

The Entanglements of Time and Politics

La Fin du sens de l'histoire. Eric Voegelin, Karl Löwith et la temporalité du politique, by Bruno Godefroy, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2021, 428 pp., €13.14 (paper)

Giuliana Parotto 

Department of Political Science and Sociology, University of Trieste, Piazzale Europa, 1, 34127 Trieste TS, Italy

La Fin du sens de l'histoire deals with the problem of the relationship between temporality and politics, tackled through a critical reading of the works of Eric Voegelin and Karl Löwith, two authors who, from different theoretical premises, have made this relationship the central issue of their respective theoretical reflections. Bruno Godefroy's analysis is developed on two levels: the more strictly interpretative first level, in which he analyses in depth the thought of Voegelin and of Löwith at the various phases of their development; and second, the theoretical level, in which he brings together the new dimensions of temporality like crisis, acceleration, or catastrophe, and investigates, by drawing on Voegelin and Löwith, their political use.

Thus the interest in these two authors is systematic: the categories elaborated in their works are capable of illuminating a current problem: their validity and relevance goes beyond the historical context in which they were born. From the fruitful interaction between these two levels, Godefroy identifies the concepts with which today we can think of the relationship between temporality and politics in a new way.

Before examining Godefroy's interpretation of the works of Voegelin and of Löwith, it is worth illuminating the theoretical premises and the scope of the theme he addresses. Firstly, he considers the political dimension that arises from a reflection on "the political" understood as the generative principle of societies that is capable of shaping human existence. According to Godefroy, talking about "politics" instead of "the political" means interpreting it in a functional way. As a result the being of society is conceived in an absolute way as something independent of time. The problem is precisely this: permanence in time is not a primary given: it stems from the fundamental element that links political order and human existence.

Here we find a second premise: human existence and the chrono-political domain both need to last over time: "Thinking about 'the political' rather than the politics aims to introduce a dynamic, and therefore, temporal dimension into the study of the political order" (29). "Duration"—a concept developed by Henri Bergson—is essential: thus permanence in time is the problem with which the political order has to deal. For Godefroy, this explains why the relationship between politics and time is so persistent. What makes Voegelin's and Löwith's reflections on this relationship significant is precisely their ability

to understand the temporal dimension of the political order and the link that ties it to human existence as a whole.

The ideas of time which Godefroy considers in his interpretation of their works are symbolized by Cronos and Aevum (21). *Cronos* stands for a relativistic and essentially nihilistic conception of history: political orders follow one another without showing any overall sense, like the mythological god Cronos who swallowed each of his children. *Aevum*, on the other hand, is a metaphor for eternal permanence. Behind the image of Aevum we find the extreme politicization of political temporality: eternity is imported into the political order. Thus eternity means the realization of aims projected into the future. The temporalisation of politics and the politicisation of time are therefore two related dimensions that describe the relationship between time and politics; they are also the theoretical challenge that Godefroy takes up, seeking to establish a new balance between them that is capable of dissolving the link between these two dimensions and arriving at an original solution.

Within this theoretical framework, Godefroy develops his analysis of Voegelin's and Löwith's thoughts: both have directly examined the nexus between time and politics by thematizing the function of history as a legitimate principle of political order. The experience from which their reflections starts is the same: the advent of National Socialism and the specific politicisation of time it brought with it. The National Socialist concept of time is centred on the idea of Aevum: a fulfilment in history and salvation embodied in the image of the Third Reich, which stems from the Christian notion of the Trinity. It is thus the link between theology and politics that unites Voegelin's and Löwith's analyses of history.

The idea of salvation at the end of history is traced back by both of them to the Christian (linear) conception of time, reconstructed from its origins to the "turning point" represented by Joachim of Flora. He projected the idea of the Trinity by distinguishing three historical periods: the period of the Father, that of the Son, and finally the period of the Holy Spirit. Both Voegelin and Löwith think that the idea of salvation brought to the plan of immanence, or in other words, "secularized," substantiates the temporalization of politics. Moreover, Godefroy points out that common to both thinkers is also the close comparison with the nihilistic approach to which historicist conceptions lead, yet with different outcomes. Löwith takes nihilism as his starting point: historicism leads to a relativism that denies eternity, thus preparing the ground for substitute forms of salvation. Voegelin's analysis is similar: historicism and its relativistic outcomes are opposed to interpretations that politicise history by transporting the Christian eschaton to the political level.

Godefroy's analysis highlights the different solutions Voegelin and Löwith give to the temporalisation of politics and the politicisation of time, which are illuminated by their divergent interpretations of Max Weber and Friedrich Nietzsche, up to the theoretical core identified in the relationship between Christianity and temporalisation. For Löwith, Nietzsche is not only the thinker who prepares the Third Reich but also the one who announces a new, positive form of natural temporality capable of reconciling mankind and the world beyond the Christian perspective. The "eternal return" becomes the formula for a new Categorical Imperative capable of replacing Christian morality and its derivatives. As stated by Godefroy, Löwith finds a solution to the politicisation of politics under the banner of Nietzsche. Voegelin's solution, in contrast, is under the banner of Schelling: Voegelin finds the way to avoid, on the one hand, the relativism to which historicism leads and, on the other, the interpretations that transpose the Christian

eschaton into history in consciousness. Eternity emerges in the personal experience of transcendence, where God and the human being meet.

In his very accurate analysis, Godefroy highlights the philosophical debts Voegelin's conception of experience owes to Karl Jaspers and to Schelling, but also to Bergson and negative theology. However, the stronger influence of Schelling leads Voegelin to the theoretical positions of *The New Science of Politics* and to seeing history as a process through which consciousness of the experience of transcendence develops and becomes "differentiated." He identifies that process in historical stages of growing consciousness from primitive cosmological societies to the form of consciousness developed by Plato and, ultimately, by Christianity. Yet this Voegelinian solution, for Godefroy, does not solve the problem of the politics of time by freeing itself from the historical dimension, but on the contrary, adopts a rigorously historicist position. Voegelin, he argues, thus develops a "dogmatic historicism," falling back into an essentially teleological conception that renders him incapable of interpreting both classical philosophy, improperly Christianized, and Christianity, improperly made philosophical.

Despite these limitations, Voegelin's and Löwith's analyses remain relevant even in relation to the most recent articulations of time. Godefroy examines current declinations of the relationship between temporality and politics, focusing on three concepts: "crisis" and "catastrophe," which he analyses from Reinhart Kosellek's standpoint; "acceleration," which he analyses in the light of Hartmut Rosa's theory; and "responsibility," which Hans Jonas elaborated. Godefroy carefully examines the underlying idea of time and of history in these three lines of thinking and shows it to be the Christian idea of time. Consequently, these three authors reformulate, albeit in different ways, the temporalisation of politics and the politicisation of time criticized by Voegelin and Löwith, whose categories are still valid today.

Nevertheless, according to Godefroy, even if Voegelin's and Löwith's categories are useful for understanding the current relationship between politics and time, the solutions they put forward have varying effectiveness. Basically, he argues, Voegelin fails to sever the link between politics and temporality, whereas Löwith points the way to a possible solution. Godefroy reaches these conclusions after examining the "new strategy" Voegelin implements to ensure the coincidence of the order of consciousness with the order of history in the formulations that follow the "crisis" of the idea of differentiation. This occurred in the long pause that separated Voegelin's *The New Science of Politics* and the third volume of *Order and History* from the fourth volume, the *Ecumenic Age*. For Godefroy there is no real turning point in Voegelin's theoretical development: the eschatological structure he theorises remains inscribed in the process tending towards fulfilment, a process that happens in history. In other words, the fulfilment of universal humanity is the eschatological horizon of the historical process, with Voegelin thus reproducing the same "dogmatic historicism"; consequently, for Godefroy, the eschatological *telos* (the concept of an end state) would be necessary for the historical *telos* (307). Attributing an eschatological structure to history therefore makes Voegelin fall back into the normative scheme, the staging of the politics of the time.

However, if we take the Voegelinian turn between the third and fourth volumes of *Order and History* seriously, we can see how he focuses on the material, the psychological, and the spiritual conditions that allow historical thought to form. Thus Voegelin distances himself from the idea of a single historical course, including the one marked by the process of differentiation. He interprets Christian eschatology with the category of *exodus*, understood

as the exclusive belonging to a spiritual reality and a spiritual community. Here, again, it is Augustine's thought that comes to the fore, albeit not in Löwithian terms, which attribute to Augustine the invention of the "procursus"—progress—but as a normative model of the relationship between spiritual reality and political reality as also expressed in the relationship between a spiritual community and a political community.

Godefroy, though, takes another line of interpretation. He finds Voegelin's answer to the issue of the politicisation of time in the idea of the fluent presence, which reformulated the experience of transcendence not embedded in the process of differentiation but as an experience of the presence of God, which occurs in history without shaping it. As explained by Godefroy, it is a philosophical anthropology anchored in the common world and common sense that would come to light, albeit in a fragmentary way. The "presence" of the divine, interpreted through Jacques Rancière's categories of synchronicity, would allow us to grasp the nature of political power as linked to mankind's natural being in the common world, thus overcoming both the temporalisation of politics and the politicisation of time.

However, Godefroy's solution seems slightly optimistic: common sense without a spiritual community or the individual experience of God cannot represent the normative reference that governs the relationship of time with politics. Voegelin points out how socially dominant opinions can also be marked by various forms of spiritual illness. It is the choice between *amor sui* and *amor Dei* that is always possible (and necessary) in a politics that is not governed by a process, but is understood as an open field in which the *Civitas Dei* (the City of God) and *Civitas terrena* (the Earthly City) fight each other: only in a spiritual sense is it possible to speak of a *telos*.

Löwith's thought has a different scope and, for Godefroy, more effectively than Voegelin succeeds in overcoming the deadly link between time and politics. The investigation focuses on Löwith's overcoming of existentialist anthropology. Revealing its nihilistic and individualist implications, Löwith contrasts it with the idea of the common world. It is from his analysis of the common world that the Löwithian rehabilitation of the cosmos emerges not in the sense of a metaphysical order but as an encompassing but unspecified totality. As the common world, the cosmos is something independent of humans who are corporeally immersed in it. In conclusion, it is this radically immanent totality and the ethical foundation of human relations that make it possible to eliminate the politicisation of time by placing a limit on the end-term goal of the political, orienting it towards the present as a horizon of possibility.

In sum: the wealth of references and the breadth of his theoretical perspective make Godefroy's *La Fin du sens de l'histoire* an important step in understanding the works of Eric Voegelin and of Karl Löwith from a contemporary perspective.