

Book Review

Alison Scott-Baumann, *Ricœur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion* (London: Continuum, 2009).

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Alison Scott-Baumann, *Ricœur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion* (London: Continuum, 2009).

Paul Ricœur had a very long and prolific philosophical career. Given the abundance of philosophy (albeit not necessarily deeply philosophical...) books written nowadays, readers tend to skim through them very fast, absorbing only a couple of main ideas at best, and usually not bothering to delve into them or trying to understand them among the broader context of the intellectual production of the people who wrote the books. So authors and philosophers are sometimes reduced to a handful of slogans by means of which they are catalogued and usually neutralized. Sadly, Ricœur's work is no exception. It would be unfortunate for such a productive philosopher if he were to come down in the history of philosophy mainly as the one who coined the expression "the masters of suspicion," thereby reducing the efforts of thinkers so important and different from each other as Marx, Nietzsche and Freud to a purely detectivist approach. However, this expression, much more successful than the book which made it famous¹, has stuck to Ricœur's intellectual persona. Even though his analyses of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud were somewhat marginal in the broader context of his philosophy, it seemed as if his most valuable contribution to present-day philosophy was his diagnosis of a common tendency of suspicion, present in the theoretical efforts of the three abovementioned thinkers, who would have decisively influenced the postmodern era. Pitted against them, Ricœur would be, in stark contrast, a backward philosopher, looking for the hermeneutic recovery of supposedly old-fashioned concepts such as meaning, truth and tradition.

As with most hasty judgments, this one is false too. Alison Scott-Baumann's book is a valuable contribution to the destruction of that prejudice. Scott-Baumann undertakes a finely nuanced analysis of expressions such as "masters of suspicion," "hermeneutics of suspicion," and "exercise of suspicion," unveiling their similarities and differences as well as the way Ricœur's ideas on these matters evolved throughout the years. Most importantly, the author shows how the notion of suspicion, throughout all its metamorphoses, is connected with a neglected topic in Ricœur's work, namely, negation. This book is the result of several years of work undertaken by the author at the archives of the recently inaugurated *Fonds Ricœur*. Its comprehensive approach to the entirety of Ricœur's production has benefited from a close collaboration with Catherine Goldenstein, the curator of the Fonds Ricœur. Through her direct access to many of Ricœur's less-known articles (the so-called "*introuvables*") and to some unpublished materials on suspicion and negation, Scott-Baumann is able to provide the first book in English that can account for these aspects of Ricœur's philosophy.

From the outset, Scott-Baumann announces the purpose of her project: to show that "the hermeneutics of suspicion is *not* a highly significant feature of Ricœur's work" (p. 10), even though the intellectual mechanism inherent to it remained important to him throughout his career. The book is divided into ten chapters, which are organized both topically and chronologically. Chapter 1 – "Cartesian Doubt" – focuses on the connection of suspicion with a certain sort of doubt. The main common characteristic that Ricœur identifies in the works of the three "masters of suspicion," Scott-Baumann argues, is the assertion that "we deceive others, and

not only others, but also ourselves, about our beliefs, motives and actions" (pp. 8-9). In this book, there is much emphasis on the *methodological* aspect of Ricœur's philosophy. As Scott-Baumann puts it: "He believes that the method we use will determine the results we achieve. If, as Ricœur argues, the question we ask will determine the answer, then we must use philosophical language to contrast and dismantle the philosophical assumptions of the different methodologies and then reconstruct them after applying *reductio ad absurdum* techniques" (p. 11). The hermeneutics of suspicion could be understood as the application of these techniques in order to tear apart the false assumptions of each methodology; what readers of Ricœur don't always understand is that this is only one part of the process, because most of the time – though not always – Ricœur then aims to go beyond suspicion in order to reconstruct the lost meaning.

Chapter 2 – "Ricœur's hermeneutics I: the archaeology of suspicion" - analyzes Ricœur's early works, the *Philosophy of the Will*² and *History and Truth*,³ showing how his work evolved from a phenomenological philosophy to a hermeneutical one, and the first clashes with yet another movement which could be characterized by its emphasis on some sort of suspicion: structuralism. Chapter 3 – "Ricœur's masters of suspicion: Marx, Nietzsche and Freud" - goes through Ricœur's classical formulation of the expression "masters of suspicion" in his controversial book, *Freud and Philosophy*. With these three masters, the transparency of the *cogito* to itself was under attack. As the distinction between inner and outer nature came to be perceived as being capable of playing a trick on us, greater levels of attentiveness and suspicion were required in order to *unmask* the true content of what was *really* happening. Scott-Baumann notes that "Ricœur concludes that there is a shadowy element in all of us that needs to be acknowledged and somehow accommodated, yet not given its head as that would create a dangerous level of excitement and recklessness" (p. 47). The most interesting feature therefore is that Ricœur enjoins the readers to take part in this kind of self-elucidating process: "Ricœur wants us to become expert in exercising suspicion" (p. 44).

Chapter 4 – "On the use and abuse of the term 'hermeneutics of suspicion'" - is the core of this book, as it contains many of the author's main claims. Scott-Baumann claims that Ricoeur chose to uncouple suspicion from hermeneutics because hermeneutics itself already contains enough doubt. Suspicion added to hermeneutical challenges would go too far and become a corrosive force, whereby we "doubt all and we see through everything and everybody. This is a curse" (p. 68). Here she argues for a moderate use of suspicion, balanced and appropriate to its goals. This is why, she claims, Ricoeur almost completely abandoned the expression "hermeneutics of suspicion" in the early 1980s, whereas the exercise of "suspicion" continued at least until *Oneself as Another*.⁴ Ultimately, suspicion is to be understood as a Kantian limit-idea. We cannot be suspicious of everything, nor can we attain a foolproof knowledge of everything. Suspicion should act as a mechanism to control both our pretension to immediate knowledge and our will to know everything. It is thus useful for unmasking ideologies and forms of false consciousness. Suspicion itself can have two poles in dialectical tension with each other. The negative moment is useful when applied to subjective consciousness, so that it can destroy false idols and overcome their domination. However, the masters of suspicion did not provide the recovery, the affirmation that should balance the exercise of suspicion and when exacerbated, suspicion can become some sort of a permanently suspicious state of mind, whereby we can ultimately destroy ourselves (p. 71). As such, suspicion should be handled with care.

Chapter 5 – "Ricœur's hermeneutics II: the theory of interpretation" - deals with the hermeneutical theory of interpretation of the mature period: *The Rule of Metaphor*⁵ and *Time and*

Narrative.⁶ By this time, Scott-Baumann argues, Ricœur had already uncoupled suspicion from hermeneutics; hermeneutics included different procedures and techniques to unveil meaning, of which suspicion was an important, but not the only, one. At this point, the author speaks about one of the most fundamental techniques in Ricœur's art of reading other philosophers: the need to create tensions between different philosophical standpoints. These tensions are both dangerous and creative (p. 95). It is dangerous because we can get lost in the game of dialectical oppositions if we do not look for a way out of it, but yet creative because these tensions can lead us to accept the plurality of interpretations and to find our way to navigate among them.

Chapters 6 ("Linguistic analysis"), 7 ("Methodological dialectics") and 8 ("Philosophical anthropology") are closely linked, as three different methodologies that Ricœur finds in order to deal with the fundamental tension between hermeneutics and suspicion. Hermeneutics believes in the existence of meaning and strives to find it, while radical suspicion can tend to doubt it all. The claim is that suspicion amplifies hermeneutics and can become so intense that the struggle for interpretation has no way out. In Scott-Baumann's tripartite reconstruction of Ricœur's philosophy, linguistic analysis, as a first approach, is a sort of pre-critical naivety, methodological dialectics being the critical moment of suspicion and philosophical anthropology the recovery of naivety, or second naivety. We can argue whether or not this model successfully captures the core of Ricœur's philosophy. As every model, it certainly has its shortcomings, due to a necessary schematic simplification. Some objections can be made, such as the fact that linguistic analysis already is a procedure in the effort of explaining the text (in order to, in Ricœur's famous definition, explain better) and therefore not very prone to be qualified as pertaining to a first naivety. Also, the quest for a second naivety after the abandonment of the first one and the long mediation of critique is something announced very early on by Ricœur himself. It remains, however, to be known whether or not he was successful in attaining it in his works, or if it remained forever on the horizon, a "promised land," like ontology in *Oneself as Another*. Be that as it may, this model has a great deal of explanatory power, and it reproduces a logic proper to the inner workings of Ricœur's philosophy: establishing a point of departure (such as faith, the ethical aim, or a conviction) and forcing it to go through the most fierce critiques and procedures of explanation whereby the first position is forced to justify itself, in order to eventually recover be recovered in a later, postcritical stage. In its spirit, Scott-Baumann's model is therefore straight to the point.

I should add that the chapter which I find the most important for the future of Ricœur's studies is chapter 7, to which I feel very close. In chapter 6, Scott-Baumann defined precisely what Ricœur teaches us about the exercise of philosophy; it is to be taken as "a reminder of the need to get inside an argument, understand it fully from close up (appropriation) and attack it (distanciation) by standing back, yet from inside its own structures" (p. 113). In chapter 7, Scott-Baumann delves into the most fundamental opposition structuring Ricœur's philosophy, the one between Kant and Hegel that led him to define his philosophical position, following Eric Weil's footsteps, as a Posthegelian Kantianism. As is well known, Ricœur is greatly influenced by Hegel, but denies the total reconciliation presupposed by Absolute Knowledge. In this respect, he remains faithful to Kant and his positing of the antinomies. The result is what Johann Michel has called a "broken Hegelianism,"⁷ and a redefinition of what "dialectical" means: "by dialectical Ricœur means that our existence is shaped by polarities and also that we must seek to resolve them by incorporating previous contradictions from each extreme into new ways of thinking. This will not necessarily provide solutions that arrive somewhere in the middle between two

opposites, but can guide us in incorporating features that are common to both extremes and in making something new, viable and ethically robust; a third position" (p. 117). I would add that almost all of Ricoeur's methodology can be found here. It resides in what I call the procedure of "creative conflict." Scott-Baumann argues that such methods create a space, a hiatus of undecidedness, in which we can contemplate the different positions and then go on to decide what we are to make of them.

One of the most interesting features of the book is the way the author strives to integrate these Ricoeurian characteristics (fair, balanced and inclusive appreciation of arguments, openness to debate and suspicion of one's own motives as well as those of others) in the broader context of world politics as well as her own activity: "Taking action to use the suspicion proportionately to personal experience and positively is vitally important" (p. 120) For instance, she argues that a radical use of suspicion is at the core of the East/West divide in international relations. She contends that after the failure of Marxism in the former Soviet Union, suspicion between East and West has changed but still remains present (p. 120). This problem is best captured in the reciprocal suspicion between the West and the Muslim world. Scott-Baumann, who also co-wrote a report funded by the British government on Muslim Faith Leadership Training, argues for a Ricoeurian-style inclusive dialogue, in order to challenge the cultural gap described in Huntington's famous claims about the clash of civilizations. In the final note of this report, the authors state: "As shown throughout this report, the Muslim Faith Leadership Training Review (...) necessarily involved attention to many different traditions and points of view, and therefore much dialogue and deliberation. The purpose of this report is to help promote further such dialogue and deliberation, not only in Muslim communities and organizations but also throughout wider society."⁸

Chapter 9 - "Ricoeur's hermeneutics III: recovery" - tries to strike a balance between suspicion and trust and to develop a mature position, able to discern the conflict of interpretations and yet act ethically and affirmatively. This last stage is supposed to include all the previous stages and to combine them in different ways, in order to face different situations. In Chapter 10 - "Conclusion" - Scott-Baumann stresses Ricoeur's engagement as a principled public intellectual. The book ends by recommending the use of an intentional, controlled and proportional suspicion to challenge accepted reality, to challenge personal positions, and to overcome the gap between belief and meaning. It depicts Ricoeur, in the words of Scott-Baumann, as "a radical rebel, who can take his place alongside the best activists" (p. 184).

I must say that I most certainly agree with that depiction. We have to challenge the common portrayal of Ricoeur as an exclusively irenic thinker. He was engaged in many public causes and was not afraid to take part in both the civic and theoretical debates of his time. From the conflict of interpretations to the conflict of norms, Ricoeur was moved by the dialectic of conflict and sought to change the world he was living in. The reconstruction of his political philosophy is one of the tasks yet to be fully accomplished, one that can certainly show us how productive his practical philosophy really is.

I recommend this book to anyone wanting a comprehensive analysis of Ricoeur's entire philosophical work, stressing the fact that it includes some of the first work on a topic as important as negation. Scott-Baumann demonstrates the need to take direct responsibility for the world we live in, through challenging our own motives and actions and thereby exercising a suspicion that is exactly proportional to the false consciousness that often allows us to indulge in doubts about others. She also reminds us of the need to go back to the primary texts by analysing

the inaccurate narrative that has sprung up around the expression “hermeneutics of suspicion.” The English-speaking reader will, with the help of this book, be capable of understanding the metamorphoses of the work of a philosopher whose production singularly represents the main philosophical moments of the 20th century.

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¹ Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. D. Savage (New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 1970).

² Paul Ricœur, *Fallible Man*, trans. C. A. Kelbley (Chicago, Henry Regnery, 1965); *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, trans. E. V. Kohák (Evanston (Illinois): Northwestern University Press, 1966); *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. E. Buchanan (New York-Evanston-London: Harper and Row, 1967).

³ Paul Ricœur, *History and Truth*, trans. C. A. Kelbley (Evanston (Illinois): Northwestern University Press, 1965).

⁴ Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. K. Blamey (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁵ Paul Ricœur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multidisciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. R. Czerny (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).

⁶ Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer for vols. I and II, Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer for vol. III (Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984, 1985 and 1988)

⁷ Johann Michel, “Herméneutique et Déconstruction,” *Études Phénoménologiques* 41-42 (Bruxelles: Ousia, 2005).

⁸ Mohamed Mukadam and Alison Scott-Baumann, with Ashfaque Chowdhary and Sariya Contractor, *The training and development of Muslim Faith Leaders: Current practice and future possibilities*, p. 70 (available at: www.communities.gov.uk).