

“Political Esthetics: History as an Approach to Political Form”

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We intend to show that there is a specific mode of thought appropriate to political problems, while other modes of thought are improper. We believe that aesthetics is the correct way of handling questions about politics. Esthetics is a way of comprehending the form of reality. Political phenomena are contingent and a part of human action. Therefore history is the best way to perceive political forms.

Rationalism in politics

Political rationalism is the most common form of thought about political phenomena (cf. Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*). It was born at a time of general fascination for quantitative methods and empirical sciences. However, philosophers ended up applying this method also to an object of a very different nature, i.e. to politics. Descartes is the most well-known thinker to attempt this, but he was not the only one. According to Carl Schmitt (*State as a mechanism in Hobbes and Descartes*), “it is thanks to Descartes that all human things changed drastically and revolutionarily, because he understood the human body as a mechanism. That is how the technical-industrial revolution began”. Hobbes is the best political rationalist thinker and he was responsible, according to Schmitt, for creating “the mechanical-technical representation. Hobbes understands the State as a clock, a machine, an automaton or gadget, *horologium, machine, automaton*”. The modern State is an artificial creation placed on top of an also artificial society; it was made to govern that society and, in the worst of cases, to subjugate it.

Esthetics

Esthetics is a philosophical discipline that in many occasions becomes reduced to estheticism.

“Gestalt”, the German word that means “form,” has been influential in many philosophical domains. The point of this way of thinking is that human perception captures its object whole and not only as a part of reality. Forms which we perceive in objects help us order and group various elements (cf. Christian von Erhenfels). For example: we hear a melody and not just a group of notes.

Balthasar goes beyond the Gestalt School and speaks not only about perception. Form is the totality of the existing reality which explains the need to go from “seeing” to “perceiving”. Balthasar relates the medieval concepts *specie* or form and *lumen* or *splendor*, and defines Beauty with three classical criteria: *integritas, proportio et claritas*. These three criteria are integrated into a phenomenological doctrine. This doctrine states that the figure which appears (*Ercheinende Gestalt*) is only beautiful because of a certain complacency (*Wohlgefallen*) which makes itself shown (*Sich-Zeigen*) and is ultimately founded on a depth of truth and well-being. Reality opens up to ourselves as something infinite and precious. The Beautiful is recovered by Balthasar as a “transcendental”, in the same way in which medieval philosophy used to refer to it. *Pulchrum* is then added to *unum, verum* and *bonum*.

Politics must not be esthetical but esthetics can be political. It is common to think of politics ontologically, and that is partially correct. Esthetics can complete and perfect ontology, but not substitute it.

History

Esthetics leads us to think of political reality as something concrete (not abstract). The way we perceive forms is always temporal, so the way we must attempt to perceive political forms is as they appear in history. We should think of politics as history and not *in* history. Politics, as human action, is in itself "history".

Political form is shown to us under two different aspects. First, objectively: for politics is the result of human action. Second, subjectively: for man develops himself by building up a personality in relation to the world (Cfr. *World and person*. Romano Guardini).

Estheticism and mass politics

Totalitarianism has always been an "estheticist" phenomenon. National Socialism, Fascism and some kinds of Communism have all been "esthetical." Only exterior forms, mass movements and propaganda, with no meaning involved, have been the elements which have shaped all anti-political movements (Cfr. *Mass psychology*. Gustave le Bon). We could say that they all belong to an a-political era.

The Historical way of thinking

If we agree that there is a dual kind of evidence which makes politics perceptible to human reason, history is the way of thinking that fits best our comprehension of political phenomena. Politics, and all that it means, cannot be understood ontologically. Politics needs concrete experience. Romano Guardini explains that we learn by means of concepts, but concepts have no life in themselves (cf. *El Contraste*). "Concept is to knowledge what a machine, mechanism or instrument is to practical action". "Machines," says Guardini, "are concepts made of steel". This is the outer limit of ontology and if we go too far that way we can end up turning politics into a mechanism and man into a machine.

History is complementary to ontology because it links with living, real and concrete objects. History explains Man as a being born inside a culture. Culture becomes "second nature", as classical thinkers used to say.

Political forms, states Dalmacio Negro, are inserted inside "eras": "forms which result from the link between ideas and facts, from a living form which expressed in the past an *ethos* or collective morality, and to which those forms refer." Guardini says that historicism is not the way to understand an age. We cannot judge the progress achieved in an era by comparing that era with a former one. Judgement must relate to the chances it offers humans to achieve their plenitude according to the historical circumstances.

Two examples out of history

A) The Greek "Polis".

It was a "closed" political form. In it, politics and religion were mixed, the polis was very small and did not tolerate any other form of government.

For the modern spirit, the Greek political form would seem unbearable. It is unfair to ask ancient Greeks to "be modern", but is also unfair to pretend today to return to life in a "polis". "Polis" were appropriate to their historical time, and not to any other time.

B) French enlightened "Monarchie".

Also known as "absolutism," one can say that it was useful for its historical moment. It led France to prosperity and unity, but after the French Revolution, and especially during the "Restoration" (1814-1830) there were people who wanted to go back in time and recover absolutism, as if such a thing could be possible. Charles X tried to do that and he caused the fall of the Bourbons. This is a clear lack of historical intelligence.

The "Polis" and the French "Monarchie" were political forms or government which served well for specific times in specific circumstances, and which allowed some great men to achieve their true heights, but we cannot speak ontologically and state that pure political forms exist, because that would be speaking outside the scope of history and therefore in an anti-political manner.