Interpretation
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Elías José Palti, *An Archaeology of the Political: Regimes of Power from the Seventeenth Century to the Present.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.

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Elías José Palti makes what he describes as a study of "the political," a term that he claims was "originally coined" by Carl Schmitt in *The Concept of the Political* (1932), in his effort to trace its trajectory from the seventeenth century through the present. He distinguishes "politics" from "the political" by explaining that the former represents "one instance of social totality," by which he appears to mean a unity between politics and society, while the latter "refers to the way diverse instances are disaggregated and mutually articulated" (xvii), which anticipates the dissolution that Palti will describe in his book. Among the unique features of Palti's work is his effort to develop his argument within "a broader historical-intellectual perspective" (xx). Throughout the book, he offers interdisciplinary examples from art, literature, and music in conjunction with his discussion of the works of political theorists and events. Palti uses this broader focus to underscore the comprehensive nature of the transformation of the political.

Two significant experiences that he identifies as disenchantments define the period addressed in his book. The first "disenchantment" occurs during the period that encompasses generally the Baroque era (1550–1650) and particularly the Reformation and the break with the single Catholic presence (which he later describes as "God abandon[ing] the world," 172). The second "disenchantment," which comes more than three centuries later, is, according to Palti, the recognition of the illusory nature of transcendent things. The disenchantments are significant in that Palti uses them to trace a trajectory of the political through a conceptual presentation. Beyond providing a new

understanding of the political, Palti's effort also aims to elicit insights into the foundation of modern democracy.

Palti's aim throughout his work is to recast the political in a manner that dramatically differs from the understanding of politics that can be traced back to Aristotle. As a prelude to discussion of the first disenchantment, he offers in his first chapter's section "The Twists in the Ancient Theory of the Forms of Government" a brief review of Aristotle, Aquinas, and Dante on forms of government and in particular on monarchy. But he misrepresents Aristotle's "opinion" when he states that, in Aristotle's view, "the art of politics consists of combining social elements" and that it is about "avoiding conflict between the many and the few, the rich and the poor, and ensuring that no social group is excluded from the process of political decision making, which would generate dissent and would threaten the stability of the polis" (5). Aristotle argues in the *Politics* that human beings, by nature, are political and social creatures who are naturally drawn to form political communities for the sake of living well. This is dependent upon the presence of law and justice, which also provides a means to address conflict, but there is no suggestion that the reason governments are established is to avoid conflict. That Palti's trajectory of the political leads far afield from Aristotle's politics will become increasingly apparent, but his interpretation of Aristotle makes clear why he stated at the outset that politics is an instance of social totality, as noted above.

Returning to Palti's trajectory, among the questions that he asks at the outset is, "How was it that theology became *political theology*?" (3). The emergence of absolute monarchies in the Baroque era is significant because, according to Palti, the monarch believed he shared the divine essence, which differentiated him from his subjects. As Palti explains, he put himself "in a situation of transcendence and preeminence with respect to those over whom he exercised power" (10). This change answers Palti's question and demonstrates the crucial political shift that began to take place in thinking about theology and politics.

Palti argues that El Greco's *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* provides a visual representation of the structure of Baroque thought and mirrors what is happening in the political realm. The heavenly figures in the top half of the painting direct their gaze upward, while the Count and the attending religious and political figures in the bottom half gaze downward. Two figures stand out: the priest in the bottom half of the painting, who is looking upward, and a young boy, who is looking outward. The mediating figures of the priest and the boy (the priest as mediator between the earthly and the heavenly, the boy as mediator between the figures in the painting and the

observers of the painting) serve as links between two worlds, yet are outside of or alien to both worlds. Yet the priest (whose vestments reproduce the folds of the sacred, like Christ's garments) as mediator occupies the center of the political stage, "the only one who is now able to reestablish communication between the sacred and the profane and restore to the world its lost unity" (13). Recalling that this is the era of the first disenchantment, the author argues that this painting is representative of God retiring from the world, which leaves a figure of a mediator that is "torn by its dual nature, at once sacred and profane, universal and particular" (13).

This dualism and its relation to the larger theological and political debate is significant. It begins to respond to the question of how theology became political theology (the mediating figure of the priest). Also, the first disenchantment (God abandoning the world) gives rise to the artificial and conventional in the world of politics. We can draw a parallel to the premodern absolute monarch, whose divine nature also separates him from his subjects. The question is whether he can serve as mediator when, like the priest and the boy, he has a paradoxical relationship. He is no longer truly of either world, a circumstance which also highlights that his rule is merely conventional. In addition to the upheaval with respect to God and the absolute monarch, the very concept of what defines the community is called into question. Palti claims: "This means that *a community is never immediately one, immediately congruent, with regards to itself.* The principle of unity that constitutes it as such comes to it from an external source. This is what 'the political' designates" (26, emphasis in the original). Palti's distancing of the political from the ruler and the community is the first step in a trajectory that ultimately leads him to conclude that "the political" is just a fiction. Palti rejects a traditional history-of-ideas approach because he believes it is inadequate to the task of understanding the structure of Baroque political thought. He argues instead that there is a new kind of logic, "the folding logic," that provides a means to understand the paradoxical nature of the Baroque. Quoting Deleuze (from *The Fold*), Palti contends that "the baroque refers not to an essence but rather to an operative function, to a trait. It endlessly produces folds" (30). Recall that Palti included the word "twists" in the title of the section on prior philosophers and theologians as well as a description of the folds of the priest's garments.

Throughout *An Archaeology of the Political* Palti draws on the theories of Deleuze, Foucault, and other postmodern theorists to structure his work and advance his argument. The book is composed of four chapters and a conclusion. Following chapter 1, "The Theological Genesis of the Political," discussed

above and which introduces the theory of the fold, the subsequent chapters study the political from the vantage point of its relation to power through the use of interdisciplinary examples (such as artists, literary figures, and composers), modern theories, and intervening political events. While Palti's argument follows a linear progression, this by no means suggests a linear pattern of development of the political. Instead, each century casts the political against the backdrop of contemporary events. Chapter 2, "The Tragic Scene: The Symbolic Nature of Power and the Problem of Expression," addresses the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and is identified with the age of representation and a logic of folding. The tragic scene reflects the contradiction and split lives (recall the duality discussed above) of the citizenry: "as citizens (legal subjects) and as Christians (moral subjects)—playing the two roles simultaneously without ever managing to fuse them" (34). Palti observes, "The *political* that at that moment emerges is, in the end, *nothing but the intermediary space opened by this double impasse*" (43, emphasis in the original).

Continuing with the temporal designation and reference to an identifiable age, chapter 3, "The Discourse of Emancipation and the Emergence of Democracy as a Problem," discusses the nineteenth century, identified as "a logic of undifferentiation/identification in the age of history" (xx). History is identified as the "new master signifier around which the entire political discourse would become rearticulated" (104). Palti cites Foucault, who argued that the paradox of an *objective transcendental* is the key conceptual device on which this regime of knowledge rested. The consequence of this "conceptual shift" is the redefinition of the meaning of the concept of political representation: "The goal became finding an existential type of identity between the governing and the governed, a link that overcame the strictly political-legal relationship and could bring it into being" (104). Recall that the second disillusionment, which delineates one of the parameters of Palti's study, is the recognition of the illusory nature of transcendent things. At the end of chapter 3, Palti moves closer to this position by explaining his description of the logic of undifferentiation/identification in this age and coupling it with this redefinition of political representation: "This attempt at undifferentiation/identification between the political and the social expressed the ideal of a radical immanence. The political order was no longer a realm outside of society but a function of it, one within a system of functions, the means of its own self-constitution" (106–7).

The discussion in chapter 3 gives yet another marker of the political, but the events of the twentieth century discussed in chapter 4, "The Rebirth of the

Tragic Scene and the Emergence of the Political as a Conceptual Problem" (the logic of leap in the age of forms), explain a break with the idea of history as a teleological, evolutionary course. "Once deprived of the teleological certainties provided by the evolutionary views of the nineteenth century, the revolutionary enterprise becomes one of subjective self-affirmation" (112). Among the consequences of what Palti calls "a drastic reversal" (112), "the realm of foundations is detached from immanence and placed again on the side of transcendence, which would nevertheless become radically redefined regarding the seventeenth century: *it is no longer the home of the universal…but…the source of contingency…dislocating the immanent logic of systems*" (113, emphasis in the original). Palti explores the work of several contemporary authors throughout the chapter, but this observation captures the trajectory of the political as he sees it. "If the political order has a natural basis, if it demands one, that natural basis always remains indefinable, conceptually ungraspable.…From this point of view, democracy is defined as an 'atopology' of values; their nature as pure excess impedes identifying them with any particular social place or political subject" (144). Palti's closing remarks in chapter 4 sum up what the political has become to him: "Once that logic is detached of any end, however, once it is no longer inscribed within a temporal horizon, a teleological framework, a given view of historical becoming, the subject becomes locked into the circle of its own self-generation. And this marks the term of the play of transcendence/immanence that hitherto articulated the horizon of the political" (165). The second disenchantment is therefore the recognition of the illusory nature of transcendent things. In the words of Alain Badiou, "The political has never been anything more than a fiction" (166).

Palti observes in his conclusion that the political "is not an eternal category, but a contingent reality" (179). He poses several questions in his summation, including "How can a sense of community be articulated, once it is deprived of every reference to an outside?" "What sort of political practice is possible after it is deprived not only of all objective guarantee but also of subjective sustenance?" and finally "What kind of political practice might take place beyond the field of the political?" (179). Palti argues that these questions are critical yet unsolvable today. Instead of this admission of defeat, a radical reassessment of Palti's assumptions and arguments about politics and the political is more likely to provide answers. The stakes are great and the consequences potentially catastrophic if politics fails. Palti traces one trajectory in his book; it behooves us to redirect the trajectory, to embrace politics and return the political to a central role in the formation of just communities founded on universal principles.