The welcome of the Editor and the Guest Editor to the Symposium on Tilo Schabert, *The Second Birth: On the Political Beginnings of Human Existence*

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Abstract

This introduction argues for a historical and anthropological contribution to the study of politics. It presents Tilo Schabert's work on the political beginnings of human existence and links his political theory to a type of Alexandrian and Byzantine Neoplatonic Aristotelianism. It maintains that Schabert's book offers a modernist theological frame for the construction of a power mechanism of freedom and that the grounding (and experiential source) of his methodology lies in the liminal void and its metaphysics.

Keywords: Tilo Schabert, political beginnings, liberal theology, metaphysics, liminal void

This IPA Introduction welcomes the *Symposium* on Tilo Schabert's recent book, *The Second Birth* (Chicago University Press, 2014), in order to explore the possible contribution of political thought to a sociological understanding of political life. This could combine an anthropological perspective with a long-term historical orientation, an approach central for some of the most important and influential social theoretical analyses of politics, such as the works of Eric Voegelin (Trepanier and McGuire 2011). The contribution of political thought might concern the intellectual background of politics and the naturally shared human co-operation to gain with it an in-depth diagnosis of the contemporary ills in political life, especially problems connected to leadership (Horváth 2013), as they manifested throughout the past century, only intensifying recently, as shown by Joan Davison's paper in the Reflection section below.

The special contribution of political anthropology to politics lies in the study of factors beyond the narrow scope of politics per se, being concerned with the broader sources and effects of political phenomena. It is in this sense that the foundations of political thought were laid down by Plato or Aristotle, though these classic figures are also claimed by philosophy and sociology, and of course such boundaries can never be drawn in a rigid manner (von Heyking, 2008).

Yet the direction in which political thought was moving during the past centuries made this endeavor considerably more alternated than it was intended by the classics (Poggi 2014; Popitz 1992). The 'social' perspective in political thought much came to be interpreted as a way of judging whether politics confirmed to the ideals of the French Revolution, meaning freedom and especially equality, resumed in the expression 'liberal democracy'. The yardstick for political thought was democracy or democratization, understood not simply in the sense of conforming to the formal, legalistic principles of democratic rule, but in assessing whether politics was indeed freely and equally accessible to every citizen; and whether politics performed its task to spread the benefits of the modern liberal world to each and every segment of the populace (see the

contribution on the ideas of Hobbes in this special issue by Thomas Heilke). Such a universalistic, rights-based approach, while certainly having its importance, by now has gone beyond any reasonable limit. This is why Schabert's new book is a promising shift from this modernocentrism, as he puts the emphasis on a different aspect of the individual, on one's identity, which is an always inherently political one. All the articles contained in this Symposium on Schabert's *The Second Birth*: "War of Bodies – Or: The Genesis of Politics", by Peter Nitschke; "Tilo Schabert's Architectonic Science", by John von Heyking; "A Very Early Second Birth", by Barry Cooper, "The Primacy of Politics: Tilo Schabert's Critique of Aristotle" by Steven F. McGuire; and "A Dance of Words on Stage", by Thomas Heilke, have made the same point, a strong necessity for a different approach for understanding our aim and goal in history and the power to reach it.

Thus, while by our days such modernocentrist ideas and ideals have become almost universally shared, to the extent that their specificity and occasional problematicity has grown invisible, in recent times a quite different problem emerged in politics – and it is here that one can search for the relevance of an anthropological perspective in politics. This problem concerns the increasing unreality of humankind itself. In one sense, nothing can be more real than a human being: *uomo*, *hombre*, the man, the manliness of the *anthropos*, the male element, his action and his political rule or his self-assertion (Pangle 1988). Or, following the happy characterization of Schabert on *Gestalt*, a pattern for human life, combining grace and power, form and shape as an ordering principle of human existence has its own importance. *Gestalt* is first of all about power, and evidently nothing is more real than power, so much so that important theories, from Nietzsche to Heidegger and beyond, possibly including Foucault, identify power with reality, even Being, while politics deals with power at the level of the entire community, even – especially with globalization – the world at large. Thus, evidently it hardly makes sense to question the reality of *Gestalt* and its equity with human being. Yet modernism stretched the limits of their reality.

This includes, to begin with, the theologisation of this doctrine. If nothing is more real than man, but if his sense of unreality is becoming permanent, then nothing will be more absurd than human being himself. From the opening lines of Tilo Schabert's *The Second Birth*, it becomes immediately clear that the book offers a major effort to provide modern politics with a theological frame. While this might sound confusing for a start, if we look at the history of the debates between the "theologizers" and the "secularizers" that cut through the entire last century, we find a long list of prominent thinkers like Jacques Maritain, Karl Löwith, Eric Voegelin, Carl Schmitt, Henri de Lubac, Hans Jonas, and, more recently John Milbank (2006), Michael Allen Gillespie (2008), Paul Tyson (2015), Harald Wydra (2015), and many more who, in one way or another, have already connected modern science, politics, and modernity writ large with theology and/or religion.

One way of going around the problem of trying to sift out the "quantity" of religion and theology remaining in our vision of the world after the corrosion of historical Christianity is by reconnecting theology to the problem of experience (as opposed to simply locking it up behind what are often seen as rigid "doctrinaire" concerns). By adopting such a perspective, we can conceive of theology in a broad way, namely as the human thought (or system of thought) designed to sustain in practice a vision of the good experienced at a specific time in history. However, this kind of generalizing process started with Plato's followers, which can be traced back to the dialogue *Parmenides* attributed to Plato. Here the doctrine of being, built with

Alexandrian and Byzantine philosophical bricks, resulted in a philosophical framework different from the one that Plato had originally intended. Most importantly, it is important to note that the reception of Plato and Aristotle among the Alexandrian and Byzantine philosophers is not separable from the reception of the parallel Oriental traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism.[1]

In this larger sense, theology is neither something exclusively religious, nor something that can be "overcome" in any sensitive way or split and barred from politics.[2] Very importantly, it is also not something that can be dissociated from scientific practices of knowledge production either, no matter how much or how little "religion" we can recognize in them. It is a technique of power, or, as it was said, a divinisation practice: how to extend divine power down into the material world.

Specifically regarding Schabert's book, we are told that, by answering the book's question 'Whence originates the political Gestalt of human life and what does it entail?', the author provides a 'transcultural and transhistorical grounding of political theory' (p. xv). From this idea stems the strength of the whole enterprise. In as much as the book reaches out to various authors from across centuries, Schabert is capable of gaining important insights that are usually neglected or simply forgotten in modern political theory. This is achieved on the back of the Alexandrian and Byzantine thinking that provides its grounding, under the cloak of a presumed (neo-) Platonic (neo-) Aristotelianism. The insights thus obtained are tested by the methodological underpinnings of the book and the results reached in the last chapter are entirely illuminating in this regard. Let us unpack this and simply begin with the end.

In a series of concluding statements we find out that freedom is the substance existing in any form-giving power of reality (*Gestalt*) in as much as freedom is the element of indeterminacy in what are otherwise determinate forms (p.113). Furthermore, we are told that 'the soul is political by itself' (p.115), that 'the reality of freedom is power', that 'the paradigm of politics is power' (116), that we are 'subjects of power by virtue of our body' (p.118), and that the human body is the ultimate source for the paradox of freedom, i.e. for the fact that 'while freedom is given to us all, we must, in order to be truly free, transform this freedom into a freedom that holds power over us'. (p.118). Finally then, the highest task of politics becomes the establishment of a truly liberal government: 'For we intend to establish in thought the rule of freedom, i.e., an order of the government of human beings that obeys freedom' (p.120).

This is, in a nutshell, the theological vision achieved in the book; as John von Heyking rightly observes in his contribution, it is the peak of the argument. The more interesting question that now naturally arises: what is the nature of theology in this? What is the nature of the road taken to it? How can we understand it, beyond just saying that it sustains the liberal political form and that it postulates freedom as the supreme value to be woven and maintained into the mechanism of power? In order to answer to this question, we have to take into account Schabert's recourse to ontology. After recognizing freedom as the first condition and value for the creative power of human existence, follows the construction of an empirical and conceptual edifice aimed at sustaining this vision of politics on hard facts. In other words, any theological vision needs to sustain itself (at least implicitly) on some form of understanding of ontology and its nature, a mental effort that traditionally passes under the name of metaphysics.

At this point, a few methodological observations have to be made. The first refers to the way in which historical sources have been made use of. In the above, we did not start with the

conclusions simply for analytical convenience. Rather, it is to highlight that the theological result achieved at the end – the vision of the 'pure regency of freedom' (p.122) – corresponds to a thoroughly modern experience and symbolization of politics and, in that sense, it looks as if the historical material has been simply subdued to match a somewhat pre-given conclusion. To put it differently, historical texts were not utilized in a reflexive manner in order to understand their connection with underlying human experiences, enquire into their conditions of emergence, follow their historic mutations, and then maybe draw a higher-order metaphysics that can elucidate the existential problem of what is politics and its "hard" foundations. Rather, the purpose of the author was to find out what was presumably common to all of the perused texts throughout history and therefore to neutralize their mode of experience. This is why, at the heart of this endeavor, lies a contradiction in terms: if the book is a search for the empirical foundations of politics, something that must be concrete, historical, and contextual, then it can not be generally valid across cultures and times and referring to what is the nature of political reality and of man inside that reality. Or can it?

Here comes the second methodological observation pertaining to the specific metaphysical construal inside Schabert's book. Although not explicitly stated, Schabert's effort for a transcultural and transhistorical grounding of political theory is in its execution a metaphysical enquiry into the conditions of possibility for politics. The "second birth" of human existence aims to elucidate what are the empirical conditions that make political community possible and even necessary. The answer is a metaphysics providing a fully elaborated ontology as to the nature of political reality (a 'transcultural and transhistorical grounding of political theory', as the author calls it.). While basically the entire 20th century history of the social sciences have made a career by virtue of dissociating themselves discursively from metaphysics, they have done this at their own peril. This is a huge concern that cannot be pursued at this point; let it only be stated that the critique made here is not that the enterprise is metaphysical in nature, but that it has a metaphysical construal inside its "empirical" use of materials that it does not problematize in any way (again following the general outlook of the social sciences and the general dominance of the natural sciences).

It is a well-known fact that the void is the foundation of modern cosmology in the natural sciences, and it is the void that seems to be also the axial point of reference for Schabert's metaphysics of politics. Just like the void is the glue of all matter of the cosmos, allowing for an infinite transmutability from the One into the infinite of the Many and back into the One, so is freedom the indeterminate particle that holds the mechanism of power together, providing for the metamorphosis of the One into the multiple and back. In order to understand the vacuous nature of this kind of government, we only need to look now at three remarks that the author makes in the final chapter. The first is that 'there is no need of an element for its construction, and human beings do not need to be "good" in relation to it' (pp.121-122). The second is that '[t]he construction sustains itself; governing under the paradox of power hinders itself, by means of its own mechanisms, from serving anything other than our freedom' (p.122). Finally, we are also told that '[i]n itself, the construction is 'empty', insofar as it has transferred the freedom of human beings into a pure regency of freedom' (p.122).

As suggested before, this is all but the transposition of modern cosmology into the realm of politics: bodies (the political), powers (*Gestalten*), and freedom for its own purpose (the indeterminate void) are the central pieces that transform everything into the self-sustaining and empty mechanism of political power (the cosmos).[3] Even more, people need not be "good",

which is, in effect, to say that, from the perspective of the void (the "regency of freedom"), people may lack any meaningful attributes. The trick is, of course, that by situating oneself in the realm of the liminal void that has no particular anchor into the concrete, it looks as if all assertions pertaining to the nature of reality and history are purely "empirical", "neutral", "explanatory", or "descriptive". In reality, however, this can only work if one follows the metaphysics of the liminal void. This is to say that one needs to postulate the void as the single locus of true knowledge from within which then one is able to nullify history to the point of absolute undifferentiation (absence or "pointlessness"). Ironically enough, while nothing can be more unreal than the liminal void, it is "hard facts" that sustain such a vision of human existence.

Finally, one additional remark is needed. As it is well known, Kant's natural philosophy was probably the first providing the most comprehensive modern vision of the mechanicist cosmos (Schönfeld 2014) and, as such, it would be worthwhile to use Kant's method more. Also because Kant's critical philosophy pioneered the method pursued here by Schabert in order to establish the conditions of possibility for specific ontological categories (Taylor 1995). First, by enquiring into the *a priori* conditions for the possibility of human experience, Kant's transcendental philosophy (1998) deals with people as "bodies", standardizing them along with the ontology of the other bodies of the universe. Second, and following from the first, in a series of writings to engulf almost all human affairs, from politics to morality, religion, history and law (1987, 1991, 2001, 2002, 2009), Kant was able to signify "pure" knowledge inside the liminal void, providing for all the ontological inversions typical of modern philosophy and science (Roman 2016).

Thank you again for this fascinating book and for the stimulating contributions it has given rise to in this special issue of IPA. We hope for a pleasant reading and for many more interesting discussions sparked around the perennial predicaments of the political birth of human existence.

Notes

[1] On Neoplatonism and Indian thought, see Harris (1982).
[2] See Dodds (1992), concerning how theurgy had an effect on the Neo-Platonists, including Pseudo Dionysius, Boethius, Plethon and Marsilio Ficino.
[3] See also Anderson (2011: 90), especially his point concerning the story of Abraham, in particular his alien worshipping of the cosmos (through the Chaldean Astrology), and the application of this knowledge to the social world. Such unwarranted extension of cosmological knowledge to minute details of daily life and society would eventually lead to the unnatural "natural science" of Newton, and its philosophical equivalent in Kant.

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