Democratising Competition

Markets, Politics, and the Crisis of Democracy

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Abstract

Competition is a fundamental aspect of markets and party politics in democratic capitalist societies. Yet, its relationship to democracy has received little attention in political philosophy and democratic theory. In this PhD thesis, I make the case for the need to rethink competition as a concept of democratic theory – for diagnosing contemporary crises of democracy as well as for analysing and reimagining democratic practices and institutions. Developing this concept, I argue, requires addressing competition both as a political and socio-economic phenomenon, pushing back against the dominance of the market metaphor, and questioning the dichotomy of competition and cooperation. I do this in two parts: In Part I, I establish the de-democratising potentials of economic competition by examining the role of competition in neoliberal theory and practice. I show that neoliberal competition erodes the 'social conditions of democracy' by intensifying and legitimating inequality, removing its rules from democratic control, and promoting a generalised ethos of individual competitiveness. I contend that political democracy cannot rely on competition alone, but requires sufficiently cooperative, yet politicised social relations. Part II provides an account of the competitive nature of political democracy as presented in normative democratic theory. I begin with an analysis of party competition and a critique of the Schumpeterian analogy to market competition. Looking beyond party competition, I suggest that competitive practices – in form of a 'contest of arguments – are an integral part of deliberative-epistemic theories of democracy. Furthermore, I suggest that the agonistic notion of democratic politics as a 'tamed conflict' is best understood as a democratic competition within and over the 'rules of the game.' I conclude the thesis by arguing that competition must be understood as a practice that incorporates moments of cooperation and remains open to the contestation of its own rules.

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Introduction: Political Competition Beyond the Market Model

Almost any mention of the term *competition* eventually invites references to the market: to innovating entrepreneurs, ambitious businesspeople striving for profit, and the 'invisible hand' which promises that ultimately everyone will benefit. Considering the dominance of 'the market' in public discourse and in people's everyday lives, this is hardly surprising. Yet, it is perhaps more surprising that it retains this dominant position within political philosophy and democratic theory. If they discuss it at all, democratic theorists seem to concur with Joseph Schumpeter that political competition "may be usefully compared" with "competition in the economic sphere".[1] From typologies identifying a "competitive model of democracy"[2] to discussions of party competition or "the marketplace of competition in ideas"[3] – wherever competition is discussed, a reference to the market seems to be lurking around the corner.[4]

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[1] Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2003 [1943]), p. 271.

[2] David Miller, "The competitive model of democracy", in: *Democratic Theory and Practice*, ed. by Graeme Duncan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 134.

Miller is not the only one to provide an account of a distinct model of democracy characterised by an emphasis on a political competition modelled on the market. See also: Jon Elster, "The Market and the Forum: Three Varieties of Political Theory", in: *Deliberative Democracy. Essays on Reason and Politics*, ed. by James Bohman and Wilhelm Rehg (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 3-34; David Held, *Models of Democracy. Third Edition* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), Chapter 5; Jane J. Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), p. 17.

[3] Jane Mansbridge et al., "A systemic approach to deliberative democracy", in: John Parkinson and Jane Mansbridge (eds.), *Deliberative Systems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 20.

The dominance of the metaphor of the 'marketplace of ideas' for the competition between different ideas in a democratic society is evidenced by its extensive discussion in legal and political theory, but also in philosophy; see, e.g.: Joseph Blocher, "Institutions in the Marketplace of Ideas", *Duke Law Journal*, Vol. 57, Issue 4 (2008), pp. 821-890; Gregory Brazeal, "How much does a belief cost? Revisiting the marketplace of ideas", *Southern California Interdisciplinary Law Journal*, Vol. 21, Issue 1 (2012), pp. 1-46; Alvin I. Goldman and James C. Cox, "Speech, Truth, and the Free Market for Ideas", *Legal Theory* Vol. 2, Issue 1 (1996), pp. 1-32; Lisa Herzog, *Citizen Knowledge. Markets, Experts, and the Infrastructure of Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), Chapter 5; Stanley Ingber, "The Marketplace of Ideas: A Legitimizing Myth", *Duke Law Journal,* Vol. 33, No.1 (1984), pp. 1-91; G. Michael Parsons, "Fighting for Attention: Democracy, Free Speech, and the Marketplace of Ideas," *Minnesota Law Review*, Vol. 104, Issue 5 (2020), pp. 2157- 2256; Robert Sparrow and Robert E. Goodin, "The Competition of Ideas: Market or Garden?", *CRISPP,* Vol. 4, Issue 2 (2001), pp. 45-58; Cass Sunstein, *Liars. Falsehoods and Free Speech in an Age of Deception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Christopher T. Wonnell, "Truth and the Marketplace of Ideas," *U.C. Davis Law Review,* Vol. 19, Issue 3 (1986), pp. 669-728.

[4] For further uses of the analogy between political competition and market competition in democratic theory, see: Noberto Bobbio, *The Future of Democracy. A Defence of the Rules of the Game*, translated by Roger Griffin, edited by Richard Bellamy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 111-114; Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 276; Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1957); Jürgen Habermas, "Three Normative Models of Democracy", *Constellations,* Volume 1, No 1 (1994), p. 3; C.B. Macpherson, *The Life and Time of Liberal*

However, the fact that market competition tends to act as the default model for political competition obscures rather than illuminates the latter's role in democratic capitalist societies.[5] This projection of a specific type of competition from one sphere onto another insinuates that political competition, like market competition, is animated by self-interest and enacted by individual entrepreneurs.[6] At the same time, this conception of political competition seems to suggest that democracy shares a fundamental affinity with competitive markets and confirms the existence of "a close symbiosis between liberal democracy and competitive markets."[7] Thereby, it implies a justification of capitalist markets, barring critical reflections on their potential negative impacts on democratic societies. Predetermined in this way, the concept of competition is attractive neither to those committed to a more expansive understanding of democracy nor to those more critical of the union between political democracy and capitalist markets.

This thesis pushes against the conceptual marketisation of political or, rather, of democratic competition.[8] It aims to uncover alternative conceptions of democratic competition – ones that

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Democracy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), Chapter IV; Ian Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), Chapter 3.

[5] I elaborate on my focus on democratic capitalist societies in Section 2 below.

[6] These are indeed the assumptions of the proponents of the 'market model of democratic competition that I discuss in Chapter Four (cf. Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, pp. 27-31; Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy,* p.283; Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory*, p. 57).

As I show in Section 4 below, market competition takes different forms in practice and gives rise to different theoretical interpretations and conceptualisations. The association of the market with individual self-interest dates back at least to Adam Smith and his famous observation that: "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages." (Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations, Volume I,* Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979 [1776], pp. 26-27.) Downs calls this the "self-interest axiom" and states that "[p]ractically all economic theory, for example, is based on this premise." (Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 28.) The relationship between market competition and entrepreneurship is explored, e.g., by Israel M. Kirzner who asserts "that entrepreneurship and competitiveness are two sides of the same coin: that entrepreneurial activity is always competitive and that competitive activity is always entrepreneurial […]." (Israel M. Kirzner, *Competition and Entrepreneurship* [Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Inc., 2013 (1973)], p. 75.)

[7] Elias Deutscher, "The competition-democracy nexus resurrected?—Four precursors of a competition-democracy nexus 4.0", *Journal of Antitrust Enforcement*, 00 (2025), p. 1

[8] Throughout this thesis, I use the terms 'political competition' and 'democratic competition' largely interchangeably. However, it is important to acknowledge that there may be instances of non-democratic political

are compatible both with more expansive conceptions of democracy and a critical view of capitalist markets. The effort of 'pushing back' against the dominance of the market analogy in democratic theory consists of two steps or lines of inquiry. First, I move from the analogy to the actual phenomenon of competitive markets. Thus, Part I of this thesis charts the effects of market competition on democracy. Then, I turn to the political realm. In Part II, I demonstrate the insufficiencies of the market model and develop alternative conceptions of political competition through engaging with deliberative and agonistic theories of democracy.

These alternative conceptions also open up avenues for integrating the concept of political competition into normative democratic theory, which rarely pays it sustained attention.[9] This disinterest in competition among political philosophers and democratic theorists marks a pronounced departure from the everyday experience of politics in democratic capitalist societies, in which elections, party competition, and struggles for leadership and influence are central.[10] It also diverges from accounts of democracy in the political sciences, which regularly

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competition. Historically, one may think, e.g., of the pre-democratic, semi-aristocratic origins of political parties in Britain (cf. Jonathan Hearn, *The Domestication of Competition. Social Evolution and Liberal Society* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023], p. 168). Other examples may include competitions between different factions in dictatorships or interstate competition. I do not discuss any form of non-democratic political competition in this thesis.

[9] However, the last few years have seen a resurgence of interest in competition in political and democratic theory. See: Shai Agmon, "Two Concepts of Competition", *Ethics,* Vol. 133, No. 1 (2022), pp. 5-37; Samuel Ely Bagg, *The Dispersion of Power. A Critical Realist Theory of Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024); Alfred Moore, "Reversibility and Democracy: The Epistemic Functions of Political Competition", in: *Democracy and the Future. Future-Regarding Governance in Democratic Systems*, ed. by Michael K. Mackenzie, Maina Setälä and Simo Kyllkönen (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), pp. 55-76, Alfred Moore, "Post-Truth Politics and the Competition of Ideas", *Critical Review*, Vol. 35, Issue 1-2 (2023), pp. 112-121; Alfred Moore/Samuel E. Bagg*, Democracy and Competition: Rethinking the Forms, Purposes, and Values of Competition in Democracy* (forthcoming). Increased interest in the related phenomena of political parties and partisanship predates this; see: Matteo Bonotti, *Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Russell Muirhead, *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Nancy Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels. An Appreciation of Parties and Partisanship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Jonathan White and Lea Ypi, *The Meaning of Partisanship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[10] For empirical evidence that competitive elections are a central aspect of popular conceptions of democracy, see: Jonathan Chu et al., "People consistently view elections and civil liberties as key components of democracy", *Science*, Vol. 386, Issue 6719 (2004), pp. 291-296.

For an extended discussion of the centrality of elections and the practice of voting in the popular imaginary, see: Emilee Booth Chapman, *Election Day* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), Chapter 1.

list "vigorous competition" among criteria supposed to measure the quality of democracy.[11] One might want to adapt a phrase Nancy L. Rosenblum employs to describe the research on parties and partisanship and call political competition 'the darling of political science' and the 'orphan of political philosophy'.[12] This thesis aims to rectify this oversight and reclaim the concept of competition for political philosophy and normative democratic theory.

1 Why this Matters: Democracy in Crisis

This project of reclaiming the concept of political competition and examining its relationship to democracy is particularly urgent today. Amidst economic turmoil and an ecological emergency, there is also a growing sense that we are experiencing a distinct *crisis of democracy*. This crisis is reported to manifest variously in corporate capture, growing distrust in political parties and public institutions, the success of far-right and authoritarian movements and leaders, increasing polarisation, and a rise of post-truth politics.[13]

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[11] Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morlino, "The Quality of Democracy: An Overview", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 15, Issue 4 (2004), p. 24.

See also: David Altman and Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, "Assessing the Quality of Democracy: Freedom, Competitiveness and Participation in Eighteen Latin American Countries", *Democratization*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2002), pp. 85-100; Marc Bühlmann et al., "The democracy barometer: a new instrument to measure the quality of democracy and its potential for comparative research", *European Political Science*, Vol. 11, Issue 4, pp. 519-536; Anna Grzymała-Busse, "Encouraging Effective Democratic Competition", *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol. 21, Issue 1 (2007), pp. 91–110

[12] Rosenblum originally writes: "Orphans of political philosophy, parties are *the darlings* of political science." (Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels*, p. 322.)

[13] See, e.g.: Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004); Colin Crouch, "Post-Democracy and Populism", *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 90, Issue S1 (2019), pp. 124-137; John S. Dryzek et al., "The crisis of democracy and the science of deliberation. Citizens can avoid polarization and make sound decisions", *Science,* Vol. 363 Issue 6432 (2019), pp. 1144-1146; Michael P. Lynch, "Polarisation and the Problem of Spreading Arrogance", in: *Polarisation, Arrogance, and Dogmatism. Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. by Alessandra Tanesini and Michael P. Lynch (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), pp. 141-157; Harry Quilter-Pinner et al., *Trust Issues: Dealing with distrust in politics,* (London: IPPR, 2021); Sheldon S. Woolin, *Democracy, Incorporated. Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Silke van Dyck, "Post-Truth, the Future of Democracy and the Public Sphere", *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (2022), pp. 37-50; Camila Vergara, *Systemic Corruption. Constitutional Ideas for an Anti-Oligarchic Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

'Competition' figures at least twice in this crisis. Particularly in its neoliberal and globalised version, *market competition* is often listed among its causes. The neoliberal celebration of competitive markets is associated with the waning of meaningful political conflict and the rise of TINA ('there is no alternative') politics.[14] William Davies even identifies it as the motor behind a more general "*disenchantment of politics by economics*",[15] while Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval contend that "[i]n the attempt to make society an 'order of competition' composed exclusively of 'economic man' or 'human capital', struggling against their fellows, the very bases of social and political life in modern societies have been undermined […]."[16] Others suspect that the worldwide resurgence of right-wing populism is fuelled by the anger and dissatisfaction of the 'losers' of globalisation.[17]

In the form of party competition, *political competition* is also a central element of the institutional makeup of liberal democracies. As declining voter turnout and the capture of large parts of the electorate by more or less openly anti-democratic forces demonstrate, the competitive electoral system is one of the primary sites on which the crisis of democracy plays out.[18] Some even argue that competitive elections themselves contribute to this crisis. They

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[14] Cf. Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018), pp. 4-5; *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution. Left Populism and the Power of Affects* (London: Verso, 2022), Chapter 1, ProQuest Ebook Central.

[15] William Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism. Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition* (London: SAGE, 2017 [2015]), p. 6.

For Davies, the neoliberal project consists of the attempt to replace anything distinctly political by "*market-based principles and techniques of evaluation*." (Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, p. 23.) Competition plays a central role in this project: "Its [neoliberalism's] authority claims, what knits its disparate adherents together, and the basis of its avowed liberalism, also derive from a particular value that is present in markets, but can be pushed into all other corners of society: competition." (Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, p. 29.)

[16] Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *Never-Ending Nightmare. The Neoliberal Assault on Democracy*, translated by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2019), p. xix.

[17] Cf. Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism. The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), p. 5; Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, pp. xvi-xvii.

For a discussion of this claim, see: Andrew Gamble, "Globalization and the new populism", *Policy Network* (11 April 2019), https://policynetwork.progressivebritain.org/opinions/essays/globalization-and-the-new-populism/ (last accessed 15 September 2025).

[18] The report on "The Global State of Democracy" notes a decline in global electoral participation "from 65.2 per cent in 2008 to 55.5 per cent in 2023." ("The Global State of Democracy 2024. Strengthening the Legitimacy of Elections in a Time of Radical Uncertainty", [Stockholm: International IDEA, 2024], p. 3.) The current presidents of the USA and Hungary, Donald Trump and Victor Orbán, are perhaps the most prominent examples of a slide

suggest that revitalising democracy requires replacing them with procedures of random selection.[19]

A sustained analysis of the relationship between competition and democracy promises to contribute to a better understanding of the de-democratising effects of market competition and the significance of competitive democratic institutions. It is, furthermore, essential for evaluating proposals for democratic revitalisation, such as the aforementioned suggestion to replace elections with sortition. Thus, an expanded conception of democratic competition provides resources not just for understanding (liberal) democracy and its crisis, but also for re-imagining its future.

2 Politics and Markets: Competition in Democratic Capitalist Societies

My starting point and frame of reference for this project are democratic capitalist societies in the so-called 'West'.[20] This involves both historical and geographical restrictions. With regard to the former, it is important to note that the debates and discourses that I primarily engage with all date to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Despite its association with political

towards authoritarianism that appears to be mandated by the electorate (cf. Gábor Scheiring, "I watched Hungary's democracy dissolve into authoritarianism as a member of parliament – and I see troubling parallels in Trumpism and its appeal to workers", *The Conversation* [7 March 2024], https://theconversation.com/i-watched-hungarys-democracy-dissolve-into-authoritarianism-as-a-member-of-parliament-and-i-see-troubling-parallels-in-trumpism-and-its-appeal-to-workers-224930 [last accessed: 15 September 2025]; Andrew Roth, "Has Trump succeeded in normalising American autocracy?", *The Guardian* [31 August 2025]), https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/aug/31/trump-american-autocracy-authoritarianism [last accessed: 29 October 2025]).

[19] See, e.g., Alexander Gurrero, *Lottocracy. Democracy Without Elections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024); Hélène Landemore, *Open Democracy. Reinventing Popular Rule for the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020); David van Reybrouck, *Against Elections. The Case for Democracy*, translated by Liz Waters (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2018 [2016]).

[20] For a conceptual history of the term 'the West', see: Georgios Varouxakis, *The West: The History of an Idea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2025).

competition and competitiveness, references to Athenian democracy will be rare.[21] Instead, I look at their more recent past to understand the present state of democratic societies.

The specification that my analysis is focused on democracies in the West is to be read in two ways. It is, first, an acknowledgment of the fact that the democratic societies I discuss are almost all located in Europe and North America; the examples I explore are primarily from the political contexts of Britain, Germany, and the United States.[22] Likewise, the theories and analyses that I draw on tend to share a focus on this part of the world. Thus, the focus of this thesis on the West is an expression of my limited familiarity with democratic societies elsewhere and, perhaps, a reflection of their underrepresentation in mainstream democratic theory more generally.[23] It should not be understood to amount to the claim that democracy is a Western invention or that Western democracies provide the most interesting object of study.

Second, more than a geographical specification, terms like 'Western democracies' or 'democracies of the Western type' evoke a particular understanding of democracy and a particular tradition of democratic theorising. In the twenty-first century, Western liberal democracies share a set of institutional characteristics that C.B. Macpherson lists as follows:

> Governments and legislatures are chosen directly or indirectly by periodic elections with universal equal franchise, the voters' choice being normally a choice between political parties. There is a sufficient degree of civil liberties (freedom of speech,

[21] Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Second Edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998 [1958]), p. 41; Jakub Filonik, "*We are the Champions*: The Role of Agonistic Metaphor in the Political Discourse of Classical Greece", in: *The Agōn in Classical Literature Studies in Honour of Professor Chris Carey*, ed. by Michael Edwards et al. (London: University of London Press, 2022), pp. 155-162; Andreas Kalyvas, "The democratic narcissus: The agonism of the ancients compared to that of the (post)moderns", in: *Law and Agonisitc Politics*, ed. by Andrew Schaap (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 15-42; Brenna McCoy and Irena Martínková, "Democracy, philosophy and sport: animating the agonistic spirit", *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, Vol. 49, Issue 2 (2022), pp. 246-262.

[22] The former two correspond to my lived experience of democratic politics as a citizen of Germany and a resident and student in the UK. The latter is a reflection of the dominance of US politics in global news and democratic theory.

[23] For an account of this dominance and the need to challenge it, see: Mark Chou and Emily Beausoleil, "Non-Western Theories of Democracy", *Democratic Theory,* Vol. 2, Issue 2 (2015), pp. 1-7.

> publication, and association, and freedom from arbitrary arrest and imprisonment) to make the right to choose effective. There is formal equality before the law. There is some protection for minorities. And there is general acceptance of a principle of maximum individual freedom consistent with equal freedom for others.[24]

Macpherson also points out that the "life" of liberal democracy "began in capitalist market societies, and from the beginning it accepted their basic unconscious assumption, which might be paraphrased 'Market maketh man'."[25]

The object of my analysis is therefore not 'democracy as such' but democracy as it is organised and lived in this specific historical configuration that combines capitalist markets with liberal democratic institutions. As alluded to in my brief sketch of the democratic crisis above, democratic capitalist societies also combine two distinct kinds of competition: market competition and political competition. Whether the combination of capitalist markets and liberal democratic institutions constitutes the "most successful political and economic system",[26] "a political economy ruled by two conflicting principles"[27] or, more ambivalently, a "tempestuous marriage", is contested.[28]

It is noteworthy, however, that within this debate, competition tends to be mentioned in defence of the complicated marriage between capitalism and liberal democracy. Examples include Elias Deutscher's diagnosis of "a close symbiosis between liberal democracy and competitive markets"[29] and the confident declaration of the authors of an OECD (Organisation

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[24] Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, p. 7.
[25] Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, p. 1.
[26] Martin Wolf, *The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (New York: Penguin Press, 2023), p. 4.
[27] Wolfgang Streeck, "The Crises of Democratic Capitalism", *New Left Review,* Issue 71 (2011), p. 7.
[28] Robert A. Dahl, *On Democracy. Second Edition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015 [1998]), p. 166.
Wolf similarly speaks of "a difficult marriage" (Wolf, *The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, p. 13) and Herzog notes that "in recent years, this marriage of capitalism and democracy has been ridden by conflict." (Lisa Herzog, *The Democratic Marketplace. How a More Equal Economy Can Save Our Political Ideals* [Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2025], Introduction, ebook.
[29] Deutscher, "The competition-democracy nexus resurrected?", p. 1

for Economic Co-operation and Development) policy paper on "The Interaction between Competition and Democracy" that "the case that there are benefits to democracy from increased competition is an easy one to make."[30] Even Wolfgang Merkel, who contends that "[t]he basic logics of capitalism and democracy are fundamentally different […]", lists competition among the "affinities and congruencies between capitalism and democracy. Competition and electoral decisions play key roles in both contexts."[31]

This thesis takes seriously Merkel's observation that competition plays a central role both in capitalism and in democracy. Therefore, I begin my investigation into the democratic potential of political competition with three chapters that chart the impact of market competition on democracy. This may seem like a detour. However, I believe it is an essential step for four reasons.

First, it reflects the institutional structure of democratic capitalist societies and draws attention to the ways in which democratic relations and institutions are always affected by economic organisation. Although my discussion of market competition and political competition remains largely separate – I discuss the former in Part I and the latter in Part II –, addressing both in the same thesis helps me avoid an overly "politicist" conception of democracy.[32] It also allows me to reflect on their interactions, as I do in the final chapter.

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[30] OECD, "The Interaction between Competition and Democracy", *OECD Roundtables on Competition Policy Papers,* No. 316 (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024), p. 3.
[31] Merkel, "Is capitalism compatible with democracy?", p. 113-114.
[32] Nancy Fraser points to the "error" of "'politicism'" with regard to common treatments of the democratic crisis: "By analogy with economism, politicist thinking overlooks the causal force of extra-political society. Treating the political order as self-determining, it fails to problematize the larger social matrix that generates its deformations." (Nancy Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism. How Our System is Devouring Democracy, Care, and the Planet—And What We Can Do About It* [London: Verso, 2022], p. 115.)

Second, I noted above that competition-as-market-competition is often considered among the causes of the ongoing crisis of democracy. Understanding the impact of market competition on democratic relations and institutions is, therefore, crucial for analysing and responding to that crisis. Insofar as I understand this thesis as a contribution to this effort, examining the relationship between competitive markets and democratic politics is crucial.[33]

Third, exploring the de-democratising effects of market competition is not only important for providing an accurate account of democratic capitalist societies or of the crisis of democracy. It is also vital for understanding the democratic role of political competition. It is vital because it cautions against the Schumpeterian analogy between political competition and market competition. Indeed, an inquiry into the de-democratising effects of market competition is also an invitation to question Merkel's aforementioned claim that democracy and capitalism converge on competition. While I have conceded that both capitalism and liberal democracy do indeed involve competition, I will argue that this does not necessarily amount to an 'affinity' between the two. What matters, rather, is that these are significantly different competitions. Yet, these differences become visible only if sufficient attention is paid to both.

Finally, and relatedly, combining analyses of market and political competition helps me avoid extending my evaluation of one to the other. It is indeed the case that theorists' evaluations of competition in the political sphere tend to mirror their stance on market competition. Proponents of the so-called competitive model of democracy – or, as I call it in Chapter Four, the 'market model of democracy' –, for whom political competition is "democracy's lifeblood,"[34] also tend to think favourably of market competition.[35] Likewise,

[33] Cf. Herzog, *The Democratic Marketplace*.
[34] Ian Shapiro, *Politics against Domination* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2016), p. 174.
[35] In his analysis of the market model of democracy, Macpherson similarly remarks: "It is not surprising that the man who first proposed this model was an economist who had worked all his professional life with market models.

critics of capitalist market competition, who point to the benefits of social and economic cooperation, tend to conceive of democracy as a cooperative endeavour. Examples include John Dewey and Axel Honneth, who argue that social and economic cooperation are essential preconditions for political democracy and suggest that the latter constitutes "a reflexive form of community cooperation".[36] Bernard Harcourt also seems to intimate that the desirability of economic cooperation corresponds to the desirability of a "cooperation democracy" in the political realm.[37]

Thus, both proponents of a market model of democracy and critics of market competition reach a clear conclusion: competition *per se* is either 'good' or 'bad' for democracy. I argue that this is too simplistic. Such an unqualified dismissal or celebration of competition pays little attention to its context-specific effects and fails to account for the differences between market competition and political competition. Discussing the democratising and de-democratising effects of market competition and political competition together, yet separately, allows me to arrive at a more nuanced conclusion: while democracy involves competitive practices in the political realm, it requires sufficiently cooperative social and economic relations as its condition.

Nor is it surprising that the political theorists (and then the publicists and the public) took up this model as a realistic one, for they also have lived and worked in a society permeated by market behaviour. Not only did the market model seem to correspond to, and hence to explain, the actual political behaviour of the main component parts of the political system – the voters and the parties; it also seemed to justify that behaviour, and hence the whole system." (Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, p. 79.) The man 'who first proposed this model' was Joseph Schumpeter.

[36] Axel Honneth, "Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation: John Dewey and the Theory of Democracy Today", *Political Theory*, Vol. 26, Issue 6 (1998), p. 765.

[37] Bernard E. Harcourt, *Cooperation. A Political, Economic, and Social Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), p. 189.

3 Two Themes: The Multiplicity of Competition and the Competition/Cooperation Dichotomy

The emphasis on the differences between types of competition informs this thesis beyond the observation that political competition differs from market competition. Indeed, it is one of two aspects of the concept of competition that I highlight throughout this thesis. First, I stress that the concept of competition is best understood as a kind of umbrella term that refers to a variety of related, yet significantly different competitive practices. Second, taking account of the multiplicity of competition allows me to unsettle the dichotomy between competition and cooperation. Instead, I will point to the ways in which competition and cooperation can combine or complement each other in different instances.

On a high level of abstraction, competition can be defined as a rule-governed activity in which two or more participants aim to outdo each other in the pursuit of a scarce good.[38] However, as soon as one moves from this abstract conceptual level to the analysis of actual manifestations of competition, the differences between competitions become more pronounced. The activities of playing a competitive board game, competing in the Olympics, applying for a job in a competitive field, and running for president arguably constitute significantly different experiences. This is true not only from a first-person perspective. More generally, competitions have different stakes, objects, purposes, and standards of assessment;

[38] For similar definitions, see: Yvette Drissen, *When Success Becomes the New Normal. The Competitive Society and Its Symptoms*, PhD diss., Tilburg University, 2024, p. 44; Hearn, *The Domestication of Competition*, p. 4; Alfie Kohn, *No Contest. The Case Against Competition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986), p. 4.

Note that I define competition as involving at least two participants. I do not address the phenomenon of 'competing against oneself'. For discussions of this kind of competition, see: Leslie A. Howe, "On competing against oneself, Or 'I need to get a different voice in my head'", *Sports, Ethics and Philosophy*, Vol. 2, Issue 3 (2008), pp. 353-366; Coren L. Apicella et al., "Compete with Others? No, thanks. With myself? Yes, please!", *Economics Letters*, Vol. 187 (2020), pp. 1-3.

they rely on and foster different relationships between competitors, and place different normative demands on them.[39]

Yet, many accounts and evaluations of competition disregard these differences. Thus, proponents of competition in the 'marketplace of ideas' defend their positions indiscriminately with references to market competition, battles, and the adversarial legal system.[40] Likewise, those opposing competitive argumentation tend to suggest that aggressiveness is as much a feature of sports tournaments as it is of wars.[41] For others, the celebration of competitive sports is as much a symptom of a competitive society and, indeed, *of the same kind of competitive society* as the promotion of an entrepreneurial ethos.[42] In his book on business ethics, Joseph Heath assumes that competition has the same morally problematic structure in sports as in the market. The result is a peculiar conception of sports as a mere measure of 'natural ability':

> Yet when the less talented begin to train, this just forces those with more natural ability to train as well, so that they can retain position. At the end of the day, when everyone trains equally, the person with the most natural ability still wins. Yet, everyone involved in the competition now is expending much greater time and effort to achieve this result, and thus the outcome is suboptimal from the standpoint of the competitors.[43]

Heath neglects that the pursued outcome in sports may be of a different nature than that of market competition. He overlooks that participation in sporting competitions may be fun or

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[39] Cf. Timo Jütten, "A Typology of Competition", unpublished manuscript (2024).

[40] Cf. Frederick Schauer, *Free Speech: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 16; Shapiro, *Politics Against Domination*, p. 80; Ian Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy: Against Political Deliberation", *Daedalus,* Vol. 146, Issue 3 (2017), p. 78.

I discuss these shifts between different analogies and metaphors in Chapter Four, Section 3.2.

[41] Cf. John Casey, "Adversality and Argumentation", *Informal Logic*, Vol. 40, Issue 1 (2020), p.77, p.104; Phylis Rooney, "Philosophy, Adversarial Argumentation, and Embattled Reason", *Informal Logic*, Vol. 30, Issue 3 (2010), p. 229.

[42] This appears to be, e.g., William Davies's suggestion, when he notes: "A society that celebrates and encourages 'competitiveness' as an ethos, be it in sport, business, politics or education, cannot then be surprised if outcomes are then highly unequal." (Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, p. 41.)

[43] Joseph Heath, *Morality, Competition, and the Firm. The Market Failures Approach to Business Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 96.

undertaken as part of a broader "quest for excellence".[44] Instead, he seems to assume that competition is just competition and, ultimately, everywhere the same.

When it comes to political competition, the disregard for the multiplicity of competition manifests primarily in the tendency to think of the former exclusively in terms of market competition. Typologies of democracy tend to use the descriptor 'competitive' almost exclusively for those democratic theories that model political relations on the marketplace.[45] The implication of this is clear: political competition is never more than the self-interested "competition for leadership" Schumpeter describes.[46] Moreover, one might be tempted to conclude that any democratic theorist who emphasises the centrality of political competition is condemned to affirm the minimalist understanding of democracy which the analogy to the market implies.[47]

A more expansive and truly democratic conception of political competition comes into view only once the adequacy of the analogy between market competition and political competition is questioned. Analogies to other kinds of competition – in sports, games, or ecology – point to different ways in which competition can be, and is, practiced as part of democratic politics. Moving beyond the analogy to market competition and drawing on alternative analogies also allows me to identify democratic competitive practices beyond party competition. Thus, I will show that democratic deliberation rests on a "contest of arguments"

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[44] Robert L. Simon et al., *Fair Play. The Ethics of Sport*, Fourth Edition (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 2015), p. 47.
[45] Cf. Elster, "The Market and the Forum"; Held, *Models of Democracy*, Chapter 5; Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, Chapter IV; Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, p.17; Miller, "The competitive model of democracy".
[46] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 271.
[47] I outline the minimalist conception of democracy associated with the market model of political competition in Chapter Four.

that resembles a sports contest more than the market.[48] Furthermore, agonistic democrats appear to be committed to a game-like competition that 'tames' political conflict.[49] Highlighting the richness and multiplicity inherent in the concept of competition, then, also allows me to explore democratic life in its richness and complexity. Consequently, the aim of this thesis is not to provide a singular definition of political or democratic competition but to trace competitive moments in democratic theory and practice – and to take stock of the democratising features they share.

The emphasis on the multiplicity of competition allows me, furthermore, to challenge the simple dichotomy between competition and cooperation. Some suggest that, within democratic theory, this dichotomy manifests in the distinction between competitive and cooperative models of democracy.[50] Such a distinction is consistent, I find, with the dominance of the market model of competition. Although the economic coordination made possible by the competitive market mechanism is sometimes described as a kind of cooperation,[51] market competition is probably most compatible with an understanding of competition as a "form of non-cooperative behaviour".[52]

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[48] Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms. Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, translated by Wilhelm Rehg (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 228.

For a discussion of the role of this competition of arguments in democratic deliberation, see: Chapter Five.

[49] Agonistic theorist Chantal Mouffe speaks of a 'taming' of political conflict: "If we want to acknowledge on one side the permanence of the antagonistic dimension of the conflict, while on the other side allowing for the possibility of its '*taming*', we need to envisage a third type of relation. This is the type of relation which I have proposed to call 'agonism'." (Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* [Abingdon: Routledge, 2005], p. 20; my emphasis.)

For a discussion of competition and the taming of political conflict in agonistic theory, see: Chapter Six.

[50] Cf. Moore, "Post-Truth Politics and the Competition of Ideas", p. 120.
See also: Agmon, "Two Concepts of Competition", pp. 6-7.

[51] Cf. Jules Coleman, "Competition and Cooperation", *Ethics*, Vol. 98, No. 1 (1987), pp. 86-87.

[52] Heath, *Morality, Competition, and the Firm*, p. 98.

"A competition, in my view (articulated at length in *The Efficient Society*) is essentially an institutionalized collective action problem, where we are released from the everyday-morality obligation to act cooperatively and are actively encouraged to play free-rider strategies." (Heath, *Morality, Competition, and the Firm*, p. 9.)

A look at the philosophy of sports, however, points to a different understanding of competition: in sports and games, the successful organisation of competition demands a degree of cooperation from competitors.[53] In contrast to the competition associated with the economic market, which involves, according to Heath, a "deontic weakening with respect to everyday morality",[54] sports competitions are also characterised by the normative demands they place on competitors; from fair play to sportsmanship.[55] Bringing these competitive practices into view allows me to question the common association of competition with pure self-interest, aggressiveness, and destruction. Certainly, competitions of this type may exist. Yet competitions that remain cooperative endeavours and come with a complex set of normative demands are equally possible. It is these latter types of competitions, I argue, that ought to be recognised in democratic theory and practice.

Ultimately, I do not believe that the central question is whether democratic societies ought to be organised either cooperatively or competitively. Rather, I aim to ask *what kind of competition* – and, likewise, what kind of cooperation – provides the appropriate mode for their economic, social, and political organisation. In drawing attention to the various competitions that are implicated in democratic life and in analysing their democratising roles as well as their de-democratising effects, this thesis prepares the ground for an answer to this question. 'Competition', it argues, is not just something that takes place in the market and is discussed

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[53] Cf. C. Thi Nguyen, "Competition as Cooperation", *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, Vol. 44, Issue 1 (2017), pp. 125-126; Simon et al., *Fair Play*, p. 47.

This conception of sports as involving cooperation is not uncontested, see: Scott Kretchmar, "Competition, Redemption, and Hope", *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, Vol. 39, Issue 1 (2012), pp. 101-116; Sinclair A. MacRae, "Competition, cooperation, and an adversarial model of sport", *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport,* Vol. 45, Issue 1 (2018), pp. 53-67.

[54] Heath, *Morality, Competition, and the Firm*, p. 9.

[55] Cf. Diana Abad, "Sportsmanship", *Sports, Ethics and Philosophy,* Vol.4, Issue 1 (2010), pp. 27-41; Robert Butcher and Angela Schneider, "Fair Play as Respect for the Game", *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, Vol. 25, Issue 1 (1998), pp. 1-22; James W. Keating, "Sportsmanship as a Moral Category", *Ethics*, Vol. 75, Issue 1 (1964), pp. 25-35; Simon et al., *Fair Play*, Chapter 3.

by philosophers of sport; it is equally important in politics and ought to be a concept in political philosophy and democratic theory.

4 Reflections on Method

This thesis is primarily a work of democratic *theory*. It is also primarily a work on the *concept* of democratic competition. While I respond to the political reality of democracy in crisis, my intention is not to chart the empirical state of economic or political competition in the twenty-first century. Instead, I engage with debates in normative democratic theory and political economy and with different proposals for the correct place of competition in democratic capitalist society. Therefore, I am also principally concerned with the different ways theorists write and think about competition.

This approach is not a flight from the messiness of political reality. Rather, it is based on the conviction that it matters how we write, speak, and think about the market, democracy, and competition. In this spirit, I do not constrain myself exclusively to the realm of theory but will occasionally draw on empirical examples, not purely as illustrations, but also to guide and challenge my conceptual analysis.

Moreover, this thesis is chiefly informed by an empirical observation, namely, by the observation that there are *multiple, different types of competitions*. Indeed, it is this observation that shapes my approach at several points. With regard to competition in the economic realm, it leads me to focus my analysis not on a general, ahistorical 'market competition' but on market competition in its neoliberal variant. With regard to political competition, it leads me to describe a range of different competitive, democratic practices and to draw on a variety of

analogies, from competitive sports and games to ecological competition. I outline the reasoning for each methodological decision in turn.

What is true for competition more generally remains true for economic competition. There are numerous, geographically and historically distinct configurations of competitive market economies and equally numerous conceptions of market competition.[56] In his conceptual history of economic competition, Nicholas Gane argues that in the period from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth century alone, it was discussed

> as a force of creative destruction that rationalized customary practices of fixing prices, wages and profits; as a means for establishing value or price which, under ideal conditions, can bring market equilibrium and be quantified mathematically; as a generative process of adaption and change that has its roots in biology; and as a social phenomenon that either adds value to social life or which promotes new forms of social selection that are tied to underlying power relations rather than to biology.[57]

Turning to neoliberal theory and practice, as I do in Part I of this thesis, does not eliminate these differences fully. There remain fundamental disagreements among neoliberal theorists, and some of these concern the nature and function of market competition. Additionally, the organisation and justification of market competition in political discourse outside of the academy also differ. Yet, by limiting my discussion to a particular debate and period, I am able to attend to these differences and avoid oversimplifications and generalisations.

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[56] For differences between actually existing market economies, see, e.g., Peter A. Hall and David Soskice (eds), *Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

For different ways of thinking about competition in the market, see, e.g., Hayek's critique of 'perfect competition' in "The Meaning of Competition" (in: F. A. Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948], pp. 92-106).

[57] Nicholas Gane, "Competition: A Critical History of a Concept", *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 37, Issue 2 (2020), p. 44.

I focus on the neoliberal version of market competition for two reasons. First, competition takes centre stage in neoliberal theory and practice. For neoliberal theorists, competition is, as Michel Foucault puts it, the "essential thing of the market".[58] Competition is indeed ubiquitous in their writings; as the key to efficient coordination and the use of distributed knowledge,[59] as "the most productive and healthiest economic principle",[60] and even as a precondition of liberty.[61] Beyond its prominent position in neoliberal theory, competition has also been described as an organising principle of life in 'actually existing neoliberalism'. Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval exemplarily observe:

> Neo-liberalism defines a certain existential norm in western societies and, far beyond them, in all those societies that follow them on the path of 'modernity'. This norm enjoins every one to live in a world of generalized competition; it calls upon wage-earning classes and populations to engage in economic struggle against one another; it aligns social relations with the model of the market; it promotes the justification of ever greater inequalities; it even transforms the individual, now called on to conceive and conduct him- or herself as an enterprise.[62]

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[58] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-79*, ed. by Michael Senellart, translated by Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 118.

For Foucault, neoliberal theory constitutes a break with an earlier conception of the market: "[…] for the neo-liberals, the most important thing about the market is not exchange, that kind of original and fictional situation imagined by eighteenth century liberal economists. The essential thing of the market is elsewhere; it is competition." (Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, p. 118.) This claim is challenged by Gane and Hearn, who argue respectively that debates on competition predate the works of neoliberal theorists and need to be situated within broader non-economic debates (Cf. Gane, "Competition"; Jonathan Hearn, "Reframing the History of the Competition Concept: Neoliberalism, Meritocracy, Modernity", *Journal of Historical Sociology,* Vol. 34, Issue 2 (2021), pp. 233-400).

[59] Cf. F.A. Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society", *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (1945), pp. 519-530.

[60] Alexander Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (Organic Policy)", translated by Daniel Steuer, in: *The Birth of Austerity. German Ordoliberalism and Contemporary Neoliberalism*, ed. by Thomas Biebricher and Frieder Vogelmann (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), p. 170.

[61] Cf. Walter Eucken, "What is the Competitive Order?", translated by Michelle Everson, in: *The Birth of Austerity. German Ordoliberalism and Contemporary Neoliberalism*, ed. by Thomas Biebricher and Frieder Vogelmann (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), p. 103; Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982 [1962]); F.A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (London: Routledge 2006 [1944]), F.A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty. The Definitive Edition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011 [1960]). See also: Sean Irving, *Hayek's Market Republicanism. The Limits of Liberty* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

[62] Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World. On Neoliberal Society*, translated by Greogory Elliot (London: Verso, 2013), p. 3.

While competition has been a feature of capitalist markets and economic theorising before the advent of neoliberalism, it attains a particularly pronounced position in the course of the latter.

Second, I focus on neoliberalism because of its immediate relevance to contemporary democratic society. Whether one believes that the economic and political present is still fundamentally a neoliberal one or is better described as 'post-neoliberal', it is hardly controversial to suggest that the effects of neoliberalism can still be felt today. If we no longer live in neoliberal times, then we certainly find ourselves, to put it in Wendy Brown's words, 'in the ruins of neoliberalism'.[63] Understanding the de-democratising effects of neoliberalism and of neoliberal competition in particular remains crucial for diagnosing and countering the crisis of democracy.

In my discussion of the democratic role of political competition, I pay attention to the multiplicity of competition in two ways. First, I do not offer a reformulated 'competitive model of democracy'. Rather, I trace different competitive practices across three democratic theories or models of democracy: the 'competitive' or, as I call it, the market model of democracy, deliberative democracy, and agonistic democracy. The market model of democracy captures a

[63] *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism* is the title of Brown's 2019 book.

For discussions of the death and survival of neoliberalism, see: Ulrich Brand and Nicola Sekler (ed.), *Postneoliberalism – A beginning debate, development dialogue,* No. 59 (2009); Colin Crouch, *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011)*;* Dardot/Laval, *Never-Ending Nightmare*; Nancy Fraser, *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born. From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond* (London: Verso, 2019); Alessandra Mezzadri, "Social reproduction and pandemic neoliberalism: Planetary Crises and the reorganization of life, work and death", *Organization*, Vol. 29, Issue 3 (2022), pp. 379-400; Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste. How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (London: Verso 2013); Joseph E. Stiglitz, "The End of Neoliberalism?", *Project Syndicate* (07 August 2008), https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/end-of-neoliberalism-unfettered-markets-fail-by-joseph-e-stiglitz-2019-11 (last accessed: 16 September 2025); Adam Tooze, "Has Covid ended the neoliberal era?", *The Guardian* (02 September 2021), https://www.theguardian.com/news/2021/sep/02/covid-and-the-crisis-of-neoliberalism (last accessed: 16 September 2025).

widespread way of thinking about democracy outside of the academy, while deliberation and agonism are perhaps the two dominant paradigms in democratic theory today.[64]

More importantly, however, these three models of democracy allow me to foreground and explore the competitive character of different democratic practices. With the market model, I focus on party competition and the electoral system, while the deliberative conception of democracy enables me to explore the "contest of arguments", the practice of democratic deliberation, and the role and design of deliberative institutions.[65] With the agonists, I discuss the democratic significance of political protest and a competition over the rules of the democratic game.[66] Thus, rather than speaking of political or democratic competition in the singular, I identify different 'democratic competitions'.

Because my primary object of analysis in this thesis is democratic competition and not, for example, democratic deliberation or "agonistic respect",[67] I have taken the liberty of grouping diverse thinkers under the label of 'deliberative democracy' and 'agonistic democracy' respectively. Yet, there are significant differences and disagreements among those commonly referred to as 'deliberative democrats.' The same is true for proponents of agonistic democracy and those who favour a market model of democracy. I aim to remain sensitive to

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[64] It seems to be a common assumption in democratic theory that the market model or the aggregative model of democracy, as Iris Marion Young calls it, "expresses the way many political actors think about democracy." (Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], p. 21; see also: Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, p. 3.) There is some empirical evidence for this claim (cf. Chu et al., "People consistently view elections and civil liberties as key components of democracy"). For the identification of deliberative and agonistic democracy as the two main paradigms in contemporary democratic theory, see: John S. Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond. Liberals, Critics, Contestations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 1-2; Lida Maxwell's Introduction to Lida Maxwell et al. "The 'Agonistic Turn': *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* in New Contexts," *Contemporary Political Theory,* Vol. 18, Issue 4 (2019), pp. 640-641; Mary F. Scudder and Stephen K. White, *The Two Faces of Democracy. Decentering Agonism and Deliberation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

[65] Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p. 228.
See also Chapter Five.

[66] See Chapter Four.

[67] William E. Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 123.

these differences and discuss them where this is significant for associated conceptions of democratic competition.

The second way in which I acknowledge the multiplicity of competition is by moving beyond the analogy between political and market competition. Instead, I explore a range of different analogies and metaphors for democratic competition: professional sports and the "sports tournament of ideas",[68] ecological competition and the nature reserve of ideas, friendly board games and the game of democracy. This is consistent with a field of study saturated by analogies and metaphors. Wherever competition is discussed as a principle of social, political, and economic organisation, it is introduced, described, and evaluated through analogies. Market competition is variously compared to sports contests and the evolutionary struggle for survival – the latter is, of course, itself only metaphorically a competition.[69] Beyond its association with the market, political competition is likened to "gladiatorial clashes"[70] and located within the broader 'game of politics'.[71]

These metaphors and analogies are more than mere illustrations. In their book *Metaphors We Live By,* George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that "[o]ur concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people." They go on to suggest that, because "our conceptual system is largely metaphorical […], the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor."[72]

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[68] Herzog, *Citizen Knowledge*, p. 114.
[69] Cf. Ann E. Cudd, "Sporting Metaphors: Competition and the Ethos of Capitalism", *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, Vol. 34, Issue 1 (2007), pp. 52-67; Robert H. Frank, *The Darwin Economy. Liberty, Competition, and the Common Good* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012 [2011]); Dominic D.P. Johnson et al., "Darwin's invisible hand: Market competition, evolution and the firm", *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, Vol. 90, Supplement (2013), pp. S128–S140
[70] Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 78.
[71] Cf. Tim Beasley-Murray, "Politics has always been a game – but why does it now feel like we're being cheated?", *The Conversation* (14 August 2025), https://theconversation.com/politics-has-always-been-a-game-but-why-does-it-now-feel-like-were-being-cheated-263083 (last accessed: 16 September 2025).
[72] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 3.

The metaphors used to describe it shape what one expects from political competition, its purpose, and justification. Exploring different ways of conceptualising political competition and its place in democracy does not merely enrich democratic *theory*. Beyond that, I hope that this thesis makes a contribution towards a metaphorical and conceptual system, which allows us to think, experience, and do democracy beyond the market model and to do so even within those democratic capitalist societies that shape our political present.

5 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into two parts. Part I focuses on competition as a socio-economic phenomenon and charts the de-democratising effects of the neoliberal celebration of competition. Here, I ask which socio-economic arrangements, cooperative or competitive, are conducive to democratic life and politics. Part II has as its object political competition more narrowly conceived. I take different normative democratic theories as a starting point to discuss a range of competitive democratic practices: party competition, competitive deliberation, and protest. There are three chapters in each part. The final chapter in this thesis, Chapter Seven, collates and connects the findings of both parts and demonstrates their relevance for democratic practice.

In Chapter One, I examine conceptions and justifications of market competition in the works of neoliberal theorists such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman and in the writings of theorists in the ordoliberal tradition. I concentrate on two aspects in particular. First, I show how neoliberal conceptions of market competition imply a defence of material inequality that sits uncomfortably with the democratic principle of equality. Second, I identify an understanding of the rules of market competition shared by Hayek and the ordoliberal theorists.

They agree, I argue, that the rules that regulate the market ought to be far removed from democratic control. This is not just a limitation of democratic control but also means that the market is imagined as a space in which citizens and market participants are confronted with their own powerlessness. I suggest that the de-democratising effects of these features of neoliberal market competition are best understood not in terms of de-politicisation but as an erosion of the social conditions of democracy.

I expand on this erosion in Chapter Two, where I trace the effects of a generalised ethos of individual competitiveness on the social conditions of democracy. My object in this chapter is not neoliberal competition in the market but the consequences of "the relentless and ubiquitous economization of all features of life by neoliberalism".[73] Drawing on critical scholarship of 'actually existing neoliberalism', I argue that the expansion of competitive attitudes is one of the features of neoliberal economisation. I analyse three aspects of this competitive economisation. Adopting a Foucauldian account of subjectivation, I discuss, first, the reconfiguration of subjectivities according to the economic concepts of the 'entrepreneur' and 'human capital'. Second, I contend that the relationship of the competitive neoliberal subject to itself is characterised by the expectation to act self-responsibly and the demand to self-optimise. Finally, I suggest that relationships of care and solidarity are unlikely to hold between individuals who constantly compete against each other. In these ways, the generalised competitiveness that neoliberalism fosters undermines any sense of collective concern or belonging that is a central condition for democracy.

Chapter Three expands on democracy's dependence on extra-political forms of community and cooperation. To do so, I turn to competition's apparent opposite: cooperation. I reconstruct

[73] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos. Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), p. 31.

John Dewey's and Axel Honneth's arguments for a cooperative basis of democracy.[74] While I concur with their argument, I also point out that it requires qualification. Like competition, cooperation can be conceptualised and organised in different ways, and not all of them are beneficial for democracy. Indeed, I identify two de-democratising, neoliberal or neoliberalised forms of cooperation and community: the ordoliberal proposal to complement highly competitive markets with traditional village communities and the neoliberal co-optation of worker cooperatives.[75] Truly democratising cooperation is characterised, I argue, by three features; it limits or mitigates the de-democratising effects of market competition, it cultivates subjectivities and relationships that are open to democratic engagement with others, and it does not resist its own politicisation.

With Chapter Four, I begin my analysis of political competition. The obvious starting point for this analysis is the conception of democracy that is sometimes termed the "competitive model of democracy".[76] In contrast to this designation, I point out that this understanding of democracy puts forward a distinct conception of political competition; namely, one that locates democratic competition exclusively in the competitive electoral system and conceives of it in analogy to the market. Highlighting the latter feature in particular, I call this the 'market model of democracy'. I trace this model of democracy and the associated conception of political competition in the writings of Joseph Schumpeter, Anthony Downs, and Ian Shapiro.[77] Yet, I show that their analogy between market competition and political competition does not only

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[74] Cf. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems. An Essay in Political Inquiry* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2016 [1927]); Honneth, "Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation".
[75] For the former, see: Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (Organic Policy)"; Wilhelm Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time*, translated by Annette und Peter Schiffer Jacobsohn (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1950). For the latter, see: Thomas Da Costa Vieri and Emma A. Foster, "The elimination of political demands: Ordoliberalism, the big society and the depoliticization of co-operatives", *Competition & Change*, Vol. 26, Issue 2 (2022), pp. 289-308; Sean Irving, "From New Left to Social Enterprise: A Conceptual History of the Industrial Common Ownership Movement, 1971-2001", *Enterprise & Society* (forthcoming).
[76] Miller, "The competitive model of democracy"
[77] Cf. Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*; Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*; Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory*.

commit them to a minimalist understanding of democracy. Ultimately, it also undermines the democratic appeal they attribute to political competition, that is, its ability to control political elites and ensure responsiveness to voter preferences. Instead, the market model of democratic competition implies an elitist political system, which reduces citizens to consumers. Thus, it provides a striking illustration of the need to move beyond the analogy between political competition and the market.

Chapter Five begins the exploration of alternative analogies. In this chapter, theories of deliberative and epistemic democracy provide the framework for my argument. I argue that epistemically successful democratic deliberation ought to involve a "contest of arguments", as Habermas puts it.[78] The most common metaphor for such a competition of ideas and arguments – the marketplace of ideas – points again to the economic sphere. However, I contend that a deliberative-democratic competition of ideas modelled on the market is unlikely to result in epistemically superior outcomes. Distinguishing between deliberation in designated institutions and deliberation in the broader public sphere, I explore a set of alternative analogies: to the battle, to sports competition, and to ecological competition. The latter two, I argue, provide a useful starting point for conceptualising and, perhaps also for organising, deliberative competitions.

In Chapter Six, I make the case that the project of agonistic democracy to tame and democratise political conflict without eradicating it can be described as a commitment to democratic competition. This framing of agonistic democratic theory foregrounds the role of rules in the taming of political conflict. Moreover, I argue that it points towards an alternative conception of rules than the neoliberal one outlined in Chapter One. For agonistic democrats,

[78] Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p. 228.

democracy is "the type of game in which the framework – the rules of the game – can come up for deliberation and amendment in the course of the game."[79] That is: the rules of democratic competition can never be removed from democratic control. I suggest that this conception of rules is alive today in democratic practices of protest such as civil disobedience and direct action.

Chapter Seven collates these findings and provides an outline of three features of a genuinely democratic conception of political competition: It conceives of political competition as a practice rather than a mere mechanism, it draws attention to the cooperative moments within that competition, and it relies on an understanding of rules as always open to political challenge. I conclude this chapter and my analysis with some preliminary reflections on the implications of my arguments for political practice. Specifically, I argue that my exploration of democratic competitions cautions against proposals to replace competitive elections with sortition.[80] Furthermore, I explore possible ways of rethinking and reforming party competition. Chapter Seven is followed by a short conclusion.

[79] Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Vol. 1,* p. 146.
[80] For such proposals, see, e.g., Gurrero, *Lottocracy*; Landemore, *Open Democracy*; Van Reybrouck, *Against Elections*.

Part I. Competition versus Cooperation: The Social Conditions of Democracy

Which forms of economic organisation best support political democracy? Is political democracy compatible with market competition? Or does it require cooperative social and economic arrangements? These are the questions that I discuss in the following three chapters. To answer them, I turn to the analysis of neoliberal theory and practice. As noted in the Introduction, one of the defining features of neoliberalism is its *celebration of market competition*. Neoliberalism is also commonly portrayed as a *force of de-democratisation*. Characterised by this competition/de-democratisation-nexus, neoliberalism constitutes an instructive object for the study of the de-democratising effects of market competition.

A large body of scholarship already attests to the anti-democratic sentiments of many neoliberal theorists as well as to the de-democratising effects of 'actually existing neoliberalism.'[81] Yet, the critique of neoliberal competition developed in the following chapters makes a novel contribution along two lines. First, rather than describing the de-democratising effects of neoliberalism as such, I concentrate on neoliberal *competition* specifically. With regard to neoliberal theory, I show how conceptualisations of market competition are tied up with an anti-democratic vision of social and political life.[82] With regard to 'actually existing neoliberalism', I highlight how neoliberal policies and discourses have promoted competition to an organising principle of ever more areas of social life.[83] More than an account of the de-

[81] See, e.g.: Thomas Biebricher, *The Political Theory of Neoliberalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), pp. 79-108; Brown, *Undoing the Demos*; Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*; Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*; Dardot/Laval, *Never-Ending Nightmare*, Sean Irving, "Limiting democracy and framing the economy: Hayek, Schmitt and ordoliberalism", *History of European Ideas*, Vol. 44, Issue 1 (2018), pp. 113-127; Arthur MacEwan, "Neoliberalism and Democracy: Market Power versus Democratic Power", in: *Neoliberalism. A Critical Reader*, ed. by Alfredo Saad-Filho and Deborah Johnston (London: Pluto Press, 2005), pp. 170-176.
[82] I discuss this in Chapter One.
[83] I discuss this in Chapter Two.

democratising effects of 'neoliberalism-as-a-whole', this focus on neoliberal competition specifically may also help uncover tensions between democracy and market competition more generally.

Second, my analysis of neoliberal competition diverges from accounts that portray neoliberal de-democratisation primarily as an outcome of broader processes of de-politicisation. Examples of such accounts include William Davies's *The Limits of Neoliberalism.* Davies describes neoliberalism as the "*pursuit of the disenchantment of politics by economics*"[84], in which anything distinctly political is replaced by "*market-based principles and techniques of evaluation*."[85] Similarly, Wendy Brown speaks of the "neoliberal vanquishing of *homo politicus* by *homo oeconomicus*".[86] While I am sympathetic to the description of neoliberalism as a force of depoliticization, the emphasis of my analysis lies elsewhere. I aim to show how the neoliberal celebration of competition within and outside of the market erodes the *social conditions of political democracy*.

This framing of my analysis requires some further clarification. I want to draw attention to two of its implications in particular: insofar as I am interested in the *social conditions* of political democracy, I primarily discuss the effects of neoliberal market competition on the relationships between members of a political association.[87] Thus, in Chapters One and Two, I demonstrate how neoliberal competition undermines social cohesion, collectivity, and concern

[84] Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, p. 6.
[85] Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, p. 23.
[86] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, p. 108.
[87] This is a different approach to the analysis of the de-democratising impetus of neoliberalism than, e.g., Davies's discussion of how discourses of national competitiveness shape and de-politicise politics in the era of neoliberalism (cf. Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, Chapter 4). Perhaps most importantly, it means that in this first part of my thesis, I am primarily concerned with the social and political experience of citizens (or members of a political association), rather than with governments.

for the common good. It does so by producing and justifying inequalities, by fostering a sense of powerlessness, and by cultivating individualism and a culture of disregard for others.

Furthermore, my analysis of the social conditions of democracy also presupposes a specific understanding of *political democracy*. Following thinkers from Alexis de Tocqueville to Claude Lefort and John Dewey, I contend that democracy is more than a mere system of government. Rather, democracy constitutes a mode of living together within and outside a narrowly defined political realm.[88] I expand on this understanding of democracy in Chapter Three, where I will also provide a positive account of the social conditions of political democracy. For now, it is sufficient to note that such an expanded conception of democracy also entails the insight that political democracy is reliant on specific socio-economic arrangements and vulnerable to changes within them.[89]

[88] De Tocqueville associates democracy with the "equality of conditions" in a material as well as a political sense (Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America Vol. 1*, translated by James T. Schleifer [Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010], p. 4). Dewey distinguishes "between democracy as a social idea and political democracy as a system of government" (Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 171) and Lefort understands democracy to constitute a specific "form of society" (Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, translated by David Macey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988), p. 14

[89] Thus, Lefort warns against a turn to totalitarianism in response to insecurity, economic crisis, and an increasingly fragmented society: "When individuals are increasingly insecure as a result of an economic crisis or of the ravages of war, when conflict between classes and groups is exacerbated and can no longer be symbolically resolved within the political sphere, when power appears to have sunk to the level of reality and to be no more than an instrument for the promotion of the interests and appetites of vulgar ambition and when, in a word, it appears in society, and when at the same time society appears to be fragmented, then we see the development of the fantasy of the People as-One, the beginnings of a quest for a substantial identity, for a social body which is welded to its head, for an embodying power, for a state free from division." (Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, p.20). As I elaborate in Chapter Three, Dewey also describes social fragmentation as a threat to political democracy (Cf. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, pp. 168-170).

Chapter One. Equal Rules, Unequal Outcomes: Neoliberalism and the De-Democratising Threat of Market Competition

My examination of the effects of neoliberal competition on the social conditions of democracy begins with a discussion of neoliberal theory. In this chapter, I assess *neoliberal conceptions of market competition* in the writings of thinkers such as Milton Friedman, Friedrich A. Hayek, Walter Eucken, Wilhelm Röpke, and Franz Böhm.[90] I am interested not primarily in the question of whether their conceptions are empirically sound or theoretically sophisticated. Rather, I want to show how neoliberal accounts of the value and functioning of competitive markets serve to justify and even celebrate socio-economic arrangements that harm democracy. This justificatory potential of the concept of market competition challenges assumptions regarding the easy compatibility of competitive markets and democratic politics.[91]

I highlight the de-democratising effects of two aspects of neoliberal conceptions of market competition that track two defining features of any organised competition: the production of *winners and losers,* and the reliance on *rules*.[92] William Davies notes that the rule-governed nature of competition also implies some sense of equality as "equality before

[90] This list of 'neoliberal theorists' includes figures from different strands or 'schools' of neoliberalism: Friedman is part of the 'Chicago School' (cf. Rob van Horn and Philip Mirowski, "The Rise of the Chicago School of Economics and the Birth of Neoliberalism", in: *The Road from Mont Pèlerin. The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective*, ed. by Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe [Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2009], pp. 139-178), Hayek is sometimes associated with the 'Austrian School' (cf. Ralf Ptak, "Neoliberalism in Germany. Revisiting the Ordoliberal Foundations of the Social Market Economy", in: *The Road from Mont Pèlerin. The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective*, ed. by Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe [Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2009], p. 122), while Eucken, Röpke, and Böhm are representatives of German ordoliberalism (cf. Ptak, "Neoliberalism in Germany"). Where they affect their conceptions of market competition, I aim to be sensitive to the disagreements that persist between these different neoliberals.

[91] In particular, my analysis in this chapter challenges the assumption that competition marks one of the affinities between capitalist market and democratic politics (cf. Merkel, "Is capitalism compatible with democracy?", p. 113-114).

[92] Recall the definition of competition I provided in the Introduction: "On a high level of abstraction, competition can be defined as a rule-governed activity in which two or more participants aim to outdo each other in the pursuit of a scarce good." (p.16)

the rules".[93] He thus describes competition as "[…] a paradoxical combination of equality and inequality. The structure of an organized competition (including, in the liberal imaginary, a market) involves contestants being *formally equal at the outset and empirically unequal at the conclusion*."[94] This chapter traces the neoliberal version of this 'paradoxical combination of equality and inequality' and its implications for democracy.[95]

I argue that both aspects of this combination have de-democratising implications. In neoliberal thought, the fact that competition produces winners and losers turns into a justification of material inequalities. The commitment to equal rules provides the basis for a severe limitation of political and democratic control. Despite my focus on neoliberal *theory*, these de-democratising potentials are not merely hypothetical. Rather, both growing inequality and restrictions of democratic control contribute to the erosion of democracy's social conditions in contemporary neoliberal or post-neoliberal societies.[96]

This chapter consists of two sections: Section 1 explores neoliberal justifications of competitively produced inequalities. I contend that neoliberals hold inequality to be a necessary and normatively desirable feature of the competitive market and of a 'free society' more broadly. I also investigate the specific nature of neoliberal inequalities and contrast neoliberal with meritocratic justifications of inequality. I observe that the latter provides a justification of

[93] Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, p. 63.
[94] Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, p. 44.
[95] While any organised competition is characterised by this 'paradoxical combination of equality and inequality', this chapter focuses only on its neoliberal version. Importantly, neither the production of inequality nor their reliance on equal rules are accorded the same role and status in different types of competition.
[96] I elaborate on the state of inequality in actually existing neoliberal societies at the start of Section 1 below. At the end of Section 2.1, I discuss how the design of political institutions in the neoliberal era contributes to the limitation of democratic control.

specific patterns of inequality by linking reward to merit, desert, or effort, while the former justifies inequality exclusively in the abstract.[97]

This is crucial, I argue, for understanding the impact of neoliberal inequalities on political democracy. Material inequalities are not only at odds with the democratic commitment to political equality and undermine the everyday experience of social life as shared and common. Since individual patterns of inequalities are attributed to chance and not specifically justified, it is especially difficult to criticise or challenge them. Neoliberal theorists expect individuals to unquestioningly accept inequality as a fact of life.

In Section 2, I discuss neoliberal conceptualisations of the rules of market competition. I contrast Hayek's account of the rules of market competition as spontaneously evolved with the ordoliberal insistence that the design of such rules is a matter for experts. Yet, I show that both ultimately converge in their concern to safeguard these rules from democratic challenge and control. Thus, the neoliberal conception of rules restricts political democracy and contributes to the erosion of its social conditions by engraining the experience of powerlessness into everyday life.

1 Unequal Outcomes: The Neoliberal Celebration of Inequality

The emphasis on competition that characterises neoliberal conceptions of the market implies a legitimisation, affirmation, and even celebration of material and social inequalities. Michel Foucault calls competition "a formal game between inequalities"[98] and Davies contends that

[97] Cf. F.A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty. A New Statement of the Liberal Principles of Justice and Political Economy* (London: Routledge, 2013 [1982]), p. 243. See also: Section 1.3 below.
[98] Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, p. 120.

"[a] society that celebrates and encourages 'competitiveness' as an ethos, be it in sport, business, politics or education, cannot then be surprised if outcomes are then highly unequal."[99] It is this link between competition and inequality that I explore in this section.

The production of social and material inequalities through processes of market competition is by no means specific to neoliberalism. Instead, Marxist economists Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy note that "[…] social inequalities are a fundamental feature of capitalism generally, and their reproduction is part of the logic of this system."[100] Yet, neoliberalism is more than a mere continuation of this capitalist logic. The period of actually existing neoliberalism is characterised by rising wealth and income inequalities from the late 1970s onwards, which suggests at least an intensification of the capitalist logic of inequality.[101] Neoliberalisation and associated processes of marketisation, commodification, and privatisation also shape the experience of material inequality. From the marketisation of health care to the privatisation of public spaces, ever more services and spaces are accessible only to those who can afford them.[102] Inequality increasingly shapes the experience of everyday life.

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[99] Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, p. 41.

Note that Davies attributes the celebration of inequality to all types of competition. As outlined in the Introduction, I challenge this conflation. Consequently, the link between competition and inequality that I describe in this chapter is specific to market competition and, in particular, to neoliberal conceptions of market competition.

[100] Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy, *Capital Resurgent. Roots of the Neoliberal Revolution*, translated by Derek Jeffers (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 137.

This passage echoes the general sentiment of Marxist analyses of neoliberalism, which tend to emphasise the continuities between neoliberalism and other forms of capitalism, presenting the former as a "project to achieve the restoration of class power" (David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005], p. 16).

[101] Although he does not employ the terminology of 'neoliberalism', Thomas Piketty provides a detailed analysis of the rise of inequality since the 1970s and 1980s, see: Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2014), pp. 237-467. The explicit connection between neoliberalism and this rise in inequality has been made, e.g., by Dardot/Laval, *The New Way of the World*, p. 13, p. 154; Duménil/Lévy, *Capital Resurgent*, p. 137. Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*, p. 63.

[102] See, e.g., Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, pp. 160-161; Bonnie Honig, *Public Things. Democracy in Disrepair* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017); Les Levidow, "Neoliberal Agendas for Higer Education", in: *Neoliberalism. A Critical Reader*, ed. by Alfredo Saad-Filho and Deborah Johnston (London: Pluto Press, 2005), pp. 156-162.

As the following sections will show, inequality also occupies a prominent position within neoliberal theory. Material inequalities are assumed to be a precondition for the proper functioning of market competition, conceptualised as a Hayekian "discovery procedure".[103] Competition and inequality are also central to the neoliberal commitment to 'liberty'.[104] Thus, neoliberal conceptions of market competition entail two distinct justifications of inequality: an instrumental and a normative one. I discuss each in turn.

1.1 An instrumental justification of inequality

Because competition, by definition, produces inequality – or winners and losers –, any proponent of market competition must be ready to accept some degree of inequality at least temporarily.[105] However, the neoliberal affirmation of inequality far exceeds such reluctant acceptance. As Philip Mirowski puts it, "[n]eoliberals regard inequality of economic resources and political rights not as an unfortunate by-product of capitalism, but *a necessary functional characteristic* of their ideal market system."[106] The conception of market competition that neoliberals favour commits them not just to the acceptance of unequal outcomes but compels them to preserve inequality within and outside of the market. This means, for example, that

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[103] F. A. Hayek, "Competition as a Discovery Procedure", translated by Marcellus S. Snow, *The Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (2002), pp. 9-23.

For my discussion of Hayek's instrumental justification of inequality as a functional necessity of market competition, see Section 1.1 below.

[104] For my discussion of neoliberal justifications of inequality in the name of liberty, see Section 1.2 below.

[105] Some proponents of competitive markets are also committed to material equality and suggest, e.g., redistribution through taxation (see, e.g.: Joseph E. Stieglitz, "The Origins of Inequality, and the Policies to Contain It", *National Tax Journal*, Vol. 68, Issue 2, pp. 441-443; Elizabeth Warren, "Elizabeth Warren's Remarks at St. Anselm College" [12 December 2019], accessible at: https://2020.elizabethwarren.com/st-anselm-speech (last accessed: 10 October 2025); Joseph E. Stieglitz, Todd N. Tucker, and Gabriel Zucman, "The Starving State. Why Capitalism's Survival Depends on Taxation", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 1 (2020), pp. 30-37). However, as the term '*re*-distribution' indicates, such proposals still acknowledge that market competition produces inequalities that can be mitigated after the fact.

[106] Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste. How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 63; my emphasis.

redistributive policies are always and necessarily excluded from the toolbox of neoliberal social policy.[107]

The centrality of inequality in neoliberal thought is illustrated by Hayek's account of market competition as an epistemic and innovative 'discovery procedure'.[108] This section will argue that, for Hayek, the observation that competition relies on and produces *difference* implies a justification for the preservation and perpetuation of material *inequality*. Before I trace this slide from difference to inequality, I provide a brief outline of Hayek's understanding of market competition.

Hayek opposes the equation of market competition with the competitive equilibrium of neoclassical economics and, instead, aims to foreground "all the activities which the verb 'to compete' describes".[109] For Hayek, market competition is first and foremost an epistemic mechanism that solves "the problem of the utilization of knowledge not given to anyone in its totality."[110] He argues that a competitive market is able to make use of the knowledge dispersed

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[107] With regard to the ordoliberals, Foucault observes: "This leads us to the conclusion that there is only one true and fundamental social policy: economic growth. The fundamental form of social policy must not be something that works against economic policy and compensates for it; social policy must not follow strong economic growth by becoming more generous. Economic growth and only economic growth should enable all individuals to achieve a level of income that will allow them the individual insurance, access to private property, and individual or familial capitalization with which to absorb risks." (Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, p. 144.) In this, the ordoliberals and neoliberals more generally diverge from an ideal of capitalist society often associated with the economic theory of John Maynard Keynes (cf. Biebricher, *The Political Theory of Neoliberalism*, pp. 16-17).

[108] See: Hayek, "Competition as a Discovery Procedure".

[109] Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order*, p. 92.

Indeed, Hayek positions his conception of market competition explicitly against economic theories of 'competitive equilibrium' and 'perfect competition': "I shall attempt to show that what the theory of perfect competition discusses has little claim to be called 'competition' at all and that its conclusions are of little use as guides to policy. The reason for this seems to me to be that this theory throughout assumes that state of affairs already to exist which, according to the truer view of the older theory, the process of competition tends to bring about (or to approximate) and that, if the state of affairs assumed by the theory of perfect competition ever existed, it would not only deprive of their scope all the activities which the verb 'to compete' describes but would make them virtually impossible." (Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order*, p. 92.)

[110] Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society", p. 520.

I sometimes refer to Hayek's conception of market competition as an 'epistemic' one or claim that he attributes an 'epistemic' function to competitive markets. I do this to highlight the centrality of knowledge and information in Hayek's theory, not to claim that markets are a primary site of knowledge production. Hayek himself moves away from the language of 'knowledge' in a later text, noting that "'information' is clearly often

throughout society by leaving it to the "'man on the spot'"[111] to adjust to changing prices which ultimately "coördinate the separate actions of different people".[112]

Hayek also contends that market competition functions as a "discovery procedure": "Which goods are scarce, however, or which things are goods, or how scarce or valuable they are, is precisely one of the conditions that competition should discover: in each case it is the preliminary outcomes of the market process that inform individuals where it is worthwhile to search."[113] Thereby, competition allows for the discovery of "unrealized" and "unexploited opportunities".[114] One might even suggest that it functions as a 'motor for progress'.[115]

In its most descriptive sense, inequality – that is, inequality as *difference* – is central to this conception of the competitive market process. For Hayek, market competition provides a way of utilising information and knowledge that different individuals might have access to because of their unique position.[116] Market competition is epistemically beneficial only because of those individual differences. In prioritising the economic knowledge and agency of diverse local actors over that of experts and statisticians, the competitive market order responds to, yet also promises to maintain these differences.[117]

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preferable to where I usually spoke of 'knowledge', since the former clearly refers to the knowledge of particular facts rather than theoretical knowledge to which plain 'knowledge' might be thought to refer." (Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, p. xxi.) Consequently, this chapter employs an arguably thin notion of 'epistemic' that merely points to the ways in which market competition communicates information. I introduce a thicker notion in my discussion of epistemic democracy in Chapter Five.

[111] Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society", p. 524.

[112] Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society", p. 526.

[113] Hayek, "Competition as a Discovery Procedure", p. 13.

[114] Hayek, "Competition as a Discovery Procedure", pp. 17-18.

[115] In a similar vein, Mirowski notes that: "Inequality is not only the natural state of market economies from a neoliberal perspective, but it is actually one of its strongest motors for progress." (Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*, p. 63.)

I discuss the relationship between progress and inequality in Hayek's conception of market competition in more detail below.

[116] Cf. Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society", pp. 521-522; Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order*, pp. 97-98.

[117] Cf. Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society", p. 524.

However, Hayek's conception of competition as a discovery procedure is not merely an acknowledgement of individual difference and positionality. Instead, his emphasis on the distributed, localised nature of knowledge and on the significance of individual difference provides the basis for his justification of *material inequality*. In the following, I discuss his claim that both inequality of opportunity and unequal consumption opportunities are integral to the proper functioning of the competitive market. Beginning with Hayek's case for inequality of opportunity, I discuss his justifications for each kind of inequality in turn.

In *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, Hayek decisively states "[t]hat the opportunities of the different members of a large and widely distributed population, resulting from circumstances which from the point of view of the present must appear as accidental, will of necessity be different, is thus inevitably connected with the effectiveness of that discovery procedure, which the market order constitutes."[118] This defence of "undesigned and unavoidable inequalities of opportunity which the decisions of one generation create for their descendants" rests partly on the insight that potential effects on future generations will shape decisions in the present. Hayek writes:

> That parents in their choice of a place to live or of their occupation usually consider the effects their decisions will have on the prospects of their children is an important factor in the adaptation of the use of human resources to foreseeable future developments. But so long as the individual is free to make such decisions, these considerations will be taken into account only if the risk is borne not only by those who decide but also by their descendants.[119]

The commitment to maintain difference and diversity is reflected in Hayek's aversion to 'making people equal', which I discuss in Section 1.2 below.

[118] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, pp. 177-178.

[119] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 177.

Thus, the functioning of the market as Hayek portrays it is at odds with achieving equality of opportunity, which requires that "all persons face effectively equivalent arrays of options."[120] For Hayek, any government action aimed at equalising the array of options must appear merely as a disruption of the epistemic function of market competition and as an obstacle to the efficient 'use of human resources.'[121]

One aspect of Hayek's defence of inequality of opportunity is worth emphasising: it reveals a broader disinterest in justifying individual patterns of inequality. The concept of 'equality of opportunity' often implies that inequality can be justified only when it results from individual choice or, perhaps, effort. As I show in more detail in Section 1.3 below, Hayek does not believe in the necessity of establishing a link between differences in individual contribution and differences in income or wealth. Rather, the latter are justified exclusively because they are the outcome of the competitive market mechanism and are required for its smooth functioning.

Hayek's proposed response to poverty and inequality is limited to protection against extreme deprivation for those unable to earn their income in the market.[122] In any other case, he seems to agree with the ordoliberals "that there is only one true and fundamental social policy: economic growth."[123] Employing the terminology of 'progress' rather than growth,

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[120] Richard J. Arneson, "Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare", *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (1989), p. 86.

[121] Note that the rejection of equalizing government intervention on grounds of the functional integrity of market competition is not specific to Hayek's thought. Thus, Foucault writes with regard to ordoliberal social policy: "In particular, relative equalization, the evening out of access to consumer goods cannot in any case be an objective. It cannot be an objective in a system where economic regulation, that is to say, the price mechanism, is not obtained through phenomena of equalization but through a game of differentiations which is characteristic of every mechanism of competition and which is established through fluctuations that only perform their function and only produce their regulatory effects on condition that they are left to work, and left to work through differences." (Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, pp. 142-143.)

[122] Cf. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 249, p. 297, p. 475.

[123] Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, p. 144.

Hayek contends that "[i]t seems indeed generally to be the case that, after rapid progress has continued for some time, the cumulative advantage for those who follow is great enough to enable them to move faster than those who lead and that, in consequence, the long-drawn-out column of human progress tends to close up."[124] Yet, Hayek's conception of progress itself entails a justification for the second type of inequality mentioned above, that is, unequal consumption opportunities.

Crucially, Hayek seems to suggest that progress is dependent on some having more consumption opportunities than others. In *The Constitution of Liberty*, he asserts:

> What today may seem extravagance or even waste, because it is enjoyed by the few and even undreamed of by the masses, is payment for the experimentation with a style of living that will eventually be available to many. The range of what will be tried and later developed, the fund of experience that will become available to all, is greatly extended by the unequal distribution of present benefits; and the rate of advance will be greatly increased if the first steps are taken long before the majority can profit from them. […] Even the poorest today owe their relative material well-being to the results of past inequality.[125]

On this account, progress depends on the existence of *relative inequalities*: the 'unequal distribution of present benefits' and the gap between 'the few' and 'the masses' are presented as preconditions for the improvement of the 'material well-being' of all. While this process may well be called 'progress' – a movement *forward* –, contrary to Hayek's suggestion, it does not seem to entail a movement of *catching-up or closing-up.* Indeed, such catching-up or

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[124] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, p. 101. See also: Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 249, p. 297, p. 476.

Friedman also maintains that: "Non-capitalist societies tend to have wider inequality than capitalist, even as measured by annual income; in addition, inequality in them tends to be permanent, whereas capitalism undermines status and introduces social mobility." (Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, p. 141.)

[125] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, p. 98.

Hayek also writes that "[…] new knowledge and its benefits can spread only gradually, and the ambitions of the many will always be determined by what is as yet accessible only to the few. It is misleading to think of those new possibilities as if they were, from the beginning, a common possession of society which its members could deliberately share; they become a common possession only through that slow process by which the achievements of the few are made available to the many." (Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, pp. 96-97.)

closing-up would halt the movement of progress as Hayek describes it. Rather, Hayek's conception of progress resembles what Robert H. Frank calls a competitive "arms race"; that is, a kind of competition that ultimately preserves the same relative inequalities on ever higher levels.[126]

This underscores what I already noted with regard to inequalities of opportunity above: the Hayekian conception of market competition as an epistemic and innovative discovery procedure requires material inequality. On this understanding, eliminating or mitigating material inequality risks the proper functioning of market competition. In turn, the benefits market competition promises – efficiency, economic growth, and innovation – appear to be conditional on the acceptance of inequality. Yet, Hayek's defence of competitively generated inequality is not merely instrumental. Rather, it is tied up with a more general and decidedly normative vision of social and political life, which I discuss in the next section.

1.2 A normative justification of inequality

For many neoliberal theorists, competition and inequality are conditions for the realisation of 'freedom' and a 'free society'.[127] Claiming to speak for "liberal philosophy" more generally, Friedman even suggests that ultimately, "equality comes sharply into conflict with freedom; one must choose. One cannot be both an egalitarian, in this sense, and a liberal."[128] His rejection of equality, he asserts, is motivated by a commitment to 'freedom'. He notes that his liberalism

[126] Frank, *The Darwin Economy*, p. 10.
[127] Despite many other differences, neoliberal theorists converge on the assumption that there exists some meaningful relationship between a competitive economy and freedom. This is also true for the ordoliberal strand of neoliberal theory. For example, Eucken remarks that "the desire for competitive order is closely related to the desire for freedom." (Eucken, "What is the Competitive Order?", p. 103.) However, I focus on the writings of Friedman and Hayek in this section, which contain more explicit discussions of the relationship between competition, inequality, and freedom.
[128] Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, pp. 160-161.

> implies a belief in the equality of men in one sense; in their inequality in another. Each man has an equal right to freedom. This is an important and fundamental right precisely because men are different, because one man will want to do different things with his freedom than another, and in the process can contribute more than another to the general culture of the society in which many men live.[129]

As in Hayek's instrumental justification of inequality discussed in the previous section, Friedman's defence of inequality in the name of freedom begins as a defence of inequality-as-difference.

Yet, this acknowledgment of basic human difference ultimately leads Friedman to a justification of differential incomes and, thereby, to a justification of material inequalities.

> Given individuals whom we are prepared to regard as alike in ability and initial resources, if some have a greater taste for leisure and others for marketable goods, inequality of return through the market is necessary to achieve equality of total return or equality of treatment. One man may prefer a routine job with much time off for basking in the sun to a more exacting job paying a higher salary; another man may prefer the opposite. If both were paid equally in money, their incomes in a more fundamental sense would be unequal.[130]

Here, Friedman presents income inequalities merely as a way to accommodate individual preferences, and thus as a way of recognising human individuality and agency. It is telling, however, that he is just as ready to accept material inequalities that arise not from choice but from differences in ability, from inheritance, and, more broadly, from chance.[131] Indeed, he suggests that inequalities themselves do not require an ethical justification but need to be accepted as "as instrumental or a corollary of some other principle such as freedom."[132]

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[129] Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, p. 160.
[130] Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, p. 134.
[131] Friedman argues that there is no meaningful difference between an 'inherited talent', such as a beautiful voice, and the inheritance of wealth. He concludes that "it seems illogical to say that a man is entitled to what he has produced by personal capacities or to the produce of the wealth he has accumulated, but that he is not entitled to pass any wealth on to his children; to say that a man may use his income for riotous living but may not give it to his heirs. Surely, the latter is one way to use what he has produced." (Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, p. 136.)
[132] Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, p. 136.

A more sophisticated account of the relationship between freedom, human difference, and material inequality can be found in the work of Hayek. For Hayek, freedom consists in "the absence of coercion".[133] He defines 'coercion' as the *intentional* and *targeted* limitation of the choices available to an individual, so that the coerced will act in accordance with the aims of the coercer.[134] It is this understanding of freedom and coercion, on which Hayek's embrace of competition as a mechanism for economic coordination and social organisation is based. He believes that competition allows for social coordination without direct government intervention – and, thus, without coercion. Coordination through competition only requires the enforcement of impersonal and general "rules of conduct".[135]

I discuss the role of rules in Hayek's thought in more detail in Section 2 below. For now, it is sufficient to note the relationship of these general and impersonal rules to equality and inequality. Such rules clearly imply a sense of *equality*: "It is of the essence of the demand for equality before the law that people should be treated alike in spite of the fact that they are different."[136] Yet, this "equal treatment"[137] is possible only as a response to the fact that individuals are *unequal* "in their gifts and inclinations": "it is only owing to this that the differentiation of functions need not be determined by the arbitrary decision of some organizing will but that, after creating formal equality of the rules applying in the same manner to all, we can leave each individual to find his own level."[138] Social and economic coordination without coercion is possible only because people are different and willing to take on different social and economic roles.

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[133] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty,* p. 199.
[134] Cf. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty,* pp. 199-200.
[135] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty,* p. 69.
[136] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, p. 149.
[137] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty,* p. 149.
[138] Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order*, pp. 15-16.

The recognition of human diversity and his commitment to equality as 'equal treatment' also grounds Hayek's rejection of any equalising government intervention.

> Since people will differ in many attributes which government cannot alter, to secure for them the same material position would require that government treat them very differently. Indeed, to assure the same material position to people who differ greatly in strength, intelligence, skill, knowledge and perseverance as well as in their physical and social environment, government would clearly have to treat them very differently to compensate for those disadvantages and deficiencies it could not directly alter.[139]

Again, the recognition of human difference and diversity begins to morph into a justification of material inequalities.

This slide from individual difference to material inequality that can be found in both Hayek's and Friedman's writings is neither obvious nor necessary. It assumes, first, that the only or most desirable form of equality is a purely procedural equality of treatment, and presupposes, second, that the economic – rather than, for example, the political – is the proper realm for the expression and enactment of human individuality and difference. Neither of these assumptions is self-evident.

However, Hayek has two further issues with the practice of 'making people equal'. First, he is convinced that equality of outcome requires intentional design; that is: "the achievement of such particular pre-determined results requires deliberate co-ordination of all the different activities in accordance with the concrete circumstances of time and place."[140] For Hayek, such 'deliberate coordination' is always bound to be less effective than market

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[139] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, pp. 244-245.

[140] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 248.

The claim that equalisation requires coordination seems to overlook the possibility of achieving or approaching equality of outcomes through taxation. Elsewhere, Hayek argues that progressive taxation conflicts with the principle of equal treatment and "denies that the accumulation of capital is a legitimate aim of an individual's efforts, and in practice makes it impossible." (F.A. Hayek, "The Case Against Progressive Income Tax", *The Freeman*, Vol. 4, No. 7 [1953], p. 231.)

competition.[141] Sceptical of the possibility of ever successfully creating conditions of equality, Hayek also suggests that "[i]nequality is undoubtedly more readily borne, and affects the dignity of the person much less, if it is determined by impersonal forces, than when it is due to design."[142]

Second, Hayek's belief that government intervention and 'deliberate coordination' inevitably imply coercion leads him to assert that any attempt to achieve material equality ultimately results in totalitarianism. "Full equality for most cannot but mean the equal submission of the great masses under the command of some élite who manages their affairs. While an equality of rights under a limited government is possible and an essential condition of individual freedom, a claim for equality of material position can be met only by a government with totalitarian powers."[143] This passage reveals Hayek's limited conception of the political: the possibility of pursuing material equality democratically is excluded, while equalising government intervention is collapsed into totalitarianism. The market is postulated as the realm of freedom and difference, while the political is associated with coercive equalisation.

For Hayek and Friedman, inequality is neither to be bemoaned nor to be avoided. On the contrary, inequality provides the condition for efficiency, progress, and liberty. As I have shown, neoliberal justifications of inequality are intrinsically bound up with the celebration of market competition. They reveal the potential of the concept of market competition to be

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[141] Cf. Hayek, *The Use of Knowledge in Society,* pp. 525-526.
See also: Section 1.1.

[142] Hayek, *Road to Serfdom*, p. 110.
"It cannot be denied that the Rule of Law produces economic inequality – all that can be claimed for it is that this inequality is not designed to affect particular people in a particular way." (Hayek, *Road to Serfdom*, p. 82.)

[143] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, pp. 245-246.

employed in attempts to legitimise and perpetuate material inequalities. However, to fully understand the de-democratising threat of the neoliberal case for inequality, it is crucial to expand on the nature of the justificatory relationship between neoliberal competition and inequality. To do so, I contrast the neoliberal conception of competition with a *meritocratic* one.

1.3 Against a meritocratic justification of inequality

Meritocratic ideas, that is, the belief that social positions or rewards track a person's talents and efforts – their 'merit' –, are certainly prevalent in public discourse in actually existing neoliberal societies. They also form part of a neoliberal ideology that at times diverges from the writings of neoliberal theorists.[144] The latter are clear in their rejection of meritocracy.[145]

Hayek associates concepts such as 'merit' or 'desert' with appeals to justice that inevitably head away from competition towards deliberate design. Merit implies, he believes, a distribution that is not produced by the market and, instead, follows extra-market assumptions about individual desert. It thus clashes with Hayek's commitment to individual agency and the

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[144] I use the term 'neoliberal ideology' to refer to ideas and justificatory discourses that are commonly associated with neoliberalism and circulate in actually existing neoliberal societies, but do not necessarily track the writings of neoliberal theorists. This distinction between neoliberal ideology and theory resonates with Philip Mirowski's notion of a "doctrine of 'double truth'" which distinguishes between an exoteric and an esoteric neoliberal doctrine (Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*, p. 68).

Convergences between actually existing neoliberalism and meritocratic ideas and discourses have been noted, e.g., by Jo Littler, *Against Meritocracy. Culture, power, and myths of mobility* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit. What's Become of the Common Good* (London: Allen Lane, 2020), p. 198.

[145] This is true particularly for Hayek and Friedman. Ordoliberal theorists seem more sympathetic to the idea that competition in some sense rewards merit or at least superior performance. Biebricher notes: "After all, it was not just any kind of competition that Eucken wanted to stimulate through the market framework but what he called *Leistungswettbewerb* […], which translates somewhat awkwardly into 'performance competition.' The notion of performance competition stipulates that gaining market advantage, making a profit, must be achievable only through a superior performance, which partly explains why Eucken is so vehemently opposed to cartels and monopolies, because they could gain market advantage through *Behinderungswettbewerb* […], or 'competition through obstruction.'" (Biebricher, *The Political Theory of Neoliberalism*, pp. 207-208.)

principle of equal treatment.[146] Indeed, he suggests that calls for meritocratic distribution pave the way towards a 'totalitarian' and 'unfree' society:

> The idea that men ought to be rewarded in accordance with the assessed merits or deserts of their services 'to society' presupposes an authority which not only distributes these rewards but also assigns to the individuals the tasks for the performance of which they will be rewarded. In other words, if 'social justice' is to be brought about, the individuals must be required to obey not merely general rules but specific demands directed to them only.[147]

It is important to note that the target of Hayek's critique is a pre-institutional and moral conception of merit. He does not seem to consider the possibility of an institutional or market-based conception, which takes merit to be determined within, not outside of the market.[148]

Instead, he emphasises the epistemic function of differential earnings. He notes that "[…] earnings in a market system, though people tend to regard them as rewards, do not serve such a function. Their rationale […] is rather to indicate to people what they ought to do if the order is to be maintained on which they all rely."[149] However, Hayek does not seem to be content with merely pointing to the function of unequal incomes. Additionally, he stresses the centrality of luck, uncertainty, and chance. Hayek asserts that "the market allows the particular combination of various goods and their distribution among individuals to be decided essentially by unforeseeable circumstances and in this sense by chance."[150] In a similar vein, Friedman

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[146] Cf. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, p. 158. Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, p. 247.
[147] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 247.
In *The Constitution of Liberty,* Hayek describes a meritocratic society as one that is both inefficient and unfree: "A society in which the position of the individuals was made to correspond to human ideas of moral merit would therefore be the exact opposite of a free society. It would be a society in which people were rewarded for duty performed instead of for success, in which every move of every individual was guided by what other people thought he ought to do, and in which the individual was thus relieved of the responsibility and the risk of decision. But if nobody's knowledge is sufficient to guide all human action, there is also no human being who is competent to reward all efforts according to merit." (Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, p. 161.)
[148] For a critique of Hayek's narrow conception of merit and the possibility of reconciling meritocratic ideas with a competitive market economy, see, David Miller, "Two Cheers for Meritocracy", *Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 4, Issue 4 (1996), pp. 277-301.
[149] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 243.
[150] Hayek, "Competition as a Discovery Procedure", p. 16.

speculates that it is this very fact that makes inequalities easier to bear: "Despite the lip service that we all pay to 'merit' as compared to 'chance,' we are generally much readier to accept inequalities arising from chance than those clearly attributable to merit."[151]

The contrast with meritocratic ideas brings some of the features of neoliberal competition and inequality into relief: Most strikingly, the function of neoliberal competition is not to produce a specific distribution or to 'pick out' individuals as 'winners' or 'deserving'. While meritocratic competition aims to reward individuals in accordance with their merit, neoliberal competition merely has "the objective of increasing the payoff but leave[s] the share of the individuals partly to chance."[152] Despite many references to individual freedom, the individual rarely takes centre stage in neoliberal justifications of inequality. The cumulative advantage that competition provides for society as a whole is considered sufficient justification.

Furthermore, neoliberal competitions do not function as 'tests' that determine the individuals who are 'the best' at something. 'Skill' in adjusting to changing market conditions or in identifying unsatisfied demands may affect an individual's success. Yet, the emphasis on chance in both Friedman's and Hayek's work underscores that evaluating skill or excellence is not the purpose of neoliberal competition.[153]

Instead of functioning like a 'test' with a clear process, outcome, and standards of excellence, neoliberal competition is directed towards growth, progress, and innovation. That

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[151] Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, p. 137.
This statement strikingly resembles Hayek's claim, quoted above, that "[i]nequality is undoubtedly more readily borne, and affects the dignity of the person much less, if it is determined by impersonal forces, than when it is due to design." (Hayek, *Road to Serfdom*, p. 110.) It is instructive that both Hayek and Friedman feel the need to resort to speculations concerning human psychology at different points in their justification of inequality.
[152] Hayek, "Competition as a Discovery Procedure", p. 16.
[153] Here, Friedman's and Hayek's conceptions of market competition starkly diverge from an understanding of competition as a "quest for excellence" that is often associated with sports competition (Simon et al., *Fair Play,* p. 47).

is: it is both open-ended and endless. Hayek's account of competition as a "discovery procedure" implies, as he himself notes, that "we do not know in advance the facts we wish to discover with the help of competition".[154] While the specific winner is unknown beforehand, a well-designed meritocratic competition will always be won by the most meritorious participant. In contrast, the outcomes of neoliberal competition are uncertain.[155]

This fundamental uncertainty and open-endedness mean that neoliberal competition lacks criteria for the evaluation of the distributions it produces. A meritocratic competition can be criticised on its own terms for failing to identify the 'best' or most deserving individuals. Because 'we do not know in advance what we wish to discover', the 'success' of neoliberal competition is much more difficult to evaluate. Consequently, Hayek's nod to uncertainty also safeguards neoliberal competition from attempts to criticise or challenge the unequal distributions it perpetuates.

According to Thomas Piketty, this feature of neoliberal competition conflicts sharply with democratic principles of justification:

> Our democratic societies rest on a meritocratic worldview, or at any rate a meritocratic hope, by which I mean a belief in a society in which inequality is based more on merit and effort than on kinship and rents. This belief and this hope play a very crucial role in modern society, for a simple reason: in a democracy, the professed equality of rights of all citizens contrasts sharply with the very real inequality of living conditions, and in order to overcome this contradiction it is vital to make sure that social inequalities derive from rational and universal principles rather than arbitrary contingencies.[156]

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[154] Hayek, "Competition as a Discovery Procedure", p. 10.

[155] This emphasis on uncertainty resonates with another aspect of life under neoliberalism: economic insecurity and precarity. Importantly, insecurity and precarity are also sometimes listed among neoliberal contributors to the crisis of democracy. See, e.g., Michael J. Graetz and Ian Shapiro, *The Wolf at the Door. The Menace of Economic Insecurity and How to Fight It* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2020); Isabell Lorey, *States of Insecurity. Government of the Precarious*, translated by Aileen Derieg (London: Verso, 2015).

[156] Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, p. 422.

It is important to note that "the meritocratic hope" Piketty points to has itself been associated with widening inequalities and a weakening of democracy. Daniel Markovits even claims that "[m]eritocracy is not the solution to rising inequality but rather its root. Meritocracy's inner logic has become undemocratic and opposed to economic equality. Even when meritocracy operates precisely as advertised, it promotes the dynastic succession

Friedman's and Hayek's free admissions that inequalities generated by market competition are largely the product of chance express disregard for the need to justify individual patterns of inequality.[157] If Piketty is right, they thereby deepen the contradiction between democratic equality and material inequality. It is this contradiction that I turn to now.

1.4 The de-democratising threat of inequality

The contradiction between political equality and 'the very real inequality of living conditions' that Piketty identifies is not specific to neoliberalism but characterises democratic capitalist societies more generally. Indeed, even Robert A. Dahl, who argues that a "modern market economy" is ultimately conducive to political democracy, notes:[158]

> Yet the close association between democracy and market-capitalism conceals a paradox: a market-capitalist economy inevitably generates inequalities in the political resources to which different citizens have access. Thus a market-capitalist economy seriously impairs political equality: citizens who are economically unequal are unlikely to be politically equal. In a country with a market-capitalist economy, it appears, full political equality is impossible to achieve. Consequently, there is a permanent tension between democracy and a market-capitalist economy.[159]

The rise of inequalities in the neoliberal era is bound to further exacerbate this tension.

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of status and wealth and turns a ratchet that increases economic inequality." (Daniel Markovits, *The Meritocracy Trap. How America's Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite* [New York: Allen Lane, 2019], pp. 18-19; see also: Littler, *Against Meritocracy*; Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*.) Yet, even if one rejects Piketty's claims around the democratic promise of meritocracy in particular, the observation that the principle of democratic equality demands that patterns of inequality require special justification still holds – and it is this justification that is denied by neoliberal conceptions of competition.

[157] As argued above, the existence of inequality is justified as a condition for economic efficiency, progress, and liberty. However, neither Hayek nor Friedman deem it necessary to provide a justification for why Person A has more (or less) than Person B.

[158] Dahl, *On Democracy*, p. 147.

As noted in the Introduction, Dahl describes the combination of capitalist markets and democratic politics as a "tempestuous marriage" (Dahl, *On Democracy*, p. 166). However, he ultimately lists "a modern market economy" among the "[e]ssential conditions for democracy" (Dahl, *On Democracy*, p. 147).

[159] Dahl, *On Democracy*, pp. 158-159.

As demonstrated above, neoliberal theorists present inequality as a precondition for the proper functioning of market competition and as inevitable in a free society. They are adamant in their warnings against any form of equalising government intervention. This bars the way for a reconciliation of capitalist markets and political democracy as Dahl proposes it: he emphasises the need for "governments to intervene in order to alter an outcome that would otherwise cause damage to some citizens."[160] Condemning any such intervention as a harmful disruption of market competition, neoliberal theorists appear to be willing – perhaps even happy – to accept an ever-widening gap between the principle of political equality and the reality of material inequality.

I highlight three ways in which material inequalities undermine political equality and erode the social conditions of democracy. The first two are related to what Dahl calls "inequalities in the political resources to which different citizens have access."[161] Such inequality manifests, first, in an excess of political resources for some, who are thus able to exert influence on government and policy decisions. It manifests, second, in a lack of political resources for others, effectively excluding them from the political community. Finally, excessive inequalities produce a social world that is no longer experienced as shared and common. I discuss each of these de-democratising effects of inequality in turn.

Political equality – the equal right and opportunity to shape political decision-making procedures – is not identical with *material equality*. It may even be compatible with a substantial amount of material inequality.[162] Yet, political equality remains vulnerable to such

[160] Dahl, *On Democracy*, p. 175.
[161] Dahl, *On Democracy*, pp. 158-159.
[162] For example, Dahl observes: "Democracy survives in some of the most unequal countries in the world as measured by the Gini coeffifficient, a standard measure of inequality. These include much-celebrated new democracies such as Brazil and South Africa." (Dahl, *On Democracy*, p. 196.)

inequality as long as the political realm is not fully insulated against the conversion of economic into political power. Dahl describes the problematic consequences of such a conversion:

> Because of inequalities in political resources, some citizens gain significantly more influence than others over the government's policies, decisions, and actions. These violations, alas, are not trivial. Consequently, citizens are not political equals—far from it—and thus the moral foundation of democracy, political equality among citizens, is seriously violated.[163]

Although they have recently taken more blatant forms, conversions of economic into political power often take place 'quietly' and covertly. They may include the funding of election or media campaigns and attempts to shape policy and public opinion through economic pressures, advertisement campaigns, and the algorithmic design of media platforms.[164] Crucially, the danger of this "oligarchization of political power" lies not just in the differential political influence it accords to the wealthy but also in the perpetuation of the material inequality that makes it possible: oligarchic structures both afford political power to the wealthy and wealth to those who hold political power.[165]

The flipside of the oligarchic conversion of economic into political power is the exclusion of the poor and disadvantaged from the political process. This exclusion is not a matter of rights, but of the capacity to make use of them. John Rawls notes a difference between "liberty and the worth of liberty": "the worth of liberty to persons and groups is proportional to their capacity to advance their ends within the framework the system defines. Freedom as equal liberty is the same for all […]. But the worth of liberty is not the same for everyone.

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[163] Dahl, *On Democracy*, pp. 177-178.
[164] MacEwan, "Neoliberalism and Democracy: Market Power versus Democratic Power", p. 171.
My remark on recent and more blatant conversions of economic and political power refers, e.g., to Elon Musk's political activities: from his brief stint as senior advisor to US president Donald Trump to his open support for the far-right in the UK and Germany.
[165] Vergara, *Systemic Corruption*, p. 3. See also: Vergara, *Systemic Corruption*, p. 44.

Some have greater authority and wealth, and therefore greater means to achieve their aims."[166] While citizens are formally equal and share the same rights to get involved in the political process, whether one will be able to do this depends largely on their access to certain resources and goods, which "function as prerequisites for *full inclusion* in society, for counting as an equal member."[167] Beyond a minimal level of welfare, these may include, for example, access to education,[168] but also time to run for political office or even just to read up on the most recent political developments.[169] In societies in which some people work two jobs just to make ends meet and access to education is a question of money, large parts of the population are effectively excluded from the political process.[170]

Importantly, material inequality is problematic from a democratic perspective not only because it is likely to result in an unequal *distribution* of political resources. What is also at stake is a particular *relationship*.[171] Elizabeth Anderson defines "democratic equality" as a "relational theory of equality: it views equality as a social relationship."[172] Democracy, she suggests, involves living together in a "democratic community", that is, in "a social order in which persons stand in relations of equality."[173] Such relations of equality are incompatible with extreme material inequalities.

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[166] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice. Original Edition* (Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press, 1971), p. 204.
[167] Debra Satz, *Why Some Things Should Not Be for Sale. The Moral Limits of Markets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 102.
[168] Cf. Satz, *Why Some Things Should Not Be for Sale*, p. 101, p. 106.
[169] Cf. Herzog, *The Democratic Marketplace*, Chapter 3, ebook.
[170] This is likely to be the case, e.g., in the UK, where 1.35 million people have second jobs (cf. Work Foundation, "Workers with second jobs at highest level since records began as one in six employees struggle to pay their bills" [11 July 2025], https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/work-foundation/news/workers-with-second-jobs-at-highest-level-since-records-began-as-one-in-six-employees-struggle-to-pay-their-bills [last accessed: 19 October 2025]), while universities charge tuition fees.
[171] For a related argument, see: Herzog, *The Democratic Marketplace*, Chapter 3, ebook.
[172] Elizabeth S. Anderson, "What Is the Point of Equality?", Ethics, Vol. 109, No. 2 (1999), p. 313.
[173] Anderson, Elizabeth, "What Is the Point of Equality?", p. 313.
I return to the topic of the democratic community in Chapter Three.

Material inequalities threaten democratic relations of equality not only when they are converted into inequalities of political influence. Rather, they undermine the everyday experience of inhabiting a shared social world. This effect of material inequality is nicely illustrated by G.A. Cohen's account of the encounter between a rich car-driver and a poor bus-rider:

> You have to ride the crowded bus every day, whereas I pass you by in my comfortable car. One day, however, I must take the bus, because my wife needs the car. I can reasonably complain about that to a fellow car-driver, but not to you. I can't say to you: 'It's awful that I have to take the bus today.' There is a lack of community between us of just the sort that naturally obtains between me and the fellow car-driver.[174]

A world in which some travel by private jet, while others struggle to afford bus fares, is most certainly characterised by the lack of community Cohen describes.

This lack of community is a problem for democracy because it may present an obstacle for collective political action. Hannah Arendt highlights the significance of a 'common world' for political action. She asserts that "the term 'public'", that is, the realm of political action, "signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it."[175] In the context of material inequality, neoliberal marketisation and privatisation, such a common world is increasingly hard to find.

Thus, the neoliberal celebration of market competition results in the defence of a social world utterly at odds with democratic principles of equality and community.[176] What is more,

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[174] G.A. Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 36.

[175] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition. Second Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998 [1958]), p. 52.

It is important to acknowledge that Arendt is not concerned with the social and economic conditions of democracy. Rather, she describes the consequences of the loss of a distinctly political sphere. Yet, I believe that her insight into the centrality of a common and shared world for political action resonates with the state of neoliberal democracies today. Although Honig focuses on slightly different questions, I find my intuition confirmed by Bonnie Honig's *Public Things*.

[176] This sentence presents the social harms to democracy as outcomes of the neoliberal celebration of competition. Yet, it is questionable whether this accurately portrays the order of events or whether a neoliberal dislike for

the neoliberal appeal to equality as 'equal treatment' or 'equality before the law' does little to temper the de-democratising threat of inequality. Instead, I argue below that the "liberal spirit" of competition, as Davies calls it, contributes further to neoliberal de-democratisation.[177]

2 Equal Rules: The Neoliberal Insulation of Markets

Davies's notion of the 'liberal spirit' refers to the rule-governed nature of competition: "all competitions have rules. To favour competition is never to favour anarchy."[178] Their reliance on rules means that competitions not only produce *inequalities*. They also involve a sense of *equality*: "We might therefore say that a competition must be imbued with a liberal spirit, inasmuch as the abstract idea of equality before the rules must exert some influence over how the contest is performed and its rules interpreted."[179]

I briefly discussed the neoliberal commitment to 'equality before the rules' or 'equal treatment' above. I noted that, as part of Hayek's case against equalising government intervention, this understanding of equality ultimately justifies inequalities of outcome. For Hayek, such intervention ought to be rejected on the grounds that it inevitably treats people differently and thereby violates the principle of equal treatment.[180] Their role in justifications of material inequality already suggests that the principles of 'equality before the rules' and 'equal treatment' are unlikely to democratise neoliberal conceptions of market competition. On

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democracy precedes and shapes their conceptions of market competition and inequality. For a discussion of the role of democracy for the neoliberal political project, see: Biebricher, *The Political Theory of Neoliberalism,* Chapter 3.

[177] Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, p. 60.

[178] Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, p. 60.

[179] Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, p. 63.

[180] Cf. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, pp. 244-245. See also Section 1.2 above.

the contrary, I argue that the equal rules of neoliberal conceptions of market competition both limit and stifle democratic control.[181]

To investigate the de-democratising effects of neoliberal conceptions of the rules of market competition, I foreground one aspect in particular, namely, the status or authority of the rules vis-à-vis the competitors. Who 'authors' the 'rules of the game' and who can change them? Can they be challenged, and if so, how and by whom? From where do these rules derive their authority?

Neoliberal theorists answer the last of these questions differently: whereas Hayek points to the centrality of organically evolved "spontaneous orders" to modern life,[182] ordoliberal theorists emphasise the expertise of economics and legal theory.[183] However, they agree on the need to insulate the rules of the economic game from political and democratic interference.[184] Both Hayek and the ordoliberals are convinced that the rules of market competition ought not to be formulated democratically, nor are they open to democratic challenge. What is more, they assert that political and government action ought to be guided and constrained by these rules.

The following sections outline different neoliberal conceptions of the rules of market competition, their implications for neoliberal conceptions of the state, and their effects on

[181] It is worth reiterating that my object of analysis in this section is a distinctly neoliberal conception of the rules of market competition. My argument is neither that by virtue of being rule-governed, competition always and necessarily poses a threat to democracy, nor that democracy is always and necessarily a disorderly practice that is incompatible with rules. In Chapter Six, I discuss a very different, democratic conception of rules from the perspective of agonistic democratic theory.
[182] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 28.
[183] Cf. Franz Böhm, Walter Eucken, and Hans Großmann-Doerth, "The *Ordo Manifesto* of 1936", translated by David Hunniford, Elaine Wagner, Alan Peacock, and Hans Willgerodt, in: *The Birth of Austerity. German Ordoliberalism and Contemporary Neoliberalism*, ed. by Thomas Biebricher and Frieder Vogelmann (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), p. 27.
[184] Cf. Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists. The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), pp. 4-7.

political democracy. In light of the common association of neoliberalism with unfettered markets and laissez-faire capitalism, this emphasis on rules may seem surprising.[185] Therefore, I begin my analysis with a discussion of the role of rules in neoliberal thought.

2.1 Neoliberalism and the rules of market competition

Against its simple identification with laissez-faire capitalism, scholars of neoliberalism have drawn attention to the ways in which the neoliberal pursuit of competitive markets is itself a political project that involves a 'strong state' and supranational institutions.[186] This political and institution-building dimension of neoliberalism finds its clearest expression in the writings of ordoliberal theorists. Walter Eucken insists, for example, "that the principle of *laissez-faire* does not create a competitive order. Other principles are required."[187] Wilhelm Röpke likewise emphasises that "a free market and performance competition do not just occur", "[t]hey are, rather, extremely fragile artificial products […]."[188] Rule-governed competitive markets, ordoliberals believe, need to be carefully constructed and maintained.

As I show below, Hayek is sceptical of the possibility of designing market competition from scratch. Yet, he also notes that "[a] functioning market economy presupposes certain

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[185] Noam Chomsky, e.g., describes neoliberalism as characterised by "a religious faith in the infallibility of the market, that draws upon nineteenth century theories that have little connection to the real world." (Noam Chomsky, *Profit Over People. Neoliberalism and Global Order* [New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999], p. 8.) Naomi Klein also describes Friedman and Chicago School neoliberalism as proponents of laissez-faire capitalism: "Friedman called himself a 'liberal,' but his U.S. followers, who associated liberals with high taxes and hippies, tended to identify as 'conservatives, 'classical economists,' 'free marketers,' and, later, as believers in 'Reaganomics' or 'laissez-faire.' In most of the world, their orthodoxy is known as 'neoliberalism,' but it is often called 'free trade' or simply 'globalization.'" (Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine. The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* [New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007], p. 14.)

[186] For an account of neoliberalism as a decidedly political theory, see: Biebricher, *The Political Theory of Neoliberalism*. For an analysis of ordoliberalism that emphasises its reliance on a strong state, see: Werner Bonefeld, *The Strong State and the Free Economy* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017). Slobodian portrays neoliberalism as a project of "designing institutions that would best safeguard the market." (Slobodian, *Globalists,* p. 58.)

[187] Eucken, *What is the Competitive Order?*, p. 105.

[188] Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time,* p. 227.

activities on the part of the state […].” It is not the “volume”, he argues in broad agreement with ordoliberal thinkers, but the “kind” of government activity that determines its compatibility with free market competition.[189] To be compatible with market competition, government activity ought to be modelled on the “rule of law”, enforcing and itself constrained by general and impersonal rules of conduct.[190]

According to Hayek, the appeal of such general and impersonal rules lies in their ability to preserve individual liberty while allowing for social coordination. This aspect of rules becomes especially clear in the way he contrasts rules or “laws” with what he calls “commands”:

> The ideal type of command determines uniquely the action to be performed and leaves those to whom it is addressed no chance to use their own knowledge or follow their own predilections. The action performed according to such commands serves exclusively the purposes of him who has issued it. The ideal type of law, on the other hand, provides merely additional information to be taken into account in the decision of the actor.[191]

As a background structure for individual decision-making, a framework of rules promises to coordinate without coercion. This is why Hayek portrays market competition as a system of liberty, while insisting that a planned or “command economy” inevitably conflicts with freedom.[192]

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[189] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, p. 331.

Similarly, Eucken criticises the interventionist tendencies of the German state, where such intervention promotes the formation of monopolies or is motivated by anti-capitalist sentiments (cf. Walter Eucken, “Structural Transformations of the State and the Crisis of Capitalism”, translated by Keith Tribe**,** in: *The Birth of Austerity. German Ordoliberalism and Contemporary Neoliberalism*, ed. by Thomas Biebricher and Frieder Vogelmann (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), pp. 56-60). Yet, he embraces intervention in the name of the competitive order: “From this it also follows that the need for economic policy intervention will endure once a competitive order has been achieved. This results in two groups of principles: constitutive principles and regulative principles. The first set relates to the creation or *constitution* of the economic order; the second group concerns the maintenance of the *functioning* of the competitive order.” (Eucken, *What is the Competitive Order?*, p. 106.)

[190] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, pp. 331-332.

[191] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty,* p. 218.

[192] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty,* p. 341.

Hayek also suggests that general rules of conduct allow for the efficient use of dispersed and localised knowledge and information because they enable individual decision-making. [193] He notes: "In fact, the collaboration of individuals under common rules rests on a sort of division of knowledge, where the individual must take account of particular circumstances but the law ensures that their action will be adapted to certain general or permanent characteristics of their society."[194] For Hayek, rule-governed market competition constitutes a desirable form of economic organisation on grounds of efficiency as well as liberty.

Additionally, ordoliberal theorists, who tend to be more attuned to its violent and destructive potentials, view rules as a means to 'civilise' competition.[195] Rules ensure that market competition "is not constituted within the battle of man against man, but is instead realised through parallel individual performances. It is neither an obstructive nor a destructive form of competition, but is instead founded within a 'performance competition' [*Leistungswettbewerb*]."[196] From the ordoliberal perspective, rules are essential for achieving a distinct kind of competition; one that is constrained, efficient, and realises the neoliberal ideal of individual freedom.

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[193] Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, p. 19.
[194] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty,* p. 225.
[195] I take the phrase 'civilising competition' from Bonefeld, who writes the following about the ordoliberal commitment to competition: "Although competition is the affirmed means of individual freedom, its conduct needs to be civilised by firm rules and regulations. The fundamental condition of a civilised system of competition is the equality of all market participants before the law and equal exposure to the dynamic of market competition, regardless of the inequality in property and economic power." (Bonefeld, *The Strong State and the Free Economy*, p. 21.)

I discuss the ordoliberal sensitivity for the violence inherent in competition in more detail in Chapter Three. The relationship between violence, competition, and politics is thematised further in Chapter Six.
[196] Eucken, "What is the Competitive Order?", p. 100.

Note that Eucken's description of perfect or performance competition invokes a "parallel" understanding of competition as Shai Agmon calls it (Agmon, "Two Concepts of Competition", p. 9). I return to Agmon's distinction between 'parallel' and 'friction competition' in the second part of this thesis.

While ideally these rules are habitually observed by economic actors, realistically, they need to be enforced. The competitive market requires, as the ordoliberal Röpke puts it, "a state constantly concerned to maintain the freedom of the market and of competition in its legislation, administration, law courts, financial policy and spiritual and moral leadership, by creating the necessary framework of laws and institutions, by laying down the rules for competition and watching over their observance with relentless but just severity."[197] Röpke's account of the state as the enforcer of rules is echoed by Chicago School neoliberal Friedman: "The existence of a free market does not of course eliminate the need for government. On the contrary, government is essential both as a forum for determining the 'rules of the game' and as an umpire to interpret and enforce the rules decided on."[198] Thus, the rule-governed nature of market competition implies a specific understanding of the appropriate relationship between state and market, between the political and the economic.

Importantly, the construction and enforcement of an 'economic constitution', of a framework of rules governing economic life, is not just a theme of neoliberal theorising but also shapes neoliberal political practice. This becomes evident, as Quinn Slobodian shows, if neoliberalism is understood "as a specific institution-building project"[199] aimed at the creation of "a rules-based system for the world economy".[200] Slobodian locates the institutions, such as the European Economic Community (EEC) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), designed to create and uphold this system primarily at the supranational level. Similarly, Thomas Biebricher draws attention to the revitalisation of ordoliberal ideas in the European

[197] Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time,* pp. 227-228.
[198] Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom,* p. 21.
For my discussion of the neoliberal conception of the state as umpire, see Section 2.3 below.
[199] Slobodian, *Globalists*, p. 5.
[200] Slobodian, *Globalists*, p. 245.

Union's (EU) response to the global financial crisis of 2008, which emphasised rules and order – and transposed the figure of the 'umpire' from the nation state to the EU:

> the economic constitution of postcrisis Europe is not just designed to organize the competition between private-market actors; more important, it is a competitive order in which the actors are nation-states and their political economies with the EU increasingly performing the functions that the ordoliberals and Eucken in particular had envisioned for the state in relation to companies, trade unions, and so forth: an impartial enforcer of the, ideally, quasi-automatic rules of the competition game; an umpire that relies on the powers of science in designing the rules and is unassailable by the players in its decision making.[201]

Slobodian's and Biebricher's analyses of these supranational institutions not only demonstrate the practical and political relevance of the neoliberal insistence on rule-governed market competition, but they also point to its de-democratising impetus. Rules and the institutions that enforce them work, as Slobodian puts it, "not to liberate markets but to encase them, to inoculate capitalism against the threat of democracy […]."[202] This 'inoculation' begins not just with the promotion of neoliberal institutions at the national and supranational level but is part of the neoliberal understanding of competition and its rules from the start. As I show in the following section, the accounts neoliberal theorists provide of the formulation or emergence of these rules already position them securely outside of democratic control.

2.2 Two conceptions of the 'rules of the game'

One of the main characteristics of neoliberal accounts of the 'rules of the game' is their insistence on the exclusion of 'players' – in their capacity as economic actors and as democratic citizens – from the formulation of those rules and any amendments to them. Neoliberals agree that those who 'play' the economic 'game' should never be the authors of its rules. Instead, it

[201] Biebricher, *The Political Theory of Neoliberalism,* pp. 200-201.
[202] Slobodian, *Globalists*, p. 2.

is the 'rules of the game' that largely dictate both the economic and the political moves available to the 'players.'[203]

I identify two diverging accounts of market rules in the neoliberal literature: Hayek argues that market competition is a "spontaneous order", the rules of which have evolved organically and, therefore, defy any deliberate intervention.[204] Ordoliberals suggest that the economy and its rules constitute a field of inquiry open exclusively to "[m]en of science", particularly to economists and lawyers.[205] In both cases, democratic decision-making is decisively disqualified as a method for designing the rules of market competition. In the following, I reconstruct first Hayek's and, then, the ordoliberal account of the 'rules of the game'. In each case, I highlight how their conception of rules excludes democratic decision-making from the outset.

Hayek's account of the development and authority of the rules of market competition is part of what might be called his broader 'social ontology'. According to Hayek, society is best understood as a "spontaneous order" [206]; that is, a kind of order "which results from the individual elements adapting themselves to circumstances which directly affect only some of them, and which in their totality need not be known to anyone, it may extend to circumstances so complex that no mind can comprehend them all."[207] The competitive market order constitutes the paradigmatic case of such a 'spontaneous order.'[208] Furthermore, Pierre Dardot

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[203] Neoliberal theorists commonly employ the metaphor of the "rules of the game" when writing about the rules of market competition and, in particular, when discussing the relationship between market and state. See, e.g., Eucken, Eucken, "What is the Competitive Order?", p. 99; Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, p. 31; Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, p. 133. However, they do not explicitly discuss the analogy between the market and a game. In Chapter Six, I develop an alternative conception of democratic rules that draws precisely on this analogy.
[204] Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, p. 28.
[205] Böhm, Eucken, Großmann-Doerth, "The *Ordo Manifesto of* 1936", p. 27.
[206] In *Law, Legislation, and Liberty,* Hayek explicitly speaks of the "spontaneous order of society" (p. 28).
[207] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 39.
[208] Cf. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 109.

and Christian Laval observe that, for Hayek, "economic relations are *at the root of the social bond*".[209] The competitive market constitutes the centre of Hayek's portrayal of the social world as consisting of 'spontaneous orders.'

Rules are a constitutive element of any spontaneous order. Indeed, Hayek notes "that the formation of spontaneous orders is the result of their elements following certain rules in their responses to their immediate environment."[210] It is important to note that, for Hayek, the act of 'rule-following' is more central than the explicit formulation of rules. Transposing insights from physics onto the social world, he states, "that the rules which govern the actions of the elements of such spontaneous orders need not be rules which are 'known' to these elements; it is sufficient that the elements actually behave in a manner which can be described by such rules."[211] In fact, the rules of social and economic life that Hayek's social ontology affirms are rarely deliberately formulated. Instead, they are discovered.[212]

The fact that Hayek locates the origins of the rules of market competition in organically evolved customs and traditions already takes one step towards removing them from democratic challenge. Rules that are assumed to have developed 'naturally' and are postulated to 'simply work' lack grounds on which they could be criticised or challenged. If the "purpose" of the rules of a spontaneous order is only "to secure the preservation or restoration of that order",[213] then any critique that draws on criteria outside of that order can easily be rejected as inappropriate.

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[209] Dardot/Laval, *The New Way of the World*, p. 125.
[210] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 41.
[211] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 41.
[212] Cf. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 42.
[213] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 38.

In addition to their evolutionary origins, their uncertain trajectory also safeguards the rules of spontaneous orders and, thus, the rules of market competition from any critique. The rules of Hayekian spontaneous orders are always general and impersonal.[214] Therefore, they retain space for individual agency and, as noted above, allow for the utilisation of distributed and localised knowledge.[215] According to Hayek, this enables modern society to achieve a "degree of complexity […] which far exceeds any that could have been achieved by deliberate organization."[216] What is more, he suggests that such complexity is not only unachievable by deliberate organisation but also *incomprehensible* to the human mind in the singular.[217] Consequently, any critique of the economic and social order can be dismissed as incapable of capturing the complexity of the issue.

In leaving space for individual initiative, the development and trajectory of spontaneous orders also remain characterised by 'spontaneity', uncertainty, and unpredictability.[218] For Hayek, this unpredictability serves as an explicit warning against government intervention into the market.[219] It also provides a further epistemic obstacle for critique and challenge, which is now confronted with unpredictability as well as with incomprehensible complexity.

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[214] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 48.
[215] See Section 2.1 above.
[216] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p 48.
[217] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 39.
Hayek does not seem to consider that it may be possible to overcome the limitation of a singular mind by engaging in deliberation with others. I discuss the relationship between competition and democratic deliberation at length in Chapter Five.
[218] Indeed, it is the latter sense of 'spontaneity' that Hayek seems to consider to be more relevant. He clarifies: "At the moment our concern must be to make clear that while the rules on which a spontaneous order rests may also be of spontaneous origin, this need not always be the case. Although undoubtedly an order originally formed itself spontaneously because the individuals followed rules which had not been deliberately made but had arisen spontaneously, people gradually learned to improve those rules; and it is at least conceivable that the formation of a spontaneous order relies entirely on rules that were deliberately made. The spontaneous character of the resulting order must therefore be distinguished from the spontaneous origin of the rules on which it rests, and it is possible that an order which would still have to be described as spontaneous rests on rules which are entirely the result of deliberate design." (*Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 44.) This second sense of spontaneity resonates in surprising ways with Arendt's insight that (political) action – which for Arendt is chiefly characterised by individual initiative – contains an "inherent unpredictability." (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 191.)
[219] Cf. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 49

Ultimately, it is the key claim of Hayek's social ontology, namely, that "we are not fully free to pick and choose whatever combination of features we wish our society to possess, or to fit them together into a viable whole, that is, that we cannot build a desirable social order like a mosaic by selecting whatever particular parts we like best",[220] that insulate the rules of spontaneous orders from any kind of criticism, including from democratic challenge. Serving no purpose but to sustain themselves, they lack any need for further justification and, thus, any basis for critique. Their proclaimed sophistication and unpredictability constitute additional obstacles for critique.

At first glance, the ordoliberal conception of the economic order appears more amenable to the political formulation of its rules. In stark contrast to Hayek, ordoliberal theorists generally believe that the economic order is something that can and ought to be 'constructed' and deliberately designed.[221] Furthermore, they emphasise that the "economic constitution", that is, the framework of rules that brings order to and encases the market, "must be understood as a general political decision".[222] Franz Böhm writes: "The first demand made of a modern economic constitution is accordingly that it is *knowingly founded in a clear and unassailable expression of political will*."[223]

Yet, the role of this 'political will' in the continuous construction and maintenance of the economic order remains vague, and its significance is quickly displaced by another

[220] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 57.
[221] In the "*Ordo Manifesto*", Böhm, Eucken, and Großmann-Doerth note that as part of their programme they "wish to bring scientific reasoning, as displayed in jurisprudence and political economy, into effect for the purpose of *constructing and reorganising the economic system*." (p. 35, my emphasis.)
[222] Böhm, Eucken, and Großmann-Doerth, "The *Ordo Manifesto* of 1936", p. 36.
[223] Franz Böhm, "Economic Ordering as a Problem of Economic Policy", translated by Michelle Everson, in: *The Birth of Austerity. German Ordoliberalism and Contemporary Neoliberalism*, ed. by Thomas Biebricher and Frieder Vogelmann (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), p. 117.

procedure of decision making. Contrasting the economic and the political constitution, Böhm observes:

> The identification of a people of the constitutional form that best reflects them is not yet commensurate with their establishment of a concrete, economic constitution. Rather, they now stand before a specific choice between a *variety* of possible economic orders. The decision in favour of one form above the others, or for a combined system, is now taken primarily in the light of *utility criteria*; at this point, the *technical knowledge* of individuals with extensive economic policy-making experience, together with *theoretical input from trained intellects*, plays a far more significant role than is the case during foundation of the political constitution.[224]

Despite the central reference to a political will, the decision for an economic system and its constitution lies ultimately not with the people but with experts.

This valorisation of expertise and science is integral to the ordoliberal project and finds expression in the "*Ordo Manifesto*" authored by Böhm, Walter Eucken, and Hans Großmann-Doerth in 1936:

> Men of science, by virtue of their profession and position being independent of economic interests, are the only objective, independent advisers capable of providing true insight into the intricate interrelationships of economic activity and therefore also providing the basis upon which economic judgments can be made. They are also the only ones who, on the strength of their intimate knowledge of those interrelationships – a knowledge which is constantly being expanded and refined by the continuing penetration of new ideas – are capable of forming an objective judgment, independent of their own immediate economic interests, about economic measures appropriate in particular circumstances.[225]

Even more so than Böhm's account quoted above, this passage highlights that expert knowledge is not merely an additional resource for designing the economic constitution. Instead, 'men of science' are 'the only ones' capable of designing impartial and objective economic policy.

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[224] Böhm, "Economic Ordering as a Problem of Economic Policy", p. 119.
[225] Böhm, Eucken, Großmann-Doerth, "The *Ordo Manifesto* of 1936", p. 27.

While Hayek's social ontology results in an understanding of the rules of market competition as never fully accessible to human understanding and deliberate design, ordoliberal theorists suggest that both understanding and design are possible but require specific expertise. Thus, the 'rules of the game' remain removed from democratic control. Now a matter of scientific inquiry, economic policy is no longer considered a topic for public debate.

In the following, I draw attention to two further features of the ordoliberal account of the scientific formulation of the rules of market competition. First, I highlight that ordoliberals portray science as objective and impartial. I argue that this claim to objectivity and impartiality acts as a further obstacle to democratic involvement. Second, I show how the specific method of scientific inquiry favoured by ordoliberals points back to the organic development of rules, thus combining their technocratic impetus with Hayek's traditionalism.

In the above-cited passage from "The *Ordo Manifesto*", Böhm, Eucken, and Großman-Doerth are clear: "Men of science" ought to be the authors of the economic constitution because they act as "objective, independent advisers", "capable of forming an objective judgment, independent of their own immediate economic interests".[226] If not designed by such objective and impartial scientists, they warn, economic policy is likely to be shaped by interests alone:

> If men of science relinquish this role or are deprived of it, then other less competent advisers take over – the interested parties. They are certainly expert in the technical details of their professional field, but equally certainly they are not, nor can they be, competent to assess overall economic interrelationships. Moreover, they are incapable of divorcing themselves from their own economic interests which, as a rule, inevitably results in the welfare of their own professional field being confused with that of the national economy as a whole. [227]

[226] Böhm, Eucken, Großmann-Doerth, "The *Ordo Manifesto* of 1936", p. 27.
[227] Böhm, Eucken, Großmann-Doerth, "The *Ordo Manifesto of* 1936", p. 28.

The belief in scientific objectivity is arguably naïve and overlooks that even 'men of science' have interests, both as scientists and as private individuals. It also ignores the many ways in which scientific knowledge production intersects with and is shaped by economic interests.[228] More importantly, however, it contributes to the insulation of the rules of the economic order from democratic challenge. As 'objective and independent advisers', scientists are effectively presented as positioned outside of the political struggle of conflicting interests – and thus as insulated against politically motivated critique. Likewise, the rules they formulate are, by virtue of being 'objective', effectively immunised against critique put forward by anyone but fellow objective scientists.

While equally obstructive of democratic involvement, ordoliberalism's technocratic impetus and its emphasis on the unique ability of science to analyse and design market competition conflicts with Hayek's emphasis on the spontaneous and organic character of human society. Yet, a closer look at the scientific method favoured by ordoliberals somewhat bridges the gap between the diverging theoretical approaches. While the "*Ordo Manifesto*" rejects a historicism associated with relativism and fatalism,[229] Eucken describes a scientific method that still takes history and historical development seriously:

> Because perfect competition has been realised on a number of occasions, it is possible to describe the conditions under which this took place and can take place in the future. These principles are identified *as follows:* they are not inferred out of axiomatic models, nor are they somehow asserted against the historical flow. Rather they are developed in contemplative historical investigation, and above all, in investigation of economic policy-making and its consequences.[230]

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[228] The intersection between scientific knowledge production and economic interests has been famously described by a contemporary of the ordoliberals. See: Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory", translated by Matthew J. O'Connel, in: *Max Horkheimer. Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1975), pp. 188-243. A recent analysis can be found in: Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt. How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010).
[229] Cf. Böhm, Eucken, Großmann-Doerth, "The *Ordo Manifesto of* 1936", pp. 28-35.
[230] Eucken, "What is the Competitive Order?", pp. 104-105.

He concludes that "*[i]f* the competitive order is *ever* to be realised, we must apply evolutionary principles."[231]

The science and expertise ordoliberals, or at least Eucken, value does not proceed "by relying on speculative generalisations or by laying down axioms."[232] Their economic constitution is not designed in a vacuum but guided by the analysis of "a *historically-formed*, highly complex economy".[233] Contained in the ordoliberal celebration of science and expertise is the reference to a historically evolved social order that in some ways resembles Hayek's spontaneous order.[234] The rules of market competition, then, are not designed from scratch and in line with the 'political decision' of the day; instead, it is shaped by previous economic practices. In their ordoliberal conception, the rules of market competition are thus doubly insulated from democratic control: First, their formulation is considered a task primarily for experts and scientists, which, second, are themselves oriented – and potentially limited – by the rules and practices of a historically emerged – or spontaneously developed – economic order.

Whether it is through the reference to spontaneous orders or the necessity of expertise, the 'rules of the game' are removed from democratic control from the outset. Importantly, economic and political actors are not just excluded from the formulation of these rules. Claims about the incomprehensibility of the market order and the objective character of its rules respectively serve as obstacles to any political or democratic challenge. Instead, neoliberals

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[231] Eucken, "What is the Competitive Order?", p. 105.
[232] Walter Eucken, "The Different Types of Economic Systems", translated by T. W. Hutchison**,** in: *The Birth of Austerity. German Ordoliberalism and Contemporary Neoliberalism*, ed. by Thomas Biebricher and Frieder Vogelmann (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), p. 73.
[233] Eucken, "Structural Transformations of the State and the Crisis of Capitalism", p. 71. My emphasis.
[234] As I will show in Chapter Three, traditional social order and civilisational development are even more central to ordoliberal social policy – the so-called "organic policy" ("Vitalpolitik") (Rüstow, "Social policy or *Vitalpolitik* (Organic Policy)".)

believe that the market order and its rules ought to determine the character and function of the political. It is this inversion of political and economic control that underlies the metaphor of the 'state as umpire.'

2.3 The state as umpire

Thomas Biebricher calls the metaphor of "the state as an umpire or referee" the "master metaphor of neoliberal state discourse":

> In other words, the main responsibility of the state is to enforce the rules of the game in an impartial and authoritative manner. Implied in this description of the state's tasks are the two sides of the same coin of state power mentioned previously: the need to enable the state and at the same time to restrict it in its actions. Without someone to enforce the rules in a competitive game, it is seemingly inevitably going to descend into chaos, which is supposedly not in the interest of anyone involved. Yet to keep the game from collapsing, it is equally important that the referee is somehow restricted to just this activity and refrains from suddenly grabbing the ball, scoring a point, and thus directly interfering in the process of the game.[235]

Biebricher highlights the dual relationship of the neoliberal umpire-state to the 'rules of the game': it is both constrained by the rules and their enforcer. In the following, I provide an outline of these "two sides of the same coin of state power"[236] and consider their contribution to the 'inoculation' of market competition against the democratic threat.

The metaphor of the state as umpire assumes a central limitation of state power. The umpire is not the author of the rules nor free to change them at whim. Likewise, the neoliberal state does not design or change the rules of market competition. Accordingly, ordoliberal

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[235] Biebricher, *The Political Theory of Neoliberalism*, p. 34.

Biebricher points out that both in theory and practice, the neoliberal state often takes on tasks "far beyond the stoic rulings of an umpire." (Biebricher, *The Political Theory of Neoliberalism*, p. 34.) Because my interest in this chapter and in the thesis more generally lies with different conceptions and practices of competition rather than with an analysis of neoliberalism as such, I gloss over these complications here.

[236] Biebricher, *The Political Theory of Neoliberalism*, p. 34.

accounts of the relationship between state and economy portray state action as both constrained and shaped by the economic constitution. Werner Bonefeld notes:

> Government policy is bound by the economic constitution, which compels it to intervene into the economy to secure the constituted order in economic life as a whole. […] Economic constitution is meant to narrow the scope of legitimate parliamentary law making and intervention into the economy. *Ordnungspolitik* manifests thus a constitutionally defined conduct of government […].[237]

Hayek also advocates for the priority of the rules of market competition over political initiative. He does so by introducing a distinction between 'law' and 'legislation'. Law is, he argues, "coeval with society" and refers to general and impersonal rules of conduct – it is ultimately identical with those rules that characterise the spontaneous order of market and society. In contrast, "the *invention* of legislation came relatively late in the history of mankind."[238] It is deliberately designed and has a specific purpose. As such, it resembles 'commands' or the 'rules of organisation' rather than the general rules of spontaneous orders.[239]

Crucially, the distinction between law and legislation is more than a demarcation; it implies a hierarchy. With regard to legislative bodies, Hayek notes that it is "important that the authorities who will be in charge of such matters, even if they are democratic or representative bodies, should, in determining particular services, be subject to general rules of conduct and not be in a position themselves 'to rewrite the rules of the game as they go along'."[240] Hayek

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[237] Bonefeld, *The Strong State and the Free Economy*, p. 70.
[238] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 69.
[239] Hayek notes that "rules of organization [are] designed to achieve particular ends, to supplement positive orders that something should be done or that particular results should be achieved, and to set up for these purposes the various agencies through which government operates" (Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 119). For Hayek's notion of command, see: Section 2.1 above and Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty,* p.218.
[240] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, pp. 132-133.
Hayek explicitly extends this to "popular or representative government" which ideally "in performing its purely governmental function […] was confined by general laws laid down by another body, equally representative or democratic, which derived its supreme authority from its commitment to universal rules of conduct." (Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 124.)

underscores that legislation should always be constrained by law. As noted above, he holds that the law or 'general rules of conduct' allow not only for efficient coordination and the use of distributed knowledge but also protect and realise individual freedom. The restriction of government – including *democratic* government – by law is thus necessary in the name of liberty: "Not only is liberty a system under which all government action is guided by principles, but it is an ideal that will not be preserved unless it is itself accepted as an overriding principle governing all particular acts of legislation."[241]

Despite this hierarchical relation between law and legislation, Hayek accords state, government, and legislation important roles. He affirms the "unquestioned need for a government that enforces the law."[242] Somewhat surprisingly, he also – albeit cautiously using a double negation – allows some space for legislation to change or, rather, 'correct' law:

> The fact that all law arising out of the endeavour to articulate rules of conduct will of necessity possess some desirable properties not necessarily possessed by the commands of a legislator does not mean that in other respects such law may not develop in very undesirable directions, and that when this happens correction by deliberate legislation may not be the only practicable way out.[243]

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[241] Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, p. 130.

[242] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 125.

In light of Hayek's account of spontaneous orders which emphasise the importance of spontaneous rule-following – sometimes even without explicit knowledge of the rules –, it may seem surprising that Hayek is convinced of the need to enforce the rules of market competition. This, he argues, becomes necessary when individual self-interest conflicts with the order as a whole: "The question which is of central importance as much for social theory as for social policy is thus what properties the rules must possess so that the separate actions of the individuals will produce an overall order. Some such rules all individuals of a society will obey because of the similar manner in which their environment represents itself to their minds. Others they will follow spontaneously because they will be part of their common cultural tradition. But there will be still others which they may have to be made to obey, since, although it would be in the interest of each to disregard them, the overall order on which the success of their actions depends will arise only if these rules are generally followed." (Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 43.)

[243] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 84.

For Hayek, the rules of spontaneous order are not fixed but require constant re-interpretation, adjustment, and improvement. As discussed above, this may sometimes require deliberate legislation. More often, Hayek prefers judges "to articulate and improve" the laws or rules of spontaneous orders; not to change the order but "to correct disturbances" within it (Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 91.) See also: Dardot/Laval, *The New Way of the World*, pp. 127-133.

However, Hayek is keen to protect such instances of deliberate legislation from genuinely democratic involvement. To achieve this, he limits the creative powers of legislation, ensuring that even "radical changes of particular rules" remain a form of correction or "revision". Furthermore, he insists that rule changes ought to be consistent with "more general principles of justice".[244] Rather than being shaped by political and democratic decisions, they appear to be determined by higher-order rules.

What is more, Hayek's intense dislike for 'social justice' suggests that the 'principles of justice' that provide the point of reference for rule-changes are not identical with those normative principles on which destitute individuals and groups base their claims for redistribution and structural changes to the economy.[245] Instead, it seems more likely that the 'principles of justice' point back to the spontaneously evolved and evolving "rules of just conduct".[246] Legislation and deliberate government action are again constrained by law and general rules of conduct – even in their most active and creative instances.

Hayek's exclusion of democratic and properly political decision-making from the task of rulemaking goes even further: In his model constitution, he distinguishes between a "governmental assembly", tasked with everyday government and administration, and a "legislative assembly" or "*nomothetea*".[247] The task of the latter is the design and development of the general rules that bind and constrain the former. Although its members are elected, it is decisively non-democratic, and Hayek is concerned "to secure the entire independence of these

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[244] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 85.
[245] For Hayek's account of the relationship between "justice" and "the rules of just conduct", see: Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, pp. 198-200.
[246] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 53.
[247] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 447.
The design of a 'model constitution' is strikingly at odds with Hayek's own emphasis on the superiority of evolved rules and institutions. For a similar point, see: Irving, *Hayek's Market Republicanism*, p. 122.

nomothetae from the pressure of particular interests or organized parties."[248] Where he allows for the explicit 'making' of law, it is, thus, "law-making by an elite, free of the need to seek re-election. Law was not to be the will of the people, but the will of the *nomothetae*, who could only be tenuously influenced by extra-parliamentary means."[249]

In its emphasis on independence, Hayek's argument for the 'nomothetae' echoes the ordoliberal case for impartial and objective rulemaking.[250] The claim to impartiality also characterises the figure of the umpire more generally. Transposing the image of a sports contest onto the economic realm, the ordoliberal Röpke notes the need for an "apparatus for *impartial supervision* of those rules which are just as necessary for competition as for a sporting contest if it is not to degenerate into a mere riot."[251] Impartiality is an uncontroversial characteristic of any umpire overseeing a sports competition. Yet, its imposition onto the state is more controversial. At least with regard to economic policy, neoliberals aim to position the state outside of partisan struggles and the party competitions generally associated with liberal democracy. As an 'impartial umpire', the state is essentially depoliticised and de-democratised. The primacy of law over legislation, of the rules of conduct over the agency and authorship of the political state is again confirmed.

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[248] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 449.

Such safeguards include the limitation of the right to vote and stand for election to those 45 and older, limitations on the size of the assembly, as well as the exclusion of individuals suspected of partisanship (Hayek, *Law, Legislation, and Liberty*, p. 449).

[249] Irving, *Hayek's Market Republicanism*, p. 124.

[250] Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, p. 448.

[251] Wilhelm Röpcke, *Civitas Humana. A Humane Order of Society*, translated by Cyril Spencer Fox (London: William Hodge and Company, 1948), p. 28, my emphasis.

Elsewhere, Röpke explicitly describes the state as "an energetic umpire whose task it is neither to take part in the game nor to prescribe their movements to the players, who is, rather, completely impartial and incorruptible and sees to it that the rules of the game and of sportsmanship are strictly observed." (Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time*, 192.)

The proclaimed impartiality of the state-as-umpire points not just to the way it is constrained by rules. It also grounds the authority that is conferred onto the neoliberal state as their enforcer. Thus, Röpke defines the "strong state" as follows:

> A strong state is by no means one that meddles in everything and tries to monopolize all functions. On the contrary, not busyness but independence from group interests and the inflexible will to exercise its authority and preserve its dignity as a representative of the community, mark the really strong state, whereas the state that acts as a maid of all work, finally degenerates into a miserable weakling and falls victim to the vested interests.[252]

While the emphasis on the 'strong state' is perhaps a particular feature of ordoliberal thought,[253] the conception of state authority derived from the supposedly impartial enforcement of supposedly impartial rules is characteristic of the neoliberal political project more generally. It is a conception of 'political' authority that paradoxically depends on its de-politicisation.

Precisely because it can point beyond itself to a framework of rules that is removed from and inoculated against democratic control and challenge, the neoliberal state and its 'inflexible will to exercise its authority' are also protected from democratic challenge. Thus, the metaphor of the state as umpire and its claim to impartial authority already entail the potential of transforming the state into the coercive, policing, and punitive state contemporary scholars sometimes associate with actually existing neoliberalism.[254]

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[252] Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time*, p. 192.
[253] For an account of the role of the state in ordoliberal thought, see: Bonefeld, *The Strong State and the Free Economy*.
[254] See, e.g., Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor. The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

2.4 The de-democratising threat of market rules

In the writings of neoliberal theorists, the observation that market competition is a rule-governed practice transforms into an argument against democratic involvement in the design of economic policy. Metaphors like the 'rules of the game' and the 'state as umpire' transpose the image of the sports contest on the market and present it as self-evident that the rules of market competition ought to be impartially designed and enforced. This impartiality, which is derived from a particular position of their authors – the ordoliberal 'men of science' or the members of Hayek's 'nomothetae' – or from their origin in essentially purposeless spontaneous orders, shields the 'rules of the game' against political critique and challenge. Thus, the recognition of the rule-governed nature of market competition serves to proclaim the primacy of the economic over the political.

Throughout this section, I have emphasised that the neoliberal version of the 'rules of the game' depoliticises the question of economic organisation, thereby limiting the scope of democratic rule.[255] In presenting the organisation of the economy as an essentially unpolitical question – a mere matter of efficiency, evolved traditions or impartial expert knowledge –, neoliberal theorists suggest that it is a legitimate exception from the 'rule by the people'. As Bonefeld puts it, they are able to demand that the state "limit itself to what is called the political".[256] However, it is unclear what this 'political', divested entirely from economic decision-making, ought to consist of. Not only are the political and economic intricately entangled, but the neoliberal project of "encasing the market" itself encroaches on areas that may be considered the natural domain of politics.[257] Slobodian's analysis of the neoliberal

[255] Whether democratic rule by the people ought to extend to the economic realm is a contested question in democratic theory more generally (cf. Held, *Models of Democracy*, p. 2).
[256] Bonefeld, *The Strong State and the Free Economy,* p. 41.
[257] Slobodian, *Globalists*, p. 103.

project as one of constructing networks of supranational institutions exemplarily demonstrates that even matters of international relations are increasingly a question of market rules rather than politics.

However, I want to suggest that the de-democratising potential of neoliberal conceptions of the rules of market competition exceeds mere depoliticisation and the limitation of democratic control. They pose an additional threat to the social conditions of democracy. Although its proclaimed aim is to retain space for individual economic agency, the Hayekian notion of spontaneous order in particular entails a devaluation of *deliberate* human action.[258] On this understanding of market and society, social structures are encountered not as something to be individually and collectively challenged and created but as something to be unquestioningly accepted. This aspect of the social world imagined by neoliberal theorists corresponds to the sense that 'there is no alternative' which is often reported to permeate actually existing neoliberal societies. [259]

This resignation to the status quo and the disbelief in the possibility of a different future are antithetical to political and democratic action, which, instead, emphasise the potential of collective action to change the social world. If passivity, surrender, and powerlessness characterise the experience of the neoliberal individual in the market and beyond, it becomes doubtful that such democratic potential will be realised in the political sphere. The insistence that the rules of market competition ought not to be written or challenged by economic actors becomes an obstacle to the cultivation of active democratic citizenship.

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[258] The notion of spontaneous orders foregrounds individual human action insofar as it describes the development of order out of the dispersed action of individuals. Therefore, it is fundamentally those human actions that shape the character of the relevant orders. Yet, such shaping is never deliberate. The argument developed here speaks to Hayek's spontaneous order in particular. However, as I argued in section 2.2 above, the scientific method favoured by ordoliberals ultimately also points to such evolved rules and, in that regard, it also applies to them.

[259] Cf. Mouffe, *For a Left Populism,* pp. 4-5; Fraser, *The Old Is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born*, pp. 11-18.

3 Conclusion

The neoliberal writings discussed in this chapter reveal the de-democratising potentials of market competition. Competition always produces winners and losers and, thereby, inequalities. In the writings of neoliberal theorists, this feature of competition transforms into an argument for the perpetuation of material inequality and a justification of a highly unequal world. Similarly, competition is always rule-governed. Yet, in the writings of neoliberal theorists, this insight gives rise to a vision of the market as insulated from democratic control and to an image of the state as an essentially depoliticised umpire.

It is important to note that neither this justification of inequality nor the depoliticisation of state and market are inevitable consequences of competition, not even of market competition. Rather, I have described a distinctively neoliberal conception of market competition and its effects on democratic life. However, it is equally important to recognise that Hayek, Friedman, and the ordoliberals make use of the justificatory potential inherent in the concept of competition. The neoliberal case for inequality depends on the fact that competition produces winners and losers. Likewise, they are able to argue for the insulation of market rules only because competition is always rule-governed. In societies that are largely organised around competitive markets, overlooking this inherent potential and the justificatory force of the concept of competition is bound to be detrimental for democracy. Awareness of this de-democratising potential becomes even more essential in societies in which the neoliberal celebration of competition has come to dominate social life far beyond the confines of the market. These societies and the generalised *ethos of competitiveness* that characterises them and their inhabitants are my topic in the next chapter.

Chapter Two. Between Self-Optimisation and Hostility: Neoliberal Competitiveness

This chapter does not only venture outside the narrow confines of the market. It also shifts attention to a different aspect of competition. Whereas the previous chapter offered an analysis of two of the structural features of competition – its production of inequalities and its reliance on rules, in this chapter, I foreground the attitudes, subjectivities, and relationships that characterise competitive interactions. In short: I turn *from competition to competitiveness*.[260]

However, as in the previous chapter, my object of analysis is not competitiveness *per se* but a particular neoliberal iteration of competitiveness. Competitions vary not just in their structure and organisation but also in the attitudes they inspire in individuals, in the behaviours they expect them to display, and in the relationships they institute between competitors. In all three regards, 'neoliberal competitiveness' diverges, for example, from the competitiveness that characterises sports contests or competitive games – two examples that I return to in Chapters Five and Six.

The competitiveness that characterises neoliberal subjectivities and relationships is distinct, first and foremost, because it is associated with processes of economisation. 'Neoliberal competitiveness' radiates from the economic realm to other areas of social life, reconfiguring non-economic practices, subjectivities, and relationships in accordance with

[260] Here, 'competitiveness' refers neither to the individual 'willingness to compete' nor to a 'preference for competition' that is frequently the object of studies in behavioural economics (see, e.g.: Muriel Niederle and Lise Vesterlund, "Do Women Shy Away From Competition? Do Men Compete Too Much?", *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 122, Issue 3 (2007), pp. 1067–1101). I am not interested in the characteristics or attitudes that lead someone to enter a competition. Instead, I outline the characteristics and attitudes that people are compelled to display when finding themselves in an ongoing and inescapable competitive dynamic.

neoliberal market competition. To trace this reconfiguration, I focus on two concepts that are often referenced in accounts of neoliberal subjectivation: 'the entrepreneur' and 'human capital'. Both concepts are, I argue, exemplary not only of economisation but of a distinctly *competitive* economisation.

They also imply a specific relationship to the self: the neoliberal subject is both self-responsible and constantly compelled to self-optimise. Thus, neoliberal competitiveness fosters individuals that are simultaneously thrown back onto themselves and excessively focused on themselves. Like the inequalities that I discussed in the previous chapter, I want to suggest that this 'competitive individualism' undermines the collective forms of life that democracy requires.[261] This is mirrored in the kind of relationships that are likely to hold between individuals that compete with one another. Following Waheed Hussain, I argue that "pitting people against each other" fosters relationship of disinterest and even hostility.[262] What is harmed by this, Hussain notes, are the principles of "community" and "solidarity" that are essential to a democratic community.[263]

This short sketch of the main argument already reveals the different approach I take in this chapter compared to the previous one – both in content and methodology: Rather than neoliberal conceptions of market competition, I now discuss a generalised competitiveness that

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[261] The phrase 'competitive individualism' is a play on C. B. Macpherson's 'possessive individualism' (cf. C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism. Hobbes to Locke* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962]). The former shares with the latter a conception of "human society" as consisting "of a series of market relations." (Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, p. 264.) However, my 'competitive individualism' foregrounds the relationship to competitors of the market rather than the self-ownership that provides the basis for the selling and buying of labour power (cf. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, p. 264). For a discussion of self-ownership in the context of neoliberalism, see: Niklas Angebauer, "Property and capital in the person: Lockean and neoliberal self-ownership", *Constellations*, Vol. 27, Issue 1, pp. 50-62.

[262] Waheed Hussain, "Pitting People Against Each Other", *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 48, Issue 1 (2020), p. 80.

[263] Hussain, "Pitting People Against Each Other", p. 79, p. 99.

is no longer strictly limited to the economic realm. Furthermore, my main object of analysis is not neoliberal theory but 'neoliberal reality' as portrayed in the works of critical scholars of neoliberalism.[264] The works I draw on also share a Foucauldian understanding of neoliberalism as a "governing rationality".[265]

Such an approach is useful for my analysis of the effects of neoliberal competitiveness on democratic life because it foregrounds the productive and creative aspects of neoliberalism. As Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval put it: "Neo-liberalism is not merely destructive of rules, institutions and rights. It is also *productive* of certain kinds of social relations, certain ways of living, certain subjectivities. In other words, at stake in neo-liberalism is nothing more, nor less, than *the form of our existence* – the way in which we are led to conduct ourselves, to relate to others and to ourselves."[266] It is this relationship to ourselves and others under conditions of neoliberal competition that I set out to explore in this chapter.

I do this in three sections: Section 1 introduces the concept of economisation and argues that neoliberal economisation characteristically involves the extension of a logic of competition to ever more social spheres. In Section 2, I consider how this competitive economisation affects the neoliberal subjects' relationship to itself. I focus on two forms of subjectivation that are commonly associated with neoliberalism: the entrepreneurial self and human capital. I argue that these forms of subjectivation share two features that characterise the competitive neoliberal subject more generally, namely, self-responsibility and self-optimisation, and outline their

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[264] This approach allows me to analyse a coherent account of neoliberal competitiveness and to derive broader insights about the relationship between competitiveness and democracy from it. Yet, it needs to be acknowledged that this competitiveness manifests differently in geographically and historically specific configurations of neoliberalism. Therefore, I refer to 'neoliberal reality' only in inverted commas.

[265] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, p. 35.

The Foucauldian framework is also shared by: Ulrich Bröckling, *The Entrepreneurial Self. Fabricating a New Type of Subject*, translated by Steven Black (London: SAGE, 2015); Dardot/Laval, *The New Way of the World*; Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*.

[266] Dardot/Laval, *The New Way of the World,* p. 3.

effects on the social conditions of democracy. In the final Section 3, I reflect on the ways in which relationships to others are shaped by competition. I contend that competitive relationships have the potential to foster disinterest and even hostility among competitors and, therefore, conflict with the collective nature of democratic life.

1 Neoliberal Economisation and the Logic of Competition

Neoliberalism is often described as involving processes of economisation.[267] However, the term 'economisation' is used to designate a number of related, yet different phenomena. Perhaps most commonly, the concept of economisation is employed as an umbrella term for processes of privatisation, commodification, and marketisation. Uwe Schimank and Ute Volkmann provide a definition along these lines, suggesting that economisation consists primarily in the extension of "*money issues*" to ever more social spheres – "either as demands for cost reduction or as requests for profit-making."[268] For them, economisation constitutes "an unfriendly take-over of non-economic societal spheres by economic concerns", which "could abolish functional differentiation."[269]

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[267] See, e.g.: Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, pp. 31-31, Uwe Schimank and Ute Volkmann, "Economization: How Neo-Liberalism Took Over Society", in: *Handbook of Economic Sociology for the 21st Century. New Theoretical Approaches, Empirical Studies and Developments,* edited by Andrea Maurer (Cham: Springer, 2021), pp. 113-128.

[268] Schimank/Volkmann, "Economization", p. 113.

[269] Schimank/Volkmann, "Economization", p. 114.

Schimank and Volkmann make explicit an assumption that, as I show below, underlies many accounts of neoliberal economisation, namely, that modern societies are functionally differentiated and that economisation threatens to eliminate this differentiation. For their account of functional differentiation, see: Schimank/Volkmann, "Economization", pp. 114-117; Uwe Schimak and Ute Volkmann, "Economizing and Marketization in a Functionally Differentiated Capitalist Society", in: *The Marketization of Society: Economizing the Non-Economic (Welfare Societies Conference Paper)* (2012), pp. 39-43; Uwe Schimak and Ute Volkmann, *Das Regime der Konkurrenz. Gesellschaftliche Ökonomisierungsdynamiken heute* (Weinham: Beltz Juventa, 2017), pp. 23-34. However, functional differentiation or rather the role of the economy within a functionally differentiated society constitutes, for them, also the source of economisation: "The structural asymmetry which constitutes the economy's dominant position within functionally differentiated society consists in the fact that money is needed in all sub-systems but is supplied only by the economy." (Schimank/Volkmann, "Economizing and Marketization in a Functionally Differentiated Capitalist Society", p. 42.) From this dominant position, 'money issues' can be extended to all other social spheres.

This account of economisation as an assault on or a take-over of previously non-economic spheres is shared by many theorists. William Davies, for example, describes neoliberal economisation as a process of dissolving separate economic, social, and political spheres. According to Davies, neoliberalism subsumes all these spheres under one economic logic and turns them into objects of "economic calculation".[270] He notes that "by subjecting them to economic analysis, they are effectively rendered economic after all, by being reduced to quantified and measured effects."[271] Wendy Brown also asserts that economisation involves "a process of remaking the knowledge, form, content, and conduct appropriate to these [noneconomic] spheres and practices."[272] Likewise, case studies tend to employ the framework of 'economisation' to trace the transformation of specific 'spheres' under neoliberal conditions: from health care to education.[273]

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[270] Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, p. xv.

[271] Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, p. 91.

This sphere-centred understanding of economisation entails an inherent de-politicising threat and is closely related to Davies' account of neoliberal de-politicisation: "Economization represents a replacement of multiple varieties of 'political metaphysics' with a single economistic variety of 'political physics'. Incommensurable values and visions of 'the public', 'social justice', 'fairness' and 'right' are all calculated and evaluated, in terms of the quantitative language of efficiency, price and preference." (Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, pp. 23-24.) If economisation refers to the take-over of previously non-economic spheres by economics and if such economisation extends to the political sphere, then its effect will inevitably be de-politicisation. I want two note two things here: First, I am not convinced that the kind of economisation Davies describes and which foregrounds a logic of calculability is distinctly neoliberal in nature. I discuss the question of the distinctiveness of *neoliberal* economisation in more detail below. Second, in line with my emphasis on the social conditions of democracy and in contrast to Davies, I do not pursue an analysis of the 'economisation of the political' but rather of the 'economisation of the social' – and, of course, its implications for the possibility of (political) democracy.

[272] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, p. 31.

[273] Exemplarily, a conference paper on *The Marketization of Society: Economizing the Non-Economic* edited by Schimank and Volkmann entails contributions on markets in elderly care, the marketisation of European universities, and the marketisation of the arts. See: Ingo Bode, "Markets in Retirement Provision and Elderly Care: Two Stories, One Cultural Struggle", in: *The Marketization of Society: Economizing the Non-Economic (Welfare Societies Conference Paper)* (2012), pp. 65-80; Marino Regini, "A Marketization of European Universities? The Role of External Demand and Internal Actors, in: *The Marketization of Society: Economizing the Non-Economic (Welfare Societies Conference Paper)* (2012), pp. 81-94"; Ivonne Küsters, "Exploring the Marketization of Arts in Music Managers' Practices", in: *The Marketization of Society: Economizing the Non-Economic (Welfare Societies Conference Paper)* (2012), pp. 95-104.

In this chapter, I draw attention to a different aspect of economisation, namely, to the *economisation of individuals' relationships to self and others*. I derive this understanding of economisation from Brown who provides the following account of neoliberal economisation:

> To speak of the relentless and ubiquitous economization of all features of life by neoliberalism is thus not to claim that neoliberalism literally *marketizes* all spheres, even as such marketization is certainly one important effect of neoliberalism. Rather, the point is that neoliberal rationality disseminates the *model of the market* to all domains and activities – even where money is not at issue – and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo oeconomicus*.[274]

Rather than restricting it to the extension of 'money issues', Brown uses the concept of economisation to capture how the market becomes the model and interpretative framework for areas of life that cannot be straightforwardly marketized. Furthermore, Brown's account suggests that economisation does not only take place in distinct and isolated spheres, but shapes individuals' conduct and self-understanding across all social spheres. Neoliberal rationality, she asserts, compels human beings to adopt the behaviours and self-understandings of market actors not only when entering into the market but for their life as a whole.[275]

The shift in analysis towards what might be termed 'the neoliberal subject' also implies a shift in the analytical register or framework employed in this chapter, namely towards a

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[274] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, pp. 31-32.

Brown adopts the term "economization" from Koray Çalışkan and Michel Callon who employ it "to denote the processes through which behaviours, organizations, institutions and, more generally, objects are constituted as being 'economic'." (Koray Çalışkan and Michel Callon, "Economization, part 2: a research programme for the study of markets", *Economy and Society*, Vol. 39, No. 1 [2010], p. 2.) While they specify that both "scholars and/or lay people" are involved in such processes, their analysis focuses on the contribution of the discipline of economics in particular (Koray Çalışkan and Michel Callon, "Economization, part 1: shifting attention from the economy towards processes of economization", *Economy and Society*, Vol. 38, No. 3 [2009], p. 370). Interestingly – and despite of Brown's emphasis on economisation beyond marketisation –, in a second part of their article, Çalışkan and Callon provide an analysis of "one particular form of economization", namely "*marketization*" (Çalışkan/Callon, "Economization, part 2", p. 2).

[275] Dardot and Laval agree that "the neo-liberal moment is characterized by a homogenization of the discourse of man around the figure of the enterprise. The new figure of the subject effects an unprecedented unification of the plural forms of subjectivity that liberal democracy allowed to survive, and which from time to time it knew how to exploit to perpetuate its existence." (Dardot/Laval, *The New Way of the World*, p. 259.)

Foucauldian understanding of neoliberalism as a "governing rationality"[276] and of the subject as constituted and constituting itself within a structured "field of possibilities".[277] Foucault suggests that within neoliberal thought "*homo œconomicus*" provides the framework through which the subject becomes both intelligible and governable: "That is to say, the surface of contact between the individual and the power exercised on him, and so the principle of the regulation of power over the individual, will be only this kind of grid of *homo œconomicus*. *Homo œconomicus* is the interface of government and the individual."[278] It is important to note that Foucault makes these claims with regard to the writings of neoliberal theorists and in his 1978-1979 Collège de France Lectures, and thus before the heyday of 'actually existing neoliberalism.'

Brown's evocation of *homo oeconomicus* in the context of her diagnosis of neoliberal economisation, instead, underlines the centrality of processes of subjectivation for precisely this 'actually existing neoliberalism'. 'Neoliberal subjects', she exemplarily shows, are addressed in and constructed by the court decisions as well as the higher education institutions of the neoliberal era.[279] Yet, it is important to note that the phrase 'neoliberal subjects' does not refer to an empirical entity, instead it functions as a shorthand for those discourses, policies, and institutional structures that constitute and "structure the possible field of action" for individuals in neoliberal societies.[280]

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[276] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, p. 35.
See also: Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics,* pp. 94-95, p. 131.
[277] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (1982), p. 790.
[278] Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, pp. 252-253.
[279] The object of Brown's analysis of actually existing neoliberalism is North American neoliberal society. Specifically, she discusses judgments of the US Supreme Court (cf. Brown, *Undoing the Demos,* pp. 152-173) and public universities in North America (cf. Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, pp. 180-199).
[280] Foucault, "The Subject and Power", p. 790.
"[S]ceptical of the claim that neoliberal subjects populate each and every social sphere", Watts cautions against using the terminology of the 'neoliberal subject' (Galen Watts, "Are you a neoliberal subject? On the uses and abuses of a concept", *European Journal of Social Theory*, Vol. 5, Issue 3 (2022), p. 472). While I agree that it is unlikely that the complexities of empirical reality conform to the account of the neoliberal subject as developed here and elsewhere, I believe that it is possible – and useful – to describe how individuals are portrayed and

Despite Brown's and Foucault's emphasis on the figure of homo oeconomicus, 'the neoliberal subject' is not merely the 'economised subject'. Although economisation is often considered to be "the distinctive signature of neoliberal rationality"[281], economisation itself is not always neoliberal. Instead, Schimank and Volkmann note "that economization is a structurally built-in feature" of the capitalist societies of Western modernity.[282] Indeed, it is striking, for example, how much of the early Frankfurt School's critique of capitalist society could be reconstructed as a diagnosis of increasing economisation. Following Rahel Jaeggi, what characterises the early Frankfurt School is precisely a "'wide' […] understanding of economy" which takes the economic to constitute "a specific mode of intercourse with things and people" extending "far beyond the sphere of economics into cultural preferences and worldviews."[283]

However, the reference to the early Frankfurt School also points to the need to provide an account of the particularities of *neoliberal economisation*. A passage from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* illustrates this: Horkheimer and Adorno characterise the Enlightenment as a

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addressed in neoliberal theory and practice. Although such portrayals and addresses certainly do not fully determine individual behaviours and self-understanding, they are likely to at least partially shape them. Watts also doubts the possibility of demonstrating a clear link between the 'neoliberal subject' and neoliberalism as a set of economic policies, an ideology, or a governing rationality, partly because key themes of neoliberal subjectivation, such as individual responsibility, are also part of other ideologies and political rationalities (Watts, "Are you a neoliberal subject?", p. 466). I aim to respond to this worry below. For a related critique of 'the neoliberal subject', see: Clive Barnet, Nick Clarke, Paul Cloke, and Alice Malpass, "The Elusive Subjects of Neo-liberalism", *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 5 (2008), pp. 624-653.

[281] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, pp. 31-32.

[282] Schimank/Volkmann, "Economization", p. 117. See also footnote 269 above.

[283] Rahel Jaeggi, "A Wide Conception of Economy: Economy as a Social Practice and the Critique of Capitalism", in: *Critical Theory in Critical Times*, edited by P. Deutscher and C. Lafont (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), p.160.

Note that the shift from the 'economy' as a noun designating a distinctive sphere to the economic as an adjective describing "a specific mode of intercourse with things and people" that Jaeggi holds to be characteristic of the early Frankfurt School (Jaeggi, "A Wide Conception of Economy", p. 160), resonates with Çalışkan and Callon's account of 'economisation'. 'Economisation', they argue is characterised by a shift from "'the economy' (noun) […] towards defining observable criteria which enables one to say that an activity, behaviour or institution is 'economic' (adjective)." (Çalışkan/Callon, "Economization, part 1", p. 371.)

Schimank and Volkmann also suggest that Marxist theories of commodification can be understood as theories of economisation (Schimank/Volkmann, "Economizing and Marketization in a Functionally Differentiated Capitalist Society", p. 37).

pursuit in "making the world calculable".[284] Davies's account of neoliberalism seems to echo this, portraying it as the attempt to construct "a wholly calculable, measurable world".[285] Yet, Horkheimer and Adorno continue: "The same equations govern bourgeois justice and commodity *exchange*. […] Bourgeois society is ruled by *equivalence*. It makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities."[286] In line with their conception of the market, it is *exchange*, not *competition* that characterises the early Frankfurt School's diagnoses of economisation.[287]

Brown observes that "[…] 'economization' is itself a broad term, with no constant content or force across different historical and spatial instantiations of 'economy.'"[288] Rather than operating with an ahistorical notion of economisation, it is therefore crucial to trace the specific features of *neoliberal* economisation. Corresponding to conceptions of the economy in neoliberal theory, one of the distinguishing features of neoliberal economisation is the *extension of a logic of competition* to ever more social spheres. Dardot and Laval describe this process as follows:

> From constructing the market to competition as the norm of this construction; from competition as economic agents' norm of activity to competition as the norm for constructing the state and its action; finally, from competition as the enterprise-state's norm to competition as the behavioural norm of the enterprise-subject: such are the phases in which market rationality is extended to all spheres of human existence, and which make neo-liberal reason a veritable world-reason.[289]

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[284] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments,* ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, translated by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 4.
[285] Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism,* p. 10.
See also Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, pp. 23-24.
[286] Horkheimer/Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 4; my emphasis.
[287] In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* Horkheimer and Adorno assume that market competition has largely been displaced by monopoly, which leaves nothing but "the appearance of competition and choice." (Horkheimer/Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 97.)
[288] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, pp. 31-32.
[289] Dardot/Laval, *The New Way of the World*, p. 302.

Thus, neoliberal economisation involves processes of subjectivation in accordance with an economic logic of competition.

Consequently, I argue that 'the neoliberal subject' is a subject whose relationships to self and others are modelled not on the ahistorical notion of *homo oeconomicus* but on distinctly neoliberal figures of competitive economic agency, namely, on the *entrepreneur* – or the 'enterprise-subject' as Dardot and Laval put it in the passage quoted above – and *human capital*.[290] Therefore, the following analysis of these concepts traces not just the de-democratising effects of the economisation of individuals' relationships to self and others. More precisely, it highlights the de-democratising effect of *competitive* processes of subjectivation.

2 Entrepreneur and Human Capital: Competitive Subjectivation

Portraits of 'the neoliberal subject' tend to centre around two related figures: the 'entrepreneur' and 'human capital'. Often, accounts of neoliberal subjectivation draw indiscriminately on both or present the 'the entrepreneurial self' as the owner of 'human capital'.[291] In what follows, I aim to more clearly articulate the specificity of each figure.[292] In doing so, I focus especially

[290] Two qualifying remarks are in order here: First, entrepreneurs and human capital are of course part of both theorised and actually existing markets outside of neoliberalism. However, within neoliberalism, these figures become not only more central to the market, but they are also reimagined in the context of neoliberal market competition. When I speak of entrepreneurs and human capital in the following, it is their neoliberal, competitive configuration that I refer to. Second, the 'neoliberal subject' is not limited to the figure of the entrepreneur or human capital. I draw on these figures because they foreground involvement in market competition as competitors. However, the 'sovereign consumer' is also sometimes analysed as a central figure of neoliberal economic and political thought, see, e.g.: Niklas Olsen, *The Sovereign Consumer. A New Intellectual History of Neoliberalism* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

[291] Angebauer explicitly argues that the "entrepreneurial subject, running its own existence like a firm through the acquisition, investment, and reassessment of human capital, is essentially an owner. Human capital, if this notion is to make sense at all, cannot be left unowned. It is no coincidence that the neoliberal self is not *managerial*, but *entrepreneurial*. While a manager runs an enterprise without owning it, the entrepreneur is by definition its owner (or partial owner)." (Angebauer, "Property and capital in the person", p. 7).

[292] These reflections were triggered by Brown's remark that: "Today, *homo oeconomicus* maintains aspects of that entrepreneurialism, but has been significantly reshaped as financialized human capital: its project is to self-invest

on the relationship to economisation and competition they imply. In turn, this discussion allows me to distil two features that characterise the 'economised' and competitive neoliberal subject: self-responsibility and self-optimisation.

While both notions – the 'entrepreneurial self' and 'human capital' – point to broader processes of economisation, they do so in slightly different ways. The concept of human capital, in drawing attention to the many aspects that contribute to a person's 'value' on the labour market, economises individuals by conceiving of them in terms of investment and returns. Genetic makeup, personality, and education are considered exclusively with regard to their potential effects on economic success.[293] In contrast, the entrepreneurial self transposes the image of a particular economic actor and the related mode of conduct onto non-economic activities. As Foucault notes in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, "[…] the individual's life itself – with his relationships to his private property, for example, with his family, household, insurance, and retirement – must make him into a sort of permanent and multiple enterprise."[294]

Importantly, the model of the enterprise and, even more so, of the entrepreneur imply that these individuals find themselves in a state of competition. The close relationship between the entrepreneur and competition finds its most explicit expression in Israel Kirzner's *Competition and Entrepreneurship*. Associating entrepreneurship with "the alertness to

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in ways that enhance its value or to attract investors through constant attention to its actual or figurative credit rating, and to do this across every sphere of its existence." (Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, p. 32)

[293] Gary S. Becker's seminal study *Human Capital* provides analyses of investment and rates of return particularly with regard to on-the-job training, high-school, and college education (see: Part One and Two of Gary S. Becker, *Human Capital. A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education (Third Edition)* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993]). In a chapter co-authored with Nigel Tomes, Becker also explore the effects of "families with greater ability, greater emphasis on childhood learning, and other favorable cultural and genetic attributes" on human capital (Nigel Tomes and Gary S. Becker, "Human Capital and the Rise and Fall of Families", in: Gary S. Becker, *Human Capital*, *A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education (Third Edition)* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993], p. 260). In his discussion of human capital theory, Foucault especially emphasises its genetic element (Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, pp. 227-230).

[294] Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, p. 241.

possibly newly worthwhile goals and to possibly newly available resources"[295], Kirzner asserts "that entrepreneurship and competitiveness are two sides of the same coin: that entrepreneurial activity is always competitive and that competitive activity is always entrepreneurial […]."[296] Likewise, market competition, its uncertainties, and innovative potentials provide the background for Frank Knight's account of the entrepreneur as risk-bearer and for Joseph Schumpeter's claim "that the function of entrepreneurs is to reform or revolutionize the pattern of production by exploiting an invention or, more generally, an untried technological possibility for producing a new commodity or producing an old one in a new way, by opening up a new source of supply of materials or a new outlet for products, by reorganizing an industry and so on."[297]

Likewise, the concept of 'human capital' implies a context of competition. However, while the figure of the entrepreneur foregrounds risk, self-responsibility, and innovation, human capital shifts emphasis towards self-investment and self-optimisation. Thus, individual competitive advantage is no longer imagined as consisting in the exploitation of an invention or in the alertness to external economic circumstances. Instead, it becomes identical with the

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[295] Kirzner, *Competition and Entrepreneurship*, p. 27.

Notably, the function of Kirzner's entrepreneur is epistemic and innovative in the sense introduced in the previous chapter. Indeed, his conception of competition, while not identical with Hayek's, also has a 'discovery function': "Competition, in this process, consists of perceiving possibilities of offering opportunities to other market participants which are more attractive than those currently being made available. It is an essentially rivalrous process […]; it consists not of market participants' reacting passively to given conditions, but of their actively grasping profit opportunities by positively changing the existing conditions." (Kirzner, *Competition and Entrepreneurship*, p. 98.) Hayek himself associates "entrepreneurial capacity" with "the discovery of a better use of things or of one's own capacities" and notes that "in discovering the best use of our abilities, we are all entrepreneurs" (Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, p. 144.)

[296] Kirzner, *Competition and Entrepreneurship*, p. 75.

[297] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 132.

Knight writes: "The setting of the problem is a free competitive situation in which all men and material agents are competing for employment, including all men at the time engaged as entrepreneurs, while all entrepreneurs are competing for productive services and at the same time all men are competing for positions as entrepreneurs." (Frank H. Knight, *Risk, Uncertainty, and Profit* (Orlando: Signalman Publishing, 2009 [1921], pp. 143-144.) For an overview over different conceptions of the entrepreneur, see: Bröckling, *The Entrepreneurial Self*, pp. 66-77.

skills and abilities of the individual, which consequently have to be continuously developed and improved.

The shift to the language of human capital, furthermore, constitutes a shift from agency to passivity vis-à-vis the economic process. Whereas the entrepreneur is the driver of the economic process, human capital is its object. According to Brown, this provides the more accurate description of the current configuration of neoliberal homo oeconomicus:

> *Homo oeconomicus* is made, not born, and operates in a context replete with risk, contingency, and potentially violent changes, from burst bubbles and capital or currency meltdowns to wholesale industry dissolution. Put differently, rather than each individual pursuing his or her own interest and unwittingly generating collective benefit, today, it is the project of macroeconomic growth and credit enhancement to which neoliberal individuals are tethered and with which their existence as human capital must align if they are to thrive.[298]

However, rather than pointing towards a difference between human capital and the entrepreneurial self as forms of subjectivation, this aspect of human capital reveals a tension between the 'entrepreneurial self' and the 'entrepreneur-as-economic agent'. In contrast to the latter, the former does not shape economic competition but is driven by it. Ulrich Bröckling notes:

> The invocation of the entrepreneurial spirit is […] inherently paradoxical. Everyone should become an entrepreneur; but if everyone really did, none of them would be. Individually, everyone *could* be, but not everyone together. This fact of a general possibility that can only be realized in a select few, forces the individual to self-optimize on the economic terms dictated by the entrepreneurial self, at the same time accusing those lagging behind of being personally responsible for their failure. No one is an entrepreneur all the time but everyone can and ought to work to increase their entrepreneurial virtues. Success at this can only be measured against the competition and therefore only temporarily.[299]

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[298] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, p. 84.
[299] Bröckling, *The Entrepreneurial Self*, p. 77.

Caught in a competition that shapes life beyond the market, the neoliberal subject, whether conceptualised as 'entrepreneurial' or as 'human capital', pursues success without the possibility of ever fully achieving it.

This inherent paradox of the entrepreneurial spirt illustrates that becoming an entrepreneurial subject is not identical with becoming an entrepreneur within the market. Rather, the neoliberal subject is merely an "entrepreneur of himself".[300] What remains from the economic figure of the entrepreneur in this configuration is not mastery of economic processes and leadership but merely the demand to be self-responsible and self-optimise. In this, the entrepreneurial subject and human capital converge.

In the two following sections, I discuss these two aspects of the competitive neoliberal subject – self-responsibility and self-optimisation – in more detail. Although these are features of the entrepreneurial subject as well as of human capital, my analysis of self-responsibility takes the figure of the entrepreneur as its starting point, and I discuss self-optimisation primarily in relation to human capital. I do this because the notion of self-responsibility retains some of the activity and initiative of the entrepreneur-as-economic-actor, while self-optimisation as self-investment is an integral part of the concept of human capital. Yet, self-responsibility and self-optimisation, the entrepreneur and human capital all converge, I argue, in their turn away from the collective to the individual, thereby undermining the social conditions of democracy.

[300] Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, p. 226.

2.1 Self-responsibilisation

Competition as such does not immediately or inevitably imply self-responsibility. Many competitions, for example in sports, involve competing teams and thus foster limited forms of collective responsibility instead.[301] In contrast, market competition is generally understood to be an essentially individualist kind of competition, and this is almost certainly the case when market actors are modelled on 'the entrepreneur'.[302] Furthermore, recall that Joseph Heath describes individualist market competition as involving "*deontic weakening* with respect to everyday morality", so that "we are released from the everyday-morality obligation to act cooperatively and are actively encouraged to play free-rider strategies."[303] One might suspect that such 'deontic weakening' also extends to relationships of care and responsibility for the wellbeing of others.

However, it is important to note that Heath only argues that such deontic weakening takes place within the competitive market. Indeed, the reference to 'everyday-morality' suggests that elsewhere cooperation is encouraged or even an obligation, while free-riding is frowned upon. Care and responsibility for the wellbeing of others may retain significance outside of the market. Thus, even a deontic wakening-conception of market competition is in principle entirely compatible with an extensive welfare state.[304]

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[301] I discuss competitions involving teams in more detail in Chapter Six, Section 2.1.

[302] I complicate the assumption that market competition and even neoliberal market competition is always purely individualist in the following Chapter Three, in which I discuss the role of cooperation in neoliberal theory and practice in some more detail.

[303] Heath, *Morality, Competition, and the Firm,* p. 9.

For my previous discussion of Heath's deontic weakening-conception of competition, see: Introduction, Section 3.

[304] Indeed, this is the combination that Heath argues for; see, Joseph Heath, *The Efficient Society. Why Canada Is As Close to Utopia As It Gets* (Toronto: Penguin, 2001).

It is precisely this combination of competitive markets and welfare state – that is: of individualist competition and collective responsibility – that neoliberal theorists take issue with. Ordoliberal theorists, in particular, argue that the post-war welfare state created dependencies and fostered a passivity that disqualified large parts of the populations as successful actors in the competitive market. The "modern, urban industrial worker" lacks, they are convinced, the independence, self-reliance, and initiative of the *entrepreneur*.[305]

The 'economisation' displayed in ordoliberal texts – the transposition of the figure of the entrepreneur onto social life as a whole – is based on the insight that market actors are raised and cultivated outside of the market. The aim of their social policy, which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Three, is not to address inequalities or improve working conditions, but to instil the virtues and attitudes of competitive market actors in individuals: independence, self-reliance, and *self-responsibility*.[306] This is best achieved, they believe, through a 'return' to life in village-like communities and opportunities for self-subsistence agriculture. Dardot and Laval summarise:

> With gardens, thanks to the self-subsistence they facilitate, wage-earners will be their own masters, *like entrepreneurs with complete responsibility for the process of production*. By becoming property-owners and family farmers, individuals will rediscover the virtues of prudence, seriousness and *responsibility* that are so indispensable to the market economy.[307]

Although this ordoliberal vision of social policy and social life was never realised in practice, its emphasis on self-responsibility is not only mirrored in self-help literature and managerial

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[305] Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (Organic Policy)", p. 165.
[306] Werner Bonefeld characterises ordoliberal social policy as "a market enabling social policy" (Bonefeld, *The Strong State and the Free Economy*, p. 11). For an analysis of ordoliberal social policy, see also: Werner Bonefeld, "Freedom and the Strong State: On German Ordoliberalism", *New Political Economy*, Vol. 17, Issue 5 (2012), pp. 633-656.
[307] Dardot/Laval, *The New Way of the World*, p. 98; my emphasis.

discourses, but also in the political rhetoric, social policies, and welfare reforms of various neoliberal governments.[308]

In the UK, Prime Minister Margret Thatcher followed her famous statement that "[t]here is no such thing as society", with the claim that "no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. It's our duty to look after ourselves and then, also to look after our neighbour."[309] In a speech on welfare reforms and the new Jobcentre Plus in 2002, Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair similarly highlights the centrality of self-responsibility, underlining repeatedly the "mutual responsibility" of government and citizens: "Government has a responsibility to provide real opportunities for individuals to gain skills and to get into work that pays. But individuals also have a responsibility to grasp those opportunities."[310] Just a year later, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder declared in front of parliament: "We will have to cut government benefits, promote *personal responsibility*, and demand more individual effort from everyone."[311]

These appeals to entrepreneurial self-responsibility in political justifications of welfare cuts point to the two sides of responsible entrepreneurship. As an economic actor, the entrepreneur demonstrates self-responsibility both through her independent initiative and the

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[308] For an analysis of appeals to self-responsibility in self-help and managerial literature and discourses, see: Bröckling, *The Entrepreneurial Self,* pp. 31-36, pp. 137-140.

[309] Margaret Thatcher, "Interview for *Woman's Own* ("no such thing *[as society]*")" (23 September 1987), https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document%2F106689 (last accessed 22 October 2025).

Admittedly, Thatcher also acknowledges a (secondary) duty to 'look after our neighbour.' It is instructive that she acknowledges a duty of care for an 'other' that is comparatively proximate and, perhaps, similar. In Chapter Three, I discuss the possibility of integrating a community of such proximate others into neoliberal thought.

[310] Tony Blair, "Full text of Tony Blair's speech on welfare reform", *The Guardian* (10 June 2002), https://www.theguardian.com/society/2002/jun/10/socialexclusion.politics1 (last accessed: 22 October 2025)

[311] My translation. In the original: "Wir werden Leistungen des Staates kürzen, Eigenverantwortung fördern und mehr Eigenleistung von jedem Einzelnen abfordern müssen." (Deutscher Bundestag, "Stenografischer Bericht. 32. Sitzung" [Plenarprotokoll 15/32] [14 March 2003], p. 2479.)

For an analysis of Schröder's so-called "Agenda 2010", see: Christoph Butterwegge, *Parteien und Demokratie: Gerhard Schröders Agenda 2010 – zehn Jahre unsoziale Politik. Analysen 162* (Berlin: Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, 2013).

willingness to bear the outcome of her choices. She takes responsibility for herself both by pursuing *success* and by accepting the consequences of her *failure*.

Foregrounding initiative and the necessity of taking responsibility of one's success, appeals to be self-responsible are often made in a register of 'empowerment'.[312] For example, ordoliberals present their social policy as an attempt to cure people from their dependency on the welfare-state, 'empowering' individuals vis-à-vis a totalising state.[313] Likewise, Blair suggests that individual responsibility is part of "an enabling welfare state – one which helps people to help themselves."[314] This 'empowering' self-responsibility entails the promise of self-realisation. It evokes ideals of individual flourishing and autonomy. Indeed, as Bröckling observes, it is even modelled on the figure of the democratic citizen: "Like empowering others, self-empowerment follows the democratic ideal of the mature citizen who assumes responsibility for herself and is actively involved in building her community."[315] It is in such ways that 'self-responsibility' is evoked as a value even by those that would seem to be opposed to neoliberal visions of economic and social life, such as proponents of worker cooperatives. I return to this in Chapter Three.

Yet, it is important to recall that the self-realisation that the empowering face of neoliberal self-responsibility promises takes place in the context of competition. Consequently, the entrepreneurial subject does not take responsibility for the free development of herself and her potentials but for her pursuit of competitive success. This implies, as I discuss in more

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[312] Bröckling discusses the ambiguous nature of the empowerment discourse in *The Entrepreneurial Self,* pp. 121-141.
[313] The ordoliberal theorist Röpke exemplarily declares: "A reform of society in the direction of giving people roots and of decentralisation would lead one to hope for a substantial improvement, whereas today's tendency towards centralisation must weaken the sense of responsibility, until the fully collectivised state would administer the coup-de-grace." (Röpke, *Civitas Humana*, p. 96.)
[314] Blair, "Speech on welfare reform".
[315] Bröckling, *The Entrepreneurial Self,* p. 140.

detail in the following section, the constant pressure to self-optimise. Furthermore, competitive success is, as Bröckling underscores, only ever achievable for a minority and, even for them, only temporarily.[316]

At this point, it is crucial to reflect on the social and material conditions, in which self-help authors, managers, and politicians resort to appeals to individual responsibility. As shown in the previous chapter, the social reality of neoliberalism is characterised by inequality, uncertainty, and insecurity.[317] Under such conditions, the chances for competitive success are not only distributed in highly unequal ways. For many, even the pursuit of such success is impossible. For large parts of the population, individual responsibility can only mean taking responsibility for one's 'failures' – or, rather, for one's disadvantages and deprivation.

This second, darker face of self-responsibility betrays the empowering promises of autonomy and individual flourishing. In a context of inequality, appeals to self-responsibility conceal the social, political, and economic processes that produce "the very real inequality of living conditions".[318] The discourse around self-responsibility that permeates actually existing neoliberal societies constitute a strange counterpoint to the insistence of neoliberal theorists that market competition does not reward individual contribution or merit.[319] Whereas neoliberal theory appears to suggest that individuals are ultimately responsible neither for their

[316] Cf. Bröckling, *The Entrepreneurial Self*, p. 77.
[317] See Chapter One, Section 1.
[318] Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, p. 422.
[319] See Chapter One, Section 1.3.

successes nor for their losses in market competition,[320] neoliberal ideology insists on holding everyone accountable – or, at least, those who fail or never even had the chance to succeed.[321]

This agenda of individual responsibility also absolves the state or, rather, the democratic community from its responsibility for its citizens and members. If it is ultimately up to the individual to make her choices and bear the consequences, then no one else – neither state nor fellow citizens – can be held responsible for the situation she eventually finds herself in: individual responsibility replaces collective responsibility. A generalised ethos of self-responsibility results in a celebration of individualism, ignores that people's opportunities and trajectories often lie outside their control, and denies the dependencies between people and their environment.

Instead, this dark face of self-responsibility gives rise to a logic of exclusion and disposability which Brown captures in her account of the neoliberal subject as "[…] at once in charge of itself, responsible for itself, and yet a potentially dispensable element of the whole."[322] Judith Butler elaborates:

> In the neoliberal morality, each of us is only responsible for ourselves, and not for others, and that responsibility is first and foremost a responsibility to become economically self-sufficient under conditions when self-sufficiency is structurally undermined. Those who cannot afford to pay for health care constitute but one version of a population deemed disposable.[323]

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[320] Responsibility usually presupposes control. Friedman's and Hayek's frequent references to the chance and luck in market competition suggest that there is rarely such control (cf. Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, p. 137; Hayek, "Competition as a Discovery Procedure", p. 16; see also: Chapter One, Section 1.3).

[321] As elaborated in footnote 144 in the previous chapter, I use the term 'neoliberal ideology' to refer to ideas and justificatory discourses that are commonly associated with neoliberalism and circulate in actually existing neoliberal societies, but do not necessarily track the writings of neoliberal theorists.

[322] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, p. 110.

[323] Judith Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 25.

Butler's emphasis on the neoliberal production of disposable population underscores that appeals to self-responsibility expand the 'deontic weakening' Heath associates with competition far beyond the sphere of the market. In social life as a whole, the entrepreneurial subject appears to be 'released from the no-longer-everyday-morality obligation to act cooperatively.'[324]

This denial of collective in favour of individual responsibility conflicts with fundamental democratic principles. Dardot and Laval argue that the emphasis on individual over collective responsibility erases the democratic citizen from the scene:

> The figure of the citizen invested with a directly collective responsibility is gradually erased from the scene, giving way to entrepreneurial man. The latter is not only the 'sovereign consumer' of neo-liberal rhetoric, but the subject to which society owes nothing, the one who 'does not get something for nothing' and must 'work more to earn more', to adopt some of the clichés of the new mode of government. The referent of state action is no longer the subject of rights, but a self-enterprising actor who enters into the most diverse private contracts with other self-enterprising actors. […] By reinforcing social inequality in the distribution of service provision and access to resources in employment, health and education, it strengthens social logics of exclusion that manufacture a growing number of 'sub-citizens' and 'non-citizens'.[325]

Such exclusions do not only perpetuate inequality and disadvantage. Like the rejection of collective responsibility more generally, they contribute further to the erosion of the 'common world' democracy relies on.

Democracy is fundamentally a project of *collective* self-government. The promotion of individual responsibility at the cost of collective responsibility denies the significance of this very collectivity. It does not abolish the political institutions of collective self-governance, but

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[324] This is a reference to Heath's above-mentioned claim that market competition is characterised by a "*deontic weakening*" and releases competitors "from the everyday-morality obligation to act cooperatively and are actively encouraged to play free-rider strategies." (Heath, *Morality, Competition, and the Firm,* p. 9.)
[325] Dardot/Laval, *The New Way of the World*, p. 304.

it produces a social reality that calls on people to focus on themselves and ignore the needs of other members of their political and social community. This erosion of care for others and the democratic community is exacerbated, I argue in the next section, by the constant pressure to self-optimise.

2.2 Self-optimisation

As noted above, the neoliberal subject that takes responsibility for his competitive success is also a subject that constantly seeks to improve himself. According to Dardot and Laval, this drive to self-optimise distinguishes the neoliberal subject from earlier configurations of 'homo oeconomicus'.

> It is the efficient, competitive individual who seeks to maximize his human capital in all areas, who not only seeks to project himself into the future and calculate his gains and losses like the old economic man, but above all seeks to *work on himself* so as constantly to transform himself, improve himself, and make himself ever more efficient. What distinguishes this subject is the very process of self-improvement to which he is prompted, leading him incessantly to perfect his results and performance.[326]

The observation that competition prompts self-improvement is not specific to the context of neoliberal market competition. Beyond the market, competition is commonly associated with the pursuit of excellence and (self-)improvement; this is true in sports, the arts, and in educational settings.[327] My main aim in this section is therefore to distinguish neoliberal self-optimisation from other forms of competitive self-improvement.

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[326] Dardot/Laval, *The New Way of the World*, p. 265.

[327] Simon et al. suggest that within sports competition is best understood as a "mutual quest for excellence" (Simon et al., *Fair Play*, p. 47). Rivalries between artists are often credited with creating or at least contributing to the 'excellence' of the art they created (see, e.g., Sebastian Smee, *The Art of Rivalry. Four Friendships, Betrayals & Breakthroughs* [London: Profile Books 2016]). The benefits of competition in education are contested (see, e.g., Kohn, *No Contest*), but some studies stipulate a relationship between competitive educational settings and student achievement (see, e.g., Chris Baumann and Marina Harvey, "Competitiveness vis-à-vis motivation and personality as drivers of academic performance", *International Journal of Educational Management*, Volume 32, Issue 1 (2018), pp. 185-202) and many educational settings are saturated with competitive practices – from marking and rankings to special reading, arts, or science competitions.

Importantly, like 'individual responsibility', 'self-improvement' has a genuinely emancipatory dimension. It is in this way that Enlightenment thinkers and proponents of a humanistic education may invoke practices of self-improvement as steps towards self-determination, towards the realisation of individual and human potential as well as human flourishing.[328] Proponents of 'participatory' and 'republican' theories of democracy – from Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Stuart Mill to Carole Pateman – even associate active participation in democratic politics itself with processes of education and improvement.[329] Hannah Arendt, who emphasises the competitive or agonal aspects of politics, even calls the "public realm", that is: the political realm, "the proper place for human excellence."[330] Competition and excellence, it is possible to conclude, are neither reserved for neoliberalism nor for sports but may constitute a central feature not just of politics but potentially even of *democratic* politics.

To distinguish this emancipatory and potentially democratic version of self-improvement from the de-democratising neoliberal one, I will refer to the latter as 'self-optimisation'. 'Optimisation', in contrast to the more general 'improvement', is often used in technical contexts and evokes considerations of efficiency and functionality.[331] Thus, the term points to the intersection of neoliberal self-optimisation with practices of self-tracking and

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[328] Kant most famously defined the Enlightenment as the "the human being's emergence from his self-incurred minority." (Immanuel Kant, "An answer to the question: 'What is enlightenment?'", in: *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant. Practical Philosophy,* edited and translated by Mary J. Gregor [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], p. 17.) Notably, this combines a notion of self-improvement with a sense of individual responsibility – yet it does so in a strikingly different way than neoliberal discourses of self-responsibility and -optimization.

[329] For a discussion of the "educative function" of political participation in Rousseau and Mill and the affirmation of such, see: Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 24-35, p. 42. It is important to note that the 'political participation' Pateman has in mind is largely cooperative rather than competitive in nature.

[330] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 49.

I discuss Arendt's agonal understanding of politics in Chapter Six.

[331] Cf. Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v. "Optimization", https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/optimization (last accessed: 24 October 2025).

quantification which I discuss briefly below. With its connotations of efficiency and functionality, this terminological choice also anticipates a feature of neoliberal self-optimisation that I turn to now, namely, its orientation towards market success.

Indeed, this feature marks the first of two points at which neoliberal self-optimisation diverges from the emancipatory notion of self-improvement. As Dardot and Laval note in the passage quoted at the start of this section, the neoliberal subject participates in practices of self-improvement "to maximize his *human capital*".[332] Consequently, the aim of self-optimisation under neoliberalism is not the realisation of individual potential nor the pursuit of an ideal of human flourishing but the enhancement of human capital. Operating according to a logic of (self-)investment and return, the success of neoliberal self-optimisation is identical with its employability or its broader market success.

This orientation towards the market finds stark expression in practices of self-tracking that often accompany contemporary forms of neoliberal self-optimisation. Foregrounding the intersection of practices of self-tracking and neoliberal responsiblisation, Deborah Lupton observes that "[s]elf-tracking may be theorised as a practice of selfhood that conforms to cultural expectations concerning self-awareness, reflection and taking responsibility for managing, governing oneself and improving one's life chances. Self-tracking therefore represents the apotheosis of the neoliberal entrepreneurial citizen ideal."[333] Furthermore, by quantifying individual efforts at self-improvement, practices of self-tracking adopt a logic of quantifiability and calculability that is often associated with the market and with neoliberal economisation more generally.[334] This quantification also affects the character of personal

[332] Dardot/Laval, *The New Way of the World*, p. 265; my emphasis.
[333] Deborah Lupton, *The Quantified Self. A Sociology of Self-Tracking* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), p. 68.
[334] Cf. Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism,* p. 10.

achievement and development: rather than something truly individual, neoliberal self-optimisation is something to be calculated, measured, and compared.

Second, and equally in line with market logic, neoliberal self-optimisation inverts the relationship between the pursuit of excellence and competition: competition is no longer a means of achieving or approaching a pre-determined standard of excellence, but it defines the standard of excellence. As mentioned above, competition is employed as a means for cultivating excellence in sports, the arts, and educational settings. In these cases, competitions provide a motivational force and a way for the 'testing' of skills. However, the standards of excellence they promote exist – at least partially – outside of the competition itself. Only for this reason is it possible, for example, to disagree about the 'better team' in a football match, even after the winner has been decided.[335]

In the previous chapter, I argued that neoliberal market competition lacks such external standards of excellence.[336] The same is true for the generalised competitiveness that radiates from the market to all spheres of neoliberal society. Thus, neoliberal self-optimisation lacks fixed standards against which it could be measured. Its aim is not to approach a fixed ideal but only to maintain competitive advantage.[337] Competition is no longer merely a means of pursuing or testing a predetermined idea of excellence. Rather, the only 'excellence' available to the self-optimising neoliberal subject is competitive success.[338] In principle, someone may

[335] And importantly, it is possible that the team that loses the match is still considered to have been the better team. See Simon et al., *Fair Play*, pp. 197-198.
[336] See Chapter One, Section 1.3.
[337] Bröckling distinguishes three different types of self-optimisation: self-optimisation as perfecting, i.e., striving towards the realisation of an ideal; self-optimisation as quantative increase along a given path; and self optimisation in a competitive context, i.e., self-optimisation as the production of relative competitive advantage. Centrally, competitive self-optimisation lacks a stable orientation or direction. (Cf. Ulrich Bröckling, "In der Optimierungsfalle. Zur Soziologie der Wettbewerbsgesellschaft", *Supervision. Mensch, Arbeit, Organisation,* Vol. 4 (2013), pp. 4-5.)
[338] This observation resonates with Adorno's account of success in the market: "Cause and effect seem to be somewhat reversed: whereas in market economy the supposedly 'better man' is defined by competitive success,

be considered an excellent football player or an excellent student even if they 'lose' some or perhaps even all competitions. In contrast, the 'excellence' the competitive neoliberal subject can claim for herself depends entirely on her competitive success.

Neoliberal self-optimisation is at once externally determined – by the market – and without clear standards of excellence. It also takes place within a continuous, open-ended, and endless competitive dynamic.[339] As Bröckling observes: "A person can only maintain their position temporarily and in relation to their competitors, so no one can afford to rest on their laurels because they are in a game where the conditions of victory are continually shifting."[340] Even for those that temporarily achieve competitive success, the pressures to self-optimise remains.

What is more, practices of competitive self-optimisation themselves perpetuate competition and contribute to ever higher stakes and ever harsher conditions. Pointing to this dynamic, Dardot and Laval describe the entrepreneurial subject as a "self-fulfilling prophecy": "In a word, the novelty consists in triggering a chain reaction by producing enterprising subjects who in turn will reproduce, expand and reinforce competitive relations between themselves. In accordance with the logic of the self-fulfilling prophecy, this requires them to adapt subjectively to ever harsher conditions which they have themselves created."[341] The ever-harsher conditions of generalised competition, combined with a lack of social security result in a competitive dynamic in which competitors no longer aim to win but merely attempt to 'keep up' and 'survive'. This is what Bröckling calls "the dark side of entrepreneurial self-

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people have come to think that success falls to the better man." (T. W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* [New York: Harper & Row, 1950], p. 669.

[339] For my discussion of the open-ended and endless nature of neoliberal market competition, see: Chapter One, Section 1.3.

[340] Bröckling, *The Entrepreneurial Self*, p. 35.

[341] Dardot/Laval, *The New Way of the World*, p. 262.

optimizing": "the constant fear of not having done the right thing or not enough of it, the feeling of insufficiency, is as much a part of the entrepreneurial self as mercantile skill or the courage to take risks. […] No amount of effort guarantees security but a lack of harsh self-discipline can ensure failure."[342]

It is unsurprising that this lack of security and the constant pressure to self-optimise can result in a pathological relationship to the self. Byung-Chul Han argues, for example, that the "self-referentiality" that characterises neoliberal competition – and, most certainly, competitive self-optimisation – means that the "achievement-subject […] succumbs to the destructive compulsion to outdo itself over and over, to jump over its own shadow."[343] He continues: "Achievement society is the society of self-exploitation. The achievement-subject exploits itself until it burns out. In the process, it develops auto-aggression that often enough escalates into the violence of self-destruction."[344] Endless self-optimisation may at any point turn into self-destruction.

The pathologies of the self that neoliberal self-optimisation produces are not just relevant from a perspective of individual well-being. They also shape social life in crucial ways. Most fundamentally, self-optimisation, by definition, implies a turn away from others in favour of excessive care and concern for the self. If the optimised self becomes the key for success – or, more likely, for survival –, then it is only rational for individuals to prioritise the work on

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[342] Bröckling, *The Entrepreneurial Self*, p. 36.

[343] Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, translated by Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), p. 46.

In his account of the "achievement society", Han does not make any specific references to neoliberalism. Instead, he characterises it as "late-modern (Han, *The Burnout Society*, p. 19). Yet, his observations resonate not only with the analysis of this chapter but also with Dardot and Laval's account of neoliberal "'*ultra*-subjectivation', whose goal is not a final, stable condition of 'self-possession, but a beyond the self that is always receding, and which is constitutionally aligned in its very regime with the logic of enterprise and, over and above that, with the cosmos' of the world market." (Dardot/Laval, *The New Way of the World*, p. 284.)

[344] Han, *The Burnout Society*, p. 47.

themselves over community. The logic of human capital is one of self-investment, not of investment in relationships or community.[345]

In its promotion of individualism, the neoliberal demand to keep up and self-optimise intersects with appeals to self-responsibility and exacerbates their corrosive effects on social life and community. Together, neoliberal self-optimisation and self-responsibilisation threaten to recast democratic life and political democracy in terms of a mere "entrepreneurial democracy", as Dardot and Laval call it, a 'democracy' reduced to "giving everyone the chance to conduct the enterprise they themselves are in whatever way they wish, making them wholly responsible for this conduct and its results, failures and successes alike."[346] This would be a 'democracy' entirely devoid of any collective component and thus, perhaps, not a democracy at all.[347]

However, the effects of neoliberal competitiveness on democracy and democratic communities exceed the promotion of individualism. The neoliberal subject does not only withdraw from collective matters to focus on her individual competitive success. She also encounters others primarily as threats to that competitive success and, therefore, potentially with hostility. I discuss these effects of neoliberal competition and competitiveness on relationships between competing neoliberal subjects in the following section.

[345] One exception are practices of 'networking'. However, even networking implies a merely instrumental relationship to others which is ultimately motivated and mediated by self-interest.
[346] Dardot/Laval, *Never-Ending Nightmare*, pp. 67-68.
[347] I discuss the importance of community for democracy and democratic life in more detail in the following Chapter Three.

3 'Pitted against each other': Competitive Relationships

I argued above that neoliberal subjectivation which centres on the figures of the entrepreneur (or the enterprise) and of human capital is characterised by a competitive logic. Thus, it is also characterised, as Bröckling notes with regard to "entrepreneurial activity", by a "logic of *pushing back limits* and *outdoing*. This means that entrepreneurship is determined by comparison. You only act enterprisingly when you are more innovative, alert, daring, self-responsible and more of a leader than all the others."[348] Processes of self-optimisation and self-investment are not only undertaken *for oneself*, but to some degree also *against others.*

The element of comparison that is inherent in entrepreneurial activity leads Bröckling to liken it to "a sporting competition".[349] Yet, he observes that:

> It is a contest no one is excused from, but not everyone plays in the same league. No matter how unequal the chances of climbing the ladder really are, every player can, in theory, improve her position, as long as she is more alert, innovative, self-reliant and assertive than the others. Inversely, everyone is threatened by descent, in the worst case by abyssal descent, if the competition starts overtaking. Since everyone's existence is at stake, there is not much room for playful levity and noble sportsmanship.[350]

Although they certainly contribute to it, I want to suggest that it is not just the essential stakes that eliminate playfulness and sportsmanship from neoliberal and entrepreneurial competition. As I argue in later chapters, competition in sports always retain a collective and cooperative dimension.[351] In contrast, I have shown that market competition in general and neoliberal competition in particular is driven by individualism and self-interest. This individualism

[348] Bröckling, *The Entrepreneurial Self*, p. 77.
[349] Bröckling, *The Entrepreneurial Self*, p. 77.
[350] Bröckling, *The Entrepreneurial Self*, p. 77.
[351] See: Chapter Six, Section 2 and Chapter Seven, Section 1.2.

provides the basis for neoliberal competitiveness to turn into disregard for and hostility against others.

In her 1937 discussion of "neurotic competitiveness", psychoanalyst Karen Horney underscores that:

> Hostility is inherent in every intense competition, since the victory of one of the competitors implies the defeat of the other. There is, in fact, so much destructive competition in an individualistic culture that as an isolated feature one hesitates to call it a neurotic characteristic. It is almost a cultural pattern. In the neurotic person, however, the destructive aspect is stronger than the constructive: it is more important for him to see others defeated than to succeed himself.[352]

This entirely destructive competitiveness is not reserved for "the neurotic" alone, Horney argues. Rather she states that "[i]n the competitive struggles of our culture it is often expedient to try to damage a competitor in order to enhance one's own position or glory or to keep down a potential rival."[353] Although she identifies the market as a source of common neuroses, the culture Horney describes is, of course, not the neoliberal one.[354] Yet, the potential for intense competition to become entirely destructive and hostile remains alive in neoliberalism. Indeed, one might suspect that it partially explains, for example, the success of disparaging narratives about the poor, such as the branding of black single mothers as 'welfare queens',[355] or the more recent right-wing, authoritarian turn of neoliberalism.[356]

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[352] Karen Horney, *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999 [1937]), pp.192-193.
[353] Horney, *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time,* p. 193.
[354] Cf. Horney, *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time,* p. 188.
[355] Cf. Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York: Zone Books, 2017), p. 53
[356] Horney notes that the "feeling" of the neurotic "may be described as an articulate conviction that 'only one can succeed,' which is only another way of expressing the idea that 'no one but I shall succeed.'" (Horney, *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time,* p. 193.) This resonates with Wendy Brown's descriptions of a nihilism that emerges 'in the ruins of neoliberalism': "Perhaps there is a form of nihilism shaped by the waning of a type of social dominance or the waning social dominance of a historical type. As this type finds itself in a world emptied not only of meaning, but of its own place, far from going gently into the night, it turns toward apocalypse. If white men cannot own democracy, there will be no democracy. If white men cannot rule the planet, there will be no planet." (Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, p. 180.)

Waheed Hussain suggests that rivalrous relationships that turn into disregard or hostility constitute a distinct wrong; moreover, a wrong that is of particular concern from a democratic perspective. By "[p]itting people against each other", the neoliberal market and associated institutions fail to comply with the principle of "community".[357] Where such rivalrous relationships are "substantially engulfing"[358] – as is arguably the case in neoliberalism –, Hussain concludes that they pose a threat to the relational ideal of a "*solidaristic association*".[359]

Liberal democracies, he suggests, are such solidaristic associations and therefore require that "[w]ith respect to the pursuit of PSGs [primary social goods], citizens should treat the successes and failures of their fellow citizens similarly to the way that they should treat their own successes and failures."[360] However, competitive arrangements of the neoliberal kind, in which one's success is dependent on the failure or loss of another, are likely to conflict with this requirement and to result in what Hussain terms "estrangement":

> We can think of failures of solidarity in terms of *estrangement*. Two people, A and B are 'estranged' when A and B are members of a solidaristic association, but they do not give each other's successes and failures with respect to P the appropriate role in their practical reasoning. Estrangement can take the form of indifference, where A and B treat each other's successes and failures as not warranting any particular actions or attitudes. But estrangement can go beyond indifference into enmity, where A and B treat each other's successes and failures as grounds for actions and attitudes that are the opposite of what the ideal requires […].[361]

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[357] Hussain, "Pitting People Against Each Other", pp. 79-80.
[358] Hussain, "Pitting People Against Each Other", p. 85.
[359] Hussain, "Pitting People Against Each Other", p. 95.
[360] Hussain, "Pitting People Against Each Other", p. 109.
Hussain adopts the notion of primary social goods from Rawls and defines them as follows: "PSGs are a set of abstract goods – i.e., liberty, opportunity, authority, income and wealth, and the social bases of self-respect – that could serve most any citizen's interest in being able to rationally form, revise, and pursue a conception of the good. Possession of these abstract goods usually consists in the possession of various concrete goods in which the abstract goods are realized. For example, having the PSG of opportunity consists, in part, in having access to health care, which is necessary to treat periodic illnesses that could otherwise prevent you from filling various work roles or caregiving roles." (Hussain, "Pitting People Against Each Other", pp. 99-100.)
[361] Hussain, "Pitting People Against Each Other", p. 96.

Hussain's account of estrangement, indifference, and enmity resonates with Horney's observation that individualist competition always harbours a destructive potential.

Two further things are worth noting here: First, the analyses presented in this chapter and the previous one would seem to provide sufficient arguments that under neoliberal conditions competitive relationships are not only 'sufficiently engulfing' but also affect what Hussain calls 'primary social goods.' The latter is evident not only in the disregard for vast income and wealth inequalities as expressed by neoliberal theorists and reflected in the distributive realities of actually existing neoliberal societies.[362] It also manifests in the privatization of essential services and the conditional social policies introduced by many neoliberal governments.[363] Neoliberal society suffers, it seems clear, from 'estrangement' as Hussain defines it.

Second, in his claim that (liberal) democracy presupposes and relies on the value of 'community' as well as on 'solidaristic' relationships between citizens, Hussain makes explicit an assumption that I have operated with in my discussion of the de-democratising effects of neoliberal competition: In the previous chapter, I argued that the production and legitimation of extreme inequalities is harmful to democratic life because it leads to the fragmentation and ultimately to the loss of a 'common world.' In a similar vein, I suggested above that the promotion of individual responsibility and self-optimisation are problematic for democratic life because they imply the rejection of a sense of collective concern in favour of individualism. Some form of community, these arguments assume, is an essential part of democratic life.

[362] See Chapter One, Section 1.
[363] See Section 2.1 above.

So far, however, I have remained silent on the nature and content of such ‘community’ and its centrality for democratic life. Yet, community, like solidarity, can take different forms and both are claimed for different purposes – importantly, not always for democratic ones. For my examination of the ‘social conditions of democracy’, it is therefore crucial to identify not only the pathologies of intense competition but also to provide a positive account of the solidaristic or cooperative basis of democracy. This will be my task in the next chapter.

4 Conclusion

This chapter has established the de-democratising effects of a neoliberal competitiveness that shapes individuals’ relationships to self and others. Neoliberalism is, I have argued, not only characterised by the promotion of competition within the market but also by a competitive economisation, in the course of which ever more areas of social life are subjected to the logic of competition. With regard to individuals’ relationship to self, this manifests in processes of subjectivation modelled on the figures of the entrepreneur and human capital. The ‘neoliberal subject’ as ‘entrepreneurial subject’ is, however, not characterised by her mastery of the economic processes but only by mastery of herself. What remains from the figure of the entrepreneur, I therefore suggested, is merely the demand to act self-responsibly, while the concept of human capital compels individuals to self-optimise.

Individual responsibility and self-improvement are not inherently de-democratising. Yet, in its neoliberal version, self-responsibility does not enable but merely burdens the individual. In a context of inequality and insecurity, appeals to self-responsibility amount to a denial of collective responsibility and contribute to the erosion of the collective life that democracy requires. Entirely dictated by the market, I contended that neoliberal self-

optimisation also loses its emancipatory promises and instead exacerbates competitive pressures. Like self-responsibility, it promotes a competitive individualism that further threatens to undermine the collective basis of democracy.

Self-optimisation also brings into view the relationships competition establishes between individuals as competitors. With Horney and Hussain, I uncovered the destructive potential of competitive relationships to foster indifference and even hostility. This latent potential points to a more general tension between competition and community or solidarity and leads me to the questions I aim to answer in the next chapter: What are the implications of my analysis of the de-democratising consequences of neoliberal competition for a positive account of the social conditions of democracy? What do references to community and solidarity entail? And is cooperation the democratising alternative to competition?

Chapter Three. The Alternative: Cooperation, Solidarity, and Community

In the previous two chapters, I have argued that the neoliberal celebration of competition within and beyond the market contributes to rising material inequality, a narrowing of political and democratic decision-making, and the cultivation of a 'competitive individualism.' Thus, I have established a relationship between the celebration of competition and the crisis of democracy, more specifically, the crisis of *the social conditions of democracy*. In this chapter, I move from a critical to a positive project and identify the economic and social relations that provide the foundation for political democracy. In particular, I examine the suggestion that such relations ought to be *cooperative.*

I turn to cooperation for three reasons, which correspond to three aspects that characterise my analysis in Part I of this thesis: First and foremost, insofar as I am interested in the effects of *social and economic competition*, I discuss 'cooperation' because, together with 'solidarity' and 'community', it is commonly considered to be competition's opposite.[364] My own analysis of neoliberal competition also highlighted its detrimental effects on a shared, 'common world', on community, and 'solidaristic associations', thereby assuming that there exists at least a tension between competition and cooperation – and related concepts and practices.

[364] Such an opposition between competition and cooperation is assumed, e.g., in the common distinction between competitive and cooperative models of democracy: See, e.g., Agmon, "Two Concepts of Competition", pp. 14-15; Held, *Models of Democracy*; Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*; Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*; Miller, "The competitive model of democracy". As discussed in Chapter Two, Section 3, Hussain's article "Pitting People Against Each Other" also identifies a tension between some competitive arrangements and the values of 'community' and 'solidarity' (cf. Hussain, "Pitting People Against Each Other", p. 79, p. 96).

Second, in my analysis of *neoliberalism,* I encounter the conceptual cluster of cooperation, solidarity, and community in diverse practices of resistance against neoliberalism. The rise, fall(s), and persistence of neoliberalism(s) have been consistently and globally accompanied by social movements that combine a concern for democracy with the promotion of cooperation. The 1990s witnessed a growing resistance against neoliberal globalisation that culminated in the establishment of the Zapatista autonomous municipalities in Chiapas, Mexico, which combined participatory democracy and local self-administration with cooperatives and a broader agenda of transnational solidarity,[365] and in the 1999 Seattle WTO protests. Importantly, the alter-globalisation movement did not oppose globalisation as such. Instead, it opposed the neoliberal and competitive version of globalisation, favouring global cooperation instead.[366] Solidarity and cooperation continued to be central concepts and starting points for practical experimentation in the wake of the economic and financial crises of the 2000s, for example, in the solidarity economies that sprang up in Argentina, Greece, and elsewhere.[367] The cooperative trace continues into the 2010s and the protests and occupations of the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement. Here, cooperation and mutual support became the organising principles for the encampments, which, although they eventually dissolved, promised to prefigure a radically different, participatory, and cooperative way of life.[368]

This emphasis on cooperation – both as a way of resisting the pressures of neoliberalisation and reclaiming political agency and as a central aspect of an alternative, more just, and democratic life – is not only shared by protestors and activists but echoed by theorists.

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[365] Cf. Richard Stahler-Sholk, "Resisting Neoliberal Homogenization: The Zapatista Autonomy Movement*", Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2007), pp. 48-6.
[366] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge MA: Belknap, 2009), p. 102.
[367] Cf. Jorge Orovitz Sanmartino, "Argentina 2001: Our Year of Rebellion", *Revolutionary Rehearsals in the Neoliberal* Age, ed. by Colin Barker, Gareth Dale, and Neil Davidson (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021), pp. 334-379.
[368] Cf. Mathijs van de Sande, "The Prefigurative Politics of Tahrir Square – An Alternative Perspective on the 2011 Revolutions", *Res Publica*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2013), p. 234; Serhat Karakayalí and Özge Yaka, "The Spirit of Gezi: The Recomposition of Political Subjectivities in Turkey", *New Formations*, Issue 83 (2014), p. 124.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri identify "the multitude" as the new revolutionary subject whose capacity for social transformation can be traced back to the communicative and cooperative character of new, immaterial types of work.[369] Less optimistic about the capacities of neoliberal workers to trigger a democratisation from within, Dardot and Laval assert that resistance to neoliberalism and a revival of democracy requires "experimenting with a political commons" and "the experience of joint participation in public affairs."[370]

Finally, as part of my inquiry into *the social conditions of democracy*, I derive the claim that the realisation of political democracy presupposes cooperative social relations from John Dewey and Axel Honneth. Dewey is convinced that a genuinely democratic public emerges out of the pre-political experience of community. In a similar vein, Honneth suggests that a commitment to political democracy ought to imply the cooperative organisation of economic relations.

This chapter largely follows Dewey, Honneth, and the anti-neoliberal movements described above and agrees with them that the full realisation of democracy requires extra-political cooperation and community.[371] However, I also argue that this claim requires qualification: Cooperation and community take different forms – and not all of them foster democratic relationships and subjectivities. Some may even contribute to de-democratisation.

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[369] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude. War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), p. 108.

[370] Dardot/Laval: *Never-Ending Nightmare*, pp. 156-157.
See also: Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *Common. On Revolution in the 21st Century,* translated by Matthew MacLellan (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

[371] This does not mean that democratic institutions, such as parliament or regular elections, are impossible in the absence of extra-political cooperation. Arguably, neoliberal competition itself is entirely compatible with such institutions. If democracy is reduced to and equated with the existence of such institutions as, e.g., in Schumpeterian models of democracy (see Chapter 4), no such extra-political conditions are required. However, as noted in the Introduction to Part I, this thesis operates with a thicker understanding of democracy, which holds that democracy manifests itself not just in specific institutions but also in specific ways of relating to and acting with others.

I exemplarily discuss neo- and ordoliberal versions of community and economic co-operation that challenge the simple opposition between cooperation and competition. I demonstrate that some forms of cooperation are not only compatible with but even enable intense competition. Furthermore, I highlight how community and cooperation can be conceptualised and organised in ways that are depoliticising and de-democratising in themselves. A convincing argument for extra-political cooperation as a condition of democracy requires a conception of cooperation that actually cultivates a democratic form of life.

The chapter is divided into three sections: In the first section, I reconstruct the relationship between extra-political cooperation and democracy as it is conceived by Dewey and Honneth. I also untangle the conceptual cluster of cooperation, solidarity, and community. This prepares an investigation into the different ways cooperation, solidarity, and community can be conceptualised and practically organised, which I undertake in Section 2. In this section, I complicate the relationship between cooperation and democracy outlined in the first section by introducing three different forms of cooperation and examining their democratising and de-democratising effects. I specifically contrast the ordoliberal vision of a cooperative village community and of entrepreneurial cooperatives with a genuinely democratic and democratising form of cooperation. The third section concludes with a discussion of the relationship between extra-political cooperation and the competitive democratic practices that are the objects of analysis in Part II of this thesis.

1 Democracy, Cooperation, Community, and Solidarity

As noted earlier, the assumption that the full realisation of political democracy relies on extra-political, social conditions presupposes a notion of democracy as "a form of society" rather than merely as a system of government.[372] In *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey accordingly distinguishes "between democracy as a social idea and political democracy as a system of government", noting that for democracy "[t]o be realized it must affect all modes of human association, the family, the school, industry, religion."[373] Importantly, a lack of 'democracy' in social life subtracts not only from its 'social idea' but equally from political democracy. In an early essay on "The Ethics of Democracy", Dewey states this explicitly with regard to the relationship between the economic and the political: "democracy is not in reality what it is in name until it is industrial, as well as civil and political. Such a condition is indeed far enough away […]. And the reflex influence of this on our civil and political organization is such that they are only imperfectly democratic."[374] To put it in the terms that I employ in this thesis, political democracy requires specific extra-political, social, and economic conditions.

The term Dewey uses to describe these conditions is 'community'.[375] Despite his use of a single word, I want to suggest that Dewey's democratic theory allows for the reconstruction of at least two different senses of community: Dewey's own writings emphasise the democratic significance of local communities and face-to-face interaction. Axel Honneth's interpretation

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[372] John Dewey, "The Ethics of Democracy", in: *The Early Works of John Dewey 1882-1898. Vol. 1* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. 232.

See: Introduction to Part I.

[373] Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 171.

[374] Dewey, "The Ethics of Democracy", p. 246.

Note that Dewey also suggests that political democracy requires the democratisation of social and economic relations. I return to this insight in Section 2.3 below.

[375] Dewey writes: "Regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself." (Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 175.) This implies that both the social and the political idea of democracy are characterised by 'community'. I challenge this assumption in Section 3 below and in Chapter Seven, Section 2.

of Dewey's democratic theory shifts attention to the activity of cooperation, the sphere of work, and questions of economic organisation. I discuss these conceptions of community and cooperation and their relationship to political democracy in turn.

In his account of the beginnings of American democracy, Dewey speaks of "community life" in reference to the American townships: "American democratic polity was developed out of genuine community life, that is, association in local and small centres where industry was mainly agricultural and where production was carried on mainly with hand tools."[376] 'Community' here implies local proximity and the possibility of everyday interactions. This sense of community is essential for Dewey, who asserts that "[i]n its deepest and richest sense a community must always remain a matter of face-to-face intercourse."[377]

The association with and reliance on community is not merely a historical accident but an essential aspect of Dewey's understanding of democracy. This is evident in his portrayal of the crisis of the democratic public in *The Public and Its Problems*. The technological and social changes associated with industrialisation and an increasingly globalised capitalism resulted, he argues, in a "new era of human relationships":

> The new era of human relationships in which we live is one marked by mass production for remote markets, by cable and telephone, by cheap printing, by railway and steam navigation. Only geographically did Columbus discover a new world. The actual new world has been generated in the last hundred years. Steam and electricity have done more to alter the conditions under which men associate together than all the agencies which affected human relationships before our time.[378]

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[376] Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 145.
[377] Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 227.
Notably, Dewey also states that a community can be "too direct and vital to occasion a need for political organization." He notes that: "Part of the problem of discovery of a public capable of organization into a state is that of drawing lines between the too close and intimate and the too remote and disconnected." (Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 88.) For his discussion of the problem, see: Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, pp. 88-91.
[378] Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 169.

Dewey is convinced that these changes result, among other things, in a loss of community and consequently in the loss of the political public. He notes "that the machine age in developing the Great Society has invaded and partially disintegrated the small communities of former times without generating a Great Community"[379] and that "till the Great Society is converted into a Great Community, the Public will remain in eclipse."[380]

For Dewey, the 'Great Community' must manifest itself primarily in "free and full inter-communication". Yet, even while underlining the significance of communication, he emphasises that "it can never possess all the qualities which mark a local community."[381] Even in times of its dissolution, Dewey maintains the centrality of "immediate community"[382] and "immediate intercourse"[383] for democratic life.

With its concern for community and its diagnosis of social disintegration, Dewey's democratic theory shares central themes with so-called 'communitarian' thinkers – and, as I show below, even with the arguably anti-democratic ordoliberals. Thus, Michael Sandel, who is sometimes classed as a communitarian theorist, also identifies the lack of community as one of the reasons for the crisis of democracy:

> Self-government in this sense requires political communities that control their destinies, and citizens who identify sufficiently with those communities to think and act with a view to the common good. Whether self-government in this sense is possible under modern conditions is at best an open question. In a world of global interdependence, even the most powerful nation-states are no longer the masters of their destiny. And in

[379] Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 157.
[380] Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 170.
[381] Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 227.
[382] Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 230.
[383] On this basis, Dewey even distinguishes between the benefits of written, mediated and oral, direct communication: "Signs and symbols, language, are the means of communication by which a fraternally shared experience is ushered in and sustained. But the winged words of conversation in immediate intercourse have a vital import lacking in the fixed and frozen words of written speech." (Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 232.)

> a pluralist society as diverse as the United States, it is far from clear that we identify sufficiently with the good of the whole to govern by a common good.[384]

Like Dewey, Sandel suggests that political democracy requires the experience of and identification with local communities – and is threatened by their fragmentation and dissolution.

Axel Honneth's affirmative reconstruction of Dewey's democratic theory reveals a different possible understanding of community; one that is not rooted in local proximity and face-to-face interaction but in a "cooperative division of labor".[385] Honneth provides the following account of the dependence of political democracy on specific social conditions: "Society's members must have been able to see in advance that, through their cooperative actions, they are pursuing a common goal, in order then to be able to understand the establishment of democratic institutions of self-organization as the means for a political solution to their problems of social coordination."[386] Honneth thus shifts attention from the geographically defined local community to the economic realm and to the activity of *cooperation*. This is consistent with Honneth's later interest in the co-emergence of "the concept of political democracy and the concept of a fair division of labour" over the course of the 18th century. He notes: "Alongside the nascent idea of the sovereignty of the people, then,

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[384] Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent. A New Edition for Our Perilous Times* (Cambridge MA: Belknap, 2022), p. 108.
[385] Honneth, "Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation", p. 765.
[386] Honneth, "Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation", p. 775.

In the context of this chapter, I am more interested in possible different articulations of community and cooperation than in the interpretation of Dewey's democratic theory itself. My reconstruction of Dewey's democratic theory emphasises the aspect of local community and face-to-face interactions partly to provide a counterpoint to Honneth's emphasis on cooperation and the social division of labour and partly in response to passages such as the following: "It is true that ties formed by sharing in common work, whether in what is called industry or what are called professions, have now a force which formerly they did not possess. But these ties can be counted upon for an enduring and stable organization, which at the same time is flexible and moving, only as they grow out of immediate intercourse and attachment. The theory, as far as it relies upon associations which are remote and indirect, would if carried into effect soon be confronted by all the troubles and evils of the present situation in a transposed form." (Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 228.)

there emerged the idea that a society is a cooperative association in which each must contribute as much as they can to societal prosperity, and in this way show that they are worthy members of the political association."[387] While never fully realised, Honneth argues that the idea of society as a cooperative association remains alive in democratic capitalist societies today.

Following this sketch of the Deweyan and Honnethian-Deweyan case for democracy's dependence on extra-political forms of community and cooperation, I want to draw attention to three aspects that, so far, I only touched on in passing: First, the concept of the social conditions of democracy is neither universal nor ahistorical. Rather, it is specific to large-scale and complex democratic capitalist societies that institute a distinction between the political, the social, and the economic. This is reflected in Honneth's genealogy of the co-emergence of the ideas of political democracy and a fair division of labour as much as in Dewey's description of the disintegration of the public amid rapid technological and economic development.

Second, Honneth's account of the relationship between a fair and cooperative division of labour and political democracy presupposes a radically different understanding of the role and status of the economy than the one I reconstructed through my engagement with the writings of neoliberal theorists. In Chapter One, I have argued that the neoliberal justification of competitive markets is based on claims of efficiency as well as on the assumption that they provide the conditions for individual liberty. On this view, the economic system is never tasked with providing the conditions of possibility for political democracy. Instead, government and state are tasked with providing the conditions for market competition.[388] Honneth's notion of 'a fair division of labour' inverts this relationship, presenting the economic realm as a sphere

[387] Axel Honneth, *The Working Sovereign. Labour and Democratic Citizenship*, translated by Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2024), p. 3.
[388] See Chapter One, Section 2.

that is subject to considerations of fairness and ought to contribute to the realisation of social freedom.[389]

This reconfigures not only the relationship between the political and the economic but also results in a different conception of the market. Rather than emphasising the impersonal nature of the competitive market mechanism, Honneth's account of the social division of labour points to the possibility of economic activity taking the form of a collective and cooperative endeavour serving the realisation of shared ends. Consequently, he also foregrounds different aspects of economic activity and the market. In the previous chapter, I noted the centrality of the figure of the entrepreneur and human capital in neoliberal theory and practice. In contrast, Honneth's analysis focuses primarily on labour and on individual contributions to social cooperation. Thereby, the claim that political democracy relies on a cooperative basis raises far-reaching questions about the relationship between politics and economics and about the nature and status of the market. I return to some of these in Section 2.3 below.

Third and finally, the two reconstructions of Dewey's democratic theory I provided locate the social conditions of democracy in (local) *community* and *cooperation,* respectively. This demonstrates the conceptual imbrication of these terms but simultaneously points to the differences between them. In the remainder of this section, I therefore outline some of the different uses and connotations of the concepts of 'community', 'cooperation', and 'solidarity'. I introduce the concept of solidarity here because it often appears in a conceptual cluster alongside community and cooperation, and all terms tend to be used interchangeably. Solidarity is also sometimes considered a feature of democratic associations – for example, by Waheed

[389] Cf. Axel Honneth, *Freedom's Right. The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, translated by Joseph Ganahl (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), pp. 178-198.

For a reconstruction and critical evaluation of Honneth's conception of the market, see: Timo Jütten, "Is the Market a Sphere of Social Freedom?", *Critical Horizons*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2015), pp. 187-203.

Hussain, who, as discussed at the end of the previous chapter, argues that liberal democracy presupposes a "*solidaristic association*".[390]

Unified by their perceived opposition to competition, the differences between community, cooperation, and solidarity are easily overlooked. However, the above distinction between Dewey's emphasis on local, immediate community and Honneth's concern with cooperation already points to some key differences between the two. The concept of community tends to be associated with local proximity or similarity, a sense of belonging, and raises questions of membership and boundaries – for neighbourhood communities as much as for national or fan communities. The primary case of cooperation, in contrast, is the actual 'working together' and the "reciprocal completion of practical actions".[391] Therefore, it typically foregrounds the sphere of work. Of course, these distinctions are not neat and clean-cut: people who work together may understand themselves as constituting a community, and communities may well require a certain level of cooperation.

The task to disentangle the conceptual cluster is further complicated by the polyvalences and contested nature of the concepts. Solidarity, for example, "is used variously to mark the cohesion of a group, the obligations of civic membership, the bond that unites the human family, shared experience, expressions of sympathy, or struggles for liberation."[392] Attempts to provide definitions of solidarity are, furthermore, inevitably met with objections and contradictory definitions.[393] Likewise, cooperation is a concept that is used to refer to a

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[390] Hussain, "Pitting People Against Each Other", p. 95.
Notably, Hussain argues that competition harms both 'community' and 'solidarity' (cf. Hussain, "Pitting People Against Each Other", p. 79, p. 95).
[391] Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, p. 331.
[392] Sally Scholz, *Political Solidarity* (University Park PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), p. 17.
[393] This is nicely illustrated by Andrea Sangiovanni's book on *Solidarity*, which includes responses by other theorists. Thus, Sangiovanni's case for conceiving solidarity as a kind of 'joint action' (cf. Andrea Sangiovanni, "Solidarity: nature, grounds, and value", in Andrea Sangiovanni, *Solidarity. Nature, Grounds, and Value*, with responses by Rainer Forst et al. [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023], pp. 3-134) is immediately

range of significantly different phenomena and practices. Recognising this, Richard Sennett defines cooperation thinly "as an exchange in which the participants benefit from the encounter."[394] This thin definition applies, he explains, to forms of cooperation that combine with competition, so that even market competition qualifies as a kind of cooperation. Cooperation can take destructive forms, harming or excluding others, but may also unite people across differences and conflicts.[395]

From this capaciousness, it follows that the mere claim that political democracy presupposes community or cooperation requires qualification and elaboration. What is needed is an account of the characteristics of those community ties, cooperative, or solidaristic practices that provide the necessary conditions for the realisation of democracy in the political sphere. While my aim here is not to provide definitions of either concept, this is also a matter of navigating the conceptual cluster of cooperation, solidarity, and community and the polyvalences of the concepts themselves. Taking account of the ways in which these concepts are theoretically and practically employed is, thus, instructive for the reconstruction of different types of community, solidarity, and cooperation and their relationship to political democracy.

2 Three Faces of Cooperation

In this section, I complicate Honneth's and Dewey's insight that political democracy in large-scale, complex societies depends on an extra-political cooperative basis. I argue that certain forms of cooperation, solidarity, and community can have de-democratising and depoliticising

followed by an essay proclaiming that 'solidarity is not joint action' (cf. Avery Kolers, "Solidarity is not joint action", in: Andrea Sangiovanni, *Solidarity. Nature, Grounds, and Value*, with responses by Rainer Forst et al. [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023], pp.137-153.

[394] Richard Sennett, *Together. The Rituals, Pleasures, and Politics of Co-operation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 5.

[395] Cf. Sennett, *Together*, pp. 5-6.

effects, effectively shrinking or closing off the space for political engagement with others. In these cases, community, cooperation, and solidarity, rather than providing a basis for democracy, threaten to undermine it. However, this does not lead me to a rejection of Honneth's and Dewey's claim but to an inquiry into the features of genuinely democratising cooperation.

To do this, I analyse *three forms or faces of extra-political cooperation*.[396] As in Chapters One and Two, neoliberal theory and practice provide the point of reference for this analysis. Thus, I begin with a discussion of the ordoliberal proposals for social policy that I briefly touched on in the previous chapter.[397] Under labels such as the 'social market economy', 'Vitalpolitik', and 'structural policy',[398] ordoliberal theorists propose a social policy that combines two aspects:

> On the one hand, vital policy consists of conservative and paternalistic-elitist perceptions of the family, gender-biased roles and a romanticising view on home ownership, rural work and natural forms for social hierarchy. This idealisation of traditional forms of rural life was very common in Ordoliberalism, and emerged against the background of what they saw as a cultural crisis of mass society. On the other hand, vital policy calls for a progressive inheritance tax, solidarity within (small and medium-sized) enterprises, and the establishment of infrastructures in support of families in order to achieve appropriate social conditions […]."[399]

Both elements of ordoliberal social policy are related to cooperation, solidarity, and community: the first element, the promotion of traditional and rural forms of life, aims at re-establishing traditional family and *community* life, and the second element entails the attempt

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[396] For ease, I speak of three faces of *cooperation* rather than of community, cooperation, and solidarity. While community and solidarity are central points of reference, especially for the ordoliberal face of cooperation, cooperation is the defining feature of all three 'faces.'

[397] See Chapter Two, Section 2.1.

[398] The different terms are associated with different ordoliberal thinkers: the influential term "social market economy has been coined by Alfred Müller-Armack (cf. Alfred Müller-Armack, "The Social Market Economy as an Economic and Social order", *Review of Social Economy*, Vol. 36, Issue 3 (1978), pp. 325-331). Rüstow, instead, uses the term "Vitalpolitik" which is translated as "organic policy" or "vital policy" (cf. Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (Organic Policy)"), whereas Röpke speaks of "structural policy" (cf. Remi Maier-Rigaud, "Social Policy in an Entrepreneurial Society", *The Oxford Handbook of Ordoliberalism*, ed. by Thomas Biebricher, Peter Nedergard, and Werner Bonefeld (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 506).

[399] Maier-Rigaud, "Social Policy in an Entrepreneurial Society", p. 507.

to foster *solidarity* within enterprises and even encourages the formation of consumer and worker *cooperatives*. However, rather than providing a basis for democracy, these ordoliberal attempts at establishing community, cooperation, and solidarity ultimately contribute to de-democratisation and depoliticization.

The *first face of cooperation* I discuss corresponds to the first aspect of ordoliberal social policy and can be found in the family and the traditional village community promoted by ordoliberal thinkers such as Alexander Rüstow and Wilhelm Röpke. While conservative values and orientations have shaped neoliberal policies, the combination of competitive markets and traditional, rural life that Rüstow and Röpke imagined has largely remained theory.[400] Yet, it resonates with contemporary phenomena such as the entrepreneurial 'trad wife' on social media and reveals a possible way for cooperative practices to contribute to de-democratisation while converging with an economised competitive ethos.[401] In contrast, the *second face of cooperation*, the neo- and ordoliberal promotion of economic cooperation, moves not only from the social to the economic realm but also to the analysis of actual historical events. Here, I consider not only ordoliberal theory but also take into account the ways in which cooperatives that initially had a political and transformative agenda were ultimately integrated into a neoliberal competitive order.

Analysing these two neoliberal or neoliberalised forms of cooperation is instructive in three ways: First, it complicates the image of neoliberalism as an economic and economising project. It acknowledges that neoliberalism is also a "moral-political" or a "markets-and-morals

[400] For accounts of the traditionalism and conservatism of the neoliberal project in practice, see, e.g., Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*; Cooper, *Family Values*.
[401] On the 'tradwife' phenomenon, see, e.g., Imogen Richards, Callum Jones, and Verity Trott, "Neoliberal capitalism and the political aesthetics of tradwife imagery", *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* (2025), pp. 1-16; Sophia Sykes and Veronica Hopner, "Trad Wives: Right-Wing Social Media Influencers", *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, Vol. 43, Issue 4 (2024), pp. 453-487.

project" that aims at the conservation or, more often, at the re-establishment of purportedly traditional values and forms of life.[402] It challenges, second, the simple opposition of competition and cooperation, instead demonstrating ways in which competition and cooperation can complement each other. Finally, this insight warns against a naïve optimism, exemplified, for example, by Bernard Harcourt, that assumes that increased cooperation will easily lead to social transformation and automatically establish a "cooperation democracy".[403]

The analysis of these de-democratising forms of cooperation provides me, furthermore, with a contrasting foil for my discussion of *the third and final face of cooperation*, the kind of social and economic cooperation that actually provides a basis for democracy. Such cooperation is characterised, I argue, by three features: It limits or mitigates the de-democratising effects of market competition, it cultivates subjectivities and relationships that are open to democratic engagement with others, and it does not resist its own politicisation.

2.1 Family life and village communities

In many ways, ordoliberal theorists are champions of competition as an organising principle of the market and, to some extent, of social life. Their economic theory is characterised by the attempt to construct and maintain a highly competitive market and is based on the conviction that the freedom to compete is a key human value.[404] Yet, they are not blind to the destructive

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[402] Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, p. 13.

On the convergence of conservatism and ordoliberalism, see: Thomas Biebricher, "Ordoliberalism and Conservatism", *The Oxford Handbook of Ordoliberalism*, ed. by Thomas Biebricher, Peter Nedergard, and Werner Bonefeld (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 76-88.

[403] Harcourt, *Cooperation*, p. 25.

Although Harcourt acknowledges that there are different forms of cooperation in existence today and that not all of them equally embody, e.g., democratic principles (cf. Harcourt, *Cooperation*, p. 22), his overall analysis pays little attention to these difficulties and instead emphasises the almost automatic transformative potential of cooperation.

[404] Cf. Bonefeld, *The Strong State and the Free Economy,* p. 3.

features of competition either and are keen to retain a sense of social cohesion and solidarity, which Rüstow calls "one of the most fundamental and valuable human needs".[405] This leads them to adopt a social policy that aims to preserve market competition while mitigating its destructive social effects. This programme is summarised as follows by Röpke, who warns against "demand[ing] more from competition than it can give". While necessary and desirable in the market, he holds that it is "not a principle on which a whole society can be built. From the sociological and moral point of view it is even dangerous because it tends more to dissolve than to unite. If competition is not to have the effect of a social explosive and is at the same time not to degenerate, its premise will be a correspondingly sound political and moral framework."[406]

Rüstow's and Röpke's descriptions of a state of social disintegration resulting from processes associated with the competitive market economy, industrialisation, and increasing complexity even mirror Dewey's diagnosis of a "new era of human relationships".[407] Röpke writes:

> society has during the last hundred years moved further and further away from such an ideal [of genuine communities filled with the spirit of human fellowship] and has disintegrated into a mass of abstract individuals who are solitary and isolated as human beings, but packed tightly like termites in their role of social functionaries. The inhabitants of a large apartment house are complete strangers to each other and meet perhaps for the first time in the air raid shelter, but on the other hand, they have the closest anonymous relations with the totality of their fellow men, relations of an external and mechanical kind, as buyers and sellers, as members of crowds jostling each other, as voters, as radio listeners and visitors to the motion pictures, sharing the same acoustic or optic impressions with millions of others, as tax payers, as recipients of

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[405] Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (Organic Policy)", p. 170.

[406] Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time,* p. 181.

See also: Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (Organic Policy)", p. 170. Müller-Armack, "The Social Market Economy as an Economic and Social Order", p. 327.

[407] Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 169.

Maier-Rigaud notes that these diagnoses and a critique of mass society were commonly shared by different thinkers at the time (cf. Maier-Rigaud, "Social Policy in an Entrepreneurial Society", p. 503).

> pensions and public assistance, as members of health insurance societies and this or that centrally organized association.[408]

Like Dewey, Röpke laments the loss of immediate community and connection in favour of ever more impersonal, mediated relationships.

Likewise, Sandel's observation that "the growth of large, impersonal cities, teeming with immigrants, poverty, and disorder, led many to fear that Americans lacked sufficient moral and civic cohesiveness to govern according to a shared conception of the good life"[409] resonates with Röpke's suspicion of the 'apartment house.' This is echoed, in turn, by Rüstow's 1951-account of the unhappy "organic situation" of the "modern, urban industrial worker":

> The family lives in a tenement block of, in most cases, over-occupied flats, together with other tenants with whom they usually do not get along, especially if the others are refugees from the East who have been placed there. Every morning, the father goes to work, and usually the mother too. During working hours, there is no family life. Then, in the evening, when the parents come home from work and the children, who have not enjoyed anything closely resembling an education, return from the streets, there tend to be minor, or sometimes major, 'disciplinary explosions', which do not exactly contribute to a harmonious family life.[410]

Although they share a diagnosis of the problems, Sandel, Dewey, and the ordoliberals arrive at decidedly different solutions: Sandel points, among other things, to the distinctly political organisation and empowerment of impoverished communities.[411] Dewey relies on communication to turn the 'Great Society' into the 'Great Community'.[412] The ordoliberals propose a 'return' to small-scale, semi-agrarian communities.

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[408] Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time,* p. 10.
[409] Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent*, p. 112.
[410] Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (Organic Policy)", p. 165.
Note Rüstow's suggestion that 'the family' is unlikely to get along with 'refugees from the East.' This illustrates my argument below that the ordoliberal community is held together primarily by similarity.
[411] Cf. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent*, pp. 259-261
[412] Cf. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 227.

The point of reference for this ordoliberal proposal is provided by a romanticised preindustrial "organic situation" which Rüstow imagines as follows: "life in the family, work in the family; the fact that work did not, as it does today, tear the family apart but, on the contrary, brought it together; life in nature, under open skies; the awareness of standing on one's own ground (even if only as a lifelong tenant); the ability to grow one's own cabbage […]."[413] Yet, such a 'return' to a preindustrial 'organic situation' does not imply a de-industrialisation of the economy or any transformation of economic relations. Instead, its main objective is to complement the cold competition of the market with "the warmth of direct human relationships".[414]

The aim of this first pillar of ordoliberal social policy is, thus, not primarily the institution of cooperative relationships but the cultivation of "an undegenerated community"[415] and of solidarity defined as a "'we-feeling'".[416] Within "an undegenerated community", Röpke specifies, people are "ready to co-operate with each other"[417] and Rüstow notably includes "work in the family"[418] in his account of preindustrial life quoted above. However, the promotion of cooperation is neither the primary aim nor the main strategy for achieving social cohesion, integration, and a sense of belonging. The solidarity that ordoliberals propose to pursue through the promotion of traditional morality and particular forms of family and village life resembles Durkheim's 'mechanical solidarity' more than his 'organic solidarity.'[419] It is not

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[413] Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (Organic Policy)", p. 167.
Rüstow is aware that a return to pre-industrial forms of life is not possible but aims to approach them, identifying semi-agrarian settlements and the allotment movement as potential contemporary versions. (cf. Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (Organic Policy)", pp. 168-170.)
[414] Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time,* p. 10.
[415] Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time,* p. 181.
[416] Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (Organic Policy)", p. 170.
[417] Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time,* p. 181.
[418] Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (Organic Policy)", p. 167.
[419] For Durkheim's discussion of mechanical solidarity, see: Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*, translated by W.D. Halls (New York: The Free Press, 1984), pp. 31-67. For his discussion of organic solidarity, see: Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*, pp. 68-87.

associated with the division of labour but "arises because a certain number of states of consciousness are common to all members of the same society."[420]

This brief characterisation of the conceptions of community, cooperation, and solidarity that underlie ordoliberal social policy already suggests that it should not be misunderstood as a democratising project. Rather than providing the foundation for democratic life, the ordoliberal community merely provides the basis for "a socially integrated life that gives the individual firm footing and meaning".[421] What is more, the ordoliberal versions of cooperation, community, and solidarity directly contribute to both depoliticization and de-democratisation in three ways: First, they leave the competitive market – and its de-democratising features – intact and even act as an enabling basis for it, fostering an entrepreneurial subjectivity unsuited for democratic engagement with others. The solidaristic community that exists alongside the market is, second, conceptualised as a private or semi-private sphere which replaces any truly public sphere of collective action and opinion formation. The combination of competitive markets, conservative values, and traditional village and family life is, third, portrayed as 'natural', part of a 'spontaneous order',[422] and thus opposed to conscious and deliberate political organisation. This final aspect of the neo- or ordoliberal vision of community is particularly pronounced when it comes to the promotion of traditional family values and gender roles, which additionally result in the perpetuation of inequality. I now discuss these three de-democratising and de-politicising features of ordoliberal cooperation in turn.

Contemporary theorists of ordoliberalism are divided over the question of whether ordoliberal social policy is best understood, following Werner Bonefeld, as "a market enabling

[420] Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, p. 64.
[421] Maier-Rigaud, "Social Policy in an Entrepreneurial Society", p. 503.
[422] For my discussion of Hayek's notion of 'spontaneous orders', see: Chapter One, Section 2.2.

social policy"[423] and "an unequivocal strategy of social engineering aiming to stabilize capitalism and prevent crises happening in the first place".[424] In contrast, Remi Maier-Rigaud argues that "it is not the market or its order, but the specific normative vision of a good society that guides Ordoliberal social policy": "The vision of an entrepreneurial society is at the core of Ordoliberal social policy, because it is consistent with the normative lifestyle its proponents envisioned."[425]

However, it is telling that Maier-Rigaud identifies the "entrepreneurial society" as the guiding normative ideal of ordoliberal social policy. Thus, even if its explicit purpose is not to uphold market order, ordoliberal social policy and its promotion of community and solidarity remain directed towards the competitive economy and society:

> The return to a genuinely competitive society is possible if we want the conditions necessary for such a return. One of the most important among these is in our view a simultaneous change of our whole economic and social system in favor of drastic decentralization of cities and industries, of the restoration of some more 'natural order,' more rural, but less urbanized, mechanized, industrialized, proletarized and commercialized. People will not like to face competition unless they have some firm stand. They must not feel lost in this present dehumanized world.[426]

Here, Röpke presents rural life and community primarily as a safeguard against the potentially 'dehumanising' effects of competition, as a realm which meets the needs for support and human connection outside of the market and provides individuals with a 'firm stand' to (re-)enter into competition.

In addition to providing a realm of human connection, integration, and some level of security, ordoliberal social policy and the kind of communities and cooperation it aims to

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[423] Bonefeld, *The Strong State and the Free Economy*, p. 11.
[424] Da Costa Vieri/Foster, "The Elimination of Political Demands", p. 292.
[425] Maier-Rigaud, "Social Policy in an Entrepreneurial Society", pp. 507-508.
[426] Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time,* p. 235.

cultivate serve to establish "an enterprise society in which the freedom to compete is second nature."[427] In line with the neoliberal demand to become an 'entrepreneurial self' that I discussed in the previous chapter, ordoliberal social policy aims at revitalising individual initiative, activity, and responsibility.[428]

> For Röpke and Rüstow, social policy should restore individual responsibility, group and family solidarity in order for society to cope in an entrepreneurial and what they believed to be a natural manner with the major risks in life. In their view it is not the state but the individual who is responsible for protecting their family against the major contingencies of sickness and old age […]. Self-help, responsibility and freedom always require the individual to risk some economic security, and for Rüstow […] the task of social policy is to support the personal capacity to perform as entrepreneurial risk-taker.[429]

A social policy of this kind reconciles individuals with the adverse effects of market competition and prepares them for their role within it, thereby also accepting its de-democratising effects.

To understand how ordoliberal social policy combines this emphasis on individual responsibility and entrepreneurialism with the notion of cooperation and community, it is necessary to consider the members of such a community. The reference to rural life and the village already reveals that the community ordoliberals favour is one characterised by proximity. Röpke's identification of the "others whose natural duty it would be to assist us when in need" as "the members of our family, our neighbors, our friends, or our colleagues" further highlights this.[430] Although this is not explicitly stated, the community celebrated by

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[427] Bonefeld, *The Strong State and The Free Economy*, p. 6.
[428] This purpose of ordoliberal social policy becomes obvious when contrasted with the welfare state as an alternative social policy which ordoliberals tend to associate with growing passivity: "The more the state takes care of us, the less shall we feel called upon to take care of ourselves and our family, and the less we feel inclined to do so, the less we can expect help from others whose natural duty it would be to assist us when in need, the members of our family, our neighbors, our friends, or our colleagues." (Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time*, p. 164.) This aspect of ordoliberal social policy resonates with my analysis of neoliberal responsibilisation in Chapter Two, Section 2.1.
[429] Maier-Rigaud, "Social Policy in an Entrepreneurial Society", p. 505.
[430] Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time*, p. 164.

ordoliberals is likely that of individuals who are fairly similar, so that the descriptor 'proximity' applies not just to spatial relations but equally to a shared set of values and commitments. Ordoliberal solidarity is, I suggested above, of a 'mechanic' type, based on similarity. The reference to family, neighbours, friends, and colleagues also marks the community as a private or semi-private sphere from which strangers or fundamentally different others remain absent.

This type of semi-private community is far from incompatible with entrepreneurialism and what Hayek terms "true individualism":

> That true individualism affirms the value of the family and all the common efforts of the small community and group, that it believes in local autonomy and voluntary associations, and that indeed its case rests largely on the contention that much for which the coercive action of the state is usually invoked can be done better by voluntary collaboration need not be stressed further.[431]

In the eyes of neo- and ordoliberal theorists, it is not the community per se that conflicts with the entrepreneurial individualism they favour, but only those communities characterised by 'massification', 'proletarization', and 'collectivism'.

These terms do not just describe the formation of 'masses' in the course of modernity and industrialisation, for example, in urban living or factory working conditions, but point particularly to the political organisation of such masses: "Ordoliberalism links the critique of mass society to a demonisation of collectivism, which comprised mostly all non-individualistic political and ideological movements […]."[432] It is therefore not the existence of any form of collectives that ordoliberals take issue with – indeed, as has been shown, the family and village are deemed to be necessary and desirable. Instead, they take issue with collectives that they

[431] Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order*, p. 23.
[432] Maier-Rigaud, "Social Policy in an Entrepreneurial Society", p. 504.

consider to be overriding the individual, either by swallowing it in an amorphous mass or by organising such a mass for a broader collective purpose.

Importantly, this rejection of collective political action entails a more or less explicit rejection of democracy or, at least, *mass democracy*: "the ordoliberals speak about the 'revolt of the masses', which helped by the system of mass democracy tends to replace the sovereignty of the liberal rule of law with the sovereignty of the proletarianised demos, who subject the liberal rule of law to mass democratic demands for social equality and material security."[433] The opposition between the community favoured by ordoliberals and collective political organisation is illustrated by Rüstow's account of the reaction of Austrian trade unions to an emerging allotment movement:

> in Vienna this led to counter-measures being taken by the Austrian trade unions because these workers, who had been diligent trade unionists, no longer regularly attended union meetings and, rather than paying their dues, bought themselves new watering cans. There was thus an immediate threat that they might become happy independently and without the help of their trade union, a possibility which, of course, needed to be prevented.[434]

Overlooking their political dimension, Rüstow portrays trade unions exclusively as a way in which workers are able to experience solidarity. Accordingly, he embraces the development of a "much healthier and more gratifying, new form through which this same old need for solidarity may be satisfied."[435] He eradicates the political dimension of collective action and presents trade unions and allotment movements alike as practices that merely serve the purpose of satisfying an intrinsically human need for social connection.

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[433] Bonefeld, *The Strong State and The Free Economy*, p. 24.

For the argument that the ordoliberals opposed 'unlimited' rather than 'mass democracy', see Irving, "Limiting democracy and framing the economy".

[434] Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (*Organic Policy*)", p. 170.

[435] Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (*Organic Policy*)", p. 171.

This reduction of collective action to an experience of connection or "belonging" somewhat paradoxically even characterises Rüstow's account of local democracy:

> Something I have only heard about recently that I do not want to pass over is that in West German cities and villages the inhabitants of individual quarters have come together to form neighbourhood groups in which they discuss and present the common concerns of the quarter: questions such as why a certain street has still not been tarmacked, whether a post box might finally be put up on that corner, and the like. In this way, astonishing and lively feelings of belonging gradually develop from the ground up. It seems that this promises a realistic and undemanding way of pursuing the aim of truly democratic integration from the bottom up […]."[436]

This passage seems to contradict my earlier claim that the ordoliberal suspicion of collectivism implies a suspicion of democracy or, at least, mass democracy. Two things are worth noting here: First, I need to reiterate that the neoliberal de-democratisation I diagnose does not manifest itself in an outright rejection of democratic principles and institutions. This is true particularly for ordoliberals who often understand themselves as defenders of democracy and whose commitment to democratic institutions was often consolidated in their opposition to the NS-regime in Germany.[437]

Yet, the kind of democracy ordoliberals understood themselves to be defending was expressly not a mass democratic one.[438] Indeed, it seems that, for Rüstow, the measure for the success of democratic politics is not its responsiveness to the interests of citizens nor its ability to express and contain political disagreement and conflict. Instead, it is unity and stability – in short, a strong state. This is evident in his warning against "a plurality of interests" in political institutions:

> A plurality of interests at the lower levels is inescapable; but so is the formulation of a unified and responsible policy at the higher governmental level if a political system is

[436] Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (*Organic Policy*)", p. 173.
[437] Cf. Bonefeld, *The Strong State and the Free Economy*, pp. 8-12.
[438] For an account of the ordoliberal stance towards democracy and its shared heritage with 'authoritarian liberalism,' see: Bonefeld, *The Strong State and the Free Economy,* pp. 47-67.

> to remain viable. The art of liberal-democratic statesmanship consists of letting this plurality of interests below flow into a unified policy above – which, though difficult, is fortunately not insoluble.[439]

Rüstow's suspicion of a pluralist democracy finds expression in a speech from 1929, which, in the name of saving the Weimar Republic and its democracy, suggests constitutional reforms to enable a "dictatorship in the bounds of democracy".[440] Interestingly, the brief sketch of this 'democratic dictatorship' that Rüstow provides resembles his account of co-determination within enterprises, which I discuss below.[441] A limited dictatorship of this kind would involve, he states, "giving the Reich chancellor the opportunity to take measures within certain limits at first, but then, since democracy is to be upheld, to have to face the question and ask: how is it? Do you like it or do you not like it?"[442] According to Rüstow, upholding democracy requires nothing more than retroactive confirmation.

Second, the desire for unity also colours Rüstow's account of a 'truly democratic integration from the bottom up' that I quoted above. Not only does it privilege small-scale local deliberation, which is limited in scope to 'the common concerns of the quarter', the tarmac, and the post box. Its main emphasis seems to lie not on democratic decision-making per se. Rather, it is presented as a means of fostering 'feelings of belonging'. It seems that Rüstow inverts the Deweyan relationship between cooperation, community, and democracy: rather than

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[439] Alexander Rüstow, *Freedom and Domination. A Historical Critique of Civilization*, translated by Salvator Attanasio (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 471.

He continues: "The best electoral system is one that leads to such a responsible formation of policy, that is, the British plurality system of elections." (Rüstow, *Freedom and Domination*, p. 471.) Rüstow shares this conviction with proponents of the market model of democracy that I discuss in Chapter Four.

[440] This is my translation of the title of the speech, which in the German original is entitled: "Diktatur innerhalb der Grenzen der Demokratie"; see: Alexander Rüstow, "Diktatur innerhalb der Grenzen der Demokratie", *Vierteljahrsschrift für Zeitgeschichte,* Vol. 7, Issue 1 (1959), pp. 87-102.

[441] See Section 2.2 below.

[442] My translation. Original: "dem Reichskanzler die Möglichkeit geben, innerhalb gewisser Grenzen Maßnahmen zunächst einmal durchzuführen, aber dann, da die Demokratie aufrechterhalten werden soll, sich stellen zu müssen und fragen zu müssen: wie ist es? gefällt euch das nicht oder gefällt es euch?" (Rüstow, "Diktatur innerhalb der Grenzen der Demokratie", p. 99)

being enabled by and grounded in them, democratic deliberation serves itself as the basis for cooperation and community.[443] Indeed, it is not clear whether the democratisation from below that Rüstow favours exceeds this expansion of 'feelings of belonging' in any meaningful way.

The eradication of the political dimension of community and collective action is furthered, finally, by a consistent appeal to the natural. From Rüstow's concept of *organic* policy (*Vital*politik), which implicitly posits an organicist understanding of society, to countless references to "natural roots"[444] and "undegenerated community"[445], ordoliberals insist that the communities they favour are in some meaningful way more 'natural' than other forms of life. These references to a "normative natural"[446] illustrate the ordo- and, more generally, neoliberal suspicion of organised and politicised collective action. It chimes, furthermore, with Hayek's praise of spontaneous order and of "the traditions and conventions which evolve in a free society"[447] as the outcome of dispersed individual rather than organised collective action.[448]

This naturalisation of a particular type of community and cooperation finds its starkest expression in the ordoliberal image of the family, the disintegration of which Röpke considers to be among the chief symptoms of the social crisis.[449] The lack of family life and the existence of working mothers are also major elements of the deplorable organic situation of the urban industrial worker in Rüstow's account. It is therefore unsurprising that he suggests "that all girls' schools see their chief task as preparing their pupils for their main professions as spouses,

[443] It is important to clarify that I do not mean to suggest that the observation that democratic participation fosters community and feelings of belonging is wrong or insignificant. On the contrary, I emphasise this potential with regard to democratic competition in Chapter Six, Section 2.2 and Chapter Seven, Section 1.2. What is problematic about Rüstow's account of local democracy is rather that he seems to reduce democratic participation to a mere means for achieving community and solidarity.
[444] Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time,* p. 10.
[445] Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time,* p. 181.
[446] Biebricher, "Ordoliberalism and Conservatism", p. 81.
[447] Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order*, p. 23.
[448] See Chapter One, Section 2.2.
[449] Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time*, p. 15.

housewives, and mothers."[450] Beyond merely positing a particular order as unchangeable and superior, the reference to the natural serves to perpetuate and justify social hierarchies and inequalities, which, from a democratic perspective, are problematic in themselves.[451]

To summarise, community, solidarity, and cooperation of the ordoliberal type are not only compatible with and designed as a complement to the competitive market order. They also contribute to de-democratisation and de-politicisation insofar as they emphasise individual initiative and foster an entrepreneurial spirit, are delegated to a private or semi-private realm which ultimately subsumes or replaces the political, and naturalise social relations, including unequal social hierarchies. Of course, much of ordoliberal social policy has remained theory, yet it would be too quick to dismiss the particular type of cooperation it aimed to establish as mere fiction. Indeed, the next section will show that some of the ways ordoliberals thought about cooperation inform policy and developments even in actually existing neoliberalism.

2.2 Entrepreneurial cooperatives

Cooperatives are enterprises that are jointly owned and democratically co-determined by the consumers, producers, or workers who are their members. This form of economic organisation has long been associated with a transformative social project: "Co-operatives, in particular the workers' type – in which owners, members and workers are one – epitomize economic democracy, and as such have been considered an alternative to capitalism by the left since the Industrial Revolution […]."[452] Today, this promise of transformation through cooperation remains alive, for example, in institutions such as the International Cooperative Alliance's

[450] Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (*Organic Policy*)", p. 172.
[451] On social hierarchies, see: Biebricher, "Ordoliberalism and Conservatism", p. 81. For the perpetuation of gender inequality and traditional family values in actually existing neoliberalism, see Cooper, *Family Values.*
[452] Da Costa Vieira/Foster, "The Elimination of Political Demands", p. 290.

(ICA),[453] and in Harcourt's insistence that "[a]n era of cooperation democracy is on our horizon."[454]

This introductory portrayal of cooperatives seems to suggest that the economic cooperation they practice almost automatically challenges neoliberalism and the individualist, self-interested competition it relies on. Cooperatives, moreover, seem to be a paradigmatic case of the kind of cooperation that Honneth, drawing on Dewey, associates with a fair and just division of labour and which, he argues, provides a necessary basis for political democracy:

> a fair and just form of a division of labor can give each individual member of society a consciousness of cooperatively contributing with all others to the realization of common goals. It is only the experience of participating, by means of an individual contribution, in the particular tasks of a group that can convince the single individual of the necessity of a democratic public […].[455]

However, when studied more closely, the relationship between neoliberalism and cooperatives turns out to be much more ambivalent – as does the democratic promise of economic cooperation. Indeed, some neoliberal theorists, including the ordoliberal Röpke, even seem to embrace cooperatives as actors in their ideal competitive market and praise "the beneficial activities of saving banks, mutual building societies, co-operatives and similar institutions."[456]

In the following, I explore this ambivalence by providing an account of the relationship between neoliberalism and cooperatives that focuses on the possibility of cooperatives becoming integrated into and upholding a neoliberal competitive economy, with all its de-

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[453] The transformative social vision of the ICA is outlined in: International Co-operative Alliance, "Blueprint for a Co-operative Decade" (2012), https://ica.coop/sites/default/files/2023-08/Blueprint%20for%20a%20Co-operative%20Decade%20-%20English.pdf and International Co-operative Alliance, "A People-Centred Path for a Second Cooperative Decade" (2020), https://ica.coop/sites/default/files/2025-02/a4_landscape_booklet_en.pdf.
[454] Harcourt, *Cooperation*, p. 30.
[455] Honneth, "Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation", p. 776.
[456] Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time,* pp. 220-221.

democratising implications. First, I consider how the conceptual intersections between cooperation, self-help, and responsibility make it possible for cooperatives to be "remade into capitalist, competitive survivors, embodying self-help, a virtuous trait representing individual responsibility."[457] Then, I discuss how even the participatory and democratic design of cooperatives – the epitome of economic democracy – has the potential to be reduced to a mere mechanism of belonging.

For the analysis of this *second face of cooperation* that takes up and elaborates on themes from the first one, I draw on writings by ordoliberal theorists Rüstow and Röpke as well as on two studies of UK cooperatives under conditions of actually existing neoliberalism: Sean Irving's conceptual history of the Industrial Common Ownership Movement (ICOM) and Thomas Da Costa Viera and Emma Foster's examination of "the Thatcher and Cameron governments' attitude towards co-operatives".[458] Importantly, I do not deny that cooperatives can be agents of economic transformation as well as of economic democratisation. Indeed, I return to this potential when outlining a *third face of cooperation* below.

Above, I noted the capaciousness of the concept of cooperation. This holds true for economic cooperatives, too. As Irving demonstrates in his account of the shifting self-understanding and practice of ICOM over the 30 years of its existence, the dominant understanding of cooperation and the role of cooperatives within ICOM developed "from a radical left politics committed to change 'in and against' the market to a position which looked to action 'in and through' the market."[459] While ICOM remained consistent in its concern for

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[457] Da Costa Vieira/Foster, "The Elimination of Political Demands", p. 300.

[458] Da Costa Vieira/Foster, "The Elimination of Political Demands", p. 290.
See also: Irving, "From New Left to Social Enterprise"

[459] Irving, "From New Left to Social Enterprise", p. 7.
ICOM was an umbrella organisation for worker cooperatives in the UK that existed between 1971 and 2001.

worker control as the core of cooperation and cooperatives, the ideological and conceptual context changed, ultimately emphasising "Leadership, The Market, and Social Enterprise" over "Activism, Democracy, and Social Transformation".[460] Crucially, ICOM's ideological and institutional development illustrates that cooperation is neither automatically nor necessarily directed against the market. Instead, the concept of cooperation itself contains the resources to be reinterpreted on market-conforming or even market-affirming grounds.

This is confirmed by Da Costa Viera and Foster's analysis of the depoliticization of the British cooperative movement during the Thatcher and Cameron governments. Rather than changing self-understandings, Da Costa Viera and Foster foreground the ways in which these governments disciplined and depoliticised the cooperative movement, among other things, by re-interpreting and neoliberalising the cooperativist ideal of self-help in terms of self-responsibility. They argue that the Thatcher government co-opted and depoliticised the British cooperative movement through the cutting of state support and the integration of cooperatives into the market:

> This assimilation and depoliticization of co-operatives was accomplished by ending the existing support for workers' co-operatives – the landmark of any socialist and Co-operativist governmental agenda aiming to take the co-operative sector beyond the margins of the economy […] – and reshaping the co-operative model through the rhetoric and policies of 'popular capitalism'.[461]

Cutting state support and integrating cooperatives into the competitive market not only limited their transformative vision and possibilities of effecting change through state policy. It also affected the character of economic cooperation: rather than providing space for radical political and economic experiments, cooperatives now had to prove themselves as responsible economic

[460] Irving, "From New Left to Social Enterprise", pp. 8-9.
[461] Da Costa Vieira/Foster, "The Elimination of Political Demands", pp. 295-296.

agents "that could weather economic realities",[462] thereby "blurring the line between neoliberal self-responsibility and Co-operativist self-help, while reshaping perceptions of what support the state should or should not provide."[463]

This reframing of the purpose and character of economic cooperation continued under Cameron, with cooperatives perceived of and presented in opposition to the welfare state: "The courageous citizen-entrepreneurs were designated as the growth-generating section of society and opposed to the unproductive, welfare-dependent proletarians […]."[464] Rather than as a challenge to the capitalist system, "the co-operative model was presented as a natural symbol of the free economy, obfuscating the Movement's historical rejection of and struggle with capitalist enterprise […]. In sum, co-operatives were co-opted and depoliticized – remade into capitalist, competitive survivors, embodying self-help, a virtuous trait representing individual responsibility."[465]

Da Costa Viera and Foster argue that this depoliticization and co-option of the cooperative movement in the UK, though not necessarily inspired by it, has "been consistent with an *ordoliberal* governing logic."[466] Some ordoliberal thinkers, such as Röpke, did indeed reserve a space for cooperatives in their image of the market economy and in their programme for de-proletarisation:

> He [the worker] must also be able to acquire freely disposable funds and become a 'small capitalist,' possibly by being given the opportunity of acquiring stocks. The perennially discussed idea of letting the workers share in the profits of an enterprise by the distribution of stock to them, meets with the objection, never entirely silenced, that the risk of unemployment is a sufficient burden for the worker without the additional risk of losing his Capital. However, one would have to consider whether this objection

[462] Da Costa Vieira/Foster, "The Elimination of Political Demands", p. 297.
[463] Da Costa Vieira/Foster, "The Elimination of Political Demands", p. 298.
[464] Da Costa Vieira/Foster, "The Elimination of Political Demands", p. 300.
[465] Da Costa Vieira/Foster, "The Elimination of Political Demands", p. 299-300.
[466] Da Costa Vieira/Foster, "The Elimination of Political Demands", p. 291; my emphasis.

> could not to a great extent be met by creating preferential labor Stocks or by labor investment trusts (as in England). At this point we should also remember the beneficial activities of saving banks, mutual building societies, co-operatives and similar institutions.[467]

For Röpke, cooperatives are but one tool among many to de-proletarise workers, turning them into 'small capitalists.' Although he is not explicitly concerned with cooperation or cooperatives, Rüstow also argues for increased workers' participation and "the workers' right to co-determination within enterprises".[468]

As I aim to show in the following, such ordoliberal references to cooperation, cooperatives, or, in Rüstow's case, co-determination also foreground cooperation's association with independence and self-help, re-interpreting it along entrepreneurial lines. 'Self-help' is a core value of the cooperative movement – and sometimes, as in the ordoliberal rejection of the welfare state, explicitly contrasted with state-administered support. Yet, its transformation into a neoliberal version of self-responsibility separates it both from its transformative vision and from its commitment to the values of caring for and working together with others.[469] Instead, the neo- or ordoliberal conception of cooperatives perceives them primarily as a vessel for strengthening an ultimately individualist entrepreneurial spirit.

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[467] Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time,* p. 221.
[468] Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (*Organic Policy*)", p. 171.
[469] Self-help and self-responsibility are both listed among the cooperative values of the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) (cf. International Cooperative Alliance, "Guidance Notes to the Co-operative Principles" (2015), https://ica.coop/sites/default/files/2021-11/ICA%20Guidance%20Notes%20EN.pdf, p. 34). However, these values are understood as independence from economic agents that usually dominate the economy and explicitly related to a transformative vision: "Co-operatives offer an empowering model based on self-help and self-reliance; a stark contrast to the consolidation of wealth and power in the hands of the small number of wealthy investors that has characterised the global economy for decades. Co-operation amongst co-operatives is fundamental to creating an economy in which the production and distribution of goods and services is undertaken in the spirit of mutual self-help and in the best interests of all the communities co-operatives serve." (ICA, "Guidance Notes to the Co-operative Principles", p. 77.)
For my discussion of neoliberal self-responsibility, see: Chapter Two, Section 2.1.

To understand this seemingly paradoxical combination of cooperation and entrepreneurialism, it is important to recognise that, for ordoliberals, the idea of 'healthy' or good work is illustrated by the pre-industrial figure of the craftsman or artisan.[470] Röpke contrasts the "the meaning, self-determination and rhythm which characterize the working life of the artisan" with "the de-personalizing and mechanizing effects of the old large-scale industrial enterprise, its massiveness, its minute division of labor and its barrack-like atmosphere […]."[471] As in their vision of community and social life outside of the economy, ordoliberals favour a return to a (re-)imagined past, although they are aware of the changed conditions.[472] Notably, this means that their point of reference remains the individual worker in their independence rather than, for example, a collective of workers or the relationship between workers. Although Rüstow, in particular, highlights the importance of increasing "solidarity within an enterprise",[473] the focus of ordoliberal theory and policy remains the individual, its independence, and entrepreneurial spirit.

It is striking that in the passage cited above, Röpke lists the "beneficial activities" of cooperatives as part of a programme of de-proletarisation that aims to transform 'proletarians'

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[470] Cf. Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time,* p. 220.

Rüstow similarly notes that "the situation of the worker in such enterprises is significantly worse than is the organic situation [*Vitalsituation*] of the farmer on his own farm or the craftsman in his own workshop." (Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (Organic Policy)", p. 170.)

[471] Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time,* p. 220.

Beyond the large apartment houses and lack of familial harmony, noted above, Rüstow's account of the "organic situation" of the modern industrial worker also includes a passage on the character of their work: "The day is taken up by work which mother and father do in different locations, under external instruction and command and with minimal personal initiative. It is divided up in such a way that its overall significance is by no means always clear." (Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (*Organic Policy*)", p. 165.)

[472] Röpke most explicitly frames the question of the reform of working conditions as one of approaching if not returning to the working experience of the artisan: "Another question is how far and by what means it is possible to transform the organization of an industrial plant in such a manner that the work will acquire the meaning, self-determination and rhythm which characterize the working life of the artisan." (Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time,* p. 220.)

[473] Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (Organic Policy)", p. 170.

As mentioned above, Rüstow considers 'solidarity' to be a fundamental human need. His main motivation for fostering solidarity seems to be meeting this need, not cultivating human relationality and community as ends in themselves.

into "small capitalists";[474] that is, following the ordoliberal understanding of proletarisation, the transformation of collective identities into self-responsible individuals. Workers become, as Da Costa Viera and Foster put it with regard to Cameron's cooperative policies, "citizen-entrepreneurs".[475] Integrated into the competitive market and devoid of any broader transformative vision, cooperatives can be turned into instruments for the "empowerment of the proletarian as an entrepreneur of their own labour".[476] Analogously to the traditional village communities discussed above, this economic cooperation does not provide a basis for political democracy. Rather, it has potentially de-democratising effects because it leaves the competitive market, its rules, and inequalities intact, de-politicises economic life, and contributes to the cultivation of an entrepreneurial subjectivity which, as I have shown in Chapter Two, is at odds with genuine democratic involvement.[477]

This diagnosis holds true even in light of what, at first glance, looks like an ordoliberal plea for economic democracy or at least for "the self-governance of the workforce".[478] Democratic organisation is a key feature and value of the cooperative movement;[479] one that carries with it a significant transformative potential insofar as it shifts control to members, that is, to consumers or workers, whose voices are not ordinarily heard and unlikely to effect change. The collective co-determination of an enterprise, furthermore, constitutes itself a form of "reflexive cooperation"[480], a potential space for democratic (self-)experience and collective

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[474] Röpke, *The Social Crisis of Our Time,* 2p. 20.
[475] Da Costa Vieira/Foster, "The Elimination of Political Demands", p. 300.
[476] Maier-Rigaud, "Social Policy in an Entrepreneurial Society", p. 507.
[477] This tension between cooperation's genuine transformative promise and co-optation by neoliberal reality also affects mutual aid initiatives that find themselves threatened to be turned into projects used to fill the gaps left by neoliberal privatisation: "If we don't design mutual aid projects with care, we can fit right into this conservative dream, becoming the people who can barely hold the threads of a survivable world together while the 1 percent extracts more and more while heroizing individual volunteers." (Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid. Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* [London/New York: Verso, 2020], p. 30 [ProQuest Ebook].)
[478] Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (Organic Policy)", pp. 170-171.
[479] Cf. ICA, "Guidance Notes to the Co-operative Principles", p. 15-16.
[480] Honneth, "Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation". See also: Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, p. 331.

oversight of the market.[481] Democratic involvement in the workplace may, thus, form a basis for political democracy and increased citizen participation. However, this is not the case when it comes to the particular kind of 'workplace democracy' favoured by Rüstow.

Rüstow discusses workers' rights for self-determination as part of his broader inquiry into the possibility of creating or increasing "solidarity within enterprises".[482] As mentioned above, Rüstow considers 'solidarity' a natural human need which is threatened or at least marginalised by the competitive order. In addition to the family and village community, Rüstow believes that the enterprise itself can become a realm of solidarity. It is in this context that he expresses "the opinion that the workers' right to co-determination within enterprises deserves every conceivable support, and that all regulation within enterprises should be left to the self-governance of the workforce, at least where this would not damage the primary purpose of the enterprise."[483]

I want to note two things here: First, mirroring his stance towards local democracy, Rüstow does not seem to value co-determination in itself or as a mechanism for members to equally contribute to and control the enterprise's organisation and goals. Instead, he views it as a tool to create a "we-feeling" within the enterprise.[484] Furthermore, he contrasts solidarity *within the enterprise* with an older form of solidarity outside and maybe to some extent against it, namely in trade unions; that is, Rüstow argues for the replacement of a politicised solidarity with a depoliticised one. By encouraging workers to identify with the enterprise that employs them, this is also likely to produce a particularly motivated workforce. Such a 'co-

[481] For an argument for the democratic potential of co-determination, see: Waheed Hussain, *Living with the Invisible Hand. Markets, Corporations, and Human Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).
[482] Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (Organic Policy)", pp. 170-171.
[483] Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (Organic Policy)", pp. 170-171.
[484] Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (Organic Policy)", pp. 170-171.

determination', it seems, is then just as favourable, if not more so, for managers and owners as for workers.

Second, this is guaranteed by the limitation of this co-determination: "[…] all regulation within enterprises should be left to the self-governance of the workforce, *at least where this would not damage the primary purpose of the enterprise*."[485] Rüstow also notes: "Of course, this right to co-determination within an enterprise has its limit where the responsibility for the economic management of the enterprise is concerned. This cannot be shared, of course: it cannot be dealt with in a democratic fashion […]."[486] Concerned primarily with the "the organic feeling [*Vitalgefühl*] of the workers" rather than with actual democratic control and participation, he is almost equally as happy to replace democratic deliberation with explanation:

> Even if the ultimate decision lies with the manager of an enterprise, there is nevertheless no reason why this decision and its rationale should not be explained to the workforce. Admittedly, this does not come naturally to everyone, and it does not suit all. But I know of cases in which it is very successfully practised by managers with a talent for it, and in such cases it can contribute very effectively to a strengthening of solidarity within an enterprise and to an improvement in the organic feeling [*Vitalgefühl*] of the workers. [487]

This passage starkly reveals that what matters, according to Rüstow, is not actually the experience of contributing to a common endeavour but merely 'the organic feeling' of the workers, a sense of belonging and being part of something.

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[485] Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (Organic Policy)", pp. 170-171, my emphasis.
[486] Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (Organic Policy)", pp. 170-171, my emphasis.
[487] Rüstow, "Social Policy or *Vitalpolitik* (Organic Policy)", pp. 170-171.
For a discussion of the variety of practices associated with co-determination, see also: Honneth, *The Working Sovereign,* pp. 170-172.

Cooperatives or co-determination on this ordoliberal model fail to realise or even to contribute to a genuinely cooperative division of labour that could serve as a basis for political democracy. Instead, they are integrated into the neo- and ordoliberal celebration of entrepreneurialism. Within this context, even democratic co-determination loses its transformative potential and is reduced to a mere mechanism of belonging. However, this analysis does not imply the conviction that economic cooperation and cooperatives can never serve as a foundation for political democracy. Instead, I will finally turn to the discussion of a democratic and democratising form of extra-political, including economic, cooperation in the following section.

2.3 Democratic cooperation

So far, I have discussed forms of extra-political cooperation that not only fail to provide a basis for political democracy but, at least potentially, even contribute to neoliberal de-democratisation. Taking these two de-democratising forms of cooperation as my negative starting point or contrasting foil, I now aim to outline a *third face of cooperation,* i.e., a form or forms of cooperation that genuinely provide "the social foundations of democratic life".[488] My account of this cooperation will remain fairly general and somewhat tentative to avoid getting lost, for example, in detailed questions of economic organisation that are beyond the scope of this thesis. Moreover, it is likely that there are several different ways to conceptualise and organise democratic and democratising forms of extra-political cooperation. Here, I only argue that such cooperation needs to satisfy three criteria which negatively correspond to the de-democratising forms of cooperation discussed above: if extra-political cooperation is to provide a basis for political democracy, first, it cannot leave the competitive market and its de-

[488] "*The Social Foundations of Democratic Life"* is the subtitle of Honneth's *Freedom's Right.*

democratising structures and outcomes intact; second, it needs to foster subjectivities and relationships open to democratic engagement with others; finally, it needs to be open to internal democratic organisation and ought not to resist its politicisation.

I have argued that both the ordoliberal village community and neoliberalised cooperatives are not just compatible with neoliberal market competition but ultimately support it. However, as demonstrated in Chapters One and Two, this competition is associated with a range of de-democratising outcomes and structures. Thus, any cooperation that upholds this type of market competition fails to provide a sound basis for democratic practices. For cooperation to provide such a basis, it cannot merely exist alongside the market – as the ordoliberal village community – or be reduced to a competitor among others within it – as in neoliberalised cooperatives. Instead, it needs to entail a re-shaping of the economic realm. According to Honneth, re-thinking and re-organising the economic realm is of additional importance today insofar as it constitutes, as the sphere of work, "the only institutional sphere in which most citizens have experiences and learn lessons that exercise a decisive influence over the social and moral views and attitudes of a political community." [489]

An account of such a cooperative re-shaping of the economic realm requires two qualifications: First, as briefly mentioned above, market competition can itself be described as a thin form of cooperation.[490] In this thin sense, cooperation can be something that 'happens' to economic actors behind their backs and that emerges out of their purely self-interested actions: they "coöperate as the cogs coöperate in the wheels of a mechanism. They work

[489] Honneth, *The Working Sovereign*, p. ix.
[490] See Section 1 above.

together; but few or none of them know how they coöperate, or what they must do."[491] It is this kind of cooperation that is invoked in Adam Smith's famous image of the invisible hand.[492]

Yet, this kind of cooperation does not provide a sufficient basis for a democratic public to emerge. Following Honneth, the full realisation of political democracy instead requires a 'thicker' form of cooperation in which economic actors are conscious of "cooperatively contributing with all others to the realization of common goals."[493] Realising this conscious and collective, thicker form of cooperation calls for a fundamental re-organisation of the capitalist market economy.

Honneth's account of cooperative contributions to common goals seems to invoke an image of economic organisation in line with Marx's ideal of "a production of men for men as such".[494] Communist society would dispense with the market, instead allowing for production immediately for the need of others. In recognising the interdependence of human need, this kind of production realises, so Marx, the "communal essence" of the producer.[495] The appeal of this vision of human society remains alive today in the movements and practices of resistance opposing neoliberal precarisation. Indeed, it may even be argued that the material organisation of communal life during the protest encampments of the 2010s and beyond realised Marx's ideal on a small scale and for a fleeting moment.[496]

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[491] Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968 [1918]), p. 264.
[492] Cf. Sennett, *Together*, p. 76.
[493] Honneth, "Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation", p. 776.
[494] Karl Marx, "On James Mill", in: *Karl Marx. Selected Writings (Revised Edition)*, ed. by. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 130.
[495] Marx, "On James Mill", p. 132.
[496] Cf. Van de Sande, "The prefigurative politics of Tahir Square", p. 234. Karakayalí/Özge, "The Spirit of Gezi: The Recomposition of Political Subjectivities in Turkey", p. 124.

Despite its continuing appeal, it is an idea of production and economic relations that seems unsuited to the complexities and scale of most contemporary democratic societies. Drawing on Durkheim and Hegel, Honneth, therefore, points to the possibilities of 'corporations' or other discursive bodies for a cooperative encasing of the market instead.[497] Such bodies, he notes, make economic actors aware of their cooperative relations and commitments to others "because the deliberation within these groups and the negotiation between them force each participant to take up the perspective of the other, thus enabling them to see each other primarily as partners in cooperation instead of as competitors."[498] While they do not institute immediate relationships of cooperation *within the market*, these bodies allow for the development of a different understanding of the market and market relations.

Waheed Hussain makes a similar proposal, suggesting organising and limiting market competition through rules formulated by discursive bodies in what he calls an "intermediated market arrangement". In processes of deliberation, "parties would cooperate with each other to find standards and polices that all could accept as an appropriate framework for competition in a properly ordered political community."[499] This discursive or deliberative encasement of the competitive market implies an inversion of the neoliberal relationship between politics and markets. From a neoliberal viewpoint, state and democratic politics ought to be limited and shaped by the competitive market.[500] In contrast, Honneth and Hussain argue that it is the market that ought to be limited and shaped by democratic deliberation.

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[497] In presenting this as a limitation of the market from the outside, I follow Jütten's arguments in: Jütten, "Is the Market a Sphere of Social Freedom?", pp. 194-196.
[498] Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, 194.
[499] Hussain, *Living with the Invisible Hand*, p. 194.
[500] See Chapter One, Section 2.

In addition to the discursive regulation of market relations, Honneth also points to the importance of the experience of work, that is, to the structures and relationships not between but within enterprises. In this context, Honneth points to the potential of worker cooperatives to increase "workers' collective self-confidence and ability to be politically active".[501] Although he notes the obstacles cooperatives face within a competitive market, Honneth underlines that "cooperative control over work processes and business aims are ideal means for creating the necessary conditions – at least the psychological and social conditions – for participation in democratic will formation."[502]

Honneth's mention of the effects of worker cooperatives on "workers' *collective* self-confidence"[503] hints at a further aspect of a truly democratic and democratising form of social and economic cooperation. Ordoliberal theory and neoliberal policies reframe cooperation and cooperatives in line with their celebration of entrepreneurialism. On this understanding, its collective aspect is incidental, and cooperation is pursued only instrumentally as an extension of individual initiative. Such cooperation thus fails to enable the experience of contributing to "the interests and goods which are *common*".[504] It is this collective and common aspect that needs to be emphasised and experienced, if extra-political cooperation is supposed to counter the de-democratising effects of market competition and to cultivate subjectivities and relationships fit for political democracy.

Many cooperatives also promise to contribute to democratisation by promoting relationships of equality: They do so internally through democratic structures that institute (more) equal opportunities for members to shape the structure and goals of their enterprise. The

[501] Honneth, *The Working Sovereign*, p. 152.
[502] Honneth, *The Working Sovereign*, p. 153.
[503] Honneth, *The Working Sovereign*, p. 152; my emphasis.
[504] Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 175.

commitment to creating "wealth for the many not the few"[505] that is expressed, for example, by the ICA, may also contribute to combating the rising inequalities associated with neoliberal economic policy.[506] This kind of cooperation, based on and directed towards equality, stands in stark contrast to the ordoliberal conception of solidarity and community which affirms social hierarchies and gender inequality.

In contrast to the ordoliberal conception of community and solidarity, which rests on similarity, on shared conservative values and a traditional way of life, a democratising form of cooperation needs to be compatible with difference. Since political democracy in large and complex societies inevitably involves encountering and dealing with difference, democratising extra-political cooperation cannot exclusively be based in similarity but has to enable a productive engagement with difference. It is, to use Sennett's words, not a "cooperation of the us-against-you sort" but "a demanding and difficult kind of cooperation; it tries to join people who have separate or conflicting interests, who do not feel good about each other, who are unequal, or who simply do not understand one another."[507] Democratising cooperation, thus, is not derived from mere similarity; it is not a solidarity of the mechanical type.[508] Instead, any principles, values, and commitments shared by those cooperating with one another emerge precisely from the practice of cooperation itself.

Political democracy still requires 'community' and feelings of belonging. Yet, these are not, as ordoliberal suggest, the simple result of similarity and proximity but are achieved through the often difficult practice of living and cooperating with others, including those others

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[505] ICA, "Guidance Notes to the Co-operative Principles", p. 90.
[506] See: Chapter One, Section 1.
[507] Sennett, *Together,* p. 6.
[508] For my suggestion that the ordoliberal community resembles Durkheim's 'mechanical solidarity, see Section 2.1 above.

that are significantly and uncomfortably different. The 'democratic community' is therefore arguably more precarious than the stable village community imagined by ordoliberals. At the same time, however, it promises to be more dynamic and open.

In this regard, the relationship between cooperation and political democracy resembles that between communication and Dewey's 'Great Community'. While he shares with the ordoliberals the diagnosis of social disintegration resulting from the loss of traditional, rural communities, Dewey does not advocate for a return to them. He continues to emphasise the importance of face-to-face encounters and local community for democratic life. Yet, ultimately, it is the practice of communication that provides the basis for the democratic public and for more open and dynamic forms of community life:

> Unless local communal life can be restored, the public cannot adequately resolve its most urgent problem: to find and identify itself. But if it be reestablished, it will manifest a fullness, variety and freedom of possession and enjoyment of meanings and goods unknown in the contiguous associations of the past. For it will be alive and flexible as well as stable, responsive to the complex and world-wide scene in which it is enmeshed.[509]

Thus, Dewey's promotion of local communities does not constitute an attempt to return to a past that may have never existed but aims at imagining a community life that reflects the changed character of the world around it.

The fact that it is based on a shared practice, rather than similarity, is also relevant for the final aspect of democratising cooperation. Instead of being presented as 'natural' and 'unchangeable', such cooperation needs to be open to being politicised and genuinely democratically organised. Political democracy and its cooperative basis stand, as Honneth puts

[509] Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, pp. 231-232.

it with regard to the relationship between democracy and the social division of labour, in a "relationship of mutual dependency".[510] The cooperative basis for democracy requires the democratisation of everyday life beyond the political realm. To conclude, as I started, with Dewey: an investigation into the cooperative basis of democracy reveals that democracy itself "is a wider and fuller idea than can be exemplified in the state even at its best. To be realized it must affect all modes of human association, the family, the school, industry, religion."[511]

3 Conclusion

This chapter concludes Part I of this thesis, in which I have examined the de-democratising potentials of market competition. Taking the neoliberal valorisation of competition as its case study, Chapter One argued that market competition's de-democratising potentials are linked to its production of inequalities as well as to its reliance on rules, which neoliberal theorists position outside and over democratic control. In Chapter Two, I explored the de-democratising effects of a generalised competitiveness that emanates from the market to ever more areas of social life. This competitiveness threatens to undermine the social conditions of democracy, not only by fostering individualism but also relationships characterised by disinterest or even hostility.

The aim of this chapter was to provide a positive account of the social conditions of democracy. To do so, I investigated the claim, derived from Dewey's and Honneth's democratic theory, that the full realisation of political democracy requires a pre-existing community and

[510] "We can therefore say that that there is a relationship of mutual dependency between a functioning democracy and a fair division of labour. Democracy relies on well-organized and sufficiently cooperative labour relations, and the quality of labour relations relies on citizens' ability to democratically influence the arrangements of the relations of production." (Honneth, *The Working Sovereign*, p. 45.)
[511] Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 171.

social and economic relations of cooperation. While I ultimately affirm this claim, I argued that it requires some qualification: I contended that such democratising cooperation is not to be found in the ordoliberal village community, which is characterised by similarity and traditional social hierarchies. Nor is it to be found in economic cooperation and worker cooperatives re-interpreted along entrepreneurial lines. Instead, I suggested that to secure an extra-political basis for political democracy, the economic realm would need to be reorganised. This may involve worker cooperatives or the introduction of discursive bodies that limit and shape market competition from the outside. A truly democratising form of cooperation must, furthermore, foster subjectivities and relationships open to democratic engagement with others and be open to its own politicisation.

Before concluding my investigation of the effects of market competition – and cooperation – on the social conditions of democracy and moving on to the analysis of political competition in Part II, I want to re-articulate what is already implied in the set-up of my thesis: my argument that democracy requires a cooperative social and economic basis does not imply that political democracy is best understood as a cooperative practice. In this, I diverge from many proponents of social and economic cooperation, including Dewey and Honneth.

Commenting on the democratic theory of the young Dewey, Honneth notes the danger of moving too quickly and directly from extra-political cooperation to democratic practice. This may result, he points out, in the elimination of the political: "Like Marx, Dewey also moved from cooperative self-realization to collective self-administration so directly that in the end there was no place at all for any discursive, procedural exercise of individual freedom in joint will formation."[512] Yet, Honneth still believes that political democracy is characterised by

[512] Honneth, "Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation", pp. 773-774.

cooperation, though by cooperation of a different kind – "reflexive cooperation":[513] "Only in the political democratic sphere does interaction consist in an exchange of arguments, i.e. a reflexive process, whereas in the other two spheres, cooperative interaction primarily consists in a reciprocal completion of practical actions, which can only be supplemented secondarily with reflexive mechanisms."[514]

In contrast to this cooperative account of democracy, Part II of this thesis will argue that political democracy centrally involves competitive practices. In Chapter Five, I even argue that the 'exchange of arguments', which Honneth considers to be the exemplary case of democracy as 'reflexive cooperation', centrally entails a 'competition of arguments.' In light of this competitive account of democracy, it may seem surprising to suggest that political democracy is threatened by neoliberal competition and depends on a cooperative social basis. The combination of political competition and extra-political cooperation becomes less surprising when two characteristics of the former are taken into account. As illustrated by the analysis of the compatibility of cooperation and competition in neoliberal societies, cooperation and competition are far from being polar opposites but can complement each other. Political competition can only be *democratic* when it remains part of a common and cooperative project – or so I will argue in Part I. On this model, cooperation still needs to extend from the extra-political into the political, not because democratic action is itself purely cooperative but to provide a cooperative framework for competitive democratic practices.

Democratic competition, furthermore, has a different character and function than (neoliberal) market competition. In democratic capitalist societies, both the economic sphere

[513] Honneth, "Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation".
[514] Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, p. 331.

and the political sphere are competitive. Yet, competition works differently and serves a different purpose in each. Indeed, while market competition, particularly in its neoliberal version, favours and fosters competitive attitudes, relationships, and subjectivities, these may still be unsuited for democratic competitions. It is the character of democratic competitions, their difference from market competition, and their relationship to cooperation that I turn to now.

Part II. Political Competition Beyond the Market Model

Having considered the effects of market competition on democracy, I now turn to *political competition*. In the following three chapters that make up Part II of this thesis, I investigate the following questions: Which political practices are appropriately described as being competitive? What are their democratic benefits? And what are the features of a genuinely democratic form of political competition?

The answers I develop throughout the next chapters push back against two common assumptions about political competition. First, I argue that political competition is not reducible to party competition. Nevertheless, in democratic societies organised around competitive elections, the competition of parties for government and politicians for leadership is not only the most obvious case of political competition but also important. Therefore, it is the topic of Chapter Four.

However, the concept of political competition points to crucial democratic practices beyond the electoral contest. Thus, I follow Habermas in describing democratic deliberation as a practice characterised by a "contest of arguments".[515] Adopting an agonistic perspective, I suggest that the relationship between democratic opponents may be described as competitive. In this context, the concept of political or, rather, democratic competition also proves useful to understand the democratic value of contestation and protest.[516] Rather than implying a focus on elections and party politics alone, the concept of democratic competition can capture the richness of democratic practice.

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[515] Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p. 228.
For my discussion of the competitive character of democratic deliberation, see Chapter Five.

[516] For my discussion of democratic competition and protest from an agonistic perspective, see: Chapter Six.

Second, I challenge the analogy to market competition that, as I noted in the Introduction to this thesis, is so often evoked in discussions of political competition. The analogy to market competition is not only limiting. It also mischaracterises the nature and function of political competition and works to conceal, rather than illuminate, its democratic value and appeal.[517] Therefore, I draw on other analogies instead: from ecological competition to professional sports and board games among friends. These analogies uncover a more nuanced and complex understanding of competition, which, in turn, provides a helpful resource for re-thinking the democratic role of competition.

[517] For my critique of the analogy between market competition and political competition, see Chapter Four.

Chapter Four. Party Competition and the Market Model of Democracy

If asked about 'democratic competition', most people probably think of party competition and competitive elections. These institutional mechanisms for selecting political representatives and governments are a fundamental feature of liberal democracy and, for many, mark the difference between democratic and non-democratic regimes.[518] In the press and public debate, Election Day often serves not only as an indicator for the success or failure of the incumbent and its challengers, but for the state of democracy as a whole. Thus, both declining voter turnout and the growing number of far-right voters are often decried as symptoms of a crisis of democracy.[519]

The normative democratic theory that reflects this centrality of competitive elections has been discussed variously under the label of a "competitive model of democracy", "competitive elitism", and "adversary democracy".[520] All these names serve to distinguish this model of democracy from apparently non-competitive conceptions, often particularly from a deliberative model of democracy that foregrounds cooperation. Thus, they imply a distinction between competitive and non-competitive or cooperative models of democracy – a distinction I set out to challenge in this thesis.[521]

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[518] A recent study with participants from Egypt, India, Italy, Japan, Thailand, and the United States "found that people across six very different countries consistently emphasize competitive elections and civil liberties as key determinants of what makes a country democratic." (Chu et al., "People consistently view elections and civil liberties as key components of democracy", p. 294.)

[519] On low voter turnout, see, e.g., David Klemperer, *Universal Suffrage? The problem of low and unequal turnout and the case for compulsory voting* (London: The Constitution Society, 2025) (last accessed: 25 October 2025). On the increasing share of far-right votes, see, e.g., Cas Mudde, "Democracy is in a doom spiral – but it isn't dead yet", *Prospect* (4 December 2024), https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/democracy/68694/democracy-doom-spiral-elections (last accessed: 25 October 2025).

[520] The label of a "competitive model of democracy" is used by David Miller (Miller, "The competitive model of democracy", p. 134). David Held speaks of "competitive elitism" (Held, *Models of Democracy,* p. 125) and Jane Mansbridge of "adversary democracy" (Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, p. 8).

[521] Examples include Mansbridge, who contrasts "unitary" and "adversary democracy" (Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, p. 8), Young, who distinguishes between "aggregative and deliberative" models of

Instead, I propose to speak of 'the market model of democracy'. This name acknowledges not only the centrality of competition. It also draws attention to the central analogy that saturates the writings of its proponents; that is, the analogy to the competitive market. Joseph Schumpeter, Anthony Downs, and Ian Shapiro, upon whose work this chapter focuses, are united both by the belief that "[c]ompetition is the lifeblood of democratic politics"[522] and that political competition "may be usefully compared" with "competition in the economic sphere".[523]

The prevalence of the analogy in their writings demonstrates that rather than merely highlighting the centrality of party competition and competitive elections for democratic politics, these theorists propose a specific conception of political competition: one which distinguishes between firms (politicians) and consumers (voters), assumes that they are exclusively motivated by self-interest, and whose democratic promise is a government responsive to the interest of voters. It is this conception of political competition that I set out to challenge in this chapter. Neither does the economic sphere provide an appropriate blueprint for the organisation of democracy, nor is market competition useful for uncovering the democratic benefits of political competition. More often, it obscures them – or so I will argue in the following.

This chapter is divided into two sections: Section 1 provides a reconstruction of the market model of democracy, of the analogy to market competition it rests on, and the resulting conception of political competition. Section 2 problematises three features of the market model of democratic competition: First, it argues that its distinction between competing parties or

democracy (Young, *Inclusion and Democracy,* p. 18), and Elster's distinction between "the market and the forum" (Elster, "The Market and the Forum").

[522] Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 82.

[523] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 271.

politicians – modelled on firms – and largely passive voters – modelled on consumers – has elitist and potentially anti-democratic implications. Second, it challenges the claim, put forward by Shapiro, that a political competition modelled on the market has epistemic benefits. Finally, it suggests that the assumption that political actors are exclusively motivated by self-interest results in a severely limited conception of political action. Section 3 points to some alternative theories of party competition and concludes.

1 The Market Model of Democratic Competition

The origins of the democratic theory that I call 'the market model of democracy' are commonly traced back to Joseph Schumpeter's 1943 book *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*.[524] It is here that he rejects the 'classical doctrine of democracy', which he defines as follows: "the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realizes the common good by making the people itself decide issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will."[525] Assuming the possibility of identifying a common good and trusting the rational capacities of individual political actors, such an understanding of democracy is, he believes, too demanding and ultimately unrealistic.[526]

This judgment leads Schumpeter to propose an alternative theory of democracy which, he claims, is "much truer to life and at the same time salvages much of what sponsors of the

[524] Cf., e.g., Held, *Models of Democracy,* p. 125; Miller, "The competitive model of democracy", p. 134; Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, p. 77.
[525] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 250.
[526] For Schumpeter's critique of the notion of the 'common good', see: *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, pp. 250-252. For his critique of citizens' rational capacities, see: *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 253, pp. 256-263.

democratic method really mean by this term."[527] This arguably minimal model of democracy no longer 'burdens' citizens with deciding political issues, instead assuming that "the role of the people is to produce a government": "the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote."[528] In contrast to the 'classical doctrine', this understanding of democracy foregrounds the "competition for leadership" rather than will formation, assembly, and representation. Furthermore, Schumpeter suggests that this political competition "may be usefully compared" with "the concept of competition in the economic sphere".[529]

Schumpeter's focus on political competition and the suggestion that it can be conceptualised in analogy to 'competition in the economic sphere' has been taken up by the two other theorists that I discuss in this chapter: In his *Economic Theory of Democracy,* Anthony Downs uses tools of economic theory "to discover what form of political behavior is rational for the government and citizens of a democracy."[530] More than a general analogy, the

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[527] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 269.

As I show below, the claim that the market model is a particularly realistic model of democracy is shared by Shapiro and Downs. However, it does not provide a merely descriptive account of the current state of democracy. Macpherson notes: "They are saying, at the least, that the system is, with all its admitted imperfections, the only one that can do the job, or the one that can do it best. They are the realists. That is what people are like, so this is the best they are capable of. Generally, even more is claimed— that the system produces optimum equilibrium and some measure of citizen consumers' sovereignty. These are taken to be self-evidently good, so the system which provides them is taken to be justified by the very demonstration that it does provide them. Both of the realists claims are thus, at least implicitly, justificatory." (Macpherson, *The Times and Life of Liberal Democracy*, pp. 84-85.) See also: Held, *Models of Democracy*, p. 142.

[528] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 269.

[529] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 271.

[530] Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 20.

Downs himself acknowledges that "Schumpeter's profound analysis of democracy forms the inspiration and foundation for our whole thesis, and our debt and gratitude to him are great indeed." (Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 29, footnote 11.)

assumed comparability of political competition and market competition becomes the basis for Downs's predictive model of party competition.[531]

In contrast to Downs's *Economic Theory of Democracy*, Ian Shapiro elaborates on the Schumpeterian model of democratic competition in the register of political theory.[532] Specifically, he adopts the Schumpeterian model of political competition for his own power-centred approach to democratic theory, which is primarily concerned with avoiding domination.[533] Schumpeter's analogy to market competition reveals, so Shapiro, that in the political realm "the value of competition is twofold: it disciplines leaders with the threat of losing power in the same way that firms are disciplined by the threat of bankruptcy, and it gives would-be leaders the incentive to be responsive to more voters than are their competitors."[534]

The aim of this section is to provide an outline of the market model of democracy as conceptualised by these theorists. In doing so, I pay special attention to the central analogy between economic and political competition. I am particularly interested in how the market analogy shapes their conceptions of political competition, its functioning, and democratic appeal. To criticise the market conception of democratic competition, as I do in Section 2 below, it is crucial to first describe its character, features, and functioning.

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[531] In contrast to normative analyses of government activity, Downs describes his project as a "positive" one "because we try to describe what *will* happen under certain conditions, not what *should* happen." (Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 14.).
[532] Shapiro even expresses scepticism regarding the accuracy of Downs' predictive project, see: Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory,* p. 58; Donald Green and Ian Shapiro, *Pathologies of Rational Choice. A Critique of Applications in Political Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), Ch. 7, pp. 147-178.
[533] Cf. Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory,* pp. 57-59.
[534] Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory,* p. 58.

1.1 The market model of democracy

The market model of democracy is often classified as a minimalist democratic theory.[535] It is also sometimes believed to give expression to commonly held conceptions of democracy.[536] For its proponents, the term 'democracy' does not denote a way of living or engaging with others but 'merely' a specific institutional arrangement and the associated rights and liberties. The relevant institutional arrangements include competitive elections and universal suffrage, while associated rights and liberties encompass, for example, the right to vote, freedom of speech and the press.[537]

Despite their shared focus on political competition, Schumpeter, Downs, and Shapiro attribute different functions to it and, consequently, provide different accounts of its democratic

[535] While I challenge the market model's minimalism in this thesis, it is also important to remember that "minimal is not negligible." (Shapiro, *Politics Against Domination*, p. 78.) As Bobbio notes, "the minimal content of the democratic state" – that is, basic liberties and competitive elections – still distinguishes democratic from autocratic or totalitarian states (Bobbio, *The Future of Democracy*, p. 40). Furthermore, Prezeworski argues that the achievement of competitive elections and peaceful regime changes appears less minimal, "if the point of departure is that in any society there are conflicts, of values and of interests […]" (Adam Prezeworski, "Minimalist conception of democracy: a defense", in: *Democracy's Value*, ed. by Ian Shapiro and Casiano Hacker-Cordón [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], p. 44). I return to the idea of political competition as a way of regulating and limiting competition in Chapter Six.

[536] For the claim that the market model expresses commonly held conceptions of democracy, see, e.g., Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, p. 21. To some extent, this assumption appears to be confirmed by Chu et al., "People consistently view elections and civil liberties as key components of democracy".

[537] Bobbio articulates the relationship between competitive elections and basic rights and liberties as follows: "Moreover, even a minimal definition of democracy, like the one I adopt, requires more than just conferring the right to participate directly or indirectly in the making of collective decisions on a substantial number of citizens, and more than the existence of procedural rules like majority rule (or in extreme cases unanimity). There is a third condition involved, namely that those called upon to take decisions, or to elect those who are to take decisions, must be offered real alternatives and be in a position to choose between these alternatives. For this condition to be realized those called upon to take decisions must be guaranteed the so-called basic rights: freedom of opinion, of expression, of speech, of assembly, of association etc." (Bobbio, *The Future of Democracy*, p. 25.) Notably, Schumpeter seems less certain about the necessary relationship between democracy and such basic liberties: "We have seen that the democratic method does not necessarily guarantee a greater amount of individual freedom than another political method would permit in similar circumstances. It may well be the other way round. But there is still a relation between the two. If, on principle at least, everyone is free to compete for political leadership by presenting himself to the electorate, this will in most cases though not in all mean a considerable amount of freedom of discussion *for all*. In particular it will normally mean a considerable amount of freedom of the press. This relation between democracy and freedom is not absolutely stringent and can be tampered with. But, from the standpoint of the intellectual, it is nevertheless very important. At the same time, it is all there is to that relation." (Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, pp. 271-272.)

appeal. Disillusioned with the political and rational capacities of ordinary citizens, Schumpeter proposes to "make the deciding of issues by the electorate secondary to the election of the men who are to do the deciding."[538] For him, competitive elections fulfil the sole purpose of selecting and "evicting" governments.[539] Democratic competition is quite literally a "competition for *leadership*". [540]

Downs acknowledges this selection function of competitive elections and similarly defines voting as "a means of selecting the best possible government from among the parties competing for the job."[541] A competitive political system can be approached, he suggests, from two different perspectives: "Voters have as their goal the attainment of a government responsive to their wants; they make use of parties to run this government. Parties have as their goal the rewards of being in office; they make use of voters to get elected."[542] In foregrounding voters' wants, the Downsian version of democratic competition is, more than the Schumpeterian one, a competition over policy – although, importantly, "parties formulate policies in order to win elections, rather than win elections in order to formulate policies."[543] To win the electoral competition, parties have to formulate policies that track the interests and preferences of the electorate. On Downs' model, "perfect competitiveness implies that the voters are maximally effective vis-à-vis the parties. In other words, the parties will be perfectly constrained by the popular will. Downs thus offers us a model of perfectly responsive political parties."[544] Of course, the democratic appeal of Downs' conception of political competition lies

[538] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 269.
[539] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 272.
[540] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 271.
[541] Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 240.
[542] Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 137.
[543] Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 28.
[544] Kaare Strom, "Democracy as Political Competition", *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 35, No. 4/5 (1992), p. 378.

precisely in the promise of such responsiveness, which political theorist Robert A. Dahl considers to be "a key characteristic of a democracy".[545]

Like Downs, Shapiro identifies as a benefit of political competition its ability to ensure that parties and governments are responsive to the interests of voters. However, he also highlights that political competition provides a way of controlling the monopoly of state power.[546] Therefore, he speaks, as mentioned above, of a twofold or "dual purpose" of democratic competition: "competition constrains elites, but the party that prevails is also the one that best figures out what most people want the government to do. This dual account fails to measure up in a multitude of ways in practice, but its distinctive center of gravity is accountability of governments to voters."[547]

I want to flag up two aspects of Shapiro's account of competitively generated democratic accountability. First, both he and Downs assume that elections are adequate 'epistemic' devices for registering people's preferences and interests.[548] They seem to consider the vote a sufficient vehicle for the expression of such preferences and interests, which are, furthermore, taken as given or privately acquired. The formation of voter preferences and interests is not accounted for in the market model.[549] Although Shapiro claims that

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[545] In the opening chapter of his book *Polyarchy*, Dahl writes: "I assume that a key characteristic of a democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals." He continues: "In this book I should like to reserve the term 'democracy' for a political system one of the characteristics of which is the quality of being completely or almost completely responsive to all its citizens." (Robert A. Dahl: *Polyarchy. Participation and Opposition* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971], pp. 1-2.) While he does not explicitly commit himself to any normative theory of democracy, Downs notes that the "parameters which we use positively can be regarded as practical expressions of ethical axioms." (Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 32.) As an example of one such ethical axiom, he quotes Dahl and Lindblom's account of the majority principle: "Governmental decisions should be controlled by the greater number expressing their preferences in the 'last say.'" (Dahl/Lindblom, quoted in Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 32.)
[546] For Shapiro's discussion of the monopoly-view of state power, see: Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory*, pp. 50-55; Shapiro, *Politics Against Domination*, pp. 32-27.
[547] Shapiro, *Politics Against Domination*, p. 79.
[548] As in Chapter One, I use the term 'epistemic' in a thin sense here to refer to the mere aggregation of information.
[549] Cf. Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, p. 20.

Schumpeterian political competition "institutionalizes John Stuart Mill's call for competition over ideas", it remains strangely disconnected from any conception of debate or deliberation that includes the voting public.[550] I discuss Shapiro's claims regarding the epistemic benefits of political competition at length in Section 3.2 below.

Second, the market model of democratic competition regards elections not merely as 'epistemic' devices for registering voter preferences, but also as mechanisms for disciplining and incentivising parties and politicians. "Conceiving of democracy as a means for limiting domination", Shapiro values this aspect of democratic competition especially.[551] He defines domination loosely as the "illegitimate exercise of power"[552] and argues that in the political sphere, Schumpeterian competition provides a useful tool for limiting such power: "The essential point is that power is acquired only through competition and held for a limited duration. […] Whereas constraints are geared to limiting politicians' power via rules (such as separation of powers or other constitutional limitations), incentives link what politicians find strategically beneficial to the demands of competitive politics."[553]

It is this incentive-based structure of democratic competition that is central to ensuring democratic accountability. To illustrate this, Shapiro employs the analogy to market competition that Schumpeter suggested might be useful:

> Firms have incentives to respond to consumers. They succeed to the extent that they are better at that than is the competition. It is the felt imperative to increase profits, or perhaps market share, that generates their incentives to keep trying. Likewise, the success of political parties at winning votes and seats depends on doing better than the competition at supplying what voters want. They are interested in their own success, but the way to achieve

[550] Shapiro, *Politics against Domination*, p. 80.
[551] Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory*, p. 51. See also: Shapiro, *Politics against Domination*, p. 46.
[552] Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory*, p. 4.
For an in-depth account of Shapiro's conception of domination, see: Shapiro, *Politics against Domination*, pp. 20-24.
[553] Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory*, p. 57.

> it is to be more responsive to voters than is the opponent. This is what ties their disciplining of one another to serving the interests of voters.[554]

In line with the economic analogy, democratic accountability – like economic growth and consumer benefits – emerges indirectly and incidentally as a by-product of the competitive struggle for votes. As Schumpeter puts it: "But in order to understand how democratic politics serve this social end, we must start from the competitive struggle for power and office and realize that the social function is fulfilled, as it were, incidentally—in the same sense as production is incidental to the making of profits."[555]

At this point, it is no longer clear that the analogy to market competition is merely illustrative. Rather than merely pointing to similarities the two competitions share, it sometimes seems as though Shapiro and, to some extent, Schumpeter *model their conception of democratic competition on market competition*. The political actors they describe share the motivations and behaviours often attributed to economic actors, and, like in the market, political competition is assumed to be a mere mechanism to satisfy consumer or voter demand. Therefore, I focus on the analogy between market competition and political competition for the remainder of this section. I begin by tracing the different conceptions of market competition and their status within different versions of the market model of democracy, before highlighting some of the implications of the analogy for their conceptions of democratic competition.

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[554] Shapiro, *Politics against Domination*, p. 82.

[555] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 282.
See also: Miller, "The competitive model of democracy", p. 134.

1.2 The economic analogy

While Schumpeter, Downs, and Shapiro all make use of the analogy to market competition, it is important to note that this analogy shows up in significantly different ways in their works. Schumpeter merely notes the potential usefulness of comparing competition in the political sphere to competition in the economic sphere.[556] Beyond this, his use of the analogy is rather cursory, noting, for example, similarities between politicians and businessmen. Moreover, he also employs martial analogies – for example, he likens parliamentary activity to the attempt of conquering a hill or stretch of land from an opposing army.[557]

Although Schumpeter is usually the one credited with the analogy between political and market competition, it is much more dominant in Downs's and Shapiro's accounts of democratic competition. However, they develop it in two distinct directions. As noted above, for Shapiro, the market provides a regular point of reference for his normative political theory. For Downs, the analogy between political competition and the market provides the basis for developing a predictive model of democratic competition using the tools of economic theory. It is therefore no surprise that Downs' basic model of party competition, developed at the start of his *Economic Theory of Democracy*, adopts many of the presuppositions of neoclassical economics, including perfect competition, perfect knowledge, and self-interested and rational agents.[558] The economic competition that provides the point of reference for Downs' model is derived from economic theory rather than from economic reality.

[556] Cf. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 271.
[557] Cf. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 279, pp. 285-286.
[558] Cf. Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, pp. 3-74.

Throughout his book, Downs complicates and adjusts his basic model, incorporating conditions of imperfect information and uncertainty.[559] However, the assumption of purely self-interested, rational political agents remains an essential aspect even of Downs's more complex model of political competition. Indeed, its predictive capacity depends on this assumption. Recall that the main claim of Downs's *Economic Theory of Democracy* is that if voters and politicians act in a rational, self-interested manner, democratic competition will produce parties and governments that are responsive to the interests and preferences of voters. More specifically, Downs suggests that competition in a two-party system will ultimately lead to an ideological convergence of party positions upon the centre or on the "position of the median voter"[560] and to an accentuation of ideological differences in a multiparty system.[561]

This claim is challenged by Donald Wittman, who presents an alternative model of party competition which replaces Downs' assumption of self-interest with the assumption "that political parties are solely interested in policy and that winning the election is just a means to that end."[562] Under such conditions, Wittmann concludes, parties will be largely unresponsive to voter preferences.[563] He even suggests that they are likely to collude against voters, so that

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[559] Cf. Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, pp. 207-276.
[560] Strom, "Democracy as Political Competition", p. 378. See also: Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, pp. 117-122.
[561] Cf. Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, pp. 125-127.
[562] Donald A. Wittman, "Parties as Utility Maximizers", *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (1973), p. 495.

Wittman also criticizes Downs's model for relying on an image of political life as characterised by transitivity. More concretely, Wittman claims that, contrary to Downs's model, in an intransitive world, there exists no single platform that is preferable to all others. Consequently, opposition parties will always be able to mobilise a majority (cf. Wittman, "Parties as Utility Maximizers", pp. 490-491). Furthermore, he focuses on the complexities of voter decision-making, pointing out that people's preferences usually do not match any party programme in its entirety. Rather, voters' preferences for certain parties may depend on and change issue to issue (cf. Wittman, "Parties as Utility Maximizers", p. 492).
[563] Cf. Wittman, "Parties as Utility Maximizers", pp. 497-498.

More recently, John E. Roemer offers an account of political competition that combines the insights of Downs and Wittman's accounts and provides further elaboration, assuming, e.g., the existence of different and diverging interests and motivations among party members – thus aiming at further empirical and predictive accuracy (cf. John E. Roemer, *Political Competition. Theory and Applications* [Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2006], p. 7).

political competition becomes oligopolistic. "The traditional [Downsian] model views the parties as being similar to perfectly competitive sales-maximizing firms. This is in contrast to the restricted competition model which sees the parties as being analogous to profit-maximizing oligopolists. Just as oligopolists often collude against the consumers, the parties may collude against the voters."[564] To retain its democratic appeal – that is, its claim to generate responsiveness to voter preferences –, Downsian democratic competition needs to presuppose that politicians are motivated exclusively by their self-interested pursuit of political power and office.

Schumpeter and Shapiro seem to largely share Downs' assumption that the average politician is not motivated by the opportunity to implement policy but by the prospect of holding office – just like a 'businessman' may care about his products only insofar as they generate profits.[565] In other regards, however, their use of the economic analogy diverges from and even conflicts with Downs' neoclassical model of perfect competition. Moving closer to the complexities of economic reality, Schumpeter even observes that: "In economic life competition is never completely lacking, but hardly ever is it perfect. Similarly, in political life there is always some competition, though perhaps only a potential one, for the allegiance of the people."[566]

For Schumpeter, the move from economic theory to economic reality involves appreciating that actually existing "consumers do not quite live up to the idea that the economic textbook used to convey. On the one hand their wants are nothing like as definite and their actions upon

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[564] Wittman, "Parties as Utility Maximizers", p. 498.
[565] Cf. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 283. Shapiro, *Politics Against Domination*, p. 82.
[566] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 271.
Miller and Macpherson both suggest that what Schumpeter has in mind is, as in Wittman's model, closer to oligopolistic than to neoclassical perfect competition. (Cf. Miller, "The competitive model of democracy", p. 139. Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, p. 89.)

those wants nothing like as rational and prompt."[567] He is convinced that this deficit of rational action becomes even more pronounced in the political realm: "Thus the typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyzes in a way which he would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real interests. He becomes a primitive again. His thinking becomes associative and affective."[568] It is due to this scepticism regarding citizens' rational and political capacities that Schumpeter espouses a particularly minimal conception of competitive elections as a mere selection mechanism and of political competition as a "competition for leadership" rather than over policy.[569]

Schumpeter's portrayal of citizens and voters as largely irrational marks a clear divergence from Downs's economic model of democratic competition that rests on the assumption of largely rational voters.[570] Furthermore, his proposal of a political competition which invites citizens to select individuals to make policy decisions for them stands in stark contrast to Downs' and Shapiro's claims that democratic competition ensures responsiveness to voters' policy preferences. Indeed, this raises the question whether Shapiro's theoretical project, which explicitly advocates a *Schumpeterian* political competition, while arguing that it produces responsiveness, is characterised by an internal tension. I explore this tension in more detail in Section 2.1 below.

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[567] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 257.

[568] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 262.

Following his references to argumentation and analysis, it is likely that Schumpeter's account of 'mental performance' – or, rather, the lack thereof – involves more than Downs' "economic definition" of rationality, which "refers solely to a man who moves toward his goals in a way which, to the best of his knowledge, uses the least possible input of scarce resources per unit of valued output." (Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 5.) Yet, Schumpeter's account of the irrationality of citizens suggests that it is likely that he would not even credit them with this limited economic sense of rationality.

[569] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 271.

[570] Downs states: "Our model in particular ignores all forms of irrationality and subconscious behavior even though they play a vital role in real-world politics." (Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 34.)

Like Schumpeter, Shapiro seems to find the analogy for his conception of democratic theory in real markets rather than in economic theory. Yet, he is concerned not so much with inherent deficits of consumer-voters but with possibilities of collusion for parties, politicians, and citizens with special means to influence the political process. In suggesting responses to such threats to the democratic process, Shapiro takes inspiration from market regulation and competition law and proposes an antitrust-inspired regulation of political competition.[571]

I have demonstrated that there are significant differences between Schumpeter's, Downs's, and Shapiro's use of the analogy to market competition. These differences also mark more fundamental distinctions between their respective theoretical projects and normative commitments, and I will come back to them throughout this chapter. However, the analogy to market competition also implies a specific type of competition as a shared point of reference for their conception of democratic competition, its features, and functioning. This is something Schumpeter and Shapiro, who move seamlessly between analogies to market competition, warfare, and the adversarial legal system, do not seem to be aware of.[572] In contrast, the following section proposes to take the analogy to economic competition seriously and aims to provide answers to the question: What are the defining features of a political competition modelled on the market?

[571] Cf. Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory*, pp. 60-61. Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 78.
[572] For analogies to warfare and fighting, see: Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 279, p.286, p. 294. Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 78. For analogies to the adversarial legal system, see: Shapiro, *Politics Against Domination*, p. 80.

1.3 A market model of political competition

Despite the differences outlined above, I argue that Schumpeter's, Downs's, and Shapiro's respective conceptions of democratic competition are characterised by three features that are consistent with common accounts of market competition.[573] Their democratic competition is, first, a *third-party competition* and, second, a *parallel competition*. Finally, and as already mentioned, the actors involved in the competition are *self-interested individuals*.

The first feature, that is, the *third-party* structure of political competition, is reflected in Schumpeter's description of it as a competition "for the allegiance of the people."[574] I take the concept of a '*third-party competition*' as a distinct type of competition from Georg Simmel's "Sociology of Competition". There, he describes a kind of competition in which "the parties do not confront each other directly but rather appeal to a third party for success".[575] This kind of competition is exemplarily found, Simmel states, in "commercial relations", where "this third party will of course be the consumer."[576] Firms and entrepreneurs achieve success not through meeting a pre-determined standard or through producing the objectively better product, but through winning over consumers.

Likewise, the market model of democratic competition assumes that 'winning' the political competition requires winning over voters. Indeed, Shapiro suggests that: "Democratic accountability is the analogue of consumer sovereignty in this stylized picture: the party that

[573] This is based on an admittedly stylized and simplified model of the market and may be closest to the neoclassical model of market competition. Despite its roots in economic theory, the features of a market-like political competition that I identify map onto Schumpeter's and Shapiro's conception of political competition – or so I will show below.
[574] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 271.
[575] Georg Simmel, "Sociology of Competition", translated by Horst J. Helle, *The Canadian Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (2008), p. 970.
[576] Simmel, "Sociology of Competition", p. 971.

convinces most voters that it will provide the policies they want wins power and a mandate to implement them for a limited time."[577] Downs similarly notes the need for government to send "its own representatives to the people to convince them that its acts are worthy of their approval. Other parties, of course, employ representatives to convince the people that the incumbents should be replaced."[578]

Crucially, the third-party model of democratic competition introduces a clear distinction between two types of political actors: competing politicians or parties and deciding voters.[579] Of course, this distinction is not fixed and, theoretically, voters can always enter the contest and become politicians. As Schumpeter notes, "on principle at least, everyone is free to compete for political leadership by presenting himself to the electorate."[580] It remains a question, though, whether proponents of the market model of democracy would deem a porous boundary between ordinary voting citizens and politicians desirable. Downs's search for "a model in which the government is a decision-making agent separate from its citizens" seems to suggest the opposite. He continues:

> Of course, it is not separate from *all* its citizens, since some of them constitute the governing party. Yet we may reasonably assume that the vast majority of citizens belong neither to the governing team nor to the other teams competing with it for power. Therefore we can treat citizens and political parties as two mutually exclusive groups without unduly distorting reality.[581]

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[577] Shapiro, *Politics Against Domination*, p. 78.
[578] Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 89
[579] Proponents of the market model of democratic competition rarely distinguish between parties and the politicians and members they consist of. This is most explicit in Downs' model, which effectively "treats each party as though it were a single person" (Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 26). As I will show below, Shapiro even considers intra-party conflict and competition as an obstacle to democratic competition (cf. Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 82; see also: Section 2.1 below). In contrast, Schumpeter foregrounds the individual politician or 'leader'. However, in defining the party as "a group whose members propose to act in concert in the competitive struggle for political power", he assumes an identity between the aims of politicians and their parties (Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 283).
[580] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 272.
[581] Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 26.

While Downs may be right in describing the distinction between citizens and political parties as an aspect of our political reality, it remains open to challenge on normative grounds – and I will discuss its anti-democratic implications in Section 2.1 below.

The second feature of an economistic conception of political competition concerns the relationship between competitors. With regard to this relationship, Shai Agmon describes two distinct kinds of competitive institutional design:

> The first, which I call *parallel competition*, aims to create separate, independent pathways for each competitor wherein she is supposed to do her best to win. The social benefit from this competition is meant to emerge as a result of the aggregative effect created by the efforts of each competitor. The second, which I term *friction competition*, denotes a competitive mechanism the goal of which is to facilitate a clash between competitors. Utilized as an institutional mechanism, this clash is supposed to generate a desirable social outcome.[582]

According to Agmon, perfect competition in the free market is a paradigmatic case of parallel competition. It is commonly depicted "as a competition in which each person is supposed to maximize her own self-interest by adjusting to the price system. No clash is needed for the competition to generate its social value."[583]

Transferred onto the political sphere, this implies an understanding of competitive elections best realised by "an institutional design which ensures that the clash between parties (the firms) is minimal and that each party or candidate enjoys a secure interference-free zone, in order to promote its agenda and convince supporters (consumers)." In a parallel democratic competition, Agmon states, politicians "offer themselves to the public and try to satisfy the largest number of people's preferences in order to get elected."[584] This is certainly an adequate

[582] Agmon, "Two Concepts of Competition", p. 7.
[583] Agmon, "Two Concepts of Competition", p. 12.
[584] Agmon, "Two Concepts of Competition", pp. 15-16.

account of the understanding of democratic competition put forward by Anthony Downs – and thus by the theorist who models his conception of democratic competition most closely on the notion of 'perfect competition'.[585]

Schumpeter's and Shapiro's commitment to parallel competition is less straightforward. Indeed, their occasional references to warring armies, in Schumpeter's case, or "gladiatorial clashes", in Shapiro's case, suggest some appreciation for the democratic benefits of friction competition – notably while moving beyond the analogy between economic and political competition.[586] Yet, elsewhere, Shapiro seems to assume that democratic competition ought to take a parallel form. This is not just an implication of his "political antitrust framework",[587] but is also reflected in the account he provides of the "Schumpeterian political arena": "Protagonists in a Schumpeterian political arena prevail not by convincing their adversaries, but by convincing those who are listening that they have better arguments than do their adversaries."[588] To put it in Agmon's words, success is achieved not by interfering with one's opponents but by putting forward the best arguments – in 'parallel'.

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[585] Downs states that "individuals decide how to vote by comparing the acts of government and the proposals of opposition parties" (Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 89). Agmon also points to Downs as a proponent of a conception of democratic competition modelled on parallel market competition (cf. Agmon, "Two Concepts of Competition", p. 15).

[586] Shapiro, *Collusion in Restraint of Democracy*, p. 78. For Schumpeter, cf. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 279. See also: Agmon, "Two Concepts of Competition", pp. 15-17.

I discuss the occasional references to 'friction competition' in Schumpeter's and Shapiro's writings in more detail in Section 2.2 below.

[587] Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory*, p. 142.

Agmon considers antitrust law to be one of the chief institutional tools to guarantee proper parallel competition in the market: "What is more, sometimes in order to meet the constitutive condition of internal noninterference in parallel competition, external interference by the state is absolutely necessary to keep competitors from turning it into friction competition. Antitrust laws are the most obvious example, in the case of the free market." (Agmon, "Two Concepts of Competition", p. 26.)

[588] Shapiro, *Politics Against Domination*, p. 80.

Admittedly, attempts to convince the audience might still involve engaging with opponents' arguments or perhaps even disparaging them. Yet, at least in principle, it does not require a clash between opponents.

The third and final feature of democratic competition on the market model corresponds to the assumption in economic theory "that firms maximize profits and consumers maximize utility."[589] In thinking of "voters as analogues of consumers, parties and politicians as corresponding to firms, the votes politicians seek as proxies for profits, and the policies governments enact as political goods and services",[590] its proponents commit themselves to a particular understanding of human behaviour or, as Downs puts it, of "human nature". "Thus, whenever we speak of rational behavior, we always mean rational behavior directed primarily towards selfish ends."[591]

Schumpeter, Downs, and Shapiro primarily discuss the selfishness or self-interest of politicians, leaving open the question whether the political preferences of voters encompass broader visions of the common good or are largely identical with their self-interest – although Shapiro's reference to "political goods and services" [592] and Downs' portrayal of human nature seem to suggest the latter.[593] Other proponents of economistic conceptions of democratic politics, such as Gordon Tullock, explicitly embrace the figure of the purely self-interested voter looking to make a bargain. "Voters and customers are essentially the same people. Mr Smith buys and votes; he is the same man in the supermarket and in the voting booth. There is no strong reason to believe his behaviour is radically different in the two environments. We

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[589] Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy,* p. 5.
[590] Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory*, p. 57.
[591] Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 27.
[592] Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory*, p. 57.
Shapiro suggests that there may also be methodological issues at play here: "With respect to method, it is worth noting at the outset that the economics and rational-choice-influenced literatures are less helpful here than in thinking about the supply side, because the assumptions behind rational choice do less well with mass behavior than with the behavior of politicians and other self-consciously strategic actors. Just as in economics these models do better at explaining the behavior of firms than of consumers, so in politics they do better with parties than with voters." (Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory*, p. 117.) See also: Green/Shapiro, *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory*, p. 27.
[593] Cf. Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 27.

assume that in both he will choose the product or candidate he thinks is the best bargain for him."[594]

Although quiet on the nature of voters' political preferences, Schumpeter is quick to deny that a political party is best understood as "a group of men who intend to promote public welfare". Instead, he argues that

> all parties will of course, at any given time, provide themselves with a stock of principles or planks and these principles or planks may be as characteristic of the party that adopts them and as important for its success as the brands of goods a department store sells are characteristic of it and important for its success. But the department store cannot be defined in terms of its brands and a party cannot be defined in terms of its principles. A party is a group whose members propose to act in concert in the competitive struggle for political power.[595]

This view is echoed by Downs, for whom the self-interest of politicians provides the basis of his predictive model of party competition.

> From the self-interest axiom springs our view of what motivates the political actions of party members. We assume that they act solely in order to attain the income, prestige, and power which come from being in office. Thus politicians in our model never seek office as a means of carrying out particular policies; their only goal is to reap the rewards of holding office *per se.* They treat policies purely as means to the attainment of their private ends, which they can reach only by being elected.[596]

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[594] Gordon Tullock, *The Vote Motive*, ed. by Peter Kurrild-Klitgaard (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 2006 [1976]), p.37.

Tullock explicitly sets out to challenge the assumption that the voter is "aiming at achieving 'the public interest'". Referencing "empirical research", he concludes "that the average human being is about 95 per cent selfish in the narrow meaning of the term." (Tullock, *The Vote Motive*, pp. 37-38). However, there is another way to interpret Tullock's suggestion that an individual is likely to be motivated by the same considerations in the market as in the voting booth. This would involve disputing his claim that this motivation is always and exclusively to make a bargain. Fairtrade labels and boycott initiatives might instead suggest that political (and moral) convictions are also alive in the economic realm.

[595] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 283.

[596] Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 28.

As shown in the previous section, this assumption is crucial for the claim, shared by Downs and Shapiro, that political competition ultimately guarantees government responsiveness to the interests and preferences of voters.

Beyond the assumption of self-interestedness, this description of the political party shines light on another aspect of the conception of human action that underlies the market model of democracy. For Schumpeter, Downs, and Shapiro, the agents of democratic competition are ultimately always self-interested, self-sufficient *individuals*. Genuinely collective action is erased from their conception of the political, as is the possibility of arriving at a shared understanding of the common good. In line with Schumpeter's critique of the 'classical doctrine of democracy', the democratic project is left to individuals alone. As Noberto Bobbio puts it, 'modern democracy' co-emerged with "an analysis of society and of social relations whose subject is once again the individual human being, *homo oeconomicus,* not the *politikon zoon* of traditional thought, who is considered not in his own right but as the member of a community."[597]

This concludes my outline of a conception of democratic competition modelled on market competition as it can be found in the writings of Schumpeter, Downs, and Shapiro. I have argued that it is characterised by three features that are consistent with common conceptions of market competition: It is a third-party, parallel competition with individual, self-interested competitors. In the following section, I will further assess and criticise the implications of each feature of this conception of democratic competition.

[597] Bobbio, *The Future of Democracy*, p. 27.

2 Anti-democratic Implications of the Market Model of Democratic Competition

In this section, I raise three objections against the market model of political competition. First, I argue that conceptualising and institutionalising political competition as a third-party competition harbours an anti-democratic threat that is most evident in Schumpeter's distinctively elitist version of the model. I do not only trace discontinuities between Schumpeter's understanding of political competition and the conceptions put forward by Downs and Shapiro, but also raise the question whether the Schumpeterian model is at all compatible with the proclaimed aims of the latter two.

Second, I make the case that the epistemic benefits Shapiro associates with political competition are, in fact, incompatible with the analogy to market competition. Although he speaks of the "marketplace of ideas", his account of the competition of ideas that arises out of competitive party politics resembles friction competition more than parallel competition.[598] This is problematic not only because of its theoretical inconsistency but also because it leads to contradictory recommendations for democratic institutional design.

Finally, I draw attention to the very limited understanding of democratic action and the distorted image of the political that underlie the market model of democracy. I argue that proponents of the market model tend to identify democratic action exclusively with participation in the electoral contest. Thereby, they overlook a range of other relevant political activities. Furthermore, the model lacks any account of genuinely collective political action and, in conceiving of political actors in analogy to economic actors, perhaps even any independent notion of 'the political.'

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[598] Cf. Shapiro, *Politics Against* Domination, p. 80. Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 80.

2.1 The elitist threat of third-party competition

Drawing on work by Georg Simmel, I have suggested that conceiving of political competition as analogous to market competition implies that it is conceptualised as a *third-party competition*, that is, as a competition in which competing parties or politicians vie for the approval of voters. This is arguably an adequate descriptive account of much of professionalised politics in contemporary liberal democratic societies. Likewise, the distinction between active, competing politicians and voters, whose political activity is limited to the vote they cast on election day, is a familiar feature of political life today.

Such arrangements and the organisation of political competition as a third-party competition are not necessarily problematic or de-democratising. On the contrary, the political organisation of large and complex societies may even demand a 'division of political labour' and the interactions between competitors and audience may generate creative and productive dynamics.[599] However, the distinction between politicians and voters harbours an anti-democratic potential that is realised when it becomes impermeable, that is, when it becomes increasingly difficult for voters or 'ordinary citizens' to enter the political arena.

Indeed, the perception of an increasingly fixed boundary between professional politicians and 'ordinary citizens' is both a symptom of the contemporary crisis of democracy and fuels it. For example, the conviction that politicians form a separate "class" and are "merely looking out for themselves" has been associated with increasing levels of distrust in politicians

[599] Sociologist Tobias Werron argues that the third-party structure Simmel identifies is central to a distinctly modern belief in competition, see: Tobias Werron, "Why do we believe in competition? A historical-sociological view of competition as an institutionalized modern imaginary", *Distinktion: A Journal of Social Theory*, Vol. 16, Issue 2 (2015), pp. 186-210. Alfred Moore draws attention to "the creativity and dynamism that arises from the audience-seeking dimension of competition" (Moore, "Post-Truth Politics and the Competition of Ideas", p. 117).

and with the belief that they pay little attention to citizens' interests.[600] While the former is consistent with the self-interest axiom of the market model of democracy, the latter is starkly at odds with its central claim that political competition guarantees responsiveness to voter preferences. Citizens' distrust in the 'political elite' is also routinely mobilised by right-wing 'populists' who present themselves as remedies for the ills of the "Washington swamp" and out-of-touch governments.[601] In the following, I analyse how proponents of the market model of democracy present and understand this relationship between parties, politicians, and voters. I begin by highlighting Schumpeter's elitism, which is, notably, not shared to the same extent by Downs and Shapiro.

Recall that for Schumpeter, the exclusive function of political competition is the selection of government.[602] Crucially, Schumpeter portrays political competition as a "competition for *leadership*", a selection mechanism for individuals tasked with political decision-making, rather than for policies that reflect citizens' preferences.[603] Although this is consistent with his own distrust in the political and rational capacities of ordinary citizens, it is at odds with Shapiro's call on politicians "to compete over policies rather than personalities".[604]

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[600] This is based on findings of the British Election Study 2020 as reported and analysed by the authors of the Institute for Public Policy Research's (IPPR) report on trust in politics. Cf. Quilter-Pinner et al., *Trust Issues*, p. 16.

[601] US-president Donald Trump often presents himself as an alternative to the political elite, with his speeches referencing "crooked politicians" and the "Washington swamp", see, e.g.: Donald Trump, "Remarks by President Trump at the 2020 Conservative Political Action Conference | National Harbor, MD", *Trump White House Archives* (29 February 2020), https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-2020-conservative-political-action-conference-national-harbor-md/ (last accessed: 26 October 2025); Nigel Farage, leader of right-wing Reform UK, repeatedly characterises the government as 'out of touch', see, e.g.: Natasha Clark, "Farage accuses Starmer of being 'hopelessly out of touch' as he looks to 'outflank' Labour on 'working people'", *LBC* (27 May 2025), https://www.lbc.co.uk/article/nigel-farage-speech-benefits-tax-birth-rate-reform-uk-rpWKQ_2/ (last accessed: 27 October 2025). Of course, neither the billionaire Trump nor the privately educated Farage are likely to be actually 'in touch with' or 'like' ordinary citizens. However, their ability to effectively mobilise the distrust in professional politicians is telling in itself.

[602] Cf. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 269.

[603] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 271; my emphasis.

[604] Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory*, p. 74.

Shapiro himself notes that for political competition to generate responsiveness to voters, it has to be a competition over policies rather than personalities: "Competition is the engine that provides politicians the reason to be responsive to voters, but for it to work well, they must have the incentive to compete over policies rather than personalities." (Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory*, p. 74.)

Schumpeter's quite opposite focus on personalities over policies becomes evident at three points in his proposal for "Another Theory of Democracy".[605] First, he describes one of the advantages of political competition as its potential to select politicians according to ability.

> In particular, the case for democracy stands to gain from a consideration of the alternatives: no system of selection whatever the social sphere – with the possible exception of competitive capitalism – tests exclusively the ability to perform and selects in the way a stable selects its Derby crack. […] It is not quite true that in the average case political success proves nothing for a man or that the politician is nothing but an amateur. There is one very important thing that he knows professionally, viz., the handling of men. And, as a broad rule at least, the ability to win a position of political leadership will be associated with a certain amount of personal force and also of other aptitudes that will come in usefully in a prime minister's workshop. There are after all many rocks in the stream that carries politicians to national office which are not entirely ineffective in barring the progress of the moron or the windbag.[606]

Albeit cautiously, Schumpeter seems to suggest that democratic competition can sometimes function as a meritocratic selection mechanism that rewards certain political abilities or merits.

Notably, the abilities and 'merits' Schumpeter lists – from 'the handling of men' to 'personal force' – paint a picture of the ideal Schumpeterian politician not as responsive to citizens' concerns but as a strong leader. It is telling that Schumpeter's account of the "prime ministerial genus" dispenses completely with the notion of responsiveness, instead asserting the creative powers of the 'leader': "He will lead party opinion creatively—shape it—and eventually rise toward a formative leadership of public opinion beyond the lines of party, toward national leadership that may to some extent become independent of mere party opinion."[607] On this Schumpeterian account of political competition and leadership, the

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[605] This is the title of chapter XXII; cf. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 269.

[606] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 289.

It is worth noting that Schumpeter suggests here that capitalist market competition is equally, if not more, meritocratic, gesturing to a radically different understanding of market competition than the neoliberal conception outlined in Chapter One. See, especially, Chapter One, Section 1.3.

[607] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 277.

In the manufacturing of public opinion, Schumpeter again observes a parallel to business and, particularly, advertising: "The ways in which issues and the popular will on any issue are being manufactured is exactly analogous to the ways of commercial advertising. We find the same attempts to contact the subconscious.

relationship between government policy and voter preferences that Downs and Shapiro champion has been inverted.

Second, Schumpeter's elitism and his tendency to prioritise personality – or leadership – over policy are even more pronounced in his discussion of the "conditions for the success of the democratic method".[608] Problems arise, he claims, because

> the competitive struggle for responsible office is, on the one hand, wasteful of personnel and energy. On the other hand, the democratic process may easily create conditions in the political sector that, once established, will repel most of the men who can make a success at anything else. For both these reasons, adequacy of material is particularly important for the success of democratic government. It is not true that in a democracy people always have the kind and quality of government they want or merit.

Therefore, one condition for the success of the democratic system "is that the human material of politics—the people who man the party machines, are elected to serve in parliament, rise to cabinet office—should be of sufficiently high quality."[609]

"[T]he only effective guarantee" for such high-quality human material is, Schumpeter notes, "the existence of a social stratum, itself a product of a severely selective process, that takes to politics as a matter of course."[610] He does not elaborate on the nature of this social stratum and the selective process that produces it. However, his reference to the political system in England indicates that "a hereditary ruling class such as the English aristocracy seems to be his ideal."[611] It turns out that the ideal competitors in a Schumpeterian political contest are all

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We find the same technique of creating favorable and unfavorable associations which are the more effective the less rational they are. We find the same evasions and reticences and the same trick of producing opinion by reiterated assertion that is successful precisely to the extent to which it avoids rational argument and the danger of awakening the critical faculties of the people. And so on. Only, all these arts have infinitely more scope in the sphere of public affairs than they have in the sphere of private and professional life." (Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 263.)

[608] This is the title of section II of Chapter XXIII of Schumpeter's *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 289.

[609] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 290.

[610] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 291.

[611] Miller, "The competitive model of democracy", p. 140

members of an aristocratic elite. The ordinary citizens whose political capacities Schumpeter called into question from the outset are effectively disqualified.

This limitation of competitors to members of a social elite threatens to undermine some of the key democratic functions of political competition as identified by Shapiro.[612] A smaller pool of competitors who belonging to the same social class may share more interests than the desire for political leadership, reduces voters' disciplinary powers vis-à-vis politicians. Consequently, the responsiveness of politicians and governments to voters' preferences is compromised, and collusion of political elites against the interests of ordinary citizens becomes more likely.[613]

Third, Schumpeter not only insinuates that it would be best to exclude 'ordinary citizens' from competing for political leadership. He also recommends that they limit their political activity to the act of casting their vote.

> The voters outside of parliament must respect the division of labor between themselves and the politicians they elect. They must not withdraw confidence too easily between elections and they must understand that, once they have elected an individual, political action is his business and not theirs. This means that they must refrain from instructing him about what he is to do […].[614]

Schumpeter's version of democratic competition leaves very little room for political participation for those who do not take part in the competition for leadership. As David Held puts it,

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[612] Note that Schumpeter does not suggest literally barring other competitors from entering the political arena. On the contrary, he states that "on principle at least, everyone is free to compete for political leadership" (Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 272). However, the assumption that political competition produces the best results when limited to a small elite reveals that Schumpeter's reason for favouring democratic competition is not responsiveness to citizens' interests.

[613] While not identical, this argument converges in spirit with Macpherson's claim that a competitive political system modelled on the market is likely to track the interests of the economically privileged. (See: Macpherson, *The Time and Life of Liberal Democracy*, pp. 86-88.)

[614] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 295.

> In Schumpeter's democratic system, the only full participants are the members of political elites in parties and in public offices. The role of ordinary citizens is not only highly delimited, but it is frequently portrayed as an unwanted infringement on the smooth functioning of 'public' decision-making. All this places considerable strain on the claim of 'competitive elitism' to be democratic. Little remains of the case for democracy except the sheer 'protection against tyranny' argument […].[615]

I have already admitted that the elitist character of the market model of competition is particularly pronounced in Schumpeter's version. To be clear, neither Downs nor Shapiro seem to share his preference for aristocratic society, and both foreground the role of policy proposals as means of winning the electoral competition. However, rather than constituting a complete outlier, Schumpeter's elitism points to an inherent de-democratising potential of a conception of democratic competition as analogous to market competition. Many common accounts of market competition focus on the *process of competition* but pay little attention to the *conditions of entry into the competition*. This is echoed by Schumpeter, who merely notes that "on principle at least, everyone is free to compete for political leadership" – "in the same sense in which everyone is free to start another textile mill."[616] Starting a textile mill presupposes access to capital and, thus, to something that is unequally distributed. Likewise, entering into the political contest and making a viable bid for leadership requires access to resources that are unequally distributed – from capital to finance election campaigns to media access.

While Schumpeter's neglect of the question of 'market entry' may be consistent with his aristocratic vision of society and his general disregard for citizens' political preferences, it is more surprising that neither Downs nor Shapiro pay sustained attention to it.[617] As noted

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[615] Held, *Models of Democracy*, p. 156.
[616] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 272
[617] Downs studies the conditions that are favourable for new parties to emerge, but he does not offer any reflections on how to encourage new parties to develop. Indeed, it is questionable whether he would consider this desirable (cf. Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 107, pp. 127-132, p. 141). Shapiro briefly notes that one target

above, a sufficiently large and dynamic pool of political competitors is a crucial precondition for voters to be able to effectively exercise control over politicians and, thus, to ensure responsiveness to their concerns. This is the case even if politicians are not exclusively recruited from a single social stratum – in the absence of potential alternative options, politicians, especially self-interested ones, are unlikely to adjust their own political agenda, and consumer-voters will likely have to settle for the political products that are available to them.

It is instructive in this regard that Shapiro explicitly prefers a two-party system, arguing that "multi-party competition encourages wholesale clientelism".[618] Moreover, he seems to employ the term "political entrepreneur" – that is, the analogy to the market actor associated with innovation and change – exclusively to mark out dubious political actors.[619] In apparent contrast to his avowed aim of maintaining competitiveness in the political marketplace, Shapiro seems concerned to limit the number of political competitors. Under such circumstances, it is unclear how voter preferences not currently reflected in the 'political products' on offer will be taken up by political parties and find their way into government policy.[620]

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of his antitrust framework for political competition would target "overwhelmingly high entry costs to third parties" but does not develop this any further (Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory*, p. 62).

[618] Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 83.

Shapiro's rejection of mulitparty competition rests on three arguments: He notes that multiparty systems tend to produce coalition governments. First, Shapiro associates coalition governments with reduced democratic accountability because responsibility can be attributed to the coalition partner and because government policy is the outcome of compromises between these partners (Shapiro, *Politics Against Domination*, p. 175; "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 81). Second, Shapiro intimates that a multiparty system invites mobilisation around narrow interests and single-issues, thus contributing to clientelism (Shapiro, *Politics Against Domination*, pp. 175-176; "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 81). Finally, he observes that the case for multiparty systems is often made in terms of increased representativeness. Yet, "the emphasis on representativeness turns into a rejection of the competitive ideal." (Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory,* p. 63).

[619] He characterises political entrepreneurs primarily as political actors who employ and incite hatred of other groups (cf. Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory*, pp. 100-102; *Politics Against Domination*, p. 109).

[620] It seems reasonable to assume that self-interested politicians who only aim to win office would not be bothered by declining participation – at least as long as participation is sufficient to guarantee their elections. The mere rise in abstaining voters is thus unlikely to ensure immediate changes in parties' policy proposals.

This becomes even more unclear when taking into account that Shapiro cautions against intra-party competition. He supposes that competition within parties "empowers people with local agendas and intense preferences who participate disproportionately in primaries and caucuses."[621]

> Some will single out party members or activists as the appropriate political shareholders, but parties that empower them run into trouble. Membership in political parties is typically free or very cheap, rendering them susceptible to hostile and anomalous takeovers, like that perpetrated by Donald Trump in the 2016 Republican primaries, or that which occurred in the British Labour Party in the summer of 2016.[622]

In highlighting the cheapness of party membership and seemingly equating an augmented party membership with a 'hostile takeover', Shapiro echoes some of Schumpeter's explicit elitism that sits so uncomfortably with his expressed commitments to democratic control and accountability.[623]

Two further things are worth noting and lead me to the two additional lines of critique that I pursue below. First, Shapiro's sceptical stance towards party members and activists reflects the third-party structure of political competition conceptualised in analogy to a

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[621] Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 82.
Together with Frances Rosenbluth, Shapiro develops these arguments in: Frances Rosenbluth and Ian Shapiro, *Responsible Parties: Saving Democracy from Itself* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

[622] Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", pp. 80-81.
Shapiro continues: "Party leader Jeremy Corbyn lost a confidence vote in the Parliamentary Labour Party by 172 to 40 in June, triggering a leadership challenge, but an easily augmented membership nonetheless reelected him as leader with 61.8 percent of the vote three months later. As this example underscores, grass roots activists tend to be unrepresentative of a party's supporters in the electorate." Shapiro refers to events of the summer of 2016. In line with his democratic theory, he seems to assume that the actions of MPs directly express the interests and opinions of the electorate, while activists' intense preferences are assumed to present a distortion of the average Labour Party supporter's position. The fact that the Labour Party managed to substantially increase its vote share under Corbyn's leadership in the 2017 General Election casts doubt on Shapiro's analysis (cf. Joseph Colombeau, "The 2017 General Election – the numbers behind the result", *London Datastore* [29 June 2017], https://data.london.gov.uk/blog/the-2017-general-election-the-numbers-behind-the-result/ [last accessed on: 26 October 2025]).

[623] This description of internal party competition that results primarily from an increased and notably cheaply acquired membership also seems to be at odds with Shapiro's claim in the same article that internal competitions "render parties vulnerable to the ideological capture of candidates by well-funded groups" (Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 82). To reconcile these claims, one would need to assume that the success of grass roots activists is always and exclusively dependent on their financial backing.

simplified model of market competition that knows only two types of political actors – firms/entrepreneurs and consumers, parties/politicians and voters. The market model of democratic competition leaves no space for politically active citizens who are not politicians, effectively limiting the range of political activity for those who are not professional politicians to the act of voting. I discuss this limited conception of democratic politics in Section 2.3 below.

Second, I have argued that a system with a limited number of competitors is likely to correspond to a limited 'political offer'. This raises issues with regard to political competition's ability to ensure responsiveness to voters' preferences, but also leads to the question whether voting, as suggested above, is the appropriate 'epistemic' mechanism for registering political preferences. While Shapiro does not offer any reflections on this problem, he claims that Schumpeterian political competition has distinct epistemic benefits. It institutes, he argues, a 'competition of ideas.' I will investigate this claim in the following section.

2.2 Parallel competition and the competition of ideas

According to Shapiro, the epistemic benefits of elections and competitive politics are not limited to the communication of voter preferences to parties and governments. Instead, he states that Schumpeterian political competition

> institutionalizes John Stuart Mill's call for competition over ideas as the surest path to truth in a world in which knowledge claims are always corrigible, and usually only partly correct when they are correct at all. On Mill's account, the best course is to subject arguments to the discipline of the marketplace of ideas: require their advocates continually to defend them against the going alternatives. It is an invisible-hand argument […]. The claim for institutionalizing Mill is that the truth is more likely to be the ongoing by-product of vigorous contestation than of any other process people have been able to devise. […] In competitive democratic politics, the parties make their conflicting cases and the voters decide.[624]

[624] Shapiro, *Politics against Domination*, p. 80.

Political competition, Shapiro claims here, is not merely a matter of disciplining politicians to implement policies in line with voter preferences. By institutionalising 'vigorous contestation', it also contributes to epistemic progress and may even lead to the emergence of 'the truth'.

Shapiro is convinced that Schumpeterian competitive politics realise the "argumentative ideal"; an ideal, he insists, that is different from the "deliberative one":

> Deliberation should not be confused with argument. When people argue, there is an expectation that one of them will, or at least should, win. Even when we speak of one person making an argument, we see this as something that stands until it is contradicted, or challenged and beaten by a better argument. Like the deliberationists, proponents of argument believe it will enhance understanding and improve the quality of decisions. This was the essence of John Stuart Mill's defense of the robust clash of opinions in *On Liberty*: it would lead people to hold better-informed and more accurate views.[625]

I challenge this clear distinction between argumentation and deliberation in the following chapter, which addresses the relationship between a competition of ideas and deliberative democracy in more detail. Thus, the remainder of this section is only the beginning of a discussion, which I will continue in Chapter Five.

The main goal of my analysis here is to investigate the analogy to market competition, which Shapiro continues to use when describing the epistemic benefits of political competition. Not only does he adopt the metaphor of 'the marketplace of ideas', which is commonly, yet

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It is important to note that while Shapiro links the idea of a Millian *marketplace of ideas* closely to Schumpeter's conception of politics and democratic competition – even claiming that it is "[…] the focused debate over ruling ideas that give Schumpeterianism its raison d'être" (Shapiro, *Politics against Domination*, p. 84.) –, Schumpeter himself does not explicitly mention it. The closest Schumpeter comes to describing anything like a marketplace of ideas is in broad acknowledgments of the role debate plays in parliament (cf. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 279) and in recognizing a loose and partly contingent relationship between democracy and a promotion of the "freedom of discussion *for all*." (Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 272.) In light of Schumpeter's general scepticism regarding citizens' cognitive abilities and his characterisation of "effective political argument" as implying "the attempt to twist existing volitional premises into a particular shape and not merely the attempt to implement them or to help the citizen to make up his mind" (Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 264), it seems, furthermore, unlikely that on his model any political discussion could lead to the approximation of the truth as Shapiro suggests.

[625] Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 78.

falsely, attributed to John Stuart Mill.[626] In the passage above, he also explicitly describes the process by which 'the truth' emerges within this marketplace as an 'invisible hand' process.[627] However, the market is not the only analogy Shapiro employs to make his case for the epistemic benefits of political competition. In passing, he notes that "[t]he adversary legal system again comes to mind as suggestive: each side makes the most powerful possible case for its position and the jury decides who carries their burden of persuasion. In competitive democratic politics, the parties make their conflicting cases and the voters decide."[628]

This reference to the adversarial legal system is significant because it highlights that where Shapiro elaborates on the activities associated with the 'argumentative ideal', these are neither compatible with the market model of democratic competition as outlined above nor do they correspond to common conceptions of competitive market action. Recall that I followed Agmon in characterising market competition as a parallel competition, that is, as an institutional framework in which competitors are able to maximise their performance without interference from other competitors.[629] The adversarial legal system is, in contrast, Agmon's paradigmatic example for 'friction competition'; the kind of competitive institutional framework that determines success and produces collective benefits through competitors interfering and clashing with each other. According to Agmon, "the whole point of the [adversarial legal] system is that the parties interfere with one another, exchange arguments, and try to refute their opponent's claims; their success is dependent on meddling with their opponent's efforts in a controlled way."[630]

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[626] See, e.g., Jill Gordon, "John Stuart Mill and the 'Marketplace of Ideas'", *Social Theory and Justice*, Vol. 23 No. 2 (1997), pp. 235-249.
[627] Cf. Shapiro, *Politics against Domination*, p. 80.
[628] Shapiro, *Politics Against Domination*, p. 80.
[629] Cf. Agmon, "Two Concepts of Competition", pp. 9-10.
[630] Agmon, "Two Concepts of Competition", p. 13.

Shapiro's language of "vigorous contestation", a "clash of opinions" as well as of arguments that are to be "contradicted, or challenged and beaten" does indeed suggest a friction competition that resembles the adversarial legal system more than the market.[631] In his account of opposition politics, Shapiro similarly slips into the language of friction competition.

> Schumpeterian democracy depends on alternation between two strong parties in government. The party that wins the election exercises a temporary power monopoly, but the loyal opposition – a government-in-waiting whose leaders hope to take power at the next election – continually challenges its policies. […] Government and opposition clash across the aisle continually, and compete during elections by offering voters the different programs they plan to implement.[632]

These unacknowledged shifts from market analogies to accounts of competition that privilege clash and confrontation, which can also be found in Schumpeter's writing, are significant.[633]

According to Agmon, parallel and friction competitions imply different institutional structures and different social benefits. For parallel democratic competition – the conception of democratic competition that actually corresponds to market competition –, Agmon notes that "the main social benefit generated by democratic competition under this interpretation is the aggregation of citizens' wishes."[634] For frictional conceptions of democratic competition, he identifies four other associated benefits:

> According to such frictional views, democratic competition is meant not to serve as a procedural tool for preference aggregation but rather to (1) prevent elites or specific interest groups from capturing and monopolizing power and thereby contribute to the people's ability to self-rule; (2) promote ideas and discussion between different worldviews; (3) force parties to publicly justify their agenda, thereby enhancing legitimacy and accountability; or (4) facilitate and regulate social conflict in a nonviolent and stable way.[635]

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[631] Shapiro, *Politics against Domination*, p. 80. Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 78.
[632] Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 78.
[633] Cf. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 279, p. 286, p. 294.
[634] Agmon, "Two Concepts of Competition", p. 16.
[635] Agmon, "Two Concepts of Competition", pp. 16-17.

What comes apart in Agmon's discussion is precisely the "dual purpose" Shapiro attributes to democratic competition – the analogy to market competition no longer suffices to provide an account of political competition that both "constrains elites" and guarantees that "the party that prevails is also the one that best figures out what most people want the government to do."[636]

The distinction between parallel and friction competition reveals that Shapiro may overburden the analogy to market competition, associating it with incompatible competitive mechanisms and social benefits. This raises the question whether he should ultimately prefer a political competition organised in a parallel or a frictional way, or whether it may be possible to combine the two in a democratic system. More urgently, these discrepancies between Shapiro's account of democratic competition and market competition invite further scrutiny of the analogy between the market and democracy.

2.3 Self-interested individualism and the erasure of the political

In addition to a parallel organisation of political competition, the market model of democracy commits its proponents to a particular account of human behaviour. Replicating common assumptions of economic theory, it conceives of political actors exclusively as *self-interested individuals*. This conception of political actors is of special importance when it comes to competing politicians: As outlined in Section 1.1 above, it is the assumption that politicians are exclusively motivated by the self-interested pursuit of power that grounds the claim that party competition produces responsiveness to voters' interests.

[636] Shapiro, *Politics Against Domination*, p. 79.

However, the assumption of self-interested, individualist political actors also results in a very limited and sometimes counterintuitive understanding of political action. It is important to note that proponents of the market model – and, thus, of an avowedly realistic and minimalist understanding of democracy – often explicitly embrace a limited conception of political action. Thus, some of the problems I diagnose in the following become problems only if one adopts a more substantial and far-reaching understanding of democracy. However, my aim throughout is also to draw attention to the implications of a minimalist conception of political action for the democratic functions that Schumpeter, Downs, and Shapiro themselves attribute to political competition.

I have already pointed out that the market model of democracy knows only two types of political actors: competing politicians or parties and voters. Consequently, it also knows only two types of political action: competing for office and casting the vote. A wide range of other activities that are commonly considered political and even vital for a democratic society are obscured from view, explicitly rejected, or considered only as strategic moves in the broader competition: intra-party debates and contestations, parliamentary debates, demonstrations, protests, and other forms of activism.

Neglecting these forms of political action is, of course, consistent with the model's focus on electoral competition, and it is tempting to regard it as nothing more than its innocent and unintended outcome. On such an interpretation, supplementing competitive elections, for example, with other more deliberative institutions may seem to present an easy solution. This is, in effect, David Miller's proposal:

> My suggestion is that we should aim for a political framework that combines competitive democracy at the national level with participatory democracy at the local and industrial levels. In other words we should retain something like the present system of elections and

> competing parties for national government while handing over local government to popular assemblies and transferring them to workers' control.[637]

Although this may be a compelling proposal for democratic institutional design in practice, it overlooks the understanding of political action that the market model of democracy implies.

The assumption that political actors always act in accordance with their individual self-interest suggests an incompatibility of political competition and deliberation that is best reconstructed with regard to Shapiro's argument that "in politics, deliberation and the search for agreement are – to borrow an antitrust analogy – unhealthy forms of collusion in restraint of democracy."[638] He is convinced that "deliberation requires people to act in good faith, but it is not possible to design institutions to induce good faith." Yet, if people do not act in good faith, deliberation is likely to turn into "bargaining", meaning that "those with the most leverage will prevail."[639] According to Shapiro, when institutionalised as a democratic decision-making procedure, deliberation "can all too easily undermine political competition and empower people with leverage to appropriate them for their own purposes."[640]

This characterisation of deliberation as collusion, an obstacle to political competition, and, by implication, as ultimately anti-democratic is consistent with the belief that political and economic actors alike are always self-interested individuals. On this account of political action, any interaction with others is only instrumental and serves the individuals' pursuit of their own ambitions. In contrast, proponents of democratic deliberation tend to conceive of the practice as one that transcends mere self-interest. They thereby assume that as political actors,

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[637] Miller, "The competitive model of democracy", pp. 154-155.
A similar proposal is the basis of Mansbridge's *Beyond Adversary Democracy.*
[638] Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 78.
[639] Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 79.
[640] Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 80.

individuals are able to meaningfully interact with and respect others, their experiences, and perspectives, to move beyond their narrow self-interest and towards a shared collective identity and common good.[641] Rather than being easily integrated into the market model of democratic competition, democratic deliberation relies on fundamentally different assumptions regarding the nature of political action and the capacities of individuals.

The contrast with democratic deliberation points to a further limitation of the market model's conception of the democratic process. While one of its main appeals lies in the promise of guaranteeing responsiveness to voters' interests and preferences, it pays no attention to the formation of such preferences. As Iris Marion Young puts it, the "aggregative model of democracy" takes "individuals' preferences, whatever they happen to be, as given. There is no account of their origins; they may have been arrived at by whim, reasoning, faith, or fear that others will carry out a threat. […] There are no criteria for distinguishing the quality of preferences by either content, origin, or motive."[642] Even Shapiro's competition of ideas appears to be limited to parliamentary or public debates among politicians and remains strangely disconnected from the debates of those citizens who form their audience.

Young's observation leads me to two final objections to the limited conception of the political as conceived on the market model of democracy. In treating them as given, first, there remains a danger that the political preferences to which the competitively disciplined

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[641] Cf. Amy Gutman and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 11-12. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms,* p. 160. *Young*, *Inclusion and Democracy*, p. 30.

[642] Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, p. 20.

Macpherson points out that the market model of democracy rests on a conception of individual political preferences that precludes arriving at any form of discursive agreement from the start: "it assumes also that the things different people want out of the government— the demands for political goods— are so diverse and shifting that the only way of making them effective, the only way of getting the government's decisions to meet them, the only way of eliciting the required supply of political goods and getting it distributed in proportion to the myriad demands, is an entrepreneurial system like that which operates in the standard model of the competitive market economy." (Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, p. 80.)

government is responsive are unconsidered or even harmful. Proponents of the market model of democratic competition may see this as an unfortunate, yet inevitable danger of democratic accountability. Yet, it sits at least uncomfortably with Shapiro's account of the epistemic benefits of political competition. Indeed, his celebration of the benefits of a 'competition of ideas' among politicians, while disregarding the way in which voters come to hold their political opinions, resonates with Schumpeter's statement that "[t]he ways in which issues and the popular will on any issue are being manufactured is exactly analogous to the ways of commercial advertising."[643] On such an understanding of the political process, any claim to genuine democratic accountability seems misplaced.

Second, the assumption that voters' preferences are given and not formed in interaction with others means, as Young notes, that the market model of democracy "lacks any distinct idea of a *public* formed from the interaction of democratic citizens and their motivation to reach some decision. Thus there is no account of the possibility of political co-ordination and co-operation."[644] This individualisation of political action goes beyond opinion formation. With the exception of the party, which is considered a merely strategic unity that ultimately serves individual ends, collective action is absent from the market model of democracy.

Thus, the market model of democratic competition severs the connection between political action and collective action as it is expressed, for example, in Hannah Arendt's notion of "acting in concert".[645] What is more, political action, so conceived, is in no way qualitatively different from economic action: Politicians are nothing more than businessmen who happen to deal in votes, while Mr and Mrs Smith, whether they are shopping or voting, are only interested

[643] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 263.
[644] Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, p. 20.
[645] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 162.

in making the best bargain. The analogy to the market with its insistence on reducing human behaviour to that of a self-interested utility-maximiser ultimately erases anything distinctly political from the market model's conception of democratic competition.

3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the market model of democracy as developed in the works of Joseph Schumpeter, Anthony Downs, and Ian Shapiro is unified both by an emphasis on political competition and by the analogy to market competition. If taken seriously, the latter suggests a conception of political competition characterised by three features: It is a third-party competition that institutes a clear distinction between politicians or parties modelled on firms and voters modelled on consumers. Furthermore, it is a parallel competition, in which competitors offer their best 'political products and services' alongside each other. Finally, it presupposes an understanding of human behaviour and political action as self-interested and fundamentally individualist.

All three features have, I suggested, problematic implications. The distinction between active politicians and largely passive voters may result in an elitism that is fully fledged in Schumpeter's democratic theory, and which threatens to undermine the central democratic promise of the market model, namely, the relationship between political competition and responsive parties and governments. The array of benefits Shapiro attributes to political competition is, moreover, incompatible with a market-like parallel competition. Instead, he often references, seemingly unwittingly, competitive behaviours that are associated with frictional competition. This results not only in an internally contradictory account of the functioning of political competition, but also raises questions regarding the design of

competitive democratic institutions. Maybe most fundamentally, the analogy between political and market actors results in an impoverished account of political action that excludes a range of activities commonly considered democratic. What is more, democratic action as conceived on the market model – neither collective nor directed towards the common good – ultimately lacks any genuinely political qualities.

I want to emphasise that my objections do not amount to a rejection of political competition per se, not even to a rejection of party competition and competitive elections. Instead, the shortcomings of the market model serve as an invitation to rethink party competition beyond the analogy to the market. Such a conception of party competition would need to make space for the dynamics of partisanship and intraparty competition, be compatible with a broader range of democratic activities, and informed by an account of its genuinely political character. I will return to this in Chapter Seven. For now, however, I will investigate the epistemic benefits of political competition that Shapiro alluded to. Yet, in contrast to Shapiro's insistence on the difference between 'the argumentative' and 'the deliberative ideal', I do so from a deliberative-democratic perspective.

Chapter Five. The 'Competition of Ideas' and Democratic Deliberation

As previously noted, Ian Shapiro contends that Schumpeterian political competition is not just an institutional mechanism that allows voters to exert control over political office holders. By institutionalising a "competition over ideas as the surest path to truth", it also has a distinct epistemic dimension. Like the competition over political power, Shapiro is convinced that this competition over ideas is best modelled on the market, specifically on "the marketplace of ideas".[646] This marketplace of ideas is superior, he argues, to other practices associated with epistemic justifications of democracy; first and foremost, it is superior to democratic deliberation. "[I]n politics," he asserts, "deliberation and the search for agreement are […] unhealthy forms of collusion in restraint of democracy."[647]

This chapter takes seriously Shapiro's claim that there exists a meaningful connection between political competition and a competition over ideas. However, it sets out to challenge his account in two other regards: this competition over ideas is neither best understood in analogy to the market nor is it incompatible with deliberation. On the contrary, I will argue that the practice of democratic deliberation involves a competition over ideas and arguments and that this competition is vital for deliberation's epistemic success.

This argument not only challenges Shapiro's characterisation of deliberation and the competition of ideas as essentially opposed, but also the common association of democratic deliberation with cooperation and collaboration. Both within democratic theory and the public imaginary, democratic deliberation is often assumed to be an effort in 'collective problem

[646] Shapiro, *Politics Against Domination*, p. 80.
[647] Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 78.

solving', privileging a balanced exchange of arguments and opinions.[648] This largely cooperative conception is also embraced by epistemic democrats who value democratic deliberation specifically for its contribution to epistemically robust, or "truth-tracking", political decision-making.[649]

In emphasising its competitive dimension, this chapter contributes towards a novel understanding of democratic deliberation and its epistemic benefits.[650] Primarily, however, it articulates a different conception and mode of democratic competition. In drawing attention to the competitive aspects of deliberation, I suggest that there are competitive democratic practices beyond the electoral process. The 'democratic competition' that I analyse here takes place not merely on or leading up to election day but continuously in parliaments, at party conferences, and in the public sphere of civil society. It foregrounds the communicative

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[648] For accounts of democratic deliberation that describe it along the lines of 'collective problem solving', see: Elizabeth Anderson, "The Epistemology of Democracy", *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology*, Vol. 3, Issue 1-2 (2006), p. 12; Jürgen Habermas, "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research", *Communication Theory,* Vol. 16, Issue 4 (2006), p. 414; Honneth, "Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation", p. 777; Hélène Landemore, *Democratic Reason. Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 97. A preference for "balanced discussion" is expressed, e.g., by James S. Fishkin, *When the People Speak. Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 26; Alan Renwick et al., *The Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Brexit* (London: The Constitution Unit, 2017), p. 35.

[649] Habermas, "Political Communication in Media Society", p. 413. The notion of epistemic robustness is from James Bohman, "Deliberative Democracy and the Epistemic Benefits of Diversity," *Episteme,* Vol. 3, Issue 3 (2006), p. 117 Simone Chambers, "Truth, Deliberative Democracy, and the Virtues of Accuracy: Is Fake News Destroying the Public Sphere?", *Political Studies*, Vol. 69, Issue 1 (2021), p. 154.

Whether truth is an appropriate referent in politics and whether democratic decision-making should be justified on epistemic grounds is contested. I do not take position on this debate. Instead, I argue more modestly that epistemic democrats who highlight the epistemic potential of democratic deliberation and deliberative democrats who defend their democratic theory on epistemic grounds ought to embrace a competitive conception of democratic deliberation. My arguments are compatible with favouring non-competitive and cooperative forms of deliberation on non-epistemic grounds.

[650] The significance of the competitive dimension of democratic deliberation has been highlighted by André Bächtiger, Bernard Manin, and, in a slightly different register, by Lisa Herzog, see: André Bächtiger, "On Perfecting the Deliberative Process: Agonistic Inquiry as a Key Deliberative Technique", Paper delivered at the 2010 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association (2010); Bernard Manin, "Political Deliberation & the Adversarial Principle", *Daedalus,* Vol. 146, Issue 3 (2017), pp. 39-50; Herzog, *Citizen Knowledge*, especially Chapter 5, pp. 104-121. In contrast to Bächtiger and Manin, I do not focus primarily on organised forms of deliberation and move beyond the analogy to the adversarial legal system. I discuss Herzog's suggestion to think of a democratic competition of ideas in analogy to sports competition at length in Section 2.2 below.

interactions among citizens that can exist independently of competitive party politics, although the two may also intersect.

I want to highlight two aspects of this chapter's analysis of a deliberative-democratic competition of ideas. First, although I have just emphasised the possible independence of deliberation from party politics, I do not mean to suggest that democratic deliberation and the competition associated with it are best analysed in isolation. In contrast, my analysis is motivated, among other things, by the observation that proponents of a cooperative understanding of democratic deliberation are hostile towards competition within and outside of deliberative settings. This is reflected in the privileging of 'mini publics' over the distributed deliberations of the public sphere and in concerns to safeguard democratic deliberation from competitive party politics. Some even suggest that electoral competitions altogether ought to be replaced by random selection.[651] Importantly, how democratic deliberation is conceptualised and whether it is considered to be a cooperative or a competitive practice shapes recommendations for democratic institutional design more broadly. I will return to this relationship between the conception of democratic deliberation and broader visions for the future of democratic institutions throughout the chapter.

Second, formulating a conception of deliberative-democratic competition requires moving beyond the analogy with market competition. Although deliberative democrats occasionally use the metaphor or related economistic language,[652] the 'marketplace of ideas' is

[651] Landemore's *Open Democracy* is an example of such an institutional proposal that is explicitly anchored in an understanding of democratic deliberation that foregrounds its epistemic potentials. Landemore prefers randomly selected and self-selected mini publics to elections because the latter "entail a type of party politics that is itself not all that conducive to deliberation or its prerequisite virtues, such as open-mindedness, rather than partisanship." (Landemore, *Open Democracy*, p. 26.)

[652] Cf. Mansbridge et al., "A systemic approach to deliberative democracy", p. 20; Habermas, "Political Communication in Media Society", p. 416.

ultimately incompatible with the democratic principles and epistemic promises of democratic deliberation. Escaping the market model of competition that dominates democratic theory and exploring alternative conceptions is necessary not only for understanding the epistemic benefits of competitive deliberation but also for rethinking the democratic role of party competition.[653]

To develop my account of deliberative democratic competition and to challenge the analogy that dominates the literature on – and often the understanding of – the competition of ideas, I discuss a set of different analogies associated with deliberation, argumentation, and the competitive exchange of ideas: beyond the 'marketplace of ideas', I discuss analogies to the battle, the sports contests, the garden, and the nature reserve. This approach not only responds to a literature saturated by analogies and metaphors. It also provides me with further resources for my account of competitive democratic deliberation.

Moving beyond the mere characterisation of democratic deliberation as competitive to describe the specific features of inclusive and epistemically successful deliberative-democratic competition is important for questions of institutional design and democratic organisation, like the ones gestured at above. It is also crucial for thinking about how to respond to a democratic crisis with a pronounced epistemic dimension. In the midst of widely circulated misinformation, growing distrust in experts and science, and diagnoses of an era of 'post-truth', one may want to question the usefulness of developing an arguably idealised account of deliberative-democratic competition. Without dismissing this worry and the sense of urgency it contains, I hope to show that such an account will be helpful both for understanding the epistemic crisis of democracy and for scrutinising proposals for overcoming it.

[653] I return to this in Chapter Seven, Section 3.2.

The chapter is divided into three sections. Section 1 begins with a discussion of the epistemic dimension of deliberative democracy. It maps out differences between theorists of deliberative and epistemic democracy and demonstrates the dominance of a cooperative conception of democratic deliberation among both. Finally, I argue that democratic deliberation by virtue of involving argumentation, also involves "a contest of arguments".[654]

Section 2 aims to investigate the specific features and functions of deliberative-democratic competition through a critical examination of different analogies and metaphors. I start off with a critique of the metaphor of the marketplace of ideas as used, for example, by Shapiro. Then, I consider analogies to the battle and to the sports contest for competitions of ideas in specifically designed deliberative settings. To capture the nature and function of deliberative competition in the broader public sphere, I turn to ecological analogies, namely, to the metaphors of the 'garden' and the 'nature reserve of ideas.' Section 3 collates the insights from the discussion of these analogies, points to the implications of my competitive account of deliberation for democratic institutional design, and concludes.

1 The Epistemic Benefits of Democratic Deliberation

For Shapiro, the notion of a competition of ideas points to a fundamental difference between *argumentation* and *deliberation.* Although both are associated with similar epistemic benefits, he suggests that they "support different and incompatible institutional arrangements" and denote contrary modes of interacting with others.[655] "Deliberation is about reaching agreement;

[654] Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p. 228.
[655] Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 78

argument is about winning."[656] In the following, I will challenge this very distinction between argumentation and deliberation.

While early accounts did indeed emphasise its orientation towards consensus, this is no longer a universally accepted aspect of democratic deliberation.[657] More fundamentally, I argue that at the heart of the practice of deliberation sits a "contest of arguments", to use Jürgen Habermas's expression.[658] Rather than constituting incompatible opposites, deliberation involves argumentation – and even competition. However, this competitive dimension is often obscured by a largely cooperative conception of deliberation. I reconstruct and then challenge this cooperative conception of democratic deliberation as articulated by deliberative and epistemic democrats. First, however, I provide an overview of epistemic considerations in deliberative democracy and the role of democratic deliberation in the work of epistemic democrats.

1.1 Deliberative and epistemic theories of democracy

Democratic deliberation constitutes the normative core of the theory of deliberative democracy.[659] According to its proponents, processes of deliberation, themselves subject to democratic principles of inclusion, equality, and reciprocity, generate democratic legitimacy by discursively involving citizens in the decision-making process.[660] In contrast to the market

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[656] Shapiro, *Politics Against Domination*, p. 80.
[657] Cf. Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond*, p. 48.
[658] Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p. 228.
[659] This is a stylised and simplified account of deliberative democracy that serves the primary purpose of distinguishing it from epistemic theories of democracy. Insofar as I am mainly interested in the epistemic benefits of practices of democratic deliberation, I bracket debates on the relationship between deliberative democracy and the practice of deliberation. For an overview of and intervention into such debates, see: Mary F. Scudder, "Deliberative Democracy, More than Deliberation", *Political Studies*, Vol. 7, Issue 1 (2023), pp. 238-255.
[660] Cf. Joshua Cohen, "Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy", in: *Deliberative Democracy. Essays on Reason and Politics*, ed. by James Bohman and Wilhelm Rehg (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 72-73. Gutman/Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?,* p. 10. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p. 151.

model of democracy, which promises to generate responsiveness to citizens' concerns by merely aggregating their preferences through the electoral process, the theory of deliberative democracy foregrounds (individual and collective) *opinion formation.* As Iris Marion Young puts it: "In the deliberative model democracy is a form of practical reason. […] Participants arrive at a decision not by determining what preferences have greatest numerical support, but by determining which proposals the collective agrees are supported by the best reasons."[661]

Its emphasis on opinion formation and Young's mention of collective decisions 'supported by the best reasons' point to democratic deliberation's decidedly epistemic dimension. Democratic deliberation has the potential to generate 'epistemically robust' opinions and outcomes – some even speak of a "truth-tracking potential".[662] However, this epistemic potential is valued differently by deliberative democratic theorists.

Some, such as Amy Gutman and Dennis Thompson, argue that the purpose of deliberative democracy is "both to produce a justifiable decision and to express the value of mutual respect."[663] By involving citizens in the process of political decision making, it treats them "not merely as objects of legislation, as passive subjects to be ruled, but as autonomous agents who take part in the governance of their own society, directly or through their representatives."[664] Gutman and Thompson neither deny nor discard the epistemic benefits of democratic deliberation but believe them to be secondary to the expression of mutual respect:

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[661] Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, pp. 22-23.
[662] Habermas, "Political Communication in Media Society", p. 413.
I take the notion of "epistemic robustness" from Simone Chambers, who argues that "[t]he truth of truth-tracking is not an idea of truth as singular and final. Truth here refers to epistemic robustness." (Chambers, "Truth, Deliberative Democracy, and the Virtues of Accuracy", pp. 153-154.) As noted earlier, I remain agnostic on the role of 'truth' in democratic deliberation and in politics more generally. I believe, however, that the arguments developed in this chapter are compatible with Chamber's thinner notion of truth as 'epistemic robustness'.
[663] Gutman/Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?*, p. 4.
[664] Gutman/Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?*, p. 3.

> A process that generally produced bad outcomes would hardly express mutual respect. Citizens might participate on equal terms, but with results that few would see as worthy. The value would at best be like the faint satisfaction that players feel on a team that constantly loses its games. The instrumental view reminds us that because the stakes of political decision-making are high, and deliberation is a time-consuming activity, a deliberative process should contribute to fulfilling the central political function of making good decisions and laws.[665]

For others, like the epistemic democrat Hélène Landemore, this subordination of epistemic concerns under the expression of mutual respect amounts ultimately to "epistemic abstinence".[666] Landemore directs her critique primarily at proponents of Rawlsian theories of deliberative democracy, including Gutman and Thompson.[667] The "fact of disagreement" accepted by Gutman, Thompson, and many other deliberative democrats – that is: the assumption that some irresolvable, usually moral, disagreements are inevitable in pluralist societies – is, for her, primarily "an obstacle to epistemic concerns."[668]

> It is a model of democratic legitimacy in which free and equal citizens are supposed to resolve their disagreement through respectful exchange of arguments that refrain from appealing to the concept of truth, as the latter is seen as unnecessarily divisive and intolerant. Relatedly, deliberative democrats have assumed that the value of democratic procedures in resolving disagreement lies essentially in the values they express (such as respect, equality, and reciprocity, among others), not explicitly or at all in their knowledge-aggregating, let alone truth-tracking, properties, or in their ability to produce 'better' outcomes.[669]

Landemore's critique brings into relief the different ways in which deliberative and epistemic democrats approach democratic deliberation. For deliberative democrats, the practice of democratic deliberation is considered in all its facets and informs their understanding and ideal of democratic society. What they value about deliberative democratic procedures is not

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[665] Gutman/Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?*, p. 22.
[666] Hélène Landemore, "Beyond the Fact of Disagreement? The Epistemic Turn in Deliberative Democracy", *Social Epistemology,* Vol. 31, No. 3 (2017), p. 278.
[667] Cf. Landemore, "Beyond the Fact of Disagreement?", p. 280.
[668] Landemore, "Beyond the Fact of Disagreement?", p. 278.
[669] Landemore, "Beyond the Fact of Disagreement?", p. 278.

reducible to their outcomes but encompasses a range of other values – for example, mutual respect.[670]

Epistemic democrats value deliberation on merely instrumental grounds. Their justification of democracy rests on its superiority as a decision-making procedure. Moreover, they do not argue that this superiority is exclusively tied to the practice of deliberation. Instead, one of the central points of reference for epistemic justifications of democracy is the Condorcet Jury Theorem, which attributes epistemic benefits to the *aggregation* of a large number of votes.[671] Thus, epistemic democrats are not committed to deliberative democracy as such, nor will they always advocate for the implementation of deliberative decision-making procedures. Rather, their approval of democratic deliberation is conditional on its epistemic benefits, which I outline in the subsequent section.[672]

Another aspect of Landemore's diagnosis of an 'epistemic abstinence' among proponents of deliberative democracy is noteworthy; it is directed especially against a Rawlsian strand of deliberative democratic theory. In contrast, Landemore notes that Habermas, "who represents the other main root of deliberative democracy", has "himself never advocated any

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[670] This difference is clearly expressed in Gutman and Thompson's distinction between "the instrumental" and "the expressive view of deliberation": "On the instrumental view (sometimes called the epistemic view), deliberating about political issues has no value in itself. It is valuable only to the extent that it enables citizens to make the most justifiable political decisions. On the expressive view of deliberation, significant value resides in the act of justifying laws and public policies to the people who are bound by them. By deliberating with one another, decision-makers manifest mutual respect toward their fellow citizens." (Gutman/Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?*, pp. 21-22.

[671] For an exemplary epistemic justification of democracy structured around the Condorcet Jury Theorem, see: Robert E. Goodin and Kai Spiekermann, *An Epistemic Theory of Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). See also: Landemore, *Democratic Reason*, pp. 145-184; David Estlund, "Beyond Fairness and Deliberation: The Epistemic Dimension of Democratic Authority", in: *Deliberative Democracy. Essays on Reason and Politics*, ed. by James Bohman and Wilhelm Rehg (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 173-204.

[672] For an overview of the relationship between epistemic and deliberative democracy, see: David Estlund and Hélène Landemore, "The Epistemic Value of Democratic Deliberation", in *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*, ed. by André Bächtiger et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp.113-131.

form of epistemic abstinence".[673] Instead, Habermas himself speaks of the "truth-tracking potential of political deliberation".[674]

My main object of analysis in this chapter is the practice of democratic deliberation, not the normative theory of deliberative democracy. However, when I do occasionally speak of 'deliberative democracy', this refers to Habermas's and Habermasian theories of deliberative democracy, which acknowledge the epistemic dimension of democratic deliberation. Indeed, Habermas will be a point of reference throughout this chapter – not least because he himself speaks of a "contest of arguments" and, thus, gestures towards a competitive conception of democratic deliberation and its epistemic benefits.[675]

1.2 The cooperative account of democratic deliberation

The epistemic benefits of democratic deliberation can be evaluated from two distinct perspectives. First, participation in democratic deliberation provides a means of enhancing individual epistemic competence. Taking part in deliberation exposes individuals to more information and perspectives and can thus result in more informed and considered voting decisions.[676] This seems to be the promise of Bruce Ackerman and James S. Fishkin's *Deliberation Day*.[677]

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[673] Landemore, "Beyond the Fact of Disagreement?", p. 281.
[674] Habermas, "Political Communication in Media Society", p. 413
[675] Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p. 228.
I also adopt a largely systemic approach to deliberative democracy as formulated in Mansbridge et al., "A systemic approach to deliberative democracy".
[676] Cf. Fishkin, *When the People Speak*, p. 143; Goodin/Spiekermann, *An Epistemic Theory of Democracy*, pp. 135-138.
[677] See: Bruce Ackerman and James S. Fishkin, *Deliberation Day* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).
In *Deliberation Day,* Ackerman and Fishkin propose to introduce a new national holiday, which "will be held two weeks before major national elections. Registered voters will be called together in neighborhood meeting places, in small groups of fifteen, and larger groups of five hundred, to discuss the central issues raised by the campaign." (Ackerman/Fishkin, *Deliberation Day*, p. 3.)

Second, epistemic benefits may be attributed to democratic deliberation as a collective decision-making procedure. On this view, democratic deliberation is epistemically beneficial not because it cultivates better individual decision-makers but because it arrives at better decisions. This understanding of democratic deliberation is associated less with events such as Deliberation Day and more with parliaments and mini publics. While a competitive conception of democratic deliberation speaks to both, I will primarily focus on this second epistemic benefit.

Many arguments for the epistemic superiority of democratic deliberation as a decision-making procedure focus less on the particular features of deliberation than on its *democratic* character: Responding to the objection that valuing epistemic outcomes inevitably leads to an 'epistocracy',[678] deliberative and epistemic democrats argue that the epistemic potential of democratic deliberation lies in its ability to pool distributed information and to bring together different perspectives and 'thinking styles'.[679] Democratic deliberation, they argue, is epistemically superior because it allows for the inclusion of *diverse* views and perspectives.

Exemplarily, James Bohman proposes a "multiperspectival" account of democratic deliberation, in which inclusion is a key guarantee for the best epistemic outcome: "the epistemic benefits of democracy derive from a practice of deliberation in which many different perspectives are brought to bear in an ongoing process of formulation, testing and revision, in which each participant proposes the very best outcome, as they understand and are able to express it."[680] Bohman's account also reveals that the pooling of diverse opinions and

[678] For an objection along these lines, see: Maria Paula Saffon and Nadia Urbinati, "Procedural Democracy, the Bulwark of Equal Liberty", *Political Theory*, Vol. 41, Issue 3 (2013), p. 6.
[679] Landemore, *Democratic Reason*, p. 3; Bohman, "Deliberative Democracy and the Epistemic Benefits of Diversity"; Anderson, "The Epistemology of Democracy".
[680] Bohman, "Deliberative Democracy and the Epistemic Benefits of Diversity", p. 182.

perspectives alone is insufficient. The 'process of formulation, testing and revision' associated with *deliberation* – rather than with its democratic character – is equally important.

Yet, many epistemic democrats pay surprisingly little attention to the way in which diverse voices are brought into conversation with one another.[681] But privileging the inclusive nature of democratic deliberation over its deliberative character may turn out to be problematic. Indeed, portraying democratic deliberation as a pooling mechanism ultimately reduces it to mere aggregation, thereby failing to account for deliberation's contribution to opinion formation.

A closer look at accounts of democratic deliberation reveals that it is generally, though often tacitly, assumed to be a fundamentally cooperative endeavour of 'collective problem solving'.[682] This is most explicit in Deweyan accounts of deliberation and democratic decision-making as "cooperative social experimentation".[683] However, it also shines through in the examples and imagery epistemic democrats employ: for example, in Landemore's *Democratic Reason* a group lost in a maze provides the guiding metaphor for the epistemic advantages of democratic deliberation. Only through drawing on their individual perceptions and skill sets and, importantly, through collaborating and working together, will they find their way out.[684] This suggests that democratic deliberation unfolds its epistemic potential only, or at least most effectively, as a cooperative project. With the exception of some theorists who highlight the

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[681] Bächtiger makes a similar observation: "However, what frequently lacks in epistemic approaches is the exact specification of the deliberative process. Landemore […], for instance, sets the prime on group composition which should maximize what she calls 'cognitive diversity'. But she is mostly silent about the exact process of how a group of people gets to the 'correct answer'. Agonistic inquiry can fill this void." (Bächtiger, "On Perfecting the Deliberative Process", p. 13.

[682] Cf. Anderson, "The Epistemology of Democracy", p. 12; Habermas, "Political Communication in Media Society", p. 414; Landemore, *Democratic Reason*, p. 97.

[683] Anderson, "The Epistemology of Democracy", p. 13.

See also: Bohman, "Deliberative Democracy and the Epistemic Benefits of Diversity", pp. 181-182; Honneth, "Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation", p. 777

[684] Cf. Landemore, *Democratic Reason*, pp. 3-6, pp. 234-237.

benefits of "*agonistic inquiry*" and "adversarial debate",[685] *competition* is either not mentioned or viewed only as an obstacle to deliberation.[686] This emphasis on cooperation and collaboration is not just an aspect of the theory of democratic deliberation but shapes the design of experimental deliberative mini-publics, which generally aim to construct collaborative environments, and is reflected in some epistemic democrats' proposals for restructuring democratic institutions.[687]

Like the pooling of diverse views, cooperation and collaboration arguably constitute important aspects of deliberation. However, exclusively emphasising cooperation may lead one to overlook a central feature of deliberation: epistemic democrats agree that deliberation, exceeding mere talk or conversation, involves the practice of *argumentation.*[688] Argumentation, however, is characterised by what Habermas calls its "fundamentally *agonal character*": "To argue is to contradict. It is only the right – and, indeed, the encouragement – to say 'no' to each other that elicits the epistemic potential of conflicting opinions in discourse; for the latter is geared to the self-correction of participants who, without mutual criticism, could not learn from

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[685] Bächtiger, "On Perfecting the Deliberative Process", p. 3. Manin, "Political Deliberation & the Adversarial Principle", p. 40.

[686] Cf. David Owen and Graham Smith, "Sortition, Rotation, and Mandate: Conditions for Political Equality and Deliberative Reasoning", *Politics & Society*, Vol. 46, Issue 3 (2018), p. 428; Landemore, *Open Democracy*, p. 39.

[687] Ackerman/Fishkin, *Deliberation Day*, p. 26.

The design principles, e.g., of the Citizens' Assembly on Brexit focused on the facilitation of a balanced discussion and on avoiding confrontational insistence on prior views (Renwick et al., *The Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Brexit,* pp. 35-36.)

[688] Cf. Bohman, "Deliberative Democracy and the Epistemic Benefits of Diversity", p. 117; Fishkin, *When the People Speak*, p. 90; Landemore, *Democratic Reason*, p. 92.

An understanding of deliberation that privileges *rational argumentation* is not uncontested. Feminist theorists have pointed out that limiting deliberation to rational argument excludes communicative practices shared primarily by oppressed groups; it thus effectively excludes these groups (cf. Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, pp. 53-57). An epistemic conception of democratic deliberation that centres argumentation has the potential to reinstate the primacy of rational argument that has been challenged by Young and others. Therefore, I choose to speak of 'argumentation' rather than 'rational argumentation' in the following. Like deliberation, I assume that argumentation can take many forms and may include communicative practices such as storytelling (cf. Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, pp. 37-40; Herzog, *Citizen Knowledge*, p. 65). It is important to note that Young does not argue for the removal of argumentation from deliberation – rather, she suggests its decentring (cf. Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, p. 79). Mirroring this, I do not claim that deliberation ought to consist exclusively in the 'contest of arguments.'

one another."[689] Elsewhere, Habermas even explicitly characterises deliberation as involving a "competition for better reasons",[690] "a ritualized competition for the better arguments",[691] or a "contest of arguments".[692]

Two things are important here: First, argumentation is competitive or "essentially adversarial", as John Casey puts it, "because to interact with someone's beliefs is to attempt to compel them."[693] Importantly, argumentation, so understood, needs to be enacted by deliberators.[694] While most deliberative and epistemic democrats recognise the significance of *competing arguments* but prefer their individual "weighing",[695] my competitive conception of deliberation emphasises that the "contest of arguments" is not merely an internal process but requires deliberators to enact it.[696]

Second, and relatedly, it is this enacted competition and the 'encouragement to contradict' that unleash the epistemic potential of deliberation. Through mutual criticism,

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[689] Jürgen Habermas, "Reflections and Hypotheses on a Further Structural Transformation of the Political Public Sphere", trans. by Ciaran Cronin, *Theory, Culture & Society,* Vol. 39, Issue 4 (2022), p. 152.

Here, Habermas corrects a common misunderstanding: "The assumption that political discourses are also oriented to the goal of reaching an agreement is often misunderstood. It by no means implies an idealistic conception of the democratic process as something like a convivial university seminar." (Habermas, "Reflections and Hypotheses on a Further Structural Transformation of the Political Public Sphere", p. 151.)

[690] Habermas, "Political Communication in Media Society", p. 413.

[691] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 1. Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, translated by Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), p. 26.

[692] Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms,* p. 228.

[693] Casey, "Adversality and Argumentation", pp.100-101.

Whether argumentation is best understood as adversarial is the object of an ongoing debate to which I return briefly in my discussion of the 'argumentation-as-war' metaphor in Section 2.2 below (See, e.g.: Daniel H. Cohen, "Argument is War…and War is Hell: Philosophy, Education, and Metaphors for Argumentation", *Informal Logic,* Vol. 17, Issue 2 (1995), pp. 177-188; Rooney, "Philosophy, Adversarial Argumentation, and Embattled Reason"; Casey, "Adversality and Argumentation"; Ian James Kidd, "Martial metaphors and argumentative virtues and vices", in: *Polarisation, Arrogance, and Dogmatism. Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. by Alessandra Tanesini and Michael P. Lynch (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), pp. 25-38). The terms 'competitive', 'adversarial', and 'agonal' are used largely synonymously in this debate and by deliberative democrats.

[694] This resonates with Habermas's account of argumentation as requiring a "division of labor between proponents and opponents" (Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 1*, p. 25).

[695] Fishkin, e.g., defines deliberation as "the process by which individuals sincerely weigh the merits of competing arguments in discussions together." (Fishkin, *When the People Speak*, p. 33.)

[696] Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p. 228.

Habermas points out, argumentation enables "learning processes – through which we acquire theoretical knowledge and moral insights, extend and renew our evaluative language, and overcome self-deceptions and difficulties in comprehension […]."[697] This link between argumentation, criticism, and epistemic learning processes has also been identified by Bernard Manin and André Bächtiger. Manin describes the epistemic benefits of an "open and explicit clash of opposing ideas": "A decision is more likely to be of a high quality – whether in factual and technical terms, or in terms of values – if the proposals for action have been submitted to criticism beforehand. Criticism permits the elimination, or at least the reduction, of proposals involving false factual beliefs, logical errors, or objectionable moral choices."[698]

With regard to his account of "agonistic inquiry", Bächtiger observes that

> when people start questioning and challenging each other's claims and arguments, potential holes in factual knowledge or argumentative consistency may come to the fore. Agonistic inquiry implies a process of continuously opening up issues about the reasonableness of a claim or belief and requires providing better evidence or counter-evidence. Such a critical, rigid, and sustained inquiry can be conducive to obtain better – or, even the 'right' – answers.[699]

In line with a competitive conception of deliberation, Habermas, Manin, and Bächtiger highlight the significance of mutual criticism for deliberative opinion formation; rather than merely aggregating citizens' opinions, deliberation transforms and improves them. Democratic deliberation is an epistemically superior decision-making procedure not simply because it pools diverse voices but because it brings them into competitive conversations with one another.

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[697] Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 1*, p. 22.
See also: John B. Min and James K. Wong, "Epistemic approaches to deliberative democracy", *Philosophy Compass* (2018), Vol. 13, Issue 6, pp. 4-5.

[698] Manin, "Political Deliberation & the Adversarial Principle", pp. 42-44.
See also: Bächtiger, "On Perfecting the Deliberative Process", pp. 13-14.

[699] Bächtiger, "On Perfecting the Deliberative Process", p. 14.

In speaking of a *competition* of reasons or arguments, rather than of *adversarial* debate or *agonistic* inquiry, Habermas evokes another theoretical tradition that predates theories of deliberative democracy and is often associated with John Milton and John Stuart Mill.[700] Both argue that it is through the confrontation of ideas in "a struggle"[701] or "a battle"[702] that the truth is most likely to emerge. In the 20th century, this martial account of the 'competition of ideas' has largely been replaced with an analogy to another, omnipresent competitive mechanism – the 'marketplace of ideas.' I continue my investigation into the features of deliberative-democratic competition with an evaluation of this metaphor.

2 Market, Sport, or Nature Reserve: A Democratic Competition of Ideas

The metaphor of the 'marketplace of ideas' and the analogy to market competition reveal that it is insufficient to merely note the competitive character of argumentation and deliberation. As previously described, the concept of competition, rather than designating a singular practice, refers to a variety of different phenomena. Competitions take place in different spheres and between different actors; they function differently, serve different goals, and place different normative demands on competitors. Especially when it comes to questions regarding the organisation of democratic deliberation and the design of deliberative institutions, it is crucial to reflect on the specific features and functions of deliberative-democratic competition. Yet, this is something even Habermas neglects – although he is perhaps the most explicit in his characterisation of deliberation as a competitive practice. Some theorists of deliberative democracy even uncritically adopt the metaphor of the 'marketplace of ideas' for the epistemic

[700] Cf. John Stuart Mill, "On Liberty", in: *Essay on Politics and Society. Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Vol. 18* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), pp. 213-310; John Milton, "Areopagitica", in: *Areopagitica and Other Writings,* ed. by William Poole (London: Allen Lane, 2014), pp. 108-145.
[701] Mill, "On Liberty", p. 254.
[702] Milton, "Areopagitica", p. 141.

dimension of deliberation, overlooking that market competition does not provide an adequate model for deliberative competition.[703]

Arguably, the use of a metaphor such as the 'marketplace of ideas' does not commit theorists to modelling democratic deliberation entirely on market competition. More often, deliberative democrats who speak of the 'marketplace of ideas' merely aim to highlight the competitive character of deliberation, not to suggest a deeper equivalence between deliberation and economic markets. However, metaphors can exceed their intended use, instead shaping common conceptions of the object they were only meant to illustrate and motivating its affirmation or rejection. Especially in the absence of any extended discussion of the nature and organisation of deliberative competition, the metaphors employed to characterise it matter. It is for this reason that I investigate the features and functioning of deliberative competition by critically examining metaphors that have been suggested for epistemic and deliberative competitions.

I begin with a critique of the metaphor of the 'marketplace of ideas,' before considering a range of potential alternatives: 'the battle,' 'the sports contest,' 'the garden,' and the 'nature reserve of ideas.' As I argue below, which metaphor and corresponding analogy are most appropriate and useful depends, among other things, on the specific deliberative setting. Thus, my aim in this chapter is not to identify *the* metaphor for deliberative-democratic competition. Rather, exploring these metaphors allows me to arrive at a set of requirements for epistemically successful deliberative-democratic competitions, while remaining sensitive to the different deliberative settings that characterise democratic society.

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[703] Cf. Mansbridge et al., "A systemic approach to deliberative democracy", p. 20.
I discuss the inadequacies of the marketplace metaphor in Section 2.1 below.

2.1 The marketplace of ideas

The origins of the metaphor of the 'marketplace of ideas' are variously attributed to John Milton and John Stuart Mill.[704] As discussed in Chapter Four, Shapiro writes, for example, that "[o]n Mill's account, the best course is to subject arguments to the discipline of the *marketplace of ideas*: require their advocates continually to defend them against the going alternatives."[705] In their writings on the freedom of speech and the press, both Mill and Milton certainly recognise the epistemic promise of a competition of ideas and arguments. However, as noted above, their arguments do not rest on an analogy to market competition but on analogies to war and battle: they are convinced that it is through the confrontation of ideas in "a struggle"[706] or "a battle"[707] that the truth is likely to emerge. I return to this rather different conception of epistemic competition in Section 2.2 below.

The core assumption of the 'marketplace of ideas'– the analogy between epistemic and market competition – was first articulated in 1919 by US Supreme Court Justice Holmes with regard to the First Amendment of the US Constitution.[708] Since then, the metaphor has found

[704] Cf. Stanley Ingber, "The Marketplace of Ideas", p. 3.

For discussions of why the attribution of the marketplace of ideas to Mill is wrong, see: Jill Gordan, "John Stuart Mill and the 'Marketplace of Ideas'"; Herzog, *Citizen Knowledge*, p. 112.

[705] Shapiro, *Politics Against Domination*, p. 80.

[706] Mill, "On Liberty", p. 254.

[707] Milton, "Areopagitica", p. 141.

[708] Cf. Ingber, "The Marketplace of Ideas", p. 3.

The metaphor of the 'marketplace of ideas' is polyvalent: it can be variously interpreted as the 'forum', as a market of goods, or as the more abstract and impersonal economic market. Common usage of the metaphor vacillates between these referents while explicit discussion tends to emphasise its economic connotations. Although some theorists have attempted to re-conceptualise the metaphor in light of insights of contemporary economics (see, e.g., Blocher, "Institutions in the Marketplace of Ideas"), the market competition that is most often referenced in the marketplace metaphor is the highly idealised market of classical economics. That is: it relies on a conception of the "marketplace as an atomistic place where individuals costlessly compete to their mutual benefit" (Blocher, "Institutions in the Marketplace of Ideas", p. 825; see also: Ingber, "The Marketplace of Ideas", pp. 4-5, pp. 16-17; Goldman/Cox, "Speech, Truth, and the Free Market of Ideas", pp. 19-20).

its way into public discourse, legal theory, philosophy, and political theory.[709] The analogy between market competition and epistemic competition expresses a general scepticism towards government regulation: like the market, which is assumed to function best in the absence of government intervention, a competition of ideas is thought to result in the 'truth' when left untouched by government regulation.[710]

As perhaps the most common shorthand for a competition of ideas, the metaphor of the marketplace of ideas may often be employed to merely gesture towards the benefits of some sort of competitive exchange of ideas and arguments.[711] Yet, in suggesting a parallel, however tenuous, between economic and epistemic practices, it may still result in the misrepresentation and misunderstanding of the latter. Indeed, critics of the marketplace metaphor often observe that it overlooks the incommensurability of epistemic and market processes. The analogy between ideas and goods fails to take into account that ideas cannot easily be divided into singular products but remain necessarily connected to networks of other ideas, and are public and nonexclusive goods from the consumption of which people cannot be easily excluded.[712] Ideas, then, are better described as being *shared*, not traded, with no one giving up the shared idea in the process of passing it on.[713]

According to Shapiro, one of the benefits of the market model of democracy – and, thus, presumably of the 'marketplace of ideas' – lies in its simple institutionalisation. He argues

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[709] See, e.g.: Wonnell, "Truth and the Marketplace of Ideas"; Blocher, "Institutions in the Marketplace of Ideas"; Parsons, "Fighting for Attention"; Goldman/Cox, "Speech, Truth, and the Free Market of Ideas"; Sunstein, *Liars*; Sparrow/Goodin, "The Competition of Ideas: Market or Garden?"; Herzog, *Citizen Knowledge*.
[710] Cf. Goldman/Cox, "Speech, Truth, and the Free Markets of Ideas", p.4.
[711] Some even argue that Justice Holmes's position is not committed to the economic analogy and could be expressed in a number of different metaphors (Cf. Brazeal, "How much does a belief cost?", pp.4-6. Blasi, "Holmes and the Marketplace of Ideas").
[712] Cf. Sparrow/Goodin, "The Competition of Ideas: Market or Garden?", pp. 48-49; Goldman/Cox, "Speech, Truth, and the Free Market for Ideas", p. 25.
[713] Cf. Sparrow/Goodin, "The Competition of Ideas: Market or Garden?", p. 48. Herzog, *Citizen Knowledge*, pp. 108-109.

that deliberation, on the other hand, "requires people to act in good faith, but it is not possible to design institutions to induce good faith."[714] In drawing this comparison, Shapiro overlooks that the marketplace of ideas rests on its own version of 'good faith'. If it is supposed to result in true or epistemically superior outcomes, the 'consumers' within it would not only need to have a strong preference for truth that leads them to 'buy' or 'invest in' true ideas. They would also need to be able to discern the truth of the ideas on offer and competently select between truths and falsehoods.[715] It is questionable that such epistemic virtue and competence are much easier to induce than the 'good faith' seemingly required for successful deliberation. What is more, the metaphor of the marketplace of ideas, which posits the 'truth' as an outcome of a marketlike competition, rests on a peculiar mischaracterisation of the market as geared towards the production of one singular good.[716]

In the following, I contribute to these critiques by focusing on the conception of competition that the metaphor of the marketplace of ideas implies. I have argued that market competition – notably a stylised and simplified image of market competition – is characterised by three features: It is a *third-party* and a *parallel* competition, and its competitors are *self-interested individuals.*[717] In my discussion here, I focus on the first two features in particular. Insofar as the metaphor of the marketplace of ideas transposes the same conception of competition onto debate and deliberation that the market model of democracy transposes onto the electoral process, I will argue that the former suffers from similar problems to the latter.

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[714] Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 79.
[715] Cf. Herzog, *Citizen Knowledge*, pp. 109-110; Sparrow/Goodin, "The Competition of Ideas: Market or Garden?", p. 52; Goldman/Cox, "Speech, Truth, and the Free Market of Ideas", pp. 18-21; Brazeal, "How much does a belief cost?", pp. 20-21.
[716] If the marketplace-metaphor corresponded to the actual function of market competition – providing efficient distribution relative to production possibilities and consumer demand –, it would result in a proliferation of ideas in line with 'consumer demand' – not in the 'truth' (Cf. Goldman/Cox "Speech, Truth, and the Free Market of Ideas", p. 17; Brazeal, "How much does a belief cost?", p. 29; Herzog, *Citizen Knowledge*, pp. 110-111.)
[717] See Chapter Four, Section 1.3.

Thus, the third-party structure of an epistemic competition modelled on the market implies a distinction between 'sellers' or 'producers of ideas' who compete for the approval of 'consumers.' This distinction certainly tracks aspects of the actual state of public deliberation and may be inevitable in complex societies with a highly mediated public sphere. It is also true that third-party competitions over ideas can be epistemically beneficial. For example, Alfred Moore points to the "dynamism and creativeness grounded in parallel striving to appeal to an audience".[718] Furthermore, Bernard Manin suggests that adversarial debates provide the audience with a special opportunity to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of a decision.[719] With regard to Manin's proposal in particular, it is important to note that he suggests adversarial debates should complement, not substitute, other forms of democratic deliberation.[720]

However, in the marketplace of ideas, the distinction between producers and consumers of ideas is all-encompassing and structural. This not only raises democratic concerns – insofar as it appears to be incompatible with the commitment of deliberative democracy to inclusion – ,[721] it also has distinct epistemic implications. As mentioned in the previous chapter, a limited number of participants in political as well as epistemic competition is likely to result in a reduced offer of political or epistemic products. What is more, the epistemic promise of democratic deliberation depends precisely on a diversity of voices – as outlined above, epistemic and deliberative democrats emphasise that it is the inclusion of diverse information, opinions, and perspectives, on which the epistemic superiority of deliberative decision-making procedures is based.

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[718] Moore, "Post-Truth Politics and the Competition of Ideas", p. 119.
[719] Cf. Manin, "Political Deliberation & the Adversarial Principle", p. 40.
[720] Cf. Manin, "Political Deliberation & the Adversarial Principle", p. 47.
[721] Cf. Gutman/Thompson *Why Deliberative Democracy?*, pp. 9-10; Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p. 365; Young, *Democracy and Inclusion*, p. 23.

Noting the dangers of such hierarchical distinctions and potential exclusions, the epistemic democrat Landemore even recommends the replacement of competitive elections with deliberative mini-publics whose members are determined by random selection.[722] It is important to remember that Landemore is a proponent of a cooperative conception of deliberation and expresses scepticism regarding the compatibility of deliberation and partisan politics.[723] In her thought, diagnosing the ills of one type of competition seems to necessitate a shift into the cooperative register. I challenge this stark opposition of competition and cooperation in Section 2.2 below.

Habermas suggests a different approach to countering the potential exclusions of third-party competitions. Interestingly, he makes his recommendation in an economistic language consistent with the marketplace of ideas. For Habermas, the epistemic function of the public sphere relies on "*moral entrepreneurs* who generate public attention for supposedly neglected issues".[724] However, the reference to the figure of the entrepreneur is problematic in two regards. Like the marketplace metaphor, the 'entrepreneur' foregrounds the initiative of individuals who distinguish themselves from the collectives for which they act as spokespeople. It is true that it is often due to such individuals that marginalised issues enter dominant debate. Yet, the reliance on individual initiative alone absolves deliberative democrats from reflecting on and correcting the unequal barriers to entry into the marketplace of ideas.[725]

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[722] Cf. Landemore, *Open Democracy*, pp. 11-12.
I discuss the implications of my discussion of democratic competition for the suggestion to replace electoral competition with sortition in Chapter Seven, Section 3.1.
[723] Cf. Landemore, *Open Democracy*, p. 39.
[724] Habermas, "Political Communication in Media Society", p. 416.
[725] By emphasising 'free' competition within the market, the metaphor of the marketplace of ideas obscures that entry into that 'market', i.e., into public debate, comes with different costs for different market actors and that differences in the 'production' of and 'investment' in ideas prior to market entry affect their performance within the market. If someone wanted to keep the marketplace metaphor in place, a focus on the framework of market competition would be more instructive than Habermas's 'entrepreneurs.' The former would allow, e.g., for the translation of anti-trust law into the epistemic and political realm (Cf. Parsons, "Fighting for Attention", p. 2234).

The emphasis on the individual 'moral entrepreneur' illustrates, second, a tendency to privilege professionalised and publicised deliberations and, consistent with a third-party conception of competition, to imagine their 'audience' as merely receptive. This obscures from view vast numbers of deliberations among 'audience' members. I return to these when discussing the metaphor of the 'nature reserve of ideas' below.[726] For the marketplace of ideas to be compatible with democratic principles and to fulfil its epistemic promise, it will be necessary, at the very least, to move from the image of a 'free, unregulated market' to that of a regulated one.

A competition of ideas consistent with the marketplace metaphor is unlikely to be epistemically successful, not only because it reduces diversity among 'producers of ideas', but also because it calls for disengagement. Following Shai Agmon, I have suggested that competition in the market takes a parallel form – that is, market competition is an institutional mechanism that produces social benefits not by generating a clash between competitors but by allowing them "to maximize their performance alongside each other". [727] In a marketplace of ideas, the 'truth' is supposed to emerge impersonally and unintentionally behind competitors' backs.[728]

Earlier, I observed that Shapiro, in his account of the marketplace of ideas, tends to move between references to parallel and frictional competitions; for example, by suggesting that the adversarial legal system is an example of the marketplace of ideas in action.[729] This is more than just a confusion of metaphors. Instead, it reveals the difficulty of imagining how a

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[726] See Section 2.3 below.
[727] Agmon, "Two Concepts of Competition", pp. 11-12.
[728] This aspect of the metaphor of the marketplace of ideas is most evident in references to the 'invisible hand', see, e.g., Schauer, *Free Speech*, p. 16; Shapiro, *Politics Against Domination*, p. 80.
[729] Cf. Shapiro, *Politics Against Domination*, p. 80; Schauer, *Free Speech*, p. 16.
See also: Goldman/Cox, "Speech, Truth, and the Free Market of Ideas", pp. 29-32.

parallel competition of ideas would produce epistemic benefits. If competitors develop their ideas in isolation and alongside each other, how are they supposed to learn from one another?

Rather than competitors appealing to an audience of largely disengaged citizens by presenting their ideas alongside each other, epistemically successful democratic deliberation requires at least some "friction competition", that is, a competition in which success requires "overcoming the responses or interferences performed by the opponent."[730] Habermas's "contest of arguments",[731] like Manin's "adversarial debate"[732] and Bächtiger's "agonistic inquiry"[733] promise to trigger epistemic learning processes precisely because they invite mutual criticism, challenge, and the exchange of arguments. While the marketplace metaphor imagines neither competitors nor consumers engage with each other, argumentation and deliberation require such engagement.[734]

In addition to the general disanalogies between economic and epistemic practices, I have demonstrated that the metaphor of the marketplace of ideas paints a peculiar picture of the competition of ideas. If the analogy to market competition is taken seriously, competitors do not engage with each other; rather than challenging competing ideas, they merely focus on their own intellectual 'product.' Only once it is ready, is it presented to the scrutinising consumers who are suddenly called upon to distinguish truth from falsity. Such an arrangement is not just incompatible with the practice of democratic deliberation; it is more fundamentally at odds with any argumentative, inquiring, or even just conversational practice.

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[730] Agmon, "Two Concepts of Competition", p. 10.
[731] Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p. 228.
[732] Manin, "Political Deliberation & the Adversarial Principle", p. 40
[733] Bächtiger, "On perfecting the Deliberative Process", p. 3.
[734] The marketplace metaphor does not preclude customers from engaging or even deliberating with each other. However, it does not account for these deliberations either.

Before exploring alternative metaphors and analogies, I want to conclude this discussion of the marketplace metaphor by noting a final inaccuracy. The metaphor of the marketplace of ideas is used indiscriminately in defence of the principle of free speech, descriptions of deliberative systems, and accounts of parliamentary debate.[735] That is: the metaphor is used for a range of different deliberative settings.

In contrast, I aim to be sensitive to the different types of deliberation that characterise democratic societies when discussing alternative metaphors and analogies. To do this, I adopt a broadly Habermasian 'two-track model' of democratic deliberation and distinguish between organised deliberations in institutions such as parliament and mini-publics and the less regulated, often mediated deliberations of the broader public sphere.[736] While deliberation in carefully designed settings is more likely to approach Habermas's *ideal speech situation,*[737] within the broader public sphere, communication is largely mediated, and the competition of arguments is often intersected by competitions for attention and influence. To take account of the difference between organised deliberation and the less regulated deliberations of the public sphere, I examine a different set of analogies for each. I begin by discussing analogies to battles

[735] For example: Schauer refers to the marketplace of ideas in his analysis of the principle of free speech (Schauer, *Free Speech*, pp. 15-16), Mansbridge et al. point to "the marketplace of competition in ideas" when discussing the role of partisan media in deliberative systems (Mansbridge et al., "A systemic approach to deliberative democracy", p. 20), and Shapiro seems to have in mind parliamentary debates (cf. Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 78).

[736] I am primarily interested in the degree of organisation and regulation of different forms of deliberation. Habermas, in contrast, additionally focuses on the decision-making power of different publics (Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p. 307). While he distinguishes parliaments from mini-publics on this basis, I consider them both examples of 'arranged publics'. My distinction also resonated with Landemore's distinction between "(i) simple deliberation, which takes place among individuals; and (ii) distributed deliberation, which takes place in a more depersonalized way at the level of society." (Landemore, *Democratic Reason,* p. 91). Importantly, in actual democratic societies, 'regulated' and 'unregulated' forms of deliberation are not always neatly separated but intersect and interact. For example, parties and politicians are prominent actors both in regulated parliamentary debates and in the dispersed deliberations of the broader public sphere.

[737] The Habermasian "ideal speech situation" describes a communicative setting that is "immunized against repression and inequality in a special way" (Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 1*, p. 26). The structures of the ideal speech situation themselves constitute an aspect of argumentation.

and sports tournaments and the deliberation that takes place in carefully organised deliberative institutions.

2.2 Battle or sports tournament of ideas

Deliberative institutions take different forms, have different functions, and stand in different relations to the broader public sphere: parliaments consist of elected members and have decision-making power. Citizens' assemblies bring together a representative sample of randomly selected citizens, often with the aim of formulating policy recommendations. Other deliberative events, such as the aforementioned *Deliberation Day*, aim to generate more considered voting decisions.[738] Yet, deliberations within such institutions also share relevant similarities; they are spatially and temporally bounded face-to-face deliberations with a clear topic and a specified aim, following a predetermined, regulated procedure.

Considering these characteristics, it may seem strange to suggest the metaphor of a 'battle of ideas' for the deliberative-democratic competitions that take place or ought to take place in parliaments and mini-publics. Indeed, Milton and Mill, who – as mentioned above – employ this metaphor, do so in making their respective cases for free speech and press. Their writings concern the conditions for deliberation in the public sphere more than the ideal conditions of parliamentary debate.[739] Yet, others use references to battles, war, and fighting precisely to illustrate the character of parliamentary debate. As discussed in the previous

[738] Ackerman/Fishkin, *Deliberation Day*.

For an overview of different types of mini-publics, see: Graham Smith and Maija Setälä, "Mini-Publics and Deliberative Democracy", in: *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*, ed. by André Bächtiger et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 301-303.

[739] However, the analogy is also present, albeit in a more subtle way, in Mill's account of parliament as a "Congress of Opinion", in which any party or opinion "can *muster* its strength" and "*marshals* its hosts in the presence of government" (John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, (Chicago: Gateway Edition, 1962 [1861]), p. 112, my emphases).

chapter, Schumpeter and Shapiro are a case in point. In addition to references to market competition, Schumpeter highlights the strategic nature of politics by comparing political parties to "two armies [that] operate against each other":

> Like the conquest of the stretch of country or the hill, the decision of the political issues is, from the standpoint of the politician, not the end but only the material of parliamentary activity. Since politicians fire off words instead of bullets and since those words are unavoidably supplied by the issues under debate, this may not always be as clear as it is in the military case. But victory over the opponent is nevertheless the essence of both games.[740]

In a similar vein, Shapiro describes the parliamentary interactions as "gladiatorial clashes".[741] Furthermore, common ways of understanding and practicing argumentation – and thus of that aspect of democratic deliberation that I describe as 'competitive' – are equally shaped by references to war, fighting, and battle. As Lakoff and Johnson observe, "the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor is one that we live by in this culture […]."[742]

I have argued that Schumpeter's and Shapiro's shift from analogies to market competition to battles and warfare reveals that a parallel organisation is unsuitable for a competition of ideas. Indeed, the analogy to the battle captures the significance of confrontation for epistemic competitions. Habermas, Manin, and Bächtiger all emphasise that it is the act of 'attacking' – of questioning, criticising, and contradicting – the arguments of others that triggers processes of learning and (self-)correction.[743] However, the 'battle' seems to imply a particularly aggressive and destructive form of confrontation.

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[740] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 279.
[741] Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 78.
[742] Lakoff/Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, p. 4.
[743] Cf. Bächtiger, "On Perfecting the Deliberative Process", p. 14; Habermas, "Reflections and Hypotheses on a Further Structural Transformation of the Political Public Sphere", p. 152; Manin, "Political Deliberation & the Adversarial Principle", p. 44.

To be sure, for the metaphor of the 'battle of ideas' to be at all compatible with parliamentary debate and the notion of a 'competition of ideas', it must be imagined as a highly ritualised affair. A duel or medieval tournament provides a more appropriate parallel than modern warfare. [744] Still, even an organised and regulated battle of this kind implies violence, aggression, and destruction, and equates winning with elimination.

Accordingly, critics of the 'argumentation-as-war'-metaphor criticise it for promoting epistemic vices, exclusionary forms of communication, and attitudes that undermine community.[745] The battle is an obviously inappropriate analogy for the organisation of democratic deliberation. Not only is its emphasis on violent elimination at odds with democratic principles, for example, of equality and inclusion. It also conflicts with the epistemic promise of democratic deliberation. As shown above, the epistemic benefits of democratic deliberation arise out of the competitive interplay of *diverse* opinions and perspectives. An epistemic competition modelled on the battle that aims at the elimination of – rather than the engagement with – competitors threatens to undermine this diversity.

Lisa Herzog introduces a different metaphor that frees the competition of ideas from this association with violence, destruction, and elimination:

> If one wants to keep a metaphor in place, let me suggest one that might express this idea better than that of a 'battlefield': that of a sports contest. But for that metaphor to make sense, the sports contest needs to be understood as one that is not only about winning, but rather about excelling at certain techniques, providing a 'good game,' and maybe also having fun together. Understood in this way, this metaphor underlines that individuals need to have a sense of sportsmanship: they need to respect the integrity of

[744] For a discussion of war as a "competitive game" and the distinction between medieval battles and modern warfare, see Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002 [1949]), pp. 91-96. For the distinction between competition and warfare, see Davies, *The Limits of Neoliberalism*, p. 62.

[745] Cf. Cohen, "Argument is War…and War is Hell"; Rooney, "Philosophy, Adversarial Argumentation, and Embattled Reason"; Kidd, "Martial metaphors and argumentative vices and virtues".

> the contest and its rules, treat their opponents with fairness, and be willing to accept defeat where appropriate.[746]

Sports competitions, Herzog suggests, rely on and foster a radically different set of attitudes than 'battles': while athletes certainly want to win, this desire is curbed by a commitment to the rules of the competition, its ethos, and standards of excellence.[747] Recognising the destructive character of the 'battle of ideas' does not need to result in a rejection of the competitive conception of argumentation nor in the embrace of a cooperative understanding instead.[748]

Expanding on Herzog's metaphor, I argue that the sports competition allows for a competitive conception of deliberation that does not descend into aggressiveness. Instead, a deliberative competition modelled on the sports contest combines the epistemic potential of competition with cooperation. It demands a commitment to the rules and ethos of democratic deliberation, while retaining space for the individual desire to win.

The sports contest offers an understanding of competition that exceeds the dichotomy of competition and cooperation. Whether undertaken for fun or as a "mutual quest for excellence"[749], sports competitions require that competitors agree on the rules, purpose, and

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[746] Herzog, *Citizen Knowledge*, p. 113.
Herzog makes this proposal as part of a broader analysis of the "'epistemic infrastructures' of democracy" (Herzog, *Citizen Knowledge,* p. 9) in line with a deliberative account of democracy in which "gathering various perspectives and exchanging arguments, can improve the epistemic bases for political decision-making" (Herzog, *Citizen Knowledge,* pp. 14-15).

[747] Cf. Simon et al., *Fair Play*, pp. 51-52.

[748] Such a turn to cooperative conceptions of argumentation is often the suggestion of critics of the argumentation-as-war-metaphor (cf. Cohen, "Argument is War…and War is Hell"; Rooney, "Philosophy, Adversarial Argumentation, and Embattled Reason"). Their rejection of an argumentative battle turns into a rejection of any kind of argumentative competition. Overlooking the multiplicity of competitions and the differences between them, they treat the battle as a paradigmatic case of competition, suggesting that discussions that mirror sports contests are equally as objectionable as those that resemble battles (cf. Rooney, "Philosophy, Adversarial Argumentation, and Embattled Reason", p.229; Casey, "Adversality and Argumentation", p.77, p.104).

[749] Simon et al., *Fair Play*, p. 47.
A critique of the account of sports as the pursuit of mutual excellence can be found in Kretchmar, "Competition, Redemption, and Hope".

ethos of the competition and act in accordance with them. They are brought about and sustained by the competitors' collaboration. The inverse is also true: many sporting practices are effectively impossible without the presence of an opponent, and "the competitive element is required for the cooperative element to work out."[750] As Habermas points out, argumentation likewise requires "a cooperative division of labor between proponents and opponents".[751] Epistemic democrats are thus partially justified in describing democratic deliberation as an effort in 'collective problem solving'. Members of deliberative institutions ought to cooperate: for their deliberations to be epistemically successful, they need to agree on the purposes and rules of deliberative institutions and remain committed to this collaborative project.

This cooperative dimension of the 'sports contest of ideas', also points to the different roles that the individual desire to win plays within it. Thus, Robert Simon et al. define "competitive athletics" "as a mutual quest for excellence, an activity that is significantly cooperative in that all the participants consent to be tested in the crucible of competition for both the intrinsic value of meeting interesting challenges and for what we can learn about ourselves and others through the attempt to meet the competitive test."[752] In a sports competition, so understood, "the principal value of athletic competition lies not in winning but in overcoming the challenge a worthy opponent presents."[753] In contrast to participants in a 'battle of ideas' who strategically pursue the elimination of opposing ideas, competitors in a 'sports contest of ideas' subordinate their individual desire to win to the collective pursuit of the 'truth' or the best policy. As Herzog puts it: "For ideas to have a fair battle, the individuals who carry them into it need to have an ethos that complements the will to win with a generous

[750] Nguyen, "Competition as Cooperation", p. 123.
[751] Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 1*, p. 25.
[752] Simon et al., *Fair Play*, p. 47.
[753] Simon et al., *Fair Play*, p. 46.

amount of sportsmanship – so much that, in case of doubt, one's will to let truth win over falsehood is stronger than one's attachment to the ideas one brought to the sports field."[754]

Likewise, Bächtiger notes that "[i]n order to spur constructivity, reflection, and eventual preference change, agonistic inquiry must be embedded in a cooperative setting with reduced partisan competition and relaxed party discipline." Such conditions are usually given "in structured citizen deliberation (such as deliberative opinion polls and deliberative assemblies)".[755] Design principles of mini publics often emphasise the importance of "non-partisan" and "open-minded" deliberations,[756] in which "[p]articipants do not insist on their prior views".[757] These principles inform the facilitation of group deliberation in a "neutral environment", as one member of an Irish Citizens' Assembly puts it.[758] While such environments are epistemically useful, Bächtiger warns that "cooperative settings may have a tendency to forego serious scrutiny and try to achieve easy agreement instead."[759]

In contrast, an epistemic and deliberative competition modelled on the sports contest combines the recognition that deliberators are engaged in a common project with the mutual challenge and criticism that trigger transformative learning processes. It even retains some space for one of the central markers of competitiveness – the individual desire to win – and allows for the articulation of its epistemic function. It seems reasonable to suspect that athletes are motivated not only by the abstract pursuit of excellence but also by their individual

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[754] Herzog, *Citizen Knowledge,* p. 114.
[755] Bächtiger, "On Perfecting the Deliberative Process", p. 21.
[756] Fishkin, *When the People Speak*, p. 53.
[757] Renwick et al., *The Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Brexit*, p. 35.
The organisers of the 2017 Citizens' Assembly on Brexit recognise the importance of being aware of and occasionally holding on to one's prior beliefs. They suggest, however, that this is best done in "personal reflection" (Renwick et al., "The Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Brexit", p. 35).
[758] Quoted in David Farrell, Jane Suiter, and Clodagh Harris, "'Systematizing' constitutional deliberation: the 2016–18 citizens' assembly in Ireland", *Irish Political Studies*, Vol. 34, Issue 1 (2018), p.118.
[759] Bächtiger, "On Perfecting the Deliberative Process", p. 21.

contribution to it. The conception of sports as a 'mutual quest for excellence' does not eliminate winners and losers, nor does it deny that athletes usually want to be among the former rather than the latter. Yet, it suggests that "the pursuit of victory takes place (or should take place) within a mutually acceptable framework created by the challenges of each sport, within which competitors test themselves against one another."[760] In other words, athletes (ought to) want to win only if they genuinely performed the best. Likewise, good deliberators may want their ideas and proposals to 'win' – not by any means but because they genuinely turn out to be true or epistemically superior.

This insight points to a conception of deliberative competition not as a simple confrontation between arguments in which ideas are immediately given up when confronted with better ones, but as a continuous process in which ideas are not merely exchanged but reformulated in response to criticism. Such a conception of deliberative competition captures the dynamics of mutual criticism triggering transformative learning processes. It also requires deliberators who are willing to hold on to their positions and correct them when confronted with good arguments. Good sportspeople continue to train and be motivated by the possibility of individual success even after losing to a better competitor; likewise, a good deliberator may hold on to, but *adjust,* their ideas and arguments when confronted with criticism.[761]

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[760] Simon et al., *Fair Play*, p. 53.

[761] Note that this 'holding on' is not a mere insistence on one's beliefs. To provide epistemic benefits, it needs to be limited: at some point, ideas and arguments are best given up. For a related argument on the value of "insisting", see Bächtiger, "On Perfecting the Deliberative Process", p. 7.

This conception is also better able to accommodate an aspect of ideas that Herzog describes in her critique of the metaphor of the marketplace of ideas. She observes that "not all ideas are such that individuals would simply want to trade them away, as if they were some random market products. Some ideas, beliefs, and convictions are part of individuals' identity—giving them away means cutting out chunks of the fabric of emotions, convictions, and memories that make up one's self. […] Changing one's views can be a years-long, painful process, nothing like the 'exchange' of goods and services in a market in which one stands back from one's transactions and remains the same person as before." (Herzog, *Citizen Knowledge*, p. 110.)

Yet, Herzog's emphasis on "the ethos of sportsmanship" serves as a reminder that in competitive-deliberative arenas, the pursuit of winning remains subordinated to the purpose, rules, and ethos of the collaborative project.[762] Contrary to the worries expressed by critics of the argumentation-as-war metaphor, the analogy to sports competitions demonstrates that a competitive conception of deliberation and argumentation does not inevitably result in the affirmation of aggression. Instead, a deliberative competition modelled on the sports contest places considerable normative demands on participants who need to respect others as equal competitors engaged in a common quest for 'truth' – or the best policy. Rather than for their elimination, it calls for the critical engagement with others' – and one's own – ideas and arguments.

Of course, neither actual instances of sports nor of deliberation always conform to this ideal. Athletes and deliberators alike are prone to cheat, and their commitment to sporting excellence or the best policy is vulnerable to being subordinated to other interests. The analogy to the sports contest provides a normative model for a deliberative competition of arguments, but also points towards avenues for its corruption.

Shapiro suggested that the individual "good faith" on which deliberation apparently relies is difficult to institutionalise.[763] In emphasising the centrality of values like fair play and sportsmanship, the metaphor of the 'sports tournament of ideas' seems to underscore this reliance on virtuous individuals. However, it equally foregrounds the role of institutions, rules, and their enforcement. Indeed, the cooperative pursuit of excellence in sporting competitions depends on careful institutional design.[764]

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[762] Herzog, *Citizen Knowledge*, p. 114.
[763] Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 78.
[764] Cf. Nguyen, "Competition as Cooperation", p. 131.

Rather than exclusively foregrounding individual epistemic virtues, the metaphor of the sports contest of ideas points to the significance of procedures, rules, and, insofar as it gestures to the presence of an umpire, their enforcement. As such, it may even provide resources for questions of deliberative-democratic institutional design. At the same time, these very features of the metaphor mean that it is limited to democratic deliberation within such institutions. To conceptualise deliberative-democratic competition outside of such institutions, the next section turns to different analogies.

2.3 The garden and the nature reserve of ideas

Outside of deliberative institutions, communication is distributed, mediated, and escapes full regulation. Here, deliberative competition intersects with non-deliberative competitions – from party competition to media competitions for attention. Therefore, deliberation in the public sphere rarely satisfies the conditions of good rational argumentation and is neither characterised by a clear procedure nor by explicit rules.

I follow Habermas in attributing a distinct epistemic purpose to this lack of regulation: while deliberative institutions identify solutions to already articulated problems, he describes the "procedurally unregulated public sphere" as a "*context of discovery*".[765] "Here new problem situations can be perceived more sensitively, discourses aimed at achieving self-understanding can be conducted more widely and expressively, collective identities and need interpretations can be articulated with fewer compulsions than is the case in procedurally regulated public spheres."[766]

[765] Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p. 307.
[766] Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, pp. 307-308.

Argumentation remains a point of reference for deliberation in this unregulated public sphere as actors aim to persuade and convince others. However, its distinct epistemic purpose – the discovery of new problems of common concern – means that deliberative competition in the public sphere is always also a competition for the *recognition* of certain ideas as relevant to many. In distinction to a sports competition, which determines its winners in accordance with predetermined criteria, following a clear procedure and rules, the competition for the recognition of ideas in the broader public sphere is decided by 'survival.' The ideas and beliefs that are forgotten or ridiculed lose; those that are widely accepted win.[767] The "struggle for recognition"[768] of contested ideas and positions in the public sphere parallels the Darwinian "Struggle for Existence".[769]

The implied analogy between epistemic and ecological competition finds expression – albeit in a slightly different, more 'cultivated' form – in the metaphor of the 'garden of ideas' suggested by Robert Sparrow and Robert Goodin as an alternative to that of the 'marketplace of ideas':

> Imagine a liberal society as a 'garden' in which ideas may take root, grow and flourish – or wither and die out. Like the market metaphor, the 'garden of ideas' metaphor recognises that ideas compete with each other to take root in a society. There may even be a presumption against interfering with the natural flourishing of the garden. In order to determine which are the most productive and vigorous strains in the garden, we must be prepared to stand back and let nature take its course.[770]

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[767] Of course, this also means that there will be cases without a clear winner or situations in which it is contested which idea has 'won'.

[768] Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p. 314.

[769] C.R. Darwin, *On the origin of species by means of natural selection, or the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life (London: John Murray, 1859)*, p. 62.

The analogy to Darwin's evolutionary competition also points to the transformations that ideas undergo in their interaction or 'struggles' with other ideas.

[770] Sparrow/Goodin, "Competition of Ideas: Market or Garden?", p. 54.

While Goodin and Sparrow choose the metaphor of the garden to introduce the figure of the gardener as a cultivating form of intervention into the competition of ideas,[771] I prefer the metaphor of the 'nature reserve of ideas,' which more explicitly acknowledges the 'wild' character of the public sphere and the impossibility of ever fully cultivating or institutionalising it.[772]

Both analogies, the nature reserve and the garden, highlight that the development of ideas is conditional on favourable ecological conditions. As success in ecological competition is dependent on environmental conditions, so it is, Sparrow and Goodin suggest, in epistemic competitions: "Some ideas may wither and die out in a particular place, not because they are bad ideas but because the 'soil' in which they attempt to take root does not suit them."[773] Mansbridge et al. similarly note the relevance of "'deliberative ecologies', in which different contexts facilitate some forms of deliberation and avenues for information while others facilitate different forms and avenues."[774]

The metaphor of a 'nature reserve of ideas' shifts attention from the agents to the environment of epistemic competition.[775] This is instructive in two regards: First, it suggests that the development of 'good' or 'truthful' ideas depends as much on a suitable environment as on epistemic actors.[776] Whereas the analogies to the marketplace, the battle, and the sports

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[771] Cf. Sparrow/Goodin, "Competition of Ideas: Market or Garden?", pp. 57-58.
[772] I thank Sara Kok for suggesting this metaphor.
Habermas describes the public sphere as "a 'wild' complex that resists organization as a whole." (Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p. 307.)
[773] Sparrow/Goodin, "Competition of Ideas: Market or Garden?", p. 54.
[774] Mansbridge et al., "A systemic approach to deliberative democracy", p. 6.
[775] Like the marketplace of ideas, the metaphors of the garden or nature reserve of ideas imply that the 'truth' emerges impersonally behind deliberators backs. Therefore, they only illustrate one aspect of deliberative competition in the public sphere and this needs to be supplemented, as I argue below, by public deliberation that is decidedly confrontational – or 'frictional'.
[776] For an empirically informed discussion of the influence of their environment on people's beliefs, see: Ana Tanasoca, "Informal Networked Deliberation: How Mass Deliberative Democracy Really Works", *Analyse & Kritik,* Vol. 45, Issue 1(2023), pp. 36-38.

tournament place the burden of epistemic success on the individual competitors, the garden and the nature reserve draw attention to the circumstances in which they develop their ideas. This is an especially crucial reminder in times characterised by misinformation, algorithmically structured media platforms, and increasing distrust in traditional guarantors of 'truth'.

Second, the environmental or ecological account of the competition of ideas underscores that a public sphere that allows for the development – or *discovery* – of a diversity of ideas needs to foster a multiplicity of publics within it. This insight corresponds to Nancy Fraser's insistence on the significance of an internally differentiated public sphere.[777] Following her intervention, Habermas describes the 'wild' public sphere not as one singular arena but as consisting of "an open and inclusive network of overlapping, subcultural publics having fluid temporal, social, and substantive boundaries."[778] These multiple publics differ from mini-publics. They do not follow predetermined procedures and are not constrained by rules. Their members are not representative, and this is central for their democratic and epistemic potential. Emerging out of the voluntary interaction of individuals who share similar identities or concerns, sub- and counterpublics provide arenas of deliberation for the articulation of ideas and identities outside of dominant debate. These counterpublics are essential for subordinate groups and minorities whose voices would be lost in a single overarching sphere – and whose issues and topics would, thus, not be discovered.[779]

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[777] Cf. Fraser, Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracies", *Habermas and the Public Sphere,* ed. by Craig Calhoun (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1992), pp. 109-142.

[778] Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p. 307.

[779] Cf. Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere", p.123.

The importance of such counterpublics highlights an epistemic weakness of Landemore's proposal to introduce agenda-setting mini publics whose members are determined by lot. Even if self-selection into different, agenda-setting mini publics is included, the fact that deliberative institutions impose regulated communicative procedures on deliberators means that such mini publics are unlikely to provide the same space for the identification and articulation of new problems and identities.

While I have so far emphasised the epistemic benefits of friction competition, this model of deliberation in the public sphere points to an alternative conception of a parallel competition of ideas than the one associated with the marketplace of ideas. Ideas, arguments, and self-conceptions are not presented by individual competitors but formulated collectively in various publics that exist alongside each other.[780] Yet, the ecological analogy should not lead to the assumption that cultivating public deliberation consists primarily in the preservation of contained epistemic environments. While it is an inherent potential of 'counterpublics' to turn into the pathological form of 'echo chambers', as 'counterpublics' proper, they always remain oriented towards the broader public.[781]

No longer in keeping with the ecological analogy, in an epistemically well-functioning public sphere, new ideas ultimately leave their original environments and challenge dominant public opinion. Parallel competition turns into friction competition, different ideas do not just co-exist but lead to mutual criticism, and eventually, to epistemically robust outcomes. Such friction competitions are not just limited to deliberative institutions such as parliaments and mini-publics. They may take place within and between sub- and counterpublics.[782] Facilitating encounters between different views and perspectives can – and maybe ought to – be a task for the press and media, which constitute yet another aspect of the "'wild' complex" of the public sphere.

[780] Deliberations within such counterpublics may be competitive – based in argumentative exchanges – or collaborative – employing, e.g., consciousness-raising practices. Either way, they are implicated in an overarching parallel competition.
[781] Cf. Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere", p. 124.
[782] For an account of how ideas travel between different groups through "informal networked deliberation", see Tanasoca, "Informal Networked Deliberation". Tanascou emphasises that for "overlapping extended communicative networks" to actually contribute to the realisation of mass deliberation, they need to enable encounters and deliberation with "differently-minded others" (Tanasoca, "Informal Networked Deliberation, pp. 34-35).

3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have challenged the assumption that democratic deliberation is an exclusively cooperative practice. Although widely accepted by deliberative and epistemic democrats, this conception fails to make sense of deliberation's distinct epistemic benefits. Only a conception of deliberation that emphasises the significance of an enacted 'contest of arguments' accounts for its potential to elicit mutual criticism and trigger transformative learning processes.

However, the deliberative-democratic competition of arguments does not take place on a 'marketplace of ideas.' Analogies to sports competitions and ecological competitions are, I have argued, more instructive. The former emphasises that competitive deliberation within deliberative institutions does not have to descend into aggressiveness and destruction but can remain part of a cooperative project. The latter draws attention to the significance of the context or environment in which ideas develop and suggests that epistemic diversity relies on the cultivation of a multiplicity of publics.

I want to conclude this chapter by noting some implications of my competitive conception of deliberation for democratic institutional design and, in particular, for the increased focus on mini-publics and random selection among deliberative and epistemic democrats. This proposal for institutional innovation comes as a response to a democratic crisis associated with the institutions of representative democracy and with the promise "that institutionalizing lotteries within government will produce epistemically better and more procedurally ideal deliberation (e.g., noncorrupt and nonpartisan)."[783] It is based, among other things, on two related assumptions: first, deliberation is an essentially cooperative activity, and

[783] Lafont/Urbinati, *The Lottocratic Mentality*, p. 17.

second, elections and partisan competitions pose a threat to democratically inclusive and epistemically successful deliberations.[784]

On such an understanding of deliberative processes, deliberative institutions, especially mini-publics, tend to be conceived as cooperative islands in a competitive and epistemically deficient public sphere. My account of the deliberative contest of arguments challenges this conception and instead suggests that it may be beneficial to include arenas for competitive argumentation in the design of deliberative institutions. Importantly, these ought to enable friction competitions; that is, a clash between competing arguments. While such friction competitions are integral to the design of parliamentary institutions, mini publics generally aim at eliciting cooperation and favour "balance" over confrontation.[785] However, this can block mutual criticism. Thus, organisers of mini publics may want to experiment with the addition of competitive forums.

Following Manin, these may include "adversarial debates" on specific issues,[786] supplementing 'balanced' and 'objective' expert panels.[787] Furthermore, deliberative competitions may be enabled by subtle changes in the facilitation of group deliberations – for example, by encouraging deliberators to critique and challenge others and to insist on their critical questions.[788] The analogy to sports competition serves as a reminder that such critical and 'competitive' engagement with others ought to take place within and as a cooperative

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[784] I return to the question whether competitive elections ought to be replaced by random selection in Chapter Seven, Section 3.1.
[785] Cf. Bächtiger, "On Perfecting the Deliberative Process", p. 21.
[786] Manin, "Political Deliberation & the Adversarial Principle", p. 47.
[787] Renwick et al., *The Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Brexit*, p. 35.
Some Irish Citizens' Assemblies involved panels where "experts with differing perspectives [were] pitched against each other." (Farrell et al., "'Systematizing' constitutional deliberation", p. 116.)
[788] Cf. Bächtiger, "On Perfecting the Deliberative Process", p. 25.

endeavour. The proposed shift in the organisation of group deliberation is a shift in emphasis, not in kind.

This proposal challenges the cooperative aspect of the 'cooperative island' account of deliberative institutions. Perhaps more importantly, my competitive conception of democratic deliberation, which includes the deliberations of the broader public sphere, also questions whether such institutions ought to be isolated 'islands.' While I do not deny the many deficiencies of public deliberation, I want to suggest that dissolving the harsh opposition between cooperative deliberation and a competitive public sphere enables a more nuanced account of their relationship as well as the recognition of the epistemic contributions of non-deliberative political competitions such as party competition.[789]

Following Jonathan White and Lea Ypi, partisanship and partisan deliberations fulfil similar functions as the diverse deliberative environments outlined above. Enabling the development of positions and interpretations that reflect the group's realities and values, partisan deliberations strengthen "the epistemic reliabilities of the projects they endorse"[790] and provide "a greater pool of epistemic resources […]."[791] In this way, partisan deliberations in the broader public sphere contribute to the diversity on which deliberation's epistemic success relies – both within the public sphere and in designated deliberative institutions.

With this discussion of the relationship between partisanship and public deliberation, I return to Shapiro's claim that opened this chapter. He claimed that party competition

[789] For accounts of the epistemic and deliberative potentials of partisanship and party competition, see: Stefan Rummens, "Staging Deliberation: The Role of Representative Institutions in the Deliberative Democratic Process", *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 20, Issue 1 (2012), pp.33-34; White/Ypi, *The Meaning of Partisanship*, pp. 90-96.
[790] White/Ypi, *The Meaning of Partisanship*, p. 90.
[791] White/Ypi, *The Meaning of Partisanship*, p. 95.

institutionalises a competition of ideas.[792] In light of Shapiro's own purely aggregative, market-model of political competition, it is unsurprising that many proponents of deliberative democracy would want to reject his suggestion. However, noting the competitive dimension of deliberation also points to the possibility of rethinking the role of political parties and partisanship with regard to their contribution to a democratic contest of arguments. As White and Ypi's account exemplarily demonstrates, this would also result in an understanding of party competition beyond the market-model: one that includes intra-party deliberation and competition and is not reducible to the strategic and self-interested pursuit of power. I return to this possibility of rethinking party competition beyond the market model in Chapter Seven.

Despite its implications for competitive institutional design, it is important to note that the deliberative competition I have described in this chapter is primarily a competition on the level of ideas. For many, it is also a competition that can be either resolved in agreement or 'won' by the 'truth' – at least potentially. The following chapter turns to a different conception of democratic competition; one for which competition is not a means for resolving conflicts of values and interests but of expressing them.

[792] Cf. Shapiro, *Politics Against Domination*, p. 80; Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 78.

Chapter Six. Competition as 'Tamed Conflict' and Agonistic Theories of Democracy

The market model of democratic competition and my account of a deliberative-democratic competition of ideas both provide instrumental reasons to value democratic competition. The former presents party competition as a means of controlling those in power and guaranteeing that they are responsive to the concerns of those who are not. The latter contends that the competitive exchange of arguments contributes to epistemically superior democratic decision-making. In this chapter, I turn to agonistic theories of democracy, for which democratic competition is not merely a means to an end but corresponds to and expresses the *ontological condition* of the political – or so I will argue.[793]

For agonistic democrats, the political is a sphere of difference, conflict, and contestation, characterised by an inherent potential for violence and destruction. They are convinced that it is impossible to eradicate or resolve political conflict and argue that any attempt to do so will only result in a resurgence of violence. Instead, they propose to 'tame' political conflict by subordinating it to rules and ensuring that political enemies recognise each other as legitimate opponents.[794] That is, I suggest, they propose to *transform political conflict into democratic competition*.

[793] I adopt this reference to ontology from Mouffe, who writes: "Antagonism, as Schmitt says, is an ever present possibility; the political belongs to our *ontological* condition." (Mouffe, *On the Political*, p. 16; my emphasis.)
[794] Again, I take this notion of 'taming' a political conflict from Mouffe: "If we want to acknowledge on one side the permanence of the antagonistic dimension of the conflict, while on the other side allowing for the possibility of its '*taming*', we need to envisage a third type of relation. This is the type of relation which I have proposed to call 'agonism'." (Mouffe, *On the Political*, p. 20; my emphasis.)

In addition to making a case for competition as an essential feature of democracy, agonistic theories enable me to revisit two aspects of an understanding of democratic competition beyond the market model. First, an agonistic conception of democratic competition is, like the deliberative one, not incompatible with cooperation and collective action. Instead, it points to ways in which the activity of competing against and with others is constitutive of collective identities. On the agonistic model, democratic competition allows for the emergence of groups and collectives who define their identity vis-à-vis their competitors, but it also institutes relationships of belonging and recognition between those competitors.

Second, one of the central mechanisms of the agonistic 'taming' of political conflict is its subordination to a shared framework of rules. Yet, the democratic conception of rules proposed by agonistic thinkers is quite different from the de-democratising one that I discussed in Chapter One. Whereas Hayek and the ordoliberals insist that 'the rules of the game' ought to be safeguarded from their democratic re-formulation,[795] James Tully describes democratic politics as "the type of game in which the framework – the rules of the game – can come up for deliberation and amendment in the course of the game."[796]

The agonistic commitment to democratic rules that are open to contestation and can always be rewritten foregrounds a democratic activity that is excluded from the market model of democratic competition and that I have neglected in my discussion of deliberative-democratic competition; namely, protest. Indeed, I will argue that the two contrasting interpretations of the rules of competition and the political game outlined above – the neoliberal and the agonistic one – are reflected in current debates and legislation on the role of protest in

[795] See: Chapter One, Section 2.
[796] James Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Volume 1: Democracy and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 146.

democratic societies. This focus on protest is in keeping with the expansive vision of democratic life put forward by agonistic democrats who draw attention to the fact that political conflicts can emerge in all areas of social life.[797] Agonistic competition is not restricted to democratic institutions, but is also enacted by social movements, activists, and 'ordinary citizens' outside of such institutions.[798]

There are four sections in this chapter: Section 1 reconstructs the agonistic understanding of the political as characterised by conflict and the potential of violence. Then, I argue that the suggestion to tame, rather than eradicate, this conflict allows for the conception of an *agonistic democratic competition*. Section 2 explores how this agonistic competition contributes to the formation of competing collective identities as well as to the emergence of an overarching citizen-identity rooted in the activity of competing itself. Section 3 discusses the agonistic conception of the rules of the democratic game and the role of protest in democratic societies. It makes the case that the rules of democratic competition need to be open to contestation and that such contestation will sometimes take the form of rule-breaking. Section 4 concludes.

1 Agonistic Democracy as Competitive Democracy

A challenge both to liberal and deliberative conceptions of democracy, agonistic theories of democracy have by now established themselves as one of the dominant paradigms within

[797] This becomes most evident in the kind of examples and struggles agonistic thinkers discuss in their work: Whereas Mouffe generally retains notions of left and right associated with liberal party politics (cf., e.g., Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*), Honig aims at the development of an "agonistic feminism" (cf. Bonnie Honig, "Toward an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity", in: *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. by Bonnie Honig [Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 1995], pp. 135-166), Connolly is concerned particularly with religious conflict (cf. William E. Connolly, *Identity/Difference. Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox [Expanded Edition]* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002]) and Tully with indigenous struggles for independence (cf., e.g., Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Vol.1*, pp. 257-288).
[798] Cf. Ed Wingenbach, *Institutionalizing Agonistic Democracy. Post-Foundationalism and Political Liberalism* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 121; Fuat Görsözlü, *Agonistic Democracy and Political Practice. Ways of Being Adversarial* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), p. 167.

democratic theory.[799] While united in their affirmation of political conflict and contestation, theories of agonistic democracy are far from forming a coherent theoretical school or tradition – a fact that is poignantly illustrated by the various and conflicting attempts at typology. Distinctions between "the Nietzschean-Arendtian and the post-Marxist" strands or "tempered" and "imperializing" modes of agonistic democracy primarily distinguish Bonnie Honig's and William E. Connolly's agonism from the one developed by Chantal Mouffe.[800] Others single out David Owen's "perfectionist agonism".[801] Disagreement persists, furthermore, on whether and where to draw the line between agonistic and radical democratic theory.[802]

In this chapter, I focus on the work of key contemporary agonistic theorists – including William E. Connolly, Bonnie Honig, James Tully, and Chantal Mouffe – and occasionally draw on earlier theorists of the agon, such as Hannah Arendt and Friedrich Nietzsche. While attentive to the differences between them, this section outlines two related assumptions that are fundamental to all theories of agonistic democracy: conflict is, first, an irradicable moment of political life, which, second, needs to be sublimated, or tamed, but retained in some form in

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[799] This move of agonistic theory into the centre or mainstream of democratic theory is acknowledged and described by Lida Maxwell in: Maxwell et al., "The 'Agonistic Turn'", p. 640. See also: Scudder/White, *The Two Faces of Democracy*, p. 6.

[800] The distinction between "the Nietzschean-Arendtian and the post-Marxist" strands of agonistic theory is proposed by Oliver Marchart (Oliver Marchart, "The Sovereign Awakened. A Radical Democratic View on Protest", *Democratic Theory*, Vol. 9, Issue 2 [2022], p. 42). Stephen K. White distinguishes between "imperializing" and "tempered" modes of agonism (Stephen K. White, "Agonism, Democracy, and the Moral Equality of Voice", *Political Theory*, Vol. 50, Issue 1 [2022], pp. 61-64). Similarly, Marie Paxton distinguishes Mouffe's "adversarial agonism" from the "inclusive agonism" developed by Tully and Connolly (Marie Paxton, *Agonistic Democracy. Rethinking Political Institutions in Pluralist Times* [New York: Routledge, 2020], p .55).

[801] Thomas Fossen, "Agonistic Critiques of Liberalism: Perfection and Emancipation", *Contemporary Political Theory*, Vol. 7, Issue 4 (2008), p. 377.

See also: Paxton, *Agonistic Democracy*, pp. 56-61.

[802] Andrew Schaap and Ed Wingenbach both include the radical democratic theorist Jacques Rancière in their typologies of agonistic democratic theory – as a "strategic" (Andrew Schaap, "Introduction", in: *Law and Antagonistic Politics,* ed. by Andrew Schaap [Farnham: Ashgate, 2009], pp. 1-2) and an "oppositional" agonism respectively (Wingenbach, *Institutionalizing Agonistic Democracy*, p. 44). However, this inclusion of radical democrats under the label of agonism is contested (cf. Wingenbach, *Institutionalizing Agonistic Democracy,* pp. 31-36; Mark Wenman, *Agonistic Democracy. Constituent Power in the Era of Globalisation* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013], pp. 9-11). I discuss the distinction between agonistic and radical democratic theory in more detail in Section 3.3 below.

democratic societies.[803] Then, I argue that such a 'tamed conflict' can be described as a distinct kind of democratic competition – one that is not limited to the electoral process or the exchange of arguments but characterises political life as a whole .

1.1 Politics, conflict, and violence

Agonistic democrats converge on the diagnosis that conflict, contestation, and even violence are existential or *ontological* conditions of human life and of its social and political aspects in particular. While Nietzsche straightforwardly attributes "the trait of cruelty, of tiger-like pleasure of destruction" to humanity,[804] contemporary agonists locate the origins of conflicts and violence in dynamics of identity formation under conditions of pluralism.[805] Agonistic democratic theory is rooted in the dual insight that "[i]dentity requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty."[806]

[803] Cf. Wenman, *Agonistic Democracy*, pp. 45-47; Paxton, *Agonistic Democracy,* p. 12.
[804] Friedrich Nietzsche, "Homer's Contest", in: *On the Genealogy of Morality and Other Writings*, transl. by Carol Diethe, ed. by Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 174.

Although Nietzsche's analysis is focused on the Homeric and pre-Homeric Greeks for most of the text, his opening statement seems to suggest that he believes that the diagnosis of a trait of aggressiveness and violence is not limited to them: "If we speak of *humanity*, it is on the basic assumption that it should be that which *separates* man from nature and is his mark of distinction. But in reality there is no such separation: 'natural' characteristics and those called specifically 'human' have grown together inextricably. Man, at the first height of his powers, is all nature and carries nature's uncanny dual character in himself. His dreadful capabilities and those counting as inhuman are perhaps, indeed, the fertile soil from which alone all humanity, in feelings, deed and works, can grow forth. Thus, the Greeks, the most humane people of ancient time, have a trait of cruelty, of tiger-like pleasure in destruction, in them […]." (Nietzsche, *Homer's Contest*, p. 174.)

[805] In the context of agonistic theories of democracy, this reference to 'pluralism' has a dual meaning: It acknowledges, with Arendt, that human difference and plurality are "the condition – not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* – of all political life." (Arendt, *The Human Condition,* p. 7.) Beyond this plurality of human individuals, Connolly and Tully, in particular, also discuss democratic life in societies characterised by a plurality of different religious, cultural, and ethnic identities; see, e.g., Connolly, *Pluralism*; James Tully, *Strange Multiplicity. Constitutionalism in an age of diversity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Vol. 1*, pp. 160-184.
[806] Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, p. 64.

Connolly elaborates:

> An identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized. These differences are essential to its being. If they did not coexist as differences, it would not exist in its distinctness and solidity. Entrenched in this indispensable relation is a second set of tendencies […] to congeal established identities into fixed forms, thought and lived as if their structure expressed the true order of things. When these pressures prevail, the maintenance of one identity (or field of identities) involves the conversion of some differences into otherness, into evil, or one of its numerous surrogates.[807]

Converted into 'evil', the other that constitutes the self is simultaneously perceived as a threat. In this context, attempts to stabilise identity and to separate it from the 'evil other' are likely to manifest in strategies of "conquest and conversion".[808] Difference turned into 'the other' is to be subordinated or assimilated – and ultimately eliminated.

In his account of identity politics, Tully observes a similar dynamic. Like Connolly, he notes the "relational and intersubjective" nature of practical identities, which are "acquired and sustained in relation with those who share it and those who do not." Those who do not share the dominant practical identity are misrecognised, assimilated, or excluded: "an alien identity is imposed upon them, without their say, through processes of subjectification, either assimilating them to the dominant identity or constructing them as marginal and expendable others."[809] As for Connolly, so for Tully, the potential for ressentiment, domination, and violence emerges out of the constitutive relationship between self and other, the fact of human plurality, and the misguided attempt to limit it.[810]

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[807] Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, p. 64.
[808] Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, p. 43.
[809] Tully, *Political Philosophy in a New Key. Vol. 1*, p. 169
[810] A similar appreciation of the plurality of the political realm and of the violence that follows the attempt to fix stable identities and overcome human plurality can be found in Hannah Arendt's work. She argues that such attempts will always result in the "arbitrary domination of all others" (Arendt, *The Human Condition,* p. 234) and the closure of the political realm (cf. Arendt, *The Human Condition,* p. 220. See also: Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* [Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1993], p. 83).

For Honig, this pursuit to limit difference and fix identities characterises not only the actions of political actors but shapes political theory and common conceptions of 'democracy'. In political theories she calls "virtue theories", she argues that

> the consolidation of the self into a law-abiding democratic citizen depends on the projection of the subject's dissonant impulses onto a stable, exteriorized other. The other is then dehumanized, criminalized, or ostracized by an (otherwise inclusive) political community. […] The democratic arrangements they envision do not cross the fundamental line that distinguishes 'us' from 'them'; they hold fast to it. It is the line that claims some for democratic citizenship while remaindering others.[811]

Certain ways of thinking about and 'doing' democracy are thus themselves marked out as sites of exclusion of 'the other.' Honig thinks about this as a kind of de-politicisation and de-democratisation: "Because virtue theorists displace politics with bureaucratic administration, jurocratic rule, or communitarian consolidation, they tend to remove politics from the reach of democratic contest."[812] In turn, democratisation à la Honig involves revitalising the democratic contest.

In a different register – importantly, one that employs the distinction between 'us' and 'them' that Honig opposes – Mouffe also argues that certain ways of conceptualising democracy have de-democratising implications. What is more, she argues that in aiming to avoid or resolve political conflict, the "'consensus model' of democracy" itself obscures and perpetuates violence and exclusions.[813] "To negate the ineradicable character of antagonism and to aim at a universal rational consensus – this is the real threat to democracy. Indeed, this can lead to violence being unrecognized and hidden behind appeals to 'rationality', as is often the case in liberal thinking which disguises the necessary frontiers and forms of exclusion

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[811] Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, pp. 4-5.
[812] Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, p. 4.
[813] Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 7.
Mouffe claims that the "'consensus model' of democracy […] informs both the theories of 'deliberative democracy' and the proposals for a 'third way politics'" (Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, pp. 7-8.)

behind pretences of 'neutrality'."[814] Mouffe even suggests that ignoring or aiming to eradicate political conflict may lead to "antagonisms manifesting themselves under forms that undermine the very basis of the democratic public sphere."[815] Indeed, it is worth noting that this is Mouffe's diagnosis of the state of democratic politics under neoliberalism.[816]

In contrast to Connolly and Honig, Mouffe derives her appreciation of democratic conflict not from Nietzsche or Arendt but from her engagement with Carl Schmitt's *Concept of the Political*. Here, Schmitt contends that "[t]he specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy."[817] This Schmittian antagonism is, Mouffe believes, a latent and ineradicable possibility of politics:

> In the field of collective identities, we are always dealing with the creation of a 'we' which can exist only by the demarcation of a 'they'. This does not mean of course that such a relation is necessarily one of friend/enemy, i.e. an antagonistic one. But we should acknowledge that, in certain conditions, there is always the possibility that this we/they relation can become antagonistic, i.e. that it can turn into a relation of friend/enemy. This happens when the 'they' is perceived as putting into question the identity of the 'we' and as threatening its existence.[818]

It is, she insists, "an illusion to believe in the advent of a society from which antagonism would have been eradicated. Antagonism, as Schmitt says, is an ever present possibility; the political belongs to our ontological condition."[819]

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[814] Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, p. 22.
[815] Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, p. 115.
[816] In *For a Left Populism*, Mouffe diagnoses a "populist moment" which "is the expression of a variety of resistances to the political and economic transformations seen during the years of neoliberal hegemony. These transformations have led to a situation that we could call 'post-democracy' to indicate the erosion of the two pillars of the democratic ideal: equality and popular sovereignty." (Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, p. 12.) While Mouffe aims to highlight the potential for a left and democratic intervention into this 'populist moment,' she also points to the resurgence of right-wing populist movements (cf. Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, pp. 5-7).
See also: Mouffe, *On the Political*, pp. 64-89.
[817] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, translated by George Schwab (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996 [1932]), p. 26.
[818] Mouffe, *On the Political*, pp. 15-16.
[819] Mouffe, *On the Political*, p. 16.

From Schmitt, Mouffe inherits a binary conception of political struggle that is at odds with "the ceaselessly pluralistic nature of the struggles for recognition" affirmed by Tully and the pluralism and dissonance celebrated by Connolly and Honig.[820] Despite this, they share not only an understanding of (democratic) politics as characterised by conflict and contestation, but also agree that attempts to eliminate such conflicts and contestations – by fixing identities or aiming at consensus – perpetuate exclusions and violence. They thus face the same challenge: How can political conflict be enacted without becoming destructive and violent? The answer to this challenge lies in the constraining and taming of political conflict – or, as I argue below, in its transformation into *democratic competition*.

1.2 Taming political conflict

In its name, agonistic democracy pays tribute to the ancient Greek "athletic agon", "the performance of a contest to excel in front of an audience."[821] Yet, beyond cursory references to "agonistic competition", agonistic theorists rarely describe their conception of democracy in terms of a 'democratic competition.'[822] Mouffe even rejects the characterisation of her democratic theory in such terms. She insists that agonistic democracy should not be thought of "as a mere competition of interests" and is eager to distinguish it from a liberal "competition

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[820] Wenman, *Agonistic Democracy*, p. 190.

For an account of how Mouffe's adoption of Schmitt's political thought differentiates her version of agonistic democracy from others, see: Wenman, *Agonistic Democracy*, pp. 180-217; Paxton, *Agonistic Democracy*, pp. 61-68.

[821] Kalyvas, "The Democratic Narcissus", p. 18.

[822] Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, p. 3.

Connolly also discusses the political relations between "competitors" (William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995], p. xxv; Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, pp. 118-119) and speaks of "the competition between contending identities" (Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, p. 222, footnote 18). Describing "public dialogues", Tully writes: "They are 'agonistic' in character: citizens and rulers *compete for*, and endlessly dispute over, forms of mutual recognition and rule in accordance with the shared principles of freedom, equality and distinctness." (Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Vol. 1*, p. 163; my emphasis.) As I discuss at length in Section 3, he also analyses democratic participation in analogy to "competitive games" (Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Vol. 1*, p. 183, p. 208)

among elites."[823] For Mouffe, it seems, political competition is synonymous with the minimalist and elitist conception that I discussed with regard to the market model of democracy in Chapter Four.

If limited to elites or modelled on the market, the notion of democratic competition would indeed be incompatible with the agonistic understanding of democracy. However, it is not the market but the *game* that provides the point of reference for my discussion of agonistic competition.[824] The analogy to the game is not meant to trivialise politics, nor do I want to suggest that involvement in democratic politics is voluntary and a playful diversion from everyday life. Rather, I borrow the analogy between democratic politics and games from Tully, who reads Arendt's political theory as pointing "to a specific kind of game-like activity that occasionally emerges in the broader field of politics and government." This activity consists "in interaction among equal citizens with different viewpoints on their common world and who engage in agonistic activities for recognition and rule in public space."[825] This 'game-like activity' is the very democratic competition which sits, I argue, at the heart of agonistic democracy.

Of course, the analogy to the game – in the sense of athletic and artistic contest – is already implied in the reference to the ancient Greek agon. However, as I will specify below,

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[823] Mouffe, *On the Political*, p. 21, p. 32.

[824] Of course, there is no such thing as 'the game.' Rather, there exists a range of different games – not all of which will be competitive. Throughout this chapter, I will elaborate on the precise features of the competitive game that provides, I believe, a compelling analogy for agonistic democratic competition. For a typology of different games, see: Roger Callois, *Man, Play, and Games,* translated by Meyer Barash (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

My discussion foregrounds structural features of competitive games, such as their reliance on rules, rather than the activity of playing or playfulness. For analyses that emphasise the latter, see: Samuel Keith Duncan, "Play, Community, and Democracy: Understanding How Play Can Stimulate Democracy", *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy,* Vol. 13, No. 1 (2017), pp. 190-221; Jason Edwards, "Play and Democracy: Huizinga and the Limits of Agonism", *Political Theory*, Vol. 41, Issue 1 (2013), pp. 90-115; Alice Koubová et al. (eds.), *Play and Democracy. Philosophical Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2022).

[825] Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Vol. 1*, pp. 135-136.

the game that informs my conception of agonistic democratic competition is not that of professional athletics but closer to a friendly board or card game. As Robert T. Tally suggests, it may even look a little like the games children play on the playground.[826] Yet, before elaborating on the analogy to the game, I want to note four ways in which the notion of a game-like competition captures essential aspects of agonistic democratic politics.

The first of these four aspects corresponds to the fundamental challenge of agonistic politics, namely, to find a democratic way of expressing potentially violent and destructive political conflicts. It evokes the ancient Greek agon or, at least, Nietzsche's interpretation of it. Nietzsche contends that "if we take away the contest from Greek life, we gaze immediately into that pre-Homeric abyss of a gruesome savagery of hatred and pleasure in destruction."[827] He seems to suggest that contest and competition provide, as C. Thi Nguyen puts it with regard to competitive games more generally, "a social technology, capable of converting aggression into a social benefit and perhaps even a moral good."[828] In this regard, the task of competitive games resembles "the task of democracy […] to transform antagonism into agonism." [829]

Second, in competitive games as well as in agonistic democracy, the conversion of aggression and the transformation of antagonism into agonism rely on a shared framework of *rules.* Mouffe observes that "[a]dversaries do fight – even fiercely – but according to a shared set of rules […]."[830] With regard to democratic competition, the "rules of the game"[831] may include written documents such as constitutions, but also agreements "on the institutions

[826] Cf. Robert T. Tally, "The Agony of the Political", *Postmodern Culture*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2007).
[827] Nietzsche, "Homer's Contest", p. 179.
[828] Nguyen, "Competition as Cooperation, p. 123.
[829] Mouffe, *On the Political*, p. 20.
[830] Mouffe, *On the Political*, p. 52.
Cf. Nguyen, "Competition as cooperation, p. 124.
[831] Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 4.

constitutive of democracy and on the 'ethico-political' values informing the political association – liberty and equality for all […]."[832] I discuss the role of the rules of the game in agonistic democratic politics in more detail in Section 3 below.

Third, Nguyen argues that the successful conversion of aggression into social benefits is most likely if players do not just follow the rules of the game but display an attitude of "striving play": "If one values game-playing only when one has successfully overcome the obstacles and won, then one is not engaged in striving play. Striving play is done for the sake of struggling with obstacles, rather than for actually overcoming them. Striving play is done because the *process* is fascinating, fun, pleasurable, satisfying, or interesting."[833] Agonistic democratic competition may not know an exact equivalent to Nguyen's conception of striving play. Yet, the notion resonates with an aspect of agonistic politics that is emphasised by Honig and Connolly.

Both underscore that the 'taming' of political conflict depends on the cultivation of a personal ethos or ethics. Drawing on Nietzsche and Arendt, Honig points to the cultivation of "multiple selves";[834] that is, of identities that affirm rather than reject and suppress their internal plurality. Addressing the relations between individuals and groups of diverging religious convictions, Connolly highlights the importance of "agonistic respect":

> An ethos of agonistic respect grows out of mutual appreciation for the ubiquity of faith to life and the inability of contending parties, to date, to demonstrate the truth of one faith over other live candidates. It grows out of reciprocal appreciation for the element of contestability in these domains. The relation is agonistic in two senses: you *absorb the agony* of having elements of your own faith called into question by others, and you *fold agonistic contestation* of others into the respect that you convey toward them.[835]

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[832] Mouffe, *On the Political*, p. 31.
[833] Nguyen, "Competition as cooperation", p. 126.
[834] Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, p. 4.
[835] Connolly, *Pluralism*, pp. 123-124.

The final aspect of agonistic-democratic competition is related to this cultivation of a specific ethos but turns its attention from the relationship to others to individual human flourishing. Drawing on Nietzsche, Owen even describes "the *agon* as a way of cultivating nobility".[836] In this spirit, he describes politics as "the highest form of human activity, the privileged locus of the good life, since it is in the arena of politics that we are concerned with the character of nobility in arguing about which virtues and values should be communally cultivated."[837] This account of politics resembles Arendt's understanding of political action as the only truly human activity.[838] Like Owen's Nietzschean agonism, Arendt's account of the Greek polis also establishes a connection between competitive political action and the cultivation of political or human excellence: "the public realm itself, the polis, was permeated by a fiercely agonal spirit, where everybody had constantly to distinguish himself from all others, to show through unique deeds or achievements that he was the best of all […]."[839]

The link between agonistic political action and excellence that Owen and Arendt postulate resonates with the concept of competition, which in sports, but also in the arts and in educational settings, is often associated with the "quest for excellence".[840] However, it also has the potential to imbue their accounts of political competition with a sense of elitism or even with "a certain 'aristocratism'" at odds with a truly democratic competition.[841] Countering this

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[836] David Owen, "Equality, Democracy, and Self-Respect: Reflections on Nietzsche's Agonal Perfectionism", *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Issue 24 (2002), p.128.
On Owen's "Perfectionist Agonism", see: Fossen, "Agonistic Critiques of Liberalism", pp. 388-392.
[837] David Owen, *Nietzsche, Politics, and Modernity* (London: Sage Publications, 1995), p. 160.
[838] Cf. Arendt, *The Human Condition,* p.180.
"Action alone is the exclusive prerogative of man; neither a beast nor a god is capable of it, and only action is entirely dependent upon the constant presence of others." (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 22-23.)
[839] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 41.
For a discussion of the problematic implications of an Arendtian agonism, see Jean-Philippe Deranty and Emmanuel Renault, "Democratic Agon: Striving for Distinction or Struggle against Domination and Injustice", in: *Law and Agonistic Politics*, ed. by Andrew Schaap (Farnham: Ashgate 2009), pp. 43-56.
[840] Simon et al., *Fair Play*, p. 47.
For the discussion of the link between competition and (self-)improvement, see also: Chapter Two, Section 2.3.
[841] Deranty/Renault, "Democratic Agon", p. 44.

potential, Honig offers an interpretation of the Arendtian "disclosure of the agent"[842] in the context of the feminist struggle that emphasises its intertwinement with collective action.

> This process of individuation is not *for* an audience, though any set of action and performances may be witnessed by one. It is for the self who in concert with others like herself gains individuation, and for others who are enabled to do the same by way of these shared, if also always conflicted, practices of support and struggle. Agonistic individuation need not be the goal of political or feminist action. As Arendt well knew, individuation tends, rather, to be one of the by-products of political engagement. Through the acid test of political action in concert, Arendtian actors find out who they are.[843]

I follow Honig's lead in emphasising the collective elements of agonistic struggle or, as I put it, of agonistic-democratic competition. Indeed, in the next section, I show that agonistic theory points to a conception of democratic competition in which competitors are neither just self-interested nor self-improving individuals, but in which the activity of competing constitutes itself meaningful forms of "acting in concert".[844]

2 Agonistic Competition, Cooperation, and Collective Action

In highlighting the convergence of competition with collective action and relationships of respect and solidarity between competitors, this section picks up and develops a theme that I began to explore in the previous chapter. In Chapter Five, I suggested that the analogy to the sports contest reveals the cooperative dimension of deliberative-democratic competitions. I also presented cooperation between deliberators as a precondition for epistemically successful deliberation: for the competition of ideas to produce good outcomes, deliberators need to be

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Deranty and Renault direct this criticism towards Arendt in particular. Owen's account of "democratic nobility" as "standing to oneself politically as a sovereign individual" may be less susceptible to the charge of 'aristocratism' (Owen, "Equality, Democracy, and Self-Respect", p. 128).

[842] Arendt, *The Human Condition,* p. 180.

[843] Honig, "Toward an Agonistic Feminism", p. 160.

[844] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 162.

committed to the common deliberative project and subordinate their individual desire to win to it.[845] In its reliance on rules, a consensus on democratic institutions, and the cultivation of an appropriate personal ethos, the agonistic conception of democratic competition seems to presuppose a similar cooperative basis. However, more than merely presupposing such a cooperative basis, this section argues that it draws attention to the ways in which political competition itself provides a site for cooperation and, importantly, for the formation of collective identities.

In stark contrast to the market model, agonistic democratic competition is neither exclusively nor primarily a competition between isolated individuals. Indeed, the very conception of the political actor that underlies agonistic theory is already at odds with such an individualistic conception of democratic competition. As outlined above, the agonistic account of the political is grounded in a relational understanding of individual and collective identity; that is, in the insight that this identity itself is constituted by and dependent on its relation to different others. It is, moreover, "an account of politics that presumes a plural self".[846] Mouffe exemplarily points to the need to conceive

> of the social agent not as a unitary subject but as the articulation of an ensemble of subject positions, constructed within specific discourses and always precariously and temporarily sutured at the intersection of those subject positions. Only with a non-essentialist conception of the subject which incorporates the psychoanalytic insight that all identities are forms of identification can we pose the question of political identity in a fruitful way.[847]

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[845] See: Chapter Five, Section 2.2.
[846] Wingenbach, *Institutionalizing Agonistic Democracy*, p. 24.
[847] Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, p. 71.
In her reading of Arendt, Honig underlines how "the inner multiplicity of the self" is a condition for politics (Honig, "Toward an Agonistic Feminism", p. 142; see also: Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, p. 117).

In the following, I will demonstrate that the plural self whose identity is constituted and challenged in interaction with others is not just a potential source of violence and conflict but also enables the formation of collective identities. I argue that it does this in two ways: first, it allows for the emergence of alliances and coalitions and, thus, points to a conception of political competition not merely between individuals but between groups and collectives. Second, it allows for the emergence of a collective identity that encompasses all those engaged in political competition and is based on the participation in it. I discuss these in turn.

2.1 Collective identities and 'teams'

Agonistic theorists provide differing accounts of the relationship between collective identity and democracy. Tully traces the misrecognition of marginalised groups' collective identities, while Connolly emphasises democracy's potential to disrupt and transform entrenched identifications:

> Democratic turbulence disturbs established commonalities: it shows them to be complex contrivances; it brings out elements of contestability within them; it exposes possibilities suppressed and actualities enabled by contestable settlements. By fostering the experience of contingency and relationality in identity, democracy disturbs the closure of self-identity and, sometimes, provides a medium for modifying the terms of collective identity. This combination increases the chance – when this destabilization is part of struggle against existential resentment – that a larger variety of identities will be allowed to contend with one another on democratic terms.[848]

Both Tully and Connolly note the centrality of collective identities in politics. Both also associate democracy with a proliferation of collective identifications.[849]

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[848] Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, p. 20

[849] Cf. Wenman, *Agonistic Democracy*, p. 146.

Mouffe characterises this vision as a "pluralism without antagonism": "[…] that type of extreme pluralism, because of its refusal of any attempt to construct a 'we', a collective identity that would articulate the demands found in the different struggles against subordination, partakes of the liberal evasion of the political. To deny the need for a construction of such collective identities, and to conceive democratic politics exclusively in terms of a struggle of a multiplicity of interest groups or of minorities for the assertion of their right is to remain

The latter marks a difference between their agonistic theories and Mouffe's hegemonic version of agonistic democracy: Rather than valuing the multipolar interplay of difference and contestation, Mouffe emphasises the need to construct binary oppositions as part of "a *hegemonic* articulatory practice".[850] Such a practice always attempts to provide some stability in the context of ineradicable conflict and contingency, it is a "practice instituting nodal points which partially fix the meaning of the social in an organized system of differences."[851] Although Mouffe emphasises that hegemonic articulations can always only "be partial and subject to being contested", this hegemonic orientation distinguishes her agonism from the pluralistic vision of proliferating collective identities that seems to motivate Connolly's agonistic project.[852]

Despite these differences, I believe that Mouffe's hegemonic agonism, with its focus on binary oppositions, brings into clear relief an aspect of collective identity formation that is central to agonistic democratic competition more generally. According to Mouffe, the articulation and formation of a 'we', a shared political identity, is a central part of any hegemonic project.[853] In her own proposal for a radical democratic hegemonic project, this takes the shape of the rearticulation of the notion of the 'people' in opposition to the 'oligarchy':

> a confrontation in which the 'people' is constituted by the articulation of a variety of democratic demands. This 'people' is not to be understood as an empirical referent or a

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blind to the relations of power. It is to ignore the limits imposed on the extension of the sphere of rights by the fact that some existing rights have been constructed on the very exclusion or subordination of others." (Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, p. 20.)

[850] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2014 [1985]), p. 101; emphasis in the Original.

[851] Laclau/Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 121.

[852] Laclau/Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 171.

The acceptance of contestability and contingency distinguishes a radical democratic hegemonic project from de-democratising ones. For example, Mouffe describes the neoliberal hegemonic project as characterised by the attempt to "transform […] what is a circumstantial state of affairs into a historical necessity" (Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox,* p. 119). In contrast: "This moment of tension, of openness, which gives the social its essentially incomplete and precarious character, is what every project for radical democracy should set out to institutionalize." (Laclau/Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, p. 174.)

[853] Cf. Mouffe, *On the Political*, p. 15, p. 53.

> sociological category. It is a discursive construction resulting from a 'chain of equivalence' between heterogeneous demands whose unity is secured by the identification with a radical democratic conception of citizenship and a common opposition to the oligarchy, the forces that structurally impede the realization of the democratic project.[854]

The clarification that Mouffe's 'people' does not refer to a pre-existing empirical referent is crucial. Rather, this collective identity – like the 'chain of equivalences', coalition and cooperation – emerges within and as a result of competition. It is constituted in light of and in response to a competing hegemonic project that is recognised as a common adversary. It is the presence of an opponent that brings commonalities and shared interests to the fore and thus enables alliances and coalitions that otherwise would not exist. To return to the analogy of the game, one might say that agonistic competition is a competition between 'teams' rather than between individual competitors, and, arguably, a team is brought together and, in some cases, only brought about by facing their opponents.

I want to briefly note three aspects of this formation of collective identities in the midst of competition. First, while particularly obvious and pronounced on Mouffe's binary and hegemonic conception of agonistic competition, such collective identity formation also takes place in a more plural democratic contest as envisioned, for example, by Connolly. As noted in Section 1, it is the encounter of and engagement with difference that constitutes identity. Thus, a democratic competition that fosters such engagement enables the articulation of new and ever-shifting collective identities.

Second, and relatedly, the formation of different collective identities vis-à-vis other groups is crucial for the emancipatory politics that animate many agonistic theories. As Mark Wenman

[854] Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, pp. 79-80.

notes, "the agonistic struggles *of* freedom will always also contain a demand *for* liberation from the oppressor […]."[855] Thomas Fossen also underscores the commitment of many agonistic democrats to emancipation, specifying that

> agonistic emancipation should not be conceived as a transcendence of relations of power through the use of reason. Rather, the term emancipation is meant as an umbrella that captures attempts to redress instances of what agonists variously identify as inequity, injustice, exclusion, marginalization, subordination, and violence, while acknowledging that these harms are to some extent inherent in politics. The emancipatory value of contestation lies in its capacity to allow individuals to challenge these harms and thereby possibly diminish them. In other words, agonists seek to empower citizens to challenge the harm endemic to their politics.[856]

Insofar as injustice, exclusion, marginalisation, and subordination often affect individuals qua group membership, agnostic emancipation as "*perpetual contestation*" must involve the continual reformulation of collective identities and struggles over the recognition of such identities.[857]

Finally, as the term 'identity' already signals, the collectives that emerge within agonistic-democratic competition are not reducible to the strategic unity of the Schumpeterian political party.[858] Whether part of the 'people' opposing the 'oligarchy' or of a specific religious group, being a member of these competitively constituted collectives shapes individuals' sense of self and belonging.[859] Indeed, as I will argue in the following, the same is true for participation in democratic competition itself.

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[855] Wenman, *Agonistic Democracy*, p. 146.
[856] Fossen, "Agonistic Critiques of Liberalism", p. 385.
[857] Fossen, "Agonistic Critiques of Liberalism", p. 386.
This aspect of agonistic emancipation finds its perhaps clearest expression in Tully's discussion of the struggles of indigenous peoples, see. Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Vol. 1*, pp. 221-288.
[858] Recall that Schumpeter describes the political party as "a group whose members propose to act in concert in the competitive struggle for political power" (Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 283).
[859] While Mouffe thematises the opposition between 'the people' and oligarchy, Connolly is concerned with how to enable agonistic respect between members of different religious groups (cf. Connolly, *Identity/Difference*). Insofar as the agonistic conception of the political foregrounds dynamics of identification and identity formation, politics is no longer viewed as purely a matter of interests, preferences, or even good reasons. On the affective

2.2 Competitive citizen-identity and solidarity

Rather than emphasising the formation of collective identities vis-à-vis and in opposition to competitors, Tully observes that participation in democratic competition itself can give rise to "a new kind of second-order citizen-identity and solidarity appropriate to free, open and pluralistic forms of association."

> The partners involved, while struggling for recognition of their group, nevertheless come to develop a complementary, second-order attachment to and solidarity with the larger association, precisely because it allows them to engage in this democratic activity from time to time. These activities of struggling over recognition also allow citizens to dispel ressentiment that might otherwise be discharged in violent forms of protest and terrorism if this openness is suppressed and a norm of mutual recognition is imposed unilaterally.[860]

Tully's account of this 'second-order citizen-identity' suggests that what pacifies political conflict is not just the consensus on a set of institutions and rules, but the very activity of participating in the democratic contest. He contends that "[w]hat shapes and holds individuals and groups together as 'citizens' and 'peoples' is not this or that agreement but the free agonistic activities of participation themselves."[861] This account of a democratic 'community' that emerges out of agonistic democratic competition runs in some ways parallel to the conception of a democratising cooperation that I outlined in Chapter Three. In both cases, it is neither a fixed similarity nor merely an agreement that constitutes community, but the experience and activity of working or competing with others.[862]

For Tully, this kind of solidarity or community is a common feature of both competitive politics and competitive games. He observes that

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dimension of (political) identification and of politics, see: Mouffe, *On the Political*, pp. 25-29, p. 70; *For a Left Populism*, pp. 76-78.

[860] Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Vol. 1*, p. 311.

[861] Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Vol. I*, p. 147.

[862] See: Chapter Three, Section 2.3.

> this kind of identification is a common feature of most contestatory games: the players competing in them generate a form of identification with the game itself above their team loyalties and their particular victories and losses. So, perhaps it is appropriate that the Greek term for the arts of contestation, 'agonistics', is now widely used to characterise these struggles, the complex set of civic virtues the participants acquire and exercise, and the conflicting goods they pursue.[863]

With Johan Huizinga, one might be tempted to describe the democratic community that emerges out of agonistic politics as a "play community".[864]

This account of democratic competition as constitutive of political community challenges common conceptions of the relationship between cooperation and competition. Recall that Joseph Heath, for example, describes "[a]dversarialism" as involving

> *deontic weakening* with respect to everyday morality, where certain actions that would ordinarily be obligatory may become optional (and, equivalently, actions that are forbidden may become permissible). […] A competition, in my view […] is essentially an institutionalized collective action problem, where we are released from the everyday-morality obligation to act cooperatively and are actively encouraged to play free-rider strategies.[865]

Approached from the perspective of an everyday morality assumed to promote cooperation, competition appears to merely reduce moral obligations to others.

With Tully and the other agonistic theorists, I have approached competition from the assumption of ineradicable and potentially violent political conflict instead. From this point of

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[863] Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Vol. I*, pp. 311-312.

[864] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 11.

Huizinga's notion of the 'play-community' foregrounds the significance of rules for play and games, an aspect I return to below (cf. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, pp. 11-12). It is important to note that his description of the play-community reflects his understanding of play as an "action which is different from 'ordinary' life." (Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 4.) Thus, he writes on the continuity of the play-community beyond the individual game: "But the feeling of being 'apart together' in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game." (Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 12.) This may correspond to some political activities, but certainly not to politics as a whole.

[865] Heath, *Morality, Competition, and the Firm*, p. 9.

view, it becomes possible to perceive other aspects of competitive interactions and institutions. Rather than encouraging free-rider strategies, democratic competition demands that competitors respect and treat each other as legitimate opponents in a political 'game' that cannot be 'played' alone.

For Tully, the analogy to the game does not just draw attention to the activity of participating in democratic politics and its significance for constituting a democratic association. He also develops his account of the rules of the democratic game with regard to this analogy. The agonistic conception of rules will be the object of discussion in the next section.

3 The Rules of the Democratic Game

Among the agonistic theorists, Mouffe, in particular, highlights the role of 'rules' in the taming or democratisation of political conflict. As noted above, she asserts that "[c]onsensus is needed on the institutions constitutive of democracy and on the 'ethico-political' values informing the political association – liberty and equality for all […]."[866] Tully investigates the role of rules in democratic organisation in his analysis of "*constitutional* democracy and *democratic* constitutionalism."[867] These combine, he asserts, the "principle of constitutionalism (or the rule of law)" and the "principle of democracy (or popular sovereignty)".[868] The latter demands that the rules set out by the former remain open to democratic contestation:

> If the rules by which the demos are governed are imposed by someone else, and even if they have a range of freedoms within this other-imposed regime, they are not self-governing, self-determining or sovereign, and are thus unfree. To be free democratically

[866] Mouffe, *On the Political*, p. 31.
[867] James Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Volume 2: Imperialism and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 94
[868] Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Vol. 2*, pp. 92-93.

> is not only to be able to participate in various ways in accordance with the principles, rules and procedures of the constitutional system, as important as this is, but also, and crucially, always to be able to take one step back, dissent and call into question the principles, rules or procedures by which one is governed and to enter into (rule-governed) deliberations over them, or usually over a subset of them, with those who govern.[869]

Elsewhere, Tully even defines the 'agonistic freedom of citizens' as "the freedom of speaking and acting differently in the course of the game and so modifying the rules or even transforming the game itself."[870]

These conceptions of the 'rules of the game' and of the 'rule of law' stand in stark contrast to the neoliberal conceptions of the rule-governed nature of competition that I discussed in Chapter One. There, I argued that Hayek and the ordoliberals conceive of the rules of market competition as organically evolved and expertly designed, respectively – and, in both cases, as securely removed from democratic control. Far from being open to challenge and amendment, these rules dictate the moves of the players not only in the economic but also in the political game.[871]

Importantly, Tully's insistence on the contestability of democratic rules conflicts not just with neoliberal theories but also with the understanding of democracy expressed in debates and legislation on protest today. The last few years have seen many changes in the policing and persecution of protest in the UK and elsewhere.[872] In the UK, the *Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act* of 2022, the *Public Order Act of* 2023, and the *Crime and Policing Bill* which was introduced in the House of Commons in February 2025 have continually provided police

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[869] Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Vol. 2*, pp. 93-94.
[870] Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Vol. 1*, p. 139.
[871] See Chapter One, Section 2.
[872] See, e.g., Amnesty International, *Under Protected and Over Restricted. The State of the Right to Protest in 21 European Countries* (London: Amnesty International 2024).

and courts with new means to end and 'prevent' protest labelled 'disruptive' and 'illegal' and to persecute the activists involved.[873]

Underlying these legal changes is an understanding of democracy that assigns primacy to the law – or, to put it in the terms of this chapter, to the rules of the game – and overlooks the democratic importance of challenging it. This is illustrated by a report entitled "Protecting our Democracy from Coercion" that was published in May 2024. Authored by James Woodcock (Lord Walney), the UK government's independent advisor on political violence and disruption at the time, the report presents the use of direct action and civil disobedience as a threat to British democracy and portrays the rule of law as drawing "a line for what is and is not acceptable."[874] To Woodcock, rule-breaking is always unacceptable:

> The fact that an activist believes their cause to be particularly noble, or argument irrefutable, does not make extreme acts acceptable; the law must be applied uniformly irrespective of the cause. This principle is vital in ensuring that democracy is not only defended in theory but upheld in practice. Lawmakers from across the political spectrum should come together to reject the idea that there are causes so important the end justifies the illegal means.[875]

In the following, I will challenge the conception of democracy Woodcock's report implies. Tully's account of democracy as "the type of game in which the framework – the rules of the game – can come up for deliberation and amendment in the course of the game" provides me with a starting point to argue that an agonistic model of democratic competition must retain

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[873] See: United Kingdom Parliament, *Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022* (c.32) (London: UK Parliament 2022), https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/32 (last accessed: 27 October 2025); United Kingdom Parliament, *Public Order Act 2023* (c. 15) (London: UK Parliament, 2023) https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/15 (last accessed: 27 October 2025); United Kingdom Parliament, *Crime and Policing Bill* (London: UK Parliament, 2025), https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3938 (last accessed: 27 October 2025).

[874] Lord Walney, "Protecting our Democracy from Coercion" (21 May 2024) (London: The Stationery Office, 2024), https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/independent-review-political-violence-and-disruption, p. 283.

[875] Walney, "Protecting our Democracy from Coercion", p. 7.

space for the practices of rule-challenging and, even, rule-breaking.[876] In doing so, I also spell out the essential role of protest for democracies in general and agonistic democratic competition in particular.

3.1 Rule-changing and rule-breaking

The openness and contestability of the rules of agonistic-democratic competition are also acknowledged by Mouffe, who describes the consensus on the constitutive institutions and principles of democracy as "a 'conflictual consensus': consensus on the ethico-political values of liberty and equality for all, dissent about their interpretation."[877] Following Wittgenstein, she points to the openness of all rules to interpretation:

> we should acknowledge and valorize the diversity of ways in which the 'democratic game' can be played, instead of trying to reduce this diversity to a uniform model of citizenship. This would mean fostering a plurality of forms of being a democratic citizen and creating the institutions that would make it possible to follow the democratic rules in a plurality of ways. What Wittgenstein teaches us is that there cannot be one single best, more 'rational' way to obey those rules and that it is precisely such a recognition that is constitutive of a pluralist democracy.[878]

One might suggest that the democratic game, as Mouffe describes it here, looks a bit like a (competitive) board game played by a group of friends who, convinced that they know the rules anyway, put the instructions to one side and begin to play. After a while, they realise that they are playing according to slightly different rules; someone must have misremembered them. They consult the instructions but cannot immediately agree on the correct interpretation

[876] Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Vol. 1,* p. 146.
[877] Mouffe, *On the Political*, p. 121.
[878] Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, p. 74.
Tully also draws on Wittgenstein (cf. Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Vol. 1*, p. 140). For Wittgenstein's discussion of rule-following, see: Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), §85, p. 44e.

of the rules. Maybe one interpretation would constitute an advantage for some of the players, so that the others push back on its adoption. In a sense, debating the rules of the game becomes part of the game itself.[879] Likewise, Owen argues that with regard to the democratic game the "distinction between contest within the rules and contest over the rules" ultimately does not hold "because (i) the activity of politics extends across both (a) contests within the current constitutional rules and (b) contests over those rules, and (ii) because there is no sharp line between (a) and (b)."[880]

Indeed, Tully seems to describe (a) and (b) as merely two different arenas of the democratic game, which both have to remain open to democratic contestation:

> To be free democratically is not only to be able to participate in various ways in accordance with the principles, rules and procedures of the constitutional system, as important as this is, but also, and crucially, always to be able to take one step back, dissent and call into question the principles, rules or procedures by which one is governed and to enter into (rule-governed) deliberations over them, or usually over a subset of them, with those who govern.[881]

Notably, Tully's account of dissenting and calling into question the principles, rules, and procedures of the constitutional system points to '(rule-governed) deliberations' and thus to higher-order rules that regulate rule-changes. Liberal democracies usually have institutional channels and procedures to challenge institutional arrangements, laws, and even constitutions. Moreover, with changes to the voting age, to identification requirements at the ballot box, and

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[879] To capture a similar dynamic, Robert T. Tally points to games on the playground: "On the playground, children both organize and play games, often coming up with and changing the rules as they go along. Their power relations are constantly adjusted, modified so as to make the game more fair ('you get a head start'), more safe ('no hitting'), more interesting ('three points if you can make it from behind that line'), and so on. The overall structure of the game does not necessarily change, but the specifics of how the game is played can vary." (Tally, "The Agony of the Political".)

[880] David Owen, "The Expressive Agon", in: *Law and Agonistic Politics*, ed. by Andrew Schaap (Farnham: Ashgate 2009), p. 79.

[881] Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Vol 2*, pp. 93-94.

Hannah Arendt also emphasises the significance of the re-writing of the 'rules' or, rather, of constitutions in: Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Allen Lane, 1990 [1963]).

to the policing and persecution of protest, the British example demonstrates that the rules of democracy are constantly re-written – arguably both with democratising and de-democratising effects.[882]

Such rule-governed changes to the rules of the democratic game are not at odds with Woodcock's understanding of democracy, which is not opposed to "political change" as long as it "is brought about with legal and democratic means."[883] Yet, he excludes "extreme, highly disruptive protests" from such 'democratic means.'[884] Crucially, the protests Woodcock labels as extreme and highly disruptive include those by environmental and Pro-Palestine protesters that make use of the protest repertoire of non-violent civil disobedience – from roadblocks to property damage. Such civil disobedience is usually accepted as a justified form of expressing dissent in liberal democratic societies.[885]

In contrast, Woodcock declares that breaking the law is, under no circumstances, a valid intervention into the political game. Rather, it amounts to the attempt of protesters to "impose their views on the rest of society without the democratic consent of the people".[886] I challenge this understanding of democracy and insist on the value of challenges to the rules of the democratic game that do not conform to the institutional higher-order rules for rule changes. Deferring all challenges to the rules to procedures that are themselves regulated by rules only

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[882] Cf. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, "16 year olds to be given right to vote through election reforms" (Press Release, 17 July 2025), https://www.gov.uk/government/news/16-year-olds-to-be-given-right-to-vote-through-seismic-government-election-reforms, (last accessed: 27 October 2025); United Kingdom Parliament, *Elections Act 2022* (c. 37) (London: UK Parliament, 2022), https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2022/37 (last accessed: 27 October 2025); United Kingdom Parliament, *Public Order Act 2023.*

[883] Walney, "Protecting our Democracy from Coercion", p. 8.

[884] Walney, "Protecting our Democracy from Coercion", p. 9.

[885] Cf. Robin Celikates, Rethinking Civil Disobedience as a Practice of Contestation—Beyond the Liberal Paradigm, *Constellations*, Vol. 23, Issue 1 (2016), pp. 37-45, Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, pp. 382-384, Rawls, *A Theory of Justice,* pp. 363-368.

[886] Walney, "Protecting our Democracy from Coercion", p. 17.

moves the problem to a higher level. If the dual democratic freedom Tully describes – contestation within and over the rules – is to be realised, not even these higher-order rules and procedures can be imposed without challenge.

Beyond the particular issues they address, acts of civil disobedience that break the law always also contest the rules of the democratic game.[887] In breaking the law, protesters challenge Woodcock's conviction that "the UK's liberal democracy and open channels of information give people the agency to secure societal change through democratic consent."[888] Instead, they insist on their inclusion and participation in the political processes by other, non-codified means. This is perhaps most striking in the case of those entirely excluded from the political process – historically, for example, in the protests of the suffragettes.[889] Yet, it is also a crucial tool for contesting the often-unequal terms of democratic debate and decision-making processes. Such popular interventions in the political process are particularly significant if acting politicians isolate themselves from citizens' concerns or cater primarily to corporate interests. [890] Rather than coercing or distorting majority opinion, activism and protest, including 'illegal' protest, promise to contribute to government policy that is responsive to popular concerns.

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[887] On a similar note, Habermas writes that "the justification of civil disobedience relies on a dynamic understanding of the constitution as an unfinished project. From this long-term perspective, the constitutional state does not represent a finished structure but a delicate and sensitive-above all fallible and revisable-enterprise, whose purpose is to realize the system of rights anew in changing circumstances, that is, to interpret the system of rights better, to institutionalize it more appropriately, and to draw out its contents more radically. This is the perspective of citizens who are actively engaged in realizing the system of rights." (Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p. 384.)

[888] Walney, "Protecting our Democracy from Coercion", p. 17.

[889] Importantly, activists who employ strategies of civil disobedience often explicitly understand their action as a democratising intervention and as a continuation of the democratising project of the suffragettes. See, e.g., Just Stop Oil, "To resist is democratic" (Blog entry) (6 October 2022), https://juststopoil.org/2022/10/06/to-resist-is-democratic-we-must-continue/ (last accessed: 29 October 2025).

[890] Tully advocates the turn to civil disobedience when the conditions for a "fair exchange of reasons" are not met: "If the dominant members refuse to enter into negotiations, or drag their feet endlessly in the negotiations and implementation, then those making the demand have the right to engage in civil disobedience to bring them to negotiate in good faith." (Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Vol 1*, p.178.)

3.2 Democratic rule-breaking

However, one might be concerned that the above defence of democratic rule-changing and rule-breaking runs the risk of overlooking the de-democratising consequences of some instances of rule-changing and rule-breaking and the sometimes outright anti-democratic motivations behind them. Indeed, rewriting the rules of the game through legislative and constitutional changes can provide a way for authoritarian governments to cement their power, as could be recently observed in Poland and Hungary.[891] Likewise, one might portray Donald Trump's refusal to accept that he had lost the 2020 US presidential elections as a case of politically motivated rule-breaking.[892]

Of course, the above examples are all cases of governments or previous members of government changing the rules 'against the will of the people.' Yet, there is no guarantee that all instances of civil disobedience are motivated by a progressive, democratic agenda. On the contrary, many far-right organisations are prolific in their employment of tactics of direct action and civil disobedience.[893] If the rules of the democratic game are open to contestation, they are also open to being challenged by anti-democrats. This fact alone does not provide an argument against the contestability of democratic rules; however, it points to the need to distinguish between democratising and de-democratising forms of rule-changing and rule-breaking. I

[891] Cf. Anna Adamska-Gallant, "Backsliding of the Rule of Law in Poland – a Systemic Problem With the Independence of Courts", *International Journal for Court Administration*, Vol. 13, Issue 3 (2022), pp. 2-8; Human Rights Watch, "Hungary: Fundamental Law Changes Attack Rule of Law, Rights" (News Release) (17 April 2025), https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/04/17/hungary-fundamental-law-changes-attack-rule-law-rights (last accessed: 29 October 2025).

[892] Cf., e.g., Tal Axelrod, "A timeline of Donald Trump's election denial claims, which Republican politicians increasingly embrace", *abcNews* (8 September 2022), https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/timeline-donald-trumps-election-denial-claims-republican-politicians/story?id=89168408 (last accessed: 27 October 2025).

[893] Cf. Paul Mason, "The New Fascism", *Prospect Magazine* (28 August 2024), https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/dissidence-and-protest/riots/67644/new-fascism-riots (last accessed: 29 October 2025)

suggest that two distinctions are helpful here: the distinction between constitutive and regulative rules and the distinction between the rules and the ethos of the game.

John Searle distinguishes between regulative and constitutive rules as follows:

> we might say that regulative rules regulate antecendently or independently existing forms of behavior; for example, many rules of etiquette regulate inter-personal relationships which exist independently of the rules. But constitutive rules do not merely regulate, they create or define new forms of behavior. The rules of football or chess, for example, do not merely regulate playing football or chess, but as it were they create the very possibility of playing such games.[894]

Thus, the distinction between regulative and constitutive rules points to a difference between rules that are fundamental to the possibility of a practice and others that merely shape an already existing practice in particular ways. While the latter can be changed without fundamentally altering the practice, changing the 'constitutive rules' of a practice transforms it or institutes a new one.

Searle's examples of constitutive rules all point to the realm of games and play and raise the question whether it is possible, as Tully suggests, to think of a "game in which the framework – the rules of the game – can come up for deliberation and amendment in the course of the game."[895] Indeed, some theorists of games would dispute Tully's characterisation of the democratic game. Most notably, Bernard Suits holds that any violation of the rules ends the game.[896] Yet, Searle notes that a constitutive set of rules always also entails regulative rules.[897]

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[894] John Searle, *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 33.
[895] Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Vol. 1,* p. 146.
[896] Cf. Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper. Games, Life and Utopia* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2005 [1978]), p. 39.
[897] Cf. Searle, *Speech Acts*, pp. 34-35.

This is true not just for games such as chess and football but also for political practices or the 'democratic game':

> Within any system of constitutive rules it is typical that some perform a role that is purely or almost purely regulative. Thus, the United States constitution is a system of constitutive rules and together those rules constitute the structure of the United States government, but within the system of constitutive rules there are some regulative rules, the famous First Amendment for example regulates the power of government with regard to freedom of speech and other basic human rights […].[898]

In contrast to Suits, Searle seems to suggest that some changes to its rules are possible without therefore ending or fundamentally transforming the 'democratic game.'

Mouffe promises to identify some of democracy's constitutive rules in her attempt to distinguish her "democratic pluralism" from a "total" and relativist pluralism:

> Those who conceive the pluralism of modern democracy as a total pluralism, with the only restriction being an agreement on procedures, forget that such 'regulative' rules only have meaning in relation to 'constitutive' rules which are necessarily of another order. Far from being bound up with a 'relativist' vision of the world, as some writers have it, modern democracy requires the affirmation of a certain number of 'values' which, like equality and freedom, constitute its 'political principles'. It establishes a form of human coexistence which requires a distinction between the public and the private, the separation of Church and State, and of civil and religious law. These are some of the basic achievements of the democratic revolution and they are what make the existence of pluralism possible. One cannot therefore call these distinctions into question in the name of pluralism.[899]

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[898] John Searle, "Constitutive Rules", *Argumenta,* Issue 7 (2018), p.52.

Arendt argues that political constitutions, in particular, need to be amended and 'augmented': "The very concept of Roman authority suggests that the act of foundation inevitably develops its own stability and permanence, and authority in this context is nothing more or less than a kind of necessary 'augmentation' by virtue of which all innovations and changes remain tied back to the foundation which, at the same time, they augment and increase. Thus the amendments to the Constitution augment and increase the original foundations of the American republic; needless to say, the very authority of the American Constitution resides in its inherent capacity to be amended and augmented. This notion of a coincidence of foundation and preservation by virtue of augmentation – that the 'revolutionary' act of beginning something entirely new, and conservative care, which will shield this new beginning through the centuries, are interconnected – was deeply rooted in the Roman spirit and could be read from almost every page of Roman history." (Arendt, *On Revolution,* p. 202.) On the relationship between revolution and augmentation in Arendt's thought, see also: Wenman, *Agonistic Democracy*.

[899] Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, pp. 131-132.

Notably, the rule-governed practice Mouffe describes here is not simply 'democracy' but 'modern pluralist democracy' – and the constitutive rules of the latter may not be identical with those of the former.

More importantly, the question of which democratic rules are constitutive, and which are merely regulative, is itself an object of democratic debate and contestation. Yet, this does not imply that the distinction is meaningless. There are cases in which it is obvious that the rules that are challenged are constitutive to democracy – for example, in the case of the German 'Reichsbürger' who call for the replacement of an existing democratic state with an ethnically exclusionary nation state under the rule of a monarch.[900]

In a less obvious way, the constitutive rules of democracy are also evoked in debates about the right engagement with right-wing politicians who express anti-democratic views. The concept of the 'constitutive rules of democracy' keeps alive the distinction between those who do and "those who do not accept the democratic 'rules of the game' and who thereby exclude themselves from the political community."[901] Whether someone is understood to accept or reject the constitutive rules of democracy may be reflected in their treatment as a democratic adversary or as a political enemy.

At the same time, the distinction retains space for challenges to any regulative rules. Indeed, it even makes it possible to contest regulative rules in the name of the constitutive rules of the democratic game. Section 7 of the 2023 *Public Order Act,* which defines any "act which interferes with the use or operation of any key national infrastructure in England and Wales"

[900] Cf. Ben Knight, "What is Germany's 'Reichbürger' movement?", *Deutsche Welle* (13 May 2025), https://www.dw.com/en/what-is-germanys-reichsb%C3%BCrger-movement/a-36094740 (last accessed: 29 October 2025)
[901] Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, p. 4.

as a criminal offence, is arguably a regulative rule.[902] Breaking this rule – as environmental activists have repeatedly done – can hardly be described, as Woodstock does, as an attempt to "destroy our democracy".[903] On the contrary, justifications of such rule-breaking may point to the constitutive role of protest and rule-challenging for democracy.

Another, yet similar way to distinguish between acts of rule-changing and rule-breaking that affirm and those that threaten democracy is to appeal to the 'ethos' of the game. With regard to "games of the ordinary kind such as cricket, baseball, soccer, hockey, and basketball", Fred D'Agostino observes that formal rules are regularly broken.[904] According to D'Agostino, this can be explained with regard to agreements between players (and officials) to disregard some of the formal rules of the game "to promote certain interests, which they share, for instance, with team owners and spectators – e.g., to make the game more exciting than it would be if the rules were more strictly enforced."[905] Taking note of such an unofficial "ethos of the game", as D'Agostino calls it, allows for a distinction not just between rule-following and rule-breaking but "between behaviour that is permissible, behaviour that is impermissible but acceptable, and behaviour that is inacceptable."[906]

While a comparable agreement between players of the democratic game may be difficult to establish, D'Agostino's account of disobeying in line with and in tension with the 'ethos of the game' may be instructive for thinking about agonistic-democratic competition in two regards: First, it draws attention to the principles and values that inform particular instances of rule-breaking. The 'ethos of the democratic game' appealed to here is more than the mere

[902] United Kingdom Parliament, *Public Order Act 2023*, Section 7.
[903] Walney, "Protecting our Democracy from Coercion", p.282
[904] Fred D'Agostino, "The Ethos of Games", *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, Vol. 8, Issue 1 (1981), p.7.
[905] D'Agostino, "The Ethos of Games", p.14.
[906] D'Agostino, "The Ethos of Games", p.15.

agreement D'Agostino describes, and points to the fundamental principles and values of democracy. Similarly, Oliver Marchart contends that protests – including those involved in practices of rule-breaking – "are democratic only to the extent to which they aim at enlarging the horizon of freedom, equality, and solidarity for all."[907]

Second, taking account of the ethos of the game also shines light on the de-democratising potentials of mere rule-following. Far-right political parties that pursue their anti-democratic aims within the constitutional frame threaten the democratic game even if they obediently follow the rules.[908] If the democratic game is one in which the rules are continuously contested, then the ethos of the game or its constitutive rules – the values and principles of democracy – have to provide the point of reference for rule-following as much as for rule-changing and rule-breaking.

3.3 Changing the game

So far, I have argued that agonistic-democratic competition cannot be reduced to a competition within the rules but is always also a competition over these rules. This conception of agonistic competition is the target of two objections by radical democratic theorists. They suggest, first, that the concept of competition is ultimately incompatible with rule-breaking. Second, they

[907] Marchart, "The Sovereign Awakened", p.45.
[908] Marchart points to this example, too. In contrast to my arguments above, he argues that mere rule-following is sufficient for political actors to be recognised as legitimate adversaries in a Mouffian understanding of agonism: "Let us only think of the political treatment of parties for which the euphemism 'right-wing populism' has become common. Even where they may still act within the constitutional frame, it can make sense to draw a *cordon sanitaire* around racist, authoritarian, and anti-democratic parties, precisely in order not to have to recognize them as legitimate agonists. Mouffe has always spoken out against the antagonistic exclusion of such parties and in favor of their recognition as agonists (Mouffe 2005: 72-76). However, it is hard to see from a democratic (i.e., non-liberal) perspective why, for instance, the political mobilization of racism must be recognized as legitimate simply because it barely escapes illegality." (Marchart, "The Sovereign Awakened", p.45.)

question whether challenges to individual rules are sufficient or whether what is needed is a radically transformed game. I respond to both objections in turn.

Marchart diagnoses agonistic democratic theory with "problems integrating the conflictive rupture of the rules of the game into its model, because such rupture would no longer constitute a case of *agôn*."[909] Implied in this critique is an assumption made explicit by Jean-Philippe Deranty and Emmanuel Renault: competition always requires fixed rules.

> How can a challenge to the very rules of a 'game' be described as 'agonistic' only in the banal sense of competitive performance? A preliminary condition of any competition is acceptance of the rules and notably of who qualifies to play the game. Challenging the rules of the games is always something more radical and more confrontational, more 'antagonistic'.[910]

Their antagonistic model, Deranty and Renault argue,

> puts much greater emphasis on the inevitability of a challenge to the law as a central part of politics. The law needs to be changed on the one hand because it is a major factor in the entrenchment of inequality and domination, in the entrenchment of social situations that make political equality and freedom a mockery; and on the other hand because it generally involves restrictions to political participation according to national or social statuses.[911]

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[909] Marchart, "The Sovereign Awakened", p. 45.

[910] Deranty/Renault, "Democratic Agon", p. 54.

It is important to note that this radical democratic use of the term 'antagonism' diverges from the way in which Mouffe employs it. For Mouffe, it refers to the political relationship between friend and enemy. According to Schmitt, from whom Mouffe takes the terminology, this relationship fundamentally entails the attempt to eliminate the other (at least as a latent possibility): "The friend, enemy, and combat concepts receive their real meaning precisely because they refer to the real possibility of physical killing. War follows from enmity. War is the existential negation of the enemy. It does not have to be common, normal, something ideal, or desirable. But it must nevertheless remain a real possibility for as long as the concept of the enemy remains valid." (Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 33.) The Mouffian notion of antagonism thus points to the assumption that the political is characterised by the latent potential of violent conflict, which the agonistic thinkers share (see Section 1 above). The radical democratic reference to antagonism does not explicitly point to this possibility of violence but to moments of disruption and rule-breaking that further inclusion and democratic participation (cf. Deranty/Renault, "Democratic Agon", pp. 54-55; Marchart, "The Sovereign Awakened", p. 45).

[911] Deranty/Renault, "Democratic Agon", pp. 54-55.

The interpretation of agonistic democracy I have developed above acknowledges the democratic significance of such challenges to the law. However, it does so precisely in the language of competition that Deranty and Renault reject. It is telling that, for them, much of the difficulty of integrating challenges to law into an agonistic conception of democracy seems to hinge on the assumption that competition and games require fixed rules and a pre-determined list of participants. This is certainly true if one thinks exclusively of the competitive games of professional athletics, but much less so once one turns to the playground or the expansive world of board and card games that are often played in accordance with the rules laid out in the instructions – but perhaps just as often with misremembered, misunderstood, or entirely made-up rules.

In his review of Mouffe's *On the Political,* Robert T. Tally adopts such a conception of competitive games, noting that "[t]he agonistic model of politics requires an arena where contestants can hold competitions. It requires rules that may be altered but that also must be in place in order to know what game is being played." Yet, he suggests the alterations to the rules may not go far enough: "A radical democracy founded on adversarial politics cannot simply replicate existing structures of liberal, parliamentary democracy. It must change the game."[912]

While this is primarily a comment on Mouffe's commitment to the institutions of liberal democracy, Tally's call to change the democratic game reveals a limitation of agonistic-democratic competition with regard to its potential to generate radical political change. Tully's conception of democratic freedom implies the possibility of *transforming* the democratic game insofar as it consists precisely in "the freedom of speaking and acting differently in the course

[912] Tally, "The Agony of the Political".

of the game and so modifying the rules or even transforming the game itself."[913] However, a closer look at his account of the modification of democratic rules shows that such a transformation will always be gradual: "At any one time, some constituents are held firm and provide the ground for questioning others, but which elements constitute the shared 'background' sufficient for politics to emerge and which constitute the disputed 'foreground' vary."[914]

As Mark Wenman notes, Tully and other contemporary agonists embrace a "politics of augmentation" rather than one of revolution.[915] Indeed, this is a limitation of any conception of democratic competition. Although I hope to have demonstrated that it does not require rules that are fixed and never changed, the rule-governed nature of competition means that it does not encompass moments of radical rupture and transformation. Agonistic democratic competition allows for the continual challenge of rules but not for the sudden introduction of a new game.

4 Conclusion

This discussion of agonistic democracy and my account of an agonistic model of democratic competition conclude my investigation into conceptions of democratic competition beyond the market model. I have argued that the concept of a democratic competition captures the fundamental challenge of agonistic democracy, namely, to tame but retain difference and

[913] Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Vol. 1*, p. 139.
[914] Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Vol. 1*, pp. 146-147.
[915] Wenman, *Agonistic Democracy*, p. 21.
For Wenman's distinction between "augmentation" and "revolution", see: Wenman, *Agonistic Democracy*, pp. 9-12.

political conflict in a plural political sphere. Like competitive games, agonistic democracy relies on the introduction of rules and on the cultivation of the appropriate ethos.

Competition not only provides conceptual resources for describing and making sense of the practices associated with agonistic democracy. Likewise, discussing competition with regard to agonistic democratic theory also enabled me to rethink the role and features of democratic competition. From an agonistic perspective, competition is not an institutional mechanism transposed on political relations to generate specific outcomes – be it responsive parties or the 'truth'. Rather, it corresponds to the very nature of political relations. Their competitive organisation is, thus, not one choice among others but the only way of establishing democracy.

In contrast to the market model, this democratic competition does not commit agonistic democrats to embrace individualism and an understanding of politics as the self-interested pursuit of power. On the contrary, agonistic democratic competition is always a collective endeavour. It enables the formation of collective political identities vis-à-vis competitors and, in the case of marginalised and oppressed groups, as a form of collective emancipation. Moreover, the participation in the democratic competition itself can establish a meaningful bond between competitors.

Agonistic democratic competition also suggests a different understanding of the rule-governed nature of competition than the neoliberal insistence on the insulation of rules from democratic control. Rather than fully determining the possible 'moves' in the 'democratic game', the rules of agonistic competition remain open to interpretation and explicit challenge.

I have argued that this emphasis on the contestation of the rules of the democratic game points to the centrality of acts of protest and even of rule-breaking for democracy.

These two features of agonistic competition also inform the democratised conception of political competition that I outline in the following chapter. A truly democratic competition enables cooperation and collective identity formation, and its rules are always open to change and contestation. This is what I will argue in Chapter Seven.

Chapter Seven. Democratising Competition: A Democratic Conception of Political Competition

At the start of this thesis, I observed a tendency to think of competition almost exclusively in terms of market competition. As if by default, competition is usually associated with individualism, self-interest, and the pitting of some against others.[916] This is reflected in democratic theory, which reserves the label of the 'competitive model of democracy' for Schumpeterian, minimalist conceptions of democracy. This 'market model of democracy', as I have called it, not only reduces democratic action to participation in the electoral contest. It also constructs this contest in analogy to the market: politicians are presumed to be motivated exclusively by the self-interested pursuit of power and political office, while consumer-voters always look to exchange their vote for the best bargain.[917]

As long as the market provides the blueprint for political and democratic competition, this short sketch provides enough reason for those committed to a more expansive, participatory, and inclusive understanding of democracy to reject a competitive conception and organisation of democratic politics. In light of the dominance of a market-model of political competition, the turn of many deliberative democrats to largely cooperative democratic institutions and procedures is unsurprising.[918] In a world shaped by the de-democratising effects of market competition, turning towards cooperation is indeed tempting – and, as I have argued in Chapter Three, may allow for the democratisation of economic relations.[919] Yet, with

[916] See Introduction to this thesis.
[917] For my discussion of the market model of democracy, see Chapter Four.
[918] For the argument that many deliberative and epistemic democrats tend to favour cooperation over competition, see Chapter Five, Section 1.2.
[919] See Chapter Three, Section 2.3.
For my discussion of the de-democratising effects of market competition, see Chapters One and Two.

regard to political practice, this thesis has proposed a different route: *not to identify democracy with cooperation, but to democratise political competition.*

This final chapter provides an outline of such a democratised conception of political competition. In Section 1, I collate the findings of the previous chapters and identify three key features of truly democratic political competition: It is best understood as a practice, not as a mere mechanism. It is always partially cooperative and, though rule-governed, it allows for the continual contestation of its rules.

Sections 2 and 3 highlight some of the benefits of this expanded conception of political competition for democratic theory and practice. In Section 2, I show how my democratised conception of political competition contributes to a more nuanced understanding of democratic capitalist societies. In particular, I argue that it is a conception of political competition that does not imply a justification for market competition. On the contrary, it is compatible with the arguments for a more cooperative economy developed in Part I of this thesis.[920]

In Section 3, I discuss the implications of a democratised conception of political competition for debates on democratic institutions. First, I address suggestions to complement or replace competitive elections with procedures of random selection. I contend that proponents of sortition often operate with a reductive understanding of party competition as a mere *mechanism* for the selection of government. Consequently, they tend to overlook the broader democratic benefits of the *practice* of political competition. This insight leads me, second, to develop a preliminary account of party competition-as-a-practice.

[920] See, in particular, Chapter Three, Section 2.3.

1 Democratising Competition

In the attempt to move beyond a minimalist conception of democratic competition that is informed primarily by the analogy to the market, I turned my attention to two normative democratic theories that are often perceived as constituting opposing paradigms: deliberative and agonistic democracy. The opposition between the two is perhaps most pronounced in Chantal Mouffe's rejection of the deliberative model of democracy. She denounces its "anti-political nature"[921] and observes a convergence of theories of deliberative democracy and neoliberal third-way politics on a "'consensus model' of democracy".[922] "For a radical and plural democracy, the belief that a final resolution of conflicts is eventually possible, even if envisaged as an asymptotic approach to the regulative ideal of a free and unconstrained communication, as in Habermas, far from providing the necessary horizon of the democratic project, is something that puts it at risk."[923] Although I do not investigate Mouffe's critique of deliberative democracy any further here, it is important to note that it probably has most purchase against a conception of deliberative democracy that highlights the centrality of rational argumentation – and, thus, against a conception of the kind that was my object of analysis in Chapter Five.[924]

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[921] Mouffe, *On the Political*, p. 87.
[922] Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, p. 7.
[923] Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, p. 8.
See also: Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?", *Social Research*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (1999), pp. 745-758.
[924] This is the case because Mouffe's critique targets not just deliberative democracy's orientation towards consensus but also its emphasis on rationality, which is arguably most pronounced among those who value democratic deliberation for its epistemic benefits (cf. Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?", pp. 748-752).
For discussions of Mouffe's critique of Habermas and deliberative democracy, see: John S. Brady, "No Contest?", *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (2004), pp. 331-354; Steven Gormley, *Deliberative Theory and Deconstruction. A Democratic Venture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), Chapter 1; Gulshan Khan, "Critical republicanism: Jürgen Habermas and Chantal Mouffe", *Contemporary Political Theory*, Vol. 12, Issue 4 (2013), pp. 318–337.

Others are less convinced than Mouffe that agonistic and deliberative approaches cannot be reconciled.[925] Yet, my aim in this chapter is not to bridge the gap between agonism and deliberation – however wide it may be. I do not plan to synthesise my findings from Chapters Five and Six to arrive at a unified account of democratic competition that encompasses and reconciles agonistic and deliberative ideals. This is not only beyond the scope of this thesis. It would also shift attention from political competition to the question of how to reconcile deliberative and agonistic conceptions of democracy. Instead, I highlight three features that the conceptions of democratic competition developed in each chapter share. Both conceive of competition as a practice, dissolve the dichotomy between competition and cooperation, and underscore that democratic competition always requires a degree of cooperation. Furthermore, both allow for the contestation and rearticulation of the 'rules of the game'. These are, I propose, the defining features of a democratised account of political competition.

1.1 Political competition as a practice

There is a difference between conceptualising *competition as a mechanism* and conceptualising it *as a practice*. Importantly, I do not mean to suggest that this is a distinction between different kinds of competition. Rather, it points to two ways of understanding, analysing, and evaluating competition: If a competition is conceptualised as a mechanism, the focus is usually on its institutional structure, rules, and outcomes. If the same competition is viewed as a practice, additional attention is paid to the interactions between competitors, their relationships, and self-understandings.[926]

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[925] Cf. Khan, "Critical Republicanism"; Scudder/White, *Two Faces of Democracy*; Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, p. 49.

[926] My use of the term 'practice' loosely follows MacIntyre's definition of the term: "By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve

The distinction between competition-as-a-mechanism and competition-as-a-practice shares some affinity with a distinction between competition-as-a-state and competition-as-a-process that can be found in economic theory.[927] This distinction underlies Hayek's critique of neoclassical economic theory and the common association of market competition with 'perfect competition'. In "The Meaning of Competition", he states that "'perfect' competition means indeed the absence of all competitive activities."[928] He claims that theories of competitive equilibrium are satisfied with assuming "that *state* of affairs […] which according to the truer view of the older theory, the *process* of competition tends to bring about". Instead, he aims to bring into view "all the *activities* which the verb 'to compete' describes […]."[929] Yet, even Hayek analyses competition primarily as a "competitive mechanism" that allows for the efficient coordination of resources.[930]

This is consistent with a general tendency in economic and public discourse to conceive of market competition as a mechanism valued for the outcomes it promises: efficient coordination, growth, progress, or innovation.[931] Consequently, accounts of democratic competition that are modelled on the market also tend to conceive of it as a mechanism. David Miller suggests that proponents of the 'competitive model of democracy' – or the market model as I call it – share a view of democracy as "essentially a protective device, a mechanism which obliges rulers to pursue policies in line with the wishes of their subjects." He continues:

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excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended." (Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981], p. 175) The crucial element of this definition for my concerns here is the claim that practices are characterised by their internal goods and standards of excellence. This is what a conception of competition-as-a-mechanism overlooks.

For a more expansive discussion of MacIntyre's conception of practice with regard to competition and corruption, see Drissen, *When Success Becomes the New Normal*, pp. 97-137.

[927] Cf. Drissen, *When Success Becomes the New Normal*, pp. 32-35.

[928] Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order*, p. 96.

[929] Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order*, p. 92. My emphases.

[930] Cf. Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order*, p. 121.

[931] As I have shown in Chapter Two, this is not the only way of conceptualising market competition. Analysing it as a practice that fosters specific behaviours, relationships, and subjectivities brings to the fore the erosive and de-democratising effects of competition in the market and beyond.

"Elections are the lynchpin of the machine, serving to punish, by loss of office, leaders who have failed to satisfy the people's aspirations and to select a new leadership who seem likely, by virtue of campaign promises or past performance, to do better in the future."[932] On this view, political competition and competitive elections are considered exclusively as mechanisms that promise to bring about a responsive government.

It is this outcome – responsive governments –, not the activity of competing itself, that constitutes the normative, democratic appeal of political competition as conceptualised on the market model. Notably, this conception relies on the equation of political competition with the electoral contest and, arguably, a reductive understanding of the latter.[933] Furthermore, the conception of political competition as a mechanism implies predictability. This is most pronounced in Anthony Downs's attempt to formulate a behaviour rule for democratic governments "comparable to the rules it [economic theory] uses to predict the actions of consumers and firms."[934] If conceptualised as a mechanism, individual actors are secondary, while the impersonal "pressure of competition" is primary.[935]

In contrast, a genuinely democratic conception of political competition also needs to conceive of competition as something that is enacted and experienced; that is, as a practice. This is not incompatible with the acknowledgment that political competition also functions as a mechanism. Thus, I described the deliberative competition of ideas and arguments as a mechanism that produces epistemically superior political opinions, judgments, and

[932] Miller, "The competitive model of democracy", p. 133.
[933] It is a reductive understanding of the electoral contest because, as I have shown in Chapter Four, it equates political parties with their leadership and does not account for internal party competitions and disagreements, lacks a conception of the public sphere, and relegates citizens and voters to the positions of mere spectators or consumers. I begin to develop an alternative conception of party competition in Section 3.2 below.
[934] Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 20.
[935] Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 70.

decisions.[936] With regard to agonistic competition, I sometimes spoke of 'mechanisms of taming political conflict.'[937]

However, on both these accounts, democratic competition is more than an institutional mechanism. The contest of arguments is more than an engine that runs on diverse viewpoints and arguments. Agonistic competition is more than a machine that, if fed with enemies, spews out adversaries. The democratic significance of these competitions cannot be reduced to the outcomes they produce. Instead, their role in democratic political life is also to foster particular forms of engagement with and relationships to others. Competitive deliberation enhances political democracy not primarily because it yields superior epistemic outcomes, but because it invites genuine engagement with those who have different perspectives and hold different opinions. Likewise, the aim of 'agonistic competition' is not merely to pacify political conflict. It also establishes avenues for the democratic expression and enactment of these conflicts.

A conception of political competition-as-practice foregrounds the motivations and attitudes that animate competitive democratic practices, and the relationships established by them. Discussions of the 'ethos' of competition or of competitive norms such as 'fair play' or 'sportsmanship' only make sense in light of such a practice-conception of political competition.[938] In bringing into view the competitive interaction itself, rather than just its outcome, this conception allows for a more nuanced understanding of the nature and democratic role of political competition. It challenges, for example, the simplistic dichotomy

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[936] See Chapter Five.
[937] See Chapter Six.
[938] See Chapter Five, Section 2.2; See: Chapter Six, Section 3.2.

It is no accident that I developed my conceptions of a deliberative-epistemic competition of ideas and of an agonistic competition at least partly in analogy to competitive sports and games. In the Introduction, I discussed Heath's peculiar portrayal of competitive sports as a mere measure of natural ability (cf. Heath, *Morality, Competition, and the Firm*, p. 96). The peculiarity of this account lies partly in the fact that it treats sports competition as a mechanism. An account of sports competition as a practice would be more intuitive.

between competition and cooperation. A closer look at competitive relationships and interactions reveals the many ways in which political competitors cooperate to keep democratic competition alive. I discuss this aspect of democratic competition in the next section.

Before I turn to the relationship between cooperation and competition, I want to conclude this discussion of the distinction between a mechanism- and a practice-conception of political competition with one important caveat. In Chapters Five and Six, I uncovered the practice-conception of political competition by shifting my attention from the electoral system to other aspects of democratic politics. However, this does not mean that it is necessary to conceive of party politics purely as a competitive mechanism. To demonstrate this, I begin to sketch an alternative conception of party competition as a democratic *practice* in Section 3.2 below.

1.2 Democratic competition, democratic cooperation

Competition and cooperation are often considered to constitute opposite modes of activity or behaviour. Joseph Heath sometimes even defines competition as a "form of non-cooperative behaviour".[939] Throughout this thesis, my aim has been to challenge this opposition and to highlight the ways in which competition can involve meaningful cooperation. What is more, my analyses in Chapters Five and Six imply that genuinely democratic forms of political competition are always also cooperative. It is this implication I make explicit and explore further in the following.

[939] Heath, *Morality, Competition, and the Firm*, p. 98.

As briefly noted in Chapter Three, one does not need to look far to find an example that challenges the competition/cooperation dichotomy.[940] Market competition itself is sometimes described as a project of social cooperation by competitive means. Whether the goal is to raise living standards or to realise individual freedom, competitive markets rest on some form of prior agreement on how to organise and coordinate economic activity.[941] Some even describe the competition within the market itself as a mechanical and impersonal kind of cooperation, in which the dispersed actions of market participants all contribute towards meeting consumer demand.[942]

Yet, these are arguably thin notions of cooperation that demand nothing more from market actors than participation in the competitive activity in accordance with a predetermined set of rules. They are entirely compatible with a *deontic weakening*-conception of competition as well as with the assumption that market actors are purely self-interested individuals.[943] Cooperation, so understood, is not something that needs to be enacted but something that 'happens' behind the backs of competitors.

Both the deliberative and the agonistic conceptions of political competition that I developed in Chapters Five and Six, respectively, share an emphasis on prior agreement with this thin notion of cooperation. An epistemically successful deliberative-democratic competition presupposes that participants agree to engage in truth-oriented deliberation.[944] Agonistic-democratic competition requires a "conflictual consensus" on fundamental

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[940] See Chapter Three, Section 2.3.
[941] Cf. Coleman, "Competition and Cooperation", pp. 84-87.
[942] Cf. Royce, *The Problem of Christianity*, p. 264; Sennett, *Together*, p. 76.
[943] Heath contends that competition is characterised by a "deontic weakening with respect to everyday morality" (Heath, *Morality, Competition, and the Firm*, p. 9). The assumption that competitors are purely self-interested is expressed most clearly in Downs's "self-interest axiom" (Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 28).
[944] See Chapter Five, Section 2.2.

democratic principles and institutions.[945] However, these agreements carry the cooperative dimension into the competitive activity itself. The respective aims of 'reaching the best decision (for all)' and of 'keeping the democratic game alive' cannot be forgotten about when entering the competitive political arena, instead, they ought to shape competitors' actions within the democratic competition.

Here, democratic competition diverges decisively from the blueprint market competition provides.[946] I argued that better analogies can be found in the realm of sports and games. These point to the possibility of competitive practices in which the orientation towards a collective benefit – excellence or simply fun and enjoyment – co-exists, perhaps uncomfortably, with the individual desire to win.[947]

The parallel to sports and games also gestures towards a different cooperative aspect of democratic competition. In contrast to the economic, the political realm is not primarily a sphere of individual, but of collective concerns. In line with their commitment to the analogy between the economic and the political, proponents of the market model – Schumpeter, Downs, and Shapiro – reject this understanding of the political as too demanding and unrealistic.[948] Accordingly, they reduce any form of collective action in the political sphere to a merely strategic coalition ultimately fuelled by individual self-interest.[949] Their proclaimed political realism somewhat paradoxically prevents them from capturing a political reality inhabited by

[945] Mouffe, *On the Political*, p. 121.
[946] In this regard, these competitions are different from common conceptions of market competition, which assume that competition produces collective benefits precisely when competitors act self-interestedly. See, e.g., Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, pp. 26-27.
[947] This idea is captured, e.g., by Nguyen's notion of "striving play" (Nguyen, "Competition as cooperation", pp. 125-126).
[948] Cf. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, pp. 250-252; Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory*, Chapter One.
[949] Cf. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 283; Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 28.

a variety of collectives beyond the political party, from social movements and activist groups to religious and ethnic minorities.

By contrast, in its deliberative and agonistic versions, democratic competition is not always a competition between individuals but often one between collectives or, if one wants to return to the metaphors of games and sport, between 'teams.' I have discussed the centrality of collective identities for agonistic democrats at length.[950] In the context of deliberative democracy, Fraser's argument for a multiplicity of public spheres is motivated by similar concerns.[951] For her, sub- and counterpublics constitute alternative arenas for deliberation, which provide space for collective identity formation as well as for challenges to dominant public opinion.

> Perhaps the most striking example is the late-twentieth-century U.S. feminist subaltern counterpublic […]. In this public sphere, feminist women have invented new terms for describing social reality, including 'sexism,' 'the double shift,' 'sexual harassment,' and 'marital, date, and acquaintance rape.' Armed with such language, we have recast our needs and identities, thereby reducing, although not eliminating, the extent of our disadvantage in official public spheres.[952]

For Fraser, group deliberation and collective identity formation are essential aspects of the deliberative-democratic public sphere. Deliberative-democratic competition is not always merely a competition between individuals; outside of carefully organised mini-publics, it may also take place between social groups and collectives.

However, a democratised conception of political competition is not just compatible with cooperation among 'team members.' Rather, I suggested with Tully that it is participation within the democratic competition itself that gives rise to a "second-order citizen-identity and

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[950] See Chapter Six, Section 2.1
[951] For my discussion of Fraser's argument for a multiplicity of public spheres, see Chapter Five, Section 2.3.
[952] Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere", p. 123.

solidarity".[953] "What shapes and holds individuals and groups together as 'citizens' and 'peoples' is not this or that agreement but the free agonistic activities of participation themselves."[954] This insight can be extended to democratic deliberation: participation in a competitive exchange of arguments, reasons, and perspectives allows deliberators to experience themselves as part of a deliberative-democratic community – even if their arguments 'lose out.'[955]

I expand on the relationship between cooperation, community, and political competition in Section 2 below. There, I also reflect on the relationship between political competition and economic cooperation. However, before I do that, I want to provide a brief outline of the final feature of my democratised conception of political competition, namely, its relationship to rules.

1.3 Democratic rule following

In the first chapter of this thesis, I reconstructed the Hayekian and ordoliberal understanding of the rules of market competition. I pointed out that on both conceptions, these rules are safely removed from democratic control – either by presenting them as the outcome of spontaneous development or by insinuating that their design is a matter for experts alone. Hayek and the ordoliberals agree that neither the participants in market competition nor democratic citizens qualify as authors of the 'rules of the game'.[956]

[953] Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Vol. I*, p. 311.
[954] Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Vol. I*, p. 147.
[955] Thus, Alexander Rüstow may be correct in presenting democratic deliberation as a source of belonging and a 'we-feeling'. For my discussion of this suggestion, see Chapter Three, Section 2.1.
[956] See Chapter One, Section 2.

As part of my discussion of agonistic democratic competition, I suggested that there are other ways of conceptualising and relating to the 'rules of the game'. Following Tully, I argued that the democratic game is one "in which the framework – the rules of the game – can come up for deliberation and amendment in the course of the game."[957] Tully contends that to align with the democratic principles of collective self-determination, self-government, and popular sovereignty, the rules, laws, and procedures of a democratic society need to be open to be questioned and challenged not only by those who govern but, more importantly, by those who are governed.[958] I proposed that protest, including civil disobedience and direct action, is among the tools for challenging the rules of the democratic game that are available to 'ordinary citizens'. Thus, the assertion that the rules of the democratic game ought to be open to challenge and contestation even provides a justification for *democratic rule-breaking*.[959]

In contrast to the neoliberal conception of the rule-governed nature of competition, Tully's agonistic account of the rules of the game retains a prominent space for political and democratic agency. Although they are subject to the rules of the democratic game, citizens are always also in a position to resist and to rewrite them. I want to suggest that this is the appropriate status of rules in a genuinely democratic understanding of political competition. As I will demonstrate in the following, it is not specific to agonistic conceptions of democracy and democratic competition. Rather, deliberative democracy and the deliberative contest of arguments are also compatible with challenges and changes to their rules and even with rule-breaking.

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[957] Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Vol. 1,* p. 146.
[958] Cf. Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Vol. 2*, pp. 93-94.
See also Chapter Six, Section 3.
[959] See Chapter Six, Section 3.

Like Tully's conception of the democratic game, Habermas's 'discourse theory of law and democracy' opposes the exclusion of citizens from the authorship of democratic rules. "The idea of self-legislation by citizens, that is, requires that those subject to law as its addressees can at the same time understand themselves as authors of law."[960] Despite a brief discussion of civil disobedience as exemplary of "a dynamic understanding of the constitution as an unfinished project", the explicit contestation of democratic rules does not seem to be among Habermas's main concerns. However, he notes the necessity of continual democratic changes to such rules:

> From a reconstructive standpoint, we have seen that constitutional rights and principles merely explicate the performative character of the self-constitution of a society of free and equal citizens. The organizational forms of the constitutional state make this practice permanent. Every historical example of a democratic constitution has a double temporal reference: as a historic document, it recalls the foundational act that it interprets – it marks a beginning in time. At the same time, its normative character means that the task of interpreting and elaborating the system of rights poses itself anew for each generation; as the project of a just society, a constitution articulates the horizon of expectation opening on an ever present future. From this perspective, as an ongoing process of constitution making set up for the long haul, the democratic procedure of legitimate lawmaking acquires a privileged status.[961]

Democratic deliberation's capacity to facilitate such rule-changes is evident in mini publics and citizens' assemblies tasked with constitutional reform: from the 2004 *British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform* to the 2013/2014 *Convention on the Constitution* and subsequent *Citizens' Assemblies* in Ireland, which regularly propose constitutional changes.[962]

While these are examples of citizens' assemblies established by governments, Dannica Fleuß argues that similar initiatives also function as "contributions of social movements and

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[960] Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p. 120. 'Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy' is the subtitle of *Between Facts and Norms*.
[961] Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, p. 384.
[962] On the Citizens' Assembly in British Columbia, see: Mark E. Warren/Hillary Pearse (eds.), *Designing Deliberative Democracy. The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). On the Irish Citizens' Assemblies, see: Farrell et al., "'Systematizing' constitutional deliberation".

civil society organisations to reforming the 'rules of the democratic game'."[963] Pointing exemplarily to the 2009 *Icelandic Initiative for Constitutional Reform* and the 2019 German *Bürgerrat Demokratie*, she notes that "bottom-up initiatives"[964] rooted in social movements and civil society organisations

> can come up with constructive reform proposals that significantly transcend the *status quo* of current liberal-democratic practices. What also became visible in both cases is that the citizens involved want *more democracy* and more immediate engagement in determining concrete policies but also cherish the opportunity to have a say in determining and adjusting the foundational 'rules of the democratic game' that structure routinised democratic processes […].[965]

Fleuß thus demonstrates that democratic deliberation can play a role in changing and challenging the rules of democratic institutions and procedures. Insofar as the citizens' assemblies listed above constitute new deliberative arenas themselves and make a claim for citizen deliberation to be included in democratic decision-making, it may also be argued that they challenge the terms of the deliberative-democratic competition in the broader public sphere.

Within mini-publics and citizens' assemblies themselves, the carefully structured and facilitated deliberations that many epistemic democrats prefer may leave less room to challenge the rules of the deliberative competition within them.[966] However, some citizen assemblies,

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[963] Dannica Fleuß, "Challenging the 'Rules of the Game'", in: *Reclaiming Participatory Governance. Social Movements and the Reinvention of Democratic Innovation,* ed. by Adrian Bua and Sonia Bussu (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023), p. 28

[964] Fleuß, "Challenging the 'Rules of the Game'", p. 28

[965] Fleuß, "Challenging the 'Rules of the Game'", p. 30.

[966] The UK charity Involve provides a list of essential and desirable features of citizens' assemblies. "Structured deliberation" is included on this list; facilitation by professional facilitators is considered desirable (cf. Involve, "Standards for Citizens' Assemblies", https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/knowledge-base/how-do-i-setup-citizens-assembly/standards-citizens-assemblies). Structured and facilitated deliberations are useful in many ways and most likely required if randomly selected strangers are supposed to deliberate with each other in a democratic and epistemically successful way. However, it is also worth noting that structured and facilitated deliberation requires clear rules and their enforcement – and that these rules will often be shaped by facilitators rather than participants.

such as the British *Citizens' Assembly on Brexit*, include discussion phases on "the Assembly's conversation guidelines – the set of rules aimed at ensuring that taking part in the Assembly would be a good experience for everyone."[967] It is noteworthy that the report describes this phase as concluding with a *provisional* agreement, thereby suggesting that the 'conversation guidelines' could again become an object of deliberation at a later stage.[968]

Thus, deliberative competition is not limited to a 'competition within the rules' but may at any time turn into a 'competition over the rules.' Argumentative challenge and criticism do not need to limit themselves to the content of discussion but can equally be directed at the terms of discussion. Indeed, as Young's case for an "expanded conception of political communication" shows, contesting the terms of discussion may even be crucial to realise deliberation's epistemic potential. She suggests that for argumentation to fulfil its epistemic function, forms of communication other than strictly rational argumentation are required to establish shared premises. The inclusion of these forms of communication depends on challenging a set of norms or rules:

> A norm of 'articulateness' devalues the speech of those who make claims and give reasons, but not in a linear fashion that makes logical connections explicit. A norm of dispassionateness dismisses and devalues embodied forms of expression, emotion, and figurative expressions. People's contributions to a discussion tend to be excluded from serious consideration not because of what is said, but how it is said. Norms of orderliness sometimes exclude disruptive or emotional forms of expression that can be very effective in getting people's attention and making important points.[969]

As in agonistic-democratic competition, the boundaries between competitions within and over the rules are porous. Sometimes, 'winning an argument' may require winning a prior

[967] Renwick et al., "The Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Brexit", p. 42.
[968] Cf. Renwick et al., "The Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Brexit", p. 42.
[969] Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, p. 56.

competition over the recognition of certain forms of communication as legitimate contributions to the debate.

With this, I conclude my sketch of the features of a democratised conception of political competition. As I have shown, this conception moves beyond the market model in three ways. First, it does not reduce political competition to a mechanism that is only desirable because it promises to produce a responsive government. Rather, it conceives of political competition as a democratic practice and draws attention to the democratic value of the activity of competing itself. Second, it does not present competition as the opposite of cooperation but highlights that democratic competition itself gives rise to various forms of cooperation. Finally, it does not reproduce the neoliberal conception of rules in the political realm. Instead, it emphasises that the rules of democratic competition always need to be open to change and challenge.

I will expand on these features of democratic competition in the remainder of this chapter. The following sections also demonstrate the relevance and usefulness of this expanded conception of political competition for democratic theory and practice. Such a conception is not only more nuanced and richer than the market model of political competition. It also proves to be the more instructive point of reference for thinking through and responding to the state of democracy in contemporary democratic capitalist societies.

2 Competition and Cooperation in Democratic Capitalist Societies

In the Introduction, I observed that theorists' evaluations of competition in the political sphere often mirror their stance on market competition. Thus, proponents of the market model of democracy also tend to think favourably of market competition. In turn, critics of capitalist

market competition, who point to the benefits of social and economic cooperation, tend to conceive of democracy as a cooperative endeavour.[970] This thesis has taken a different approach. In Part I, I emphasised the de-democratising effects of market competition and argued that democracy requires sufficiently cooperative social and economic conditions. Yet, I insisted in Part II that many democratic political practices are and ought to be organised competitively. The democratised conception of political competition sketched out above now allows me to make sense of this combination of economic cooperation and political competition.[971]

Before I expand on the relationship between economic cooperation and political competition, it is worth noting that I am not entirely alone in proposing such a combination. Although James Tully argues that participation in democratic competition itself gives rise to a second-order solidarity, he still notes the importance of other sources of solidarity:[972]

> Of course, openness to and exercise of dialogical civic freedom and negotiation is not the only source of solidarity. The substance and reality of that collective identity comes from a variety of other sources, such as participation in collective and cooperative projects, a shared collection of goods, equality before the law, and the different ways diverse individuals and groups relate intersubjective norms to their histories, identities and so on.[973]

A closer look at Tully's account of "the citizen relationship" underscores that 'participation in *collective and cooperative projects*' is more than one source of solidarity among others. For him, this relationship emerges "whenever and wherever they 'act together' as citizens in various activities. The relationships are civic and democratic partnerships among equals negotiating and acting together. These are relationships of trust, conviviality or solidarity and

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[970] See Introduction, Section 2.
[971] I hinted at the possibility of reconciling my argument for economic cooperation with my insistence on the democratic significance of political competition at the end of Chapter Three. See Chapter Three, Section 4.
[972] Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key. Vol. 1*, p. 311.
[973] Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key, Vol.1*, p. 312.

civic friendship across identity-related differences and disagreements of various kinds."[974] The phrase 'acting together' suggests that this 'citizen relationship' is fundamentally a cooperative one.

Indeed, Tully points to "the commonplace cooperative" as the space in which such citizen relationships most commonly manifest.

> Here citizens ignore the civil division between (non-democratic) private and (representative) public spheres, between civil liberties and democratic rights. They participate as democratic citizens governing themselves directly in the economic sphere (and other spheres), citizenising the same kinds of activity that corporations privatise. In contrast to individual and corporate competition in market relations, cooperatives are founded on the ethics of cooperation.[975]

It seems as though, for Tully, the competitive game of democracy rests on a cooperative social and economic basis and, as I also argued in Chapter Three, on the politicisation and democratisation of economic relations.[976]

To explore why even democratic competition depends on cooperative social and economic relations, I want to revisit the effects of market competition on democracy. In Chapter One, I argued that market competition is harmful for political democracy, among other things, because it produces material inequalities. Material inequalities may be translated into unequal political power and, thereby, allow some to unduly influence or bypass the political process.[977] Clearly, such inequalities in political power also affect political competition and may undermine its intended function. If some yield disproportionate political power, political

[974] Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key, Vol. 2*, pp. 290-291.
[975] Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key, Vol. 2*, pp. 291-292.
[976] See Chapter Three, Section 2.3.
[977] See Chapter One, Section 1.4.

competition is unlikely to result in a responsive government or in epistemically superior political decision-making.[978]

Notably, the potential for economic power to corrupt political competition is also recognised by those in favour of competitive markets.[979] However, they tend to conceive of market competition as the solution rather than the problem. Elias Deutscher exemplarily summarises:

> the idea of competition-democracy nexus revolves around the core proposition that the excessive concentration of economic power is antithetical to a democratic form of government. The flipside of this assertion is that, in contrast, deconcentrated markets, in which power is structured in a polycentric manner and diffused amongst a high number of players, are conducive to democracy.[980]

Competition is presented as an antidote to concentrations of economic and, thus, of political power. Importantly, deconcentrated market power does not amount to equality. While market competition may be more favourable to democratic organisation than a highly monopolised market, it still produces and relies on inequalities.[981]

Furthermore, the de-democratising threat of inequalities is not reducible to their contribution to power differentials in the political realm. Rather, I argued in Chapter One that increasing inequalities also erode the sense of sharing a common world and, thereby, the material preconditions for a democratic community.[982] This erosion of collectivity and

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[978] Chapter One, Section 1.4.
[979] See, e.g., Deutscher, "The competition-democracy nexus resurrected?", pp. 3-6; OECD, "The Interaction between Competition and Democracy", pp. 14-20.
[980] Deutscher, "The competition-democracy nexus resurrected?", p. 3.
[981] See Chapter One, Section 1.
[982] See Chapter One, Section 1.4.

community is furthered by the promotion of the competitive individualism that I described in Chapter Two.[983]

Although markets foster individual competitiveness, they do not cultivate the preconditions for competitive democratic citizenship. Whereas competitive markets and neoliberal competition are associated with an individualist, self-interested competitiveness, democratic competition requires an attitude of competitiveness that involves the recognition of other competitors as equal opponents, commitment and loyalty to the democratic game. Democratic competition, I argued above, always involves moments of cooperation: among political allies or team members, but also between political opponents and competitors.[984]

In societies in which political activity plays a comparatively small role and work and markets play a comparatively large role in everyday life, it is unlikely that cooperative attitudes and behaviours of this kind can be cultivated in the narrow political sphere alone.[985] Indeed, this becomes even more unlikely if market competition continuously works to undermine any collective and cooperative impulses. Spaces of economic and social cooperation, such as worker cooperatives, promise to re-vitalise the care for and recognition of others that characterises genuinely democratic competition.

Yet, it is important to recall, as I argued in Chapter Three, that not all forms of extra-political cooperation or community provide the appropriate social conditions for democracy. A democratising cooperation is, in Richard Sennett's words, "a demanding and difficult kind of

[983] See Chapter Two, Sections 2 and 3.
[984] See Section 1.2 above.
[985] This is a claim about democratic capitalist societies in particular, not about democracy as such. Indeed, societies such as the often-referenced polis of Greek antiquity, in which politics play a more prominent role at least for parts of the population, may be able to generate feelings of belonging in the political sphere alone.

cooperation; it tries to join people who have separate or conflicting interests, who do not feel good about each other, who are unequal, or who simply do not understand one another."[986] Crucially, a cooperation of this kind remains open to the possibility of difference, disagreement, and even conflict. That is: it remains open to the possibility of democratic competitions emerging in its midst.

For this reason, economic and social cooperation does not automatically give rise to a "cooperation democracy".[987] The insight that competition and cooperation are not polar opposites applies here, too. Indeed, economic and social cooperation not only provides a source for democratic solidarity and cohesion. The disagreements and conflicts that inevitably arise if different people work and, thereby, genuinely engage with each other also allow for the experience of the centrality of democratic competition.

A critique of competitive markets does not imply an unqualified celebration of cooperation in the political realm. Likewise, appreciating the democratic significance of political competitions does not necessarily involve a defence of market competition. In democratic capitalist societies, it is especially important to resist the temptation to equate political competition with market competition or to assume that competition, in every form, is either conducive or harmful to democracy. This is crucial both for understanding the crises these societies find themselves in and for developing responses to them. The evaluation of some such proposed responses is my task in the next section.

[986] Sennett, *Together,* p. 6.
[987] Harcourt, *Cooperation*, p. 189.

3 Institutionalising Democratic Competition

The current crisis of democracy manifests perhaps most strikingly as a crisis of established democratic institutions. Declining voter turnout and consistent expressions of distrust in politicians and public institutions raise the question of whether representative democracy in its current form is still the most appropriate mode of political organisation.[988] Among proposals for the reform of democratic institutions, suggestions to replace competitive elections with procedures of random selection have received growing attention in recent years.[989]

In the following, I will show that my democratised conception of political competition shines a new light on these debates on democratic institutional reform. The considerations developed in this thesis caution against the embrace of sortition as the solution to the crisis of democracy. Not only does the hope placed in sortition alone betray a certain "politicism" that overlooks the extra-political causes of this crisis.[990] It also tends to rest on a reductive understanding of political competition. The conception of democratic competition outlined above challenges the understanding of electoral competition that motivates many proponents of sortition and highlights the democratic benefits of party competition.[991]

However, my democratised conception of political competition does not imply a defence of existing electoral institutions and party politics. Rather, I argue for the importance

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[988] For a radical critique of representative democracy, see: Isabell Lorey, *Demokratie im Präsens. Eine Theorie der politischen Gegenwart* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2020).
[989] See, e.g., John Gastil and Erik Olin Wright (eds.), *Legislature by Lot. Transformative Designs for Deliberative Governments* (London: Verso, 2019); Gurrero, *Lottocracy*; Christina Lafont and Nadia Urbinati, *The Lottocratic Mentality. Defending Democracy Against Lottocracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024); Landemore, *Open Democracy*; Yves Sintomer, *The Government of Chance. Sortition and Democracy from Athens to the Present,* transl. by Sarah Louise Raillard with help from Patrick Camiller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Van Reybrouck, *Against Elections*; Wayne Waxman and Alison McCulloch, *The Democracy Manifesto. A Dialogue on Why Elections Need to be Replaced with Sortition* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2022).
[990] Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism*, p. 115.
[991] See Section 3.1 below.

of re-thinking and, perhaps, re-organising party competition. In particular, I emphasise the necessity of conceiving of party competition not just as a mechanism but as a practice.[992]

The following reflections on the reform of democratic institutions inevitably remain preliminary. However, they demonstrate that how we think about competition and its role in democratic politics is not just a matter for democratic theory. It also has implications for democratic practice and shapes our imagination of the future of democracy.

3.1 Sortition versus elections

Inspired by lottocratic elements in Athenian democracy and the Italian city states of the Renaissance, recent decades have seen a renewed interest in *sortition*, the selection of political representatives and officials by lot, as a democratic mechanism.[993] Proposals for the integration of randomly selected assemblies into modern democracies range from the promotion of merely consultative mini-publics of the kind discussed in Chapter Five to the introduction of a complementary 'sortition chamber' and the complete replacement of electoral institutions by sortition.[994] In the following, I will largely gloss over these differences. However, it is important to note that my critique of sortition has most purchase against the latter, most radical proposal.

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[992] See Section 3.2 below.

[993] For theorists that emphasise the historical roots of this practice in Greek antiquity and the Renaissance, see, e.g., Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), esp. Chapter 1; Van Reybrouck, *Against Elections*, Chapter III; Hubertus Buchstein, "Democracy and Lottery: Revisited", *Constellations*, Vol. 26 (2019), p. 361; Landemore, *Open Democracy*, pp. 66-74, p. 115.

In the following, I use the terms 'random selection', 'lottocracy', and 'sortition' interchangeably to designate political institutions whose members have been selected by lot.

[994] Examples for each type of institutional proposal can be found in: Lafont/Urbinati, *The Lottocratic Mentality* (democracy enhancing, consultative mini-publics); John Gastil and Erik Olen Wright, "Legislature by Lot: Envisioning Sortition Within a Bicameral System", in: *Legislature by Lot. Transformative Designs for Deliberative Governments,* ed. by John Gastil and Erik Olen Wright (London: Verso, 2019), pp. 3-38 (bicameral system, combining an elected and a randomly selected legislative chamber); Landemore, *Open Democracy* (replacing elections with sortition).

Proponents often locate the democratic promise of random selection in its potential to overcome "the fundamental feature of electoral democracy in which ordinary citizens are ruled by political elites."[995] Competitive elections tend to be presented as partially aristocratic, oligarchic, or elitist.[996] In contrast, lottocratic selection is seen as fundamentally democratic and egalitarian in nature:

> Lottery selection thus arguably better reflects egalitarian ideals, since anyone might wield political power, and everyone has an equal chance of doing so. […] In addition to better satisfying norms of equal chance of having political power, the lottocratic system also comes closer to satisfying a condition of equal actual political power than any other system that uses some subset of the population as political decision-makers.[997]

In this regard, the critiques of the electoral system that motivate many to turn to sortition resonate with my critique of the elitist version of the market-model of democratic competition and of political third-party competitions more generally: both emphasise the danger of an elite monopolising political decision-making.[998] In providing citizens with direct access to decision-making power, the introduction of lottocratic institutions promises to dislodge political elites and to close off conventional channels for economic power to be translated into political influence.[999] This potential to disrupt established channels for elite influence and to empower voices that are currently not heard is perhaps the most significant democratic promise of sortition.

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[995] Gastil/Wright, "Legislature by Lot", p. 4.
[996] Cf. Gastil/Wright, "Legislature by Lot", p. 3; Landemore, *Open Democracy*, p. 121.
[997] Alexander A. Guerrero, "Against Elections: The Lottocratic Alternative", *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (2014), p. 169.

Note that the claim that sortition comes close to the realisation of 'equal actual political power' is contested. See, e.g., Lafont's discussion of deliberative mini-publics in: Christina Lafont, "Deliberation, Participation, and Democratic Legitimacy: Should Deliberative Mini-publics Shape Public Policy?", *The Journal of Political Philosophy,* Vol. 23, No. 1 (2015), pp. 40–63.
[998] See Chapter Four, Section 2.1 and Chapter Five, Section 2.1.
[999] Cf. Guerrero, "Against Elections", p. 164; Landemore, *Open Democracy*, pp. 89-90, p. 197.

However, there are also reasons to be sceptical of the democratic potential of a turn away from competitive elections towards sortition.[1000] In the following, I argue that proponents of sortition tend to operate with a reductive conception of political competition and, thereby, overlook its democratic benefits. Indeed, it is surprising that supporters of sortition, although they write extensively on elections, rarely mention political or party *competition*. The lack of attention paid to political and party competition is reflected, first, in a tendency to associate competition with attitudes not conducive to democratic engagement. It is evident, second, in the fact that proponents of sortition treat competitive elections merely as mechanisms for the selection of the legislature, not as a part of a broader political practice. I discuss each of these shortcomings and their implications for conceptions of sortition in turn.

The belief that party competition fosters attitudes and behaviours that are harmful for democratic engagement with others is most pronounced in Hélène Landemore's critique of elections:

> Elections introduce systematic discriminatory effects in terms of who has access to power, specifically agenda-setting power. By so doing, elections skew the type of perspectives and input that shape law-making, likely resulting in suboptimal results. Second, elections entail a type of party politics that is itself not all that conducive to deliberation or its prerequisite virtues, such as open-mindedness, rather than partisanship.[1001]

The first part of Landemore's critique largely overlaps with the lottocratic critique of competitive elections that I outlined above. Yet, Landemore points to a further harm of elections: she asserts that competitive party politics cultivate attitudes that conflict with epistemically successful democratic deliberation.

[1000] For critical discussion of sortition, see: Lafont/Urbinati, *The Lottocratic Mentality*; Stefan Rummens and Raf Geenens, "Lottocracy Versus Democracy", *Res Publica,* Vol. 31 (2025), pp. 339-357; Lachlan Montgomery Umbers, "Against Lottocracy", *European Journal of Political Theory*, Vol. 20, Issue 2 (2018), pp. 312-334.
[1001] Landemore, *Open Democracy*, p. 26; see also: Landemore, *Open Democracy*, p. 39.

Recall that Landemore values democracy and democratic deliberation, among other things, for their potential to produce epistemically superior political decisions. Her turn to sortition and deliberative mini-publics is largely motivated by the assumption that these are the better forums for epistemically successful democratic deliberation.[1002] She is worried not only that elections may result in less diverse groups of decision-makers, but also that party competition fosters attitudes that prevent genuine engagement with the ideas and perspectives of others.

There may be some truth to this. Hardened party discipline and unwillingness to change one's mind may stand in the way of a successful exchange of perspectives, ideas, and arguments. However, Landemore's equation of 'partisanship' with 'closed-mindedness' also implies a limited conception of political competition that, to some extent, replicates the competition/cooperation-dichotomy on epistemic terms. It appears that Landemore assumes a sharp distinction between non-partisan, cooperative 'good deliberators' and partisan, competitive 'bad deliberators'.[1003] This suggests that the mere fact that someone is convinced of the rightness or even of the superiority of their political position and wants it to 'win' already poses an obstacle to successful democratic deliberation.

Drawing on Nancy Rosenblum's notion of 'ethical partisanship', Fabio Wolkenstein points to a different understanding of partisanship.

> They [ethical partisans] are aware that their own perspective is partial and acknowledge that others, even within their own party, might reasonably disagree with them. Despite their strong attachment to particular ideas, they defend their views with great respect for the other side and exhibit a disposition to listen and compromise (which presupposes that they relax the intensity with which they hold their views). This makes respectful and

[1002] Cf. Landemore, *Open Democracy*, pp. 7-8.
[1003] For my discussion of the cooperative bias of many deliberative democrats and of Landemore specifically, see Chapter Five, Section 1.2.

> constructive debates possible, and facilitates reaching prudential and widely accepted outcomes—goals on which most deliberative democrats place high value.[1004]

On this account, the ethical partisan is not dissimilar from the participant in the sports contest of ideas as I described it in Chapter Five: motivated by a desire to win and by the conviction that one's position is right, yet willing to correct that position when confronted with good arguments.[1005] Wolkenstein thus underscores Jonathan White's and Lea Ypi's claim, briefly noted in Chapter Five, that political parties and partisanship can make epistemically significant contributions to democratic deliberation.[1006]

Wolkenstein's and White and Ypi's accounts of parties and partisanship share a further feature. Their discussion of the significance of *intra-party deliberation* highlights that party competition is more than a selection mechanism for governments. Beyond election day, parties and partisans animate and structure democratic deliberation. I elaborate on the importance of conceptualising party competition as a democratic practice instead of a mechanism in the next section.

However, before I move on to this discussion of party competition-as-a-practice, I want to note that proposals for lottocratic reform tend to conceive of party competition merely as a selection mechanism. At its core, the reform proponents of sortition favour is ultimately a reform of the central selection mechanism of representative democracy: random selection instead of election. Clearly, it is significant how lawmakers are determined. Yet, focusing on

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[1004] Fabio Wolkenstein, "A Deliberative Model of Intra-Party Democracy", *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (2016), p. 304.
For Rosenblum's account of an "ethic of partisanship", see: Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels*, Chapter 8.

[1005] See Chapter Five, Section 2.2.

[1006] Cf. White/Ypi, *The Meaning of Partisanship,* p. 90; p. 95.
For my earlier discussion of their claims, see Chapter Five, Section 3.

the moment of selection alone is likely to result in an impoverished picture of political and democratic life.

This is the case, as I argued in Chapter Four, in the market model of democratic competition. Exclusively focused on the production of a responsive government, this conception of democracy and democratic competition lacks any conception of a political public and is unable to identify motivations for political engagement beyond the pursuit of power and personal gain.[1007] I want to suggest that some proposals for lottocratic reform suffer similar shortcomings. This is most evident in their underlying conception of political representation, which Alexander Guerrero summarises as follows:

> The thought behind the lottocratic system is that members of the SILLs [single-issue lottery-selected legislature] will be—at least over a long enough run—broadly descriptively and proportionately representative of the political community, simply because they have been chosen at random. But they will not have in mind the idea that they are to represent some particular constituency. Rather, the fact that an individual member of a SILL comes to have certain views about an issue, after hearing from experts and engaging in consultation and deliberation, is a kind of evidence that members of the political community who share contextually salient characteristics with that individual would also come to have those views, had they gone through the same experience.[1008]

This conception of political representation is problematic not only because it equates demographic characteristics with political preferences.[1009] It also advocates for an insular approach to politics, in which demographic representativeness replaces integration into public debates.[1010]

[1007] See: Chapter Four, Section 2.3.
[1008] Guerrero, "Against Elections", p. 159.
[1009] Cf. Lafont/Urbinati, *The Lottocratic Mentality*, pp. 11-12; Rummens/Geenes, "Lottocracy Versus Democracy", p. 351.

I do not mean to dispute that descriptive representation matters. It is arguably more likely that minority perspectives and issues are taken up and taken seriously if minorities are represented in an assembly. However, it is questionable that political views and preferences track demographic features alone. There may also be ways to promote descriptive representation within elected democratic institutions (cf. Herzog, *Citizen Knowledge*, p. 216).
[1010] Cf. Lafont, "Deliberation, Participation, and Democratic Legitimacy", pp. 49-54.

Institutions based on random selection extend the possibility of one day being a lawmaker to larger parts of the population. They may, thereby, act as a force of politicisation and democratisation. But a lottocratic vision of democratic politics lacks the intermediary institutions that promise to connect even those who do not govern to the process of lawmaking.[1011] Outside of legislative or consultative assemblies, it lacks institutions that allow for collective identity and opinion formation. It also lacks institutions that shape public discourse and express and structure central conflicts and disagreements.[1012]

The aim of this list is not to discredit the democratic promise of sortition once and for all. I am not ignorant of the fact that much of democratic experimentation and innovation today is inspired by a lottocratic vision of some kind.[1013] Sortition promises to provide a powerful corrective for the ills of contemporary electoral competition, and many theorists argue convincingly for a combination of elected and randomly selected democratic institutions.[1014] Instead, my aim in highlighting the shortcomings of a lottocratic vision of democracy was to point to those aspects of party competition that proponents of sortition often overlook. It is

[1011] Cf. Lafont/Urbinati, *The Lottocratic Mentality*, p. 72, pp. 118-119.

Of course, it may be possible to design such intermediary institutions for a sortition democracy. Yet, this does not seem to be a major concern for many of its proponents.

[1012] Landemore expresses scepticism towards the epistemic benefits of what we might ordinarily call public discourse: "[…] the idea that the decentralized deliberations of citizens "in the wild" add up to a meaningful way of setting the agenda for the formal decision-making sphere is not convincing. There are many reasons to think that the larger public sphere is itself shaped by the formal deliberative track in a way that is not reciprocal. The collective action problems faced by "the public" are enormous compared to those faced by the powers that be. Moreover, even in the best-case scenario of a fully functional public sphere, why should we expect a series of haphazard, unregulated, and decentralized deliberations among groups of different sizes and compositions, which are not intentionally oriented toward this outcome, to be the proper way of setting up the agenda for the formal deliberative track?" (Landemore, *Open Democracy*, p.38.) It is also striking that Guerrero's sketch of his version of a "lottocratic system" specifies the inclusion of expert-led "Learning Phases" and "Community Consultation" with selected activists and stakeholders but does not seem to plan for engagement with a more diffuse public discourse (Guerrero, *Lottocracy,* p. 149).

[1013] The mini publics and citizens' assemblies discussed in this thesis are a case in point – from the British *Citizens' Assembly on Brexit* and the Irish citizen assemblies to the *Bürgerrat Demokratie* and the *Icelandic Initiative for Constitutional Reform*.

[1014] See, e.g., Gastil/Wright, "Legislature by Lot"; Lafont/Urbinati, *The Lottocratic Mentality*, Chapter 8.

these aspects that a conception of party competition-as-a-practice brings into relief and that I turn to now.

3.2 Party competition as a democratic practice

So far, the only sustained discussion of party competition in this thesis took place in Chapter Four and in the context of the market model of democracy. As I argued above, the market model views political competition and, consequently, party competition exclusively as a political mechanism.[1015] For Schumpeter, Downs, and Shapiro, party competition is a mechanism for the selection of government, which also promises to keep its elected members accountable and responsive to the concerns of voters.[1016]

This tendency to view party competition merely as a mechanism also affects its portrayal: for proponents of the market model, party competition is ultimately a "competition for leadership" and, thus, a competition between individual politicians.[1017] Although parties are regularly mentioned, this model of party competition dispenses with any conception of the party as more than a vehicle for individual ambition. Party members, other than the 'leader', are rarely accounted for, and intra-party deliberation and competition are generally discouraged.[1018] Moreover, insofar as the motivating force behind the 'competition for leadership' is assumed to be nothing but political power – or: "to reap the rewards of holding office" –, this model of party competition effectively does away with any significant notion of partisanship.[1019]

[1015] See Section 1.1 above.
[1016] For my discussion of the market model of party competition, see Chapter Four.
[1017] Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, p. 269.
[1018] Cf. Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", pp. 80-82. See also: Rosenbluth/Shapiro, *Responsible Parties*.
[1019] Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, p. 28.

This section makes the case for an alternative conception of party competition as a *practice*. Far from locating its democratic significance exclusively in its contribution to the formation of government, such a practice-conception of party competition recognises the democratic value of the activity of competing itself. A practice-conception of party competition also challenges the conflation of political parties with their leaders. Instead, it acknowledges the collective nature of parties, accounts for internal discussion and disagreements, and allows for the articulation of 'partisanship' as a distinct political attitude and behaviour.

In highlighting these aspects, a conception of party competition as a democratic practice intersects with recent research on parties and partisanship in political philosophy and democratic theory.[1020] For example, Jonathan White and Lea Ypi seek to reclaim those "older views on the party" that Schumpeter explicitly rejects.[1021] They offer the following account of partisanship: "Partisanship in its ethically most defensible form, as we have argued, is a type of associative practice in which the many come together to form a collective 'we', one that advances distinctive principles and aims in the name of the whole, rather than just for the advantage of some particular class or group."[1022] White and Ypi not only emphasise the collective and principled nature of party politics, but they also note the significance of intra-party deliberation.[1023] On this and related conception of political parties, they are not vehicles for the individual pursuit of power as Schumpeter, Downs, and Shapiro argue. Rather, the purpose of parties lies in "[c]onnecting citizens to government".[1024]

[1020] For an overview over these more recent debates on parties and partisanship, see: Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum, "The Political Theory of Parties and Partisanship: Catching Up", *Annual Review of Political Science,* Vol. 23 (2020), pp. 95–110; Fabio Wolkenstein, "The political theory of parties", *Politik,* Vol. 22, No. 2 (2019).

[1021] White/Ypi, *The Meaning of Partisanship*, p. 20.

Among those 'older views on the party' that White and Ypi discuss is the one developed by Edmund Burke (cf. White/Ypi, *The Meaning of Partisanship*, pp. 15-16). It is Edmund Burke's understanding of parties which Schumpeter explicitly rejects (cf. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, p. 283).

[1022] White/Ypi, *The Meaning of Partisanship*, p. 155.

[1023] Cf. White/Ypi, *The Meaning of Partisanship*, p. 141, p. 224-225.

[1024] Wolkenstein, "A Deliberative Model of Intra-Party Democracy", p. 297.

However, my aim in this section is not primarily to provide an expanded account of political parties and partisanship. Instead, I want to point to the democratic benefits of party *competition* specifically. I approach the question of the purpose and functioning of party competition-as-a-democratic-practice from the perspective of the two democratic theories that have provided the positive points of reference throughout this thesis – deliberative and agonistic democratic theory. I begin with a deliberative conception of the democratic value of party competition.

In Chapter Five, I argued that an epistemic justification of democratic deliberation points to the significance of competitive forms of deliberation and the 'contest of arguments.'[1025] I also gestured towards a potential role for political parties within the deliberative competition of the broader public sphere. Following White and Ypi, I suggested that partisan or intra-party deliberations strengthen "the epistemic reliabilities of the projects they endorse"[1026] and provide "a greater pool of epistemic resources […]."[1027] On this account, parties provide spaces for deliberation among people who share some political commitments and, in doing so, ensure that competing positions are considered and epistemically reliable.

However, this deliberative-democratic conception of parties is not yet able to account for the distinct epistemic value of party *competition*. An understanding of parties, which Nancy Rosenblum calls "proto-Millian", comes closer to articulating the epistemic significance of competition. "The expectation is that party conflict not only keeps the other side 'within the limits of reason' but produces better political decisions—better at least in the sense of decisions

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See also: Muirhead/Rosenblum, "The Political Theory of Parties and Partisanship", pp. 97-99.
[1025] See: Chapter Five.
[1026] White/Ypi, *The Meaning of Partisanship*, p. 90.
[1027] White/Ypi, *The Meaning of Partisanship*, p. 95.

faithful to the public interest and based on reasoned justifications."[1028] On this understanding of party competition, "parties in some sense 'add up.' They correct for one another's deficiencies. They keep one another 'within the limits of reason and sanity.' The outcome of their antagonism is better—more reasoned, more likely to be in the public interest—than other ways of reaching political decisions."[1029] In many ways, this understanding of the epistemic benefits of party competition mirrors the arguments of deliberative and epistemic democrats for the inclusion of diverse views and perspectives.[1030]

But Rosenblum's proto-Millian account of the epistemic value of party competition goes beyond the simple valorisation of diverse perspectives. She also points to the specific epistemic role for rivalry or *competition*:

> That is the main point to retain from a pared-down proto-Millian position: without party rivalry, 'trial by discussion' cannot be meaningful. It will not be if interests and opinions are disorganized and are not brought into opposition, their consequences are not drawn out, and argument is evaded. Nor can it be fruitful if the inclusion of interests and opinions is exhaustive and chaotic; parties are about selection and exclusion. Shaping conflict is what parties and partisans do and what will not be done, certainly not regularly, without them.[1031]

Political parties should not be misunderstood as enclaves, in which like-minded people discuss their worries and wishes. Rather, the fact of party competition means that party positions are always already formulated with rival parties in mind. Parties are not just epistemic resources; they also challenge and criticise the positions of other parties and may, thereby, improve the quality of their own position as well as that of their rivals.

[1028] Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels*, p. 144.
[1029] Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels*, p. 156.
[1030] See Chapter Five, Section 1.2.
[1031] Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels*, p. 160.

This function of party competition to challenge political positions and decisions and to shape conflict is perhaps most manifest in the institution of opposition politics. Stefan Rummens describes the epistemic role of opposition politics as follows:

> Epistemically, this means that opposition parties or organizations, by challenging majority decisions, are able to situate these decisions in *a space of public political reasons*. By pointing out the alternative policy options which have not been chosen, the opposition gives voice to the preferences and values which, possibly, have not been sufficiently taken into account and enables, thus, to disclose the more specific nature of the partialities inherent in the decisions made.[1032]

Opposition politics consistently challenge government policy and, thereby, have the potential to prevent or correct misguided policies. They also provide a tool for partisans to insist on the significance of their political views:[1033]

> In this regard, oppositional parties and organizations function as *epistemic reservoirs* in a twofold sense. They represent and keep alive the *memory* of interests and values which have been excluded by majority decisions. By keeping these arguments and interests on stage, it remains at the same time possible to use them in the *design of policy alternatives*. By opposing the majority in the hope of a possible future access to power, the opposition plays a crucial role in maintaining the dynamics of the democratic process as an ongoing search for a better, more inclusive and less partial future society.[1034]

Thus, epistemic benefits also arise from the continuous nature of party competition. Party competition and argumentative challenge do not stop once a temporary winner has been determined and awarded governmental power.

[1032] Rummens, "Staging Deliberation", pp. 33-34.
[1033] On the epistemic benefits of 'insisting', see: Bächtiger, "On Perfecting the Deliberative Process", p.7 and Chapter Five, Section 2.2.
[1034] Rummens, "Staging Deliberation", p. 34.

It is important to note that the deliberative and epistemic benefits of party competition depend on a particular mode of partisanship.[1035] I want to draw attention to two aspects in particular: First, parties need to be more than interest groups, seeking to advance the interests of a subgroup of the population. As White and Ypi put it in their definition of "[p]artisanship in its ethically most defensible form" quoted above, they need "to form a collective 'we', one that advances distinctive principles and aims in the name of the whole, rather than just for the advantage of some particular class or group."[1036] For the contest of arguments to be epistemically successful, individual deliberators need to be oriented towards the 'truth' or the best policy.[1037] Likewise, political parties need to converge on their orientation towards the common good or 'the whole'.

Second, a deliberative and epistemically successful party competition ought to be characterised by an 'ethical partisanship' as outlined by Wolkenstein and discussed above. [1038] This ethical partisanship combines attachment to certain ideas and positions with a willingness to listen to and even compromise with others.[1039] I observed above that on this account the partisan resembles the participant in the 'sports tournament of ideas': motivated by the desire to win and insistent on the epistemic value of their position, yet willing to correct that position and admit defeat when faced with better arguments.

Interestingly, it is a related aspect of this 'ethical partisanship' that resonates with an agonistic understanding of democratic politics and even seems to evoke something like William

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[1035] Recall that the 'contest of arguments' more generally also depends on the right attitude and modes of engagement with other deliberators. I have discussed this in Chapter Five with regard to the 'sports contest of ideas', see Chapter Five, Section 2.2.
[1036] White/Ypi, *The Meaning of Partisanship*, p. 155.
[1037] See Chapter Five, Section 2.2.
[1038] Cf. Wolkenstein, "A Deliberative Model of Intra-Party Democracy" and Section 3.1 above.
[1039] Wolkenstein, "A Deliberative Model of Intra-Party Democracy", p. 304.

E. Connolly's "agonistic respect".[1040] For Rosenblum, party competition is at its core a form of "regulated rivalry": "Partisans see themselves as firmly on the side of the angels, but regulated rivalry demands acknowledging their partiality, that they do not and cannot speak for the whole, and that their exercise of power is provisional (as is their status as losers, relegated to opposition)."[1041] Indeed, in light of the emphasis on the regulation, institutionalisation, and *taming* of political conflict in the literature on party competition, it is surprising that agonistic theorists rarely discuss political parties.[1042]

Rosenblum's discussion of partisanship reveals two further ways in which party competition can be conceptualised as an agonistic democratic practice. First, Rosenblum describes partisanship as the only truly *pluralist* political identity:

> Partisanship is the only political identity that does not see pluralism and political conflict as a bow to necessity, a pragmatic recognition of the inevitability of disagreement. It demands severe self-discipline to acknowledge that my party's status is just one part in a permanently pluralist politics, and hence the provisional nature of being the governing party and the charade of pretending to represent the whole.[1043]

Rosenblum's partisans share with Mouffe's adversaries the commitment to pluralist politics and the recognition that no political project will ever be able to represent and include everyone.[1044]

Second, the 'taming' of political conflict through party competition and an ethos of partisanship does not eliminate such conflict, nor does it merely mute it. Rather, party

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[1040] Connolly, *Pluralism*, p. 123.
For my brief discussion of Connolly's notion of agonistic respect, see Chapter Six, Section 1.2.
[1041] Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels*, p. 124.
[1042] For an exception, see: Gürsözlü, *Agonistic Democracy and Political Practice*, Chapter 5.
[1043] Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels*, p. 7.
For my discussion of the centrality of pluralism to the agonistic project, see Chapter Six, Section 1.1.
[1044] Cf. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, p. 19.

competition provides avenues for the expression and enactment of these conflicts. Rosenblum notes that "[p]arties create, not just reflect, political interests and opinions. They formulate 'issues' and give them political relevance. Party antagonism 'stages the battle'; parties create a system of conflict and draw the lines of division."[1045] Crucially, an agonistic understanding of the practice of party competition needs to emphasise this creative force.[1046]

A practice-conception of party competition, both in its deliberative and in its agonistic version, demonstrates the democratic significance of parties and partisanship beyond their role in elections. On this understanding, party competition is more than a cog in the machinery of elections, producing responsive governments. Competing parties and partisans structure political deliberation and conflict. They criticise and challenge each other and may thereby improve and correct each other's positions and policies. They combine strongly held political convictions with a commitment to democratic pluralism. Party competition, so understood, embodies crucial democratic principles and animates political life.

This shift from viewing party competition as a mechanism to conceptualising it as a practice integrates parties and partisanship into the democratised conception of political competition developed in this thesis and outlined above. Yet, it is relevant not only for theoretical coherence. How party competition and its democratic role are conceptualised also has implications for recommendations regarding the institutional design of competitive party politics.

[1045] Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels*, p. 7.
[1046] This is perhaps most pronounced in Mouffe's conception of agonism, which emphasises the political centrality of constructing hegemonic projects and new political identities (Cf. Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, pp. 69-73).

Those who, like Downs and Shapiro, view party competition primarily as a mechanism for the production of responsive governments tend to prefer two-party systems over multiparty competition. Downs predicts that competition in a two-party system will ultimately lead to an ideological convergence of party positions upon the centre or on the "position of the median voter" – and thus to government policies in line with the interests of this median voter.[1047] In contrast, he observes that multiparty systems are likely to lead to an accentuation of ideological differences.[1048]

Shapiro makes his preference for a two-party system more explicit. He notes that multiparty systems have a tendency to produce coalition governments. This may result, he intimates, in reduced democratic accountability because responsibility can be passed on to coalition partners and because government policy is the outcome of compromises between these partners.[1049] Furthermore, he warns that a multiparty system invites mobilisation around narrow interests and single-issues and, thereby, "encourages wholesale clientelism".[1050] Ultimately, Shapiro even suggests that arguments for a proliferation of political parties tend to be anti-competitive in nature, based on a concern for representativeness rather than increased competitiveness.[1051]

Yet, the deliberative and agonistic accounts of the *practice* of party competition highlight the advantages of multiparty systems – and do so in the name of competition, not in the name of representation. Because their concerns lie less with the smooth functioning of the

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[1047] Strom, "Democracy as Political Competition", p. 378.
See also: Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, pp. 117-122.
[1048] Cf. Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, pp. 125-127.
[1049] Shapiro, *Politics Against Domination*, p. 175; Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 81.
[1050] Shapiro, "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 83. See also: Shapiro, *Politics Against Domination*, pp. 175-176; "Collusion in Restraint of Democracy", p. 81.
[1051] Cf. Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory,* p. 63.

machinery of electoral competition and its outcomes and more with the democratic benefits of the activity of competing, the institutional recommendations drawn from these accounts differ dramatically from Shapiro's. From the deliberative and epistemic perspective, the purpose of party competition – and of political competition more generally – is the production of epistemically robust and tested political decisions and policies. As noted in Chapter Five, diversity of views and perspectives is among the conditions for an epistemically successful deliberative competition.[1052] Party competition is no exception in this regard. Only a party competition, which can mobilise a diversity of views, opinions, and perspectives is likely to contribute to the process of critique and challenge that enhances epistemic robustness. In turn, this points towards a deliberative-epistemic argument for intra-party deliberation and multiparty competition.[1053]

Down's and Shapiro's orientation towards the median voter, which grounds their preference for two-party systems, is sharply at odds with the agonistic commitment to pluralism and political conflict.[1054] Indeed, for Mouffe, this convergence of political parties on a "'consensus in the centre'" is a sign of neoliberal depoliticization and de-democratisation.[1055] In many ways, an agonistic conception of party competition which emphasises its role in taming and institutionalising political conflict appears to be more compatible with a party system that encompasses different collective identities, political positions, and lines of conflict.[1056] It is less clear that this would also be the most appropriate institutional form for

[1052] Cf. Bohman, "Deliberative Democracy and the Epistemic Benefits of Diversity". See also: Chapter Five, Section 1.2.
[1053] On the importance of intra-party deliberation from a deliberative perspective, see: Udit Bhatia and Fabio Wolkenstein, "Freedom of speech within political parties", *European Political Science Review,* Vol. 13, No. 4 (2021), pp. 431-448; Wolkenstein, "A Deliberative Model of Intra-Party Democracy".
[1054] Cf. Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, pp. 117-122; Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory,* p. 63.
[1055] Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, p. 17.
[1056] This appears to be the vision of party politics most compatible with those agonists who, such as Connolly and Tully, embrace the multipolar interplay of difference and contestation (Cf. Paxton, *Agonistic Democracy*, pp. 68-74; Wenman, *Agonistic Democracy*, p. 146).

Mouffe's hegemonic agonism, with its emphasis on binary oppositions, and for her proposal for a left populism.[1057] However, even if Mouffe preferred a two-party system, it would need to be characterised not by the courting of the median voter but by a clash between genuinely different political projects.[1058]

4 Conclusion

With this brief overview of the institutional implications of a practice-conception of party competition, I conclude this chapter. I have argued that this thesis's reflections on the democratic role of competition point towards three features of a democratised conception of political competition. Democratic competition is, first, a practice and, second, always also cooperative. It is, third, open to the contestation and amendment of its rules.

I have also shown that this democratised understanding of political competition has distinct benefits for political philosophy and democratic theory. It allows for the separation of evaluations of political competition and market competition. Thus, a critical account of the de-democratising effects of market competition is compatible with, if not required for, the appreciation of the democratic significance of party competition. Moreover, the understanding of democratic competition I have developed bears on debates on the democratic role for elections, sortition, and political parties. It uncovers the importance of political and party

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[1057] Cf. Mouffe, *On the Political*, p. 15, p. 53.

For my discussion of this difference between Mouffe's hegemonic agonism and the agonistic theories of Connolly, Tully, and Honig, see Chapter Six, Section 3.1.

[1058] Gürzölü reconstructs a Mouffian "normative argument for political party that is implicit in her work, but one she has not explicitly developed. According to this account of political party, the most significant political function of the political party in agonistic democracy is to offer distinct hegemonic visions and political discourses that create and shape collective political identities." (Gürzölü, *Agonistic Democracy and Political Practice*, p. 170.) He notes that her critique of actually existing parties can be traced back to their failure to provide distinct hegemonic projects and visions (cf. Gürzölü, *Agonistic Democracy and Political Practice*, pp. 169-170).

competition beyond elections and allows for a reconceptualization of party competition as a practice.

These discussions demonstrate again that the question of how we conceptualise and evaluate the relationship between competition and democracy is a question that matters not just to political philosophers and democratic theorists. Answers to it shape how democracy is lived and organised. Coming to grips with competition – in markets and in politics – is thus ever more important today as democratic societies find themselves in crisis.

Conclusion: Political Competition in Times of Crisis

The aim of this thesis has been to reclaim the concept of competition for democratic theory and practice. To do this in the context of a democratic capitalist society, it was necessary, first and foremost, to free competition from its immediate conflation with market and market-like competitions. Looking beyond the sphere of the market to ecological competition, competitive sports, and games revealed a richer understanding of competition: one in which competition is more than just a mechanism valued for its outcomes and more than "non-cooperative behaviour".[1059]

This expanded understanding provides the basis for the appreciation of the democratic value of political competition. Truly democratic competition compels citizens to genuinely engage with others, their views, and positions. It expresses and shapes political conflict without collapsing into violence and destruction. By fostering mutual critique and challenge, it even promises to result in better, more epistemically robust political positions and policies. On this understanding, competing with others democratically – as politicians, deliberators, protestors, or, simply, as citizens – means to take part in a rich and varied democratic life.

The project of rethinking political competition beyond the market model does not imply a conception of the political cleansed from its imbrication with the economic, nor does it deny the centrality of market competition in democratic capitalist societies. Most importantly, my arguments in favour of democratic competition do not entail a defence of competitive markets. Instead, they carve out space for the independent assessment of the impact of market competition on democracy.

[1059] Heath, *Morality, Competition, and the Firm*, p. 98.

Competition does not need to be celebrated or condemned *per se*. What is more, an account of the relationship between competition and democracy cannot merely note the benefits of political competition. It is equally important to recognise the many ways in which market competition harms political democracy and erodes its social conditions. Thus, the analysis in this thesis does not only emphasise the significance of competition in the political realm. It also suggests that the recovery of democratic life today requires a less competitive, more cooperative, and more democratic economy.

1 Future Research: Democratic Competition in Practice

In the final Chapter Seven, I outlined three features of a democratised conception of competition as it emerged out of the analyses of previous chapters: a genuinely democratic competition ought to be conceptualised as a practice; it is always also cooperative; and it allows for the continual amendment and challenge of its rules. However, Chapter Seven also demonstrated that this conception of democratic competition does not mark the endpoint for the project of rethinking the role of competition in democratic capitalist societies.

The question of how to democratise political competition in practice ought to be explored further. I offered some brief and preliminary reflections on the implications of my democratised conception of political competition for democratic institutions in arguing for the benefits of competitive party politics and gesturing towards the possibility of rethinking party competition as a practice.[1060] Yet, these issues warrant more research. In particular, it remains open how party politics may be democratised and how other democratic institutions, such as deliberative mini-publics, could be integrated into a competitive democracy.

[1060] See Chapter Seven, Section 3.

The question of how a competitive conception of democratic politics affects recommendations for a democratic reform of economic relations also demands further attention. Many proposals for the democratisation of the economy, as well as for economic reforms that reduce its de-democratising effects, rest on cooperative conceptions of democracy.[1061] As I argued earlier, there are reasons to suspect that proposals based on a competitive conception of democracy will not differ drastically.[1062] Still, this is something to be investigated further.

In short, while this thesis offers an extensive assessment of the role of competition in democratic theory, more work needs to be done on competitive democratic politics in practice. This turn to practice is crucial because 'democracy' is more than a concept studied by political theorists and philosophers. It is an ideal that still inspires political activists and social movements worldwide – and is increasingly under threat.

2 Competition and the Crisis of Democracy

It can be a strange experience to read and write about democracy, to study the intricacies of democratic theories and debate proposals for democratic institutions in a world that often appears decided that its experimentation with democratic politics is over. In the last few years I have spent working on this thesis, I have often closed a book about the promise of democracy

[1061] See, e.g., Harcourt, *Cooperation*; Honneth, *The Working Sovereign*.

In her proposals for democratising economic reforms, Herzog acknowledges the competitive dimension of political democracy. However, she still places more emphasis on cooperation. Spelling out the vision of democracy that underlies her analysis, Herzog writes: "But this combative dimension of democracy needs to be balanced by other democratic values such as cooperativeness, mutual respect, and willingness on all sides to uphold democratic institutions and procedures. If public attention focuses on election campaigns alone, citizens will likely come to see democracy as just another kind of public spectacle, on a par with sports leagues or Olympic games—and it is a sad irony that critics of democracy then disparage it for reducing politics to the equivalent of sports rivalries, with citizens just cheering for their opposing teams." (Herzog, *The Democratic Marketplace*, Introduction, ebook.)

[1062] See: Chapter Seven, Section 2.

to read news reports detailing the deplorable state of democracy in the 'real world': from the electoral successes of the far-right to the return of global power politics and ever-tighter restrictions on protest. To recover the sense of optimism that always compels me to keep reading, writing, and thinking about democracy, I want to conclude by noting three ways in which the findings of this thesis may help us understand and perhaps respond to the crisis of democracy.

First, the analysis of market competition in Part I highlighted the many ways in which the democratic crisis is not just a crisis of the political narrowly understood. This insight not only cautions against an overly "politicist" understanding of the crisis of democracy.[1063] It also suggests that reforms of economic relations can contribute to the recovery of political democracy.[1064] Although large-scale economic reforms of this kind may seem unlikely, bottom-up economic initiatives and experiments keep this hope alive.[1065]

Second, competition – as party competition – is an essential aspect of established democratic institutions. As these institutions find themselves in crisis, the analysis of political competition may help identify new avenues for institutional reform and innovation. Rather than assuming a choice between democracy and competition, such an analysis is able to recognise the benefits of political competition as well as the shortcomings of contemporary electoral practices.

Finally, the crisis of democracy is often described in terms of polarisation and experienced as the deepening of social and political difference and the inability to 'speak with each other.'

[1063] Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism,* p. 115.
[1064] For a defence of this claim, see Herzog, *The Democratic Marketplace*.
[1065] For an overview of such initiatives and experiments, see Harcourt, *Cooperation,* Chapter 2.

One symptom of this crisis appears to be the inability to endure and negotiate political difference and conflict. Democratic competition does not do away with these differences; it expresses and may even accentuate them. Yet, at the same time, it promises to establish relationships of, perhaps grudging, respect between competitors.

This affirmation of democratic competition does not need to imply a defence of the status quo. It does not entail a justification of market competition nor a commitment to the established institutions of liberal democracy. Instead, it may provide a novel resource for imagining a truly democratic future.

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