



Voegelinview.com October 3, 2012

A Wise French Accommodation

a book review by

Martin Palouš

Tilo Schabert. [How World Politics is Made: France and the Reunification of Germany.](#) Edited by Barry Cooper, Trans. John Tyler Tuttle. Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press (2009). 400 pp. Hardcover. \$54.95.

Let me state right away: this is an extraordinary book and I highly recommend it to anyone interested in contemporary European history or international relations. Its subject-matter—the role played by the French president Mitterrand in the process of German reunification—is important. The analytical skills of its author, who managed to get access to memos, transcripts of meetings and other materials from both French and German governmental archives, are brilliant. However, the most valuable contribution of this book to the current political debate is his attempt to use this story for the renewal of communication broken a long time ago: to resume the dialogue between politics and classical political philosophy. No surprise, though.

Tilo Schabert, an outstanding figure among the members of a generation of students of Eric Voegelin, is not just a skillful political commentator and an informed analyst in the area of current French or German politics and Franco-German bilateral relations, but also a philosopher *par excellence* and an erudite scholar in the field of political theory and the history of philosophical ideas.

Schabert's unusual approach to current political problems manifests itself right away on the first pages. In explaining the course of events that resulted in the reunification of Germany in 1990, we are not rushed to the facts and events to be commented on and analyzed. The reader

is supposed to ruminate over the relationships between political action and thought and focus on *dramatis personae*: Who actually was François Mitterrand? Was he just a shrewd and savvy pragmatic politician or also a thinker *par excellence*? What about major German counterparts or other participants at “strategic conversations,” taking place, if I may use the Schabert’s terminology, “in the workshop of world politics?” What kept returning to my mind when I started to read his book, and found myself trapped by a number of unexpected questions, was the work of his teacher, Eric Voegelin, especially his critique of modern philosophies of history which dominate not only the historical sciences of today, but also our current public discourse.

A Pause to Consider the Nature of Reason

Schabert even provoked me to interrupt reading his text and look once again at the Voegelin’s essay “Reason: The Classic Experience.” Having stated in the first sentence that “reason is the constituent of humanity in all times,”¹ Voegelin immediately turns the reader’s attention to an historical event that decisively contributed to “its differentiation and articulation.”² It was the discovery of reason as “the source of order in the psyche of man,”³ its rise to articulate self-consciousness for which we are obliged to the philosophers, the “lovers of wisdom,” who appeared in the Greek city states in the 6th century B.C. and became the spiritual founding fathers of Europe and its civilization. However, as Voegelin reminds us emphatically, they experienced reason very differently from us, the heirs of European modernity and enlightenment. For the classical Greek philosophers, reason didn’t have the form which has asserted itself nowadays as a kind of dogma and which ties its “idea” or “definition” to the concept of science and scientific explanation. Reason was perceived and analyzed by ancient Greeks as *nous*, “the force and the criterion of order;”⁴ the capacity to think possessed by all men without distinction; the capacity manifested in their desire to know, to escape the state of ignorance into which they keep falling thanks to finite (‘slavish’, as Aristotle once put it) human nature;⁵ the power to renew the always deteriorating noetic bond between men and the ordering divine *aition* of their existence; the power to be re-attuned to the order of being; the power of spirit that can set whole societies on a new, essentially open and thus unpredictable, unknown path of human history.

In other words: long before reason was monopolized by modern science and linked to its never-ending discoveries in various sectors of “objective reality,” it constituted the essential bond between philosophy and politics, between our capacity to think and reflect on our past experiences made in our life-world, and our capacity to act and to start something new. It had belonged—in Voegelin’s succinct classical formula—to “a process in reality in which concrete

human beings . . . were engaged in an act of resistance against the personal and social disorder of their age.”⁶

Mitterand: Both Philosopher and Realist

In what sense, however, is Voegelin’s rediscovery of the classical experience of reason, relevant for Schabert’s study of the role of France in German reunification and for the general question raised in his book *How World Politics is Made?* Did François Mitterand, who, as Schabert informs us, occasionally read Plato,⁷ indeed, attempt to approach the problems on his plate more philosophically? Has the busy “workshop” he took part in together with other world politicians anything in common at all with the quiet and meditative spirit of Plato’s Academy? Schabert argues that from the moment he took office as President of France in 1981, two competing attitudes could be discerned in his political thought and action. On the one hand, we are told Mitterand was a staunch political realist. For him, “the Yalta Order” was the main source of peace and stability in Europe and he believed this fact needed to be respected whether we liked it or not. With all its problems and imperfections, the bipolar political architecture based on the balance of power that emerged as the result of World War II “was still preferable to disorder.”⁸ The priority of France under his leadership was its maintenance: no one had “the right to try to abolish Yalta and run the risk of a world war.”⁹ At the same time Mitterand’s respect for the existing power constellation on the European continent was complemented by his Europeanism, by his unwavering allegiance to fundamental European values that always inspired and oriented all his policies.

When he took office in 1981, he was evidently well aware that the *status quo* in Europe created under the conditions of the Cold War was in the long term untenable; that the movement of history could not be blocked for ever; that the power of spirit is mightier than the powers-that-be; that sooner or later the European nations would overcome their East-West division, open a new chapter of history and find the way out from the current realities. In short: the principle of balance of power in relations between states was always accompanied in the Mitterand’s thoughts and actions by “the principle of freedom that had to be placed above all else, but to which ‘order’ had to be brought.”¹⁰

The Importance of Franco-German Reconciliation

“Nothing would be worse than the words that . . . could not be followed by acts.”¹¹ This is what Mitterand the realist had to say in December 1981 during his Cabinet meeting, commenting on the proclamation of the state of emergency in Poland and indicating that there was hardly anything France could do for the Polish rebels under current circumstances. But within a few days he added another statement proving his European way of thinking and thus rebellious nature: “The Polish affair now signifies that people need liberty, and that someday this liberty will come.”¹² But if he didn’t see a way he could directly help the Poles in 1981 in their current liberation struggle, what were the potential “acts” Mitterand and the other Western participants in the “workshop of world politics” could discuss in their “strategic conversations,” the acts capable of making real difference and helping desirable change to come? Mitterand believed he had the answer. Had he? The way forward from the existing European historical impasse didn’t lead through the frontal challenge of Soviet domination of Eastern Europe—the strategy of his American counterpart Ronald Reagan. Right after he took office in 1981, Mitterand prophetically said to his chief of staff, Pierre Bérégovoy: “start with the idea that the Soviet Union will explode by the end of this century!”¹³ Thus he already seemed to apprehend that the key element on the path to a new political order in Europe would be connected primarily with the on-going Franco-German political dialogue at the highest level which had started immediately after World War II. The dialogue was loaded with the touchy themes from the past, dealing with both economic and security issues currently emerging in the existing “Yalta Order,” and obliged also to open the most difficult questions concerning Germany’s future. The evolving relations between France and Germany when François Mitterand was the French president and Helmut Kohl was the German Chancellor, are, as I have already said, described in Schabert’s book in a clear and distinct manner. His knowledge of historical relationships and cultural contexts, his philosophical depth and sublime sensitivity for the history of political ideas helped him to turn the historical facts and dates assembled in his book into a real story, exciting reading for any reader.

Politics as *Nous* Struggling with Disorder

Instead of my reproducing Schabert's insightful observations and commenting on his apt commentaries on the milestones of the path that ended in the act of German reunification on October, 3, 1990, I will close by touching briefly upon his concept of power and politics and the underlying philosophical anthropology. What is the basic level of description in

Schabert's approach to contemporary history? What is the elementary point of departure of his historical analysis? It is his Voegelinian observation that what we are dealing with is primordially a "process in reality," in which, "concrete human beings" had to rely on their *nous* in struggling with the "disorder of their age." This time, however, these "concrete human beings" were not classical philosophers, but were contemporary world politicians, compelled by the very nature of their vocation not only to think and gain insights in their 'workshops', but also to act in the real world, to assume responsibility for its state, and to change it by their deeds. Current world politicians seem to have much more in common with the Voegelin's 'lovers of wisdom', according to Schabert, than we might be inclined to believe at first sight. The reason is fundamental and points to the very core of our European identity: politics is never a Machiavelian power game only, but it is always vitally dependent on its noetic point of departure. Hard power certainly is what is at stake in politics and what decides the outcomes of political clashes or conflagrations. What should never be forgotten, however, is where it is coming from, its 'soft' source or beginning. "If one wishes to exercise political power, above all, one must think."¹⁴

Politicians—at least in the context of current European civilization which is finding itself in deep crisis on the current historical crossroads—cannot successfully perform their duties unless they are thinkers! They certainly must take all geopolitical realities into consideration and respect the existing power constellations in discharging their state functions.

Socrates Addresses the Politician

Nonetheless, whatever decisions they take in their official capacity—when they are temporarily empowered to act on behalf of others whom they represent and to participate at the "workshop of world politics"—it is primarily their individual, and thus necessarily thoughtful and responsible action! This seems to be the main reason why the Socratic appeal of 'care for the soul' addressed to all men—the search for the unity with oneself in the dialogue of the human psyche, the *pros hauten dialogos aneu phones*¹⁵ —always zeroes in primarily on politicians. Politicians are endowed with the responsibilities as main guarantors and principal guardians of the well-being¹⁶ of their fellow-citizens in the ever changing circumstances of human history. Politicians must enable their *poleis* to overcome the historical dead ends—the static constellations whose rigidity could only lead to new forms of 'barbarous slavery.' By their actions, politicians ought to enable their fellow-citizens to keep freedom, justice, peace and order.

Martin Palouš, PhD, is Director of *Vaclav Havel Library* in Prague and Senior Fellow at the School of International and Public Affairs at Florida International University in Miami. Between 2001 and 2011 he served as Ambassador of the Czech Republic to the United States and the United Nations.

NOTES

1. *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Volume 12. Edited With an Introduction by Ellis Sandoz, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge and London, 1990, p. 265
2. *ibid.*
3. *ibid.*
4. *ibid.*
5. "γὰρ ἡ φύσις δούλη τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐστίν," Aristotle, *Metaphysics*. 982b29-30.
6. Voegelin, *op.cit.* p. 265.
7. Schabert, p 4.
8. Schabert, p. 9.
9. Schabert, p. 8.
10. Schabert, p. 34-35.
11. Schabert, p. 54.
12. Schabert, p. 55.
13. Schabert, p. 6.
14. Schabert, p. 4.
15. Plato, *Sophist*, 263e 4-5.[πρὸς αὐτὴν διάλογος ἄνευ φωνῆς –trans. "the unuttered conversation of the soul with itself"]
16. Aristotelian *eubios*, the good life.