
Reviews

Sources of Order in History: Voegelin and His Critics

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Eric Voegelin: The Restoration of Order, by Michael P. Federici. *Wilming-
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The discipline of political theory has witnessed some dramatic changes over the past half century. Perhaps the most compelling of these is the ever-growing scholarly dissatisfaction with behaviorism and positivism, and the attendant resurgence of interest in classical and Christian traditional philosophical approaches. The horrors of modern totalitarianism have shattered our illusions about the possibility of a “value-neutral” or strictly “empirical” social science, and have led to a renewed appreciation for the ethical and spiritual roots of Western civilization. As a consequence, one finds a rich body of contemporary literature that not only resurrects the wisdom of Greek, Roman, and Christian political thought, but also calls into

question many widely held assumptions about the origins, meaning, and significance of modernity, from political, spiritual, and cultural perspectives. In *Eric Voegelin: The Restoration of Order* Michael Federici presents a valuable introduction to the thought of perhaps the most reputable post-War political theorist to explore these dynamics with full philosophic and theologic rigor.

While there are at least two outstanding introductory texts already available (Eugene Webb’s *Eric Voegelin: Philosopher of History* and Ellis Sandoz’s *The Voegelinian Revolution*, both published in 1981), Federici’s work is distinctive in two ways. First, it seeks to “disseminate Voegelin’s political theory to a broader audience than seems to have been

reached by the existing literature" (xxxv). Specifically, Federici wishes to render the "deep and philosophically penetrating" Voegelinian corpus more accessible to the advanced undergraduate student. As the author is well aware, no secondary source can eliminate the interpretive difficulties that beginning students will invariably encounter, as "there are no shortcuts" (xxxv). It is certainly possible, however, for a good writer and teacher to present central Voegelinian themes in such a way as to awaken in the reader a sense of their profound importance for our time, and ultimately to inspire the student toward further study of the primary texts. This relatively brief book meets this challenge quite well. In addition, Federici's work represents a timely scholarly supplement to the existing literature. The book incorporates a range of primary source material that has only recently become available through the University of Missouri Press's *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* project. Federici has also included a well-conceived and highly thoughtful discussion of Voegelin's recent criticisms (chapter 7), some of whom studied directly under Voegelin and are now highly respected political theorists in the prime of their careers. Consequently, this book-length introductory treatment of Voegelin's political thought not only is able to reach an undergraduate audience, but does so in the light of all available source material and contemporary scholarly critique.

Largely based on a literary chro-

nology, the expository portion of the book (principally chapters 1-6) provides an overview of the core ideas that characterize Voegelin's distinctive approach to political theory. Very early in his academic career Voegelin was concerned with the nature of political ideology, and was particularly interested in understanding the source of its power in the modern West. As he emerged as a mature scholar during his time in the United States, he mounted a formidable challenge to the conventional view that modern revolutionary movements can be adequately understood as rational exercises in enlightened secular politics. Voegelin argued that modern ideological thinking is symptomatic of a deep crisis of Western civilization. Drawing on the portions of Voegelin's *History of Political Ideas* project contained in *From Enlightenment to Revolution* and elsewhere, Federici makes clear (chapters 2 and 3) that Voegelin understood the crisis as essentially *spiritual*, rather than merely political, institutional, sociological, or cultural. The architects of modernity have sought to capture the imagination of a fragmented West by constructing and articulating symbols of redivinization, symbols that are informed by innerworldly eschatological expectations about the future perfection of society through human action. For Voegelin, modern ideologies derive their power from an ability to supply a spiritually impoverished civilization with a renewed sense of meaning and purpose; he referred to this abil-

ity to provide meaning as a “shelter function.” The nature of this function, moreover, is distinctly at odds with the spiritual underpinnings of Western culture. As Federici explains, Voegelin was concerned in *The History of Political Ideas* with drawing contrasts between the sound conceptualizations of the shelter function in a range of pre-modern modes of thought and those characteristic of modern ideologies. In Federici’s words, the result of the modern project has been “nothing short of that loss of consciousness of reality that leads in its most advanced stages to totalitarian mass murder and existential destruction” (17).

Such conclusions impressed upon Voegelin the necessity of reexamining the nature of scientific and philosophic inquiry in the modern age. It is ultimately the task of political science to diagnose the sources of order and disorder and offer an appropriate therapeutic response. In chapter 4, Federici provides an outline of Voegelin’s attempt at a restoration of scientific inquiry in the widely read Walgreen lectures published under the title *The New Science of Politics* in 1952. Voegelin argued that the discipline of political science has been seriously damaged by the positivistic and scientific emphasis on the accumulation of facts. This preoccupation tends to subordinate philosophic and theologic substance to method, thereby perverting the true meaning of science. It is simply not possible to understand the sources and na-

ture of modern ideological movements through positivistic methods; some sort of moral and ethical reasoning must be applied. Voegelin therefore turned to the classical tradition, particularly as it is found in the works of Plato and Aristotle, as a corrective. Classical political science is characterized by an openness to the full range of human experience, including the metaphysical, as a legitimate source of knowledge concerning right order. As Federici explains, “historical experience, not the scientific method, is the standard by which to judge the truth of theoretical arguments . . . [and classical] symbols such as “*nous*” or “*xynon*” are articulations of experiences with transcendence that can be rediscovered because [their] presence is a universal feature of human nature” (59).

It is through this insight that Voegelin was able to establish the scientific validity of the Platonic conception of human nature as a state of “in-betweenness” (*metaxy*). That is, human beings understand themselves as inhabiting a sort of middle ground between lower and higher possibilities, between what Voegelin called the depths of *apeiron* and the heights of *epekiena* (the Beyond). It is an experience that is rendered fully luminous in Plato’s analysis of love in the *Symposium*. It is the experience of being drawn inexorably toward the Good in all of its manifestations, without actually possessing the Good with any finality. As Federici indicates, Voegelin applies this core conviction to his

analysis of modernity in both the *New Science* and *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*. Specifically, he characterized much of modern ideological speculation as a deformation of reality, insofar as it denies the metaxic structure of human existence. As such, modern ideologies tend to bear a close resemblance to ancient Gnostic religious traditions, so much so that Voegelin identifies modernity as essentially neo-Gnostic. Like their counterparts of old, modern Gnostics are existentially alienated to the point of adopting an obsessive escapism. This escapism manifests itself as an effort to deliver people from an evil world by creating an enchanting intramundane alternative firmly fixed in the future. For Voegelin, this experience of pathological spiritual alienation is at the heart of modern politics, particularly insofar as that politics is concerned with creating a sense of existential certainty revolving around the advent of a final realm of dream-like perfection. The self-understanding of modern man has been informed by an intense spiritual desire to resupply the believer with a profound sense of personal and societal purpose, a purpose that can only be fully understood as an expression of *ersatz* religious aspiration. Though his definition and description of the *metaxy* experience could be drawn out in greater detail, Federici succeeds in clarifying for students the central components of Voegelin's analysis of modern political forms and symbols.

Many of the ideas contained in

the *New Science* are given fuller expression in Voegelin's five-volume magnum opus, *Order and History*, the work that serves as the foundation for chapter five of Federici's study. *Order and History* contains a thorough examination of Western civilization's historical quest for transcendent meaning. In his research Voegelin detected certain historical patterns, and presented for our approval what he saw as an empirically grounded interpretive paradigm. This paradigm revolves around the observation that cultures and societies organized for collective political action will invariably develop symbolic expressions or representations of some body of transcendent truth, or of an order that is understood as beyond the simply human and as obligatory or binding in some way. In other words, as a condition of their existence all societies, modern and pre-modern alike, will invariably seek to create a well-ordered society according to the requirements of some conception of divine being. As Federici points out, the decisive event in the historical continuum of experiences of divine being, and their subsequent articulation in symbolic form, is described by Voegelin in terms of a qualitative "leap in being": the discovery of a transcendent divine reality by the Greek philosophers. This discovery took place historically, and continues to take place as a result of each individual person's acts of resistance to the corrupting forces of the surrounding society. Such acts of resistance are motivated by an intense

desire to escape the anxiety of the fall from meaningful existence, and to be led back to participation in goodness. The process of attunement toward the highest, most real reality constitutes the regeneration of order within the soul of the philosopher. Analogic symbols of such regeneration can be found throughout the Platonic corpus, with perhaps the most well known example being the allegory of the cave in Book VII of *The Republic*. For Voegelin the great achievement of classical political science was its differentiation of the regenerated individual soul as the fundamental source for order in society, an insight that animates the entire *Order and History* project. Subsequent to such a differentiation, Western man would begin to understand meaningful history as an account of the extent to which a society reflects the true order of being as it has been revealed to the soul of the genuine lover of wisdom. It is in this context that one can appreciate Voegelin's maxim that "the order of history emerges from the history of order," or from the history of successive attempts to conform to various experiences of transcendent truth. It is in these attempts—as they are reflected in the representative writings of philosophers, poets, kings, priests, historiographers, and other intellectuals responsible for cultural and historical self-interpretation—that Voegelin hoped to reintroduce the life of the spirit as the standard by which a contemporary restoration of order might be judged.

With the fourth volume of *Order and History* (*The Ecumenic Age*), Voegelin embarked upon a literary phase that Federici characterizes as considerably more abstract than the early works in political theory. Voegelin became increasingly concerned with the philosophy of consciousness as a way to explore the nature of transcendental experience and spiritual movement within the metaxic structure of existence. Federici here attempts to relate Voegelin's philosophy of consciousness to the overall logic of his political theory by focusing the discussion on Voegelin's understanding of *historiogenesis*, or the process by which societal representatives "illuminate the reality of the ground of being through the creation of symbols inspired by experiences [of divine transcendence]" (130). Voegelin noted a remarkable degree of continuity among a wide variety of separate symbolisms in the "ecumenic age," which he defined as the period from the rise of the Persian Empire to the fall of the Roman Empire and the advent of the Byzantine, Islamic, and Western cultures. What he noted was the fact that, in Federici's words, "human beings are [continually] in search of the divine, and that search is engendered by an attraction or pull from the divine," and that the "defining element" of the ecumenic age is the deepened understanding of the nature of divine being that is discovered across civilizational lines (132, 133). As Federici's discussion makes clear, the abstractions of Voegelin's philosophy

of consciousness complement the more overtly political phases of his work by clarifying and deepening our understanding of right spiritual order as the “essential step in the restoration of political and social order in the West” (136).

The seventh substantive chapter, “Voegelin’s Critics,” is the greatest strength of the book. In the process of reviewing the major points of contemporary criticism, Federici brings additional conceptual clarity and perspective to Voegelin’s work itself, particularly in its relationship to liberal, conservative, and Christian theoretical alternatives to neo-Gnostic revolutionary speculation. In his overview of David Walsh’s criticism, for instance, Federici points out Voegelin’s curious inability to see in liberal constitutionalism anything but a neo-Gnostic deformation of Christian civilization. In the process, Federici draws our attention back to the experience of transcendence that forms the core of Voegelin’s critique of modernity. Likewise, in his discussions of Edmund Burke and the contemporary critic Claes G. Ryn, Federici highlights the almost obsessive preoccupation with transcendence in Voegelin’s work, a preoccupation that may “engender a withdrawal from and cynicism about politics” that is rather troubling. Finally, the chapter clarifies Voegelin’s views on doctrinal Christianity by taking us through the specific charges leveled against him by those who deem the Gospel message to be central to the reinvigoration of Western culture. Such

critics have taken Voegelin to task for his undue emphasis on the derauling tendencies of Christian belief. Voegelin explains in *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* and elsewhere that there is an unsettling anxiety associated with a God who mysteriously hides himself in the Beyond. The result can be a lapse of faith and an escapist craving for permanence among innerworldly phenomena. This craving for certainty manifests itself politically in the degeneration of symbols from well-ordered and balanced forms to disordered and unbalanced forms. Federici’s discussion of Voegelin’s Christian critics adds valuable perspective to the early chapters by pointing out that the reconstitution of culture requires as a *sine qua non* the recovery of experiences of transcendence, and that Voegelin is in the end rather sympathetic to certain forms of dogmatic expression as “a socially and culturally necessary protection of insights experientially gained against false propositions” (179).

The concluding essay (“Voegelin’s Contribution”) neatly summarizes the main components of Voegelin’s political thought as they have been presented in the foregoing chapters. The essay is followed by a glossary of terms that will be highly useful for the beginning student. In the conclusion Federici presents a brief but unique insight into the mind of Eric Voegelin: “what separates [him] from most modern philosophers is not so much a difference of intellect as a difference of imagination” (184). Specifically, it is a “transcendent

imagination" (185) that speaks to the heart of the contemporary reader who longs for a sense of meaning and order in a chaotic world, a sense that is grounded in the bedrock of immediate, experiential reality. It is an imaginative vision that is capable

of producing a profound appreciation for the "truth of the soul" that is given expression in the great literary works and symbols of antiquity. This, Michael Federici demonstrates thoroughly, is the significant achievement of Eric Voegelin.