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Book Review

Johann Michel, *Quand le social vient au sens* (Bruxelles: PIE Peter Lang, 2015)

In *Quand le social vient au sens,* Johann Michel engages in a dialogue between hermeneutics, social phenomenology, historiography and various non-phenomenological currents within contemporary French sociology. The author proposes to see this collection of exquisitely well-written essays, all of which were previously published separately, as unified by a common hermeneutic interrogation about the historical and social sciences. The book is divided into three parts, each consisting of three chapters. I will first outline the contents of the book and then raise two inter-related problems concerning social theory.

The first part discusses Ricoeur's views on the epistemology and the "regional ontology" of historiography. These are quite technical chapters in which Michel impressively deploys his vast knowledge of Ricoeur's work. The chapters are less concerned with historiographical research as such than with epistemological and ontological problems that are fundamental from a philosophical point of view.

The second part of the collection, entitled *Inhabiting and Resisting Institutions*, begins with a commentary on Ricoeur's conception of human institutions, continues with a polyphonic discussion on the regional ontology of human institutions to which contemporary French sociology is convoked, and ends with a "micro-sociological" case study, based on Primo Levi's account of Nazi camp life, highlighting the irreducible human power to negotiate and resist even the most oppressive institutions.

Michel carefully demonstrates that Ricoeur's political and ontological thought on institutions remains ambivalent. On the one hand, in a classical holistic manner, Ricoeur thinks of institutions as objects "always already" there; institutions predate individual subjects, or more precisely, precede and enable their subjectivation in the first place. But, on the other hand, institutions are held to be reducible to intersubjective exchanges, which reveals the ultimately individualistic framework of Ricoeur's social ontology. This ontological "tension" finds its reflection on the political plane, with Ricoeur arguing both that individual freedom is irreducible and, in the opposite direction, that allegiance to political institutions is irrevocable.

Michel successfully engages a dialogue between philosophy and sociology in the second chapter of this section, which is dedicated to problems of social ontology and genuinely informed by non-philosophical sources. Not only Ricoeur, but also Schütz and Berger/Luckmann form the backdrop of Michel's contribution to this dialogue. The author contends that the way in which various currents of contemporary French sociology deal with institutional phenomena in terms of structures or grammars is compatible with a hermeneutical focus on the "textual configuration of institutions." (p. 94). But he warns that the inevitably synchronic or static emphases of the notions of structure and grammar should not prevent the analyst from problematizing the origin of institutions, an important point on which I will elaborate in the discussion below.

The third part of the book deals with the social conditions of subjectivation, that is, the cultural resources through which human individuals come to think of themselves and act in the world as subjects. The first chapter compares Ricoeur's and Foucault's approaches regarding the relationship between subjectivity and truth, opposing the former's insistence on testimony (*témoignage*) to the latter's concentration on avowal (*aveu*) as alternative modes of veridiction. For the rest, the second chapter clarifies the notion of inability, again in genuine dialogue with sociology, whereas the third and final chapter develops the thesis that narrativity is a fundamental mode of understanding and interpreting the self, or in other words, that it is an "existential."

I now want to address two important problems that the book brings to the surface. The "tension" that Michel clearly demonstrates at work in Ricoeur's social thought refers to the commitment to two apparently incompatible theses, namely, that institutions predate the constitution of people as subjects, though they are not entities that can be added on to the people. I read this as a characteristic attitude of social theory during the period in which Ricoeur reflected on the nature of the social. That attitude conjoins ontological individualism and methodological holism: the "stuff" of the social is supposed to be nothing but individuals in interaction; but at the same time holistic concepts prove powerful, while individualistic concepts prove utterly helpless, to advance enlightening analyses of the social world. In this view, social units such as institutions should not be reified, that is, treated as entities or "substances" separate from people's actions, though there seems to be no practical way to analyse them without invoking, explicitly or tacitly, irreducible "structures" or "systems" endowed with constraining powers over individual actions. The question facing social theory today is whether or not we should content ourselves with this tension between our individualistic ontology and our holistic method.

One way out, which is fully compatible with Michel's (and Ricoeur's) approach, is to acknowledge that social structures, since they exert causal powers on people, do exist, though not in the way that observable empirical

units like people exist. This points to a stratified view of social reality. In this regard, it would be advisable, as Michel occasionally does, to acknowledge that it is not institutions but the structural properties of "institutional phenomena" that are the proper object of sociology. The talk of institutions is confusing because it connotes the very substance that it wishes to discard. Instead, institutional phenomena can be conceptualized as resulting from the interaction between different strata of reality, such as social structure, culture, and people. Structural facts, such as role systems, and cultural facts, such as shared meanings, could also be usefully distinguished in the analysis of institutional phenomena.

This brings me to the second point I wish to discuss, namely, Michel's legitimate protestation that sociologists focusing on structures or grammars, which are by definition synchronic arrangements, unduly neglect their diachronic formation or historicity. In my view, Michel is right to diagnose that sociologists' inability to account for the historical origin of social structures stems from methodological helplessness, and that the latter is never a good reason, and always a bad excuse, for endorsing or rejecting any ontological position. What most sociologists are unable to do indeed is to analyze the interaction between social structures and people, assuming as they do that either structures mechanically determine people's doings or structures are "just" what people do. Focusing on subjectivation and interpretation, Michel suggests a non-reductive, stratified method for analyzing how social and cultural structures shape people and vice-versa.

Quand le social vient au sens will thus be of interest for specialists of Ricoeur's work, epistemologists of historiography, social theorists, and students of subjectivation processes.

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