

In the first part, Sollazzo tracks recent evolutions in the theoretical and historical understanding of social and political control of human collectivities, such as: (1) “totalitarianism” (17) in the work of Vaclav Havel and his mentor Jan Patocka; (2) “system” (20) in that by Herbert Marcuse; (3) “terror” (25) in Max Horkheimer’s; (4) “stereotyped reasoning” (28) in Theodor Adorno’s; (5) “rationality deficit” (28) in Juergen Habermas’; (6) “empire” (30) in Michael Hardt’s and Antonio Negri’s (30); (7) and “culture” according to Pier Paolo Pasolini (34). This initial section is followed by an exposition of the philosophical anthropology of three great minds of the 20th century, namely Arnold Gehlen, Helmuth Plessner and Max Scheler. A common theme is retrieved in their thought about human nature and the human condition, that is, the uniqueness of humankind’s inextricable admixture of biological and psychical elements, which allow the human being to be part of nature as well as to transcend it through its “peculiar” (43) intellectual—for the first two authors—and spiritual—for the third—abilities. The ensuing chapter stresses the crucial role played by the species-wide biological and emotional make-up in providing a valid ground for the establishment of credibly universal philosophical anthropology and ethics. Remarkable is the attention paid to the notion of vital “needs” (47) as a stark and straightforward reminder of our common humanity. The field of ethics is further explored in a chapter devoted to communitarianism as a representative reaction to utilitarian individualism, which fails to acknowledge the deeply interpersonal preconditions for any meaningful human existence.

In the second part, Sollazzo explores the issue of totalitarianism with special reference to the seminal work of Hannah Arendt and her ability to perceive the totalitarian threat of numb conformism in modern mass cultures, and not just in the key examples of totalitarian regimes, namely Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union. This line of analysis is deepened by means of a discussion of the notion of “bio-power” (84) and of different conceptions of totalitarianism beyond Arendt’s one, such as Marcuse’s, Horkheimer’s and Neumann’s. Sollazzo then returns to Arendt’s work and her study of the anonymous, grey “model citizen” (108) of modern societies, who is incapable of challenging the received views of her socio-political community and participates dutifully in whatever life-destructive systemic horror such received views may entail. This study is followed by a reflection on genuine democracy as Alexis de Tocqueville and Arendt would have it, so that model citizens be not as incapable of Socratic critical reflection as previously discussed. Considerations on democracy are furthered by a presentation of Karl Popper’s ideal of democracy as open society and his profound distrust for any “utopian engineering” (135) that may prevent tolerant coexistence of different worldviews in peaceful conversation with one another. Adorno, Norberto Bobbio and Zagrebelsky are then utilised to criticise Popper’s seemingly wilful blindness to the darker areas of actual democratic communities, such as techno-scientific “chains” (150) to free human agency, dehumanising “mass conformism” (150), economic “commodification”

(150) of human relations—including political ones—and “political apathy” (153). Zagrebelsky’s work is also utilised to assess the issues of social justice and human rights in allegedly democratic societies, whose enduring and entrenched inequalities fail regularly large sectors of the population.

The third part of the book opens with a survey of the so-called “rehabilitation of practical reason” in the German-speaking philosophical world of the 1960s and 1970s, especially with reference to Hans-Georg Gadamer and Habermas. The threat to social cohesion and human well-being emerging from pseudo-rational individualism is presented and then addressed in a chapter on leading libertarian thinkers, such as Robert Nozick and Friedrich Hayek. Bobbio and John Rawls are introduced and presented as attempts to rectify from within the liberal tradition the many weaknesses and blind spots of several libertarian stances. Communitarianism is addressed subsequently as an attempt to rectify them too, though this time from without the liberal tradition. Ferdinand Toennies, Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre are the pivotal references in this context. Amartya Sen is used eventually to propose a tolerant, pluralist form of communitarianism that describes cultural identities as inherently diverse, “always in fieri” (212) and analogous to an ever-shifting mosaic requiring the person’s free consent and critical self-reflection. The theme of a species-wide ground for life-enhancing social and political self-organisation is brought back in a chapter devoted to Hans Jonas and his call for human ethical responsibility vis-à-vis the planetary environment, which human ingenuity and techno-scientific advances are threatening as never before in human history. The final chapter outlines the understanding of human alterity in the works by Emmanuel Lévinas, Paul Ricoeur and Jacques Derrida.

The book is most erudite and shows how well-versed the author is in the works and terminology of the many thinkers that he cites and presents to the reader. Still, after reading the book, it is not clear what the author wished to accomplish with it, apart from charting a number of interesting issues and related reflections by famous thinkers. In short, the book has no clear thesis to offer. Also, the critical assessment of the thinkers tackled in the book varies considerably, thus a few thinkers are duly presented and equally criticised for what Sollazzo argues to be their theoretical weaknesses (e.g. Jonas), whilst others are just outlined and never criticised (e.g. Havel) or timidly rebuked in a few footnotes (e.g. Arendt). By this lack of critical evenness and courage, Sollazzo comes across as sharing claims by some of the thinkers that he refers to (e.g. Arendt’s negative assessment of the modern political emphasis upon human biological necessity) that do not sit well with those of other thinkers that he includes in his book (e.g. Jonas’ call for immediate global ethical responsibility in the face of the modern techno-scientific threat to the continuation of biological life on Earth). Analogously, it is not clear whether some rare yet conspicuously superficial analyses, such as

the one that he provides about human rights (159-65), should be ascribed to him or to the thinkers that he makes use of therein. Specifically, as human rights are concerned, they are reduced to the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights, which is claimed to be “universal, modern and Western” (163), as though there had never been thereafter any advancement, such as the actually binding sister covenants on civil and political rights on the one hand, and economic social and cultural rights on the other; or the pronouncements of the related United Nations’ human rights committees. Finally, the book would have benefitted from an analytical index and a bibliography.