



# “A sociality of pure egoists”: Husserl’s critique of liberalism

Timo Miettinen<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

According to Husserl’s self-description, his phenomenological project was “completely apolitical.” Husserl’s phenomenology did not provide a political philosophy in the classical sense, a normative description of a functioning social order and its respective institutional structures. Nor did Husserl have much to say about the day-to-day politics of his time. Yet his reflections on community and culture were not completely without political implications. This article deals with an often-neglected strand of Husserl’s philosophy, namely his critique of liberalism. In this article, liberalism is understood in the manner of Leo Strauss, as a tradition of individualist philosophy emerging from Hobbes’s political thought. As the article shows, Husserl followed many of his contemporaries in criticizing Hobbes’s abstract individualism, which could provide only a preventative function for political institutions. More importantly, Husserl’s engagement with Hobbes can be understood as a kind of ethical counterpart to his analysis of Galileo in the *Crisis*, as a critique of formal apriorism in the political domain. What Galileo did for physical nature with his “garb of ideas,” Hobbes did for human nature, reducing human sociality to interactions between atomistic individuals. In doing so, Hobbes ended up presenting a “mathematics of sociality” in an empirical garb. Going against the liberal view of the human person, Husserl presented his theory of social ethics founded on an original co-existence of subjects and a theory of human renewal.

**Keywords** Phenomenology · Liberalism · Politics · Social ethics · Renewal

Husserl’s reputation as an essentially apolitical thinker is well known. Although classical phenomenology is currently being applied also in the fields of social and political philosophy, most commentators see thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty or Lefort as

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✉ Timo Miettinen  
timo.pa.miettinen@helsinki.fi

<sup>1</sup> University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

being more relevant points of departure for a politically oriented phenomenological philosophy.<sup>1</sup> For broader issues of social solidarity and cultural critique, the works of Scheler are still indispensable; the same goes for such lesser-known figures as the Catholic phenomenologist Dietrich von Hildebrand, who also worked actively in Austrian resistance movements during the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> However, while it is easy to situate other phenomenologists, such as Scheler, Heidegger, or Merleau-Ponty, in more or less clearly defined ideological traditions, in the case of Husserl this is not at all evident. Before and during the First World War, Husserl was a somewhat ardent nationalist who spoke about the triumph of spirit in the German nation, a line of thought that culminated in the famous Fichte lectures of 1917/18.<sup>3</sup> After the catastrophic events of the war, however, Husserl began to criticize unilateral imperialism in favor of more cosmopolitan ideas.<sup>4</sup> In Husserl's correspondence from the post-1918 period, there is some evidence that he had an appreciation for Karl Kautsky's (1854–1938) social-democratic ideas and was a supporter of progressive, yet non-revolutionary socialism.<sup>5</sup> But how all this links to his overall philosophical project – for instance, his so-called social-ontological investigations – is still somewhat of a mystery.

In his lecture course on the birth of biopolitics in 1978–79, Michel Foucault gave one possible answer.<sup>6</sup> In his account, Husserl's philosophy provided one of the key intellectual impulses for the formation of the early German neoliberal tradition, often referred to as ordoliberalism. This movement, which originated in interwar Freiburg, produced some of the most influential post-WWII German economists, such as Walter Eucken and Ludwig Erhard. In Foucault's account, what distinguished the neoliberalism of Eucken and other ordoliberals from its 18th - and 19th -century predecessors was not just its view of the role of the state, which was much more positive than in classical liberalism, but also its inherently *idealistic* approach.<sup>7</sup> Instead of deducing general features from empirically observable phenomena, the German neoliberals conceived of the market economy as an optimally functioning system of ideal relations. This principle of idealization concerned particularly the phenomenon of competition, which thinkers no longer conceived of as a naturalistic phenomenon having its origin in human nature. For the ordoliberals, Foucault claimed, competition was “an essence” or “an eidos”:

Competition is a principle of formalization. Competition has an internal logic; it has its own structure. Its effects are only produced if this logic is respected. It is, as it were, a formal game between inequalities; it is not a natural game between individuals and behaviors. Just as for Husserl a formal structure is only

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Held (2012); Lee (2018), and Bedorf and Herrman (2020). See also Merleau-Ponty (1969) and Lefort (1986). See also, for example, Flynn (2005).

<sup>2</sup> Von Hildebrand (1955).

<sup>3</sup> Husserl (1986, p. xxx).

<sup>4</sup> Husserl (1988, p. 53).

<sup>5</sup> Schuhmann (1988, p. 231).

<sup>6</sup> Foucault (2008).

<sup>7</sup> Foucault (2008, p. 120).

given to intuition under certain conditions, in the same way competition as an essential economic logic will only appear and produce its effects under certain conditions which have to be carefully and artificially constructed.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, Foucault claimed that the ordoliberalists took advantage of a Husserlian "eidetic reduction" by constructing the logic of competition as an ideal phenomenon. Although Foucault was rather careful in not taking this line of argumentation too far – he did not claim that Husserl was an actual neoliberal – other commentators have not shied away from making this connection. As Johanna Oksala has argued, there is an "essential affinity between Eucken's project and Husserl's late views on the philosophy of science."<sup>9</sup> Both approached the market economy as a phenomenon that belongs primarily to the domain of cognition rather than morality, that is, as something defined by categories of truth and evidence. By doing so, Oksala argues, they both contributed to a "morally and politically neutral" view of the economy.<sup>10</sup> This strict separation of economy from politics remains an important legacy of the liberal tradition.

But is it historically accurate and intellectually viable to situate Husserl in the liberal tradition? This article takes the position that it is not. On the contrary, I claim that Husserl was rather a fierce critic of the liberal tradition from at least two perspectives. First, Husserl criticized the *abstract individualism* characteristic of the political ontology of modern liberalism. According to this idea, the individual should be conceived as the basic unit of all political thinking, and the political community should be understood as emerging from a voluntary agreement between these individuals. Husserl, in contrast, emphasized the intersubjective nature of human experience already at the very fundamental levels of our comportment in the world. Second, Husserl refuted the *static conception of human nature* characteristic of the liberal tradition. In his view, the political ontology of modern liberalism has been built on the insights of the Galilean natural sciences, which began from a conception of nature being devoid of any teleological structures, that is, as homogenous space and time defined by causal laws. In the liberal tradition, it produced a fascination with mechanistic concepts both on the level of the individual as well as society. Husserl, in contrast, emphasized the indispensable role of teleological concepts from a normative standpoint. His theory of social ethics built on the idea of ideals of perfection that serve as a source of societal renewal.

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, I will present a few observations regarding Husserl's political philosophy. Second, I will discuss Husserl's often disregarded critique of Hobbes, particularly from the perspective of practical philosophy. Third, I will discuss Husserl's alternative to liberalism by looking more closely at his social ethics. Finally, I will raise some issues regarding the shortcomings of Husserl's political thinking.

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<sup>8</sup> Foucault (2008, p. 120).

<sup>9</sup> Oksala (2016, p. 118). See also Miettinen (2021).

<sup>10</sup> Oksala (2016, p. 124).

## 1 Husserl's political philosophy

In a letter from 1935 to his son Gerhart, Husserl described his phenomenological project as “completely apolitical.”<sup>11</sup> True, Husserl had very little to say about the traditional problems of political philosophy, such as power, legitimacy, the state, or ideology. He wrote extensively on the idea of community but seemed to avoid questions concerning the mechanisms bringing communities together to resolve basic questions related to their being together. In short, what Husserl lacked was a comprehensive theory of *political institutions*. While some of Husserl's pupils did discuss these topics – for instance, Edith Stein published a treatise on the problem of the state in 1925 – Husserl's writings offer few resources for building a consistent theory of the political domain.<sup>12</sup>

For some commentators, such as Robert Sokolowski, this suggests a “total lack of any political philosophy in Husserl.”<sup>13</sup> Others, such as James G. Hart, find little more in Husserl's political philosophy than his rather abstract ethical-political considerations on the role of reason within a community.<sup>14</sup> This, however, is not the whole truth. It is clear, for instance, that the crisis of European culture that Husserl analyzed in his writings of the 1930s was undoubtedly also a political crisis. As Husserl put it in his 1935 Vienna Lecture: “The European *nations* are sick; Europe itself, it is said, is in crisis.”<sup>15</sup> Instead of being a crisis of political culture as such, Husserl analyzed this crisis in terms of a civilizational breakdown that concerned the deepest norms and values of European culture. At the heart of this crisis, Husserl claimed, was the disintegration of philosophical reason and the break-up of a unified idea of science. Modern natural sciences had produced a fundamental rift between the natural and the human sciences, effectively displacing all questions of value and purpose to the side of the human spirit. As a result, questions of right and wrong, or the *telos* of culture as such, seemed to fall outside the domain of scientific reasoning, at least from the point of view of the natural scientist. Instead, such questions were increasingly a matter of subjective preference.

Second, although Husserl did not develop a systematic theory of political institutions, his interest in the historical emergence of philosophy did contain a specific political dimension. Already in his writings of the post-WWI period, Husserl began to approach the birth of philosophy in Ancient Greece as a kind of “geopolitical” event founded on the close interaction between individual city-states.<sup>16</sup> Although philosophy itself was defined by a quest for universal truths, it was founded on the peculiar interest that different city-states had in each other's cultures – and the will to overcome typical cultural differences. At the heart of this undertaking was a specific relativization of individual cultures and their worldviews. As Husserl put it, this process was by no means simple and harmonious but also took place in the form of

<sup>11</sup> See Schuhmann (1988, p. 18).

<sup>12</sup> Stein (2006). See also Calcagno (2016).

<sup>13</sup> Sokolowski (2015, p. 60).

<sup>14</sup> Hart (1992, p. 370ff).

<sup>15</sup> Husserl (1970, p. 270).

<sup>16</sup> See Miettinen (2020).

a political conflict.<sup>17</sup> Even still, it was able to foster a new type of cultural transformation that was no longer bound by the typical constraints of a political community. Husserl described the process as follows:

Unlike all other cultural works, philosophy is not a movement of interest that is bound to the soil of the national tradition. Aliens, too, learn to understand it and generally take part in the immense cultural transformation which radiates out from philosophy. [...] Philosophy, which has grown up out of the universal critical attitude toward anything and everything pre-given in the tradition, is not inhibited in its spread by any national boundaries.<sup>18</sup>

As Husserl put it in a later manuscript, this kind of movement was constitutive of what he called the domain of "political historicity" (*politische Geschichtlichkeit*).<sup>19</sup> This type of historicity takes place at the level of individual nations, but it can also take the form of international development whereby the histories of individual communities are merged or become intertwined with one another. The genuine "political" outcome of philosophy was exactly its ability to foster such a horizon of cooperation that was independent of typical national constraints. This was also the root cause of the process of Europeanization (*Europäisierung*).<sup>20</sup>

This was not to say, however, that politics would only take place at this rather abstract level of national or international cooperation. As Husserl's manuscripts reveal, at the beginning of the 1930s he was planning a larger philosophical work that would have also included what Husserl called the "restitution of the Platonic theory of the state."<sup>21</sup> At the heart of this undertaking was not only the question of correct political governance but also the relationship between the individual and the community. Husserl wanted to understand what kinds of laws, institutions, and forms of participation make possible the continuation of a particular community. Politics is as much about the individual as it is about structures.

As Eugen Fink once argued, the political task of Husserl's phenomenology was rather clearly demarcated. Instead of being a defense of a "humanitarian ideal of democracy" or an assault on a "fascist doctrine attacking the idea of humanity," Fink argued, "[the] whole setting of the problem leads into the other side of the political struggle, the battle for the philosophical meaning of human being."<sup>22</sup> All political reflection ultimately relies on how we see the meaning of the human being, its nature, and its relation to other subjects. Therefore, a critique of a particular political ideology must start with the conception of the human being. For Husserl, the decisive figure to articulate this modern conception of political subjectivity was Thomas Hobbes.

<sup>17</sup> Husserl (1970, p. 287).

<sup>18</sup> Husserl (1970, pp. 286–287).

<sup>19</sup> Husserl (1992, p. 10).

<sup>20</sup> Husserl (1992, p. 16).

<sup>21</sup> Husserl (1973b, p. xl).

<sup>22</sup> Husserl (1992, p. xx).

## 2 Husserl's critique of Hobbes

The status of Hobbes in Husserl's works is ambiguous. Compared to many other central philosophers of the early modern period, such as Descartes or Locke, Hobbes did not play a major role in Husserl's historical analysis.<sup>23</sup> Although Husserl did discuss Hobbes's work on a few occasions, most of his remarks were predominantly critical by nature. At the heart of this critique was Hobbes's insistence on building "a natural science of the soul."<sup>24</sup> This undertaking, Husserl argued, was fundamentally based on "imitation of the natural sciences."<sup>25</sup> However, whereas Descartes still operated with the concept of a thinking substance – that is, the mind as an autonomous being – for Hobbes human cognition was primarily epiphenomenal. For him, the true nature of reality was material – thus, Husserl called him the father of "materialistic psychology".<sup>26</sup>

In Husserl's interpretation, Hobbes was not the sole initiator of this materialistic thinking. Hobbes's approach was founded on the fundamental revolution of the modern natural sciences instigated by Galileo Galilei. Galileo played a major part in the transition from an Aristotelian, teleological view of the natural world towards a conception of material nature consisting of a homogenous space and time in which individual bodies interact with one another. In Husserl's view, however, what ultimately defined Galileo's position was not so much his commitment to materialism as his underlying idealism, that is, the reliance on *a priori* ideas.<sup>27</sup> For Husserl, Galileo's view of nature was, above all, an *abstraction* based on particular types of ideas, for instance those of empty and homogenous space.<sup>28</sup> Through this idealization, nature was reduced to a symmetric, geometrical space in which all movement and change take place under external forces. For this reason, modern natural sciences could not acknowledge the role of teleology as a genuinely scientific category. For modern natural sciences, goals and purposes are second-level phenomena that take place at the level of human or animal cognition.

For Husserl, materialistic psychology (or simply "naturalism") was never just a theoretical problem. It presented a radical challenge also to our ethical thinking, particularly to the ideas of autonomy and responsibility.<sup>29</sup> In Husserl's view, true ethics was never just a matter of reacting to external impulses or demands, but instead based on the insistence of building one's beliefs and actions on a firm, intuitively given foundation. All of this required, however, a conception of the human person (or human spirituality in general) as being autonomous of its materiality.

The most extensive analysis of Hobbes's works in Husserl can be found in the lecture course *Einleitung in die Ethik* from 1920/24.<sup>30</sup> Here, Husserl aimed to bridge

<sup>23</sup> Sokolowski (2015).

<sup>24</sup> Husserl (1965, p. 88).

<sup>25</sup> Husserl (1988, p. 134).

<sup>26</sup> Husserl (1965, p. 95).

<sup>27</sup> Husserl (1970, p. 23).

<sup>28</sup> Husserl (1970, p. 27).

<sup>29</sup> Husserl (1988, p. 173ff).

<sup>30</sup> Husserl (2004).

the gap between Hobbes's materialist psychology and his political theory as it was presented in the 1651 book *Leviathan*. To call Hobbes's political theory "liberal" is a huge oversimplification; he provided very few resources for the kinds of individual freedoms and political rights usually attached to the liberal tradition of John Locke and others. Nevertheless, there is also a serious scholarly tradition represented by such thinkers as Leo Strauss that considers Hobbes one of the true founders of modern liberalism.<sup>31</sup> This is because, in Hobbes's view, all political communities have their origin in the conscious decision of individual subjects to limit their absolute freedom and submit themselves to a higher authority: the sovereign. Hobbes refuted classical views premised on the idea that political communities would come about naturally: political institutions are artificial, and they have their origin in the common agreement of individuals. This idea of politics as a negotiation of the restricting of absolute freedom can be understood as part of the liberal tradition.<sup>32</sup>

As Husserl was willing to admit, the great achievement of Hobbes was his insistence on building a political theory on rational grounds, as a "posthumous clarification of the rational motives that lie in state control."<sup>33</sup> For Hobbes, the birth of the state was not a mythical event nor did its origin lie simply in the right of the strongest. Instead, the state is an entity based on the voluntary and proactive *decision* of individual subjects. At the heart of this decision, however, is not so much the aspiration to live in harmony with others as a fear of one's fellow human beings. As Hobbes argued in *Leviathan*, the human psyche is fundamentally geared towards two basic motives, the seeking of pleasure and the avoidance of pain.<sup>34</sup> Being two sides of the same coin, they both contribute to the fear of a painful death as the most elementary drive of the human psyche. As Husserl argued, Hobbes's theory, despite its rational outlook, was ultimately based on the "egoistic principle of self-preservation" (*egoistisches Prinzip der Selbsterhaltung*). "In the state of nature," Husserl wrote, summarizing Hobbes's position, "the principle *homo homini lupus* holds good."<sup>35</sup>

For anyone familiar with Hobbes, most of these points come across as standard interpretations. Two aspects of Husserl's analysis, however, are worth highlighting. First, despite Hobbes's firm commitment to materialistic psychology, Husserl saw Hobbes's political theory as being guided by essentially *idealistic* principles. Just as Galileo proceeded from an idealized conception of physical reality, Hobbes constructed his theory of the state from a highly abstract conception of the human being. This isolated individual was presumably driven forward by simply egoistic motives. In doing so, Husserl argued, "the empiricist Hobbes acts, without understanding this, as an idealist. He constructs pure, supraempirical ideas."<sup>36</sup> Hobbes took the individuality of the subject as a given and not as something that requires other subjects or is formed in connection to them. In this regard, Hobbes's understanding of the social was precisely "Galilean" insofar as it was based on an idealized and static concep-

<sup>31</sup> See Keedus (2012).

<sup>32</sup> Jaume (2007).

<sup>33</sup> Husserl (2004, p. 49).

<sup>34</sup> Hobbes (2012).

<sup>35</sup> Husserl (2004, p. 50).

<sup>36</sup> Husserl (2004, p. 57).

tion of individuals and their social relations. What looked like a political philosophy based on material interests, Husserl argued, turned out to be “an *a priori* theory in empirical disguise.”<sup>37</sup>

According to Husserl’s interpretation, Hobbes’s theory followed Galileo not only in substance but in method as well. For Galileo, the homogenization of space, movement, and time meant that the properties and relations of individual bodies allowed themselves to be presented in quantified terms: mass, velocity, and force. This was what Husserl described in great detail as the “mathematization of nature” in the *Crisis*.<sup>38</sup> As Husserl was keen to point out, for Galileo the difference between method and substance was, ultimately, ambiguous. From the fact that ideal properties allow themselves to be described in quantifiable terms, Galileo deduced the idea that the “book of nature” itself was written in the language of mathematics. The method became the matter itself. Similarly, Husserl claimed, Hobbes reduced the complexity of human passivity to a single drive, the fear of violent death. In doing so, he presented in an “*empirical garb a mathematics of sociality, and thus a sociality of pure egoists*.”<sup>39</sup>

Now, as Husserl emphasized, it was not until 18th-century utilitarianism that this idea of “moral arithmetics” became a systematically articulated endeavor.<sup>40</sup> For Jeremy Bentham and his followers, the central normative standard of any political system was how much quantifiable good they were able to generate. In Bentham’s words, any political system should aim at generating the “greatest happiness for the greatest number,” with happiness here being understood as “the sum of pleasures and pains.”<sup>41</sup> It is only through a systematic calculation of feelings of pain and pleasure that one can deem a particular arrangement as being morally good or reprehensible. For liberals such as John Stuart Mill, this was indeed the great achievement of Bentham, who converted the philosophy of law, and political theory in general, from obscure moralism into genuine science.

For Husserl, the problem with this approach was not so much that it did away with conventional distinctions between science and morality. It was, after all, one of Husserl’s arguments that a “rational reform of community” should be based on philosophical-scientific reflection.<sup>42</sup> His problem with Hobbes and the subsequent liberal tradition was that it based its approach on this “hedonistic pseudo-ethics.”<sup>43</sup> It reduced reason to a mere calculation of quantifiable pleasure. In doing so, it did away with all questions of individual responsibility and change. From this standpoint, the relation of liberalism to political theory was similar to that of Galileo to natural science: a method that evolved into a blindly accepted technique.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Husserl (2004, p. 58).

<sup>38</sup> Husserl (1970, p. 23).

<sup>39</sup> Husserl (2004, p. 59).

<sup>40</sup> Husserl (2004, p. 54).

<sup>41</sup> On different formulations of this principle, see Crimmins (2021).

<sup>42</sup> Husserl (1988, p. 5).

<sup>43</sup> Husserl (2004, p. 55).

<sup>44</sup> Husserl (1970, pp. 47–48).



What, then, was Husserl's alternative to the individualistic and idealistic approach of liberalism? The contrast between phenomenology and liberalism becomes apparent when we look at a few specific premises of Husserl's social ethics.

### 3 Social ethics

Husserl's interest in the problem of communality and intersubjectivity dates back already to the first decade of the 1900s. During this period, a new concept of social ontology emerged to describe the aspects and complexities of the social realm.<sup>45</sup> These analyses usually take their point of departure from the unique character of other subjects as objects of experience. Other living beings are not simply things in the world, but they contain within themselves a unique depth that is inaccessible to us. At times, Husserl called this inaccessibility "original" since it concerned particularly the *subjective* character of others' experiences. It belongs to the structure of "alien-experience" (*Fremderfahrung*) since we have no direct access to such experiences. However, it is exactly this original inaccessibility that gives human sociality its unique character as a multi-layered process that occurs both on the level of empathy as well as through communication.

Even more importantly, this emphasis on sociality had significant consequences for Husserl's theory of the human person. Although Husserl never treated human subjectivity simply as a social construction – there is, a certain "mineness" in the experience that can never be taken away – he nevertheless emphasized the dynamic and layered character of subjectivity.<sup>46</sup> The human person is not a closed entity; rather, we become who we are through our encounters with others. Now, unlike with most of the liberal tradition, for Husserl this coming together with others was not simply a matter of negotiation. There is a connection to other subjects already at the deepest levels of human experience. Husserl writes:

I can only point briefly here to the idea that [social] affinity cannot be established solely based on social acts. As the individual subjects unfold their activity based on dark, blind passivity, the same concerns social activity. But already the sphere of passivity, the instinctive life of drives, can produce an intersubjective connection.<sup>47</sup>

For Husserl, the human mind was not simply a closed machine seeking pleasure. Already at the deepest levels of the human psyche, Husserl claimed, there is a certain openness towards others that can produce a sense of intersubjective connection. In addition to what Husserl called "the universal lifedrive," the will to preserve oneself, there are several "reciprocal drives" (*Wechseltriebe*), such as sexual drives, that are themselves directed towards other subjects.<sup>48</sup> Speech, communication, and other

<sup>45</sup> For its early history, see Salice (2013).

<sup>46</sup> Zahavi (2020).

<sup>47</sup> Husserl (1973a, p. 405).

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Husserl (1973b, p. 594).

active types of social acts that constitute a sense of community are thus not something radically new regarding lower levels of human subjectivity. Rather, they can be understood as a kind of continuation of intersubjective drive-intentionality.

However, it was not until the 1920s that Husserl began to seriously discuss the ethical implications of his social theory.<sup>49</sup> Most of Husserl's early ethical texts from the 1910s focused on rather restricted problems of value-experience in contrast to other types of experiences. These texts, like most of Husserl's works, were dominated by the first-person perspective – and only that. However, already in the second volume of *Ideas*<sup>50</sup> – a collection of manuscripts that Husserl worked on from 1912 to the end of the 1920s – Husserl began to broaden this perspective, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive social theory also from a normative perspective. The relation between a “theory of person” and a “theory of community” is so fundamental that “our entire world-view is fundamentally determined by it.”<sup>51</sup>

This emphasis was also evident in the lecture course *Einleitung in die Philosophie* from 1919/20, which contains probably his earliest reflections on the problem of “social ethics” (*soziale Ethik*, later *Sozialethik*).<sup>52</sup> The way Husserl introduced the problem of social ethics can be read as an implicit critique of liberal philosophy. In the *Einleitung* course, for instance, Husserl contrasted social ethics with the ethics of “spiritually isolated individuals”.<sup>53</sup> Although ethical behavior always starts with the concrete human person, ethics as a discipline is by no means restricted to it. Instead, only by taking into account the interpersonal dimension can one concretize what it means to act according to genuinely ethical norms.

The critique of liberal individualism was connected to Husserl's insistence that a community is more than a sum of its parts. Communities, too, can be thought of as “communal persons” of their own, with their unique styles, attitudes, and personal histories. As Husserl argued, communities can be thought of as truly autonomous in the sense that their existence is not dependent on a particular person. Communities are “living unities” that “continu[e] to exist, as it were, in the spiritual metabolism of elimination and re-entry of individuals.”<sup>54</sup> But even more importantly, communities can and must be thought of as normative beings that can define themselves ethically as well.<sup>55</sup> He writes:

The most important issue is that the community is not a mere collection of individuals, and the communal life and its communal accomplishments are not a mere collective of individual lives and individual accomplishments [...] but a community as a community has a consciousness. As a community it can, how-

<sup>49</sup> Husserl (1988).

<sup>50</sup> Husserl (1952).

<sup>51</sup> Husserl (1952, p. 172).

<sup>52</sup> Husserl (2012).

<sup>53</sup> Husserl (2012, p. 37).

<sup>54</sup> Husserl (2012, p. 171).

<sup>55</sup> Husserl (1988, p. 22).

ever, have in the full sense a self-consciousness: It can have an appreciation of itself and a will to direct itself, a will to self-formation.<sup>56</sup>

From the viewpoint of rigorous phenomenological analysis, statements like this are not easy to swallow. Alfred Schütz, who was otherwise quite appreciative of Husserl's phenomenology, argued that the methodological individualism of Georg Simmel and Max Weber was in this regard perhaps closer to the spirit of phenomenology than Husserl's remarks about collective consciousness.<sup>57</sup> Husserl was quite clear, however, in arguing that his ideas of "we-subjectivity" or "suprapersonal consciousness" were not simply a matter of metaphor or analogy.<sup>58</sup> A community can be said to act meaningfully also as a *collective*: it can be said of having ideals and goals of its own. Just think of nations like the Baltic countries in the late 1980s as they began to reclaim their independence from the Soviet Union. Despite these countries having their own unique traditions and their national identities, it was not until that unique period in the late 1980s that regaining independence became an actual possibility for them. What is clear is that this desire for independence was not simply the expression of a few individuals or the leaders of the country; rather, it became a widely shared sentiment: in a series of 1991 referendums, the overwhelming majority of each country's citizens supported independence. In cases like this one, it is indeed possible to speak of a transformation in the collective consciousness.

This does not mean, however, that individuals would somehow lose their individuality. Personalities of a higher order remain, in the end, "many-headed yet interconnected subjectivities."<sup>59</sup> As Szanto points out, Husserl's account is best understood in terms of a multi-layered account based on an intentional integration.<sup>60</sup> Husserl used the concept of "chaining" (*Verkettung*) to describe the specific fusion of horizons of empathy that takes place through direct or indirect forms of cooperation.<sup>61</sup> There is an experiential difference between an experience in which an individual or a group of individuals strive for something and an experience in which my striving is part of a collective striving for something. In the first case, a group of people may strive for the same goal (e.g., securing one's position in the job market), but this experience is different from an experience where a group of people actually strives for the same goal and does so as a collective. In the latter case, my experience can be said to overlap with other people's experiences and constitute the "unity of a suprapersonal consciousness."<sup>62</sup>

For Husserl, the idea that communities are self-conscious beings imbued with the possibility of guiding their actions was by no means a meaningless bypath. Instead, this idea of a "personality of a higher order" played an important role in Husserl's

<sup>56</sup> Husserl (1988, pp. 48–49).

<sup>57</sup> Schütz (1975, p. 39).

<sup>58</sup> Husserl (1988, p. 21).

<sup>59</sup> Husserl (1988, p. 22).

<sup>60</sup> Szanto (2016, p. 168).

<sup>61</sup> Husserl (1976, p. 258).

<sup>62</sup> Husserl (1973a, p. 199).

social-ethical considerations.<sup>63</sup> The idea that communities can direct themselves and be held accountable for their actions was an important element in building a theoretical framework that goes beyond the individual-oriented approach of liberal theory. Ethics should instead be conceived of as a generational issue.

To construct a counter-narrative for liberalism, Husserl returned to the conceptual resources provided by Greek philosophy. Particularly in his writings of the 1920s, such as the Kaizo essays and the 1923 lecture course *Erste Philosophie*, Husserl credited Plato with being the “establisher of the idea of social reason” and the first to conceive “social ethics as the full and true ethics.”<sup>64</sup> At the heart of this undertaking was the deep connection that Plato had articulated between the individual and the community. As Husserl put it: “The Platonic analogy of the community and the individual should not be understood as an inventive coincidence of natural thinking, but as an expression of the common apperception mounting from the actuality of human existence.”<sup>65</sup> A community is more than the sum of its parts; it is, as Plato thought, a personal whole capable of directing its course of action. For this reason, the metaphor of the communal person provided a key alternative to the treaty-based approach of classical liberalism.

This is not, however, where the analogy stops. It should be remembered that for Plato, the analogy of community as a person did not serve merely the purpose of constructing a theory of a self-conscious community. It served as an important tool for highlighting the unique intertwining of individual and social ethics. As Plato argued in the *Republic*, it was the primary task of any reformer to start with a sort of “idealistic” approach whereby “the *polis* and the characters of men” are treated like a clean slate, that is, without prejudice.<sup>66</sup> In *Gorgias*, he famously defined politics as a kind of “care of the soul” consisting of two aspects: “legislation” (*nomothetikos*) and individual “righteousness” (*dikaiosynē*).<sup>67</sup> Politics is thus not something that happens solely at the level of institutions. Rather, true politics occurs both at the level of the individual as well as social organizations: it is about making possible such conditions that enable righteous behavior. This is where Plato’s idealism differs radically from that of Hobbes. Instead of simply imposing a single ideal of human nature onto politics, it is only by “examining [the individual and the community] side by side and rubbing them against one another, as it were from the fire-sticks we may cause the spark of righteousness to flash forth.”<sup>68</sup>

At times, Husserl also referred to this idea of the “internal and external politics of practical reason,” an idea resembling Plato’s conceptual distinction.<sup>69</sup> Unlike what those in the liberal tradition had argued, for Husserl genuine political thinking was not something that simply *follows* a particular conception of human nature. Instead, genuine political reflection takes place precisely at that juncture where questions of

<sup>63</sup> Husserl (1988, p. 22).

<sup>64</sup> Husserl (1965, p. 16).

<sup>65</sup> Husserl (1988, p. 5).

<sup>66</sup> Plato (2000, p. 206).

<sup>67</sup> Plato (1979, p. 32–33).

<sup>68</sup> Plato (2000, p. 129–130).

<sup>69</sup> Husserl (1968, p. 11).

individuality and communality intersect. Politics is more than the sum of individual interests: it is the creation of a shared will and a shared *telos* for the "personality of a higher order."

It was based on these considerations that Husserl presented his theory of ethical renewal (*Erneuerung*). This concept, which he considered the "main theme of all ethics," had its background in Husserl's genetic analyses of the temporal character of human personhood.<sup>70</sup> As opposed to earlier static analyses of subjectivity, his genetic analyses revealed a conception of human personhood as a temporally evolving being with its own unique "habitus" and "style." In this regard, the genetic analyses provided an important alternative to the essentially static view of the human person as represented by classical liberalism, including Hobbes. By taking this view as its point of departure, the concept of renewal aimed to provide an alternative to the classical deontic view of ethics, which approached moral behavior through individual acts and laws. A human being, Husserl argued, is more than the subject of ethical reflection: she/he "is both the subject and the object of his striving."<sup>71</sup> To act ethically means to take a critical relationship not only to one's actions but also to oneself as a human person: it is a critique of our acquired habits, convictions, and (limited) capabilities. Self-critique is an essential part of our ethical comportment in the world.

What did this principle of renewal mean from the perspective of the political community? For the liberal tradition, the key question concerning a political community was its stability. Political institutions must be built in a manner that prevents the violent escalation of our natural drive for self-preservation. This means that their basic task is, in fact, conservative: they aim to preserve law and order. While Husserl did not deny the need for political communities to uphold a law-based order, his basic response to the problem of the political community did not follow the idealistic approach of classical liberalism. Instead, the key question was how to realize the principle of ethical renewal also on the communal level.

One way to understand this dilemma is to look at one of the key concepts in Foucault's analysis of modern liberalism. As pointed out in the first section, Foucault treated Husserl's eidetic reduction as an important precursor to the idealism of German ordoliberalism. According to this interpretation, Husserl provided an even stronger justification for a static conception of the political domain under the guise of pre-given ideals. This interpretation, while suggestive, seems to overlook an important conceptual distinction in Husserl's practical philosophy. While Husserl did see political ideals as a necessary component in overcoming the brute realism of power politics, he nevertheless emphasized the need to distinguish between two types of ideals of perfection (*Vollkommenheitsidealen*): relative and absolute.<sup>72</sup> Although Husserl spoke of a rational life guided by full intuitive evidence, this absolute ideal should not be understood as something we can achieve through our limited capabilities. In concrete situations, it makes much more sense to tie ethical choices to ideals that are relative to our situation. Just think of the concrete possibilities of a white, relatively wealthy middle-class person compared to those of a single mother

<sup>70</sup> Husserl (1988, p. 20).

<sup>71</sup> Husserl (1988, p. 20).

<sup>72</sup> Husserl (1988, p. 33).

in Punjabi, India. To make ethical choices or to live according to ethical ideals, such as charity, means, quite concretely, different things in each situation. Following Brentano, it makes much more sense to define the categorical imperative as “Do the best among the achievable!”<sup>73</sup> It is only through relative ideals that are tied to concrete capabilities that we can speak of political idealism in any meaningful practical sense. Husserl writes:

It belongs to the idea of an absolutely valuable community, that it cannot be realized a priori statically, but only through a valuable becoming towards the infinite. These two related ideas belong a priori together: the infinite pole-idea of absolutely realizable value – the value of a community that constantly actualizes itself in a thorough and absolutely rational manner – and the idea of infinite progress of perfection that corresponds with it. [...] Against the absolute static idea, [this community] has the absolute, best possible form of development.<sup>74</sup>

In short, what the liberal tradition had missed was precisely this possibility of constant perfection that takes place in the interplay between absolute and relative ideals. Both have their unique functions. Relative ideals are needed because we must act, but absolute ideals remind us of the relativity and finitude of such actions. Since human beings are capable of learning, ethical action always takes place against a temporal continuum of relative ideals. In most Western countries, corporal punishment was still viewed as a legitimate method of childrearing not so long ago, but now we know better. What was a relative ideal at one point in time has been superseded by new relative ideals. The genuinely social-ethical approach entails that we take seriously both the concrete constraints that hinder us from realizing the “best possible” form of communal life as well as the necessary imperfections that characterize our existing institutions, norms, and practices. Self-critique, both individual and societal, is a necessary condition of ethical life.

## 4 Conclusion

Although Husserl defined his phenomenological project as “completely apolitical,” this has not prevented commentators from extracting political insights from his extensive body of work. Some have discovered Husserl’s political philosophy in his considerations on the essence of the state.<sup>75</sup> Others have emphasized the importance of his rather abstract analyses of the divine “personality of a higher order” founded on a harmony of interests.<sup>76</sup> In this paper, I have pursued a different line of argumentation and raised an often-neglected aspect of Husserl’s social and political philosophy, namely his critique of liberalism. Although the theoretical and political traditions surrounding the concept of liberalism are varied, in this paper I have followed the line of

<sup>73</sup> Husserl (1988, p. 221).

<sup>74</sup> Husserl (1959, p. 200).

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, Schuhmann (1988).

<sup>76</sup> See, for example, Hart (1992).

argumentation made famous by Leo Strauss, according to which modern liberalism starts with Hobbes's *Leviathan* and its critique of a divine justification for sovereign power. Although Husserl credited Hobbes with constructing a theory of the state on rational rather than metaphysical grounds, Hobbes fell victim to a naturalist prejudice that led him to take self-preservation as the sole point of departure for his analysis. Hobbes presumed that human nature is unchangeable and that the best we can do is to curb our worst traits from violent eruption. After this step, Hobbes was forced to base his political theory on the principle of egoistic individualism, which could only give political institutions the task of preventing conflict.

Husserl was certainly not alone in his analysis. The idea that contemporary social sciences were suffering from an excess of individuality, particularly in the form of economic individualism of the *homo economicus*, was shared by many of his contemporaries. Even liberal philosophers such as Georg Simmel and Max Weber, who otherwise expressed sympathy for methodological individualism, were critical of the transformation of economic categories into political ones.<sup>77</sup> As I have argued, however, Husserl's critique was not primarily ethical in the sense that it would have denounced Hobbes's egoism or individualism on moral grounds. At the heart of Husserl's critique was rather the fundamentally static and isolated view of the human person represented by Hobbes, a critique that can be read as analogical to his interpretation of Galileo and the triumph of modern natural sciences. Just as Galileo had proceeded from a set of *a priori* ideas about nature in the guise of empiricism, so too did Hobbes proceed from a pre-established conception of human nature in the form of empiricism.

As I have shown in this essay, this anti-naturalist and anti-individualist view of the social realm was further developed by Husserl in the context of his social ethics. At the heart of this approach was a view of the human person as a fundamentally intersubjective being defined by an elementary openness to other subjects. As a result of this openness, we are more than closed vessels consisting of individual drives. We are temporally developing beings who also have the possibility to take a critical stance towards our history. For this reason, ethical reflection can never be simple rule-following; it must be understood as based on a constant will to renew oneself. Ultimately, this renewal is a communal and an inter-generational task for the intersubjective "personality of a higher order." In Husserl's view, this possibility formed the key starting point for any normative theory of political institutions: How can communities become genuinely self-reflective and self-responsible entities? How can renewal become a habitual and lasting characteristic of communities?

What can we say, then, about the concrete political implications of Husserl's phenomenology? To begin with, it is simply wrong to see Husserl as a predecessor of neoliberalism. Despite the fact that both Husserl and the German neoliberals of the interwar period shared a basic critique of naturalism, the neoliberal vision of a clearly defined "competitive order" was far from Husserl's vision of perpetual renewal. Husserl's sympathies towards Karl Kautsky's social-democratic ideas might partially be explained based on this motive. To repeat the famous expression of another German social democrat, Eduard Bernstein: "Movement is everything." As Husserl began

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<sup>77</sup> Moebius (2021).

to realize after the Great War, however, this movement of renewing oneself and the community could not be realized within the context of the nation-state. In the *Kaizo* essays, Husserl denounced the “false gods of nationalism” in favor of cosmopolitan ideas and a constantly expanding “rational internationalism.”<sup>78</sup> In the end, however, most of these ideas remained unclarified. It seems to me that what hindered Husserl from realizing the full potential of his political insights was the fact that he was heavily preoccupied with questions of rationality and evidence, thus leaving very little space for addressing the genuine disagreements and conflicting interests that are at the heart of politics. Instead, Husserl seemed to resort to a quasi-theological vocabulary of harmony and concordance that constitutes the true goal of divine “supra-humanity” (*Übermenschentum*).<sup>79</sup> The question thus remains: What would a “rational” disagreement look like from a Husserlian perspective?

From a different perspective, Husserl’s social-ethical insights – particularly his emphasis on the different ideals of perfection – can be seen as an argument for the need of a future horizon for the political domain. This is not to say that contemporary political theorists should not be interested in the future – however, they often approach it solely from the perspective of risk. Instead of constituting a horizon of expectation, for them the future offers only threats and challenges to our existing institutions or ways of life. Despite justifiable concerns regarding many of such risks, there is a point to Husserl’s argument according to which societal renewal is inherently tied to a vision of future development. In this regard, there is a certain affinity between Husserl and the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, for whom the principle of hope represented an important element in his critique of economic reductionism.<sup>80</sup> In a liberal society, Bloch argued, this principle of hope becomes increasingly privatized in the sense that we only have our dreams and aspirations, whereas at the collective level no such utopias exist. Husserl’s social ethics, despite the somewhat abstract insights, can be interpreted in a similar vein as an argument for the need for a collective future horizon.

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<sup>78</sup> Husserl (1988, p. 117); Husserl (1988, p. 240).

<sup>79</sup> Husserl (1973b, p. 610).

<sup>80</sup> Bloch (1985).



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