

The Vertical and Horizontal Axes of Democracy

by Laure Gillot-Assayag

Following in Paul Ricœur’s footsteps, Olivier Mongin proposes an interpretation of politics as a tension between state domination at “the top” and living together at “the bottom.” This tension, he argues, contains a potential for reciprocal violence that poses a threat to democracy.

About: Olivier Mongin, *Démocraties d’en haut, démocraties d’en bas, Dans le labyrinthe du politique*, préface de Frédéric Worms, Seuil, 2023, 480 p., 25 €.

In his latest book, Olivier Mongin, former director of the journal *Esprit*, offers a reflection on the “labyrinth of politics,” which is to say, on a power that intersects the vertical axis of state domination and the horizontal axis of the will-to-live-together (“*vouloir-vivre-ensemble*”).

The ambitious project of *Démocraties d’en haut, démocraties d’en bas* (Democracy from above, democracy from below) is to present a “basic equation” of political thought (p. 216). We recognize here some of Mongin’s recurrent concerns: the question of political violence, which must be resisted and regulated despite its irreducibility (Mongin, 1997); a method of philosophical argumentation consisting of a rapprochement between Paul Ricœur and philosophers with whom the great French thinker has or has not entered into dialogue; and an approach that privileges the

analysis of the present and “oscillat[es] between close textual reading and freer interpretations” (Mongin, 1998).

It is in his favorite author, the philosopher Paul Ricœur, that Mongin finds the adequate intellectual tools to reflect on the contradictions of politics.

While Mongin’s earlier overview of the work of Ricœur (1998) left its mark on the landscape of Ricœurian criticism, the reader is warned that this new essay is not an exegesis of the philosopher. Rather, Mongin proposes a “re-figuration” (p. 26) of Ricœur’s thought, that is, an analysis of politics from a Ricœurian perspective.

The aim of the book is to demonstrate that political thought does not seek to conceptualize an object, but to interrogate the relationship—silently present in Ricœur’s work—between the vertical axis of domination and the horizontal axis of the will-to-live-together. By following Ricœur’s spiral style of argumentation, Mongin stresses the relevance of the tension at the heart of politics for shedding light and understanding our present time. In his view, the current crisis of politics stems from the dissociation and the conflict between living together at the bottom and state domination at the top.

Revisiting the Paradoxes of Politics

Mongin observes that Ricœur’s conception of politics is inspired by Michael Walzer’s theory of spheres of justice and by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot’s economies of worth. According to these authors, politics is linked to a pluralist representation of society, whereby each sphere corresponds to a common good and conflicts between spheres are resolved through individual practices of argumentation and justification.

In Ricœur’s view, the political sphere is sovereign over the juridical and economic spheres. The political relationship cannot be defined as a legal contract, since one cannot negotiate or choose one’s national membership. Moreover, politics raises social and moral questions about the will-to-live-together that go beyond mere economic concerns.

As Mongin points out, Ricœur preferred paradoxes to dichotomous and systematic oppositions.

Indeed, the philosopher brought to light three “paradoxes of politics.” Beyond their differences, all three paradoxes are according to Mongin articulated around the following problem: How to ensure the coexistence of the vertical dimension of state domination and the horizontal dimension of citizenship. This problem is also the fundamental thesis of the book.

The first paradox, discussed in Ricœur’s 1957 article on the Russian invasion of Budapest, deals with state domination and with the excess and irrationality of a violence that cannot be resolved by the “power from above.”

The second political paradox concerns the rationality of the state. It can be stated as follows: While the state, as Weber rightly noted, is founded on an original archaic violence and holds the monopoly of legitimate violence, a number of safeguards exist to regulate the use of violence by the state—namely, civil society, institutions, and the constitution.

The third paradox, which was formulated in later years, is that of the “encompassing encompassed” (Ricœur, 1995). It refers to the complexification of citizens’ spheres of belonging. While the political sphere encompasses the other spheres, it is also being encompassed, even eclipsed, by the concurrent action of the economic sphere, under the pressure of neoliberal ideologies that call for limiting public action and that purport to govern both the economy and society.

In Ricœur’s account, the paradoxes of politics are linked to the “paradox of authority” (Ricœur, 2001, pp. 101-123): The power from above cannot do without legitimation or recognition by the power from below. Thus, according to Mongin, the paradox of authority cancels neither verticality nor horizontality. Rather, it connects the question of power to that of the multiple recognitions that have the effect of widening the political domain.

In line with Ricœur, Mongin emphasizes that democracy entails neither a world without authority nor a politics of direct horizontality. Democracy cannot radically institute itself or do without hierarchical relationships. At the same time, the verticality of state domination must always relate to the horizontality of the will-to-live-together and to a historical community that legitimates the vertical authority of political power.

A Dialogue Between Ricœur and Arendt

To better highlight the originality of a Ricœurian conception of politics—a question that has often been neglected in favor of Ricœurian hermeneutics—Mongin draws a comparison between Ricœur and Arendt. He highlights the similarities between the two thinkers, who both viewed politics as an orthogonal structure based on a compromise between the hierarchical relationship and the consensual relationship. In addition, both Ricœur and Arendt seemed to be concerned with the following question (p. 269): “How can we ensure that the framework of cooperation, which corresponds to the horizontal axis, will resist the framework of domination, which corresponds to the vertical axis?”

Yet, as Mongin also observes, the two thinkers differed in their conception of the articulation and relationship between these two axes. Arendt believed that resistance to domination lies in the force of the founding event—a unique, extraordinary moment in which political space opens up to popular participation and rebuilds political legitimacy. Ricœur, for his part, considered that there is an aporia of revolution. Representation, he argued, must be instituted to enable the foundation and perpetuation of the will-to-live-together of a historical community. In other words, unlike Arendt, Ricœur maintained that the horizontal axis cannot do without a regulating political power.

Mongin argues that Ricœur’s vision was deeply imbued with his conception of the social imaginary. According to this conception, imagination can institute society through utopia and ideology, provided that each of these two elements corrects the excesses of the other and leads back to reality—with utopia serving to criticize the imaginary radicality of ideology and ideology bringing the unreality of utopia back to reality (Ricœur, 1984, pp. 53-64).

The “*Chiaroscuro*” of Living Together

Throughout the book, Mongin insists on the growing gap between the top and the bottom of the political system. Democratic regimes are now hostage to two forms of unilateral violence that ought to be eradicated: the violence of power *qua* domination and the violence of power *qua* living together. The author analyzes the broken link between the two axes through the lens of contemporary events that are

symptomatic of the crisis of representative democracy (rewriting of constitutions, rejection of institutions, electoral abstention, etc.) or the growth of political violence (wars, assaults on public representatives, etc.). He notes that the state has become the target of many denunciations, whether from critics of domination or from civil society movements—“*dégagiste*” movements,¹ illiberal democracies, populist democracies, etc. Certain moments of political crisis seem to indicate a forceful resurgence of violence. Mongin mentions the invasion of Ukraine, the civil war in Syria, and the influx of refugees into Europe, all of which bear witness to the globalization of violence and the use of illegitimate force. Yet, he also reminds us that moments of civic expression remain vivid and that movements of hope and resistance against authoritarianism continue to emerge, as exemplified by the episode of the Arab Spring or the publication of Charter 77.

It is nevertheless through tragic experiences that the “*chiaroscuro*” of living together becomes apparent—in all its urgency and fragility. In the Ricœurian conception of identity, otherness to the self is constitutive of intimate identity. Following Ricœur, Mongin seeks to demonstrate that remembering our condition as strangers can make us aware of our common humanity founded on the experience of sharing and hospitality. Ricœur, he argues, may well provide a remedy for the ills of our time, including intolerance towards foreigners.

The book is remarkable for its numerous references to current political events and for its engagement with a plethora of authors, whether Ricœurians (Jean Greisch, Pierre-Olivier Monteil, etc.) or philosophical critics of totalitarianism (Claude Lefort, Pierre Hassner, etc.). While this abundance makes it difficult at times to distinguish clearly between Ricœur’s arguments and those of Mongin, it undeniably contributes to the extraordinary richness of the argument.

The great originality of this essay lies in the non-Manichean reading of politics and the exploration of middle paths—an exploration that was very dear to Ricœur. This unique approach sets the author apart both from those who champion participatory democracy and those who, in view of the alleged dislocation of national values, defend the authority of a Leviathan state. Mongin succeeds in proposing a Ricœurian philosophy of politics that ends neither in perfect harmony nor in absolute discord. His dense work avoids systemic thinking, and offers tools for reflecting on the question of politics without lapsing into relativism or catastrophism.

¹ The French term “*dégagisme*” refers to movements that seek to “get rid” (*dégager*) of allegedly corrupt political leaders.

An ambiguity nevertheless runs through the text: Is Mongin's analysis concerned with politics, with the state, or with democracy? Moreover, a number of questions remain unanswered: What exactly does Mongin mean by "power from below"? Is he referring to the will-to-live-together of a "historical community" (p. 204), to the "desire for citizenship" (p. 103) of the sovereign people, or to movements of civil society? If tension is indeed the mainspring of democracy, then there is little hope that power will ever achieve a perfect equilibrium that could satisfy the aspirations of people on both the top and bottom axes. Is not recognition a continual struggle for legitimation on the part of the members of the upper axis and those of the lower axis, with both necessarily seeking to reduce the orthogonal distance by flattening one axis onto the other? How can we avoid democratic backsliding and ensure that the legitimation of the state by the "power from below" is not corrupted or fabricated by the "power from above"? After finishing the book, the reader is left with a bittersweet taste of democratic fragility.

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