

Ricoeur's Hermeneutics: Transforming Political Structures into Just Institutions through the Critical Appropriation of Political Power

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Abstract

In this paper, I aim to show that the critical appropriation of political power can be a potential tool in transforming political structures into just institutions. To achieve this aim, I employ Ricoeur's hermeneutics of symbols because in his different political essays, he consistently regards political power as akin to a symbol. Thus, for him, the critical appropriation of political power requires a hermeneutical procedure. And so in my discussion, I devote one section for Ricoeur's hermeneutics of symbols, one for his thoughts on political power, and another one for the critical appropriation of political power through the hermeneutics of symbols. To put Ricoeur's political and hermeneutical thoughts in a better light, I introduce these sections with a separate section on his philosophical anthropology. In my conclusion, I affirm that transforming political structures into just institutions is very much possible through the critical appropriation of political power. It is such a potential tool in effecting these transformations because the critical appropriation of political power involves a hermeneutical procedure that follows a three-step process of reflection. And reflection, which makes way for the critical appropriation of political power, is what ensures that power rests only in the hands of those who are more likely to advance the common good, resulting into a greater possibility for the transformation of political structures into just institutions.

Keywords: Ricoeur, hermeneutics, political power, political vigilance, reflection

1.0 Introduction

Since the dawn of political institutions, human factor has always been a significant contributor in the evolution of political structures. Political leaders play a crucial role in shaping political landscapes, so that if we leaf through the pages of history, it would not take us long to notice that a lot of momentous changes in human society

as a whole were due to the influence of noteworthy political figures. To name a few, we have Shih Huang-ti, who unified all of China and became its first emperor; Alexander the Great, who spread Hellenism throughout the then known world; Julius Caesar, who laid the foundations of the would-be mighty Roman Empire; Genghis Khan, who passed along to the West the use of gunpowder;

and closer to our times, we have Adolf Hitler, who instigated World War II. These men may have been military personalities, but they were at the same time true politicians. They were political leaders who happened to be adept in military science. Other than this common attribute, however, these men equally show that regardless of your racial origin, religious belief, educational attainment, etc. you can effect a great change in society when you hold political power (Deweert, 2017, p. 76).¹

What political power can effect to society, however, is not always good. History is a witness to the most horrible human atrocities and massacres committed by the politically powerful. And up until today, history's records of politically-instigated incidents of violence – whether in smaller or bigger scale – continue to add fresh entries on a daily basis across the globe. Even in religious circles, it is not uncommon to hear of power abuse. In the history of the Catholic Church, for example, there were a number of popes who were farthest from being saintly, caring only about their growing political power instead of spiritual matters. This constant possibility of sliding towards the negative clearly indicates that political power is problematic: that is, while it can be a blessing, it can also be a curse.

Given the problematic nature of political power, what could be the best thing to do to ensure that it would not be employed for sinister purposes? What could also be done to ensure that political power would be continually used to advance the common good? Such questions do not have simple answers. Be that as it may, possible appropriate answers are not wanting.

Paul Ricoeur is one of those who I believe can provide the best answers to questions concerning the problem of political power. He may not be widely considered as a political theorist by some

scholars, all the same, “the question of power is constantly present in his thinking” (Monteil, 2015, p. 227). In fact, political power has always been a topic of interest for him because he saw it as “the highest of all the levels of power” (Ricoeur, 2013, p. 18.). This explains why political power is a central concept in Ricoeur's political theory. In addition, Ricoeur (1992, p. 240) also holds that an ideal political system is one that is anchored on “just institutions.” Such an anchoring, in his view, entails “the creation of spaces of freedom which confer on the governed a structure that enables its members to pursue the aim of enduring indefinitely in the future” (Suazo, 2014, p. 707). And to create these spaces of freedom, transforming political structures – especially those that are freedom-constraining – is, without doubt, a must. So with these elements present in his political theory, Ricoeur has indubitably plenty to suggest on how to wield political power for the good of all.

In this paper, I aim to show that the critical appropriation of political power can be a potential tool in transforming political structures into just institutions.² To achieve this aim, I employ Ricoeur's hermeneutics of symbols because in his different political essays, he consistently regards political power as akin to a symbol (Ricoeur, 1965, p. 117). Thus, for him, the critical appropriation of political power requires a hermeneutical procedure. So, in my discussion, I devote one section for Ricoeur's hermeneutics of symbols, one for his thoughts on

¹ In Ricoeur's view, this is because in the normal dynamics of political affairs, “there are no decisions without political power.”

² In *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur (1992, p. 180) explicitly defines the ethical aim – that is, the ideal telos that we humans, as political beings, should strive for – in the following terms: “aiming at the good life with and for others in just institutions.” Attaining this aim presupposes political responsibility because living this “good life with and for others in just institutions” is not possible outside the framework of a political community. Thus the creation of just institutions always requires the transformation of political structures.

political power, and another one for the critical appropriation of political power through the hermeneutics of symbols. To put Ricoeur's political and hermeneutical thoughts in a better light, I introduce these sections with a separate section on his philosophical anthropology. In my conclusion, I affirm that transforming political structures into just institutions is very much possible through the critical appropriation of political power.

The significance of this study is that it provides a unique approach to Ricoeur's examination of the problem of political power, that is, by means of his hermeneutics of symbols. This study also adds fresh insights on how political structures may be transformed into just institutions through the critical appropriation of political power. Hence, Ricoeurian scholars can greatly benefit from this study as well as those scholars whose interests are in hermeneutics and politics. Philosophy enthusiasts and students will also find this study helpful especially in deepening their knowledge on Ricoeur's philosophical thoughts.

Ricoeur's Philosophical Anthropology³

Ricoeur's political philosophy is not something that suddenly appears from a vacuum; rather, it appears as a result – as a logical aftermath we can also say – of his long reflection on the fallible nature of man (Dauenhauer, 1998, p. 2). For Ricoeur, the problem of politics cannot really be divorced from the problem of human reality itself. This is why, the best starting point to arrive at a better and fuller appreciation of Ricoeur's political philosophy is his philosophical anthropology.

As he already explicated in *Fallible Man*,

⁴ Ricoeur (2016, pp. 1-20) stresses anew in "The Antinomy of Human Reality and the Problem of a Philosophical Anthropology" that deep within

man there lies a certain disproportion, a kind of duality, which points to the inherent antinomical constitution of human beings. Thus while man is capable of transcendence, of going beyond the spatio-temporal sphere of his existence, at the same time, fallible that he is, man is equally capable of descendance, of going down into the nadir of immorality and despair. Man is at the crossroads, so to speak, between two extremes, between two polarities. That is to say, man is in a sort of "middle" and therefore is always open to two opposing possibilities. This is the inherent paradox, the inner antinomical structure that constitutes every human being.

While he affirms the reality of this inner antinomical structure in man, Ricoeur argues that man – no matter how conflicted his paradoxical-antinomical nature appears to be – is fundamentally a unity. Every man is a synthesis, that is, not the opposition of this thesis and that antithesis but the dialectic of the two. For Ricoeur, however, it is not enough that we are able to understand that we are a unity. How do we live as a unity? This, for him, is a more important question. In other words, Ricoeur is more concerned about praxis, about how we concretely live our existence as a unity, as whole human beings, despite our inner antinomical makeup.

On the practical domain, Ricoeur holds that there is an essential element which we need to possess: respect. In his recently published book on

³ The main portion of this section is based on Ricoeur's essay "The Antinomy of Human Reality and the Problem of a Philosophical Anthropology." For this reason, repetitive reference to the text is no longer made.

⁴ *Fallible Man*, originally published in 1965, is one of Ricoeur's early works. Although his main focus is to explain what accounts for the fallible nature of man, one can already find in this book a number of passages where Ricoeur connects his philosophical anthropology to politics (see, for example, Ricoeur 1986, pp. 116-120).

Ricoeur, Geoffrey Dierckxsens (2018, p. 72) refers to respect as an imperative that lets us perform moral actions as a sign of our recognition of another person. Respect is thus of paramount importance in one's day-to-day existence in that it serves as "the condition for a constructive dialogue with others" (Ibid., p. 75).

Concluding "The Antinomy of Human Reality and the Problem of a Philosophical Anthropology", Ricoeur admits that notwithstanding our greatest efforts, and try as we might, we will always remain fallible human beings. We will always fail. We cannot always respect. That's because we don't only possess reason (logos); we also possess feelings (thumos). And feelings always arouse in us plenty of desires which, oftentimes, go against the dictates of reason (logos) and the universal rule of respect. Because of this, Ricoeur counsels us to regulate our feelings (thumos), to keep an eye on our affective inclinations because, obviously, this is mainly where our human fragility lies.

Logos and thumos will always be in conflict, but this is part and parcel of our antinomial structure as humans. This is where the crucial role of respect comes in. It is precisely through respect where I can show to myself, to others, and to the world that I am a unity, a "synthesis" of rationality and sensitivity. The truth is, in spite of fallibility, man is not necessarily evil. Evil is not part of human nature; it is only a constant possibility (Pellauer & Dauenhauer, 2016). Man can always act following his rationality and showing respect to his fellow humans.

Meanwhile, further into his philosophical anthropology, Ricoeur underlines that man is by nature linguistic.⁵ This suggests that "it is in and through language that man expresses himself and manifests his being; in other words, it is by means

of language that man relates with other beings and with the world" (Itao, 2010, p. 2). Thus for Ricoeur, "language plays a significant part in constructing meaning and self-understanding" (Purwadi, 2014, p. 63). And since language generally consists of words that are characteristically symbolic, a hermeneutics of language necessitates a hermeneutics of symbols (Ricoeur, 1974, p. xiv; Itao, 2010, pp. 2-3). This is the point where Ricoeur's later philosophical anthropology, which sees man as essentially linguistic, intersects with the boundary of hermeneutics.

The Paradox of Political Power

One of the earliest themes in Ricoeur's political philosophy is the paradox of politics, specifically, the paradoxical nature of political power – the theme that he explores at length in his essay which simply bears the title "The Political Paradox." The said essay is now part of Ricoeur's *History and Truth*, but it did not appear in the original 1955 edition. This is because Ricoeur wrote "The Political Paradox" only after the 1956 Hungarian Revolution whose brutalities truly and deeply moved him, urging him to pen down a carefully-thought reflection on the real possibilities of politics which he saw in the then Marxist Hungary.

In the first pages of "The Political Paradox", Ricoeur (2007, pp. 247ff.) right away reveals his personal view of political power: it is inherently paradoxical. This is due to the fact that it is fallible man who gets to possess this power and fallible man is in himself a paradox, capable of doing equally good and evil. Reflecting on human

⁵ Ricoeur's emphasis on the linguistic nature of man came after his so-called "linguistic turn" – his shift of philosophical focus from phenomenology to hermeneutics – which began in the 1960s.

fallibility, Pellauer and Dauenhauer (2016) confirm that “[t]his disproportion shows up in every aspect of human existence, from perceiving to feeling to thinking. It is evident in the human quest for possessions, power, and prestige.” As Ricoeur (2007, pp. 234ff.) notes in “State and Violence”, throughout history, man has to resort to violence for his own political survival and to perpetuate his stay in power, at times legitimizing this resort by employing violence in the name of the State. This is the reason why in general, power has come to be associated – albeit wrongly – with violence (Ricoeur, 2010, pp. 18ff.).⁶

In any case, whether we like it or not, political power has both a positive and a negative side. Ricoeur, however, cautions that for us to arrive at a wholistic reflection of political power, it is not correct to solely emphasize either its positive or its negative dimension. We need to take into account both in order preserve the paradoxical character of political power.

Ricoeur contends that the presence of political structures implies the existence of political power (Helenius, 2016, p. 122). Commenting on Ricoeur, Dauenhauer (2000, p. 78; Ricoeur 2000, pp. 80ff.) defines political power as “the power that people who belong to a geohistorical community accrue together by acting in concert to preserve and improve it.” It is fundamentally a “power in common” (Arendt, 1972, p. 143). In itself, political power is not evil; in fact, Ricoeur (2013, p. 22) even sees it as something that advances “the public good.” As Dauenhauer (1998, p. 186) opines, political power is there to prevent discord and conflict in society. It is because it arises from the “collective or shared will [of the people] to live together” in peace and harmony (Mann, 2012, p. 20). And yet, as history would also attest, it can happen that in the exercise

of such power, the ones possessing it start to dominate, constrain freedom, and inflict violence. This is an open possibility in politics because the ones in power are all fallible men; they can still go wrong (Pellauer & Dauenhauer, 2016). This is how political power becomes evil, that is, when “it becomes power over other people” (Simms, 2003, p. 124).

This is the paradox of political power: on one hand it is good, because it is necessary in holding together political structures; on the other hand it is evil, because it is prone to perversion and abuse (Simms, 2003, p. 111; cf. Ricoeur, 1998, pp. 247-270). As David Kaplan (2003, p. 131) affirms, “Political power is both rational and irrational.” For instance, we often hear of new political leaders – who are elected to serve everyone in their political domain – giving preference to their political supporters and ignoring their political opponents. From an ideal perspective, this is simply irrational; this goes against the original mandate of political leaders to serve all, not just their political supporters. As Dauenhauer (1998, p. 24) succinctly puts it, “The essential task of politics is to hold together the multiple interests and goals of its members.”

Political power thus entails both opportunity and risk (cf. Deweer, 2017, p. 38) because political power can either turn a political agent into a tyrant or into a “true magistrate” (Ricoeur 1974a, pp. 112, 114). This is why Ricoeur would advice the citizenry to be politically vigilant since in the first place, it is

⁶ Ricoeur would say, taking cue from another political philosopher Hannah Arendt, that this mistaken association of power with violence is due to the erroneous conception of politics as domination. For Arendt, domination is a wrong interpretation of the real essence of power. Power is never lording over another man; it is totally something else. Power, as the ancient Romans ideally conceived of it, is rather a common enterprise of the citizenry. In Arendt’s terminology, power is “power in common.” It should therefore – in the utopic sense – not lead to violence.

their duty to do so (Ricoeur, 1998, p. 98). It is their responsibility to see to it that political power is justly exercised (cf. Deweer, 2017, p. 40) and “kept within its boundaries” (Ricoeur, 2000, p. 80). Thus for Ricoeur (2013, p. 24), political vigilance is a “critical task.” The paradoxical nature of political power is such that foregoing political vigilance would immediately mean courting danger and perhaps even disaster. But then, what can the citizenry concretely do to ensure that their political leaders will not become megalomaniac tyrants? This is where Ricoeur’s hermeneutics can be applied.

Hermeneutics as the Interpretation of Symbols

The hermeneutical writings of Ricoeur are vast, spanning about 40 years, and they are at the same time immensely rich, prompting Don Ihde (1995, p. 59) to name Ricoeur as one of the “giants of hermeneutic philosophy.” Definitely, it is not possible to summarize Ricoeur’s hermeneutical philosophy in a few paragraphs, or even in a few pages. For the purposes of this paper, I will solely focus on Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of symbols, especially on the salient points that are applicable in the critical appropriation of political power. And this is because for Ricoeur – and which I will prove later on – political power is in a lot of ways analogous to a symbol.

Ricoeur (1974b, pp. 13ff.) originally conceived of hermeneutics as the interpretation of symbols. He even went as far as “to define, i.e. limit, the notions of symbol and interpretation through one another” (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 9). Interpretation, then, is none other than the making sense of symbols; it is “the process of deciphering the meaning of symbols” (Itao, 2010, p. 4; cf. Ricoeur 1974b, p. 13). So what are symbols?

Symbols for Ricoeur (1974b, p. 13) refer to

anything that carries double or multiple meanings. In every symbol, therefore, one will find a surface meaning as well as another underlying meaning/s. For this reason, all symbols are opaque; their underlying meaning/s are not always manifest. This opacity is what makes symbols characteristically enigmatic (Ricoeur, 1967, pp. 14-16). The question is: how are we to interpret symbols?

Ricoeur (1970, pp. 26-28) maintains that a universal method of interpreting symbols does not exist; rather, what exist are two opposing methods of interpretation, namely: the hermeneutics of suspicion and the hermeneutics of faith. The hermeneutics of suspicion, true to its name, is interpretation characterized by doubting (Ibid., p. 32; cf. Scott-Baumann, 2009, p. 97). While it primarily doubts the surface meaning of symbols, it also involves doubting ourselves – we, who act as interpreters – in order to destroy our prejudices and arrive at an unbiased interpretation (Scott-Baumann, 2009, p. 68). Meanwhile, the hermeneutics of faith is interpretation that is characterized by believing (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 20). It seeks to understand not only the surface meaning, but also the deeper meaning/s of symbols. And it does so by listening to what the symbols really intend to convey (Ibid., p. 28).

Since the hermeneutics of symbols can either be an exercise of suspicion or faith, we have what Ricoeur (1970, p. 20) simply calls “the conflict of interpretations.” This conflict, however, is not something permanent. Ricoeur (1970, pp. 38, 494) argues that when we apply philosophic reflection, the conflicting and seemingly incompatible hermeneutics of suspicion and hermeneutics of faith will no longer be opposed to each other; they will become complementary (Ricoeur, 1974d, pp. 322-323). This is because philosophic reflection, or

simply reflection, is the hermeneutical procedure that takes the two conflicting hermeneutics together and relates them to one another in a dialectical manner (Itao, 2010, pp. 9-13). Reflection, in short, is what “will provide the structure for handling any hermeneutic conflict” (Ricoeur, 1970, pp. 42-43). Now this structure consists of three stages, namely, the stages of “dispossession, antithetic, and dialectic” (Ibid, 495).

In the stage of dispossession, reflection proceeds by making use of the hermeneutics of suspicion, shifting the focus of interpretation from the surface meaning/s to the hidden, deeper meaning/s of symbols (cf. Itao, 2010, pp. 11-12). In the antithetic stage, reflection proceeds by making use of the hermeneutics of faith, endeavouring to bring to light the real meaning/s of symbols (Ibid., p. 12). Finally, in the dialectic stage, reflection proceeds by reconciling the two initially conflicting hermeneutics, setting them up in dialogue with one another (Ricoeur, 1974d, pp. 322-323). This triadic structure of dispossession, antithetic, and dialectic is what renders reflection into a three-step process by which we critically appropriate⁷ (cf. Ricoeur, 1981, p.185) the meaning/s of symbols through a dialectic of suspicion and faith (Itao, 2010, pp.10-14). Thus through reflection, the hermeneutics of symbols becomes complete.

The Critical Appropriation of Political Power

As I mentioned earlier, political power is in a lot of ways analogous to a symbol. This is so since in general political power is enigmatic owing to its paradoxical character (Ricoeur, 1974c, p. 144). And like symbols, political power does not also have one meaning; it carries double or even multiple meanings. It could mean an avenue to render public service, but it could also mean an instrument

to control the people. As one Ricoeurian scholar says, political power “is always open, an always unfinished project, but it is also unavoidably risky” (Akrivoulis, 2006, p. 232). This is why Ricoeur (1998, p. 261) encourages political vigilance. It is incumbent upon the citizenry to be politically vigilant for through it, they are able to “participate in the care for the just exercise of political power” (Deweere, 2017, p. 40). But, how is it done?

Ricoeur (1998, p. 261) suggests that political vigilance is only possible through philosophic reflection. This implies making use of hermeneutics, given also the fact that political power is so much like symbols. In particular, this implies the critical appropriation of political power through a dialectic of suspicion and faith.

One of the most potent avenues to exercise political vigilance through reflection is during elections “since it is in elections that power is distributed” (Suazo, 2014, p. 706). And this is how I imagine it would proceed: First, employing the hermeneutics of suspicion, the citizenry, before putting certain people in positions of power, will have to doubt and distrust the “political passion” of these people and see in it “an escape or disguise” (Ricoeur, 1974a, p. 114). Who knows? These political aspirants might turn out to be megalomaniac tyrants so it is always best to be cautious and suspicious of their motives. Second, employing the hermeneutics of faith, the citizenry will likewise have to believe in the sincerity and capacity of these aspiring politicians. Again, who knows? It

⁷ The word “appropriation” is Ricoeur’s own “translation of the German term *Aneignung*. *Aneignen* means ‘to make one’s own’ what was initially ‘alien’... Appropriation is the concept which is suitable for the actualisation of meaning as addressed to someone.” Consequently, if we apply philosophic reflection, the act of appropriation acquires a critical lens, compelling us to not easily accept given meaning/s.

could also be that their political passion is actually an “authentic political vocation” (Ricoeur, 1974a, p. 114). Third, employing a dialectic of suspicion and faith, the citizenry will have to weigh and consider carefully whether the ones they should put in power truly deserve to appropriate such power (cf. Itao, 2010, p. 14). This is how the critical appropriation of political power should be, that is, it has to follow the three-step process of reflection.

When the citizenry succeeds in putting the right individuals in power, this will result into a lot of positive repercussions. One such result will be the transformation of political structures into just institutions. For Ricoeur, just institutions are what characterize the ideal political system because in such institutions, there exists “a balance between (1) care for others and (2) the laws that enact and monitor a life in search of that care” (Hesni, 2013, p. 90). Needless to say, for institutions to become just, it is necessary to first transform the political structures that constitute these institutions. This necessary transformation will be the one that “will ensure the living together of a good life and will give some protection from human fallibility” (Transforming unjust structures, 2006). And such necessary transformation of political structures, I believe, is best achieved when the citizenry follows the three-step process of reflection that allows for the critical appropriation of political power, especially during elections. Without reflection, the citizenry would have no way of letting the right men appropriate power in a critical manner. They could not “keep one another secure from [the] grave risks” that go along with political power (Dauenhauer, 1998, p. 151).

Moreover, when the right men will be the ones in place, although they remain fallible human beings, the chances are high that these men would

ensure the prioritization of public welfare, the common good, and not the self-centered interests of the few. On the contrary, when the wrong men are in power, they could use force and violence to impose their will; they could create havoc and terror in society. Hence, transforming political structures into just institutions through the critical appropriation of political power is no small task. It is a superlatively important task. According to Timothy Maddox (2013, p. 147), if we don’t do anything to transform our political structures, it could lead to the rise of dictatorships. This explains why for Ricoeur, in the arena of politics, reflection is necessary. It is never “an optional detour but an obligatory route” (Garcia, 1994, p. 37) in the process of transforming political structures into just institutions. As a matter of fact, it is when it is concretely applied that reflection becomes an “actuality and moves from critique to praxis” (Ricoeur, 1998, p. 261).

2.0 Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that the critical appropriation of political power can be a potential tool in transforming political structures into just institutions. It is such a potential tool in effecting these transformations because the critical appropriation of political power involves a hermeneutical procedure that follows a three-step process of reflection. Such process, which employs the hermeneutics of suspicion and the hermeneutics of faith, plus their corresponding dialectic, makes reflection a powerful instrument of political vigilance.

The necessity of political vigilance is grounded on the fact that both risk and opportunity are found in any form of political power. The fallible nature of man, as Ricoeur informs us, is the one responsible

for this paradox in politics. But while evil is always a possibility in any political setup, it does not mean that we cannot anymore do anything to minimize, if not altogether prevent, its emergence. Philosophic reflection, which makes way for the critical appropriation of political power, holds a great promise in preventing the occurrence and recurrence of evil in politics. This is in greater part due to what the critical appropriation of political power entails: the ensuring that power rests only in the hands of those who are more likely to advance the common good and are less likely to pursue their own personal interests.

When political power is in the right hands, it is also not a remote possibility for the transformation of political structures into just institutions to become a concrete reality. This is because the good of all will be the priority of the powerful. Of course, if we look at reality, especially as evidenced in history, time and again there will always be tyrants. But this should not discourage us; for, through our collective continuing reflection, we can as responsible citizens, always choose wisely who should be in power. In the next elections, then, let us be reminded of what Ricoeur has taught us in his writings: Let us choose our leaders well. Let us elect wisely by employing a three-step reflection process.

And this, I would say, is the richness of Ricoeur's hermeneutics of symbols that has not been that explored. That is, it is a hermeneutics that implicitly carries a critical theory of society that has a great potential in transforming political structures into just institutions.

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