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RICOEUR'S INFLUENCE IN AND FROM THE POST-WAR DEBATE ON CHRISTIAN AND PERSONALIST SOCIALISM

Dries Deweer¹

Abstract

This article discusses Ricoeur's contribution to the French post-war debate on the possibility and nature of Christian and personalist socialism in two journals, on the one hand Emmanuel Mounier's pluralist journal *Esprit*, on the other hand the leftist-protestant *Le christianisme social*. Among the gathering of personalists and protestant socialists around these journals, Ricoeur found kindred spirits, struggling with similar questions and ambitions. Ricoeur would become one of their main theoreticians. First, I briefly reconstruct the tragic optimism and its general societal implications that Ricoeur drew from his phenomenology of the will in conversation with existentialism. Then, I discuss how these implications informed his reflections in *Esprit* and *Le christianisme social* on the economic, cultural, and political dimensions of socialism. Finally, I highlight in what sense these debates made a lasting mark on Ricoeur's thought.

Keywords

Paul Ricoeur, personalism, socialism, political paradox, tragic optimism

The intellectual life of the young Paul Ricoeur was dominated by the quest for reconciliation between his Christian vocation and his leftist political orientation. His very first publications, before the Second World War, were political or theological reflections in the peculiar journal *Terre Nouvelle*, a platform for Christian Marxists.² Similar attempts at developing a Christian variant of Marxism were at the heart of his then contributions to the Barthian theological journal *ÊTRE*.³ He considered the capitalist indifference with regard to poverty as incompatible with the evangelical concern for the weakest. His experiences as POW during the war and the continuing development of his thought, however, pushed Ricoeur towards more intellectual depth

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² E.g. P. Ricoeur. *L'appel de l'action. Réflexions d'un étudiant protestant*, « Terre nouvelle. Organe des chrétiens révolutionnaires », 2/juin (1935), pp. 7-9.

³ E.g. P. Ricoeur. *Socialisme et christianisme*, « Être », 4 (1937).

and political moderation.⁴ After the war, his academic career gradually took shape but also his civic engagement took a more stable form. The latter was instigated by two mentors.

The first mentor was the personalist philosopher Emmanuel Mounier, founder of *Esprit*, a movement defined by the search for the human vocation in modern society, in contrast to the dominant ideologies of the day: communism, fascism, and so-called bourgeois-capitalism. Rather than be another ideology, personalism strived to develop a broad ethical perspective on civilization premised on the idea that a human being is not a self-sufficient individual, but a community creature who, nevertheless, possesses individual dignity. In addition, personalists sought a vision that recognized the human person in his totality, including a spiritual dimension, instead of reducing her to an instrument of production, a member of a nation, or any other part of a whole.⁵ Mounier considered that restoring respect for the dignity of the human person would require nothing less than a social revolution directed toward a personalist and communitarian civilization. Such a civilization would enable everyone to live their lives to the fullest and recognize natural communities in their own purpose, although these communities would also have to be directed towards the full development of every person. This personhood was essentially characterized by the positive liberty to discover one's own vocation in life and to commit oneself to its actualization.⁶ The heart of Mounier's personalist manifesto was the description of the institutional preconditions to make this personhood possible.

The second mentor was the politician André Philip. Philip embodied Christian socialism in a remarkable career, both in the French resistance during the war and as member of several French governments after the war. He played a significant role in the economic reconstruction after the war, but he was also involved in issues such as European integration, opposition to the war in Algeria, Third World development, and the development of youth movements and educational policy.⁷ As such, he inspired Ricoeur on the combination of protestant conviction and leftist commitment.⁸

⁴ F. Dosse. *Paul Ricoeur. Les sens d'une vie (1913-2005)*. Édition revue et augmentée, La Découverte, Paris 2008, pp. 54-63.

⁵ E. Mounier, *Manifeste au service du personnalisme*, in *Œuvres. Tome I 1931-1939*, Seuil, Paris 1961, pp. 483-88.

⁶ E. Mounier, *Manifeste au service du personnalisme*, cit., p. 523.

⁷ C. Chevandier et G. Morin (ed.), *André Philip, socialiste, patriote, chrétien*. Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière de la France / IGPDE, Paris 2005.

⁸ F. Dosse. *Paul Ricoeur. Les sens d'une vie*, cit., 38-54 ; P. Ricoeur, *Préface*, in R. Crespin (ed.), *Des protestants engagés. Le christianisme social 1945-1970*, Les Bergers et les Mages, Paris 1993, p. 5-10; P. Ricoeur, *Réflexion faite: autobiographie intellectuelle*, Esprit, Paris 1995, pp. 18-19.

The influence by Mounier and Philip crystallized in Ricoeur's active commitment in two journals, on the one hand Mounier's pluralist *Esprit* journal, on the other hand the leftist-protestant *Le christianisme social*. Among the gathering of personalists and protestant socialists around these journals, Ricoeur found kindred spirits, struggling with similar questions and ambitions. The debate on the complicated relationship between Christian faith and leftist social criticism received broad attention in *Esprit* and *Le christianisme social*.⁹ Not only did their influence help him to overcome the somewhat naïve nature of his pre-war reflections,¹⁰ they stimulated him to eventually become one of their main theoreticians. In his contributions to these journals, Ricoeur addressed a broad range of debates, but his most important topics were the relationship between personalism and existentialism and the potentiality of personalist socialism.

First, I will briefly reconstruct which general societal implications Ricoeur drew from his phenomenology of the will in conversation with existentialism. Then I will discuss how these implications informed his reflections on the economic, cultural, and political dimensions of socialism. Finally, I will highlight in what sense these debates made a lasting mark on Ricoeur's thought.¹¹

Societal implications of tragic optimism

Existentialism was the dominant frame of reference in mid twentieth century Parisian philosophical circles. Personalists, therefore, were inevitably involved in efforts to position themselves with regard to existentialist thought, given that the ideas of Sartre, Camus, and other mainstream existentialists, seemed incompatible with personalist principles mentioned above, such as the positive conception of freedom and spirituality-inclusive conception of personhood. Ricoeur's philosophy of the will turned out to play a significant part in those efforts. Ricoeur's philosophy attested to essential structures of human existence, where it is shown that freedom and

⁹ R. Crespin, *Des protestants engagés. Le christianisme social 1945-1970*, Les Bergers et les Mages, Paris 1993, pp. 59-80; P. Grémion, *Mounier et Esprit dans l'après-guerre*, in G. Coq (ed.), *Emmanuel Mounier. L'actualité d'un grand témoin. Actes du colloque tenu à l'UNESCO*, Parole et silence, Paris 2003, pp. 104-109.

¹⁰ He remained in agreement with Marx's criticism of alienating labor and the need to collectivize the means of production, but atheism was no longer the only major flaw he saw in Marxism. Cf. P. Ricoeur, *Histoire et Vérité* (3^o ed.), Seuil (Esprit), Paris 1967, pp. 117-118; P. Ricoeur, *From Marxism to Contemporary Communism*, in D. Stewart and J. Bien (ed.), *Political and Social Essays by Paul Ricoeur*, Ohio University Press, Athens 1974, pp. 217-228.

¹¹ An earlier version of this research was presented as part of D. Deweer, *Ricoeur's Personalist Republicanism. On Personhood and Citizenship*. Lexington, Lanham 2017, Chapter 2.

nature are not opposites, as Sartre would have it,¹² but rather paradoxically connected. Using phenomenological method, Ricoeur developed his own “tragic optimism” – a concept he borrowed from Mounier – in which man is characterized at all levels by a mediation between constant confrontation with our own finitude and a more original affirmation of life.¹³ Armed with these findings he brought personalism into dialogue with the existentialism of Sartre and Camus. He refuted the dichotomy of freedom and nature by means of his phenomenology of the voluntary and the involuntary.¹⁴ This, in turn, enabled him to defend the personalist positive conception of freedom and the spiritual dimension of the personalist conception of personhood against the emptiness of Sartrean Nothingness, a defense founded on the original affirmation of being as freedom to act¹⁵ and the implied primacy of hope over fear.¹⁶ “*L’homme, c’est la Joie du Oui dans la tristesse du fini.*”¹⁷ That is how Ricoeur phrased this in a nutshell.

More important for our purposes than Ricoeur’s theoretical conversation with existentialism itself was the foundation that Ricoeur’s ontology of the person provided for the elaboration of social and political reflections in line with personalism and Christian socialism. Ricoeur’s reflections on Christian and personalist socialism in his *Esprit* and *Le christianisme social* contributions were consequently a direct extension of this human ontology. The conception of liberty that Ricoeur had developed in his phenomenology of the will emphasized that liberty expresses our capability to act, so that the product of our actions – nature made into culture – externalizes our freedom, while it also makes up the framework for our future actions, and, therefore, for our freedom. This emphasis on the cultural mediation of freedom directed Ricoeur at the ambiguous relationship between politics and freedom, in the sense that social and political institutions both enable and endanger human freedom. The interpretation of this ambiguity was also indebted to the idea of human fallibility as a consequence of the tension between finiteness and infinity in his ontology of the person. In *L’homme fallible*, Ricoeur emphasized that human fallibility reveals a particular relation to the world and others since the tension between finitude and infinitude concretely manifests itself in economics, politics and culture.

¹² J.-P. Sartre, *L’Être et le Néant. Essai d’ontologie phénoménologique*, Gallimard, Paris 1943.

¹³ P. Ricoeur, *Histoire et Vérité*, cit., pp. 168-72.

¹⁴ P. Ricoeur, *Philosophie de la Volonté. Tome I: Le volontaire et l’involontaire*, Aubier, Paris 1950; P. Ricoeur, *Philosophie de la Volonté. Tome II: Finitude et culpabilité*, Aubier, Paris 1960.

¹⁵ P. Ricoeur, *Histoire et Vérité*, cit., pp. 336-360 ; P. Ricoeur, *Nature and Freedom*, D. Stewart and J. Bien (ed.), *Political and Social Essays by Paul Ricoeur*, Ohio University Press, Athens 1974, pp. 23-45.

¹⁶ P. Ricoeur, *Histoire et Vérité*, cit., pp. 3-14, 81-98, 317-335.

¹⁷ P. Ricoeur, *Philosophie de la Volonté. Tome II*, cit., p. 156.

In the economic realm, the world appears as an ensemble of available goods and the human subject as a worker. The interiorizing of our relation to the available goods implies feelings that are tied to possession and distinction vis-à-vis the other, who in principle cannot possess what I possess and vice versa. This structure carries human fallibility in it, but Ricoeur underlined that the economy nonetheless is not necessarily of an evil nature. Our relationship to the world as a collection of available goods results in the problem of property. Property contains original goodness insofar as property relations are at the service of the flourishing of everyone in the community, but it is extremely vulnerable to pernicious deviations in which one's property goes at the expense of the human dignity of other people. He believed a form of good property relations to be possible in a personalist and communitarian utopia.¹⁸

The cultural realm on the other hand is dominated by an urge for recognition. Though alienation exists here too, Ricoeur conceives this struggle after Hegel as a fundamental urge to exist as person and to be recognized as such by others. Consciousness only becomes true consciousness in the esteem of others, in the sense of esteem for myself as for another person. This self-esteem is ultimately very vulnerable since it is based on a conviction that may be denied, contested or humiliated by the opinions of others. Yet we can only understand these pathological forms from the non-pathological form.¹⁹

The political realm is based on power relations. Again, Ricoeur did not see this realm as evil by default, even if it was associated with violence. There is after all the idea of power without violence, of power that services the education of individuals toward freedom. This idea reveals politics to be something that is quintessentially part of humanity, but humans become alienated from themselves when politics become alienated from this idea.²⁰ As with the economic and cultural realm, Ricoeur concluded that the non-pathological form supersedes the pathological and constitutes human existence. That was the theoretical starting point for Ricoeur's line of reasoning concerning the economic, cultural and political dimensions of socialism, to which we will now turn successively.

¹⁸ P. Ricoeur, *Philosophie de la Volonté. Tome II*, cit., p. 129-132.

¹⁹ P. Ricoeur, *Philosophie de la Volonté. Tome II*, cit., p. 136-141.

²⁰ P. Ricoeur, *Philosophie de la Volonté. Tome II*, cit., p. 132-136.

Economic concerns

In the economic domain Ricoeur remained loyal to what he considered to be the skeleton of socialism:

Par socialisme nous entendrons le passage d'une économie de marché à une économie de plan, subordonnée aux besoins humains et accompagnée d'un transfert de la propriété des moyens de production à des entités collectives ou publiques.²¹

Three elements were to be distinguished in this definition that already gave a personalist turn to the general characteristics of socialism. First, socialism stands for economic planning. Socialism does not leave the economy to the invisible hand and it also goes beyond a mixed economy that limits itself to correcting market distortions. From the outset the economy must be subject to rational planning in light of the common good, that is to say the maximal satisfaction of needs in accordance with their level of urgency. Second, the needs that are taken into account are not the given or created needs, but the real needs of the human person. Rational planning starts, in other words, from an ethical vision of man and his needs. Third, socialism demands that the means of production are in collective hands. Collective property was for Ricoeur, however, not a goal in itself, as it was for Marx. In line with Christian social teaching, Ricoeur did not consider private property as unjust in itself. Collective appropriation of the means of production was, then, for Ricoeur only a means, because rational planning is difficult to sustain otherwise.²²

Despite his loyalty to the core of socialism, Ricoeur was well aware of the evolutions in society since Marx. Adapting leftist thought to contemporary society, is what Ricoeur considered to be the core of his political vocation. In the economic domain, the main evolution in his eyes was the rise of consumerism, in the sense that the misery of industrial society was partly overshadowed by wide access to consumer goods. The indirect consequence of consumer society was a major value shift. Not only old aristocratic values were destroyed, but also proletarian desires for justice, dignity and recognition. Although the consumer society was able to satisfy more needs, it was also responsible for a continuous creation of new needs and desires. Hence, the pursuit of the good life was gradually replaced by the pursuit of consumption, comfort and luxury. Property integrated the proletariat into capitalism and broke the revolutionary zeal. All of this resulted according to Ricoeur in a new kind of alienation. It was no longer primarily in labor that people became

²¹ P. Ricoeur, *Le socialisme aujourd'hui*, « Le christianisme social », 69/7-9 (1961), p. 451.

²² P. Ricoeur, *Le socialisme aujourd'hui*, cit., pp. 451-454.

alienated from themselves and others, but rather in consumption. Ricoeur considered it as socialism's biggest challenge to make itself relevant in light of this new issue.²³

Two elements were of central concern in Ricoeur's attempt at bringing socialism economically up to date. Both elements bear the marks of personalism and its pursuit of the wellbeing of mankind as a whole and the development of every individual into a complete person. First, he considered it necessary to broaden the scope of the socio-economic problem. The moral foundation of socialism is to voice the grievances and the hopes of the weakest. Keeping this moral footing alive implies, according to Ricoeur, that solidarity and the pursuit of social justice should cross national borders. The aim of socialism is, then, to create a fair global economy, with due respect for the Third World. Amidst the decolonization era – but no less relevant today, I might add – this implied among other things that political decolonization was to be supplemented by economic decolonization.²⁴ Second, Ricoeur argued for an ethical orientation of economic planning. The consumer society was no less in need of a planned economy, but it had to be a planned economy with a personalist and communitarian orientation. In other words, care for every human person should direct investments. That is why he called for investments in too often overlooked corners, such as health care, services for the elderly, urban quality of life and the prison system. He also wanted to shift the focus of the economy from consumption to production, in order to restore the meaning of labor, beyond the cost of leisure, in light of the personalist positive conception of freedom. For the common thread in these concerns, Ricoeur referred to Max Weber's distinction between the ethics of responsibility and the ethics of conviction. This means, on the one hand, that one has to bear the limitations of social reality in mind, but, on the other hand, that one should never lose sight of the ideal of the flourishing of every human being. That is Ricoeur's interpretation of the balancing act of economic planning.²⁵

Cultural concerns

²³ P. Ricoeur, *La crise du socialisme*, « Le christianisme social », 67/12 (1959), pp. 695-702.

²⁴ P. Ricoeur, *La crise du socialisme*, cit., pp. 698-702; P. Ricoeur, *Le socialisme aujourd'hui*, cit., p. 460; P. Ricoeur, *Prévision économique et choix éthique*, « Esprit », 32/2 (1966), pp. 178-193; P. Ricoeur, *De la nation à l'humanité: tâche des chrétiens*, « Le christianisme social », 73/9-12 (1965), pp. 493-512.

²⁵ P. Ricoeur, *La crise du socialisme*, cit., pp. 698-702; P. Ricoeur, *Prévision économique et choix éthique*, cit., pp. 178-193; P. Ricoeur, *Tâches de l'éducateur politique*, « Esprit », 31/7-8 (1965), pp. 78-93.

Personalism was from the outset an attempt at creating an alternative for the division between individualism and collectivism. The alliance of personalism and socialism brings, then, a big question to the fore: Do not the collectivist foundations of socialism imply a serious impediment? Along with Jean-Marie Domenach, the later editor-in-chief of *Esprit*, Ricoeur tried to clarify the relationship between the collective and the person.²⁶ They thought of the rise of mass society and mass culture as a sociological pattern in need of an ethical-pedagogical adjustment. Hence, they did not reject collectivism completely, but their personalist principles challenged them to combine the valuable in collectivism with the valuable in individualism. That is why they made a distinction between a valuable and an objectionable kind of collectivism. The latter kind is the collectivism where the masses represent a phenomenon of mental regression, conformism and propaganda-driven control. The first kind is about the masses who gather around shared grieves, where the collective dimension is responsible for the generation of resilience and drive for emancipation. Ricoeur and Domenach admitted that this distinction is not a pure one. In fact, history only displays hybrid kinds of collectivism. Nevertheless, they recognized the importance of the positive and active kind of massification as a source of authentic progress in the direction of personalist values, as long as the recognition of the dignity of the individual person continues to expose the dark side of collectivism. This way Ricoeur and Domenach showed the ambiguity of personalism. Personalism cannot be fully detached from individualism. Mounier's "new renaissance" demands that we hold a firm grip on this valuable heritage of modern history. But the flourishing of every individual cannot be fully detached from massification. Domenach and Ricoeur considered it as their personalist duty to engage in the emancipation of the masses, but also to pursue the recognition of the person within that framework and, hence, to warn of the totalitarian inclination in Marxism-Leninism and other kinds of socialism. Collectivism was to be tolerated – that is in its valuable form – insofar as human emancipation can only come about through community, but the human person must retain precedence, based on her absolute dignity, which is independent of the community. Therefore, socialism was to be detached as far as possible from mass culture, in order to be imbued with humanism.²⁷

²⁶ J.-M. Domenach and P. Ricoeur, *Masse et personne*, « *Esprit* », 17/1 (1951), pp. 9-18.

²⁷ Cf. P. Ricoeur, *What Does Humanism Mean?*, in D. Stewart and J. Bien (ed.), *Political and Social Essays by Paul Ricoeur*, Ohio University Press, Athens 1974, pp. 68-80.

The question remains what these rather abstract remarks actually imply for the development of socialism. Ricoeur gave some clues in that regard. Socialism is essentially concerned with lifting the alienation in labor. Humanism adds pigment to this basic goal. Capitalism reduces labor to a commodity, which implies the destruction of its deepest human significance. The goal of socialism must therefore be to restore purpose in labor. The humanist perspective teaches that this requires more than the rejection of wage work and the establishment of collective management of the means of production.²⁸ Ricoeur also argued that socialists need to pay attention to the technological form of labor, as technological progress and the ensuing extreme division of labor are ambivalent at best, in the sense that these circumstances create feelings of boredom and emptiness. Labor continues to be alienating in a socialist system if it is not more than the social cost of consumption and leisure time:

Le propre du travail est de me lier à une tâche précise, finie: c'est là que je montre qui je suis, en montrant ce que je peux [...]. [M]ais ce même mouvement qui me révèle, me dissimule: qui me réalise, me dépersonnalise aussi. Je vois bien, par l'évolution des métiers [...], qu'il y a une limite vers laquelle tend ce mouvement d'objectivation: cette limite c'est ma perte dans le geste dénué de sens, dans l'activité au sens propre insignifiante, parce que sans horizon. Mais être homme, c'est non seulement faire du fini, c'est aussi comprendre l'ensemble.²⁹

Hence, Ricoeur thought that socialism must not be too easily satisfied. Next to socio-economic alienation, the cultural alienation in labor also requires attention.

From the attention for the cultural alienation in labor results a second implication of the humanist perspective. In the struggle against alienation, socialism must steer clear of absolutizing labor. Ricoeur saw great danger in the pursuit of a so-called labor society. This was subject to a fierce internal debate in the *Esprit* movement. Together with Jean-Marie Domenach, Ricoeur opposed a more radical left faction under the leadership of Jean Lacroix and Henri Bartoli, who considered labor as the all-embracing social category.³⁰ They were afraid that the glorification of labor would no longer see capital as its sole target but would also take aim at contemplation. In other words, socialism goes astray when being an intellectual becomes shameful. Ricoeur emphasized that a labor society must remain a *logos* society as well. Socialism must therefore leave the Marxist framework in order to rethink the relationship of

²⁸ P. Ricoeur, *Le socialisme aujourd'hui*, cit., pp. 457-458.

²⁹ P. Ricoeur, *Travail et parole*, « *Esprit* », 19/1 (1953), pp. 96-117.

³⁰ F. Dosse, *Paul Ricoeur*, cit., pp. 170-176.

economy and thought. Instead of the pattern of infrastructure and superstructure, which reduces culture to an epiphenomenon of production relations, we must see the relationship of labor and thought in a dialectical way. Ricoeur based this on a phenomenological analysis of labor and language that shows how both intersect in human existence. The analysis shows that language does something, but in a different way than labor. Language is in a sense part of labor insofar as it produces useful effects, but this is inessential. The essential feature of language is that it gives meaning, not that it produces effects in reality. A labor society is therefore impoverished if it is not a *logos* society as well.³¹

Ricoeur made clear that a labor society should not downgrade culture to a celebration of technology. Culture should also not become an ideological instrument in the hands of the apparatus of government. Although it is a legitimate aim to revitalize culture on the basis of labor and workers, the dialectics of labor and culture, including the necessary critical and poetical role of culture, must not be lost. Ricoeur distinguished four core functions in this dialectical relationship. First, language and culture are a correction for the so-called objectification in labor. Only language and culture grasp the connection among the divisions of labor and make it possible for people to change tasks. Moreover, only language and culture give labor its social meaning. Second, language and culture constitute a compensation for labor during leisure time. Third, language and culture must found praxis on theory. This is only possibly if there is room for fundamental research. Finally, language and culture have a creative function. In art and literature new understandings of human existence come about.³²

In analogy with his plea for a global perspective in the economic domain, Ricoeur also paid attention to the global implications of socialism in the cultural domain. Given the importance of the dialectics of labor and culture, he was confronted with the problem of the plurality of cultures in opposition to the unity of technological progress and the development of economic globalization. The question Ricoeur raised was how cultures can retain their particularity in the context of globalization, as the globalization of science, technology and economy turned out to involve the generalization of a cheap consumer culture. Globalization develops at the expense of cultural roots, and mass access to culture is shown to involve a replacement of high culture by low culture, as if nihilism is the price to pay for a worldwide

³¹ P. Ricoeur, *Travail et parole*, cit., pp. 96-117.

³² P. Ricoeur, *Travail et parole*, cit., pp. 96-117; P. Ricoeur, *What Does Humanism Mean?*, cit., pp. 80-87.

better standard of living. However, if cultures are to be saved from destruction, we need to know what it is that needs saving. Therefore, Ricoeur looked for the core of a culture. He came to the conclusion that there is no fixed core, but rather a creative core. A culture basically consists of values that constitute a people, and their attitude towards others, towards strangers, towards nature, and so on. These values are actually embedded in different levels, ranging from customs to institutions to symbols. But Ricoeur situated the actual core of a culture on a deeper level, in a way of dealing with time that is founded on a combination of loyalty and creativity. The next question is then how this creative core of loyalty and creativity can be sustained. Ricoeur emphasized that cultures can resist the pressure of globalization only if they succeed in giving scientific rationality and anthropocentrism their due place. Finally, he also raised the question under what circumstances a fertile encounter of culture can come about, without putting one's own values on the line. Referring to the creative core of a culture, he argued that only a dynamic culture is able to cope with intercultural exchange. In that case, the encounter is even a source of creativity. This presupposes that the encounter is not based on vague universal convictions, but rather on an awareness of one's own roots: "*Pour avoir en face de soi un autre soi, il faut avoir un soi.*"³³ Ricoeur consequently emphasized that globalization was not to result in a vague syncretism, but rather in genuine communication on the basis of sound self-awareness.³⁴

At the heart of all these warnings and adjustments concerning the cultural aspects of socialism was actually the same ethical message that grounded Ricoeur's economic reflections. In essence it is time and again a reminder to respect the moral foundation of socialism as a collective project of solidarity. Whereas this resulted at the economic level in an appeal to adopt a global point of view and to take personalist priorities into account in economic planning, at the cultural level this came down to resistance against the reduction of socialism to an optimal technique for welfare creation. Solidarity had to inspire socialists to add thoughtful resistance against the hedonist or even nihilist morality of consumer culture.³⁵

Political concerns

³³ P. Ricoeur, *Civilisation universelle et cultures nationales*, « Esprit », 27/10 (1961), p. 452.

³⁴ P. Ricoeur, *Civilisation universelle et cultures nationales*, cit., pp. 439-454; P. Ricoeur, *Tâches de l'éducateur politique*, cit., pp. 91-93.

³⁵ P. Ricoeur, *Le socialisme aujourd'hui*, cit., pp. 459-460.

The pursuit of a personalist socialism requires attention to the political dimension of socialism. This political dimension is at least as important as the socio-economic and cultural dimension. Ricoeur already reached this conclusion shortly after the war, under the influence of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Humanisme et Terreur* (1947), which was written as a reaction to the consternation caused by the renowned novel *Darkness at Noon*, by Hungarian-British writer Arthur Koestler, and his explanatory essay *The Yogi and the Commissar*. This novel about a Bolshevik who is impeached for treason played a major role in the awakening to the true nature of Stalinism. Koestler explains that communism imposes a choice between the *yogi* – the symbol for a merely inner revolution and escape from reality – and the *commissar* – the symbol for a relentless activism that reduces people to mere instruments in service of the revolution. In other words, he criticizes communism for being a totalitarian system in which morality is by definition eclipsed by efficiency, as is demonstrated by the terror under Stalin.³⁶ Merleau-Ponty wanted to adjust this bleak picture by clarifying the nature of political terror in the Soviet Union in light of the humanist undercurrent in Marxism. In *Humanisme et terreur*, Merleau-Ponty presents Marxism as a philosophy that goes beyond the division between the *yogi* and the *commissar*. He stresses that the Marxist philosophy of history concerns the realization of human values in such a way that morality and efficiency go hand in hand. However, given the insights of existentialism, he adds that history is contingent; that is, that the actual course of history depends upon individual decisions. If no decisions ever had to be made, then no violence would ever take place. The realization of the proletarian revolution depends upon actual decisions, their effect on the revolution – and hence on guilt and innocence – only becoming clear in hindsight. That is why Merleau-Ponty held onto Marxism, in spite of the terror. In his view, it was Stalinism, not Marxism that deserved criticism because under Stalin, it was not the emancipation of the proletariat, but the communist party itself that was exalted to the absolute. Stalinism replaced the proletariat with the party *commissar* and thereby obscured the actual goal of the revolution.³⁷

³⁶ A. Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*, transl. by D. Hardy, Macmillan, New York 1941.

³⁷ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Humanisme et Terreur. Essai sur le problème communiste*, Gallimard, Paris 1947.

Ricoeur wrote two critical reviews of Merleau-Ponty's book, one for *Esprit*³⁸ and one for *Le christianisme social*.³⁹ In these reviews, he expressed his sympathy for Merleau-Ponty's criticism of Stalinism, while he also questioned whether the problem is not more deeply ingrained in Marxism itself. More specifically, Ricoeur questioned whether Marxism is sufficiently immune from the slippery slope towards the primacy of the *commissar*. He considered proletarian humanism itself to be the source of terror, since it is an attempt to constitute humanism without transcendent, transhistorical morality. According to Ricoeur, Marx's mistake was to think that the socio-economic circumstances of the proletariat would suffice to produce compelling universal values, without any reference to the transcendent. Without any reference to transcendent values, the ability of indignation and the sense of duty to keep the means and ends in balance fails and the primacy of the proletariat gradually lapses into the primacy of the *commissar*. Nevertheless, Ricoeur emphasized that this criticism should not be mistaken as a plea for the *yogi*. In other words, his case against the totalitarian inclination in Marxism is not a plea for an apolitical attitude. The *yogi* withdraws into himself and, hence, is rightly subject to the Marxist reproach of mystification. The *prophet*, on the contrary, wants to affect history. Hence, Ricoeur argued for *prophetic* input to keep the appeal of transcendent values alive, thereby contributing to a non-totalitarian socialism. The political implication for personalist socialism was summed up as the need for permanent anti-totalitarian vigilance, by grafting political liberties onto the socialist demands of justice and by ensuring political education for the masses, so that people are actually able to assert their political rights.^{40 41}

Democratic legitimacy has always been a primary concern within Ricoeur's socialist thought. The period between 1955 and 1956, however, saw a significant deepening of his insights in the political realm, boosted by personal experience from that time.⁴² First, there was the impact of his official visit to China as a member of a delegation of the French Ministry of Education. Although his reports of the visit retrospectively display a disconcerting naïveté

³⁸ P. Ricoeur, *Humanisme et Terreur*, in *Lectures 2. La contrée des philosophes*, Seuil, Paris 1992, pp. 149-56.

³⁹ P. Ricoeur, *Le Yogi, le Commissaire, le Proletaire et le Prophète*, « *Le christianisme social* », 57/1-2 (1949), pp. 41-54.

⁴⁰ J.-M. Domenach and P. Ricoeur, *Masse et personne*, cit., pp. 15-18.

⁴¹ For further analysis of the influence of Ricoeur's reading of Merleau-Ponty on his political philosophy, see D. Deweer, *Ricoeur on 'Humanisme et terreur': The Case for the Prophet*, « *Chiasmi International* », 18 (2016), pp. 433-448.

⁴² Ricoeur was not the only one to change his mind. Around the year 1956 a significant part of the French intelligentsia sobered up with regard to communism. Cf. T. Judt, *Past Imperfect. French Intellectuals 1945-1956*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1992.

concerning the socio-economic and cultural realizations of the Chinese communist revolution, he also expressed grave concern with regard to the political regime and its bureaucracy, centralization of power and monopoly on truth.⁴³ Thus, he emphasized that his sympathy for the socio-economic revolution did not justify in any way the political evil. He was convinced that there is no necessary connection between economic planning and dictatorship, however efficient the latter may be. The more planning, the more need for democratic control, independent administration of justice, freedom of information and cultural and religious tolerance.⁴⁴

Second, the Soviet-Union gradually showed its true colors. In November 1956, Soviet tanks crushed the uprising in Budapest and, therefore, the hope for a more humane and free communism. For Ricoeur, the outcome of the Hungarian uprising was the ultimate proof of the continuity of the problem of political power and its independence from socio-economic revolutions. If socio-economic revolutions succeed in lifting socio-economic oppression, then the risk of political oppression still remains. The problem of communism is essentially the fact that political oppression is reduced to an epiphenomenon of socio-economic oppression. As such the problem of surveillance on government power is brushed aside. Marxist discourse argues that the state will come to an end once the revolution is finished. Hence, it holds out the prospect of the end of political evil in an indefinite future, instead of limiting evil here and now. That is what left the door wide open for totalitarian dictatorship. Ricoeur argued that the state simply cannot disappear. There is no public management of resources possible without power over people. Moreover, communism implies more opportunity for abuse of power, because of the centralization of economic power and the indoctrination of a monopolized truth. That is why Ricoeur deemed it necessary to examine what elements of liberal democracy have nothing to do with the domination of one class over another, or, in other words, what elements are purely linked to the universal problem of abuse of power. Examples are independent administration of the law, freedom of information, trade union freedom and the right to strike, and, last but not least, free elections in a multi-party system.⁴⁵

The dictatorial history did not make Ricoeur lose faith in socialism, but it made him emphasize all the more that socialism must go hand in hand with political liberalism. He

⁴³ P. Ricoeur, *Certitudes et incertitudes d'une révolution*, « Esprit », 22/1 (1956), pp. 5-28.

⁴⁴ P. Ricoeur, *Certitudes et incertitudes d'une révolution*, cit., pp. 5-28; P. Ricoeur, *Note critique sur 'Chine, porte ouverte'*, « Esprit », 22/6 (1956), pp. 897-910.

⁴⁵ P. Ricoeur, *Le paradoxe politique*, « Esprit », 23/5 (1957), pp. 721-745.

remained as convinced as ever of the planned economy, but he argued that personalist socialism must stand for more than just the end of destitution. It should also strive for the conquest of a positive liberty that includes participation in political decision-making. The idea is that central planning is vital, but it should happen in such a way that autonomous secondary choices remain possible. In other words, bureaucracy needs to be compensated for by bottom-up forms of democratic control and corporate management needs to be supervised by the workers.⁴⁶

Influence

Ricoeur's input in the *Esprit* and *Le christianisme social* debates on Christian and personalist socialism were clearly based on the ontology of the person that resulted from his phenomenology of the will. His tragic optimism was reflected in the economic, cultural, and political concerns alike. The institutional mediation of freedom both enables and endangers human freedom. This ambiguity that characterizes Ricoeur's conception of human fallibility returns in the relationship of the person with the other and with the world, as economy, culture and politics all show a combination of original goodness and pathological inclination. Ricoeur's reflections on socialism continuously display an awareness of the tragic dimension in human existence without falling into despair. The manner in which he approached economic, cultural, and political evil and suffering is to show that hope is more powerful than despair and joy more powerful than fear.

More important than the influence of Ricoeur's philosophy in these post-war debates on Christian and personalist socialism, is the extent to which these particular public debates have influenced Ricoeur's philosophy further in his career. After a notable decline in his engagement on these societal questions during the 1970s, this gradually reclaimed center stage from the 1980s onwards until the end of his life. It is remarkable how much the specific concerns discussed in *Esprit* and *Le christianisme social* would resurface then, to receive a more thorough philosophical elaboration. In the economic domain, Ricoeur focused on the embedding of economic planning in the personalist ethical pursuit of the integral development of every individual. The focus on economic planning withered away, but the same personalist ethical pursuit would go on to characterize Ricoeur's later engagement with Rawlsian distributive theory.⁴⁷ In the cultural

⁴⁶ P. Ricoeur, *Le socialisme aujourd'hui*, cit., pp. 454-457.

⁴⁷ P. Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, Seuil, Paris 1990, pp. 199-344, P. Ricoeur, *Le Juste*, Esprit, Paris 1995. For analysis on this point, see D. Deweer, *Ricoeur's Personalist Republicanism*, cit., pp. 91-162; M. Harkirat Mann,

domain, the concern for cultural resilience and intercultural exchange in the context of globalization resurfaced in the development of an ethics of translation,⁴⁸ which is an elaboration of the intuitions about genuine communication on the basis of self-awareness he had published in *Esprit* almost half a century before.⁴⁹ The most prominent further elaboration, however, concerned the political domain. Ricoeur's reflection on the Soviet repression of the Hungarian uprising in *Esprit* already contained a first elaboration of the idea of the political paradox, in the sense that awareness of political evil cannot eclipse the fact that the political is more essentially what enables us to create an order that allows people to flourish.⁵⁰ This idea would remain key to Ricoeur's political philosophy, as shown in the different elaborations of the concept of the political paradox that he developed in later decades.⁵¹

In sum, our interpretation of Ricoeur's contribution to the post-war French debate on Christian and personalist socialism cannot neglect the entanglement with his early philosophy of the will and the influence on his later social and political philosophy. These publications in *Esprit* and *Le christianisme social* are not to be considered as side projects, in the margins of his academic oeuvre. They play a key role in our understanding of continuing threads in Ricoeur's thought.

Ricoeur, Rawls, and Capability Justice. *Civic Phronesis and Equality*, Continuum, London and New York 2012; J. Michel, *Paul Ricoeur. Une philosophie de l'agir humain*, Cerf, Paris 2006, pp. 383-420.

⁴⁸ P. Ricoeur, *Le paradigme de la traduction*, in *Le Juste* 2, *Esprit*, Paris 2001, pp. 125-40; P. Ricoeur, *Sur la traduction*, Bayard, Paris 2004; P. Ricoeur, *Le dialogue des cultures, la confrontation des héritages*, in J. Porée and G. Vincent (ed.), *Paul Ricoeur, la pensée en dialogue*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, Rennes 2010, pp. 13-18. For analysis on this point, see D. Deweer, *Communication, Translation and the Global Community of Persons*, « Études Ricoeuriennes / Ricoeur Studies », 6/1 (2015), pp. 46-56; D. Jervolino, *For a Philosophy of Translation, Lessons from Ricoeur*, « Revue de métaphysique et de morale », 50/2 (2006), pp. 229-238; A. Scott-Baumann, Ricoeur's Translation Model as a Mutual Labour of Understanding, « Theory, Culture & Society », 27/5 (2010), pp. 69-85.

⁴⁹ P. Ricoeur, *Civilisation universelle et cultures nationales*, cit., pp. 439-454.

⁵⁰ P. Ricoeur, *Le paradoxe politique*, cit., pp. 721-745.

⁵¹ P. Ricoeur, *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique II*, Seuil, Paris 1986, pp. 433-482; P. Ricoeur, *Morale, éthique et politique*, « Pouvoirs » 65 (1993), pp. 5-17; P. Ricoeur, *Le Juste*, cit., pp. 121-142; P. Ricoeur, *Le Juste* 2, cit., pp. 107-123; P. Ricoeur, *Responsabilité et fragilité*, « Autres Temps » 76-77 (2003), pp. 127-141. For analysis on this point, see D. Deweer, *De dosering van de staat. Ricoeurs politieke paradox herbekeken*, « Tijdschrift voor Filosofie » 79/1 (2017), pp. 89-110; P.-O. Monteil, *Ricoeur politique*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, Rennes 2013; B. Dauenhauer, *Paul Ricoeur: The Promise and Risk of Politics*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham 1998.