

Paul Ricoeur, *Politics, Economy, and Society*. Edited and with an introduction by Pierre-Olivier Monteil. Translated by Kathleen Blamey. *Writings and Lectures*, vol. 4. Polity Press, Medford, 2021. xiv + 231 pages. ISBN 978-1-5095-4386-1.

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If one were to appreciate the meaning of a philosopher by its appearance in monographs, and if articles were only to be considered as minor, occasional writings, Ricoeur would not be counted among the political philosophers. For it is in volumes with collected articles like *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (1986), *Lectures 1: Autour du politique* (1991), and this posthumous collection titled *Politics, Economy, and Society* that Ricoeur has expressed his thoughts on politics, political power, and political themes in society. These articles are the elaborations of lectures that Ricoeur has presented on many occasions. No monographs by his hand are devoted to the subject of political philosophy. However, that does not imply that the theme of the political is a minor affair for Ricoeur. For during his entire philosophical career, Ricoeur has been actively engaged in political themes. The impact of the First World War must have been immense for the young Paul Ricoeur (born 1913), as this war made him an orphan. He was raised by his aunts in a strict Protestant environment. As a young man he became involved in the French personalist circle around the political philosopher Emmanuel Mounier, to whom he was closely connected. The Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) made a big appeal to French intellectuals to speak out against fascism. It brought Ricoeur to a personalist and socialist stance toward mass violence and war.

The Second World War made Ricoeur a prisoner of war. He used the time in a POW camp to translate Edmund Husserl's *Ideen I* (1913). During the war he engaged with the thinking of Karl Jaspers. The phenomenological method that he had come to know in Husserl's work led Ricoeur to the large phenomenological project of describing human being as an intentional being, a willing subject. The phenomenon of willing made Ricoeur investigate the borders of the human will, first in the aspect of human fallibility and subsequently in the aspect of actual forms of evil, as appearing in culture. Ricoeur turned to cultural myths on the origin of evil in order to saturate his investigation. At this point, Ricoeur experienced that such myths are not just expressions of intellectual concepts, nor just cultural forms of access to an intellectual discussion on human intentions and inclinations. The cultural narratives on evil appear to have a reflective capacity of their own. "The symbol gives rise to thought" is the conclusion of Ricoeur in his monograph *The Symbolism of Evil* (1967).

This insight makes Ricoeur turn to the creative power of language. How do the dynamics of metaphors and narrative, as expressions of creative language, form figurations in cultural reality that shape this reality? In short, Ricoeur's phenomenological philosophy receives a hermeneutical complement, in the same year that Gadamer presents the hermeneutics of his *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960).

Meanwhile, Ricoeur is deeply formed by the rather unknown philosophy of Jean Nabert (1881–1960), who is convinced of a fundamental experience of affirmation that underlies human existence and leads to a legitimate acting out of hope. An interest in the creativity of cultural expressions, together with a philosophy of affirmation and hope: it all seems to lead Ricoeur to a triumphant position in the philosophical sixties and seventies, in which the popularity of Ernst Bloch's *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (1954–1959) and the student revolutions would cheer the themes of Ricoeur's philosophy.

There were, however, some elements that led to a different course in history. Ricoeur's conviction that the human being has an intentional capacity, together with the Kantian idea that human being has an inclination to evil but also a tendency to the good, led Ricoeur to confrontations with strict Marxists, with their idea of perverse capitalist intentions that shine through the expressions of a cultural superstructure. The idea that there is an affirmation in existence that guides human thinking

and acting was contradictory to the existentialist movement led by Sartre and his idea of existence preceding essence. Finally, Ricoeur's conception of linguistic figurations that refer to reality and (trans)form this reality opposed the structuralist scene of French philosophy, in which linguistic sense is not created by reference to reality but through binary intralinguistic forces. It is typical that Ricoeur concluded a book on the psychology of Sigmund Freud with an extensive analysis of the forces and drives in human psyche, present in the depths and remnants of one's youth, with a chapter on how the positing of a teleological dialectical counterpart to the archaeological tendencies of psychoanalysis can be fruitful for interpretation. A surplus of meaning is not given in the blind forces of the past but only in its confrontation with a tendency toward the future, toward human self-realization.

This was not what the French intellectual mix of Marxists, existentialists, structuralists, and post-structuralists wanted to hear. Ricoeur became the rector of Paris Nanterre University, an experimental alternative for the established academic order of the Sorbonne. For the students, however, Ricoeur as a rector was simply a symbol of the old regime. After some harsh confrontations and disappointments, Ricoeur went to Belgium and to the United States. It was only after decades that he reentered French academic life.

Ricoeur's elaborate investigations into metaphor and narrative that appeared in the seventies and eighties led him again to the question of the willing subject. His definitive statement on the human capacity was given in *Oneself as Another* (1992). Human beings live in narratives—so much is clear for Ricoeur. The capacity to be a narrative self is preceded by the capacities of speaking and acting. But the narrative self is not the culmination of the course of human development. The formation of a narrative self counts as a creative preparation of one's capacity to make oneself available to another. We may notice the themes of Levinas's philosophy here (though there are some important differences). Such availability to the other is not a momentous experience or a matter of individual feelings. The human intentionality to open up to another has to be anchored in human institutions that bear witness to justice.

This brings us full circle. Ricoeur's initial investigation into the limits of human intentionality finally turns into the solid conviction that human being has a capacity to install institutions to guard and love and justice and to guide them into an ever-increasing course of recognition of the other (see Ricoeur 2005).

Clearly, political philosophy is not a side issue for Ricoeur. For it is in political philosophy that the capacities of human beings to turn to one another receive their expressions. The political life is the end (*telos*) of human existence, lived as an affirmation that good will prevail over evil, or at least, that human beings are not at the mercy of blind societal powers, however tragic and cruel life may be.

The articles in *Politics, Economy, and Society* evidence Ricoeur's lifelong intellectual quest as set out above. The opening articles in the volume are from 1958; they deal with Marxism, socialism, and the role of Christians in society. The final article dates from 2003 and covers the subject of economical exchange by treating Marcel Mauss's classic essay on the gift. Within this chronological spectrum, Pierre-Olivier Monteil, the editor of both the English and the original French volume, has chosen to order the collection of articles according to five themes: a theological-political prologue; paradoxes of the political; politics, economy, and societies; Europe; and an epilogue.

The three articles in the theological-political prologue convey the atmosphere of Europe after the Hungarian invasion in 1956. What should be expected from Christians in this situation? Ricoeur (12) answers that

I have said that there is not a Christian politics, but a politics of the Christian as a citizen. It must be said that there is a Christian style in politics. This style consists in finding the just place of the political

in life: elevated but not supreme. . . . The Christian knows that she is responsible for an institution that is God's intention with respect to human history, but she knows that this institution falls prey to a vertigo of power, with a desire of divinization that clings to it, body and soul.

Ricoeur speaks these words as president of the Christian socialist movement in France. He could have been more outspoken when it comes to a socialist state, but it is clear he respects the modest position that the state gives to the church in the French *laïcité*. As a Christian socialist, he does not intend to impose socialism on the state, but neither does he want to refrain from Christian commentary on the political tendencies in society.

Throughout the volume, this will appear to be the main intention of Ricoeur's political philosophical endeavor: to critique any dehumanizing tendency in politics. Institutions are criticized for their "desire of divinization" (12). Current Marxism is criticized for its petrification (17), and socialism without the horizon of a utopia is confronted with the risk of calculation and technocracy (28). This criticism is continued in Ricoeur's view on Hegel, as laid down in the seminal text "Hegel Today" (31–51) that opens the section devoted to the paradoxes of the political. Any student who needs an introduction to Hegel should read this accessible and profound text. There are so many Ricoeurian themes that come forth from his interaction with Hegel's philosophy: the development of human will, not in a solipsistic movement but in interaction and confrontation; the prominence of freedom; the realization of tendencies in concrete labor and societal efforts; the teleological tendency instead of the backward movement of Freud. It is clear that Ricoeur cannot do without Hegel. However, he cannot accept Hegel's claims to absolute knowledge and his tendency toward totalization. Hegel's absolute epistemological claims should be reduced to contextual interpretations. Meaning in the hermeneutical age does not arise from absolute knowledge but from meticulous contextual interpretation.

Such hermeneutical philosophy does not lead to relativism. Ricoeur's philosophical task is to remind us of a wider horizon, a societal utopia even, to counter the constraints of ideology. Having to operate within paradoxes and perplexities is the fate of the philosopher. To counter the fragilities that are laid down in reality, absolute truths do not suffice. Indeed, the world of morality, ethics, and politics—which is also the title of a seminal essay from 1993—is one of paradoxes. We are far away now from the dialectical moves of Hegel and his faith in approaching the absolute spirit through dialectics. What remains is a strong faith in citizenship. For Ricoeur, the civil task consists in embodying a living dialectics of societal life. A citizen should be capable of reconciling opposites or at least of bearing these opposites in her or his life: love and justice, belonging and distancing, neighbor and stranger. All essays emphasize the human capability of living together and a fundamental will to do so. These forces counter the powers of fear and domination. Instead of the idea of *homo homini lupus*, Ricoeur's work displays a strong and reasoned conviction that human being is a living dialectics: human beings cannot live without others, who form their counterparts.

The third section applies this political philosophical stance to themes of applied philosophy and economy: economical crisis, money, tolerance, and foreigners, as in Ricoeur's essay "Fragile Identity: Respect for the Other and Cultural Identity" (159–168) from 2000. A fragile identity is the philosophical starting point, but it needs the complement of critical narratives to remain fragile and sensitive to otherness. Ricoeur's thoughts at that moment revolved around the theme of memory and acts of commemoration (Ricoeur 2004). How can such acts feed a fragile identity? His questions are urgent in a time of populism, in which history-telling seems to be restricted to reviving a sense of belonging to a nation rather than fostering a sensitivity to otherness.

But how to deal with otherness in society? This question becomes pressing when it comes to a philosophical view on Europe, the subject of the fourth section. Ricoeur presents some models of integration for Europe ("What New Ethos for Europe?," 171–181). A model of translation is the start.

Translations start from the supposition of translatability. Similarly, groups and even cultures within Europe may come together because there is a spirit of translatability, as a capacity that can be fostered. Cultural exchange is, moreover, a matter of the exchange of memories, which makes up the second model for integration. Postwar Europe has taught us that real peace cannot be established without this exchange. Finally, a third model should be added: the model of forgiveness, absolutely necessary for a continent marked by violence and wars in its entire history.

Now we exceed the level of application and come to a fundamental philosophical problem. As Ricoeur writes (178):

It is true that forgiveness in its fullest sense far exceeds political categories. . . . Forgiveness belongs to an economy of the gift, where the logic of overabundance exceeds the logic of reciprocity. . . . Its “poetic” power consists in shattering the law of the irreversibility of time, in changing—if not the past as the collection of all that has happened—at least its meaning for the people of the present. It does this by lifting the weight of guilt that paralyzes the relation that acting and suffering people have with their own history. It does not abolish the debt, inasmuch as we are, and remain, heirs of the past, but it lifts the pain of the debt.

If there is any power of transcending opposite forces, it is not by a Hegelian contradiction and suspension but by the power of imagination—by telling stories, by a poetical figuration of living together that leads to a refiguration of old patterns of guilt and debt.

In the final section of the volume, Ricoeur again turns to Hegel and confronts the Hegelian logic of reciprocity with his logic of overabundance, the logic of the gift that exceeds reciprocity. There is a deep, spiritual force in human being to transcend the powers of violence and war or just the limitations of economical exchange, and we can give shape to this spiritual force in political life.

Why do we need a political thinker like Ricoeur, and why do we need this volume of political philosophical articles? Let me answer the latter question first. Because this volume stretches from Ricoeur’s initial philosophy to the maturity of his final years, it offers a unique insight into the themes and developments of Ricoeur’s political thinking that was not covered in other collections of his lectures and articles. Moreover, the volume presents accessible and short texts, which are ideal for academic teaching.

But why should we need Ricoeur for political reflection? It is my conviction that we need a substantial counterweight to postmodern political thinking. Such thinking features the recognition of power, but postmodernity’s dealing with the meaning of power cannot only succeed through movements of deconstruction. In a formal sense, this may easily lead to relativism or to a confirmation of power as a blind force, entailed in itself. Ricoeur offers an alternative by proposing the power of imagination as a force that leads from totalization and the seclusion of ideology to utopian, hopeful thinking, to unceasingly opening up to otherness. Such political thinking rests upon a conviction of referentiality, the idea that meaning is related to a figured reality of concrete practices.

Clearly, Ricoeur is a Christian in his political philosophical reflection. Yet, he doesn’t show this by simply putting forward Christian values or simply stressing the Christian background in Western cultural values, as many Christian thinkers would. Ricoeur’s thinking stresses the contributions of the Christian tradition in the poetic figuration of the necessary acts of living together in a state.

Christianity tells stories that lead to a growing capacity of sharing, mutuality, recognition, and forgiving. The gift of Christianity to politics is given in its power of imagination.

After posthumous volumes on psychoanalysis, hermeneutics, and anthropology, this fourth volume presents a welcome collection of inspiring political texts of Ricoeur. A fifth volume, on the philosophy of religion, has appeared in French and awaits translation.

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