Review

Metamorphoses of the city: On the western dynamic

Pierre Manent, trans. Marc LePain
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In this book, adapted from his course at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, Pierre Manent, one of France's leading political philosophers, explores the dynamics at work in the political development of the West. The aim of this ambitious book is to capture the essence of the political project of modernity: "what are the proper characteristics of the history of the West? What is its formula, so to speak?" (p. 4). To answer this question and to highlight the curious specificity of Western modernity, the author scrutinizes the various political forms that have succeeded one another throughout European history. He examines their specificity, their internal logic, and how they evolved to give birth to new political forms. These transformations have implied changes in terms of morality, ontology, and human affects amongst the population. Manent focuses specifically on three kinds of political structures: city, empire, and church, and he draws upon the work of prestigious predecessors such as Aristotle, Montesquieu, and Tocqueville. These three authors are characteristic of an intellectual tradition that, instead of reducing political philosophy to the quest for a single, ideal model of society, explores with great wit the unavoidable adaptation of human societies to historical and cultural contexts. In the last part of the book, Manent evokes the emergence of the nation-state. He observes its current erosion to the advantage of nebulous entities such as the European Union, which creates mounting apprehension in his mind.

Manent devotes the first part of his book to the city (*polis*), which is the first political form that appeared in Western history. The Greeks distinguished the city from other political forms, such as the tribe (*ethnos*), the empire and tribal monarchies. The city distinguishes itself from the outside, and is subordinated to the *oikos* and to the world. With the invention of this new concept, the Greeks developed a science of political experience: "men govern themselves and know that they govern themselves" (p. 18). The social order ceases to be reduced to the perpetuation of the legacy of ancestors. Manent sees in this development a unique historical rupture.

Through analysis of the work of Homer (chapter 2), the author reveals the invention of a method of collective action and deliberation. The epic poem creates “political” criteria allowing a distinction to be made between Trojans and Achaeans. The former are stuck in the family and sexual order. The latter can stay quiet and listen, and therefore have the ability of rational deliberation (p. 38). Achaeans also obey rules that domesticate the raw passions of vengeance, hatred, and desire. Homeric heroism and glory are inseparable from the ontological conception of human life, and are seen as a response to its finitude (pp. 42–44). Manent underlines the specificity of modernity: in ancient times: the political order was aiming at something beyond death (honor, virtue, or eternal life), whereas modernity aims at making humans less mortal. In chapter 3 (“The Civic Operation”) which recalls some aspects Norbert Elias’ work, notably *The History of Manners*, Manent explores how the violence of the ancient Greeks gradually became codified to give birth to civic spirit.

The second political form is the empire, which begins with the reign of Augustus. In the second part of his book (chapters 4, 5 and 6), Manent analyzes the disruption that the empire represents in comparison to the Greek *polis*. While the Greek *polis* was a narrow political framework for a tumultuous free life, the empire corresponds to a peaceful life under a master. In this regard, chapter 6 dedicates beautiful pages to Cicero’s diagnostic of the end of the republic. As noted by the Roman lawyer – whose preference for republican institutions is famous – the exercise of citizenship declines, and the private aspect of the person gradually tends to prevail over the citizen, *contra* the Greek model. The empire was to be a model for medieval monarchies until the advent of modern nations. According to Manent, the Middle Ages were marked by structural ambivalence, a confusion between (Christian) finality and (Greco-Roman) founding principles.

The Roman Empire also hosted the birth of the Christian church, a radically new political form that differs both from the empire and the *polis*. In chapter 8, through a meticulous reading of St. Augustine’s *City of God*, Manent emphasizes the church’s uniqueness as a human association. The transformation of one political form into another leads him to investigate Europe’s theological-political problem. The nation-state arises as a political (and pragmatic) response to conflicts between faiths in the sixteenth century. The role of the Protestant reformation is crucial in this regard: according to Manent it is no surprise that the first type of nation-state was to be found in England. The nation is also the result of a revolution of mentalities, as well as an innovation in the ontological justification of the political order. Indeed, in modern political thought, the sinful condition of human beings is no longer the justification for the political order: the reason is the state of nature as described by Thomas Hobbes, the miserable, precarious living conditions that human institutions must improve (pp. 204–205, 214–215). In this second part, the book takes an unexpected direction: instead of focusing his analysis on the transition from medieval monarchies to modern nation-states, the author devotes

many pages to the church (pp. 213–273), whose authority is in competition with that of the empire. The book surreptitiously changes direction to focus on the relationship between Christianity and the specific requirements of political life (chapters 8 and 9).

That brings me to what could be considered the two downsides of the book. First, *Metamorphoses of the City* does not really fulfill the criteria of an academic work. Manent never refers to the scientific literature on the subject he addresses. This is not a book that contains a clearly identified thesis, followed by demonstration based on a specific methodology. It includes numerous digressions, which are erudite and absorbing, but leave the reader confused about the general frame of the book. In some ways, Manent's book belongs to the tradition of the *essai*, which is typical of the French intellectual milieu. It is a brilliant, erudite, and passionate conversation on what Leo Strauss used to call the "theologico-political problem of the West."

Second, Manent evokes in his introduction the analysis of the modern political form: the nation. The reader assumes that the following chapters about empire, church, and the monarchy will deliver a rich, innovative historical perspective on the specificity of the nation-state. However, apart from chapter 9, which deals with the links between the Protestant reformation and the rise of national particularities ("The Mediating Nation," p. 318, almost at end of the book), Manent does not really analyze the characteristics of the nation-state as a political form. It would have been fascinating to read about it, since, as Manent himself points out, the concept of "nation" was a way to break the religious stalemate of the wars of religion, and to enact new political rules. This lack is particularly unfortunate as Manent shows great concern for the future of this political form in the twenty-first century: "What characterizes the European situation is that what we say as citizens has no importance whatsoever, since political actions will be decided in an indeterminate place..." (p. 12). This is an evolution of citizenship leading to the triumph of negative liberty, contrary to what the Greeks sought.

Despite these shortcomings, however, the book provides the advantage of a deep and engaging analysis about the founding texts of Western political thought, and a brilliant demonstration of how attitudes and representations of the world of a given era concretely affect the political system. After reading Manent's work, one realizes the extent to which contemporary political philosophy is less sensitive to the heterogeneity of forms of political good than Aristotelian political science. Aristotle's approach is particularly sensitive to the incommensurability of forms of the Good and is aware that a system always marginalizes certain forms. On the contrary, instead of assessing the relevance of political regimes in relation to different contexts and the forms of political good they promote, modern philosophers have attempted to establish the legitimacy of democracy by invoking the concept of will. Today we usually tend to consider liberal democracy to be the best political system ever...which shows a belief in a philosophy of history that

does not speak its name. For Manent, however, the “dynamic of the West,” which is the subtitle of his book, is not a movement of progress aimed at a specific end. It is not a straight path but a winding road, made of obstacles and difficulties. In this regard, the quarrel between Ancients and Moderns is always revived, sometimes in favor of the latter.

Paul May
Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA
paulmay@fas.harvard.edu