Book review

Redemption, Reconciliation: Either/Or, Both/And?


In this important book, Joshua Foa Dienstag argues that political theorists persuade as much by the narratives they construct as by the arguments they employ. What sorts of future there can be depends upon the pasts from which they develop. By telling a particular narrative, the past is recounted in such a way as to make plausible the narrator’s recommendations. Dienstag writes that “the project of political theory is not so much to reform our morals as it is to reform our memories” (p. 22). Political theorists reform memories by narrating new stories. Those reformed memories, in turn, create a different past—or remember the past differently—and so make a future that is different than the one which seemed likely to develop from the unrefomed memories. When a political theorist constructs a narrative in which the future will make good on the sacrifices of the past, Dienstag claims that the past has been redeemed. When the past is redeemed, the future becomes open and contingent, offering a choice of what it will be. He writes:

We think of certain concepts, like redemption, as religious, not so much because of any inherent quality they possess as because modern philosophy has abandoned some fields of inquiry and left religion without a rival there—the question of time is foremost among these. But to wonder about the meaning of time is a fundamentally human preoccupation, not necessarily a religious one, even if modern philosophy often abjures it. The question is generic and precedes the answers to it supplied by religion, answers that transform it in popular understanding into a “religious” question. To reexamine the question without becoming religious in the process is difficult then, but not impossible, and, I contend, some of the philosophers under discussion have given us great aid in this area. Where the religious sense of redemption means almost “to rescue out of time,” the term is used here to mean something quite different from the flight from temporality that this implies. Redemption can also mean “to buy back,” “to ransom,” and hence “to free.” In the context of narrative political theory, this act can take on the sense of “to make good on the debts of the past” or even “to rescue the past by means of the future,” with the implied connection to freedom taking on a political rather than a religious meaning. It is in this sense, I argue,
that the question of time in politics can issue in a notion of redemption distinct from its religious meaning (one resolutely *within* time), even if it cannot shake all of the connotations that the term implies. The idea of redemption, then, is a tool a narrator can employ (as effectively as any timeless truth) to confront political evil (pp. 21–22).

Dienstag employs three case studies – of Locke, Nietzsche, and Hegel – to demonstrate that political theorists persuade by narration as much as by argument. Dienstag maintains that only Locke and Nietzsche project an open future which allows them to seek to redeem their past, while for Hegel the future is closed and history is over.

Locke rejects biblically based narratives which would justify the divine right of kings to rule as they see fit. Rather, Locke tells a story in which persons create their society through contract, which is threatened when the king violates the terms of that original agreement. When a king no longer respects the social contract, Locke argues that the people have a right to revolt in order to protect it and safeguard their rights. Locke, then, constructs his narrative so as to present his readers with a choice between capitulation and slavery on the one hand, or revolution and freedom on the other.

Nietzsche also confronts his readers with a choice. He sees memory as itself a historical product, produced through suffering and pain. The acquisition of memory was a great achievement, but too much memory is a trap. This is so because, while memory is necessary for imagination, memory also threatens to suffocate creativity. Memory and imagination require each other, but too much of either threatens the other and so, in turn, itself. Nietzsche argues that humanity is constrained by the past through memory, while imagination provides freedom within – as well as the ability to contest – those constraints. Thus Nietzsche uses the image which Dienstag takes as his title: persons dancing in chains. Dienstag writes:

Creativity cannot work without materials. It needs conventions. It needs memories. Nietzsche is fond of saying that each interpretation must “obliterate” previous ones . . . This means to write over them (obliterate; *aus-löschen*) – not, to replace them and start from scratch. The image Nietzsche uses to describe this process is “dancing in chains.” Although macabre, the metaphor captures just what he means to say about the mutual contributions of creativity and memory (p. 105).

Nietzsche fears that humanity may give itself over completely to memory, totally repressing imagination, dreams, and creativity. In that case, humanity will produce what Nietzsche calls the Last Man: a happy, totally integrated member of the herd. So humanity either may have a closed future, or – while retaining a strong memory – may seek to liberate imagination through dreams, redeeming the past and obtaining an open future.