifiability are denied. By emphasizing the historicity of the political, Lefort is pointing to the fact that democratic achievements are never secure, that we are always already in danger of creating a world in which citizens are passive and previously achieved rights are not used any longer to demand new rights. In such a world, literature as well as philosophy loses its capacity to communicate new experiences. It is for these reasons that Claude Lefort took over as chairman of the French Committee for the defence of Salmon Rushdie when his novel, *The Satanic Verses*, was condemned by a religious *fatwa*, and even many so-called democrats replied by saying that the novel was after all 'only literature.' For Lefort as well as for Arendt, literature is a confrontation with the truth, the indeterminable and the historical.

Against this background, we could summarize the political and intellectual career of Claude Lefort with the following phrases: If totalitarianism is not understood and criticized from inside – i.e. as the denial of the indeterminability and differences on which democracy is, so to speak, founded – then one cannot have a correct understanding of the radical potential of democracy. A democracy that is fully realized once and for all does not exist; however, a democracy that renews itself continually remains our possibility, but also our challenge.

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