

PAUL RICŒUR AND THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY. THE INSTITUTING AND THE INSTITUTED

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SUMMARY: 1. *The Social Imaginary as Instituting*. 2. *The Social Imaginary as Instituted*.

THIS essay's claim is that we do not understand the nature of Paul Ricœur's approach to social and political life unless we comprehend his advocacy of the integral role to this life of the social imaginary. While the social imaginary is usually a subtext in his writings, not frequently addressed directly, it provides a continuing basis for his evaluation of social and political life. The social imaginary is an umbrella term that composes what more precisely could be subdivided into the political imaginary, the cultural imaginary, and the social imaginary. For Ricœur the social imaginary undergirds all of social and political life.

The essay proceeds in two parts. To introduce the significance of the social imaginary in Ricœur, the first part concentrates on how Ricœur's *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* develops the themes of ideology and utopia on the basis of the social imaginary, revealing the inextricability of the social imaginary to social and political life. The second part turns to consideration of how a positive notion of the social imaginary can be perpetuated over time and examines Ricœur's attention to just institutions. The two parts might be considered parallel to Castoriadis's considerations of the social and political imagination as instituting and instituted.¹

In what ways are institutions necessary for the protection of human values? How can we ensure that institutions in fact enhance human values rather than distance us from them? These are the kinds of questions Ricœur's *Lectures* address that makes it still so relevant today.

In a 1985 radio discussion, Ricœur and Castoriadis met to discuss these issues.² They agreed on the value of the promise that always lies ahead of us

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¹ C. CASTORIADIS, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. by K. Blamey, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1987.

² C. CASTORIADIS, P. RICŒUR, *Dialogue sur l'histoire et l'imaginaire social*, Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris 2016; *Ricœur and Castoriadis in Discussion: On Human Creation, Historical Novelty, and the Social Imaginary*, ed. by Suzi Adams, Rowman & Littlefield International, London 2017. For further discussion of the relation be-

in the social imaginary. Yet while Castoriadis emphasized the possibility of an absolute rupture with existing reality, Ricœur argued that a total break is not possible and that institutions can be the locus for the promise of values to thrive. François Dosse has noted, “Ricœur reminds us of the importance of utopia, of building a project of society, of giving a horizon of expectation”.³ This project and promise do not have lie in separation from institutions but in their perennially instituting capacity.

1. THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY AS INSTITUTING

The first part begins with a question. The lectures that comprise Ricœur’s *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*⁴ (hereafter *Lectures*) were delivered nearly 50 years ago and first published nearly 40 years ago. Why should current political inquiry pay attention to a book of this vintage and on subjects such as ideology and utopia? Isn’t discussion of a topic such as ideology passé, and isn’t attention to figures on ideology such as Althusser or on utopia such as Saint-Simon and Fourier out of date and no longer relevant to contemporary circumstances?

As the editor of the *Lectures*, it is likely not surprising that I continue to find value in this text. I do have some ambivalence about whether the concept of ideology retains currency; its connotation is generally pejorative. But whether or not we like the term, ideology remains, as I shall discuss, a significant placeholder for issues that remain quite vital.

In other publications on this topic, I have contextualized the current significance of the *Lectures* to show how the work coheres with contemporary scholarship dislocating reason as foundational and thus engaging in a critique of the self-sufficiency of the Enlightenment legacy. In the words of George Lakoff, we cannot understand 21st century politics based on the model of an 18th century brain.⁵ In the present part, I want to concentrate on Ricœur’s contributions to one element of this critique: the significance of the social imaginary.

Ricœur, Castoriadis, and Charles Taylor are generally recognized as the leading thinkers on the social imaginary. Attention to the social imaginary

tween Ricœur and Castoriadis, see my essay in the latter volume: *On the Cusp: Ricœur and Castoriadis at the Boundary*, pp. 23-48.

³ Philosophie: vivre mieux avec Paul Ricœur, «La Croix L’Hebdo», 173/10 mars (2023), Paris.

⁴ P. RICŒUR, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. by G. H. Taylor, Columbia University Press, New York 1986.

⁵ G. LAKOFF, *The Political Mind: Why You Can’t Understand 21st-Century American Politics With an 18th-Century Brain*, Viking, New York 2008; see G. H. TAYLOR, *Why Ideology and Utopia Today?*, in *Ideology and Utopia in the Twenty-First Century: The Surplus of Meaning in Ricœur’s Dialectical Concept*, ed. by S. N. Arel and D. R. Stiver, Lexington Books, Lanham, MD 2019, pp. 217-235.

participates in the 'hermeneutic turn' in the social sciences and elucidates how 'cultural configurations of meaning' orient our encounter with the world and influence the formation of social institutions and practices. The social imaginary also emphasizes the creative aspects of the imagination, the ability to reform social institutions.⁶ In opposition to materialistic and quantitative reductions of reality, the social imaginary highlights the ineradicable quality of structures of meaning (or of meaninglessness) in social life. In the words of Charles Taylor, the social imaginary has a "constitutive function".⁷ It is not ornamental, not epiphenomenal.

The larger significance of the *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* lies in the text's development of the symbolic mediation of action, a topic that persists as a theme in Ricœur, as he returns to it as an element of "prefiguration" in *Time and Narrative*. In fact, I want to start from an example of symbolic mediation that Ricœur offers in *Time and Narrative* to help illustrate what the topic entails. Ricœur writes that when we raise our hand, it is not simply a physical motion but has meaning, as depending on the context, it can be interpreted as voting, greeting a friend, or hailing a taxi.⁸ The physical activity is never isolable from the meaning of the activity; the activity is symbolically mediated. The meaning of action is a language that can be 'read'.⁹ Readers of Ricœur will be familiar with the extension of this argument: action is a 'quasi-text' that can be interpreted.¹⁰

In the *Lectures* Ricœur indicates that he grafts his entire analysis of ideology on Marx's acknowledgment that there is a "language of real life" that exists before all ideological distortions.¹¹ For Ricœur the symbolic structure of action "is absolutely primitive and ineluctable".¹²

⁶ S. ADAMS, et al., *Social Imaginaries in Debate*, «Social Imaginaries», 1/1 (2015).

⁷ C. TAYLOR, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC 2004. Much of this book was later incorporated into ID., *A Secular Age*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2007. Ricœur does title *The Social Imaginary* a section of an article, see P. RICŒUR, *Imagination in Discourse and Action*, in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, trans. by K. Blamey and J. B. Thompson, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL 1991, pp. 181-187.

⁸ P. RICŒUR, *Time and Narrative* (vol. 1), trans. by K. Mc Laughlin and D. Pellauer, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1984, pp. 57-58. Ricœur also develops the thematic at some length elsewhere. See P. RICŒUR, *The Symbolic Structure of Action*, in *Philosophical Anthropology*, ed. by J. Michel and J. Porée, trans. by D. Pellauer, Polity, Cambridge, UK 2016, pp. 176-194.

⁹ P. RICŒUR, *Time and Narrative*, cit., p. 58 ("symbolism confers an initial readability on action").

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ P. RICŒUR, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, cit., p. 77 (quoting Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology, Part 1*, ed. and intr. C. J. Arthur, International Publishers, New York 1970, p. 47).

¹² P. RICŒUR, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, cit., p. 77.

I will return to the import of Ricœur's insight for his theory of ideology but want to remain for the moment with the larger implications of Ricœur's thesis. He frequently reiterates in the *Lectures* that the symbolic structure of action is ineluctable. He claims that "a nonsymbolic mode of existence, and even less, a nonsymbolic kind of existence, can no longer obtain".¹³ The world of human action – of human praxis – must "immediately have a symbolic dimension".¹⁴ Praxis must have "from the beginning a symbolic dimension so that it might have and receive its own language".¹⁵ No social action "is not already symbolically mediated".¹⁶ The import of this thesis for the larger inquiry into the nature of imagination is also telling. Ricœur relates symbolic mediation with the imaginary. We would not be able to understand the notion of the imaginary if reality were not already symbolically mediated.¹⁷

There is a "primary imaginary structure of our being in the world"; the imaginary "is constitutive of our relation to the world".¹⁸ The social imagination, Ricœur writes, "is constitutive of social reality".¹⁹ In turn, interpretation is not isolable from but integral to human praxis; it is "so primitive that in fact it is constitutive of the dimension of praxis".²⁰ Symbolic mediation, meaning, imagination, and interpretation are all interrelated and are all interrelated as integral to human action.

The consequences of this thesis are immense. Human activity begins not in abstract logic or isolable fact but in symbolic mediation. In the *Lectures* Ricœur extends the argument into human activity beginning in rhetoric. We see similar threads across Ricœur's corpus. In *The Rule of Metaphor* Ricœur hypothesizes that we begin in metaphor: "is there not, in Gadamer's terms, a *metaphoric* at work at the origin of logical thought, at the root of all classification?"²¹ In *Time and Narrative*, as previously noted, Ricœur returns to the symbolic mediation of action and maintains that we begin in *figuration*, particularly *prefiguration*.

Ricœur is quite direct that ideology and utopia are integrally connected to the symbolic mediation of action. "Ideology and utopia – he writes – have ultimately to do with the character of human action as being mediated, structured and integrated by symbolic systems".²² If symbolic mediation is ineradicable, so is ideology. "A pre-symbolic, and therefore preideological, stage of

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 258.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 139.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 81.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 145.

²¹ P. RICŒUR, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. by R. Czerny, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1977, pp. 197-198.

²² P. RICŒUR, *Ideology, Utopia, and Faith*, «Protocol Series of the Colloquies of the Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture», 17 (1976), p. 21.

real life can nowhere be found".²³ Ricœur's main thesis is that underlying the distortive level of ideology identified and explored by Marx, there must be a constitutive level of ideology, a level of symbolization itself that can be distorted.²⁴

If there were not symbolic mediation already at work in the most basic kind of action, there would be no symbolic structure that could be distorted.

Ricœur types the constitutive level of ideology as "nonpejorative", one that seeks to preserve social and individual identity.²⁵ While the utopia too can have a distortive function as escapist, it has a constitutive role as well, to help us imagine and bring to reality alternative futures.²⁶ The utopia itself offers a form of identity, a "prospective identity", something that we seek and are yet not.²⁷

If the constitutive and distortive aspects of ideology and utopia relate to the symbolic mediation of action, so does the third component of ideology and utopia: its role as legitimation or as contestation of 'power'. As Ricœur relates, the process of legitimation lies within the level of symbolization. For many who participate in society, their engagement is not simply a matter of a social contract – of giving to the society in return for what is received – but depends on 'belief'. The symbols and symbolic structure of a society, culture, or nation do not give rise simply to thought but to belief. Acknowledgment that some in society may not believe does not negate the point that many do. In the *Lectures* Ricœur addresses the topic of legitimation in his discussion of Weber. Ricœur observes that in each of the types of authority that Weber addresses – legal, traditional, and charismatic – the leader's assertion of authority rests finally on the citizenry's belief (*Glauben*).²⁸

A system of power ultimately rests on our belief.²⁹ If ideology acts to consolidate and reinforce this belief, the utopia offers a space to challenge this belief.

The deeper contributions of the *Lectures* to the theories of ideology and utopia and to the nature of the social and cultural imagination can be aptly summarized in Ricœur's response to Marx. First, Marx argues for a differenti-

²³ P. RICŒUR, *Can there be a Scientific Concept of Ideology?*, in J. Bien (ed.), *Phenomenology and The Social Sciences: A Dialogue*, Springer, Dordrecht 1978, pp. 44-59; ID., *Science and Ideology*, in *From Text to Action*, cit., p. 255: "Ideology is always an unsurpassable phenomenon of social existence, insofar as social reality always has a symbolic constitution and incorporates an interpretation, in images and representations, of the social bond itself".

²⁴ P. RICŒUR, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, cit., p. 255.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 258.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 311.

²⁸ A more detailed inquiry would be needed to assess Ricœur's brief contrasts between Weber's employment of belief as *Glauben* and his usage of *Vorstellung*, which has been translated as belief but means representation (pp. 199, 203).

²⁹ P. RICŒUR, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, cit., p. 214.

ation between an economic infrastructure and a superstructure of ideas; ideas are an “efflux” of the infrastructure of “material behavior”.³⁰ But Ricœur maintains that Marx’s allowance of a “language of real life” shows that the symbolic mediation of action permeates the economic infrastructure. The symbolic mediation of action is in fact infrastructural itself – inextricable to human action. While distortive ideology may be contrasted with praxis, a more constitutive form of ideology as symbolic mediation offers an “inner connection” with praxis. Symbolic mediation, imagination, and interpretation go all the way down. Second, symbolic mediation involves a motivational model – pertaining to our relation to structures of power, including belief – and this displaces Marx’s causal relation between infrastructure and superstructure. The motivational model better founds the possibility of agency in human praxis. Third, Marx criticizes interpretation as fallow because it does not effect change; interpretation remains caught in the superstructure, the world of ideas. In the language of Marx’s eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: “the philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it”.³¹ Yet, Ricœur responds, the utopia is not simply a dream but seeks to change reality. The fiction that is the utopian form of productive imagination does not remain in the air but aims to shatter reality. Like ideology, in its constitutive fashion it can act at an infrastructural level.

I now want to pull back from specific discussion of the themes of the *Lectures* to argue for their continuing vitality today. First, it is likely only too apparent that the *Lectures*, irrespective of their focus on the precise topics of ideology and utopia, offer decisive contributions to the contemporary attention to the social imaginary. In fact, I would argue that Ricœur’s development – in the *Lectures* and elsewhere – of the theme of the symbolic mediation of action goes significantly further than the work of Castoriadis and Charles Taylor in clarifying how the social imaginary operates. Substantively, the thesis of the symbolic mediation of action is also hugely important. It is an essential contribution of Ricœur’s to articulate that human culture is situated and begins in symbolic mediation. We begin not with reason, fact, or quantification but in meaning, imagination, metaphor, rhetoric, and, yes, ideology. As I attempt to elaborate elsewhere, perhaps the best way to encapsulate Ricœur’s approach here is to relate it to his thesis in *Time and Narrative*: we begin in *figuration*.³² This seems a momentous reversal of the Enlightenment claim asserting the primacy of reason.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 77, quoting K. MARX, F. ENGELS, *The German Ideology*, cit., p. 47.

³¹ K. MARX, *Theses on Feuerbach*, in K. MARX, F. ENGELS, *The German Ideology*, Prometheus, New York 1998.

³² See G. H. TAYLOR, *The Deeper Significance of Ricœur’s Philosophy of Productive Imagination: The Role of Figuration*, in *Productive Imagination: Its History, Meaning and Significance*, ed. by S. Geniusas and D. Nikulin, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD 2018, pp. 157–181.

As evident, there is much value in Ricœur's analysis in the *Lectures* on the symbolic mediation of action that can be retained independent of any attention to ideology. For Ricœur's work to be congruent with the current turn toward conceptualization of the social imaginary, should we drop the vocabulary of ideology? After all, Ricœur acknowledges that ideology is persistently a polemical concept, and Charles Taylor insists that the social imaginary allows for a constitutive function as, he claims, ideology does not.³³ Even if Taylor does not incorporate Ricœur's nonpejorative sense of ideology, do not we still give credit to what he means? Characterizing an approach as an ideology is an aspersion, a denunciation.

As I adverted to at the outset, I do think that the vocabulary of the social imaginary more easily allows for consideration of positive functions of social and political life than does the term ideology. It is difficult for ideology to shake its negative connotations.

Nevertheless, I would urge that the terminology of ideology be retained and incorporated into the larger perspective of the social imaginary, because the conception of ideology contains values that are often missing or underplayed in the notion of the social imaginary. In part ideology's weakness – as polemical, as critique – is also its strength. Although critique of particular social imaginaries is not unknown,³⁴ we seem more typically to conceive of the social imaginary as positive: it is creative, imaginative. But Nazism was also a social imaginary that was creative and imaginative, and we each have our views on perverse social imaginaries of various political stripes today. The conception of ideology retains the analytic lens that can perceive distortion. The conception of ideology is also attentive to the problematic of power and legitimacy, as an orientation to the social imaginary is often not. And the vocabulary of ideology typically presumes a coherence in approach – perhaps totalistic – that the social imaginary does not.

The social imaginary may permit multiple such forms, whereas ideologies may view themselves more in competition, each asserting its own view about the proper form of ideological coherence. Finally, while Ricœur maintains that the major ascription of ideology rightly is political, he also appreciates that the characterization of ideology – including all of the above traits – can apply to other contexts too: economic, moral, aesthetic, religious, and so on.

I would also suggest that Ricœur's concept of the utopia be retained from the *Lectures* and included into the perspective of the social imaginary. The utopian includes the possibility of historical change, as the social imaginary also often but not necessarily does. A social imaginary may be static. Retention of the utopian is additionally important in relation to how Ricœur's corpus as a whole offers a resource for considering the social imaginary.

³³ C. TAYLOR, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, cit.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 183.

If, as I have commented, Ricœur not only continues to adhere to the notion of the symbolic mediation of action but expands upon it in his development of the notion of *figuration*, the same persistence is not true in his reference to the utopian. The conjunction of Ricœur's engagement with *The Rule of Metaphor*, the *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* and the *Lectures on Imagination*³⁵ was a time when he emphasized the creativity and productivity of imagination. If Ricœur's work on metaphor demonstrates that we are not caught in the prison house of language,³⁶ his work in the two sets of lectures demonstrates similarly that we are not caught in the prison house of contemporary social and political structures.

This is a most important message today and, in my mind, an essential and abiding contribution of Ricœur's work here. So, in the contemporary context of increased scholarly regard for the social imaginary, I find much of value to be retained in the *Lectures* on not only the social mediation of action but the more particular themes of ideology and utopia as well.

Ricœur's analysis of the symbolic mediation of action and its manifestations as ideology and utopia continues not only to have significant value but to deserve much greater appreciation for incisive understanding of contemporary culture and politics.

There also seems much more to mine in Ricœur's work on legitimacy. Is he accurate that all political systems cannot survive only on the basis of the imposition of force but require legitimation, that is, citizenry belief? Is Ricœur correct that in every political system there is a gap in level between the authority leaders claim and the belief in this authority offered by the citizenry?

2. THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY AS INSTITUTED

More broadly, the question of legitimacy raises the issue of how the social imaginary is perpetuated and perpetuated (or not) in just ways in social and political institutions. This turns us to our second part on Ricœur's discussion of just institutions. Although in this part I move away from direct reference to the social imaginary, the issue here remains how the social imaginary can be protected and enhanced in institutions over time.³⁷

Ricœur defines the ethical intention in *Oneself as Another* as "aiming at the good life with and for others, in just institutions".³⁸ What does *just institutions*

³⁵ P. RICŒUR, *Lectures on Imagination*, ed. by G. H. Taylor, R. D. Sweeney, J.-L. Almaric, and P. F. Crosby, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2023.

³⁶ F. JAMESON, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ 1975.

³⁷ For prior consideration of this theme, see G. H. TAYLOR, *Ricœur and Just Institutions*, «Philosophy Today», 58/4 (2014), pp. 571-589.

³⁸ P. RICŒUR, *Oneself as Another*, trans. by K. Blamey, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992, p. 172.

mean? The twentieth century has left us with an indelible memory that institutions such as nation-states and legal systems can be evil. We also know similarly that on a more routine and ongoing basis institutions such as nations can impose coercion and violence on their people as a matter of requiring obedience or imposing punishment. Legal institutions can also accommodate what Ricœur criticizes as “la justice vindicatoire”, the claimed justice of revenge.³⁹ I will not assess these elements of institutions, however, in order to concentrate on how institutions might be just.

Like Ricœur does, as we just saw in the *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, when he differentiates the constitutive aspects of ideology from its distortive aspects, I want to determine whether we may separate the just possibilities of institutions from their negative and coercive sides.

Along with Ricœur, I will then not assume that an institution such as the state is defined by violence;⁴⁰ I will also not assume that an institution’s assumption of power is defined by coercion.⁴¹ The claim is not that in practice any institution can avoid negative imposition of its power but that if we want to retrieve and inculcate more just institutions, we need to assess from the start their at least theoretical capabilities to offer justice. I am therefore in agreement with Bernard Dauenhauer, who asserts: “Ricœur has consistently refused to join the ranks of those who tend to regard all institutions as nothing more than sites of domination. He accepts the Hegelian insight that the mediation effected by institutions is essential for the constitution of the ethical subject”.⁴²

In order to move toward Ricœur’s depiction of the potentially positive relation of spirit and institution, we must place ourselves within his evaluation of “just institutions” and his definitions of each of those two terms. Although Ricœur pays primary attention to public institutions such as government and the law, he notes that, more broadly, institutions arise when we move beyond face to face relations and determine how to allocate the rights, duties, responsibilities, and abilities – the prerogatives and burdens – of a community.⁴³

³⁹ P. RICŒUR, *Le Juste, la justice et son échec*, in Paul Ricœur, ed. by M. Revault d’Allones and F. Azouvi, Éditions de l’Herne, Paris 2004.

⁴⁰ P. RICŒUR, *Ethics and Politics*, in *From Text to Action*, cit.

⁴¹ P. RICŒUR, *History and Truth*, trans. by C. A. Kelbley, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL 1965, pp. 261-262; see ID., *Ethics and Politics*, cit.

⁴² B. DAUENHAUER, *Paul Ricoeur: The Promise and Risk of Politics*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD 1998.

⁴³ P. RICŒUR, *Éthique et morale*, in *Lectures 1: Autour du politique*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1991, p. 259; ID., *Oneself as Another*, cit., p. 200; ID., *The Course of Recognition*, trans. by D. Pel-lauer, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2005, p. 223.

That community might be a nation,⁴⁴ a religious institution,⁴⁵ an economic institution such as a business⁴⁶ and so on.

Institutions govern the community's terms of internal exchange, the rights of internal distribution.⁴⁷ In political and legal institutions, these rights of distribution have generated claims of distributive justice, of some kind of equality.⁴⁸ For my purposes, I want to focus within institutions less on any claim of equality than on its regime of distribution of rights and responsibilities. I am very much taken by Ricœur's insistence that "what fundamentally characterizes the idea of institution is the bond of common mores and not that of constraining rules".⁴⁹

In trying to assess what the nature of the 'just' in just institutions might mean, my analysis is predicated upon the determination of the just as the 'equitable'. This accords with Ricœur's own emphasis on practical and situated judgment and his endorsement of the equitable as defined by Aristotle: that which by deciding on the basis of the specific situation of application allows the equitable to correct the defects of formal law.⁵⁰ Ricœur proposes that the just is no longer the good or the legal but the equitable.⁵¹ Particularly attractive for me here is Ricœur's claim that the equitable speaks to a *sense* of justice (*sens de la justice*) which is distinguishable from a *rule* of justice.⁵² The sense of justice is not exhausted in the formal construction of juridical systems.

Ricœur speaks of a sense rather than an idea of justice to indicate justice's emergences from the immemorial,⁵³ a realm I relate to the affective, symbolic, and pre-predicative realm of *prefiguration*. As we know from *Oneself as Another*, determination of the equitable requires a form of practical wisdom.⁵⁴ This practical wisdom is not arbitrary to the extent it recurs to the *sense* of justice, that is, to the resources of an originary ethical sensibility (*sens éthique*) that are not reached in the norm.⁵⁵

Ricœur interrelates institutions and the just in his contention that practical

⁴⁴ P. RICŒUR, *Oneself as Another*, cit., p. 194.

⁴⁵ P. RICŒUR, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. by D. Ihde, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL 1974, p. 423.

⁴⁶ Cfr. P. RICŒUR, *History and Truth*, cit., p. 114.

⁴⁷ P. RICŒUR, *The Course of Recognition*, cit., pp. 223-224.

⁴⁸ P. RICŒUR, *Oneself as Another*, cit., p. 194.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ P. RICŒUR, *Oneself as Another*, cit., p. 262 (quoting ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by M. Ostwald, Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis 1962, 5.10.1137b25-27).

⁵¹ P. RICŒUR, *The Just*, cit., p. xxiv.

⁵² P. RICŒUR, *Éthique et morale*, cit., p. 269.

⁵³ P. RICŒUR, *Le juste entre le légal et le bon*, in *Lectures 1*, cit., p. 177.

⁵⁴ P. RICŒUR, *Oneself as Another*, cit., p. 250.

⁵⁵ P. RICŒUR, *Éthique et morale*, cit., p. 265.

wisdom must pass through institutional mediations.⁵⁶ “The institution – he says – is part of the ethical aim taken in its full scope”.⁵⁷ Ricœur’s tying together of practical wisdom and institutions is responsive, I think, to the charge of Amartya Sen’s book *The Idea of Justice* that too often political theorists such as Rawls equate justice simply with the right institutional structure.⁵⁸ While institutions are crucial to any account of justice, says Sen, we must attend the way these institutions do or do not promote justice in the hands of actual human behavior.⁵⁹ For Ricœur, the institution acts to mediate practical wisdom; the institution is not an end to justice entirely on its own.

I want to argue, then, that at their best, just institutions operate beyond the bounds of formalism and interrelate form and spirit, understanding the latter as underlying values, the *sense* of justice. Critically, just institutions require the interrelation of both form and spirit; they cannot offer their best if either form or substance is absent. While Kant says “thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind”,⁶⁰ I want to maintain that for institutions form without spirit is empty, and spirit without form is blind.

Action is “always symbolically mediated”⁶¹ and experience has “a narrative or pre-narrative quality”.⁶² Similarly, in language, no matter how emotive or poetic it is, it is structuring, not simply spirit. Olivier Abel in fact describes how for Ricœur language is the institution of institutions.⁶³

If we may view this prefiguring and structuring as forms of explanation, we reinforce the notion that the relationship between understanding and explanation also goes all the way down; their intertwining is inextricable. Ricœur’s interrelation of form and spirit in institutions has at least four implications, which grow out of his emphasis on this interrelation as a form of institutionalization.⁶⁴ First, the emphasis on institutionalization rather than institutions stresses the generative source of institutions in elements such as spirit and values. Institutions are not autonomous or self-derived.

Second, the ordering function of institutions – their creation of rules and restraints – is not antithetical to the generative capacity; it offers form to spirit, which allows spirit to survive. What Ricœur says of ideologies I would also say of institutions: they help “to perpetuate the initial energy beyond the pe-

⁵⁶ P. RICŒUR, *Oneself as Another*, cit., p. 250.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 201.

⁵⁸ A. SEN, *The Idea of Justice*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2009, p. 83.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 82.

⁶⁰ I. KANT, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by N. Kemp Smith, St. Martin’s Press, New York 1965, B75 at p. 93.

⁶¹ P. RICŒUR, *Time and Narrative*, cit., p. 59.

⁶² P. RICŒUR, *Mimesis and Representation*, in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. by M. J. Valdés, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1991, p. 142.

⁶³ O. ABEL, *Paul Ricœur: la promesse et la règle*, Éditions Michalon, Paris 1996, p. 60.

⁶⁴ P. RICŒUR, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. by K. Blamey and D. Pellauer, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2004, p. 220.

riod of effervescence".⁶⁵ Did not the failure of the French Revolution, Ricœur asks in *The Just*, have something to do with its incapacity to "stabilize itself through a constitution", through some sense of form?⁶⁶ Also, the ordering function works out the logic and coherence of the nascent meaning. Ordering fleshes out the inchoate, reduces the conflicting, allows us to determine and know what should be required of us.

Third, institutions are themselves dynamic as the process of institutionalization continues over time. "Every conception of justice – Ricœur writes – requires a coherence that is not merely to be preserved but to be constructed".⁶⁷ In his assessment of the legal institution, Ricœur rightly finds the Anglo-American common law system to typify this inventiveness.⁶⁸ Rather than a movement of application of an existing rule to a case, the institutional dynamism permits a movement from the case to an extension of and a new variation on the rule – a creation of a new rule in which to encompass the case.⁶⁹

Decision here, Ricœur says, is an operation of what Kant calls in *The Critique of Judgment* ⁷⁰ "reflective judgment".⁷¹ Judgment is poetic, Ricœur writes, as an "invention of an appropriate solution to the unique situation".⁷² The reflective, creative judgment is an act of productive imagination.⁷³ Institutions are not necessarily bound to static rules, forms, and procedures; they can engage in productive imaginative acts. Characterization of judgment as engaged in productive imagination and in the creation of the rule to fit the circumstances relates us back to our opening characterization of the just as the equitable rather than that which comports with the existing rule.

As the productive character of institutions foresees, the fourth and final characteristic of institutionalization is that it partakes in the dynamic of a continual intertwining of institution and grounding energy or spirit. The institution can be an objectification rather than a reification of spirit. Just as a text can release "dynamic meaning"⁷⁴ so too can the productive capacities of an institution. Ricœur writes that we must dissolve the opposition between the inside and outside of a text: "we must stop seeing the text as its own interior and life as exterior to it. Instead we must accompany that *structuring operation* that begins in life, is invested in the text, then returns to life".⁷⁵ I would say the same of the relation between life and institutions. The two remain interconnected.

⁶⁵ P. RICŒUR, *Science and Ideology*, in *From Text to Action*, cit.

⁶⁶ P. RICŒUR, *The Just*, trans. by D. Pellauer, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2000.

⁶⁷ P. RICŒUR, *Oneself as Another*, cit., p. 277.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁹ P. RICŒUR, *The Just*, cit., p. 95; ID., *Reflections on the Just*, cit., p. 219.

⁷⁰ I. KANT, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. by J. H. Bernard, Hafner Press, New York 1951.

⁷¹ P. RICŒUR, *Reflections on the Just*, cit., p. 35.

⁷² P. RICŒUR, *The Just*, cit.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, p. xxii.

⁷⁴ P. RICŒUR, *The Model of the Text*, cit., p. 149.

⁷⁵ P. RICŒUR, *Mimesis and Representation*, cit., p. 151.

I resist, then, the characterization of an institution such as law as purely formal and procedural with an internal logic only. I also resist in Ricœur's theory of justice the differentiation of the teleological and the deontological as separate stages that return to the teleological in the practical wisdom of judgment.⁷⁶ The return to the teleological, says Ricœur, does not repudiate the "formalization procedures" of the deontological stage.⁷⁷ I, on the other hand, think the intertwining of spirit and institution in the productive imagination of judgment does break down the formalization of procedure and does break down the division between the deontological and the teleological.

The point remains that Ricœur's discussion of just institutions importantly focuses attention on how the social imaginary can be perpetuated and protected over time, and his discussion of the social imaginary itself demonstrates its inextricable role in social and political life, a role that as he reenvisionages it requires us to reform our standard views of what social and political rationality entails.

ABSTRACT · Paul Ricœur *Ricœur and the Social Imaginary. The Instituting and the Instituted* · This essay's claim is that we do not understand the nature of Paul Ricœur's approach to social and political life unless we comprehend his advocacy of the integral role to this life of the social imaginary. The essay proceeds in two parts. The first part concentrates on how Ricœur's *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* develops the themes of ideology and utopia, revealing the inextricability to social and political life of the social imaginary as the symbolic mediation of action. The second part turns to attend how a positive notion of the social imaginary can be perpetuated over time and examines Ricœur's attention to 'just institutions'. The two parts could be read as a dual assessment of the social and political imagination, both as 'instituting' and as 'instituted'.

KEYWORDS · Paul Ricœur, Social Imaginary, Ideology and Utopia, Just Institutions, Cornelius Castoriadis.

⁷⁶ For elaboration of this point in a different context, see G. H. TAYLOR, *Ricœur versus Ricœur? Between the Universal and the Contextual*, in *From Ricœur to Action: The Socio-Political Significance of Ricœur's Thinking*, ed. by T. S. Mei and D. Lewin, Continuum, London 2012, pp. 136-154.

⁷⁷ P. RICŒUR, *Oneself as Another*, cit., p. 228.