

# *From the Critique of Totalitarianism to the Invention of Democracy*

Dick Howard

*The critique of totalitarianism was a constant thread in the work of Claude Lefort (1924-2010). The article distinguishes between two periods, the first building from a critical Marxism as well as Lefort's experience as a political militant; the second, influenced by the later work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, his teacher whose posthumous work he edited, rethinks the concept of totalitarianism particularly in terms of the role of the symbolic. The result of the second period shows how democracy is itself the radical implications of the critique of totalitarianism. Perhaps more important, during the interlude between the two periods, Lefort's monumental *Machiavel le travail de l'œuvre* had highlighted the concept of "the political" whose relation to the emergence of modern democracy the essay suggests.*

Keywords: Lefort, Merleau-Ponty, Critique of Totalitarianism, Democracy, Political Theory.

## 1. Introduction

I adopt the basic outline of this essay from Miguel Abensour's distinction of «two interpretations of totalitarianism» in Lefort's work. In a word, his *first critique* was directed at defining, denouncing, and overcoming the practices of Soviet totalitarianism (and its influence on the politics of western Communist parties and their intellectual camp-followers). Step-by-step, beginning in the 1940s, Lefort untangled the aporia of Marxist (and Leninist) politics. He then left behind his days as an active militant to develop a philosophical *second critique* that he used to decipher the restless ambiguities of modern democracies. A close look at the work of the militant as well as that of the philosopher shows that Lefort's two critiques are complementary; neither can stand alone. That is perhaps one of the reasons that Claude Lefort's last book was titled *La complication* (1999).