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Review

Instituting Thought: Three Paradigms of Political Ontology

Roberto Esposito (translated by Mark Willian Epstein)

Polity Press, Cambridge, 2021 [2020], 238pp., ISBN: 978-1-5095-4643-5

In his new book, Roberto Esposito does precisely what the title describes. *Instituting Thought* is an exposition of three different political ontologies – destituting, constituting, and instituting – that draw, respectively, from Martin Heidegger, Gilles Deleuze, and Claude Lefort. The outset of the book is promising. With the rise of interest in social ontology and the current political climate in western democracies, it seems only natural to analyze ‘the essential relationship that conjoins being and politics’ (p. 2). The general approach of the book is set in a post-foundationalist frame, in which there is no metaphysical grounding that would give definite direction or form for political systems. Instead, politics negates ‘every transcendent presupposition’ (p. 3). One of the merits of the book is to show that even within the post-foundationalist understanding of the political, there are clear differences in approach.

Esposito summarizes his own position in the introduction: ‘the first two paradigms – the post-Heideggerian and the Deleuzian ... – are inscribed in the current crisis of the political and thus contribute to its exacerbation, only the third, the instituting, is able to reverse this drift with a new affirmative project’ (p. 4). This thesis also gives a structure to the book, which consists of three chapters, one for each of the paradigms.

The destituting paradigm emphasises the role of the impolitical (pp. 19-20). One of the central concepts is the Greek *polis*, not as a political regime, but rather as the ‘unfounded foundation of the political’ (p. 55). Esposito argues that this negative basis for politics leads Heidegger into a problem that he cannot solve. He wants to ‘affirm, against the negativity of the political, a perspective that is itself articulated in negative terms’ (p. 55). However, as this is not possible, the only option is to deactivate politics (p. 59). Esposito (p. 73) suggests that Heidegger aims to offer a rehabilitation with respect to his Nazism by turning away from the political and letting it implode on its own (pp. 75-76).

The second approach, which emphasizes the inexhaustible human capacity to create (p. 84), is a direct response to Heidegger. This constituting paradigm overturns the negativity of the previous one, but in turn goes too far into other direction: if politics is constituting, and everything is political, including the constitution of being itself, it becomes impossible to recognize anything as specifically political (p. 80). In practical terms the Deleuzian approach does not seem to offer any normative guidelines for evaluating different kinds of political organization – politics is no longer an arena for comparison or confrontation, but rather becomes an arena of ever-shifting acceleration (pp. 111, 117).

The third paradigm traces a path between two previous excesses. Drawing from Lefort, the political is described as instituting the social. Since societies do not have any solid grounding for their identity, ‘social being needs to be politically instituted’ (p. 150). Instituting is an activity that is understood as pretty synonymous to politics. It happens in a historical context and is ‘destined to change the normative framework in which it operates’ (p. 12). As such, it is a continuous historical process, which ranges from state-level to smaller arrangements, which can be autonomous and also in competition with each other (pp. 12-13).

Esposito contrasts his view with thinkers such as Bourdieu, Foucault, Sartre, and Searle, who ‘converge on this conservative interpretation of the institution, understood as that which neutralizes the innovative drives from society, in order to legitimize existing powers’ (p. 150). Here the book

would have benefited from more engagement with the literature, as many available accounts of social ontology not only describe institutions as something that solidifies social practices, but also has creative elements. For John Dewey (1973), for example, the ossification of institutions would be a disaster, as institutions are malleable historical products, created as answers to particular contingent historical challenges.

In the Lefortian (or neo-Machiavellian) paradigm, the instituting relationship is described as vertical instead of horizontal (p. 157). This hints at a view where institutions are in some sense 'above' individual agents. Sadly, the key differences between vertical and horizontal relations are not explicated. The book also would have benefited from a more detailed discussion of the different features of the institutional world. It is not obvious, after all, that social institutions such as language, money or the state are in any relevant senses similar. For example, Raimo Tuomela's (2007) classifications of different kinds of institutions could have been helpful in discussing what exactly is being instituted in the Lefortian view.

For Esposito, the role of politics is also to make society aware of the formative process of instituting. He sees this aspect as relevant for modern democracies: they recognize conflict – or political struggle over the institutional world – as 'inevitable and productive' (p. 158). This awareness is tied to Esposito's anti-foundationalist view of democracy. Conflict and struggle are central for social power and politics, but at its core politics is 'participation in a common situation' (p. 184). In short, politics is struggle over shared life, without any clear-cut answers. The benefit of a democratic system is that it makes this explicit: 'Democratic is a vortex that rotates around an empty point. While this occurs unconsciously in all kinds of society, in the democratic kind this dynamic acquires awareness, presenting itself for what it is' (p. 196). Although Esposito casts Hegel as a remnant of a foundationalist past, his tone is very Hegelian: the self-awareness of a society is taken as a criterion for supporting that form of social organization. In this sense, he also endorses a normatively demanding view of democracy as much more than a decision-making mechanism.

It is doubtful if self-awareness is really achieved in democracies, or that the citizens of democracies would agree on how their political systems function. Would those democracies that fail to make explicit their conflictual non-foundationalist nature not be democracies at all, or perhaps unsuccessful democracies? Esposito recognizes these challenges. In his reading, democracies are riddled with paradoxes: they can never recognize themselves as a whole; there is an 'irreducible chiasmus between rights and their effective validity'; and seemingly individual rights of citizens are always socially dependent (p. 206).

The book is presented as an answer to the crisis of the political. It is easy to agree that the third paradigm presents a view of political ontology that retains and enables political agency. However, the reader is left – quite literally, as there is no conclusion in the book – without a clear conclusion. Different political ontologies are laid out in detail, but the analysis remains at a very abstract level. In places the motivation for the analysis seems to be drawn from the 'crisis of the European philosophical left' (p. 82), but at the same time it is unclear how a different understanding of political ontology would help in the criticism of capitalism and the overturning of actual neoliberal praxis.

One of the challenges seems to be that 'the left' does not think politically and does not recognize the symbolic dimension of power (p. 201). To me this diagnosis rings as partly untrue. Recent years have seen a revival of utopian thinking, and critical social theory drawing from Marxist roots has probably more proponents than ever before. What is the issue then? That these movements have not gathered enough impetus? Perhaps Esposito stays true to the non-foundationalist approach and does not want to provide support for any particular political project. After all, with the fact of

plurality in mind, it is not obvious which direction practical politics ought to take, and indeed it would be suspicious if one would merely hand out such a direction. However, if direction is missing, then in a more pragmatic tone, it could be asked what use – other than epistemic – does the instituting account of the political have? Perhaps we should be content that the fundamental nature of the political is unveiled. However, without a normative element, the account seems powerless to help with political crises.

In this sense the book's motivation becomes puzzling: it is quite hard to see what tools it offers for social critique and analysis of the often-mentioned crises of political systems such as populism, polarization, apathy, disinformation, (corporate) technocracy, and depoliticization. Nonetheless, there is clearly merit in providing a detailed account of the political in the instituting sense. As an account of the political it is in itself interesting and compelling, even if the book would not help with everyday politics as such. Esposito's account, if taken seriously, could open up potential new venues for political struggle and democratization. No institutional arrangement should be beyond negotiation. Indeed, this is a project that is shared by many critical theorists under various titles such as 'critical social ontology'.

References

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