An Introduction into Extraordinary Racial Politics

Our work begins with an engagement with the past, out of which we imagine, create, and dare to secure a future.
—Lisa Lowe, Immigrant Acts

These single instances, deeds or events, interrupt the circular movement of daily life in the same sense that the rectilinear bios of the mortals interrupts the circular movement of biological life. The subject matter of history is these interruptions—the extraordinary, in other words.
—Hannah Arendt, Between Past and Future

Trumpism may well be both a last and a first gasp. What might be passing away and what might be coming about, however, is precisely the question for the opposition. According to many liberal democrats, Donald Trump’s presidency is an unprecedented threat to U.S. constitutional government. Their broader proposal is that transatlantic democracies recommit to liberal values and make recourse to legal measures to contain authoritarian populisms. For many progressives, by contrast, Trumpism is rooted in North Atlantic “traditions” of white nationalism. In their view, the Trumpist movement is continuous with prior reactions to civil rights reforms, transnational migrations, and economic globalization; likewise, anti-Trumpist struggles are continuous with histories of antifascist and anticolonial struggles.

We should not exaggerate differences among the opposition, though. The diagnoses of authoritarian populism and white nationalism are compatible if the nation of Trumpist populism is authoritatively white. Furthermore, the reactions of outraged liberals and unfazed leftists are complementary if the Trump presidency is an episode in ongoing dramas of race and nation. Trump is a break from the post–civil-rights-era mainstream politicians who
conformed to color-blind—including “color-blind racist”—norms. Yet Trumpism is an intensification of the 1970s and 1980s new right, which blamed the 1960s and 1970s new left for wrecking disorder on the United States. How Trump marks the end of the post–civil rights era from which Trumpism emerged is suggestive of a general dynamic: what I call the relationship between extraordinary racial politics and everyday racial politics.

In my usages, extraordinary racial politics are unusual, episodic, intensive, decisive, and transformative, while ordinary racial politics are quotidian, ongoing, extended, negotiated, and reproductive. The thesis of this book is that extraordinary racial politics rupture out of and reset everyday racial politics. Exceptional racial crises are partly continuous with normalized racial conflict, yet the resolution of these crises reconstitutes the terrain of those conflicts. Extraordinary racial events are, in part, extensions of ordinary racial processes; ordinary racial trajectories are, in turn, redirected by extraordinary racial turns. I examine four moments of this kind in U.S. history: southeastern Indian removals in the 1830s and 1840s, the Japanese internment of World War II, the postwar civil rights movement, and racial empowerment movements during the 1960s and 1970s. In so doing, I recover the extraordinary dimension of U.S. racial politics from the combined standpoints of ethnic studies and political theory.

Radical political theorists have traditionally imagined the relationship between the extraordinary and the ordinary as the relationship between the revolutionary and the pre- and postrevolutionary. While I share this orientation toward transformative crises, I think that revolutionary struggle far from exhausts the field of extraordinary politics, which also encompasses state-declared emergencies and mass-mobilized movements. Similarly, I agree with Andreas Kalyvas that radical political theorists need to recuperate “the politics of the extraordinary” from a Jacobin-Leninist tradition whose emancipatory potential is likely exhausted. As a political theorist, I argue that extraordinary politics is best revitalized in the register of the

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political, constitutive politics, or what I call “public constitution.” All these terms gesture toward the moment that generates and transforms the public world of selves and groups, relations and structures. This moment, though, only emerges against the backdrop of the routinized functioning and reproduction of the constituted public.

Ethnic studies scholars have long theorized something analogous to the relationship between public constitution and constituted publics under the heading of “racial formation.” Racial formation, in Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s classic formulation, is “the sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed.” This definition in principle encompasses both the everyday and the extraordinary, but contemporary ethnic studies in fact has an abiding concern with quotidian life and longue durée processes—often for good reasons. I want to shift our center of attention to courte durée events and extraordinary experiences in order to restore the other half of the racial formation story, as it were. For the normal politics of negotiation, reworking, and subversion are prefigurations and fulfillments of the crisis politics of extremes, creation, and confrontation. I am particularly attentive to how the fall and rise of racial orders disrupt and reconstitute the extended processes of racial formation.

Let us say, in synthesizing the concepts of racial formation and public constitution, that particular black, indigenous, and Asian formations can acquire the general significance of reconstituting the entire U.S. public. This idea is already familiar to ethnic studies, which—after all—has taken my four events as paradigmatic turning points. The historiographical convention of attaching “pre-” and “post-” to events, for instance, informs many accounts of the “post–civil rights era” of African American and U.S. politics. Asian American studies and indigenous studies have made homologous periodizations with regard to wartime Japanese incarceration and nineteenth-century Indian removals, although scholars outside those fields still underappreciate the implications of these events for U.S. politics overall. An

extraordinary racial politics that seems to affect only one group can “touch all”—that is, reidentify who “all” are and reimagine how all are “touched.” What political theory contributes to ethnic studies here is “the public” as a constitutional rather than a sociological category, “the people” as a symbolically articulated rather than a positively existing entity.

I seek, then, to racially inflect the intuitive linkage between U.S. peoples and U.S. constitutions. What is too often narrowly understood as “the U.S. constitution” is the symbolically constituted product of an ongoing project of U.S. racial formation. For the U.S. constitution, especially in its nonlegal aspects, is the articulation of racial identifications and institutions (“racial formation”) at the level of generative powers and conflict (“extraordinary politics”). Upon this expanded account of constitutionalism, the United States has been informally constituted multiple times for all its citizens, denizens, and subjects. Here ethnic studies must help political theory overcome prejudiced views of race as merely social, purely illusory, or otherwise unworthy of serious theorization. Race as public identity belongs in a series with other modern political concepts, such as citizenship as social standing and the body politic as body politics.\(^7\)

This book was written out of the conviction that the concepts of racial formation and public constitution refer to interlocked, if not identical, phenomena in the U.S. context. This is the case, however, for reasons neither concept as it is currently articulated can provide. My own explanation is articulated in terms of questions common to political theory and ethnic studies—questions of generative conflicts, historical transformations, and social crises. To use Jane Gordon’s terms, it seeks to “creolize” closely related concepts in a transdisciplinary fashion and warns us against approaching our disciplines as “discrete.”\(^8\) Furthermore, it reminds us of the perils and promises of extraordinary racial politics in times and places of stasis for critical theory with emancipatory interests. We need neither rehabilitate revolutionary Marxism nor resign ourselves to liberal reformism if we can recuperate the genuinely radical experiences at the roots of both traditions.

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The remainder of this introductory chapter is divided into four sections, the first two of which offer critical reconstructions of previous scholarly work and the second two of which construct the theoretical framework of this study. Section I brings forward the tacit distinctions of extraordinary politics and everyday politics in Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s account and Charles Mills’s account of racial formation. Section II examines the explicit distinctions of extraordinary politics and everyday politics in Carl Schmitt’s and Hannah Arendt’s accounts of public constitution. Turning from interpretive to original claims, Section III unpacks the three powers of extraordinary racial politics: disrupting ordinary politics, opening extraordinary possibilities, and reinstituting ordinary politics. Finally, Section IV situates my selected historical cases within the framework of extraordinary racial politics established in the previous sections.

Section I: Racial Formation as Extraordinary Politics

Political theorists of color (and our white allies) must be credited for insisting on the importance of race for investigations of solidarity politics,\(^9\) democratic citizenship,\(^10\) and progressive discourse.\(^11\) Political theorists have even begun to ask what “race” itself means,\(^12\) a question historically raised within the disciplines of anthropology and sociology or within the paradigms of natural sciences. These studies hold that race is not only socially constructed as opposed to naturally given; race is also, as ethnic studies scholars have long contended, deployed by states, saturated with power, and—in short—politically constituted. This insight about the inherently political character of race has come attached to a largely quotidian notion of politics, however.\(^13\)

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This focus on the everyday signals the choice of the theorist as much as it sketches a dimension of racialization.

To explore the extraordinary dimension of racialization, we return to two classics of critical race theory, broadly construed. In this section, I examine (the third edition of) Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s *Racial Formation in the United States*, a historical sociology of U.S. racial formation, and Charles Mills’s *The Racial Contract*, a philosophical model of global white supremacy. Both Omi and Winant’s work and Mills’s work raise racial questions that have direct, albeit racially unspecified, analogues in political theories of extraordinary politics. Neither, though, fully appreciates the qualitative difference between extraordinary and ordinary racial politics. In response, I amplify this conceptual distinction that ethnic studies articulates in a somewhat muted fashion.

My interpretation of Omi and Winant’s theory of racial formation accordingly focuses on questions of process and rupture. To reiterate, Omi and Winant define “racial formation” as that sociohistorical process through which racial orders are created, maintained, changed, and destroyed. The early-modern European colonization of the Americas and of Amerindian peoples, for instance, was a racial formation with a theological cast. The building of Western nation-states was a different kind of racial formation, one dependent on racial pseudo-sciences—initially natural historical, later biological developmental.14 It is not until after World War II that the process of racial formation acquires predominantly sociopolitical meanings in the United States: “race is now a preeminently political phenomenon” in that race is understood to signify “social conflicts and interests” more than natural divisions and hierarchies.15

Omi and Winant expand their time horizons to capture extended racial trajectories.16 They conceive of the longue durée of racial formation as “a constantly reiterated outcome . . . of the interaction of racial projects.” A racial project, the basic unit of organized racial politics, consists in “an interpreta-

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15. Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 120, 110. Omi and Winant correctly note that scientific and other naturalistic concepts of race are making a troubling resurgence.
tion, representation, or explanation of racial identities” conjoined to “an effort to organize and distribute resources . . . along racial lines.”17 Periods like “the 17 years of the Civil War/Reconstruction (1860–1877) and roughly 22 years (1948–1970) of the post–World War II racial 'break’” are “exceptional,”18 the rising phase of a racial trajectory. The falling phase of a racial trajectory begins when the state re-contains popular forces and partially satisfies popular demands. Conversely, an extraordinary event will contract the time horizon of U.S. racial formation to the courte durée once the longue durée of institutionalized politics can no longer contain popular insurgencies.

The rise and fall of a racial trajectory consist in the confrontational, rapid reformulation of U.S. racial order followed by the creeping, measured effort to restore the status quo ante. For instance, the redistributive and participatory trajectory of the civil rights and allied movements peaked in the late 1960s and began a decades-long decline in the 1970s.19 A rising phase reconstituted a U.S. racial order of domination (wherein racial oppositions are violently crushed) as a U.S. racial order of hegemony (wherein racial oppositions are nonviolently incorporated). This “Great Transformation” expanded normal politics to accommodate the interests of racial oppositions, but the new normal re-contained the very black, Amerindian, Latino/a, and Asian American movements responsible for it. In this falling phase, the new right and neoconservative movements appropriated new left and liberal keywords such as “equality” and “freedom” in order to push the U.S. racial mainstream rightward.20

The norm of racial formation is the extension of sociohistorical trajectories, while the exception of racial formation is the establishment of new terrains (on which sociohistorical trajectories travel). Omi and Winant’s distinction is, in sociological terms, the social reproduction/transformation distinction or, in my terms, the ordinary/extraordinary politics distinction. The primary difference is that Omi and Winant are oriented to extended processes, while I am oriented to episodic crises. If anything, the extended subsumes, historicizes, and explains the episodic within their theory of racial formation “process.” An additional complication is that Omi and Winant analyze only one “Great Transformation” and—despite numerous references to Asian, Amerindian, and Latina/o formations—center their exceptional

17. Omi and Winant, Racial Formation in the United States, 127, 125, italics original.
18. Ibid., 148; see also Howard Winant, New Politics of Race: Globalism, Difference, Justice (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 15–18.
20. Ibid., 192.
periods (1860–1877 and 1948–1970) on black Americans. Omi and Winant offer a historical sociology of the racial formation process in the United States. Mills, for his part, offers a philosophical modeling of what Omi and Winant might call an epoch- and globe-shaping racial formation. As a contribution to the social contract tradition, Mills’s theory of the racial contract is more attuned to foundational moments than Omi and Winant’s theory of racial formation. The racial contract is the “original” structure through which whites and nonwhites come into existence as such. The term “contract” marks the establishment of “global white supremacy” as “a political system” of formal and informal rule; social privileges and disadvantages; moral, aesthetic, and epistemic normativity: “the Racial Contract is that set of formal or informal agreements or meta-agreements” between “one subset of humans, henceforth designated by (shifting) ‘racial’ (phenotypical/genealogical/cultural) criteria C_1, C_2, C_3 . . . as ‘white’” so as to “categorize the remaining subset of humans as ‘nonwhite.’”

Mills makes the existential claim that white supremacy exists and the ontological claim that it is grounded in convention rather than nature. The contract, Mills claims, is “clearly locatable” in “the creation of the modern world by European colonialism,” where white/nonwhite “gradually became the formal marker of [the] differentiated status” between European/non-European, civilized/uncivilized, and Christian/non-Christian. Mills, of course, cannot point to a document stipulating the unequal moral, civil, and political status of whites and nonwhites. It is rather as if “clearly locatable” European colonizers had signed such a contract. It is “in the beginning”

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24. Ibid., 127.

25. Ibid., 21, 23, italics added.

26. I leave aside various controversies surrounding this claim, including whether racialist ideologies infused the original colonization of the Americas and whether the origins of any states—racial or otherwise—can be contractually modeled. On the former controversy, see Seth, *Europe’s Indians*, 175–76; on the latter, see David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2002), 36–37.
that Mills’s variant of the social contract is closest to my understanding of an informal constitutional moment. Mills, however, is quick to clarify that the racial contract is “continually being rewritten” by new signatories, who have materially reproduced white supremacy for some five centuries.27

Even more than Omi and Winant, Mills imagines racial trajectories on expansive time scales. Omi and Winant’s account of the transformation of racial domination into racial hegemony in some ways parallels Mills’s account of the transformation of violently enforced racial contracts into ideologically enforced racial contracts.28 For Mills, the ideology that white supremacy is the “exception” rather than the “rule” of European modernity is “an artifact of the Racial Contract in the second, de facto phase,” an ideology that would have been inconceivable in the first, de jure period.29 Yet the second period is only a modest rewriting of the racial contract that continues to underwrite the social contract. While Omi and Winant think that the U.S. racial order underwent a “Great Transformation,” Mills thinks that the global racial polity is steeped in social reproduction. The power of extraordinary politics to push white supremacy far into the contemporary world is founded on deep consensus.

The racial contract as the extraordinary foundation of the Herrenvolk polity establishes norms of equality and freedom for whites over and against norms of exclusion and subordination for nonwhites. The racial contract as the everyday operation of white privilege, by contrast, enforces this two-tiered system of normativity. Both Mills’s “the racial contract” and my “racial constitution” account for the determination and institution of racial rules. My idea differs from Mills’s insofar as I argue that the U.S. polity has undergone several re-constitutions, all of which exceed the rewriting of de jure clauses of the racial contract as de facto ones and most of which fall short of the qualitative transformation of the racial formation process (as in Omi and Winant’s Great Transformation). This question of multiple racialized constitutions raises the related question of multiple racialized trajectories.30 Any racial constitution by definition affects the whole polity or the entire public, but its consequences are disproportionately borne by groupings too crudely identified as not-white. My claim is not incompatible with, yet also not in the spirit of, Mills’s assertion of a Manichean split between white and nonwhite.

29. Ibid., 122.
This section has analyzed analogous elements from Omi and Winant’s and Mills’s theories of racial construction: the original moment of Mills’s racial contract is an analogue to the initiatory moment of Omi and Winant’s racial formation (extraordinary politics), while the rewriting process of Mills’s racial contract is an analogue to the reiterative process of Omi and Winant’s racial formation (ordinary politics). What I would maintain, pace Mills as well as Omi and Winant, is that a multiplicity of heightened conflicts has initiated a multiplicity of intertwined, group-differentiated trajectories. What I would warn is that both theories threaten to reduce eventlike ruptures to quasi-causal moments of historical processes, especially in those times and places I would highlight as strange and creative.

One reason that ethnic studies scholars like Mills or Omi and Winant turn sharply to everyday politics is that standard histories downplay the agency, viewpoints, and vernaculars of everyday people. For instance, W.E.B. Du Bois took white and other nonblack Americans behind “the Veil” surrounding black American lifeworlds, just as Ronald Takaki offered Americans a multicultural “mirror” consisting of the life stories of ordinary “strangers” from other shores. I acknowledge that many groups are constantly renegotiating their engagements with the informal U.S. constitution (e.g., peoples indigenous in a settler colonial society, peoples descended from slaves in a society founded on slave labor, peoples migrating under an exclusionary immigration regime). The point to emphasize is that ordinarily, extraordinary racial politics is embedded within everyday life as the potential transformation of the public world. Only at “critical junctures,” as American Political Development scholars put it, does extraordinary racial politics emerge from everyday life to actually transform lived experiences for better and for worse.

Section II: Extraordinary Politics as Public Constitution

My articulation of informal constitution taps into the ambivalence of the modern term “constitution,” which describes both the action and the prod-

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uct of creating a public. 33 It is partially inspired by early modern notions of Original Compact, Republican Foundation, or Constituent Power. 34 However, I resituate the constitution-making power of early modern revolutionaries inside the broadly modern problematic of racial formation. What constituent power (the power to create constitutional order) is to constituted power (authorized powers within that order) for juridical constitutionalism, extraordinary racial politics (the power to create racial order) is to ordinary racial politics (legitimized powers within that order) for informal constitutionalism. Postjuridical constitutionalism, in addition, harks back to ancient notions of constitution obscured by modern legal discourse: constitution (politeia) is connected to offices of the city (polis), but also connected to arrangements of the citizens (polites). 35

This section discusses how Carl Schmitt and Hannah Arendt connect public constitution to the very existence of political communities and actors. The books in Arendt’s and Schmitt’s oeuvres are interpreted here as directly concerned with constitutive moments. Schmitt, in The Concept of the Political, argues that the official decision that identifies enemies creates public order; Arendt, in The Human Condition, makes an analogous claim that the collective action that discloses selves enacts public freedom. Unlike our race theorists, who subsume the extraordinary into the ordinary, our political theorists have the opposite tendency—they go too far in treating the extraordinary as a break from or bracketing of the ordinary. In moderating both tendencies, I venture that ordinary politics constitutes extraordinary politics as much as extraordinary politics constitutes ordinary politics.

Carl Schmitt sharply differentiates the political—his term for extraordinary politics—from the aesthetic, the moral, and the economic. But the sharp distinction between the political and the nonpolitical is softened by the fact that the political is always and never purely itself. The political is the friend/enemy distinction on which European international law authorizes

the sovereign state to decide.\textsuperscript{36} The friend/enemy distinction is “independent, not in the sense of a distinct new domain,” but in that it is irreducible to ugly/beautiful, good/evil, and profitable/unprofitable distinctions.\textsuperscript{37} The political is dependent, however, in that it “does not describe its own substance, but only the intensity of an association or dissociation of human beings whose motives can be religious, national . . . , economic, or of another kind.”\textsuperscript{38} As a form of (dis)association, the friend/enemy relationship presupposes actually nonpolitical, yet potentially political forms of association. Politics is parasitic on substantial differences that, as of yet, lack the intensity of friend/enemy antagonism.

The political for Schmitt is to the prepolitical (which, following Arendt, I call “the social”) what the extraordinary break is to ordinary fault lines. A “concrete” rupture from everyday forms of tension,\textsuperscript{39} the political is the point at which an entire people—and, less circularly, the sovereign authorized to represent it—decides on the boundaries of membership, law, and territory (e.g., a decision to handle enemies in “our” midst extra-legally). More concisely, the state’s articulation of the friend/enemy distinction closes the inside of “a whole nation” against the outside of a concrete enemy.\textsuperscript{40} For Schmitt, the closure of the public in the face of existential conflict makes the legal operations of administration and regulation possible.

Consistent across Schmitt’s \textit{oeuvre} is the notion that politics is the creation, protection, and destruction of public order. His pre–World War II work is clearly marked by a concern with maintaining constitutional order in the legal state.\textsuperscript{41} This commitment to the nation-state carries into Schmitt’s wartime and postwar work as a concern with maintaining Eurocentric glob-

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38. Schmitt, \textit{The Concept of the Political}, 38.
39. An account of Schmitt’s usage of “concrete” can be found in Mika Ojakangas, \textit{A Philosophy of Concrete Life: Carl Schmitt and the Political Thought of Late Modernity}, 2nd ed. (Bern, CH: Peter Lang, 2006), 32–34.
\end{footnotesize}
Public order, whether national or international, is not “law and order” for its own sake; the defensive posture toward public order is taken for the sake of a particular way of life. The political presupposes that a collectivity is willing and able to stake the physical existence of its members to preserve a way of life consisting of more than physical existence. For Schmitt, the political way of life—this standing for friendship and standing against enemies—is the properly human way of facing up to death.

Schmitt, in this vein, stands against liberal hopes that economics and morality will one day eliminate war and politics. Liberal theorists, in turn, criticize the friend/enemy distinction for partaking of amoral, if not belligerent formalism. Formalism is potentially both a weakness and a strength, however. It is a strength if Schmittian friendship and enmity are universal structures of experience, but it is a weakness if they are peculiar to the European nation-state system. It will suffice for my purposes if friend versus enemy conflict is a—and not the only—structure of racial constitution in the United States. When it racially constitutes the U.S. public, the friend/enemy distinction typically divides white against nonwhite, two categories whose criteria of membership are historically rather than logically determined. The crucial point is that at least one of, and perhaps both of, the antagonistic racial groupings is willing to utilize violence against a perceived existential threat.

Hannah Arendt, like Schmitt, draws a stark distinction to the effect of underscoring the distinctiveness of political life. Arendt holds that politics for moderns is no longer what it was for ancients—the speech of the public actor who stands out against the background of private labor. Arendt’s story of “the rise of the social” is that the emergence of once-private labor into the

42. These latter works temper Schmitt’s earlier “decisionism” through their turn toward “concrete order thinking.” See, e.g., Schmitt, Nomos of the Earth, pt. 4; Carl Schmitt, Writings on War, trans. Timothy Nunan (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 125–97.
43. Schmitt, The Concept of the Political, 27, 34.
46. Action is to Arendt’s “public” what decision is to Schmitt’s “the political”; Arendt would call Schmitt’s faculty of decision “the will.” Hannah Arendt, The Life of the Mind (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), pt. 2.
public realm has blurred the once-bright public/private distinction. Hence modern polities lack the common sense of (Arendt’s) Greeks that certain phenomena are essentially public, while others are essentially private. Indeed, in “socialized” polities, the lines between public and private, action and labor, are slippery because essentially contestable. Here Arendt’s activities of action and speech appear to be as formal as Schmitt’s identities of friend and enemy; these concepts refer to intersubjective forms of grappling with substances, not to substances themselves. In its independence from others, speech-as-action can pertain to “private” matters (e.g., domestic violence) or “social” matters (e.g., welfare provision). In its dependence on others, speech-as-action must take something other than itself as its concrete content.

While both Schmitt and Arendt relate the political as form to the social as content, Arendt more than Schmitt stresses that the political as extraordinary event breaks from the social as ordinary process. We need not read Arendt against Arendt—as we have to read Schmitt against Schmitt—to assert that the political is the disruption of the existent and the irruption of the emergent. Extraordinary politics for Schmitt is a conservative closing against enemies, while extraordinary politics for Arendt is a creative opening between citizens. In contrast to Schmitt’s decision, which bounds a public identity and a constitutional order, Arendt’s action establishes relationships between distinctive selves that “force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries” (legal, physical, or otherwise). This informal constitution, as I call it, “predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government.”

Across her corpus, Arendt holds that politics is the enactment, maintenance, and augmentation of public freedom. We can, at the risk of anachronism, trace a distinction between political action and social behavior back to Arendt’s early work on European Jewish assimilation. With more respect for chronology, we can see a turn toward less “heroic,” more ordinary spaces of freedom in Arendt’s later publications on mental experience and constit-

50. Ibid., 190.
51. Ibid., 199.
tutional endurance. The public actor or the free self is the existential achievement that Arendt worries is withering under the social pressures of modernity. The political for both Arendt and Schmitt is a problem of being, existing as potential “beginners” for Arendt and as potential combatants for Schmitt. Both hold that political existence presupposes that physical existence might be at risk, as Arendt no less than Schmitt holds that politics is oriented toward death and life. Then again, Arendt differentiates political life (bios) from physical life (zoe) in terms of the courage to die rather than the commitment to kill.

Speech-as-action, with its emphasis on persuasion and plurality, is assuredly friendlier to liberal commitments than the friend/enemy distinction, with its emphasis on violence and identity. Even so, liberal theorists also charge Arendt with excessive formalism, asking what exactly the substance of speech-as-action might be. Like Schmitt’s, Arendt’s formalism can be a hindrance or a help: hers is a hindrance if action is peculiar to Greek poleis (or Hellenophile imaginations), yet hers is a help if action is a human faculty that makes certain kinds of politics possible. It will suffice for my purposes if Arendtian public freedom, like Schmittian public order, is a structure of racial constitution in the United States. Friend/enemy distinction, as we have seen, has the tendency to divide the U.S. public into white versus nonwhite identifications. Speech-as-action, by contrast, has the tendency to distinguish selves from one another, deny that existent social formations are contestable, and affirm that humans “are not born in order to die but in order to begin.”

On the question of how the extraordinary constitutes the ordinary, we see that decision for Schmitt sets identitarian limits for a legally ordered public, while action for Arendt initiates new processes within socially articulated publics. On the question of how the ordinary conditions the extraordinary, we see that the political for Schmitt ratchets social tensions up into friend/enemy conflicts, whereas the public for Arendt has been overrun by labor and other social preoccupations. This mutually constitutive rela-

tionship between the political and the social, to which the next section returns, is perhaps the problem for thinking public constitution and racial formation together.  

Part of the problem is that where race theorists subsume the punctuated moment of the political into the epochal processes of the social, political theorists posit the “miraculous” break of political actions from social structures. That is, Arendt and Schmitt tend to exaggerate how far the political overrides the social as compared to how far the social underpins the political, while Mills as well as Omi and Winant have the opposite tendency. If extraordinary politics have indeed declined under the vicissitudes of modernity, Arendt’s polemics against the social and Schmitt’s attacks on liberalism may be warranted. If the political has instead been resituated in racial and other formations of the social, however, my appraisal of the relatively miraculous power of the extraordinary is the more appropriate response. Hence I differ from scholars who seek to loosen whatever hold Arendt’s and Schmitt’s extramundane politics have on our theoretical visions. I want, if anything, to cultivate a fascination with extraordinary politics in the expectation that neither a constitutionalized liberalism nor a revolutionary Marxism will be the final word for critical theory.

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58. Schmitt, Political Theology, 36–37; Arendt, The Human Condition, 246–47.
60. See, e.g., Frank, Constituent Moments, chap. 1; Bonnie Honig, Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), chap. 3. The hold is not that tight, in my view.