

Tilo Schabert and the Primacy of Persons in Politics (Review)



By [Thierry Gontier](#)

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John von Heyking & Thomas Heilke (eds.), *The Primacy of Persons in Politics: Empiricism & Political Philosophy*, Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013, vii, 292 pp. Hardcover, \$69.95. With a bibliography of the major works of Tilo Schabert on the subject and an index.

Translated by Johanna Louw

This work is presented as a tribute to Tilo Schabert, Emeritus Professor of Political Sciences at the University of Erlangen, well known for his work on François Mitterrand and the Mayor of Boston, Kevin White^[1]. It consists of eight studies written by different authors (David Tabachnik, Toivo Koivukoski, John von Heyking, Thomas Heilke, Dan Avnon, Alexander Thumfart, András Lánçzi and Erik Neveu), preceded by an introduction written by the two editors and an essay by Tilo Schabert himself, which offers a synthesis of the central themes within his thought.

Although it is a dedicatory volume, the work addresses a particular question, that of the value of persons within the contemporary political world, that is to say, the political world born out of the proclamation of the “rule of law” and the primacy of legal institutions over the arbitrary power of individuals. In this context, the title of the work is in itself a statement. By affirming the primacy of persons within politics, the work questions the prejudice of liberal democracy – and of modern political science – against the “human factor” (Avnon, 159), and highlights the fact that politics in the contemporary world is not merely a matter of institutions, but remains as it did in the past – albeit in a different form – dominated by men.

The intellectual project undertaken by Tilo Schabert can only be understood in relation to his method, the originality of which is emphasized in the study by the French sociologist Erik Neveu. It is situated at the intersection between philosophy and empirical sociology. Schabert uses data from observations (followed, through interviews and archival research, by the daily practice of power) in order to relate them to the questions inherited from the most classic tradition of political theory. The volume accedes to this approach, combining highly theoretical studies, often informed by classic references (Tabachnik, Koivukoski, Heyking, etc.) with case studies, such as that produced by Alexander Thumfart, which deal with changes in modes of governance in a city hall in the eastern part of Germany after the fall of the wall. Eric Neveu brings this approach, far removed from any kind of dogmatism or ideology (245), attentive to detail, engaged in a dialogue with the social sciences, together

with that of Norbert Elias (250, 258) or Pierre Bourdieu (251). Like the latter, Tilo Schabert refuses to essentialize the group and its structures (246), and favors the hard reality of individuals, their feelings and affects, their actions, their “style”, their methods of communication and interpersonal relations (257). The attention devoted to observable data nevertheless allows Schabert to offer a theoretical analysis of the nature of *the* political and to distinguish it from other spheres of human activity, be they economic, social or moral. In this respect, Schabert presents himself as the heir to Carl Schmitt and Eric Voegelin (whose student he was at Munich during the 1960s) and even more so, perhaps, that of Hannah Arendt (Koivukoski, 57).

Schabert locates this specific aspect of the political in the notion of creativity (Schabert, 7-8). It is significant that his work on Boston politics (the most frequently cited in this volume) bears the sub-title *The Creativity of Power*. While referring to the classic figure of the legislator as a paradigmatic figure of political creation, Schabert extends this notion of creativity to everyday political practice, which requires “constant reworking” (Heilke, 124; Avnon, 141) in a perpetually shifting world (Schabert, 3-6), and which is compared to a *creatio continua* (Lánczi, 228). This creative aspect, inherent in all politics, is driven by persons, and not by institutional systems, which, by contrast, seek stability and the perpetuation of an already established order. This is the meaning of the study by Thomas Heilke, which demonstrates how this creative dimension, led by the executive, makes it possible to escape the reduction, criticized by Arendt, of politics to a rule. The difference (Heilke, 124, 138) is that Arendt tends to view the political as the exercising of pure creativity, whereas Schabert is sensitive to the constraints created by context: the political world is not pure chaos, but rather a mixture of order and disorder (p. 91), of stability and fluidity (p. 130), which Schabert describes, borrowing the neologism of James Joyce, as a *chaosmos* (Intro., xiv; Tabachnik, 47; Lánczi, 224-225).

By thus extolling the “primacy of persons in politics”, Schabert offers an answer to the question of modernity^[2], which is frequently characterized as the empire of an autotelic bureaucratic rationality, anonymous and indifferent to humans. This modernity is not, in a sense, to be exceeded: it is in reality no more than a facade obscuring the perennity of the political in its classic signification, that is to say, the activity of actual persons. This is the meaning of the study by David Tabachnik, which, by means of a genealogy of anti-modernism in the twentieth century, contrasts Schabertian optimism with the pessimism of the anti-modern tradition stretching from Heidegger to Adorno and Horkheimer and to Fukuyama: “For Schabert ‘executive politics’ or the practice of executive political leadership is the vestige of political creativity, where politics remains fluid and powerful – less encumbered by the pressures of the modern state” (44). “The secret of modern politics is how to hide the real conditions of power” (Lánczi, 227-28). Modern politics is able to conceal them without, however, making them disappear entirely. Behind the institutional facade there is always human activity. At this point, Schabert appears (even though the comparison is not drawn in the work) to be an optimistic heir to Carl Schmitt, less concerned than the latter with condemning the mystifications of the rule of law than with revealing how the politics of the present era, and in particular (Lánczi, 209, 212, 230, 232) that of the post-communist age, involves a dialectic interplay between institutions and the creative.

In this context, the executive is no longer viewed as the ancillary figure of legislative sovereignty which, it is claimed, constitutes the true heart of the political, but rather as a parallel structure constituting the real engine of political life in the manner of a second, invisible government. Dan Avnon demonstrates the extent to which the thought of Tilo Schabert leads to a re-evaluation of the status of autocracy (142, 149, 153, 157). Here,

autocracy (or monocracy) is no longer presented as a political regime opposed to democracy, as is the case in Hans Kelsen, for example. It is located within the system of constitutional government itself (Schabert, 22), of which it is the dynamic and creative core. The work also refers to the different figures associated with the presidentialization (or hyper-presidentialization) of power, in France (De Gaulle, Mitterrand, Sarkozy) and Germany (Kohl, Merkel), in England (Blair), Italy (Berlusconi) and the United States (Wilson, Obama) (Schabert, 16-20; Lánzi, 235). As Avnon (144) writes regarding our societies, “although democratic in form, they are autocratic in practice”, autocracy constituting “the prime mover behind the institutional façade of democratic politics” (145). From which there emerges a series of paradoxes bringing into play the conflict between appearance (democratic, rational, stable, routine and predictable) and actual functioning (monocratic, arbitrary, fluid, open to novelty) in our modern societies. It is not in the least surprising to find the different authors referring constantly to Machiavelli (e.g. Heilke, 118 ff.) and his figure of the prince (Lánzi, 217 ff.) – the difference being that where Machiavelli emphasizes efficiency and outcome, Schabert ascribes greater importance to creativity (Avnon, 164).

The ruler does not act alone. His success is highly dependent on the implementation of a network of supporters, often comprised of old friends (Schabert, 16). If classic political theory placed friendship at the heart of political life, the moderns, from Hobbes and Kant (von Heyking, 80-82) onward, have continued to see in the creation of what could be considered as “factions” a residuum of personal arbitrary power, a source of civil conflict and an obstacle to the inauguration of a rational state based on law. In fact, the formation of a “party of friends”, whose function is to help the individual into power and enable him to maintain it, constitutes “the essential art of politics” (von Heyking, 87) and the necessary condition of political success (Intro, xxxiv).

Is it possible to see, inquires John von Heyking, in the formation of a personal party at the very heart of the state, comparable with the Roman system of patrician clientelism (Avnon, 158; Thumfart, 195) and the “court society” analyzed by Norbert Elias (Thumfart 188; Neveu, 263), a resurgence of the *philia politike* of the ancients? The party is an association of friends whose goal is not friendship itself. However, the idea that there cannot be friendship without intimacy, and the resultant rejection of the idea of a *politike philia*, is a modern, and in particular romantic, notion^[3]. Instead, political friendship entails a form of distant intimacy (von Heyking, 97), similar to that which Mitterrand was able to maintain with his closest associates. Without therefore being the *teleia philia*, friendship founded upon pleasure or usefulness nevertheless remains, for Aristotle, an authentic friendship. As for *synaesthetic* friendship, which brings intellectual goals into play, it represents an essential part of politics (von Heyking, 82), in the form of friendship between statesmen – between Mitterrand and Kohl, for example.

We might ask ourselves whether this collection of studies, which are all highly stimulating (and we must be aware that there are indeed some distinctions to be drawn between Schabert’s own thought and the commentaries which furnish the studies in this collection), do not tend to restrict the person, whose “primacy in politics” is being affirmed, to the single ruler, and *philia politike* to the relations he maintains with an elite of supporters and counselors^[4] – personal relationships which may themselves be extended to a greater number of militants or sympathizers. The very notion of “person” refers implicitly to “personalism”, and especially the Christian personalism of the 1930s (Intro, xi, xvi, xxvi). In this case, it seems important to me to pursue the question, asked by Toivo Koivukoski (especially pp. 63-64), concerning an extension to all citizens, avoiding the danger of viewing them as a “mass” of subject-consumers, reduced to a simple interplay of passions and interests and capable of

being manipulated by autocrats, who are not in the least able to rely on the legitimacy of the philosopher-monarchs of Plato. This extension is undoubtedly the *sine qua non* condition of *philia politike* understood as the foundation of the political bond. Thomas Heilke (111) reminds us precisely, after Voegelin, that political institutions do not rely solely on rational, procedural systems, but on the sharing of common symbols. The institution thus understood (in a specifically “institutionalist” manner) is a shared symbol, based on a community of beliefs between persons. Democracy is not simply a rational and efficient system of government. Insofar as it grants the equality of persons bound together in community, it comes within the remit of these symbols and in this regard forms an essential condition for the “transformation of friendship into a political bond” (Avnon, 157). Plato, who is less “autocratic” than might appear at first sight, saw this clearly in the *Laws* (Von Heiking, 91), by demonstrating the importance of the festivals through which everyone is invited to participate in the great dance of the city. Aristotle also saw this, by reserving decision-making (and thereby also creative) power for the ordinary citizen in the judicial domain. And, for Thomas Aquinas, “the best form of government is in a state or kingdom”, wherein the government “is shared by all, both because all are eligible to govern, and because the rules are chosen by all” (*Summa theologiæ*, IaIIae, q. 105, a.1, resp.). In the contemporary context, democracy is not simply a routine or a facade. In its symbolic sense, it accords a role to the creativity of the ordinary citizen, and makes it possible, as requested by Hannah Arendt (Heilke, 129), to conceive of political creativity not merely within the framework of government *over* others, but also government with others.

However, this book, through the cohesion of the studies collected here, succeeds in attaining its goal: showing, in line with Weber’s study of charismatic authority, that the relationships which create political power are not exclusively institutional in nature, and that there can be no creativity in politics without the personal relationship that the ruler maintains with his entourage, whether confined to an elite or extended to the many.

[1] Tilo Schabert, *Boston Politics: The Creativity of Power*, Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1989; *Wie Weltgeschichte gemacht wird: Frankreich und die deutsche Einheit*, Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 2002, eFrench transl. O. Mannoni, *Mitterrand et la réunification allemande: une histoire secrète (1981-1995)*, Paris, Grasset, 2005, English transl. J.R. Tuttle, *How World Politics is made: France and the Reunification of Germany*, Columbia (Mo) and London: University of Missouri Press, 2009.

[2] Tilo Schabert has addressed this issue on more than one occasion. See especially “A Note on Modernity”, *Political Theory*, 7/1 (1979), pp. 123-37; “Modernity and History I: What is Modernity?”, *The Promise of History, Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. A. Moulakis, Berlin, De Gruyter, 1985, pp. 9-21.

[3] In reality, it is in large part possible to trace this idea back to chapter I, 28 of the *Essays* of Montaigne, who rejects the idea of political friendship (and, along with it, any other form of imperfect friendship) in the name of the authenticity and exclusivity of the personal friendship, which related him to Étienne de la Boétie.

[4] The various authors refer frequently to Plato, in particular in order to comment upon the personal nature of his model of government or his rejection of creativity in politics (Heilke, 114; Avnon, 139-41). To their references, I will add some others on the essential role played by friendship in the formation and preservation of government. In an autobiographical passage in the Seventh Letter (325d), Plato attributes the difficulty that he has experienced in participating in the political life of Athens to the difficulty, in a corrupt society, of having a

group of “friends and trusty companions”. Thus he advises Dionysius to create in himself a personality capable of attracting “loyal friends and companions” (331d-e). The safeguard of friendship between the rulers is, in the *Republic*, what justifies the communism of property and family (VIII, 543a-c), and the primary cause of the decline of the original *politeia* is the unloosening of that friendship within the governing class (VIII, 545d).



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