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The philosophical wager of Ricœurian hermeneutics

Abstract: This chapter unpacks the “philosophical wager” underlying Ricœurian hermeneutics. Going back to *Freud and Philosophy* and the discovery of the conflict of interpretations, Marcelo emphasizes the origin of Ricœur’s perspectivism and “enlarged standpoint.” He puts forward a possible development stemming from Michael Walzer’s model of a “connected critic.” This progressive hermeneutics tackles some of the social and political challenges stemming from concrete, existing societies. Drawing from *Freud and Philosophy* (alongside the *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, *Oneself as Another* and *The Course of Recognition*) two examples of progressive hermeneutics become apparent: 1) that of a “critical hermeneutics of populism” and 2) that of a political transformation that is “real utopian”, that is, partially achievable by approximating the space of experience and the horizon of expectation (to borrow Koselleck’s notions that Ricœur also uses) by breaking up the proposed utopia in a series of intermediary goals. Marcelo argues that the ontological and epistemological dimensions of Ricœur’s philosophical wager have ethico-political implications for a hermeneutics deeply rooted in our social world and that this hermeneutics bears potential for progressive social transformation.

1 Introduction

This paper aims to assess the “philosophical wager” underlying Ricœurian hermeneutics. In fact, the notion of “wager” (*pari*), which is reminiscent of Pascal’s take on the belief in God, could perhaps be considered an “operative concept” (to borrow Eugen Fink’s terminology) in Paul Ricœur’s philosophy, insofar as he used it often to clarify his own stance on a wide array of philosophical matters. Was this just a casual choice of a word that became idiosyncratic, or is it rather indicative of some underlying traits of his philosophy that run deeper?

Indeed, what is a wager? A semantic clarification of this act reveals it as a decision made in a context of uncertainty and in which one risks something; de-

Note: This article was supported by the Foundation for Science and Technology, FCT, I.P. under the postdoctoral grant (SFRH/BPD/102949/2014), the ‘norma transitória’ junior researcher contract signed under the (D.L. 57/2016) and the CECH-UC project: UIDB/00196/2020.

pending on the outcome, one can win, or lose, what is at stake: material possessions, the future of a personal or collective (political, cultural, social) project endowed with and justified by a certain set of values, or even oneself. Unlike the Faustian pact, a wager does not have to involve a bargain, but the stakes can also be high. Indeed, if the result of the wager is unknown (or even unknowable) and yet one continues to act accordingly, out of respect for what is wagered, not only does this involve some sort of existential attitude and ethical positioning, but it can also, in the case of a “philosophical wager”¹ have ontological and epistemological consequences.

In what follows, I want to unpack some of the dimensions and consequences implicitly involved in the wager behind Ricœurian hermeneutics. In the first section, I recall some of the dimensions it shares with other strands of ontological hermeneutics (e.g., Heideggerian or Gadamerian hermeneutics²) such as the fact of being a philosophy of finitude, as well as some of the aspects in which Ricœur innovates, e.g., in his systematic exploration of imagination, in the emphasis on the hermeneutical act of reception, or on the way in which he ties hermeneutic imagination with a philosophy of action.

In the second section I explore what to me is the epistemological key behind this philosophical wager: going back to *Freud and Philosophy* and the discovery

1 Readers acquainted with Ricœur’s vocabulary will recognize this intriguing concept of ‘wager’ as being distinctive of his philosophical style. The concept appears often when Ricœur is alluding to contexts in which beliefs and choices are involved. See, for instance, the conclusion of *The Symbolism of Evil* where, for the first time, some of the implications of Ricœur’s hermeneutic turn are unpacked, notably the fact that this is a philosophy “with presuppositions” (i.e., involving a belief and a choice, in a context in which objective knowledge is not possible): “Such is the *wager*. Only he can object to this mode of thought who thinks that philosophy, to begin from itself, must be a philosophy without presuppositions. A philosophy that starts from the fulness of language is a philosophy with presuppositions. To be honest, it must make its presuppositions explicit, state them as beliefs, wager on the beliefs, and try to make the wager pay off in understanding” (Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 357). Ricœur would then go on to use this concept many times, for instance when discussing religion, faith or attestation. In this paper I am arguing that his hermeneutic philosophy does involve a wager, whose implications I unpack in the next sections of the text.

2 In this paper I am not developing an analysis of Heidegger’s or Gadamer’s hermeneutics but suffice it to say that after Heidegger’s seminal analyses of the 1920s hermeneutics is radicalized as an ontological project, a “Hermeneutics of facticity” in which the question of Being reappears in full force. In the wake of Heidegger, Gadamer develops the ontological implications of hermeneutics in *Truth and Method* and in both these hermeneutical projects the methodological aspects are somewhat brushed aside. This problem will receive a different treatment by Ricœur: as I briefly develop in §2 below, Ricœur’s hermeneutics grafts a project of methodological explanation onto the ontology of understanding.

of the conflict of interpretations, I want to emphasize that this is the origin of Ricœur's perspectivism and "enlarged standpoint," which is, to my mind, one of the most significant originalities of Ricœurian hermeneutics, and which helps to explain the multiple foci of attraction of this complex and wide-reaching philosophy. To state it in a few words: by recurring to the conflict of interpretations as a methodological tool, Ricœur's philosophy is able to shed new light on the phenomena it analyzes, not by discarding or simply synthesizing the rival interpretations on these phenomena, but by dialectically mediating between them and putting forward new, original interpretations stemming from the conflictual process itself.

Finally, in the third section, I put forward a possible development stemming from Ricœurian hermeneutics, that of an ethico-political involvement of what Michael Walzer (1987) would call a "connected critic,"³ and which is, to my mind, a possibility laid open by Ricœur: a so-called "progressive hermeneutics" tackling some of the social and political challenges stemming from concrete, existing societies. This is, to be sure, my own finite interpretation and appropriation of a possibility that is present in Ricœur's philosophy; I do not mean to claim that Ricœur would spell it out exactly in these terms; but I do want to argue that, given the philosophical framework he left us, and insofar as he stressed in his philosophical anthropology and his theory of recognition that hermeneutics not only has to do with texts, but also with actions—even though "meaningful action" can also be "considered as a text"⁴—, that this is a possibility that we can take up and constantly renew.

I then offer a few examples of this "progressive hermeneutics" that we could develop within a Ricœurian framework in order to tackle current social challenges, and specifically with the help of some insights to be found in *Freud and Philosophy* (alongside the *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, *Oneself as Another* and *The Course of Recognition*): 1) that of a critical hermeneutical approach of phenomena such as democracy, migration and populism; and 2) that of a political transformation that is "real utopian," i.e., able to denaturalize the currently instituted social reality and inspire something to come, not by being escapist, but

3 In Michael Walzer's *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, Walzer offers a powerful description of the "connected critic": he who is not (intellectually or emotionally) detached from the social reality which is being analyzed and criticized because he is immanently arguing from the inside of such social reality (39). In other words, the connected critic does not aim at an impartial standpoint because he acknowledges his interest in taking part in social change, for the sake of the common good. I believe that such a positioning can be shared by the Ricœurian wager I am unpacking here.

4 Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*.

partially achievable by approximating the space of experience and the horizon of expectation (to borrow Koselleck's notions that Ricœur also uses), breaking up the proposed utopia in a series of intermediary goals.⁵ When discussing this progressive character of hermeneutics, I also draw on Vattimo and Zabala.⁶

It might be argued that I am spelling out the ontological (§1) and epistemological (§2) dimensions of Ricœur's philosophical wager, while also drawing some of its possible ethico-political implications for a hermeneutics deeply rooted in our social world and somehow willing to transform it (§3). It goes without saying that this is no more than a tentative project that does not, in any way, deplete the possibilities of this rich and complex hermeneutics; other, radically different takes on this wager are possible. But insofar as the hermeneutic process of interpretation, reception and reinterpretation is infinite, and given the fact that, to paraphrase Ricœur's famous statement on Hegel,⁷ we think *after* Ricœur, I want to offer this possible interpretation to discussion.

2 Ricœur's hermeneutics: Finite, critical and imaginative

This book delves in the intricacies of *Freud and Philosophy*. However, in order to provide some context to the way in which the main findings *Freud and Philosophy*, and then the overall notion of the conflict of interpretations, are grafted into Ricœur's philosophical framework, it is perhaps useful to recall some of the main traits of his hermeneutics. This is not an extensive list of these traits, and I concentrate only on three of the most fundamental: 1) it is a hermeneutics of finitude (and this is a fundamental ontological trait, insofar as we are finite beings); 2) it is a "critical hermeneutics"; 3) it is a hermeneutics of imagination extending to encompass the domain of human action.

On closer inspection, it is noteworthy that each of these characteristics is somehow a deepening of a Kantian philosophical attitude. Indeed, at one point, Ricœur even ties the intrinsic limitation of any hermeneutics of selfhood to an alleged Kantian affiliation of all types of hermeneutics: "I would say today that all hermeneutics are Kantian to the degree that the powerlessness of self-knowledge is the negative counterpart of the necessity to decipher signs given in me and outside me. It is the limited character of self-knowledge which impos-

⁵ Ricœur, *From Text to Action*, 221.

⁶ Vattimo and Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*.

⁷ Ricœur, *Time and Narrative* III, 206.

es the indirect strategy of interpretation.”⁸ In a way, the Kantian framework is itself a wager, and one that guides the self-professed philosophical agnosticism that we find in the last paragraph of *Oneself as Another*⁹ (and which is affirmed in spite of Ricœur’s adherence to Protestantism, as is well known); it is the wager on the limits of human knowledge, and to what “reason” can legitimately aspire to know.

Each of these three traits needs to be unpacked. First, Ricœurian hermeneutics is, as stated, a *philosophy of finitude*, in the wake of Kant, Heidegger or Gadamer. This is understood as a caveat against all philosophical onto-epistemological pretensions to place philosophers in a position of epistemological certainty and superiority that would ultimately aim at “absolute Knowing.” This is the centerpiece of Ricœur’s “Post-Hegelian Kantianism” as it is defined in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, and it places Hegel as the main target of critique; as Ricœur explicitly stated in his famous *Cours sur l’herméneutique*: “entre le savoir absolu et l’herméneutique il faut choisir,” that is, one must choose between hermeneutics and absolute Knowing.¹⁰ In the last chapter of the last volume of *Time and Narrative*, titled “Should we renounce Hegel?”¹¹ Ricœur makes clear his refusal of the possibility of a total mediation, to grasp the “eternal present,” to decipher the supreme plot. And this applies not only to Hegel but to all those, like Althusser (or Marx, in Althusser’s and other readings) would argue for some sort of “epistemological break” after which the theoretician would be able to see reality scientifically and somehow discern the laws of history. A major consequence for Ricœur is that the future can never be anticipated, and this entails the radical novelty of human action (a view he shares with, and was partially inspired by, Hannah Arendt) and the need to respond to the uniqueness of events in their radical singularity.

Second, as it has been emphasized by Thompson and others, and theorized by Ricœur, this is a *critical* hermeneutics.¹² And this means that it not only aims at the rehabilitation of traditions and the creative reinterpretation and reconstruction of meaning; rather, it is also interested in making phenomena pass the criteria of critique (again a Kantian resonance), as is the case of the universalization test of the moral rule that the ethical aim is forced to pass in the eighth study of *Oneself as Another*. It should be noted, however, that Ricœur was not a

⁸ Ricœur, “Foreword,” in Ihde, *Hermeneutic Phenomenology*, xvi.

⁹ Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 355–356.

¹⁰ Ricœur, *Cours sur l’herméneutique*, 228.

¹¹ Ricœur, *Time and Narrative* III, 193–206.

¹² See Thompson, *Critical Hermeneutics* and Ricœur, “Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology,” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 63–100.

full-fledged universalist, rather preferring to speak of the “inchoative universal” that need contextual and historical intersubjective recognition in order to be effective.¹³ This also has important social consequences, as it puts Ricoeurian hermeneutics in the neighborhood of Critical Theory, which is tantamount to admitting that this hermeneutics has emancipatory goals. When applied to the will of living together “with and for others in just institutions” (to borrow the phraseology of the little ethics of *Oneself as Another*) this critical hermeneutics thus also points to the need of a critique of unjust social institutions or given political situations. And in what comes down to the properly hermeneutical act of appropriation of a given theory or phenomenon, it emphasizes not a merely passive reception but rather an active and creative co-creation of meaning, insofar as, in the world of the reader, every interpretation is a new interpretation and this, in turn, singularly enriches the world of the text.

Third, and this has been explored in depth before by Kearney, Amalric and others, this hermeneutics is intrinsically tied to a theory of imagination, and one cannot comprehend the creativity this hermeneutics contains without grasping the way in which it redefines and expands reality through the grasping of “basic metaphoricity” (in *The Rule of Metaphor*), refiguration (in *Time and Narrative*) or the panoply of possibilities laid out for human action through the dialectics between ideologies and utopias in the *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*.¹⁴ One possible framing to understand how this works is to recall that the limits to the game of interpretation are provided by Kantian antinomies (in what Ricoeur calls Kant’s “philosophy of limits”) but that within this horizon, this “*aire de jeu*,” hermeneutical imagination expresses the creative theoretical reinterpretation of the phenomena it deals with. This ranges from a hermeneutics of selfhood that takes the “long detour” of the several mediations of the conflicting theories of the self, to a social hermeneutics such as the one I will invoke in the third section of this chapter, not forgetting applied hermeneutics such as textual hermeneutics in several domains, e.g., in law, philosophy, literature and others. And while I cannot delve here, given the limited space of this chapter, on the specifics of this hermeneutic imagination, I do want to briefly explicate the main mechanism underpinning this operation, which is that of the conflict of interpretations.

¹³ See Ricoeur, *Reflections on the Just*, 247, and Marcelo, “The Conflict Between the Fundamental, the Universal and the Historical.”

¹⁴ See Kearney, “Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutic Imagination,” and Amalric, *Paul Ricoeur, l’imagination vive*.

3 *Freud and Philosophy and The Conflict of Interpretations: The making of an enlarged perspectivism*

When it was published in 1965, *Freud and Philosophy* did not receive the credit it was due. This was certainly caused by episodic reasons, such as Lacan's sour reception of the book.¹⁵ But this is certainly a very important book for a variety of reasons. To name only a few: the fact that it was one of the first comprehensive interpretations of Freud's works through a philosophical lens; the key discovery of the "semantics of desire" connecting force and meaning within human psyche and its reverberations for every project of a "carnal hermeneutics."¹⁶ More importantly, for my own proposal here, *Freud and Philosophy* provides the first conceptualization of a conflict of interpretations, through a dialectics between hermeneutics as an exercise of suspicion and hermeneutics as a recollection of meaning, or between archaeology and teleology.

Let us recall that in this first stage of Ricœurian hermeneutics, and which comes in the wake of the *Symbolism of Evil*, hermeneutics is defined as having to do with the overdetermination of symbols: Ricœur speaks about the double (or multiple) meaning of symbols, and of the dialectics between patent meaning and latent meaning; or as Ricœur sometimes calls it, the "semantics of the shown-yet-concealed,"¹⁷ in which an important part of hermeneutics becomes that of "*unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning.*"¹⁸ Ricœur thus understands hermeneutics as being marked by "the confrontation of hermeneutic styles" and "the critique of the systems of interpretation" leading up to the "arbitration among the absolutist claims of each of the interpretations" whose methods are only justified "within the limits of [their] own theoretical circumscription," this being a part of the "critical function" of hermeneutics.¹⁹ In other words, this is the conflict of interpretations.

As Ricœur would make clearer in the second stage of his hermeneutics, in the 1980s, each method will be given a task to explain more, so that we can understand better. Hermeneutics as an exercise of suspicion will not, for instance,

¹⁵ See Dosse, *Paul Ricœur: les sens d'une vie*, in particular Chapter 29, "La levée des boucliers des lacaniens."

¹⁶ Marcelo, "Ricœur on the Body."

¹⁷ Ricœur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 12.

¹⁸ Ricœur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 13 (emphasis original).

¹⁹ Ricœur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 15.

deplete the meaning of a given symbol, such as the Oedipus symbol; its psychoanalytical interpretation will be only one among many (and Ricœur contrasts it with the Hegelian reading in which self-consciousness is to be sought after teleologically in the succession of figures through which meaning is revealed), even though it can be invaluable for our own self-understanding. As Ricœur beautifully puts it, “[t]rue symbols contain all hermeneutics.”²⁰

Now, as I have argued before,²¹ this is not an argument for relativism, but it does contain, in a nutshell, some sort of perspectivism. Not all theories are equally valid, or equally able to explain the phenomena at hand. But within certain constraints, which are to be provided by the adoption of plausibility criteria (in *Interpretation Theory*, for instance, Ricœur invokes Hirsch’s logics of probability to argue that the procedures of validation of interpretations are akin to “qualitative probability” rather than empirical verification²²), some theories will be able to fill each other’s gaps, uncover each other’s blind spots and therefore give way to an “enlarged perspective” on the same phenomena.

This is to say that a reductionist, psychoanalytical account of religious phenomena will never be able to “explain away” religion; but that, at the same time, there are significant dimensions of the religious experience that might only be uncovered by a psychoanalytical approach. Or, as Ricœur frequently claimed, critiques and convictions are not incompatible. In *Freud and Philosophy*, Ricœur makes this clear in the dialectics between suspicion and recollection of meaning. In this particular occasion, Ricœur starts by defining the procedure of recollection of (religious) meaning as being grounded in the phenomenology of religion: “Phenomenology is its instrument of hearing, of recollection, of restoration of meaning. ‘Believe in order to understand, understand in order to believe’—such is its maxim; and its maxim is the ‘hermeneutic circle’ itself of believing and understanding.”²³ And Ricœur goes so far as to ground “confidence in language” in this (religious) belief: “the belief that language, which bears symbols, is not so much spoken by men as spoken to men”²⁴ (a claim that is at odds with the religious agnosticism professed in *Oneself as Another*; this shift has reasons dealing with the evolution of his philosophy and its reception). And without trust in language, Ricœur would go on to argue in *Oneself as Another*, it is the intersubjective link itself that gets broken.

²⁰ Ricœur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 23.

²¹ Marcelo, “Perspectivismo e Hermenêutica.”

²² Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory*, 78.

²³ Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 28.

²⁴ Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 30.

However, Ricoeur's fundamental discovery in this book, as far as I am concerned, is really the common features shared by the philosophies "of suspicion" as he calls them, those of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. According to Ricoeur, the main locus of their attack is on consciousness, and namely on the notion of "false consciousness": "The philosopher trained in the school of Descartes knows that things are doubtful, that they are not such as they appear; but he does not doubt that consciousness is such as it appears to itself; in consciousness, meaning and consciousness of meaning coincide. Since Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, this too has become doubtful. After the doubt about things, we have started to doubt consciousness."²⁵

And Ricoeur credits these masters of suspicion with the true invention of "an art of interpreting," insofar as seeking meaning involves not a direct, intuitive, and transparent access to our own selfhood, but rather a need to decipher its expressions.²⁶ Now, this is of the utmost importance for Ricoeur's perspectivism, because, in its critical function, it is the hermeneutics of suspicion that enlarges our perspective. Without it, we would take patent meaning at face value; with it, we are forced to engage in some sort of depth hermeneutics and to go beyond our own (often deceptive) certitudes.

In fact, for Ricoeur, already at this point, the crisis opened up by the masters of suspicion had as its result the fact that there was no general hermeneutics: "there exists no general hermeneutics. This aporia sets us in movement: would it not be one and the same thing to arbitrate the war of hermeneutics *and* to enlarge reflection to the dimensions of a critique of interpretations? Is not by one and the same movement that reflection can become concrete reflection *and* that the rivalry between interpretations can be comprehended, in the double sense of the term: justified by reflection and embodied in its work?"²⁷ It is noteworthy that Ricoeur is already pointing to a critique of interpretations (with the metaphor of the arbitration) and at the same time to a reflective philosophy of selfhood mediated by a hermeneutics—at this point in time still a hermeneutics of symbols.

In the third part of *Freud and Philosophy*, significantly called "dialectic," and which is certainly one of its most innovative parts, Ricoeur concedes that he does not want to posit an overarching theory capable of reconciling language with itself;²⁸ but he does want to go beyond the antithetic between the different theories by putting forward a dialectic between Freud's archeological model and He-

²⁵ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 33.

²⁶ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 33.

²⁷ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 55–56.

²⁸ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 343.

gel's teleological model. Now, this is an interesting way to frame the hermeneutics of selfhood, because it takes stock of the need of a certain "dispossession" (with Freud) and thus reveals the "wounded cogito."²⁹ Freud discovers repressed desire and (according to Ricœur) its tension to be expressed in language. But, on the other hand, for Ricœur "in order to have an *archê* a subject must have a *telos*."³⁰ To become conscious involves to appropriate meaning and this is also, in a way, a path. Thus, he recovers Hegelian teleology (and namely the one to be found in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*) and grafts it into Freudian archaeology. Therefore, the struggle for recognition is incorporated as a way to attain, through its twists and turns, some sort of partial self-consciousness. It must be stressed that this is only the internalization of a process that for Hegel was metaphysical and for Ricœur is not; we could even call it (in postmetaphysical terms, and extending it to cover not only self-consciousness but also the processes of consciousness formation through intersubjective interaction, as well as the making up of institutions themselves and even the social world) a "grammar of recognition" that unfolds in different spheres of the "desire of desire" and its struggles—and here I find myself in the vicinity of Axel Honneth (1992).

Ultimately, in *Freud and Philosophy*, Ricœur aims to uphold the possibility of a recovery of meaning after the traversal of suspicion. But this is not tantamount to depriving the hermeneutics of suspicion of its legitimacy and role within what I call Ricœur's rule-based perspectivism. Suspicion is useful to force critique and lead us to think more and think better. And also to come up with new solutions to given problems; and this ultimately even leads us to the teleological nature of (personal and collective) projects themselves.

Before coming to the last section of this chapter, I want to emphasize one of the striking features of the philosophical wager of Ricœurian hermeneutics that this passage through *Freud and Philosophy* and *The Conflict of Interpretations* revealed: and this is the philosophical humility of constantly seeking the blind spots of one's own perspective, in order to enlarge it and get a better and more comprehensive understanding. This was certainly a personal trait pertaining to Ricœur's attitude and his vision of what serious philosophical work en-

²⁹ The topic of the "wounded" (*blessé*) or "broken" (sometimes translated as "shattered," i.e., *brisé*) cogito runs from *Freedom and Nature* to *Oneself as Another*, while also being important in *Freud and Philosophy* and *The Conflict of Interpretations*. It means the condition of the cogito, or the subject, after having been 'decentered,' i.e., after having lost its status of master of himself and having come to doubt consciousness, free will, and even its own existence and capacities, after the critiques of the so-called "masters of suspicion." For a more detailed account of this problem, see the Introduction to *Oneself as Another*, "The Question of Selfhood."

³⁰ Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 459.

tailed. But what I am arguing, and this without wanting to completely conflate the subjective level of the author's intention with the work itself, is that there is a correspondence between the personal attitude and the objective dimension of the work. This is, I think, clear in the second hermeneutical phase that is best captured in *From Text to Action*, because Ricœur contends that the world of the reader is enriched by the world of texts, and that the interpretation of a given text is made up of the several readings it has received. This also entails a dialectic between sedimentation and innovation and, sure enough, there is room for creativity; but if interpretation is potentially infinite, and if rules for judging on interpretations need to be laid out, one equally important aspect is the openness to other viewpoints that this philosophical humility allows.

4 The hermeneutician in the world: Ethico-political implications of a progressive hermeneutics

In this section I want to depart from the ontological and epistemological dimensions of Ricœur's philosophical wager that we analyzed before and come to a personal development of its ethico-political implications. Ricœur was not really preoccupied with devising an overarching theory of interpretation, nor was he only dealing with the intricacies of textual and cultural interpretation. On the contrary, in his reflections on philosophical anthropology, ethics, politics, philosophy of action, justice and even history—that is to say, in the several aspects and ramification of his practical philosophy—he dealt with what we could call the situation of the hermeneutician in the world, and with the manner in which theory could contribute to envisage a “just” or even, to use a thicker concept, a “good” society. Indeed, through the deep Aristotelian rooting of his ethics and philosophical anthropology, Ricœur did not shy away from providing existential or even political indications as to what we should do to orient ourselves in the world. And I want to build on this latent possibility in Ricœur's philosophy.

In order to do so, we can start by recalling a simple fact: hermeneutics is not, and can never pretend to be, “neutral.” That is, hermeneutics is value-laden. It works with beliefs, preconceptions, choices and values; it serves to analyze, explicate, and sometimes to denaturalize and challenge them. But it is more than merely descriptive philosophy and sometimes, when it operates, it does so with very specific goals in mind, according to the values that animate it. As I already recalled, for instance, the project of a “critical hermeneutics” is, like other crit-

ical theories, and namely the ones put forward in the tradition of the Frankfurt school, animated by an overall goal of emancipation.

Acknowledging this might bring us to some interesting conclusions, even if they might sound counterintuitive at first glance. A few years ago, Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala argued that hermeneutics is actually progressive in nature. And why? According to these authors, unlike descriptive philosophies, hermeneutics is “committed to overcoming institutionalized conventions, norms and beliefs” precisely because it is a “politics of interpretation” with “emancipatory goals.”³¹ Rejecting naïve objectivism which, according to Vattimo and Zabala, almost always plays into the hands of those who are actually holding power (insofar as merely describing reality can in fact be a *parti pris* in favor of a conservative standpoint that wants to leave things exactly as they are, unchanged) hermeneutics is “a force pushing for change,” a “weak thought” (insofar as it does not rely on scientific objectivism) that in practical terms reveals itself as being “the thought of the weak”³² in that it can contribute to identify power-relations, domination—what Ricœur would call “power-over” rather than the more fundamental “power-in-common” which is specific of the will to live together—and push for change.

Now, I do not want to argue that every hermeneutical project is *necessarily* progressive (or that it has to be so) as there can be many hermeneutical exercises that are not really political in nature, and we do not have to think too hard to be reminded of great hermeneuticians who tended to be conservative (allow me to use a euphemism in this assessment). However, my claim is that this progressive potential of hermeneutics can be put to good use in social theory, and I’ll end with a few brief examples.

There are several different methods in moral / political philosophy and social theory, ranging from constructivist approaches wagering on the epistemic power of thought experiments (e.g., Rawls’ *Theory of Justice*) and focusing on normativity to realist and /or radical social ontologies from several perspectives. But hermeneutics (or, in Walzer’s vocabulary, simply ‘interpretation’³³) situates itself somehow halfway between constructivism and realism insofar as it does

31 Vattimo and Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 76.

32 Vattimo and Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 96.

33 Walzer, in his *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, puts forward a convincing account of interpretation as the best path for moral philosophy, as against purely constructivist Kantian approaches (to which he calls “invention”) or Platonic “discovery” as some sort of revelation of the norms and principles that should guide us. When discussing social reality, Walzer argues, most of the time we are really resorting to interpretation.

not negate the role or the importance of imagination³⁴ (including in social theory) but it pretends to be solidly anchored not only in existing reality, rather also in a certain interpretation of society: indeed, it is interested in pushing for the transformation of reality. That is, it strives to acknowledge that certain existing states of affairs are contingent and adopting a strong version of interpretation, it aims at reinterpreting them in light of the specific values it puts forward. And in the version of progressive hermeneutics I am arguing for here, the values are to be understood as coming from social reality itself, but the task of the hermeneutician (or social theorist) is to help provide the best interpretation of them and, when needed, to provide arguments for transformation.

This version of hermeneutics is thus, evidently, a “critical hermeneutics” that owns up to its progressive leaning. And as I have been trying to defend in recent years, this can be a methodological toolbox to analyze and face some of the recent challenges ailing our societies today.

First, I believe that given the current challenges facing liberal democracies around the world—and that derive, on the one hand, from unfettered neoliberalism, its excesses and the social problems it causes, and on the other, from the illiberal and exclusionary rightwing populism that falsely tries to brand itself as a viable alternative to the neoliberal consensus of the last decades, but that actually embodies the threat of the destruction of democracy, we can put forward critical hermeneutics of democracy, migration or populism.³⁵ These will of course have different challenges, but in a way they are all connected, insofar as migrations or populism have to be understood also in their relation to the challenges they pose to democratic societies, and tackling these challenges necessitates an encompassing theory that also goes beyond the level of the deliberation of domestic politics and really takes stock of the transnational dynamics that rule these phenomena. To be clear: when discussing the plight of asylum seekers or so-called ‘economic migrants’³⁶ or when assessing the dynamics of the authoritarian backlash in different countries and the way these movements have an international dimension in their organization, one cannot only look to what is happening behind the closed borders of States. Rather we need to

³⁴ Indeed, imagination is given a central role in it, including for social change, for instance through utopia, which is seen as a means to imagine alternative realities in order to criticize existing social reality, as is argued in Ricoeur’s *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*.

³⁵ See Marcelo, “The Conflict Between the Fundamental, the Universal and the Historical.”

³⁶ This distinction itself is disputable, insofar as the misery plaguing many countries, often the victims of an economic world order that keeps them in a subordinate position, should be enough to consider flight from these places as being motivated by ‘humanitarian’ reasons as much as a flight of someone who is fleeing war.

take up a ‘transnational’ standpoint, and thus the discussion on the political causes behind the crisis of liberal democracy or of the duties towards migrants and other denizens has to take stock of this complicated space of flows.

As for those domestic societies themselves and the way in which these ailments of democracy have been affecting them, I contend that with its interpretive tools, hermeneutics is well suited to comprehend the contextual causes that, case by case, lead some constituencies to adhere to rightwing populism. And this has an archaeological ring to it, as what is needed is some sort of depth hermeneutics that assesses the social psychology behind rightwing populism. Furthermore, it could also apply a therapeutic model to these social ills, which can actually be considered a “social pathology.” Moreover, a way to counter the exclusionary and enemy-multiplying tendency of this sort of populism is to foster some sort of Gadamerian “fusion of horizons” as a way to really understand others, and namely those that are in a more fragile position (such as migrants, who are often scapegoated by rightwing populists).³⁷ Finally, and to add just one more element to it, I also believe that “populism” must go through a process of “critique” and that actually some political proposals that have been dubbed “populist” can contribute to deepen and renew democracy, such as those that are progressive, and to which Mouffe calls forms of “left populism,” who really just want to renew the ideals of liberal democracy (freedom and equality for all) and thus are pushing for a hermeneutic reinterpretation of them in a way that gives birth to new, more democratic and representative practices.³⁸ I thus argue that what we need is not so much to distinguish populist from non-populist proposals and completely reject the former, but just to assess the substantive content of the discourses, values and practices put forward by so-called “populist” proposals, to see which are deemed legitimate for our own liberal-democratic standpoint, and which are not, and that the hermeneutical vantage point is the most appropriate to do this.

Furthermore, I also want to claim that the current shift away from the political center, with its accompanying crisis of representation and challenge to traditional political parties is a sign of something potentially different to come. And in this it might be useful to resort to Ricoeur’s analyses of ideology and utopia. If hermeneutics does have the emancipatory potential I have been arguing, then it also involves a teleological dimension, such as the one we have seen in the first section, somehow stemming from the Hegelian analyses to be found at the end

³⁷ See Marcelo, “Towards a Critical Hermeneutics of Populism.”

³⁸ Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*; see also Marcelo, “Towards a Critical Hermeneutics of Populism.”

of *Freud and Philosophy*, but that have to be enriched. To look at present societies and refuse to accept the unjust aspects of the *status quo*, to denaturalize them and see them as contingent historical products of a certain moment in history is also tantamount to looking at these same societies as containing possibilities of renewal that can either come by means of a creative reinterpretation of their founding ideals³⁹ and ideologies or through the teleological guidance of something different; a “utopia,” if we want to phrase it in these terms, provided that it can be “real,” that is, brought by a gradual process of implementation that acknowledges the complexity of already-existing societies but carefully prepares what is to come.

This is to say that this project of transformation, which is itself hermeneutical, can have both archeological and teleological aspects; and that in Ricœurian hermeneutics we can find some of the tools to feed it. Here I am keeping my analysis at a very formal level, and therefore refusing to specify whether we are (or should be) heading to a post-capitalist, or ecological utopia—or what we should be doing to avoid the dystopia of exclusionary societies fueled by rightwing populism, fear and rejection of the others. But I am entailing that hermeneutics can have a say in these transformative processes; and this should not be a surprise. Only a project that must be taken up with renewed vigor.

5 Conclusion

In this chapter I argued that the philosophical wager of Ricœurian hermeneutics has ontological and epistemological dimensions, as well as ethico-political implications which I tried to spell out in my own attempt to combine a progressive understanding of hermeneutics with the tools that Ricœur provides us.

³⁹ One example here could be the European project, such as it is embodied in the European Union. It can be argued that at the center of the so-called ‘European social model’ there was an original ‘ideology’ justifying its distribution of power through a specific combination of free markets, defense of human rights and strong social protection. An immanent critique of such a project would today reveal how far today the EU is from those ideals, if we for instance take into account the erosion of the European welfare state through neoliberalism as well as, to give only one notable example, the way refugees have been treated in recent years against the backdrop of closed borders and strong measures focused on security. In this case, a creative reinterpretation of the EU’s guiding ideals would mean to instantiate them anew, perhaps in new forms. In terms of the reinvention of its social protection some authors—myself included—have been claiming that for instance implementing a Universal Basic Income might be a sound policy in the future.

It thus became apparent that Ricoeurian hermeneutics is a philosophy of finitude, critique and creativity, that has a political and, moreover, an emancipatory potential. Epistemologically, it is rooted in the limits provided by Kantian antinomies, and its creativity is fueled by the concrete exercises of imagination which, in turn, are grounded in the epistemological tool of the conflict of interpretations. This is evident in the domain of the hermeneutics of selfhood, but it has a more general significance for what I called Ricoeur's rule-based perspectivism, and which can be seen as applying to his theory of interpretation as a whole.

Also important, and with this I conclude, is the specific type of existential attitude that underlies it. Ricoeurian hermeneutics is actually a philosophy of *humility* that lets itself be guided by the contact with its others—i.e., its theoretical alternatives that help to provide it with an enlarged perspective, but also with its concrete others in the framing of intersubjectivity and mutual recognition that it fosters. And for all its humility, it is also sufficiently ambitious to open up new horizons, be critical and strive towards emancipation. In that, it can be edifying and provide inspiration. An inspiration that only we, who come after Ricoeur, will be able to take up.

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