

Book Review

Ernst Wolff, *Between Daily Routine and Violent Protest* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021)

Fernando Nascimento

Bowdoin College – USA

Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies, Vol 13, No 1 (2022), pp. 166-167

ISSN 2156-7808 (online) DOI 10.5195/errs.2022.592

<http://ricoeur.pitt.edu>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

Book Review

Ernst Wolff, *Between Daily Routine and Violent Protest* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021)

Fernando Nascimento

Bowdoin College – USA

Ernst Wolff's new book, *Between Daily Routine and Violent Protest*, brings an invigorating intellectual breath to several issues developed by Ricœur, presenting them in a critical and creative light and fostering thought-provoking dialogues with other philosophers and social scientists. Wolff structures the work into two neatly integrated parts that progressively explore technicity as an essential aspect for understanding human action. He defines "technicity" as the "combination of capabilities and means" and discusses how such intrinsic dimensions of human action are permeated by ethical expectations and hesitations. The book is available for free download at the website of its publisher, De Gruyter.

As Johann Michel highlighted in his recent *Études ricoeuriennes/Ricœur Studies* review of Wolff's other recent work, *Lire Ricœur depuis la périphérie*, one of the significant contributions of this present book is its nuanced analysis of Ricœur's primary works, some much discussed such as "The Political Paradox" and *Oneself as Another* and others less explored by the Ricœurian community such as "La question coloniale" and "Non-violent Man and his Presence to History." (It is impossible not to underline the academic prowess of Wolff's publishing two significant works in such a short space of time.) Wolff critically interprets some of Ricœur's cardinal concepts, offering innovative perspectives to Ricœurian scholarship. For example, he dissects the concept of institutions and discusses the limitations of Ricœur's teleological approach to actions that may not sufficiently account for the systematic denial of the possibility of action in social circumstances of violence and oppression.

Wolff's style resembles many Ricœurian argumentations as he lays out the debate between Ricœur's work and important thinkers such as Giddens, Debray, and Bolstanski, just to cite a few examples. As in Ricœur's work, the philosophical dialogues promoted by Wolff have a synergistic effect. Wolff engenders a new whole that is more significant than the mere sum of the arguments and applies them productively to unveil new dimensions of the technicity and ethics of human action.

The author carefully crafts the book's organization to guide the reader through the various components of his main thesis on the technicity of action and its implications. The flipside of the book's fine-grained structure is that at some points it demands a conscious effort to take stock of past sections and reconstruct the vision of the work as a whole. The first part deals primarily with the conceptual argumentation about the technicity of action. Wolff argues that the technical dimension of action encompasses three complementary elements: personally acquired capabilities, the systems of technical objects, and the understanding of the social and material environment in which actions take place. The social, institutional, and interpersonal perspectives constituting the technicity of action provide a welcome expansion beyond alternative approaches that focus primarily on technological tools and equipment. As a key contribution to

contemporary hermeneutics, Wolf insightfully applies the threefold mimesis that is primarily defined by Ricœur with regards to texts to the larger domain of symbolically mediated actions.

In evaluating this first part, the growing impact of digital technologies on capabilities, means and ethical expectations that characterize the technicity of action suggests an area in which Wolff's work might be expanded through a more robust development of how his analyses of the technicity of action are impacted by recent digital technologies such as artificially intelligent agents and virtual environments. Given Wolff's familiarity with issues in the philosophy of technology, this expansion of his analysis of the technicity of action seems a relevant and necessary complement to the vitality and relevance of his conceptual proposal. I have an availability bias for working with these questions in my own research, so my comments should be read with a grain of salt. However, I believe they are relevant in terms of the conceptual framework of the technicity of action that has itself been constantly transformed by the mediation of digital artifacts.

Wolff partially dedicates the second part of the books to a discussion, certainly controversial, on the use of violent action as a form of resistance to institutional and systemic violence that exhausts other possibilities of action and demands a contextual deliberation that transcends the imposed limits by universal principles. Wolff explores Okolo Okonda's arguments that recontextualize Ricœur's thought on a semantic horizon more representative of the tragedy of institutionalized violence and oppression. Wolff's intellectual movement is admirable as it compels us to ponder the richness of the reception of Ricœur's thought in international cultural and social contexts.

Some of the themes developed by Wolff point towards possible research programs for the Ricœurian community. These themes include, for instance, his insightful and nuanced analysis of incapacities in connection with the Capability Approach suggested by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, as well as an in-depth rereading of concepts and arguments from Ricœur's lesser-known works on emerging problems of postcolonialism and growing social inequalities.

Wolff joins a long-running discussion on the most salient aspect of Ricœur's work with an intriguing question about what the name "Ricœur" means to his readers, interpreters and commentators. Instead of offering just another exclusive and encompassing attempt to exhaust the meaning of Ricœur's work in a single interpretive dimension, Wolff wisely proposes thickening the conflict of interpretations about the name "Ricœur" by identifying it with the "philosophical ethos of letting the fate and views of the others resonate in our own mind, under global conditions of increasing uncertainty and perplexity."