



# Political aspects in Hans Blumenberg's philosophy<sup>1</sup>

## *Aspectos políticos na filosofia de Hans Blumenberg*

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### **Abstract**

The scientific community in the humanities agrees that the work of the German post-war philosopher Hans Blumenberg is fascinating, compelling and inspiring, although the texts remain to some extent hard to understand. His extensive exchange with authors like Carl Schmitt, Jacob Taubes or Hannah Arendt show the often forgotten and sometimes systematically hidden political aspects of his philosophy. The theory of modernity, the theory of myth and of course his metaphorology are the main areas of debate

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is meant to be a first presentation of the political implications of Blumenberg's writings and has been formulated for the general academic reader who is not necessarily a specialist on Blumenberg. It is based on publications in German which tackled the question of Blumenberg's political thought in different contexts. The constant dialogue with Angus Nicholls has played a very important role concerning my views; our common interpretations are explored in more detail in the "Nachwort" of our common edition of "Präfiguration".

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which can be checked for their political implications and ramifications. However, the *a priori* exclusion of republican arguments and ideas points to a systematic problem in Blumenberg's thought. All his thinking remains in the framework of what has been called "subject-philosophy"; it seems. While his early publications allowed a certain critique of ideology (from the perspective of metaphorology), this gesture almost disappears in his later writings. It is basically the single subject which works on myth, which seems to project "significance" (*Bedeutsamkeit*) into the world, which makes sense of his life in anecdotes. However, human self-assertion is always a *common* project, an inherited technique which creates not only myths but also institutions and law. The political aspects in Blumenberg's work therefore also make transparent the limitations of his thought.

**Keywords:** Modernity. Self-assertion. Legitimacy. Metaphors. Political myth.

### **Resumo**

*A comunidade científica no contexto das humanidades concorda que o trabalho do filósofo do pós-guerra Hans Blumenberg é fascinante, convincente e inspirador, mesmo seus textos sendo, de certa forma, difíceis de compreender. Seu extenso diálogo com autores como Carl Schmitt, Jacob Taubes ou Hannah Arendt mostra o quão frequentemente os aspectos políticos de sua filosofia são esquecidos, ou mesmo sistematicamente ocultados. A teoria da modernidade, a teoria do mito e, claro, sua metaforologia são as principais áreas de debate que podem ser avaliadas por suas implicações e ramificações políticas. No entanto, a exclusão a priori dos argumentos e das ideias republicanas aponta para um problema sistemático no pensamento de Blumenberg. Parece que todo o seu pensamento permanece no quadro daquela que foi apelidada de "filosofia do sujeito". Embora suas primeiras publicações permitam uma certa crítica da ideologia (na perspectiva da metaforologia), esse gesto quase desaparece das obras mais tardias. É essencialmente apenas o sujeito singular que trabalha no mito, que parece projetar "significância" (*Bedeutsamkeit*) no mundo, que dá sentido a sua vida em anedotas. No entanto, a autoafirmação humana é sempre um projeto comum, uma técnica herdada que cria não apenas mitos, mas também instituições e leis. Por conseguinte, os aspectos políticos no trabalho de Blumenberg também tornam transparentes as limitações de seu pensamento.*

**Palavras-chave:** Modernidade. Autoafirmação. Legitimidade. Metáfora. Mito político.

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## Introduction: Blumenberg and Politics?

The work of the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg is today intensely read in German academia, translated into English, French and Spanish, discussed in books, articles and in conferences from Berlin, Heidelberg and Paris to Jerusalem. The scientific community in the humanities seems to agree that his thought is fascinating, compelling and inspiring, although the texts remain to some extent hard to understand. The theory of modernity, the theory of myth and of course his metaphorology are the main areas of debate which his books continue to influence. Many scholars from all over the world seek to put his arguments in dialogue with these contemporary discussions concerning the self-understanding of philosophy in the age of technology. As the publications from his archives are expected to continue for years, the research illuminating his controversies with extraordinary figures such as Carl Schmitt, Hans Jonas, Jacob Taubes or Hannah Arendt will be fed continuously. This philological work is sometimes wrongfully accused of being mere "Blumenbergology"; however it produces important insights of philosophical relevance.

It is however often forgotten that Blumenberg's work has been considered, in the late 1960s, to be of highly political ambition. As Anselm Haverkamp outlined in a debate in Heidelberg in September 2013, Blumenberg's defense of Modernity — a direct attack on catholic anti-modern mainstream in Adenauer's Germany — was seen as a left-wing project fitting perfectly well with the ideas of the other heroes of the early "Suhrkamp-culture" such as Jürgen Habermas. However, Blumenberg's following books made clear that his work did not at all address contemporary political issues. While Habermas was discussing the reform of the German university system, the possible collapse of capitalism, the ramifications of technological progress, Blumenberg seemed to focus on the history of Modernity in general (with a special interest in William of Ockham). His enormous work includes only one article which directly treats a political topic, a brief text on the concept of state (cf. BLUMENBERG, 1968). While Habermas constantly put into dialogue Political Theory and politics and gained a role as a leading

political intellectual, Blumenberg seemed to retreat into the almost private life of theological erudition, strict phenomenological research and philosophical interpretation of literature and anecdotes. Although he held a chair denominated for “Practical Philosophy”, he was, as Barbara Recki recently pointed out, known for claiming that “morality is what does not need to be discussed” (RECKI, 2015). In the German context in particular, this thought seems to express a hope, not to state a fact. Nowhere had it become more evident that morality cannot be simply taken for granted, as Blumenberg’s saying suggests. It is not a surprise, therefore, that Blumenberg is often considered to avoid the political dimensions of his topics.

However, as the research on Blumenberg continues and our picture of his thinking is more and more nuanced, it becomes clear, that he approaches political issues in a very indirect, sometimes almost hidden way. In this paper I would like to outline in what way these political aspects of his work can be detected, where they are hidden and whom they contradict implicitly. I shall first of all recall the political dimension of his thinking, beginning with his theory of modernity (2), to his theory of Myth (3), to his conception of rhetorics and anthropology (4). I will then conclude by sketching his thought as a *liberalism of distance* and discuss the questions un-answered in his work (5). The exclusion of the sphere of law in his thought proves to be a decisive indicator for the limitations of his philosophy, I claim.

## **The way modernity produces legitimacy**

The book on the *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* today appears to be fighting a battle which seems to be over. Today, the legitimacy of modernity is rejected only by actors and schools of thought which seem to be beyond the limits of reasonable disagreement: Islamic wahabites and salafists, Russian nationalists, minor catholic groups such as the Brotherhood of Pius continue to fight modernization, but in intellectual discourse they do not appear at all, not even as objects of philosophical scrutiny, thereby forming a kind of “toxic other”. Today, we could

state, anti-modernism is “not even wrong”. Re-reading Blumenberg’s classic of German post-war thought hence quickly makes clear that his first great book is not just a historical theory of the genesis of modernity. All the decisive terms of this book have a political dimension: *legitimacy, secularization, absolutism, self-assertion*. Blumenberg not only reconstructs the way in which modern functionalist rationality arose from a specific development in scholastic philosophy. He also emphasizes the self-foundational character of modern thought, its truly post-gnostic “grammar” (in the sense of Wittgenstein’s later thought).

In the early 1960s Blumenberg’s defense of modernity faced two opposed schools of thought which attacked modernity from two different angles. On the one hand, a whole series of conservative, even reactionary thinkers claimed that modernity should be considered a failure — at least if evaluated in total. Modern individualism, modern moral pluralism, modern science, modern self-referential law: all these core-elements of modernization, from their point of view, had guided mankind into apocalyptic disaster of world-wara, genocide and the narcissism of Western mass-consumption culture. Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt were probably the most evident examples of this line of thought. Whereas in the case of Carl Schmitt the anti-democratic and anti-semitic elements of his world-view were evident from the start, in the case of Martin Heidegger only the recent publication of the “Black Notebooks” made any attempt to defend him vain.

Heidegger had presented himself with elaborated means of self-mystification as a guardian of an ancient, pre-Socratic wisdom. Blumenberg had already in his “Habilitationsschrift” formulated a convincing critique of Heidegger’s “History of Being”<sup>2</sup>. Heidegger had attributed the two main stances a human mind could take in relation to the world to different authors and epochs in the history of Being: a) “Being-in” or “In-ständigkeit”, referring to a self-forgotten involvement into the world experienced for example in concentrated work, on the one hand, and b) “Calculating thought” or “Gegen-ständigkeit” on

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<sup>2</sup> *Die ontologische Distanz*, unpublished manuscript finished in Kiel in 1950, accessible through the system of German university-libraries.

the other hand, naming a objectifying attitude aiming at the world as pure object of manipulation and exploitation. While some pre-Socratic thinkers, the scholastic heretic Master Eckhart and the romantic poet Friedrich Holderlin were qualified as acceptable predecessors of the master-philosopher himself, Plato, Descartes and at a specific moment in his thinking even Husserl were qualified as purely objectifying thinkers who had forgotten about Being and thereby expressed the deeper fate of the European history of power-seeking thought. The anti-Semitic elements of this crude history of European thought have only recently become public by the publication of Heidegger's "black notebooks".

Blumenberg rejected this view and claimed that the two possible stances should be considered as two possible modes that *could* and actually *are* taken by all humans depending on their situation and its constraints. When Blumenberg tried to show that self-assertion is a legitimate reaction of man facing a world of contingency and danger, this argument therefore indirectly addressed Heidegger's romantic celebration of the pre-modern world: Modern technology, we can conclude, is not just a sign of a modern egocentrism but the legitimate answer of a creature forced to defend itself against a merciless Nature. Heidegger's attack on modernity therefore looks like a regression into a gnostic pattern—an interpretation Hans Jonas had developed early on and which Blumenberg, a close friend of Jonas', had outlined in the chapters on Heidegger in his book "Cave Exits" (*Höhlenausgänge*)<sup>3</sup>.

Whereas Heidegger always strengthened the difference between pre-modern and modern thought — in his bizarre view, modernity actually begins with Plato and his re-interpretation of truth (*a-letheia*) as correctness (*orthotês*)<sup>4</sup> — Carl Schmitt criticized modernity for having occupied an illegitimate pre-modern heritage. Modernity can only *pretend* to be modern, he claimed. The term "secularization" is consequently loaded with a very specific meaning: Carl Schmitt considered modern state-law to be the result of a process of transformation (and

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<sup>3</sup> I propose a more detailed interpretation of Blumenberg's view on Gnosis in an article entitled "Unvermittelte Gegensätze: Blumenbergs Analyse des gnostischen Denkens", to be published in a volume edited by Melanie Möller.

<sup>4</sup> See his article on the conception of truth in Plato.

perversion) of catholic theology. Where theology attributed "sovereignty" to the one God capable of a creation *ex nihilo*, modern state-law has to hide by all kinds of strategies the inevitable foundation of its system in the sovereign, voluntaristic act of a person willing to take power. These strategies make modern political thought a kind of a zombie of catholic theology, pretending to be something (self-foundational, democratic, "fair", rational etc.) which it can never really be. The foundation of politics will always be an irrational act, expressing a will to power, Schmitt argued. Authority creates truth and "reason", not the other way around. He consequently openly had declared and explained his hate and disgust towards modern parliamentarianism which he considered to be an attempt to sidestep the necessity of decision. His engagement for National-Socialism was just the logical consequence of his anti-liberalism and anti-modernism.

Blumenberg opposed this view with a theory of concepts which contradicted the essentialist idea of a given meaning (e.g. "sovereignty"). Referring to Cassirer and his idea of "functionalist concepts" (*Funktionsbegriff*), he claims that in the new context of modernity, old terms can take a truly new meaning: modern political thought may *sound* like catholic theology; but all the terms follow a completely new logic, because they now a part of a different language-game. Legitimacy e.g. is attributed by evaluating the results, not by considering the origin (of a person, an institution or an idea): Whereas in pre-modern societies may ask a stranger "Where do you come from?" or "Who *are* you?", in modern societies a typical question would be "What do you do in Life?", thereby addressing a performance. Not where you come from defines your essence, but what you do, what you achieve, how you perform. In that sense, Modernity is not only legitimate, as the title of Blumenberg's book claims, but it also produces a new kind of (functionalist) legitimacy which could be summed up: Whatever works! Pragmatism therefore is genuinely modern and Modernity genuinely an Age of pragmatism.

The letters exchanged between Carl Schmitt and Hans Blumenberg may, on the surface, appear to be a friendly dialogue between two well-educated German professors, full of allusions to their

enormous erudition. A closer look shows, I think, that these letters constitute a calibrated dance of two radical opponents, a dance in which Blumenberg fires strong ammunition against Schmitt while hiding this aggression in a very fine irony which is hard to detect.

Whereas his book on modernity highlights the authentic character of modernity, its autonomy and truly innovative logic, Blumenberg's book *Work on Myth* from 1979 seems to take another perspective. His most important opponent here seems to be a self-interpretation of modernity which claim the overcoming of pre-modern myth in a once-and-for-all-manner. *From Myth to Logos* — a formular used by the famous specialist of Greek thought Wilhelm Nestle — is the scheme which needs to be contradicted, Blumenberg argues. Myth can never be completely overcome, he claims.

## **Myth, Polytheism and Tolerance**

The debates in the group *Poetik und Hermeneutik* had already in the late 1960s focused on myth and terror; ten years before publishing *Work on Myth* Blumenberg had defended myth as a polytheistic and therefore more tolerant version of pre-modern ways of dealing with contingency (BLUMENBERG, 1971). Already back then, Blumenberg's paper had provoked passionate contradiction, which shouldn't surprise us since the mythical character of National-Socialism was far too obvious (cf. NICHOLLS, 2015)<sup>5</sup>. In 1979 Blumenberg makes almost the same claims about the tolerant character of myth, excluding almost completely the intense debates he had with Jacob Taubes concerning the intolerant myth of Gnostic thought and — more importantly maybe, from the point of view of Jacob Taubes, who was also a Rabbi — the tolerant and rational character of monotheism, and Judaism in particular. Praising polytheism for its absence of moral bigotry was a Nietzschean gesture which had to look suspicious.

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<sup>5</sup> Angus Nicholls shows in detail in what way these questions played an outstanding role in Blumenberg's life and intellectual biography.



It is evident that as Blumenberg emphasizes the tolerant character of polytheistic myth, his defense of a “separation of powers” at the same time takes the side of a liberal, power-taming conception of a modern state. This state would have to limit its capacities to rule the citizens, and have all his activities counter-checked in a system of a balance of power. Looking back at this debate, it is however astonishing that Blumenberg never really discusses possible objections to his view, Taubes being the author of the most important ones. In *Work on Myth* Blumenberg claims “Everything the dogma demands, myth will do without”. When taking into account the case of the dogmatic myth as it can be observed in the Gnostic texts, one could wonder if Blumenberg's statement can be defended. If we re-interpret the term of myth as a kind of collective imaginary, the binding power of the imaginary — as Castoriadis had shown at great length — cannot be denied.

The discussion on the excluded dimension of political myth — a subject almost absent in the published version of *Work on Myth* — has been boosted by the publication of a chapter entitled “Prefiguration” which Blumenberg apparently had written for the book and then excluded (BLUMENBERG, 2014). As the chapter discusses mainly Hitler's mythical thinking, it can be suggested that Blumenberg finally decided that he did not want to give room to Hitler in a book mainly talking about Goethe, the deeply adored hero of the German intellectual class in general and Blumenberg in particular. In this chapter, Blumenberg describes Goebbels' and Hitler's thinking as deeply rooted in mythical, almost magical ideas of providence and fulfillment: Hitler thought of himself as the promised savior of the German people who came to fulfill what has been announced in the deeds of Alexander the Great, Napoleon or Frederick II of Prussia. The case of this excluded chapter, destined to be part of *Work on Myth*, then hidden in the archives for reasons hard to figure out, appears to be emblematic of the way Blumenberg bypasses political topics or even political aspects of his subjects.

Whereas “prefiguration” seems to argue that mythical thought will always have fatal consequences in politics, Blumenberg's remarks on Hannah Arendt and her analysis of Adolf Eichmann take

the opposite position (BLUMENBERG, 2015). Arendt had argued that the kidnapping of Eichmann in Argentina by the Israeli secret service, his trial in Jerusalem and finally his execution operated as a political myth, a deceptive personification of evil, a mythical foundation of the Nation of Israel. In her view, Eichmann was not the mastermind, the evil murderer of the Jewish people, but an astonishingly stupid person, following his orders, not capable of understanding what he was doing. "Eichman was breath-takingly stupid" (ARENDR; FEST, 2011), she wrote to a friend in Germany. The research undertaken by Elisabeth Stangneth allows us today to see that Arendt was fundamentally wrong about Eichmann (cf. STANGNETH, 2014). He had systematically planned how to present himself in the event that he were to be caught, preparing to play the role of a stupid bureaucrat. Moreover, he had continued to be a hateful anti-Semite after 1945 and tried systematically to build a network of Nazis in Latin America. Eichmann was all but stupid; in contrast to Arendt's analysis we now have good reasons to consider him a vicious murderer and liar.

However, Blumenberg's critique of Arendt could not, in the 1960's, take into account what we know today. His most important argument is the following: Even if the trial in Jerusalem and the condemnation of Eichmann were to be considered to be a political myth, the young state of Israel would have all the right to produce and use this myth. Exposed to imminent threat, questioned by many states in the region, desperately trying to integrate Jews coming from all the corners of the earth, the young nation of Israel needed a political myth, Blumenberg claims. Arendt's ignorance of this existential need discloses a fundamental lack of political prudence, an absence of political "faculty to judgement" ("*Urteilskraft*"), he argues. Arendt's abstract critique of political myth might be right in general, but in this case her misunderstanding of the situation in Israel is rude, arrogant, unacceptable. This perspective may today look like a harsh attack on an intellectual of great merit-back in the early 1960s this defense of Israel's perspective was — in the USA more so than in Germany — a mainstream position, based however on a specific theory of myth.

## Rhetorics and political anthropology

The case of the critique of Arendt (unpublished in his lifetime due to the respect he had for Arendt's close friend Hans Jonas) makes it clear that Blumenberg was following daily politics very closely. It is known that he was a passionate reader of newspapers; we find many traces of this daily reading in his Archives and in some of his publications. His political views can however only be detected very rarely in his publications. Two brief essays show in what way Blumenberg opposed Carl Schmitt's conception of politics — defined as the distinction between friend and enemy — by defending the liberal idea of second-best solutions, rhetorical exchange instead of ultimate decisions, de-escalation instead of escalation. Blumenberg's article about the genesis of the concept of the state ("Staatsbegriff") and finds its climax when Blumenberg argues that the art of politics today is defined by the skill to delay decisions and moderate conflict by the means of rhetorical patterns (cf. BLUMENBERG, 1968, p. 144).

It seems obvious that this conception of politics has its particularly persuasive power if we take into account the situation in Germany at the end of the 1960s: as the conflict between the Soviet Union and the West could escalate at any given moment, keeping the Cold War under control was the major task of the hour. In addition to this international horizon even internally escalation seemed to threaten the young democracy of Western Germany: after 1968 the students' movement which had started out as a wave of protest against the war in Vietnam now continued to make life in universities difficult. Defending the art of a time requesting rhetoric which uses specific techniques and topologies was therefore meant to contradict a political movement which tried to operate mainly with "happenings", sit-ins, demonstrations, action.

His theory of rhetoric as an art of delaying final decisions and civilizing discourse (by making it more sophisticated, maybe even boring) is put into a larger context of a philosophical anthropology in a later article: In his essay "Anthropologische Annäherung an die Aktualität der Rhetorik" (1971) he tries to show that man, by his

nature-given condition, is condemned to compensate his weakness by means of ‘technique’ (in a larger sense) — such as rhetoric. Referring to the anthropological thesis of Arnold Gehlen — not an author to be quoted without reserve, to put it politely — Blumenberg explains that rhetoric can be considered not as an art of deception, but, as long as the listeners are well educated in rhetoric, as a medium of getting to terms even in case of conflict. This conception is not only a far more humble version of Habermas’ “communicative reason”, but quite in contrast it expresses the idea that human reason will always continue to be a compensating tool, a way of dealing with a complex world uninterested in the survival of Man and Mankind. Blumenberg’s conception of reason therefore could be described as a theory of muddling-through, using analogies, metaphors, rhetoric, whatever helps in order to get to terms with life. In contrast to Habermas’ conception of deliberative reasoning, Blumenberg’s concept of rhetorical reason does not imply the necessity of a consensus. Habermas’ “public reasoning” has a coercive dimension; it produces at least the impression to have a *telos*, even if it does not actually have a *telos* in the Hegelian sense. Blumenberg in contrast to Habermas insists on the importance of replacing action with word. From his point of view, the major task can be described as follows: *How to do nothing with words*<sup>6</sup>.

The anthropological dimension of Blumenberg’s philosophy is obvious in all his publications, and although it is very present in *Work on Myth*, it is the book entitled “Beschreibung des Menschen” (*Description of Man*) which makes clear in what way anthropology (in the very specific sense of German *philosophische Anthropologie*) and politics are linked<sup>7</sup>. It is mainly in the second part of the book that Blumenberg outlines two elements of the human condition of extraordinary importance. His first argument consists in strengthening the idea of the “undefinedness” of Man — an intuition present in German philosophical anthropology from the 1920s on. The human being, Blumenberg claims, is paradoxically determined by the fact that nature does not really determine him:

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<sup>6</sup> Blumenberg of course alludes to the famous book by J. L., *How to do things with words*.

<sup>7</sup> The context is made perfectly transparent in Angus Nicholls’ book (2015).

in contrast to animals he can choose and has to choose what to do in Life. Therefore all "naïve" philosophical anthropology which claims to conceive an "essence of man" is to be rejected. Blumenberg at least in this regard subscribes to the objections against Gehlen formulated in particular from the Frankfurt School. Adorno and Habermas had both contradicted authors like Gehlen by showing that Man cannot be reduced to a "natural essence" without excluding all the social and historical context so important from a Marxist point of view: workers or capitalists are different beings insofar as they are co-defined by their inclusion into a social class. Philosophical anthropology therefore runs the risk of producing pre-modern naturalizations.

Blumenberg however adds a special twist to this argument. He emphasizes the fact that humans strive towards very different goals in life. The openness or "undefinedness" of man renders comprehensible why the conceptions of the good life are so fundamentally different. This appears to be a rather trivial thesis; but Blumenberg gives this idea a political spin: It is, he argues, this variety of goals in life which allows people to live together peacefully. If we were all seeking the same goals in life, civil war would break out. Only if our desires, dreams and aspirations are dispersed to a multitude of objects, careers and conceptions of success, mankind can avoid an escalation of concurrence. This idea implies a strikingly Anti-Aristotelean line of attack: If there is — hopefully — no common idea of *euzên* the polis does not play the same role as in antiquity and man is not a *zoôn politikón*. The contrast to neo-republican thinking often attributed to Arendt is obvious: Politics is not about acting together, but about protecting the mechanisms of distance.

The second important line of thought renders the consequences of this approach more transparent. After having formulated severe doubt concerning the possibility of a definition of the "essence of Man", Blumenberg nevertheless gives a hint about what he considers to be a major difference between men and animals: man is, he states, a "being of distance" (*Distanzwesen*). In contrast to animals, Man can use stones, sticks, all kinds of means of intervention by distance, e.g. language, scripture etc. Whereas animals do not in the same way have the need and the capability to secure their life by instruments of prevention,

Men can bridge both special and temporal distance. The book of Paul Alsborg, *The Puzzle of Humanity*, serves Blumenberg as an important source of inspiration in this regard, as Angus Nicholls (2015, p. 11-121) has shown clearly. In Blumenberg's descriptions man is sketched as an animal constantly seeking distance: distance from danger that might hit him out of the blue. Even his primitive weapons such as stones or sticks have their advantage in allowing to attack without being attacked at the same time.

Although this scenario looks plausible at first sight, one objection is evident: Blumenberg does not refer to the fact that Man at the same time systematically longs for proximity, yes even intimacy. The erotic drive disappears in his conception and an evident plea could be to stress the simple fact that Man is also a "being of proximity", producing great parts of his culture not to protect his distance from the world or from others but quite in contrast in order to bridge this distance, to produce "resonance" (Hartmut Rosa) or gain "recognition" (Axel Honneth).

Let's briefly focus more thoroughly on the political dimension of this anthropological argument: What exactly follows on the political level from a conception of man as a "Being of distance"? To put it as blunt as possible: only a liberal conception of a minimal community seems to fit with this idea of Man. Only a liberal framework (which secures the distance amongst the citizens and between the citizen and his state) will make sure that escalation can be prevented. Every citizen may strive for his individual conception of happiness — and help his fellow citizens by not intervening into their plans. The exclusion of all the erotic striving in man therefore produces an implicit rejection of all republican ideas: There is no *res publica*, Blumenberg lets us know, because there is no common idea of happiness. Rousseau's *volonté générale* therefore must have looked like a fatal misconception of modern politics to Blumenberg, it seems. The best we can achieve is a political framework which allows everybody to follow their private aims as peacefully and distanced from the others as possible. Blumenberg's political thought can therefore be qualified as a "liberalism of distance", I claim (cf. HEIDENREICH, 2011).

## The limitation in Blumenberg's philosophy: From rhetorics to law

It is not hard to see that Blumenberg's theory of man and culture has specific limitations. From the historical point of view of a German post-war situation, a liberal conception of the State seems perfectly convincing and rather typical for what has been called the "skeptical generation" (including such important figures as Odo Marquard). If we take into account what the contemporary options of political thought actually were in early post-war Germany — the range ranking from right-wing anti-liberalism of Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, Arnold Gehlen and Helmut Schelsky on the one hand radical anti-parliamentarist left of early Habermas and the Marxist left on the other hand — Blumenberg's liberalism proves to be a brave defense of the rule of law, the civilizing effect of rhetorics, the thorough reflection of mythical elements in politics and the fact of pluralism, to put it in Rawls' terms.

However, the *a priori* exclusion of republican arguments and ideas at the same time points to a systematic problem in Blumenberg's thought. All his thinking remains in the framework of what has been called "subject-philosophy", it seems. While in his early publications concepts like "Concept of Reality" (*Wirklichkeitsbegriff*) seemed to allow a certain critique of ideology, this gesture almost disappears in his later writings. It is basically the single subject which works on myth, which seems to project "significance" (*Bedeutsamkeit*) into the world, which makes sense of his life in anecdotes. However, human self-assertion is always already ("*toujours déjà*", Derrida would say) a *common* project, an inherited technique. And it has not only taken the form of myth and dogma, but also the form of Law.

It is, I have argued, astonishing that the question of law never really is discussed by Blumenberg (cf. HEIDENREICH, 2005). From a Hegelian point of view, law is the most obvious example of what he calls "objective spirit" (*objektiver Geist*), common cultural tools taking the form of a nature-like, undisputable being. Law, although a human product, addresses man as if it had a perfect objective character: although it is "constructed" and "produced", it doesn't disappear simply, because we do not believe in it anymore. It is "real" and therefore more



than just a myth, a metaphor or a “figure of significance”. The same is true, of course, of our institutions, namely the state. It is therefore surprising, that Blumenberg taught Hegel’s “Elements of the Philosophy of Right” while at the same time excluding the dimension of “objective spirit” almost completely from his books — “Prefiguration” being one important but unpublished example.

The exclusion of the dimension of law has severe consequences. Jürgen Habermas and Robert Brandom have — in very different theoretical frameworks — showed the *binding character* of speech-acts. We would not have to agree with their very ambitious theories about the nature of reason to see that the production of myths, metaphors or rhetorical arguments is not sufficiently understood if it is mistaken for an exclusively art-like activity. In this regard, Blumenberg remains very much in the Nietzschean tradition (an author extensively cited by the young Blumenberg, then more and more absent in his writings). As a defender of Modernity and a critic of positivism this is a strength, concerning the political dimension of his philosophy, it is a limitation.

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