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Speaking Crisis in the Eurozone Debt Crisis: Exploring the Potential and Limits of Transformational Agonistic Conflict

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ABSTRACT

Agonism as a political theory emphasizes the ontological aspect of conflict in human political interaction. This article aims to shed light on the political practice of agonism – and in doing so on its limits – by viewing 'crisis discourse' as an agonistic political practice. As my analysis of the Dutch Socialist Party and the Freedom Party's speech in the European Sovereign Debt Crisis shows, crisis discourse aimed to (re)create a 'people' and to justify radical change in economic and social structures. Crisis discourse is employed to construct an 'other' that can be based on ethnic and nationalist terms and to justify retroactive application of the law and the stripping of Dutch citizens of their rights. This attention to crisis discourse as an agonistic political practice highlights an unease within agonism itself: where must the agonist accept limits to the conflict and contestation she so values? The article starts with Chantal Mouffe's answer to this question - her insistence that legitimate conflict must always recognize the shared values of equality and liberty - and proceeds to show that Mouffe's view unnecessarily relies on a deliberative democratic desire for consensus. Other than Mouffe, I draw on Honig's emphasis of perpetual contestation to propose that the issue of limits can be best answered by reference to the core of agonistic thought: the preservation of the struggle over political norms and processes. It is not shared values or even a shared political space that matters, but that the political space of the 'people' – however contested membership therein might be – remains a place that the 'other' can re-enter.

Keywords: Agonism, Antagonism, Bonnie Honig, Chantal Mouffe, Crisis Discourse, Exclusion

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1 Introduction

At the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, Europe was in crisis. Greece was no longer able to service its debt, and began to request a series of loans from the IMF and European Union. Spain, Portugal, Ireland and Cyprus soon followed.¹ Concerns about weak national economies with high sovereign debt collapsing and bringing the other Eurozone economies down with them were rampant, both in Europe and globally.² In 2010 national elections were held in the Netherlands and, only two years later, after the government fell due to discord over austerity measures responding to the Eurozone crisis, another election was held. During both of these elections the concept of crisis loomed large. Political parties on the right and left mobilized a discourse of crisis that constructed specific threats to the political community and that worked to justify the necessity of certain deep changes to legal and political structures to remedy these threats, even going so far as to propose retroactive legislation and stripping certain Dutch citizens of their nationality. This article argues that the crisis discourse used by two specific political parties in the Netherlands, the Socialist Party and the Freedom Party, is both an example of agonism at work in political discourse and that this example can help us think through more carefully a key, yet underdeveloped, debate in agonistic theory: whether agonism accepts any limits to political contestation. When does the conflict agonists so value become unacceptable?

Agonists approach politics from the starting-point that political systems depend on contingent foundations that produce and sustain relations of power that benefit some while excluding others.³ Political struggle is seen as legitimately focusing on challenging those foundations, thus including contest over the very principles, procedures and foundations of political life. In this sense, the democratic contest is seen as going “all the way down”⁴ to the fundamental principles of a political system. Since agonists rejects the possibility of ever eliminating contingency or the influence of power relations on political decision-making,⁵ agonistic politics is about the struggle over *which* particular “configuration of power relations around which a given society is structured” gains hegemonic status.⁶

Over the past decade-and-a-half, multiple theories of agonism have appeared, been fleshed out and analyzed. Many scholars have attended to the different streams of agonsim,⁷ the *ethos* needed for agonism to thrive,⁸ and most recently, what agonism means for the institutional structure of democratic political systems.⁹ Yet, during this period, the issue of the *limits* to acceptable political activity within an agonistic conception has remained unsatisfactorily conceptualized. Theories of agonism promote and value conflict and contestation and argue that legitimate political debate can include dissent over the fundamental values of society. They hold that change of the most basic institutions must be possible and claim that any given society cannot avoid exclusion and othering. It remains, however, unclear whether agonist theory posits any *limits* to this contest? Can *any* values and *any* type of change be legitimately argued for? Are all exclusions to be accepted?

The answers that some agonists have attempted to give to these questions remain unsatisfactory. Chantal Mouffe gives us the most guidance on these questions, arguing that in order for political action to be acceptable, it must take place within a shared symbolic space of equality and liberty. According to Mouffe, once a political actor leaves this symbolic space

and no longer accepts the values of equality and liberty, her actions can no longer be considered acceptable from the perspective of agonism and she becomes an enemy.¹⁰ This approach however seems to reveal an underlying reliance on more consensus-oriented deliberative democracy – the very strand of thought that agonism aims to critique. After all, if the point agonist scholars are making is that the political is about the contestation of the very foundations of a particular society – how can values such as equality and liberty be placed beyond this space of contestation? Moreover, Mouffe’s insistence on shared political values fails to accurately identify the real risk of agonistic conflict: not that values are contested, but that conflict leads to the permanent destruction of the other. While Mouffe’s work does recognize the need for agonism to prevent such permanent destruction, the importance claim is weakened by Mouffe’s attention to other more substantive limits to political conflict.

I argue that a more satisfactory approach to the limits of conflict can be found by attending to how agonism plays out, concretely, in the language political actors use. Attention to political discourse clarifies how agonism works in the everyday business of politics and, by doing so, reveals the concrete implications of an agonistic attitude towards politics, including the risks conflict can entail. This attention to the discourse of agonism as used in actual political practice remedies the shortcomings of agonism’s traditional approaches to the limits of acceptable politics in two ways. First, by attending to the actual practice of the political and by seeing language as a site of agonism, we are able to more clearly grasp the risks inherent in agonism and more clearly specify what can be done about these risks. As we move from the abstract level of agonistic theory to the very concrete level of agonistic practice, it becomes apparent what exactly is at stake in agonistic contests. In other words, by taking language seriously, we are able to take the risks of agonism more seriously. Second, in attending to discourse as a tool of agonism, we stay true to agonism’s post-foundational commitment to the importance – and contingency – of meaning in the political. It is this contingency of meaning that eventually leads us to a more sufficient conceptualization of the limits of acceptable political activity, thus avoiding Mouffe’s proposal that these limits can only be found in consensus-based liberal democratic ideas of a shared commitment to equality and liberty.

The particular type of language use this article focuses on is what I call crisis discourse: a narrative that discursively constructs a threat and that frames a fundamental change to the legal, social or political order as the only way to address that threat. In doing so, crisis discourse has the potential to (re-)constitute the friend/enemy distinction in a political community around the constructed threat and act as a catalyst of structural change.¹¹ These two characteristics of crisis discourse – its ability to call into being a ‘people’ and call for radical change make crisis discourse a tool of agonistic politics. In this sense, when one ‘speaks crisis’, something is done. Crisis discourse is often approached as a ‘speech act’: it does more than simply reflect reality as it already is. Speaking crisis can be seen as a ‘performative utterance’¹² that – when successful – brings a reality into existence that was not there before.¹³ In this way, my approach to crisis discourse can be reconciled with agonism’s post-foundationalism. Within post-foundationalist theories, language and language games are acknowledged as the means by which humans attribute meaning to the world and by which humans are turned into subjects. It is through discourse that power is exercised and through discourse that power is challenged.¹⁴ This discursive aspect of politics – and of the

construction of crises – drives my focus on the specific language used by those invoking crisis discourse. By examining this site of power in a systematic way, as the following sections will do, we can see more concretely how exclusion takes place in political activity, what its effects are in a particular case and take the risks of this exclusion seriously. Attention for the illocutionary force of crisis discourse will show that we can view the risks of agonistic speech as part of a continuum of risk: while risk cannot be eliminated from political speech, we can evaluate whether political speech brings us closer to or farther away from the limit between the conflict agonism values and that which it cannot.

In what follows, I will define crisis discourse in more detail and show how it is used in political communication (Section 2). I apply my analysis to the crisis discourse employed in relation to the financial upheaval that has marked the second decade of the 21st century, focusing on the discourse used by two Dutch political parties in relation to what is often termed the ‘European sovereign debt crisis’¹⁵. Section 2 further explores how crisis discourse functions as a tool of agonistic politics as I emphasize crisis discourse’s ability to (re)constitute a ‘people’ and to call for fundamental change. The concrete examples of crisis discourse in Section 2 set the stage for the subsequent exploration of where agonism sets the limits to acceptable political speech in Section 3. Here, I acknowledge the risks attendant in using crisis discourse, risks that agonists seem too often to underestimate and I explore where the limits of using crisis discourse as a political tool lie, by taking language – and the risks – seriously. At the same time, I ensure that I maintain the possibility of perpetual contestation contest over political values and institutions, an emphasis particularly present in Honig’s work on agonism.¹⁶ In the end, I propose viewing the dangers of agonistic speech as part of a continuum of risky illocutions with a clear boundary between the *agonistic* behavior that can be positioned on this continuum and unacceptable behavior that crosses the boundary into *antagonism*: the realm of the destruction of the other.

2 Crisis Discourse as a Tool of Agonistic Politics

Crisis discourse has been impossible to ignore during recent years’ developments in financial markets. During the financial crisis that started after the fall of a number of systemic banks in 2007 and 2008, political and economic actors employed crisis discourse that framed these events and attributed causes and responsibilities to certain actors and objects.¹⁷ Different variations of crisis discourse were pervasive in the public speech of international corporations and national political organizations.¹⁸ As a term, crisis discourse can be traced to different lineages. The field of crisis communication within a larger literature on business communication has enjoyed increasing popularity over the past 15 years.¹⁹ This field has focused mostly on how companies can best react to crises in order to protect their reputation and to manage shareholder impressions,²⁰ although recent attention has also been paid to the potential crisis offers for the introduction of innovations in business.²¹ The study of crisis itself has also been a point of interest within the field of international relations and public policy studies.

With his seminal article in 1999,²² Colin Hay provided a framework for understanding when and how crises can arise, and what affects they have on the state. Although not focusing

specifically on the role of discourse, Hay's work provided the basics necessary for later exploration of how crisis discourse can be constructed by political actors.²³ Most recently, crisis discourse has been explored within critical discourse studies.²⁴ In this section I will analyze the crisis discourse with the following method of discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis starts from the assumption that language *does something*. Language calls into being a new reality based on its performative force. When we speak we not only describe 'reality' but at the same time create or transform reality. This constitutive function of language is referred to as language's illocutionary force.²⁵ In order to study this function of language, discourse analysis studies how language contained in a variety of texts links together various elements into a chain of meaning. It is important to recognize that it is impossible to ever fully localize a complete discourse and instead, one must look to texts as artifacts that can give us indications of the content of social discourse. In this way, the text – as a written or spoken selection of language – serves as a crystalized point of discourse, evidence (and to some extent a simplification) of the complex and dynamic language games that produce social reality.²⁶

My concern with crisis discourse as a tool of agonistic politics, leads me to focus my analysis on *public* discourse in this article. To illustrate the main characteristics of crisis discourse, this section draws on instances of crisis discourse used by two Dutch political parties during the so-called 'European sovereign debt crisis'. These two political parties, the Socialist Party (*Socialist Partij*) and the Freedom Party (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*) are situated at opposite ends of the Dutch political spectrum. The Socialist Party is the most left-leaning party in Dutch parliament, and the Freedom Party the most right-leaning party in Dutch parliament.²⁷ Based on the realization that crisis discourse can be a tool for structural change, it is a logical assumption that the parties furthest from the political status-quo would be most likely to employ crisis discourse (although this is certainly not to say centrist parties never attempt to change the status quo through crisis discourse). While this article focuses on crisis discourse as used in the Netherlands, the speech used by the left-populist Socialist Party and the right-populist Freedom Party echoes that employed by other anti-establishment parties and candidates, on both the left and the right in other Western democracies, for example in France (with *La France insoumise* on the left and the *Front National* on the right) or the United States (with Democratic primary candidate Bernie Sanders on the left and Donald Trump on the right). As will be shown below, a survey of the Socialist Party and Freedom Party's discourse between 2010-2014 provides us with an example of the use of crisis discourse during the critical years of the European sovereign debt crisis.

The key characteristic of crisis discourse is its ability to discursively frame events in ways that define a particular problem and postulate a seemingly necessary solution, thus "selectively legitimating certain courses of action."²⁸ Constructing a moment as crisis requires "a double articulation of the events themselves and of a solution to the morbid, underlying condition they were claimed to represent."²⁹ In crisis discourse, the first of these articulations diagnoses, naming a problem or threat, the latter proposes a specific change necessary to solve of this problem.

Framing the threat of crisis

In its framing of the problem, crisis discourse creates an urgent threat that is posed by a 'them' to an 'us'.³⁰ The problem is attributed to a group that is constructed as being opposed to the 'us', the group who is unduly threatened by the problem. If the crisis is to be taken seriously, and if the solution is to be justified, the threat must be construed as an existential threat: a threat to the physical survival of an individual or group or a threat to the survival of the individual or group's identity.

Crisis discourse's framing of the problem as a threat to a current way of life can be seen in the language used by both the Socialist Party and the Freedom Party regarding how they perceived the threat posed by the Eurozone crisis, although it is clear that the parties differ in their definition of this threat. The Socialist Party's use of crisis discourse focused specifically on the economic causes and effects of recession and budget cuts, and placed the blame squarely on the financial sector and the politicians who facilitate it.

The Netherlands is at a crossroads. Our economy is in a recession that threatens to deepen into a great crisis. A crisis with lost jobs, lower wages and threats to our pensions. A crisis with great social consequences. One that undermines solidarity, shared destinies and confidence in the future. This is not a natural disaster that just happened to us. It is the consequence of a derailed financial sector. A consequence of a system that favors the short term interests of shareholders and consumers above the long term interests of citizens, employees and our society as a whole.³¹

Serving the bill of the crisis to those who had no part in the cause of the crisis, causes more crisis. Not less. [This is] an approach that ensures that thousands of people are sitting at home unemployed and that smothers the recovery of the economy. That is a costly lesson history has taught us before. A lesson this cabinet has forgotten.³²

In constructing this threat, the crisis discourse used by the Socialist Party presupposed an 'us', a 'people' who is being threatened by a 'them', the 'most rich', bankers and speculators as well as the political parties whose policies allowed for these enemies to have their way:

In the past years, European leaders have paid more attention to the financial markets than to the needs of the citizens. The Dutch government is participating in that.³³

The government ... lets the most-rich do whatever they want. And imposes cuts of billions on citizens. ... Such austerity politics enlarges the division in society and suffocates economic growth.³⁴

In contrast to the Socialist Party's framing of the threat as mainly economic, caused by the financial sector, the Freedom Party constructed a far broader threat. Although the threat of economic crisis was discussed explicitly, often the Freedom Party expanded the crisis to include a threat posed by 'Europe' and immigrants to the Netherlands. So for example, the Freedom Party discursively linked a threat to the welfare state in the context of the European sovereign debt crisis with immigration from Muslim countries:

Only the Freedom Party is standing up to protect the welfare state and is therefore in favor of stopping immigration from Islamic countries. You can't have both: either you are a welfare state or an immigration country. All other parties choose the latter.³⁵

The Freedom Party claimed that the Dutch state was in a crisis that was the biggest since the introduction of liberal democracy into the Dutch constitution by Thorbecke and linked this, again, to a threat posed by immigration:

Our democracy is in the biggest crisis since Thorbecke. More and more Dutch people are wondering why The Hague is pushing on with these disastrous measures that are not supported by our people. In the meantime, many have the feeling that we are losing the Netherlands. Neighborhood after neighborhood, school after school is being islamified.³⁶

Part of the threat perceived by the Freedom Party during the European sovereign debt crisis was the power the Freedom Party saw the European Union as having over the Netherlands.

Brussels, keep your hands off our taxes. Never, ever European taxes! We citizens are not here to finance your undemocratic organizations. Look up how the Eighty Year War started (Hint: it started with the *tiende penning*, a tax of the European superstate of those days).³⁷

And why does the Netherlands give seven billion euro to Brussels each year, while our elderly have pajama days and have to pay for their own walker? Did *they* rebuild the Netherlands after the war or did those Greek swindlers?³⁸

Brussels wants to control the Netherlands to the last detail ... Bye, bye freedom.³⁹

In the Freedom Party's crisis discourse, just like in the Socialist Party's, a clear 'us' is created and juxtaposed against a 'them' that is causing the threat. However, the Freedom Party's 'us' and 'them' are differently composed than the Socialist Party's. For the Freedom Party, the group being threatened by the crisis was ethnically and nationalistically defined – the Dutch, non-Muslim citizen was the 'us', set against the 'them' of the European Union and of Islam.

Framing the call to change

The framing of the urgent and existential threat posed by the crisis is linked to the solution the crisis discourse calls for. How this solution is framed is the second unique aspect of crisis discourse. "Defining the solution is fundamental to the construction of crisis."⁴⁰ There are two types of solutions that can be proposed to the 'problem' or 'threat' defined in the diagnostic crisis frame: the first is when "a solution is sought within the *pre-existing and largely unmodified structures of the state* regime, generally in the absence of a crisis narrative."⁴¹ This is to say, when this response is employed, the particular register of 'crisis' is downplayed. Instead, it is argued that the events are not rightly interpreted as crises, but rather as incidental failures that can be dealt with by using the current measures in place. The second type of solution that can be offered is one in which "the very institutional form of the system of reference ... is fundamentally transformed." A restructuring of the system is proposed as the necessary solution.⁴² It is only when this solution is offered, in addition to the diagnostic frame of a threat that I speak of crisis discourse. Crisis discourse is characterized by a call to take action that breaks with past approaches; action that entails structural change. As Hay argues, "during moments of crisis, indeed, during the very process of crisis identification, the state is discursively reconstituted as an object in need of decisive intervention and as the object of strategic restructuring."⁴³

The Socialist Party called very explicitly for structural change in response to the crisis and proposed a shift away from austerity and towards active investment and solidarity. The Socialist Party appealed to the people to take an active part in this moment in history and to decide what type of society they want to live in, thus doing the work of positing the state as in need of the 'decisive intervention' Hay speaks of.

The way out of this crisis will also not just be something that happens to us, that presents itself naturally ... This is not the time to sit on your hands. It is time to roll up your sleeves. To make the right choices for the future. So that the derailed financial system gets back on track and the long-term interests of the Netherlands prevail over the short-term profit hunting or short-sighted austerity. A recession must be fought with cuts based on solidarity, smart investments and reforms. Not just with cold austerity such as the cabinet is doing.⁴⁴

These elections will determine whether our society becomes even harder and the division even bigger, or that we now make another choice and start building a more social, more humane and more sustainable Netherlands.⁴⁵

Future generations will look at us critically. And ask why this crisis wasn't used to make the transition to a more sustainable future. Clean energy, dealing with pollution and protecting the environment. They will ask themselves why only a few years after the crisis in the financial sector it is back to business as usual and a new crisis has not been prevented. Future generations will wonder why the causes of the crisis have not been dealt with.⁴⁶

The Freedom Party also proposed certain solutions to the threats their crisis discourse constructs. Their solutions were less concrete, but no less clear. In the words of the Freedom Party, on the issue of the threat posed by the EU and Islam in the context of economic crisis:

Our battle is a just one and we are standing on the shoulders of those who went before us. And we must do the same as our ancestors: Parliament must issue a serious warning to the most powerful institute of Europe, in this case the multicultural superstate with its capital in Brussels – the empire that wants to impose more Islam on us and take away every memory of an independent and recognizable Netherlands. Again: a people that is led by the wrong leaders has to be able to say goodbye to the ruling ideology.⁴⁷

We are the only ones who are saying to the unelected eurocrats: your end is our beginning. Your dream is our nightmare. Your loss is our gain. We are the only ones saying: it has to end somewhere. Now it is time to be the boss in our own country. Our flag is red-white-blue.⁴⁸

This call for change, if accepted by sufficiently powerful and numerous groups, can indeed lead to structural change. In this way, the use of crisis discourse implies a “moment in which the unity of the state is discursively renegotiated and, potentially, re-achieved and in which a new strategic trajectory is imposed upon the institutions that now (re-)comprise it.”⁴⁹

Above we have seen the characteristics of crisis discourse, particularly focusing on the discourse used in relation to the European sovereign debt crisis. The next two parts of this section focus on how crisis discourse acts as a tool of agonism. By attending to the ability of crisis discourse to create us/them distinctions and call for and justify change, these next parts explore how crisis discourse reflects the agonistic characteristics in political interaction.

(Re)Constituting ‘the people’

Despite great variety within theories of agonism,⁵⁰ agonists share the assumption that politics is not a matter of rational deliberation between equally powerful parties, but rather that the key characteristic of the political is the distinction between a ‘we’ and a ‘they’, an inside and an outside to the political community. How this distinction is given shape is not fixed or natural, but is rather the object of political activity and contestation. In this contest between defining and shifting the boundaries of insiders and outsiders, a conception of the ‘people’ – and what this ‘people’ want – is at stake and this struggle is the “political act par

excellence”⁵¹ This emphasis on in- and exclusion in political activity is grounded on the ontological assumption that difference is “an axiological principle of our collective lives.”⁵² Agonists see it as ontologically impossible for any one regime or ideology to encompass and represent all the interests and identities of all people.⁵³ Every consensus, every constellation of political power, is “based on acts of exclusion” and reveals “the impossibility of a fully inclusive ‘rational’ consensus.”⁵⁴

Crisis discourse engages in this political act ‘par excellence’ of creating a people, by discursively creating an us/them division. Crisis discourse’s construction of a threat, discursively creates an ‘other’ who is framed as the cause of the threat and must be excluded from the ‘people’ – an inside – who is threatened and must be protected. By naming a threat broad enough to threaten more than one particular group, crisis discourse is able to bring various groups together into a coalition that sees itself sharing an overarching interest in dealing with this threat. It articulates a discourse that emphasizes common interests instead of differences between the groups that are formed into a ‘people’.⁵⁵ This discourse masks and depoliticizes differences between the different groups and individuals that comprise the ‘us’ while it (re)politicizes differences between the ‘us’ and the ‘them’.

This construction of the people goes beyond only reflecting or reinforcing a construction of a people that is already present in political discourse. As we see in the Freedom Party and Socialist Party’s use of crisis discourse, crisis discourse can also *reconstitute* the distinctions between the ‘us’ and the ‘them’, disrupting previously constituted coalitions. By articulating new logics of equivalence, crisis discourse peels away particular groups from former coalitions. Here, groups are destabilized as crisis discourse (re)politicizes the differences *within* the group. For example, the Socialist Party’s use of crisis discourse attempts to (re)constitute the ‘people’ around class lines, positioning “shareholders and consumers” against “citizens, employees and our society as a whole.”⁵⁶ The Socialist Party referred to the interest the ‘people’ have in not enduring the deep austerity cuts and argues that these cuts should instead be borne by the ‘most rich’ so as to discursively link the many diverse groups outside the ‘most rich’ together in a ‘people’. All who are not the ‘most rich’ are discursively linked together in a common project.⁵⁷ The Socialist Party called this people into being, while it acted on its behalf. The Freedom Party also called a ‘people’ into being, and did so by referring to the threat ‘Islamification’ posed to traditional Dutch identity (to be found in the welfare state, neighborhoods and schools) and by placing Dutch financial interests against those of the larger European Union. The people the Freedom Party created is one that is nationalistically, but also ethnically, defined. Only those within the borders of the Netherlands – and only those who did not get there as the result of immigration from Muslim countries – are counted as belonging to the people. Again, here too, the Freedom Party linked together the many diverse groups that can be found within the ethnically Dutch in opposition to the ‘threat’ posed by Islamification,⁵⁸ the ‘European superstate’⁵⁹ and ‘Greek swindlers.’⁶⁰

Changing the rules of the democratic game

Agonists emphasize that political conflict between groups includes conflict over basic ideas about what is “reasonable or unreasonable, legitimate or illegitimate political action and speech.”⁶¹ From this perspective, agonists argue that the possibility to contest the very

procedures and agreements of democracy is vital; these procedures and agreements must always be open to change. Politics “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.”⁶² And this room for conflict and contestation must be preserved and, as Chantal Mouffe explains:

“... the specificity of modern democracy lies in the recognition and the legitimation of conflict and the refusal to suppress it though the imposition of an authoritarian order. A well-functioning democracy calls for a confrontation between democratic political positions, and this requires a real debate about possible alternatives.”⁶³

Here, again, we see crisis discourse having a role to play. As we saw in the Freedom Party and Socialist Party’s use of crisis discourse, this particular discourse allows the speaker to call for change to the structure of the current system. The Socialist Party called for major, structural change to the economic system and argued that the cause of the crisis can only be solved if the foundational principles of the capitalist economy are overhauled.⁶⁴ The Freedom Party’s solution to the threat posed by Islamification and ‘Europe’ is found in defending the Netherlands against this influence. It implies rejecting the ‘ruling ideology’, the multiculturalism that the Netherlands – and Europe – has built its democracy on since World War II, and means far-reaching change to the Dutch state’s current legal and political links to the European Union, as well as to guarantees and protections of rights of immigrants.

In practice, this rhetoric crystalized into the Socialist Party supporting a thorough reform of the financial sector, setting caps on incomes for managers in the public and semipublic sector, limiting the power of shareholders and criminalizing financial mismanagement. The Socialist Party proposed a new top tax rate of 65% and a new way of taxing wealth so as to combat unequal distribution of wealth in the Netherlands.⁶⁵ The Socialist Party was in favor of “clipping the wings” of private equity funds that take over companies and “suck them dry as locusts do.”⁶⁶ The Socialist Party has moreover argued in favor of the retroactive application of legislation banning bonuses for managers at financial institutions that received state support after the crisis.⁶⁷ In practice, this meant arguing in favor of 100% taxation rate on any bonuses given to such managers, even if the bonuses were given before the proposed law passed. The Freedom Party used the ‘crisis’ to justify its calls for banning immigration from “Islamic countries.”⁶⁸ Moreover, the Freedom Party proposed stripping convicted criminals who have double nationalities of their Dutch citizenship, deporting non-Dutch citizens who commit a crime⁶⁹ and criminalizing being in the Netherlands without a valid permit.⁷⁰ The Freedom Party argued in favor of stripping non-Dutch citizens of their voting rights in local elections and stripping Dutch citizens with a second nationality of the ability to be a member of the government, parliament and local political organs.⁷¹

These calls for change are buttressed by reference to the supposed existential threat the crisis discourse is based on. The claim is that the threat occurred because the current structures failed to prevent it and this threat now must be dealt with by changing the structure that allowed this threat to materialize. These calls for change concern the very rules of the ‘democratic game’; including changes to fundamental political and legal procedures (for example stripping people of voting rights and retroactive application of the law) and fundamental rights (stripping people of citizenship). In this way, the crisis discourse fits

within an agonistic view on what political conflict is about: conflict over the very ideas upon which a current political system is based. Moreover, as shown above, crisis discourse can create extremely exclusive conceptions of the people, conceptions based on race, religion and class. These concrete examples of exclusion and calls for change raise concerns about whether agonism can see *all* calls for change as legitimate political action? Do proposed changes ever go too far for agonists or does the importance of contestation and conflict mean that no type of change can be off limits?

The ability of crisis discourse to create, solidify and break the us/them distinction and the ability of crisis discourse to justify structural change reveals its deeply political potentials. The use of crisis discourse in this way, to participate in the struggle over meaning, gives us an example of agonism at work in current politics. Yet, this analysis also made concrete just how far the othering and calls for change can go within crisis discourse. This section showed how the Socialist Party and the Freedom Party used crisis discourse to discursively exclude the other and to justify fundamental political and legal change, including the retroactive application of laws, labeling all the inhabitants of a particular countries determined “Islamic” unwelcome in the Netherlands and stripping certain Dutch citizens of their nationality. The following section explores the question whether agonists must accept all such exclusions and calls for change or whether agonists must admit limits to the conflict and contestation they so value. I will start by exploring the answer Mouffe gives to this question, and proceed to argue that this answer is insufficient as it relies too much on the very consensus-oriented politics agonism aims to critique and fails to take seriously the risks posed by crisis discourse. Instead, I propose a theory of the limits of legitimate political activity that draws on tenets inherent in the values agonism itself professes. I develop the idea of a ‘continuum of risky illocutions’ that helps us better conceptualize agonism’s boundaries of the acceptable.

3 Speaking Crisis

Crisis discourse can be a powerful tool for shifting the boundaries of the ‘people’ and for calling for foundational change. But it also has the potential to activate a type of conflict in which no limits are placed on the destruction of the other.⁷² Moreover, crisis discourse can construct an argument for change that impacts the very foundations of political, social or legal orders. This type of change often entails an increased willingness to deviate from political and legal procedures, as well as from the protection of fundamental rights. This willingness is supported by the logic of necessity crisis discourse invokes: the link discursively made between the threat and the seemingly necessary solution. As we have seen in the examples of crisis discourse discussed above, this type of speech can pit the ‘average’ person against the most rich,⁷³ compare private equity funds to locusts,⁷⁴ evoke imageries of past wars,⁷⁵ and claim that Dutch citizens are being robbed of their freedom,⁷⁶ as the EU “impose[s] more Islam on us.”⁷⁷ The past section showed how this discourse can intensify the exclusion of an ‘other’ and justify departures from the rule of law and human rights violations against this other. Yet, from the perspective agonists take on politics, attempts to change the political system are not exceptional or extraordinary but rather part and parcel of the political. Moreover, conflict between groups is seen as an inevitable part of the struggle that characterizes the political, and is an aspect that must not be suppressed. However, agonists

also acknowledge the possibility that the us/them distinction can become too hardened, at which point the contest can no longer be characterized as agonistic, but rather as antagonistic. At that point, contestation is no longer productive but becomes destructive, and should be considered unacceptable.

This section will explore how the line between agonistic and antagonistic conflict should be drawn. It starts with Chantal Mouffe's conception of this boundary and her insistence on the necessity of such limits between acceptable agonistic political behavior and unacceptable antagonistic relations.⁷⁸ The first part of this section will critically reflect on the utility of Mouffe's suggestion that the realm of antagonistic relations is entered once participants of a political conflict reject a shared symbolic space characterized by acceptance of the values of equality and liberty and argues that Mouffe's approach fails to take sufficiently seriously the risks of agonistic speech. I will show that Mouffe's proposal is internally inconsistent and, in its current form, not able to perform the important function of distinguishing between agonistic and antagonistic forms of political action.

In the second part of this section, I propose an account of the limits of agonism that uses Honig's insistence that every consensus produces remainders to radicalize Mouffe's view of a shared symbolic space. I argue in favor of conceptualizing this space differently from Mouffe. Instead of seeing this space as being characterized by shared values that may not be departed from, it is belonging within this space that is seen as the very object of contestation. Who is inside and who is outside this space of the political community is what is at stake in agonistic politics and, as such, in order for politics to *remain* agonistic, this conflict must always remain possible. In other words, agonistic politics requires two things: first, the boundary between the inside and the outside of this shared space is drawn and, second, that this boundary always only be drawn as a temporary and thus permeable boundary. Unlike Mouffe, I show that where the boundary is drawn between the inside and the outside cannot be evaluated based on the insistence of shared liberal democratic values, but rather only based on whether the second criteria – the temporary and permeable nature of the boundary – is respected. I proceed to analyze the crisis discourse used by the Socialist Party and the Freedom Party with this distinction between agonism and antagonism. To do so, I develop the notion of a continuum of risky illocution in order to position these uses of crisis discourse based on whether they move towards or away from antagonistic relations. This has the function of emphasizing that even agonistic speech, speech that does not directly call for the eradication of the other, carries with it the risk of antagonism.

Finding the frontier between agonism and antagonism

In this section, I examine Mouffe's approach to the risks attendant in agonism and attempt to remedy her reliance on a shared liberal-democratic political space, a reliance that fails to take seriously the necessity of deep conflict over political values and the risks inherent therein.⁷⁹ I argue that there can be limits to the acceptable use of crisis discourse that are based on agonistic values themselves. In doing so, my aim is not to reject Mouffe's view of agonism but rather to show how her own agonistic convictions can sustain a theory of responsible use of crisis discourse, without either relying on consensual liberal democratic ideals of a common core of shared substantive values or accepting any and all type of struggle.

Mouffe is clear that adhering to agonism does not imply accepting all demands as legitimate.⁸⁰ She distinguishes between those demands which can be accepted as a legitimate part of the agonistic debate and those which should be excluded, not because they are morally unacceptable but because “they challenge the institutions constitutive of the democratic political association.”⁸¹ While Mouffe also acknowledges that contestation of the nature of these institutions is, at the same time, the very thing that agonism sees as core to political debate, she argues that this contestation can only take place if the actors engaged in such contestation share a symbolic space, characterized by the ethico-political values of liberty and equality.⁸² In her view, the conflict and contestation valued in agonism is a conflict and contestation that must occur within the bounds of agreement on these values, even while the *meaning* of these values is disputed. In her words, “a line should ... be drawn between those who reject those values outright and those who, while accepting them, fight for conflicting interpretations.”⁸³ Accordingly, once the political debate moves outside of this shared symbolic space, adversaries turn into enemies and agonism into antagonism. Those who reject these values “cannot form part of the agonistic space” and thus can only be dealt with as the ‘enemy’ relevant for antagonistic relations.⁸⁴ At this moment, politics is no longer possible and instead human interaction is characterized by violence and domination.

Mouffe thus attempts to draw a clear line between agonistic politics and antagonism by pointing to the importance of accepting the values of equality and liberty. According to Mouffe, agonism is characterized by conflicts over the meaning of these values, while antagonism occurs when these values are themselves rejected.⁸⁵ There are two problems with this approach. Firstly, it brings Mouffe very close to the consensual deliberative democracy she critiques and, secondly, it fails to acknowledge that the very questions of who have liberty and how much and who are equal are at the core of the political. I will explain each critique in turn.

Mouffe’s emphasis on the need for a shared symbolic space characterized by the acceptance of the values of equality and liberty seems to contradict the importance she places on deep conflict, conflict that supposedly includes the foundational values of a political community. Mouffe’s need for a shared consensus characterized by particular values whose acceptance (but not meaning) are beyond the pale of political contestation within which citizens can engage in agonistic politics mirrors the consensus-focused forms of democracy she aims to critique.⁸⁶ Mouffe’s solution is particularly problematic because it implies that political opponents who explicitly reject and attempt to bring change to the shared symbolic space are risking devolution into antagonism. Yet, this very change is what agonism says politics is about. If Mouffe’s perspective on agonism requires the rejection of political projects that call for changes to accepted political ideals and institutions, little room is left for any attempts to change the ‘rules to the game’, attempts that agonists profess to accept – and promote – as part of a healthy political encounter. Mouffe’s conception of the limits of the acceptable appears preclude that very political struggle from taking place, resulting in the end in a “politics of minor stakes”⁸⁷ in which contestation is only accepted if it does not strike too deeply at the heart of the existing hegemonic constellation.

Mouffe explicitly acknowledges that her approach to the frontiers of the acceptable are informed by the liberal democratic principles that are constitutive of “our form of life”.⁸⁸ Mouffe’s frontier is in essence not one between agonism and antagonism, but between the liberal democratic principles that currently inspire the ethico-political nature of contemporary western political institutions on the one hand and threats to liberal democracy on the other. From this perspective, we can say that Mouffe is attempting to broaden the register of acceptable political discussion *within* political liberalism, arguing contra many deliberative democrats that the definition of reasonable pluralism cannot be determined based on rationality or morality, but is rather always an object of political contestation.⁸⁹ In the end, Mouffe’s approach is far less a determination of the difference between legitimate and illegitimate political demands and action in general and far more a determination between legitimate and illegitimate *liberal democratic* political demands and action. By taking the values of liberty and equality as an unassailable starting point she positions the ‘acceptable’ only within the realm of liberal democratic political possibilities. This approach may certainly be a valuable addition to liberal democracy, but fails to provide much guidance on where the line can be drawn between agonistic politics in general (without any particular allegiance to liberal democracy) and the antagonism agonists try to keep at bay.

Moreover, I argue that Mouffe’s distinction reveals a failure to account for the fact that debates over the very appropriateness of liberty and equality in particular circumstances are at the core of the political choices we make. This failure makes her distinction both under- and over-inclusive, and thus lacking in utility. Let me explain this claim: On the one hand, this distinction lacks the ability to recognize the threat to agonism posed by political actors who pay lip service to the values of liberty and equality, all the while using these professed values to justify the destruction of the other. Surely a person calling for the death of all monarchs based on the reasoning that all people are equal and the very existence of monarchy threatens that equality would not still fall within the acceptable limits of agonism, despite the fact that the person advocated for such a measure on the basis of equality. In this way, Mouffe’s focus on adhering to the values of liberty and equality fails to accurately classify those who engage in antagonistic behavior as antagonistic, thus being an under-inclusive test. On the other hand, this distinction is over-inclusive, because if lip service is not enough to prove one’s adherence to these values, then the whole matter becomes a question of which engagements fit within the *acceptable range* of a debate over the meaning of these values and which fall outside the acceptable range.⁹⁰ And if *this* is actually the question, and not whether one uses the terms equality and liberty with which to frame one’s demands, then it does not automatically matter whether one rejects the use of these terms. It is possible that political speech rejects equality or liberty on some register, while not necessarily being antagonistic. One can, for example, very well argue that inequality is appropriate in a certain circumstance and still be found adhering to the broader value of equality overall. For example, one can argue that someone who is convicted of murder should be deprived of liberty and lose some equality viz-a-viz someone who has not been convicted of murder, and still conceivably not be considered as ushering in antagonistic relations from Mouffe’s perspective. Moreover, the whole agonistic political endeavor of constituting a people, a ‘we’ over and against a ‘them’, implies *some* inequality on *some* register. Thus to say that agonistic political behavior must accept these values of liberty and equality seems to strip agonism of much of the analytical value that Mouffe believes it has.

These two flaws in Mouffe's approach ultimately lead her to underemphasize the real challenge inherent in agonism itself: the very present risk that the (politically necessary) creation of the 'other' – and thus of some measure of inequality – leads to the idea that the other must be destroyed. While Mouffe certainly acknowledges this risk, her subsequent focus on the need for 'common values' distracts from its primacy. As the next part will show, this is when relationships become antagonistic and is the point at which conflict no longer promotes the political, but destroys it.

A continuum of risky illocutions

What are the actual boundaries between agonistic politics and antagonistic violence? I argue that the answer to this question is implicit in Mouffe's view of agonism, but requires a radicalization of the concept of Mouffe's shared symbolic space to empty it of the adherence to any particular set of political values. Here it is worthwhile to examine what Mouffe sees as the function for this shared symbolic space – how exactly, in Mouffe's understanding, a shared symbolic space prevents antagonism. Mouffe sees the shared ethico-political values as a 'common bond' that ensures political actors do "not treat their opponents as enemies to be eradicated."⁹¹ While engaged in conflict with each other, this common bond leads political actors to "see themselves as belonging to the same political association"⁹² and to recognize that all conflict must take place within this shared space. What Mouffe is getting at is that the us/them divisions and exclusions that agonistic politics acknowledges as a legitimate part of politics, must not lead to the other being expelled from this shared space or, in her words, being 'eradicated'. The reason for Mouffe's insistence on this particular *inclusion* is not despite her acknowledgement that *exclusion* cannot be overcome⁹³ but rather *because of* agonism's ontological starting point that exclusion is the inevitable result of any conception of the 'people' and of any hegemonic ordering based thereon. It is this inherent exclusion that requires a normative appreciation for pluralism.

These insights are, however, underemphasized in Mouffe's thoughts on boundaries. Other agonistic thinkers place more importance on preserving pluralism. Bonnie Honig makes this clear in her thoughts on the inevitable remainder of politics. Honig calls attention to the fact that no one conception of 'the people' can ever fully incorporate all individuals and groups. There will always be remainders that can never completely be included in the hegemonic 'we'. It is this impossibility of completeness that leads to the normative stance that agonistic conflict must preserve possibilities for those left out of the hegemonic order to contest their exclusion and demand a new constellation of 'the people', one that will be more inclusive of this excluded group (but, inevitably, will exclude some other identities).⁹⁴ No regime or ideology should ever try to subdue or eliminate the contestation of who belongs and who does not, since to do so would silence those whose interests and identities inevitably cannot be successfully incorporated into that regime. In other words, those excluded from 'the people', must not be so finally excluded that they have no way of challenging their position. The distinction between the 'we' and the 'they' must always remain open to future contestation and any attempt to impose a fully unified and conflict-free society can only end in totalitarianism.⁹⁵ Contra to Mouffe's interpretation of Honig's work on this issue,⁹⁶ Honig is not arguing that agonism requires a cessation of othering or the end of hegemony, but that

othering and hegemony must never be final. It is not that Honig thinks that exclusion of hegemonic closure can be avoided, but simply that this closure must not be total. It must be acknowledged that 'the people' is never fully constituted, that certain individuals and groups fall outside the 'people' and that 'the people' must always be open to contestation re-constitution by shifts in the us/them distinction. In this way, Honig's attention to the remainder of politics provides an important perspective when thinking about the limits of agonism.

This attention to preserving the possibility of contesting political belonging allows us to radicalize Mouffe's idea of a shared symbolic space. The boundary between agonism and antagonism is not about those who reject any particular shared values, but deals with the question who can participate in the contest about who belongs in the political community, in the shared symbolic space – whatever its contents might be. The line between agonism and antagonism is a division between, on the one hand, exclusion in a way that allows for contestation of that exclusion versus, on the other, exclusion without any possibility to challenge the exclusion. In other words, for the contest to remain open, the excluded individual or group must not be posited as never being able to enjoy the rights, liberty and equality of those within the political community, and the excluded individual or group must not be stripped of all ability to continue to struggle for those rights, liberty and equality. The point is not so much that all legitimate participants in the agonistic debate must frame their arguments in terms of liberty or equality or even that they must accept these values as the aim of political life, but rather that no legitimate participant can put forth demands that would entail stripping the other of the *potentiality* of enjoying whatever rights are granted to the political community constructed by that participant. To state Mouffe's ideas with a slightly different emphasis, the othering must not lead to the other being seen as an enemy to be permanently excluded from the shared symbolic space, while at the same time acknowledging that othering always attempts to *temporarily* exclude the other from that space. This conclusion, that there must always be space open for contestation of the boundaries of the shared space and who belongs inside and out – *by* those who are considered the other – necessitates that defeat must only ever be political – and not defeat of the other's very existence. Agonism accepts that an individual or group can be *temporarily*, discursively, placed outside of the political community but this othering must never be so complete that the individual or group has no way of reentering the political community. The possibility must remain open for the 'people' to be *reconstituted* in such a way that the other becomes one of the 'us'. The realm of antagonism, on the contrary, is characterized by the discursive creation of an other who could never re-enter the political community, an other who has no ability to contest his othering.

In practice, this means that the realm of antagonistic relations are entered as soon as an other is discursively constructed who must be eradicated or expelled from the space of the political – with no possibility to discursively challenge this expulsion. What does this mean for the types of exclusion that politics can legitimately create and those it cannot? We must be clear that such a view does not preclude politics from striving to permanently eliminate certain *behaviors* from the political community (think for example of murder, rape or pedophilia). The concern is, thus, not so much that such activity is othered – even if permanently. What is vital, though, is that in aiming to eliminate certain behaviors, the individuals who commit

those behaviors are not constructed as someone or something to be permanently excluded from the political community. Thus, whereas attempts to permanently exclude behavior can be accepted as part of normal politics, this can never be the case for exclusion of the people 'behind' the behavior.

There are some similarities between my emphasis on agonism as precluding a permanent defeat of the other and Breen's attitude of care towards the enemy. Breen explains that the enemy will be seen as one to be defeated but that this defeat may only be in "respect to that which he represents a serious threat, not in terms of the totality of his person."⁹⁷ Yet, my approach differs in two important ways from that of Breen. First, I reject Breen's assumption that by only focusing on the threat posed by the other, and not the totality of the person, antagonism can be avoided. In fact, all too often antagonism is triggered by the conviction (however errant) that it is the very person of the other himself who poses the threat. It is the (however mistaken) belief that the other cannot be separated from the threat that often ushers in the perceived necessity of eradicating the other, as a person. Thus, instead, I argue that the emphasis must simply be placed on the distinction between behavior and the person as such, while intentionally precluding the possibility that the other as person is ever excluded, no matter how serious the threat the other is perceived as posing. From this it follows that exclusion cannot be based on characteristics that are perceived as unchangeable. If it is a characteristic such as for example race, sex or sexuality that is perceived as posing the threat, and society perceives these characteristics as an unchangeable, inherent part of the person who has them, the individuals targeted could not be separated from those characteristics and thus would be permanently excluded.

Moreover, it is important to note that Breen characterizes *antagonism* as the realm of othering as such, whereas I stress that othering takes place within the limits of acceptable agonistic behavior as well. In my view the boundary then is between agonism on the one hand and antagonism on the other, where agonism is the realm of passionate struggle to defeat the other *politically* and antagonism is the – unacceptable – realm of passionate struggle to defeat the other in their very existence.

This boundary between agonism and antagonism does not mean that political activity that falls on the agonism side of the line is necessarily 'safe'. There is no risk-free way of doing politics; the instability of politics is irreducible and the possibility of antagonism cannot be eliminated without eliminating the possibility of politics itself.⁹⁸ It is, however, possible to identify political activity that moves toward the boundary between agonism and antagonism versus other types of activity that move farther away from that frontier. In this way, within agonistic politics – within the limits of the political – one can position behavior on a continuum between anti-political antagonism (relations that make politics impossible because they end the possibility of contestation) on the one hand and apolitical pluralism (relationships characterized by individual freedom, without any representation of interests as relating to the common good and thus also without any politics) on the other. The area between antagonism and complete pluralism is where politics is possible, is where the *agon* is found. As one approaches the boundary between agonism and antagonism, the risk of antagonism becomes greater and as one moves away from that boundary, the risk of antagonism lessens.

This is not to say that the position farthest from the antagonistic boundary – complete pluralism – is the most desirable position on the continuum. Adherence to an agonistic view of politics does not reject the idea that decisions must be made and that ground must be found (temporarily) for shared political identity. Nor does it mean that closure over meaning should be avoided. And for these decisions and shared political identity, some form of othering is necessary, and thus a move toward antagonism. The necessity of keeping space open for contestation should not be interpreted as a prohibition on political actors aiming to have their claims hegemonically entrenched. The aim of agonism is not to escape hegemony; power and hegemony cannot be escaped and there is no “beyond hegemony.”⁹⁹ Neither does agonism require or presuppose politico-socio-legal fields without the constraints of power on the people living within those fields. What matters is that those being constrained have the possibility to contest and actually change these constraints. The foundation of decisions and the basis of stable ground are not the neutral outcome of a rational deliberation process, but are rather the result of the exertion of power – not in the form of explicit violence, but in the form of hegemonic power. And since these foundations will never represent all people, interests and identities, they must be open to contestation and change, even while functioning as the (temporary) hegemony that politics results in.

Let us now explore what this insight on the boundary between agonism and antagonism means in practice by turning our attention to the most proximate tool of politics – language. As shown above in relation to crisis discourse, it is speaking crisis that not only illustrates, but calls into being, the risk of permanently excluding the other. By focusing on the illocutionary force of crisis discourse, we can evaluate the position a particular use of crisis discourse inhabits on the continuum of risk. Thus, if we go back to the use of crisis discourse by the Socialist Party and the Freedom Party, we can attempt to place the parties on this spectrum. We see that the two parties engaged in different types of othering. On the one hand, the Socialist Party discursively constructed the ‘other’ based on changeable characteristics and behavior, as a group engaged in a particular activity or having a particular amount of wealth (bankers and the very rich). While ‘bankers’ and the ‘very rich’ are more than just behaviors, they are not characteristics that are perceived as an unchangeable part of their holders’ identities. This is reflected in the measures proposed by the Socialist Party, which relate to changing particular activities the rich engage in to promote their wealth (for example the Socialist Party’s plan to deter bonuses by taxing bonuses retroactively). These proposed changes do not target specific, unchangeable identities and do not have the effect of permanently excluding those they target from the ‘people’.

The Freedom Party, on the other hand, defined the other with reference to the indelible identity of ethnicity. The Freedom Party aimed to exclude the Muslim ‘other’ permanently from the political body of the ‘people’, for example by banning all immigration from Muslim countries. Other measures proposed by the Freedom Party, although formulated neutrally and thus not targeting Muslims specifically, still had the effect of permanently excluding those they affect from the political community, for example by excluding those who have double nationality from representative government functions or by stripping Dutch citizens with double nationality of their Dutch citizenship if they commit a crime. This difference in how the two parties spoke crisis, puts the Socialist at a different position on the continuum of risk

than it does the Freedom Party. While the Socialist Party certainly engaged in othering (even going so far as to speak of bankers as insects) and calls for fundamental change, their discourse stayed more removed from constructing the other as something to be *permanently* excluded from the realm of political contestation than that used by the Freedom Party. The Socialist Party constructed the other based not on characteristics perceived as unchangeable but on behavior and it proposed changes that did not exclude this other from the political community. The Freedom Party's use of crisis discourse, however, crossed the border into the antagonistic. First, the Freedom Party framed the 'other' based on the unchangeable characteristic of ethnicity. Next, the Freedom Party used its crisis discourse to call for changes that would permanently exclude this other from the Dutch community, such as the party's demand to stop immigration from "Islamic countries." This combination of constructing an other based on the very identity of the other instead of his behavior, along with calls for change that exclude the ability of the other to gain admittance to the political community, crossed the line from agonistic to antagonistic speech.

4 Conclusion

This article sheds light on agonism – and its limits – by viewing crisis discourse as an agonistic political practice. By viewing the speech act of crisis discourse through the lens of agonism, I interpret crisis discourse's ability to create us/them divisions and call for change as part and parcel of the agonistic political struggle. As the discourse used by the Socialist Party and the Freedom Party shows, crisis discourse was employed during the European Sovereign Debt Crisis to (re)create the 'people', albeit in very different ways by the two parties, and to call for change in economic and social structures. The Freedom Party's calls in particular highlighted a certain uneasiness in agonism itself. The Freedom Party's constitution of the people by distinguishing between a native Dutch, non-Muslim populous on the one hand and the EU and Muslims on the other, and the Freedom Party's claims that the discursively created other threatened the very identity of the people raised the question where agonists would place limits on speaking crisis. Certainly, agonism always presupposes a type of othering and sees deep change to the political community as a legitimate aim of political activity, yet at the same time Mouffe in particular stresses that conflict cannot be without any bounds. Mouffe's insistence that *antagonism* must be avoided in political struggle gives us a place to start inquiring into these potential limits, although Mouffe herself fails to expand upon these limits from an agonistic perspective. I argue instead that the issue of limits can be adequately addressed by reference to the aim of agonism itself: to preserve struggle over political processes and norms. What distinguishes agonism from antagonism is thus not a *lack* of othering or exclusion but rather the way in which this other is constructed. Contra Mouffe, I do not see a role for values of liberty or equality here. Rather, I emphasize the importance of ensuring the *temporary* and *reversible* nature of exclusion. Agonism requires that the other, even though certainly excluded from the people in one particular political moment, retains the ability to contest and reconstitute the 'people', in the next political moment. The constant possibility of struggle must be preserved in order for othering to remain agonistic and to avoid the dangers of antagonism.

Based on these insights into the limits of agonism, I propose viewing political activity – and particularly the use of crisis discourse – as occupying particular places on a continuum of risky illocutions. On the one end of this continuum is antagonism and on the other complete pluralism. The space in between is where politics takes place; where agonism can be found. This continuum gives us the tools to evaluate political speech from an agonistic perspective and to acknowledge and manage the risk inherent in political behavior. At the same time, this continuum identifies a clear outer limit of acceptable political speech: once the elimination of the other – qua human – is called for or the boundaries of the people are created based on unchangeable characteristics, the agonistic morphs into the antagonistic. From this perspective, the Freedom Party's use of crisis discourse to construct an other based on (perceived) unchangeable characteristics and to argue for the permanent removal of the other from the Dutch political community rapidly approached the antagonistic end of this continuum. On the other hand, while the Socialist Party also engaged in a harsh rhetorical campaign of crisis, it did so without constructing the other based on inherent characteristics and instead focused on changeable behaviors. In this way, the Socialist Party used a crisis discourse that remained more securely in the space of the political.

This study's view of crisis discourse as an agonistic speech practice provides a tool to evaluate the use of crisis discourse in current political discourse. It proposes a measure for critique of crisis discourse decoupled from whether the discourse justifies for deep, radical change to the status quo of legal or political structures, and from whether the discourse creates an other. Indeed – true political discourse will always create an other and it is the very struggle over the foundations of the political community that characterizes true political interaction. Moreover, in a western political landscape increasingly (once again) characterized by anti-establishment politics that presume and construct a threatening other, often based on views of the social that are not based on scientific facts, this agonistic view calls attention to the fact that crisis discourse is constructive, not constative; it is a speech act that aims to create the reality it claims already exists. Thus, instead of 'fact-checking' or accusations of irrationality, this article calls for evaluative criteria of crisis discourse based on whether the reality it aims to create is one in which the other is permanently excluded from the political community. What is important in this view, is not shared values or even a shared political space. Rather, what matters is that the political space of the 'people' – however contested membership therein might be – remains a place that the other can re-enter. The contestation itself must remain possible, and permanent exclusion from the political space is unacceptable.

Endnotes

¹ For a good overview of the chronology and legal implications of these early months of the Eurozone debt crisis, see Claire Kilpatrick, “Are the Bailouts Immune to EU Social Challenge Because They Are Not EU Law?,” *European Constitutional Law Review* 10 (2014): 393-421 and Claire Kilpatrick, “On the Rule of Law and Economic Emergency: The Degradation of Basic Legal Values in Europe’s Bailouts,” *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 35 (2015): 325-353.

² See for example Virginia Mayo, “Eurozone Seeks to Stop Debt Crisis Domino Effect,” *CBS News*, 11 July 2011, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/eurozone-seeks-to-stop-debt-crisis-domino-effect/>; Giles Tremlett, “Fears Portugal May Be Next to Fall in Debt Crisis,” *The Guardian*, 28 April 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2010/apr/28/portugal-debt-fears-mount>; and Elena Moya, “Spain Seeks to Calm Fears it is ‘Next Greece’ as European Markets Plunge,” *The Guardian*, 5 February 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2010/feb/05/spain-bid-calm-turmoil>.

³ Ed Wingenbach, *Institutionalizing Agonistic Democracy: Post-Foundationalism and Political Liberalism* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 6.

⁴ Andrew Schaap, “Introduction,” in *Law and Agonistic Politics*, ed. Andrew Schaap (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 1.

⁵ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), 96-98.

⁶ Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2005), 21.

⁷ See for example Schaap, “Introduction,” Wingenbach, *Institutionalizing Agonistic Democracy* and Robert W. Glover, “Games without Frontiers? Democratic Engagement, Agonistic Pluralism and the Question of Exclusion,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 38 (2012).

⁸ William E. Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁹ Wingenbach, *Institutionalizing Agonistic Democracy*.

¹⁰ Mouffe, *On the Political*, 121.

¹¹ Laura M. Henderson, “Crisis Discourse: A Catalyst for Legal Change?,” *Queen Mary Law Journal* 5 (2014).

¹² Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 84.

¹³ The operative word here is ‘successful’, as speech acts are not always felicitous. Speech acts – and thus also crisis discourse – can go wrong in two senses. First, a speech act can fail because it is composed in a way that is not in adherence with the societal, legal or political expectations for that particular speech act. If an event is not framed as a threat, or if a threat is not framed as necessitating structural change, the speech act cannot be considered crisis discourse, because it has not adhered to the typical structure of this type of speech. Second, even if speaking crisis as a speech act occurs (because it adheres to the expectations of the particular type of speech and, in doing so, by the very act of saying something calls something into being) it can fail to cause the reaction it aims to create. Thus, an event might be framed as a threat that necessitates structural change (thus meeting the requirement for a felicitous illocutionary act) but consequently fails to actually *cause* that structural change. This second type of failure is a failure of persuasion, see J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, ‘*Society Must Be Defended*’: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. D. Macy (New York: Picador, 2003), 24.

¹⁵ Although I will use the term ‘European sovereign debt crisis’ for the remainder of this article as a short-hand for the complex set of events and reactions in the Eurozone countries starting in the first half 2008 with concerns about Greek ability to pay off state debt, it must be noted that this label in itself masks the contestation over the existence of a crisis and whether such a crisis has to do with sovereign or private debt (see Mark Blyth, *Austerity: The History of A Dangerous Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013 (2015)), 5-7).

¹⁶ Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, 3.

¹⁷ Friederike Schultz and Julia Raupp, “The Social Construction of Crisis in Government and Corporate Communications: An Inter-Organizational and Inter-Systemic Analysis,” *Public Relations Review* 36 (2010).

¹⁸ Friederike Schultz and Julia Raupp, “The Social Construction of Crisis” and Alon Lischinsky, “In Times of Crisis: A Corpus Approach to the Construction of the Global Financial Crisis in Annual Reports,” *Critical Discourse Studies* 8 (2011).

¹⁹ Lischinsky, “In Times of Crisis,” 154.

²⁰ Lischinsky, “In Times of Crisis,” 154.

²¹ Robert R. Ulmer, Timothy L. Sellnow and Matthew W. Seeger, *Effective Crisis Communication: Moving From Crisis to Opportunity* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2011), 211-222.

²² Colin Hay, “Crisis and the Structural Transformation of the State: Interrogating the Process of Change,” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 1(1999).

²³ See for example Jack Holland, “From September 11th, 2001 to 9-11: From Void to Crisis,” *International Political Sociology* 3 (2009); Jack Holland & Lee Jarvis, “‘Night Fell on a Different World’: Experiencing, Constructing and Remembering 9/11,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 7 (2014); and Arjen Boin, Paul ’t Hart, and Allan McConnell, “Crisis Exploitation: Political and Policy Impacts of Framing Contests,” *Journal of European Public Policy* 16 (2009).

- ²⁴ See, among others, Lischinsky, "In Times of Crisis;" Antoon De Rycker and Zuraidah Modh Don, ed., *Discourse and Crisis: Critical Perspectives*, (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2013); and Yiannis Mylonas, "Crisis, Austerity and Opposition in Mainstream Media Discourses of Greece," *Critical Discourse Studies* 11 (2014).
- ²⁵ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 4-6.
- ²⁶ My conception of discourse analysis is heavily influenced by Nelson Phillips and Cynthia Hardy, *Discourse Analysis: Investigating Processes of Social Construction*. Sage University Paper Series on Qualitative Research Methods, Vol. 50. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002).
- ²⁷ This was, at least, the case in the time period I study here.
- ²⁸ Lischinsky, "In Times of Crisis," 155.
- ²⁹ Holland & Jarvis, "'Night Fell on a Different World'," 17. This insight into discourse's ability to define problem and solution stems originally from Benford and Snow's frame analysis, which distinguishes diagnostic from prognostic frames, see Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000).
- ³⁰ Ruth Wodak and Jo Angouri, "From Grexit to Grecovery: Euro/crisis Discourses," *Discourse and Society* 25 (2014): 418.
- ³¹ Socialistisch Partij, "Samen de Crisis te Lijf" ("Fighting the Crisis Together"), 14 January 2012, <https://www.sp.nl/opinie/emile-roemer/2012/samen-crisis-te-lijf>.
- ³² Socialistisch Partij, "Samen de Crisis te Lijf."
- ³³ Socialistische Partij, "Nieuw Vertrouwen: Verkiezingsprogramma SP 2013-2017" ("New Faith: Election Programme Socialist Party 2013-2017"): 7, <https://www.sp.nl/sites/default/files/sp-verkiezingsprogramma-nieuw-vertrouwen.pdf>.
- ³⁴ Socialistische Partij, "Nieuw Vertrouwen," 5.
- ³⁵ Partij voor de Vrijheid, "De Agenda van Hoop en Optimisme. Een Tijd om te Kiezen: PVV 2010-2015" ("The Agenda of Hope and Optimism. A Time to Choose: Party for Freedom 2010-2015"): 21, https://www.parlement.com/9291000/d/2010_pvv_verkiezingsprogramma.pdf.
- ³⁶ Partij voor de Vrijheid, "De Agenda van Hoop en Optimisme," 5.
- ³⁷ Partij voor de Vrijheid, "*Hún* Brussel, *Óns* Nederland: Verkiezingsprogramma 2012-2017" ("*Their* Brussels, *Our* Netherlands: Election Programme 2012-2017"): 21, https://www.parlement.com/9291000/d/2010_pvv_verkiezingsprogramma.pdf.
- ³⁸ Partij voor de Vrijheid, "*Hún* Brussel, *Óns* Nederland," 11.
- ³⁹ Partij voor de Vrijheid, "*Hún* Brussel, *Óns* Nederland," 12.
- ⁴⁰ Holland, "From September 11th, 2001 to 9-11," 290.
- ⁴¹ Hay, "Crisis and the Structural Transformation of the State," 329.
- ⁴² Hay, "Crisis and the Structural Transformation of the State," 328.
- ⁴³ Hay, "Crisis and the Structural Transformation of the State," 331.
- ⁴⁴ Socialistisch Partij, "Samen de Crisis te Lijf."
- ⁴⁵ Socialistische Partij, "Nieuw Vertrouwen," 5.
- ⁴⁶ Socialistische Partij, "Roemer: 'Ons Belastingstelsel is een Kopstoot voor de Gewone Man'" ("Roemer: 'Our Tax System is a Punch in the Head to the Average Man'"), 17 September 2014, <https://www.sp.nl/nieuws/2014/09/roemer-ons-belastingstelsel-is-kopstoot-voor-gewone-man>.
- ⁴⁷ Partij voor de Vrijheid, "De Agenda van Hoop en Optimisme," 6.
- ⁴⁸ Partij voor de Vrijheid, "De Agenda van Hoop en Optimisme," 14.
- ⁴⁹ Hay, "Crisis and the Structural Transformation of the State," 331.
- ⁵⁰ Glover, "Games without Frontiers?," 89-91.
- ⁵¹ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 154-155. See further Bonnie Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 19.
- ⁵² Glover, "Games without Frontiers?," 88.
- ⁵³ Glover, "Games without Frontiers?," 88.
- ⁵⁴ Mouffe, *On the Political*, 11.
- ⁵⁵ Hay, "Crisis and the Structural Transformation of the State," 331-332.
- ⁵⁶ Socialistisch Partij, "Samen de Crisis te Lijf."
- ⁵⁷ Socialistische Partij, "Nieuw Vertrouwen," 5.
- ⁵⁸ Partij voor de Vrijheid, "De Agenda van Hoop en Optimisme," 5.
- ⁵⁹ Partij voor de Vrijheid, "*Hún* Brussel, *Óns* Nederland," 21.
- ⁶⁰ Partij voor de Vrijheid, "*Hún* Brussel, *Óns* Nederland," 11.
- ⁶¹ Andrew Schaap, "Political Theory and the Agony of Politics," *Political Studies Review* 5 (2007): 61.
- ⁶² James Tully, "The Agonic Freedom of Citizens," *Economy and Society* 28 (1999): 170.
- ⁶³ Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 113.
- ⁶⁴ Socialistische Partij, "Roemer: 'Ons Belastingstelsel'."
- ⁶⁵ Socialistische Partij, "Nieuw Vertrouwen," 65-67.
- ⁶⁶ Socialistische Partij, "Een Beter Nederland voor Minder Geld: Verkiezingsprogramma SP 2011-2015" ("A Better Netherlands for Less Money: Election Programme Socialist Party 2011-2015"): 8, https://www.parlement.com/9291000/d/2010_sp_verkiezingsprogramma.pdf.

- ⁶⁷ Socialistische Partij, “Kamer Steunt SP: Totaalverbod op Bonussen bij Gesteunde Banken” (“Parliament Supports Socialist Party: Total Prohibition on Bonuses by Banks that Received State Support”), 11 October 2011, <https://www.sp.nl/nieuws/2011/10/kamer-steunt-sp-totaalverbod-op-bonussen-bij-gesteunde-banken>. Interestingly, the Socialist Party was not the only party in favor of the retroactive application of such legislation. The Freedom Party, along with the Green Left (*GroenLinks*) and Labour Party (*Partij van de Arbeid*) also supported retroactive application in this instance, see Author unknown, “Kamer wil Bonussen Steunbanken 100% Belasten” (“Parliament Wants to Tax Bonuses at Banks that Received State Support at 100%”), *Financieel Dagblad*, 22 March 2011, <https://fd.nl/frontpage/Archief/737475/kamer-wil-bonussen-steunbanken-100-belasten>.
- ⁶⁸ Partij voor de Vrijheid, “De Agenda van Hoop en Optimisme,” 57.
- ⁶⁹ Partij voor de Vrijheid, “De Agenda van Hoop en Optimisme,” 11.
- ⁷⁰ Partij voor de Vrijheid, “De Agenda van Hoop en Optimisme,” 15.
- ⁷¹ Partij voor de Vrijheid, “De Agenda van Hoop en Optimisme,” 19.
- ⁷² Claudia Aradau, “Security and the Democratic Scene: Descuritization and Emancipation,” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 7 (2004).
- ⁷³ Socialistische Partij, “Nieuw Vertrouwen,” 5.
- ⁷⁴ Socialistische Partij, “Een Beter Nederland voor Minder Geld,” 8.
- ⁷⁵ Partij voor de Vrijheid, “*Hún Brussel, Óns Nederland*,” 21.
- ⁷⁶ Partij voor de Vrijheid, “*Hún Brussel, Óns Nederland*,” 12.
- ⁷⁷ Partij voor de Vrijheid, “De Agenda van Hoop en Optimisme,” 6.
- ⁷⁸ See for example Mouffe, *On the Political*, 120-123, but also Glover, “Games without Frontiers?,” 90.
- ⁷⁹ Keith Breen, “Agonism, Antagonism and the Necessity of Care,” in *Law and Agonistic Politics*, ed. Andrew Schaap (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 137-140.
- ⁸⁰ Mouffe, *On the Political*, 120.
- ⁸¹ Mouffe, *On the Political*, 120-121.
- ⁸² Mouffe, *On the Political*, 121.
- ⁸³ Mouffe, *On the Political*, 121.
- ⁸⁴ Chantal Mouffe, “Agonistic Democracy and Radical Politics,” *Pavilion* (2014), <http://pavilionmagazine.org/chantal-mouffe-agonistic-democracy-and-radical-politics/>
- ⁸⁵ Mouffe’s approach to antagonism in her early work with Ernesto Laclau seems to differ somewhat from the conception of antagonism she discusses later (the approach presented here). In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* for example, her discussion of antagonism (with Laclau) emphasizes the actual presence of antagonism in all of society and as *constitutive* for society. See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2014 (1985)), xiv. In *The Democratic Paradox* and *On the Political* however, antagonism is seen only as a *possible* presence in human relations and one that should be tamed. Additionally, antagonism is portrayed more neutrally in her earlier work. Instead of antagonism being the element of existential violence in which one enemy tries to physically eradicate another, an element that thus therefore must be ‘kept at bay, it is discussed in more structural terms as a “witness to the impossibility of a final suture,” the “‘experience’ of the limit of the social.” See *On the Political*, 16 and Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 112. In the current text I take Mouffe’s position toward antagonism to be best characterized by her statement in *On the Political*, 20, that while antagonism is an ever-present possibility, it is the task of democracy to “transform antagonism into agonism.”
- ⁸⁶ Breen, “Agonism, Antagonism and the Necessity of Care,” 138.
- ⁸⁷ Breen, “Agonism, Antagonism and the Necessity of Care,” 140.
- ⁸⁸ Mouffe, *On the Political*, 121.
- ⁸⁹ Mouffe, *On the Political*, 121.
- ⁹⁰ Mouffe does acknowledge that the decision whether one’s political activity falls within the realm of respecting the values of equality and liberty is a *political* decision, a decision that will always be the topic of political contestation, but subsequently fails to draw the logical conclusion that, if this is the case, these values cannot add anything to her initial focus on the need to keep the space for political contestation open, see Mouffe, *On the Political*, 121.
- ⁹¹ Mouffe, *On the Political*, 20.
- ⁹² Mouffe, *On the Political*, 20.
- ⁹³ Mouffe, *On the Political*, 121.
- ⁹⁴ Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy*, 39.
- ⁹⁵ Glover, “Games without Frontiers?,” 89; see also Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 13 and Bert van Roermund, “Questioning the Law? On Heteronomy in Public Autonomy,” in *Law and Agonistic Politics*, ed. Andrew Schaap (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 122. Lefort theorized that the difference between a democratic and authoritarian state is precisely whether the ‘people’ is seen as a complete, self-transparent whole without any internal divisions. From this perspective, authoritarianism is not the opposite of democracy, but its “pathological form”, as it departs from the ambiguity of the people inherent to democracy.
- ⁹⁶ See for example Mouffe, “Agonistic Democracy and Radical Politics,” and Mouffe, *On the Political*, 131.
- ⁹⁷ Breen, “Agonism, Antagonism and the Necessity of Care,” 145.

⁹⁸ Chantal Mouffe, “Deconstruction, Pragmatism and the Politics of Democracy,” in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge, 1996), 9.

⁹⁹ Mouffe, *On the Political*, 118.