

Neopragmatism and Postliberalism: A Contemporary Weltanschauung (Bilingual Edition: Postliberalism Neopragmatism: un Weltanschauung Contemporan)

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Motto:

'Wonder is the beginning of philosophy and doubt is the beginning of political philosophy. Disagreement, antagonisms, and the questioning out of beliefs and, especially, hierarchies, questioning initiate and form political action. The more we discover our own standpoints against the background of the socialization the more we are able to take them apart the more equipped for political action' (p. 373)

This unique bilingual book (in Romanian and English) is an apt, most welcome extension of previous works by the author (in Romanian and English). The major issues here deal with what Dr Serban calls *neopragmatism* and *postliberalism*. Her capable and subtle analysis interweaving the two inter-related philosophical and political terms follows the reviewer's own social philosophical work operating at the intersection of self, time, and place. The book opens with a historical and intellectual origin note, an opening Argument ('Neopragmatism, postliberalism and subjectivity: our thought, our representation, our world'), eight essay chapters, and then closes the initial argument with a 'Conclusive discussion: On the evolution, involution and revolution of contemporary times'. Interestingly, placed after the general bibliography, and a 'Guiding and Selective Bibliography – Pragmatism and Neopragmatism', the book contains two easily overlooked self-contained articles in (perhaps) later-added 'Annexes', '*The political self — discursive interpretations*' and '*Reforming ideologies as a paradigm and a political stake*'.

Now, I shall walk the reader through these unnumbered chapters, making individualized comments on each as I go. I will close with some general observations connecting the finely-wrought theories presented in the book to the very uncertain political trends we in Europe, the USA and beyond face today,

ARGUMENT: Neopragmatism, postliberalism and subjectivity: our thought, our representation, our world.

This detailed opening to the book lays out the parameters of the specific discussions and illustrations that follow, drawing first from varied European thinkers, including Lucian Blaga, who defines the human being's interaction with philosophy ('*Philosophy represents the great opening, the great exit from 'the infinite sleep in which our being floats*' (p. 196, emphasis in original), then from 20 C American philosopher Richard Rorty's work, does a very able job in summarizing his argument made there and applying to the topic at hand. As she states:

[T]hese philosophical ideas will be present throughout the work, by virtue of the continuities I announced earlier and which we are interested to follow (generated by the central continuity between thought, language, action and creation). Repeatedly, and in this sense systematically, too, almost methodologically, neopragmatism opens the possibility of whole approaches for the 'complete, big picture', although it is bound to generate almost a paradoxical image, so to speak, of unity in discontinuity, understood from the contemporary theoretical positions of subjectivity, with imperfections, limitations, erased areas, gaps and contrasts. (p. 212)

1. Subjectivism, fallibilism, pragmatism. Phenomenological, semiotic and pragmatic confluences

Walking the reader through the seminal works of authors such as William James, Edmund Husserl, and C. S. Peirce, the author leads us to the key definition of the human subject that the rest of the book builds upon, i.e., that humans are 'tridimensional, encompassing the syntactic, the semantic and the pragmatic dimensions' (p. 224), a highly phenomenological perspective.

2. Pragmatism and action based on knowledge

This chapter takes the reader through varied logical turns modern philosophy has taken since Descartes, culminating in neopragmatism, which is defined as a reconsideration of logos existing in a critical

environment questioning ‘foundationalism, realism, rationalism and representationalism,’ in the service of explicating ‘paradigms of difference’ via ‘the “linguistic turn” (p. 236). The author continues:

The ideas sustained by neopragmatism can be appreciated in correlation with a specific contemporary theoretical ‘landscape’, characterized by a series of ‘turns’ in the ways of reporting to the investigated problems, to the world and to others (linguistic turn, historical turn, social turn, humanistic turn etc.), all having in the centre of the approaches the ontological affirmation through discursiveness, a perspective of re-evaluation-recovery of rationality (J. Habermas, C. O. Schrag), poststructuralist aspects (R. Barthes, J. Derrida, M. Foucault) and, especially, (neo) pragmatic aspects (J. Derrida, R. Rorty, C.O. Schrag). A more complete image of the theoretical approaches, at least in contemporary philosophy, must include as well the postanalytic [sic] contributions (L. Wittgenstein, J.L. Austin, D. Davidson), the post-rhetorical or neo-rhetorical one (C. Perelman), the hermeneutic perspective axed on a ‘philosophy of reception and aesthetic experience’ (Gadamer) and ‘hermeneutic circle’ (Ricoeur), cultural and intercultural perspectives (Fred Casmir), the generalization of the antagonisms and the attempts of their resolution through discourse (Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe) and the preoccupation for the knowledge-power duet (Foucault), ‘the end of the grand narratives’ (J.-Fr. Lyotard), the perspective of the ‘philosophy without mirroring’ (R. Rorty), the aspects concerning “transparent society” (Vattimo), ‘the ecstasy of communication’ (Baudrillard), deconstructivism (différance’ and ‘trace’, in Derrida), ‘communicational praxis’ (C. O. Schrag) and the ‘principle of charity’ (Donald Davidson).’ (pp. 239-40)

Yet, while accepting contingency as detailed by all these theorists, the author claims in this sophisticated survey that neopragmatism does not deny the possibility of reaching truth. This is a welcome finding, in my view.

3. The glance of God belongs exclusively to God. Turmoil and turns

Drawing heavily from Heidegger, the author points to the fact that neopragmatism is something that is established by humans. ‘In the spirit of the uniqueness of the human ontological mode, neopragmatism brings to attention under various aspects the implications of the idea that being is something established by man’ (pp. 243-44), by a human that, driven by too much systematic structures and meaning structures, is drawn to a postmodern ‘interest for what is contingent, particular, different, marginal, secondary, ironic or contextual’ (p. 243). Birthed by the previously noted ‘linguistic turn’, theorists then considered the ‘social turn’ (which causes them to reconsider the role of social constructivism in the world of science), under what the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman termed ‘liquid modernity’. From this point, the author takes the reader through a winding progression of a ‘humanistic turn’, informed by Rorty and C. O. Schrag’s understanding of Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari and Derrida, and finally a ‘rhetorical turn’, informed by Ch. Perelman’s and L Olbrecht-Tyteca’s work on neo-Aristotelian ‘new rhetoric’ and closing with the hermeneutical circle as articulated by Gadamer and Ricoeur. I see a similarity here to George Kelly’s philosophy of constructive alternativism.)

4. The resources of postliberalism

This chapter is a complicated one. On one hand, the author states that postliberalism will provide a vision for progress, but one of constant reformations and improvements in an environment of fluidity, because as a vision, it cannot make any absolute claim of objectivity and truth along with the view of having the ‘last word’ and feasible in a policymaking way too. But when opposed to the ‘Will to Power’ vision, implying an embrace of monistic, operational ‘truth’, in practice if not in theory, this ambiguous stance becomes problematic. When one reads Foucault, who denies any transcendental truth, only an immanent power struggle remains. Behind the author’s optimistic perspective on postliberalism and its political enactment on the global stage is an embrace of a Habermasian view that assumes the practical achievement of an ‘ideal speech situation’ in a public sphere wherein no political party or persons will exercise ‘unnecessary domination’ upon others. I find this unrealistic giving current conditions in which ‘illiberal democracies’ are largely taking authoritarian right-wing forms.

5. *Intermezzo: postliberalism as nihilism and engagement*

The reviewer well appreciates the author's close reading of Hannah Arendt, particularly considering her useful distinction between 'common sense' and what I would say is 'good sense'. Yet, our recent experience with COVID-19 shows clearly that nonsense can easily coexist with intelligence. Indeed, if a brilliant person embraces the wrong starting point, it can be even harder to convince them of good sense. In fact, many intellectuals and advisers to the powerful have practised a 'cynical distancing' in the author's words, between what they themselves know to be true and what 'lines' of falsehood their masters posit, simply because their life is too intertwined in the corrupt system they inhabit. So again, while I wish very much that the expressed hopes and goals of the author can realistically be obtained, I have my sincere doubts that they can be.

6. *Rortian postliberalism*

This chapter returns us to a consideration of the work of Richard Rorty, via Lucian Blaga, one of the strongest aspects of this book. As the author states:

Creativity, emotion, feeling and will have significant roles in post-liberalism. In this sense, we are evoking once more the closeness between the philosophy of Richard Rorty and the philosophy of Lucian Blaga, a closeness that can be fully understood from the perspective of the important role given to creativity and subjectivity. The Romanian philosopher is led by a 'belief about the uniqueness of the human being'. Moreover, 'man [the human being] is a being who, in his eminently human capacity, exists in a certain horizon and for a certain purpose; man appears to us, by his purpose, engaged in an ontological way that separates him from the animals by a nothing less than an abyss: man exists in the horizon of mystery and in the intention of revelation. The result of this existential mode are the creations (...) Any creation of culture, from a poem to a metaphysical idea, from an ethical thought to a religious myth is in itself a small world, a universe. (...) 'Society' is, in the final analysis and in its most secret principle, a form of coexistence [emphasis added] that does not exist in order to (simply) be; it is a form of coexistence for the production of 'spiritual' universes (emphasis added) (pp. 291-92).

However, while it is very clear that the consequences of pragmatism show that we can make the world of others' experiences more satisfying in relation to our own projects, interests, goals and hopes, I hold this happy equilibrium is more likely to be achieved on an individual basis and not a collective one. The author agrees with me here (somewhat), stating:

A source of misunderstandings was also the approach of 'public-private distinction'. The simplest way to understand the relativization, but not the annulment of this distinction from the perspective of Richard Rorty, is to interpret things precisely from the neopragmatist perspective with an emphasis on praxis and the narrative dimension. Quite simply, both the praxis and the narrative dimension are what correlate both the private and the public sphere. The ironist, as a human type, represents the most likely individual type to achieve the ironist culture (i.e. a more genuinely liberal and somewhat a more just society, from Rorty's perspective), is still an individualistic liberal and can be understood as well as an entrepreneurial spirit. (p. 296)

The main issue or challenge not addressed here is how this high hope of a humane collective politics can survive when the inertia of institutions and their operating principles (especially unstated covert ones), works precisely against such a goal in lieu of 'special interests', and have the upper hand because of manipulation by presently powerful, anti-democratic governments. 'The personal is political' stance does not avoid this dilemma, indeed, it compounds it, in my view, and my fear is that an ironist, unless very well placed in the hierarchy of powers, can be ignored or sanctioned.

7. *An interpretation of postliberalism through the 'pragmatic turn', 'the paradigms of difference, reforming ideologies' and the symbolic forms*

This complex chapter attempts to walk the reader through the many variations and contestations of 'representation'. The author refers to 'paradigms of difference' and its relation to the pragmatic turn in

philosophy, a turn taken to transcend the modernism that preceded it and makes its foundation from which it seeks liberation:

Postliberalism based on pragmatic turn is a response to the crisis of rationality, a result of rediscovering difference – a solution found in the spirit of embracing multiple options and in contradiction and contrast with the simplistic view of democratic egalitarianism (on a horizontal symbolic dimension) or hierarchies in communication between people (on a symbolic vertical dimension). Without the interest of completing truly an exhaustive big picture, we easily notice among the new concepts that are imposed in postliberalism, such as, holism, eclecticism, procedural bias, textual interest, along with the Rortian ones: rhetoric, irony, indeterminacy, liberalism, communitarianism, pluralism, solidarity. (p. 305)

Similar to Kenneth Boulding, the author gives close attention to the centrality to the concept of the image. On one hand, she even points to the possible ‘divinity’ of the image. Yet, in the next paragraph she then states, that in the view of both pragmatism and neopragmatism, this ‘crisis of representation’ loses its stake, because the Platonic essence on which it depends no longer holds true. If this is the case, then competing political projects and their incommensurate goals can only be regulated by existing ‘norms and legal structures’, which can change quickly. And not always for the best reasons.

The only optimistic note is when the author points to is a ‘symbolic-poetic invasion’ that can somehow survive and undermine cynical power plays in the political sphere. Only in this way do I agree that postliberalism can, in her words, create ‘lasting ideas’ in society, among other concrete settings.

8. Other perceptions on postliberalism, different from the Rortian ones

In this chapter, the author turns to consideration of authors writing about postliberalism from a top-down perspective. Beginning with Foucault, she considers the work of two professors (Laurence McFalls & Mariella Pandolfi) who wrote a series of articles discussing Foucaultian concepts of governance, wherein they admit that postliberalism ‘is a fragile social construct’. Instead, as she shows, in a frightening probable counter-scenario:

In this case important is governability and it is logically oriented extremely different, towards the multiplication and radicalization of control mechanisms (as fundamental as possible) dedicated to governing human life. ‘Even ontologically, this sort of postliberalism redefines the human experience, replacing the selfish liberal subject and the neoliberal entrepreneur with the self that Michael Dillon and Julian Reid call ‘biohuman’ (p. 340).

This stark concept is then linked to illustrations of therapeutic governance, all governed by the ‘logic’ of the marketplace. But this logical foundation of global systems found its Achilles Heel in the financial crisis of 2008, in my view. The abandonment of a coherent liberal governing order in favour of a postliberal one that seeks only to manage ‘chaos’ with fallible experts will be, as the author said, ‘short-term and short-lived’. Key quote: ‘Postliberalism that has in its conceptual centre the idea of biohuman it is a type of humanitarianism but not humanism’ (p.346). Given an international stage with much disarray and crises galore, the challenge of converting [an increasing] number of ‘ungovernable individuals’ into ‘manageable populations’ becomes central. As she concludes, ‘hence is issued the need for strategies for intervention and preparation of populations for adequacy to post-liberal leadership’ (p. 346).

CONCLUSIVE DISCUSSION: *On the evolution, involution and revolution of contemporary times*

The author concludes the main text of the book by observing alongside Ernesto Laclau, ‘that the revolution of our times develops around a theoretical-practical axis represented by the revolutionary transformation of society, which involves ideological commitment and long-term activism, with a pronounced expressiveness in the antagonisms transposed discursively’ (p. 347). Despite its high ideals and goals in reforming empiricism following Plato and Descartes, pragmatism not only challenged ‘tradition’ in a productive knowledge-building direction, but also in a sceptical or cynical direction too. ‘Truth’, the author states, ‘is approached pragmatically as sum of statements – as functional, established, validated and justified in a coherent way statements –, but not as a principled ultimate foundation, nor as correspondence, and, not through the prism of rationality. Neopragmatism supports coherence, and it inherits and continues the

epistemological directions drawn by pragmatism. The central value of the functionality and use of postliberal pragmatism and neopragmatism is nuanced by pluralism and a pluralistic ethics valid epistemologically and socio-politically' (p. 348).

Most tellingly, given our sad state of current affairs in the world, the author, despite her innate positive mindset about a humane left emancipatory version of postmodernism and postliberalism as articulated by Rorty, realizes it is 'increasingly an outdated concern' (p. 348), following the lead of 'national liberation' thinkers such as Michael Waltzer, and leading to the 'rhetorical foundations of society' as theorized by Laclau. As the author summarizes the idea:

The theory of rhetoric foundation of society elaborated by Ernesto Laclau establishes the general, ontological status of rhetoric and through it, a subtle correlation between ontologic and oneiric level, in which the oneiric level is constituted as a resource for the ontological one. In the context of this theory, 'politics' is [a process of] articulation of heterogeneous elements and this articulation is essentially tropological, because it presupposes the duality between the establishment and undermining of the positions of differentiation that we consider defining for rhetorical intervention. But social organization is not exclusively political: it largely consists of differentiating positions that are not challenged by any confrontation between social groups. (p. 352)

Upsetting (or reactivating) this 'sedimentation' of social structures is the point of politics, according to Laclau. Technocratic management exists to prevent this process of occurring, leading to a 'dissolution of politics' in his view. So, the author of this encompassing work of social and political theorizing ends on an ambiguous note:

[T]he dissolution of politics in community management, or the fact that democratic deficit is followed by democratic involution, in the sense of increased control, is exactly what we live today, all over the globe, at the dawn of a new Weltanschauung, emerging, so fast, with its long shadow of fear and the potential of passivity inducement, loneliness, de-socialization, as well as the deformation and reduction to bio- of the human ontological mode. With the nostalgia of dedication to Geist, within the "horizon of mystery" (Lucian Blaga), we notice that Rortian postliberalism (although neopragmatism not so much), already represents the 'old'; although it is something "old" with a special statute, paradoxically, still contemporary. (p. 352)

ANNEXES:

1. The political self — discursive interpretations

2. Reforming ideologies as a paradigm and a political stake

Reading the conclusions in the first article that forms one-half of the Annexes, I am reminded of the work of George Kelly on philosophical alternativism, i.e., 'to the living creature, then, the universe is real, but it is not inexorable unless he chooses to construe it that way'. The author states: 'The accent of this is placed on the interpretation of the concept of the 'political self', in correlation with the explicit and implicit idea of self-determination, and an implicit contribution for the discussion of personal freedom'. She continues: 'Social reality becomes political not only by the descriptions of the designated political actors and of the specialists in politics in politics (or the analysts) but by the first-hand experimentation of the world by the daily efforts of the individual' (p. 372).

In the second article in the annexes, the link the author makes between feminism and ironism is very welcome. Usually, feminism, as a school of thought, has not been known for its ability to analyse itself in a detached way. So, bringing feminism into a dialectical relationship with ironism is a welcome step forward. Such a synthesis of individual seriousness and collective playfulness will in my view, be the only thing that can keep the postliberal political project a humane one. Thanks to these annexes, I can now close my review of this important book on a more positive note than I had thought possible.

In summation, a very worthy read, substantial and challenging.

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