

## COMPTEs RENDUS

Henrieta Anișoara Șerban, *Neopragmatism și postliberalism. Un Weltanschauung contemporan [Neopragmatism and Postliberalism: A Contemporary Weltanschauung]*, ediție bilingvă, referenți academicianul Alexandru Surdu și prof. univ. dr. CS I Claudiu Baci, București, Editura Institutului de Științe Politice și Relații Internaționale „Ion I. C. Brătianu” (ISPRI), 2021, 408 pp., ISBN 978-606-8656-94-6

In this book Henrieta Șerban returns to some of the themes she addressed in her previous books, particularly, *Reforming ideologies* and *Symbolic forms and representations of socio-political phenomena*. In her current book, Șerban's focus is on postliberalism and neopragmatism. What characterises the tone of the book is a sense of hope and optimism about the future of liberalism and the possibilities for democratic participation. This optimism is sustained by a complex argument which draws in large part on the work of Richard Rorty, amongst others.

Rorty's work is a comprehensive attack on the idea of foundations in philosophy. It rejects the role given to metaphysics and essentialism in traditional philosophy. Șerban's use of Rorty's ideas is confined to the political sphere, so those who object to the all-embracing nature of Rorty's vision may find this book more to their liking, as few would dispute that political ideologies and political structures are human creations rather than metaphysical entities. So, the reader will not find in this book any attempt to ground human rights or a concept of justice in such metaphysical entities as natural law or natural human rights. Instead Șerban looks for human solidarity based on a broadly shared sense of compassion and the rejection of cruelty.

Șerban identifies liberalism with the contemporary organisation of Western society, whose most popular expression appears in Fukuyama's triumphalist book *The End of History and the Last Man*, which appeared in 1992. In that book, Fukuyama identifies democracy with the kind of representative system we are familiar with in the West, regards justice, in so far as it features in his book, as the rule of law, identifies freedom with that tradition of an individualistic conception of negative freedom that derives from Locke, to which he adds the freedom from state interference in the free market. Fukuyama largely ignores that other strand of liberalism, equality, which finds expression in the work of Mill and Rawls. The contemporary expression of the Fukuyamian type of liberalism is found in the technocratic conception of expert management of society, with the primary focus upon the operation of the market. A richer conception of democracy than the one which currently is in operation in the West is regarded as a threat to technocratic efficiency and must be resisted.

Șerban sees this conception of political life as a diminished conception, and her aim in *Neopragmatism and Postliberalism* is to offer a much richer vision of politics, with a greater sense of participation and engagement for everyone in the political life of the

communities they form part of. It is in this sense that what she offers is a vision of postliberalism, a conception of a society which accepts the ideals of a liberal society but which goes well beyond what is currently on offer. What Şerban offers is an analysis and a range of intellectual proposals for moving towards a postliberal society.

The second element in Şerban's analysis draws on neopragmatism. If I have one criticism to make it is that although the author does draw on the work of writers like Susan Haack, she does not devote enough attention to analysing the difference between pragmatism and neopragmatism. However, this is not a serious fault, since Şerban is interested not in a global theory of neopragmatism, but in the way the neopragmatism of Rorty can be applied to political life. Because Şerban limits herself to the political, the pragmatist approach to truth, that truth is what it is good or useful to believe, fits comfortably into a neopragmatic approach. Rorty's neopragmatism represents, as has been often remarked, a shift from *getting the experience right*, to *getting the conversation right* – in effect adding a linguistic turn to traditional pragmatism. In politics, what counts as useful, or getting things right, is social solidarity. And Şerban sees getting the conversation right, or at least, having the right kind of conversations, as a first step towards getting the politics of compassion and solidarity right. In that sense, Şerban reconciles old fashioned pragmatism of experience and action with the neopragmatic linguistic approach of Rorty. At the political level, getting the language right results in getting political action right, where right is understood pragmatically, as what it is good or useful to think and do.

Starting from the remark of Rorty's that "there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones - no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow-inquirers", Şerban sets about analysing the semantics and semiotics of a neopragmatic conception of political discourse – that is to say, the conversational constraints on political discourse.

Given the rejection of essentialism and any metaphysical basis for such things as rights and justice, Şerban looks at how human interests shape the nature of political discourse and how debates are and could be conducted. Şerban draws on Rorty's threefold structure of irony, contingency and solidarity to provide her analysis. When looking at the semantics and semiotics of neopragmatic political discourse, she draws principally on Rorty's idea of irony, or ironism in her preferred terminology.

Once we have effectively given up on the idea of truth and essentialism in political discourse, we accept that political discourse is a matter of creating answers to political questions rather than discovering the truth, the distinction between convincing someone by rational argument and persuading someone by the use of rhetoric disappears.

Adopting an attitude of ironism means recognising that one's own opinions have no deeper foundations than anyone else's provided both answers are good or useful to believe, and that your own opinions have no particular claim to truth. This allows for a wide latitude in political opinion. Drawing on the discourse theories of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Şerban argues in favour of the role of emotion and creativity in producing ways of understanding and changing political thought and structures. Argument becomes the field of images and metaphors and good arguments are those which deploy images and metaphors to good effect. Good arguments are those which people accept as being good arguments.

Once one recognises that one has no essentialist grounding for one's political ideas, it follows that one stands towards one's own beliefs with a degree of detachment. At any time, you may revise or even reject one's current beliefs. For the ironist, what one believes is never more than a temporary resting place, from which one expects to move on, to another temporary resting place.

From Ironism, Şerban goes on to discuss social epistemology, which corresponds to some degree with contingency, the second element in Rorty's neopragmatist trinity. Şerban fleshes out her conception of social epistemology in terms of an awareness of the historical and developmental nature of ideology, and liberal ideology in particular. The author focusses on the recognition of the way social circumstances shape ideology, and here, at the heart of the liberal tradition, we can think of how Locke, the great advocate of the freedom of the individual, believed in the 'accidental superiority' of men over women, and invested his money in the slave trade. Drawing on Vattimo and Foucault, Şerban shows how the recognition that political rationality and essentialist metaphysics have functioned simply to disguise the operation of power. Once we recognise the contingency our own position, that had things been other than they are our beliefs and any dependence they may have upon the prevailing ideology could have been completely different, we can recognise that the current foundations for our beliefs are simply the result of contingent circumstances, and we are liberated from the need to find foundations for our own ways of thinking about politics. For Şerban this is an emancipatory occurrence, as an awareness of the historical contingency of ideology works alongside ironism to overthrow dependence upon past and present ideology.

Given a stance of ironism and detachment, and a recognition of the contingency of ideology, Şerban goes on to discuss the conditions that make for successful political discourse. This is the longest and most interesting part of the book. From the neopragmatic point of view, society is the mechanism by which successful co-existence is achieved. Successful co-existence is something that it is good to have, the practical equivalent of pragmatic truth, which is that which it is good to believe. To attain successful co-existence, an atmosphere of mutual respect is needed. The problem is how to attain a degree of what Şerban describes as 'conversational convergence', given the multiplicity of voices in society and the fact of difference. It is here that mutual respect is important, as it allows for the possibility of fruitful dialogue between different groups. What serves to underpin mutual respect is the recognition of contingency and the subsequent adoption of an attitude of ironism.

It is here that optimism and hope are to the fore. Rather than seeking to reconcile conflicting ideologies, Şerban sees the way forward towards a successful consensus as lying in feelings and emotions. Drawing on the work of Judith Shklar, the author sees consensus emerging from a shared human propensity to respond to manifestations of cruelty with feelings of revulsion, what she calls 'the rejection of cruelty'. As one reads this, one thinks of Hume and his conception of the way the natural virtues are founded on the natural moral sentiments of approval and disapproval, which arise in response to the operation of natural sympathy. This shows that for all its differences with the existing form which liberalism has taken, postliberalism still retains deep roots in the liberal philosophical tradition. But it is a serious question whether the rejection of cruelty is sufficient to ground conversational consensus, which is perhaps the topic for another book.

A further difficulty which Şerban faces is in the move from thought to action. This is a problem which was identified by Thomas Nagel in his book *Mortal Questions*, "I am pessimistic about ethical theory as a form of public service. . . philosophy is best judged by its contribution to the understanding, not to the course of events." Given Rorty's linguistic turn, his primary concern is with conversation, with the need to engage in constructive dialogue while recognizing that we have given up faith in truth.

Conversations cannot merely result in everyone believing what it is good to believe. If political conversations are to serve the pragmatic goal of utility, they need to result in action. It is here that Şerban draws on feminist models of the practical application of rethinking the existing paradigm. Rethinking on its own, is not sufficient. It must result in action. To give substance to the idea of how changing a paradigm can result in action, the author draws on the idea of 'active nihilism' as developed by Simon Critchley. It is not enough to lose faith in the old. To be of practical use in the political sphere, critical thinking must be accompanied by an ethics of commitment. There is a tension between holding an attitude of ironism and adopting an ethics of commitment, which needs to be resolved. Şerban suggests that feminism points one possible way forward, by combining individual recognition of contingency with collective social action, epitomised in the slogan, 'the personal *is* political'.

Şerban also has interesting things to say about spirituality, addressing the sorts of concerns which Walter Benjamin identified about the dis-enchantment and de-spiritualisation of the modern world. Drawing on the work of the Romanian philosophers Lucian Balga and Constantin Noica, whose names will be unfamiliar to most people in the West, she considers the possibility of creating a sense of the spiritual, based on myths and symbols. This would be a spirituality which would be anti-essentialist, in that it would not be based on the idea of metaphysical essences, but which would none the less be able to give shape to our sense of the ineffable and create a place in our lives for something that points to a significance that goes beyond the everyday world. She suggests that we have the ability to re-spiritualise the world, to create a matrix of myths and symbolic actions where a kind of secular re-enchantment of the world becomes possible.

Overall, this is an excellent book, which draws on a large range of thinkers and brings together a variety of ideas to create a positive and optimistic vision of the possibilities opened up by neopragmatism in the domain of politics. The author is not trying to replace the old ideology of liberalism with a new ideology of postliberalism. Her aim is to emphasize the human capacity for creativity in both life and politics, and to do away with need for ideology. In place of ideology the author offers a vision of the connectedness we share with each other, and offers postliberal grounds, based on neopragmatism, for a new way of thinking about human solidarity, as something which is not merely good to believe in, but as something which it is good for us all to strive towards, however much we may differ in our choice of narratives.

Ian Browne