ARISTOTLE, HOMER, ALEXANDER

The thinker as political educator

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Although Paul Ricoeur's thought does not multiply comments of an aesthetic nature, he does occasionally evoke paintings, literary or musical works that throw light on his own work. Such is the case with his analysis of Rembrandt's famous painting Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer.

A painting by Rembrandt

What do we see in this painting? Three figures. First of all, Aristotle, dressed in the painter's contemporary clothes, which means that philosophy is always contemporary, linked to its time, but in the sense of inactual and not of a slavish and blind following of current events in increasing need of fake news. If Aristotle changes his clothes and continues to think in times that are not those of the Greek philosophers, he is turned towards a statue-like bust, that of Homer. The poet of The Iliad and The Odyssey, who is indeed the second figure in the painting, is presented in the form of a statue, the one that represents his face, which Aristotle touches physically, tactilely, thus showing that he is in bodily contact with the rhythmic language of poetry. After Aristotle, the thinker who has become a contemporary, and Homer, the poet, the gaze turns to a third figure, Alexander, the politician whose tutor Aristotle was historically, is depicted in a medallion hanging from his waist.

If poetry, philosophy and politics go hand in hand, the triangular relationship between poetry, philosophy and politics visibly privileges language. Without language and the art of speech, which the poet symbolises, the human community could not endure. This is why philosophy, which is reflexive, second, requires all the detours of hermeneutics, which is why it is always indirect: if it decides on its beginning, it has no other object than external, science or poetry, hence the hermeneutical challenge. "Philosophy always has to deal with non-philosophy, because philosophy has no object of its own. Philosophy has its sources outside itself, but it is responsible for its point of departure, its method, its end. But if it has its point of departure, it does not have its sources (P. Ricoeur). (P. Ricoeur). If the poet speaks and preserves language with an imagination whose register is that of metaphor, this is the theme of the Living Metaphor, the philosopher's primary task is to respond to violence, which is irreducible, through discourse and deliberation, the Socratic relationship. Poetry and discourse in the face of violence: under these conditions, the task of politics is to make possible the space of a common word, a common living together, an imaginary institution of society without which poetry and philosophy disappear. The association of poetry, which is primary, philosophy and politics, Rembrandt's painting sends each of these spheres back to its own responsibility, but the polarisation on the political is not a

surplus, it is the condition of thought as well as of language. From this point of view, and echoing the colloquium, I would like to insist on the question of language in its relationship to politics. This is not without reminding us that Alexander had a preceptor, Aristotle, who invited him not only to do philosophy but to protect language.

The tasks of the political educator

In a landmark article published in 1965, Ricoeur speaks of the tasks of the political educator: These must combine a reflection on Technique (it is cumulative and without memory), on politics (it refers to the capacity to decide) and law (it stages the rules of living together that are indissociable from the democratic social contract), and on values, this last theme evoking cultural and anthropological ensembles that inscribe the will to live together in a historicity, which underlies the reflection of Time and Narrative but also of Memory, History, Forgetting. For Ricoeur, talking about post-modernity only makes sense if we understand that Tradition is a question, just as Modernity is when it claims to make a brutal break with memory. This approach makes it clear that the political educator is neither a man of doxa, of doxic belief, nor a man of political verticality or of exact Science. And that he must make possible and credible just institutions as responses and retorts to violence. Institutions that promote capability is a theme dear to Amartya Sen, often crossed and evoked by Ricoeur. This challenge is met by a multiplicity of texts on circumstances and interventions that bear witness to his daily actions on themes such as torture, illness, prison, medicine, the judicial institution, ageing, immigration, refugees, etc.

But let us not delude ourselves, if there is no other recourse than language in the face of violence, we must nonetheless recognise the weakness of political language. This weakness is perceptible on at least three levels: that of the unavoidable conflict between the plurality of values and beliefs within a state governed by the rule of law; that of the invincible plurality of the ends of 'good' government; and that of the indeterminacy of value horizons. The extreme fragility of political language, which is forever removed from a supposedly 'incontroversible', 'indisputable' knowledge, explains its vulnerability, as evidenced by the misuse of sophistry and rhetoric: indeed, political language is rhetorical not by vice but by essence. What makes its limitation is also its greatness. While reality swirls in the clouds of the internet and is apprehended by artificial intelligence, this painting by Rembrandt is more than ever ours in the sense that it reminds us that touching the bust of Homer the poet is the end of ends, and that this end has neither beginning nor commencement but an origin that is always deferred and rhymes with a humanity in the grip of inhumanity. As we have seen, Aristotle is Alexander's educator, teaching him that he must protect language, symbolised by the bust of the poet Homer, which he touches as if poetry had a bodily dimension. This rhetorical and poetic valorisation of language is offered as a recourse against a violence that does not require speech, it is the preferred option of those who want to speak well together in a public space, the choice of those who want to act in the world and not expatriate themselves in a space outside the world. To be a political educator is not only to be a committed politician or an educator, but to institute a common language within institutions.

The capacity for translatability

The painting evokes three Greek figures, but these three names could be those of an Indian poet, an Indian thinker or an Indian politician. It is up to you to imagine. The originality of Ricoeur's reflection on political action is also to suggest that a historical community, whatever it may be, has no other way out than to reinvent itself through language from within and without. "We always speak in a milieu where it has already been spoken. We are already preceded as individuals and as communities. We do not know a language that comes out of the animal cry. We are immediately in language. I have no access to this first moment of language, the problem is that of an institution that starts from nothing. We are faced with an institution that proceeds from an institution. (P. Ricoeur). On a human scale, there is no sovereign entity that can escape from other historical communities, that is to say, from the test of the foreigner that passes through the confrontation of languages and cultures, this approach is therefore inseparable from a capacity for translatability that is not only experienced in the experience of the sharing of languages but also in that of the exchange between cultures and thoughts. Ricoeur knew Arjun Appadurai and would have appreciated Dipesh Chrakrabarty, and today will be the figures of Gandhi, Sundera Rajan, Bahurupiya and Gayatri Spivak. The tasks of the political educator who values language are thus inseparable from the possibility of translation between languages that are marked by plurality. "What language shows is not only that translation has been possible but also that it has been successful. We will never be faced with a language that is absolutely untranslatable. Without translation, there would be no human species but human species like dogs and cats (P. Ricoeur).

The political paradox

These questions about violence, language and translation allow us to make progress in understanding what democratic political culture is, if we do not want to turn it into a science or a permanent statistical survey of practices. Hence the theme of the political paradox, which is stated as follows: "From the greatest rationality, that of wanting to live together, a rationality that is not technical and instrumental rationality, can arise the greatest evil, the abuses of Power. This paradox highlights the dissymmetrical relationship that values the rationality of living together, that of Rousseau's Social Contract, which has a universal dimension, power with a small p, coexistence, in relation to the excesses of State Power, that of the High, Power with a large P. The power of the Bottom that rests in democracy on the contractors is an ideality that must take a historical form, be inscribed in time, in a narrative identity, to prevent the Power of the Top from digging a gap between the contracting People and its representatives. This dissymmetrical relationship, which focuses on the excesses of political Power, has its opposite in a second vertical configuration which is no longer a hierarchical relationship of subordination or domination: this second configuration is based on the recognition of political or non-political Authorities. These two dissymmetrical relations draw for Ricoeur the circle of the political, the passage of a potentially violent hierarchical Power without will of reciprocity, and that of political or non political authorities which rest on a recognition, on a dissymmetrical reciprocity. Thus the social contract potentially advances from the non-reciprocity of Power to recognition as dissymmetrical reciprocity. And in a final step, Ricoeur evokes a third relationship which is that of cooperation, that of 'living together', that of a (non-dissymmetrical) reciprocity which symbolises times of peace, moments of non-violence.

The ideality of the social contract was misleading, living together was not born of war but of peace, of that original peace which has been forgotten, which is why the political relationship refers to an original relationship, that of living together which is of a cosmopolitical order and involves the whole of humanity through the figure of the foreigner. The institution of the social is based on an original right which, being of a pre-contractual order, is not the property of the sovereign state, which does not mean that we live outside our historical communities. This is the meaning of the political paradox: the social contract, the most grandiose rationality, is an anhistorical ideality, so it had to write a history, the one that passes through the sovereignty of the People in a democracy, through the Power of the High, and through the authorities based on non-dissymmetrical reciprocity. As a result, the reciprocity of historical living together is based on an original right that is pre-contractual: this right, which commits humanity as a whole, is that of people who want to make peace and favour states of peace. It is the right of those who believe that inhuman violence and war are not inevitable, that humans can return to themselves without being crushed by evil and monstrosity.

This is the circular nature of the political relationship: weakly oriented towards the potential violence of the state, it must protect itself against discord by valuing dissymmetrical authority relations and celebrating times of non-violence. Those that are dear to our friend Ramin Jahanbegloo. These times of non-violence have different names in Ricoeur, Hannah Arendt, Jan Patocka, the author of Charter 77 with Vaclav Havel, or Gandhi.

"A journey of recognition" of the political

Between Homer, Alexander and Aristotle, it is therefore a journey of recognition of the political that has been made: the observation of a dissymmetry between the vertical axis of politics and the horizontal axis, that of power, of the "will to live together" indissociable from the shared language that is the condition of a democratic politics, is the starting point. For Ricoeur, whose latest work is Parcours de la reconnaissance, power is that of a "will to live together" that progresses in singular historical communities in the mode of re-cognition. This is why, like Hannah Arendt, he speaks of an Authority of tradition, that of founding events and surrections, and not of the Authority of Tradition.

Since historical communities are inseparable from pluralism (pluralism of communities, of spheres of justice, of orders of magnitude), the sphere of politics, which has the task of regulating the links between heterogeneous spheres, finds a specific role and cannot be relegated to the background. But the verticality changes orientation when the vertical axis is placed under the angle of recognition which confers on the sphere of politics a regulating role.

Recognition is multiple: the re-recognition of the authority of the state, which is legitimised by those it governs; the re-recognition of non-political figures of authority such as exteriority, superiority and anteriority by those over whom they are exercised. These are all forms of re-cognition that involve the possibility of a "utopian" gap that produces a feedback effect on the historical community. The mimetic circle, the circle of circles, then takes on its full meaning: the pre-figuration of a world that is ours must be re-figured to allow a re-configuration of action.

This triple movement refers to the imaginary institution of society, which itself echoes the circle of ideology and utopia. Pre-figuration, re-figuration, re-configuration, the circle of mimesis, that which underlies the trilogy of Time and Narrative, has an "instituting" dimension. There is a spiral movement where the diversions through the other is a resource that makes progress in good. Ricoeur proceeds by turning the situation around by turning the outside inwards, from otherness to identity. Living together" necessarily involves outsides that are not revolutionary upheavals but progressions, re-understandings that allow us to believe that the common good is progressing. Far from subscribing to a formidable divide on the political level between a sovereignty closed in on itself and a supra-national cosmopolitanism, Ricoeur sees in the link between the national or federal political community and the ordeal of the foreigner a regulation that is played out at the level of a globalised horizontality. If politics has a primary capacity for regulation (that of the multiple spheres that animate a society), it is by confronting exteriority (to other sovereignties) that a political community, far from closing in on itself and exacerbating identity reflexes, takes on a universal dimension and participates in a pacified horizon. Needless to say, this reflection has strong resonances today, when identity-based nationalism is omnipresent and democracy is increasingly understood as the reinforcement of a verticality that is set against what exceeds it from the outside, the refusal of the foreigner going hand in hand with the defence of a closed identity. This unceasing democratic reinvention of the links between the horizontal and vertical axes is the nerve of Ricoeur's plot.

Although Ricoeur is wary of great men and great national narratives, he nonetheless offers valuable insights for the approach to contemporary democratic societies. By increasingly emphasising plurality and pluralism, he does not see society as a Great Whole, as unified by the High, but as a whole governed by orders of magnitude, by spheres of justice and by multiple temporalities. If I emphasised politics and thus Aristotle as a political educator, as a mediator, at the opening of this day, it was to recall his links with Alexander and Homer. To be a political educator was Paul Ricoeur's obstinacy.

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