
Review Essay

Modernity's exclusions

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Genealogies of Political Modernity

Antonio Cerella, Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2020, 280 pp., ISBN: 978-1350079465

Birth of the State: The Place of the Body in Crafting Modern Politics

Charlotte Epstein, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2021, 352 pp., ISBN: 978-0190917630

What are the (violent) roots of the modern state, and how are we to make sense of it today? Both Epstein and Cerella aim to answer this paramount question by offering interpretations of modernity that enlighten its critical dark spots. Cerella's book is a genealogical reflection on the loss of the sacred and its function in ancient times. In his view, the sacred continues to haunt, albeit unrecognized, our modern political order, which is ripe with the contradictions of this denial. Epstein, by contrast, is focused on the political implications of the epistemological revolution that occurs at the end of the Renaissance. She illuminates how a new understanding of the human body in space helps craft the modern state. She also shows how this process led to the exclusion of women, criminals, slaves, and the poor.

Hobbes is interestingly central to both Cerella and Epstein, but in opposite ways: as a witness of centennial religious wars, he proposes to found a new political order that ignores altogether religion, the soul, and conscience. Leviathan knows only bodies as *res extensa*, as moving bodies in the newly conceptualized perspectival space. Hobbes therefore eschews most of the pitfalls of later political philosophy that Epstein pinpoints in Locke's exclusionary logics. But Hobbes also, Cerella argues, radically changes the meaning of representation, which becomes understood as the mechanical aggregation of the many, devoid of the transcendence that unified the religious community. Hobbesian modernity thus marks a loss of meaning for Cerella or, for Epstein, an alternative to religious symbolic representation that allows to create new, mundane symbols.

Cerella's *Genealogy of Political Modernity* aims to give sense to our current postmodern globalized predicament, which he sees as the latest stage in the immanentization and secularization of the political. The text consists of eight independent chapters, united by the notion of representation as a guiding thread.



Cerella's genealogy seeks to highlight the traces of theological power, 'the spirit of the former age' (p. 6), within modern or contemporary power. It thus points to the contradictions of a secular construct whose foundations are theological. What remains of ritual sacrifices or other forms of political violence in postmodern societies? How should such remains orient our conception of democracy in a globalized world? To answer these questions, Cerella weaves together the thought of Hobbes, Carl Schmitt, René Girard, Max Weber, Jürgen Habermas, and Giorgio Agamben, among others.

The first chapter questions the Hobbesian model of power and representation. Cerella opposes Leviathan's mechanistic aggregation by insisting, following Schmitt, on the symbolic value of representation. Representation is also an imagination of the collective, a form of both transformation and transcendence through which the group becomes 'visible to itself as a symbolic totality' (p. 23). Sovereign power therefore, should be understood as the incorporation of the polis in the body of the king. Drawing on Ernst Kantorovicz, Cerella argues that the king is the embodiment of continuity and order in the face of the contingencies of nature. Further back in time, the king indeed bore the promises of cosmic and natural order. But the possibility of his waning strength also carried the threat of the decay of the polis, hence the necessity to sacrifice and replace the sovereign at regular intervals. Ritual violence here appears as an intrinsic part of the ancient communal and political life.

Following this association of symbolic representation with the unity of the polis, the second chapter shows how spatial representation—and, with it, ways of perceiving the world—changed at the end of the fifteenth century. Cerella beautifully illustrates this process in reference to paintings by Masaccio and Masolino who, at the liminal point of encounter between two cosmogonies, switched between the naturalist perspective and an older spiritual and flat representation of icons. Strongly influenced by Euclidian geometry, Hobbes' vision of the political, by contrast, marks the imposition of the new perspectival representation, thus ousting the spiritual from the political. In modernity, the world is reduced to its physical, visible dimension: 'what is invisible no longer exists' (p. 67). This process culminates with globalization, where 'the Earth becomes the objectified object of the sole sovereign subject: the human gaze', and God, the cosmos, and being are 'lost to calculations' (p. 67).

The third chapter compares Weber's and Schmitt's diagnoses of modernity. Both thinkers hold a theory of modern disenchantment that puts the plurality of values at the heart of the political. Weber suggests solving conflicts of value within the liberal democratic frame, while Schmitt regards the presence of radically different worldviews as a source of potential violence and 'real physical killing' (p. 87). More fundamentally, for Weber, modernity is truly secular—hence pluralism can find a solution in parliamentary democracy—and it is the task of human beings to give meaning to their common world. For Schmitt, modernity takes a



paradoxically theological form: the political becomes the impossible search for unity, the idea of which is inherited from a lost religious order. Cerella concludes that modernity is, in fact, a ‘crisis of meaning in an age of immanence’ (p. 90).

In chapter four, Cerella examines the idea, first evoked in the previous chapter, that pluralism is the origin of political violence. Here, Schmitt is compared to Girard, and again Schmitt is shown to hold a more radical position. Both thinkers situate the source of evil in sociality, and they do so in parallel yet opposing ways. For Schmitt, violence inheres in the condition of immanence, whereas for Girard it is a consequence of the mimetic desire for someone else’s objects, and thus a deviation of the will from the good. Lost unity and the friend–enemy relationship it entails explain political violence for Schmitt, but for Girard it is sacrificial unification that is violence.

The fifth chapter presents a critique of Habermas’ answer to the post-secular predicament. While Habermas recognizes the resurgence of religion, his answer, as if following Weber, lies in the imposition of a rational language that is common to all in the public liberal space that would silence the ‘religious irrational’. But this view, Cerella argues, fails to take seriously Habermas’ own diagnosis of the current era. Drawing on Schmitt, Cerella instead proposes that the state represent (in the Schmittian sense) all communities as an ‘enlarged community, which can become truly inclusive only if it is open to concrete entities’ (p. 138). This alternative is, however, unconvincing given Cerella’s own argument. If, indeed, one should accept Girard’s claim that ‘religion is entirely concerned with peace but the means it has to bring it about are never free of sacrificial violence’ (p. 105), one cannot find possibilities for a peaceful resolution of conflicts in the political inclusion of a plurality of religious views that are often incommensurable and non-democratic.

Chapter six offers a genealogy of the sacred that centres the works of Girard and Agamben. For Girard, sacrifice is the source of the sacred as contingent and pure violence. It is also the ‘ur-symbol’ (p. 152) that superimposes ‘the book of history on the tabula rasa of nature’ (p. 151). Agamben also links the sacred with the quest for meaning and continuity. But for him, it is the oath, rather than sacrifice, that allows humanity to pass the threshold of law and religion. The oath creates the subject that binds herself in deeds and words, making of language an ‘anthropo-genetic dispositive’ (p. 154). Both authors thus give a functional explanation to the sacred insofar as they regard the sacred as having ‘a fundamental ordering function’ (p. 163). As such, the sacred lurks behind the secular political order ‘as a wound under the skin that never heals’ (p. 158).

The last chapter is dedicated to the contemporary globalized predicament and reflects on migrants, who are sent from one country to the next or, worse, lost at sea. Following his thesis that religious traces continue to haunt the political, Cerella interprets migrants as the martyrs of our era and as the locus of sacredness that crystallizes a unity of which they are not part. Cerella thus ends his book with an injunction to a new morality: migrants are not only the apex of current political



violence, but they also hold the possibility of our own immanent redemption and of an ethical life. It is this conclusion—that our current political order is contingent and open to amendments—that also brings Cerella into conversation with Epstein.

Epstein's book studies how the modern state was co-constituted with a novel conception of the human body in the seventeenth century. This process begins with an epistemological revolution in the understanding of nature: nature no longer is the ordered and hierarchical Aristotelian cosmos where things have a 'place' but a 'space' where things are in continuous motion (pp. 19–20). Like Cerella, Epstein thus takes the moment when 'political agency shifted from the divine to the human' (p. 9) as her subject of analysis and links this shift to new ways of seeing and understanding. But instead of focusing on the break between the theological and the political, Epstein is interested in the consequences for the political of the historical emergence of the human body as a site of scientific knowledge.

Epstein devotes chapters two and three to a close reading of Hobbes in order to reveal that security is a fundamental aim of the modern state. In chapter two, Epstein reconstructs Hobbes' *Leviathan* through the lens of the body. Hobbes identifies the scholastic soul and religious conscience as causes of political conflict of his time. To resolve this crisis, Hobbes proposes to discard the soul and all that is incorporeal as 'nothing' (p. 57) and focus instead on bodies as the only scientific reality to be governed. By doing so, he 'denaturalizes' reason, which until then was regarded as the highest faculty of the soul 'that mirrored the cosmic Logos, the natural order', reducing it to the mechanical capacity to add and subtract (p. 59). The subjection that takes place in the public sphere is thus concerned with actions and bodies rather than conscience. It 'carved out a private space marked by the "silence of the law"' that, Epstein insists, could accommodate (private) religious communal life (p. 55).

At this point, however, Hobbes reaches a paradox to which Epstein attends in chapter three. On the one hand, Hobbes has reduced man to a *res extensa*, a moving body in space, the more so determined as Hobbes rejects the new logic of probability and adheres to the traditional view of a causal universe (p. 85). On the other hand, Hobbes assumes consent for the constitution of the commonwealth. More precisely, the covenant results from men's instinct for self-preservation and their desire for security. Yet, left alone, this instinct does not lead to peace but chaos. How, then, can Hobbes explain the necessary self-restriction of instincts once he has discarded conscience as the traditional site for taming the passions?

The tension, for Epstein is a dialectic one. It is resolved by the unique creative capacity of human beings to 'exceed their natural determinations' (p. 86). Just like language becomes, in the classical age, the arbitrary capacity to name things and create fictions that exemplify human will, human beings can decide to craft the state as a human artifice.

The second part of the book deals with liberty as a fundamental right of the modern subject in its newly defined relation to the state. In the fourth chapter,



Epstein examines historical events that contributed to the shift from an understanding of the body as a collective entity that ‘holds the many into one’ (p. 109) to the biological body to which the liberty of the subject is attached. This is accomplished, she argues, through the isolation of territory as the limit of sovereignty. The shift here is from the Aristotelian notion of ‘place’ that accommodated mediaeval corporations, and it can interestingly be seen as the juridical equivalent to the two techniques of painting that Cerella identified in Masaccio’s paintings: premodern iconic representation is replaced with spatial perspective when territory replaces place and when the body becomes *res extensa*.

In the fifth chapter, Locke’s conception of liberty is compared to Hobbes’. While both thinkers resort to bodies to give liberty its naturalness, they do so in opposite ways: whereas Hobbes externalizes liberty by refusing any kind of internality (or conscience) and defining liberty as ‘the absence of impediment to motion’ (p. 131), Locke internalizes liberty by locating freedom in the mind or understanding—a bodily organ and embodied reason, ‘the natural faculty we possess to discover the law of nature’ (p. 152). The mind is what directs the will and is the seat of freedom. Freedom, however, is not license, and it needs to be educated. This leads Locke to propose a hierarchy of human beings according to their rational capacity of practicing liberty, a capacity that also grants them status in the polis: at the top are men as full members, followed by women and foreigners as reasonable yet not rational persons and, at the bottom, irrational criminals who have infringed the natural rights of another, whatever their particular offence (p. 168).

The last part of the book deals with property. In chapter six, Epstein delineates how Locke excludes slaves from the commonwealth by way of resolving a problem encountered by his predecessors, Hugo Grotius and Samuel Pufendorf. Both Grotius and Pufendorf started with the natural givenness of the body to ‘legitimize the original act of appropriation’ (p.179), but they could not agree on whether property was a natural right or the result of the covenant. Locke resolves this conflict by resorting to labour as an act that *incorporates* the product of labour into the labouring man, thus naturalizing property. Labour, Locke argues, changes the value of the thing cultivated, thus transforming its substance and making it part of the labourer. Labour is an act of appropriation, but in Epstein’s reading it is also a corporeal process where the thing is joined to a human being who thereby also becomes a person legally responsible for their actions (p. 205). Interestingly, from this perspective and following Balibar, Epstein sees in this triangulation of the labouring body, the human being, and the person the transformation of Christian trinity and the passage from a ‘theological age’ to a ‘psychological (or anthropological) age’ (p. 203). Property and liberty are then concomitantly built as an immediate and natural sphere around the body, the *suum*—that which is one’s own—made of the body and the proprietary things attached to it by labour. In a strange twist, however, the labouring slave does not acquire property and therefore remains deprived of freedom and personhood. Locke’s explanation is that the slave



is in a state of war, which is distinct from a state of nature where natural rights are granted, and he is therefore devoid of such rights.

Chapter seven shows the centrality of the body in the modern state as it is revealed by the anatomy lesson. These lessons became regular public rituals in seventeenth-century Europe as the conjoint spectacle of the scientific revolution and the nascent modern state. The lessons helped entrench the scientific gaze that objectivized some bodies while subjectivizing others, thereby also consolidating power relations and drawing the lines of new exclusions. The bodies of dead criminals were first destined for dissection as the last stage of their punishment. But with growing demands for bodies, corpses taken from poorhouse and hospices also served the needs of science. The state thus violently imposed its scientific gaze: at the symbolic level, the dissection was the victory of scientific man over nature, often represented by a woman. But the female body, absent from the anatomy lesson, remained unknown, thus showing the gendered structure of modern knowledge and power.

Both Epstein and Cerella compellingly unearth the multiple ways in which modern democracies were built on exclusion and violence. In doing so, they ask us to question anew our political arrangements to craft them in more inclusive ways. As Epstein reminds us, political space always results from collective decisions and commitments. In this period of crisis, these two books are important reminders of the unique human capacity to create our common world.

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Laurence Barry
Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel
laurence.barry@mail.huji.ac.il