

Aesthetics and Politics: Tragedy as a Paradigmatic Category

Written by Elisa Narminio

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ELISA NARMINIO, DEC 18 2009

“We are all prisoners of a rigid conception of what is important and what is not. We anxiously follow what we suppose to be important while what we suppose to be unimportant wages guerrilla warfare behind our backs, transforming the world without our knowledge and eventually mounting a surprise attack on us”, writes Milan Kundera in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1981, 197). The rigidity of our conceptions alluded to by Kundera recalls the rigidity of those categories which are theoretical toolboxes in whose boundaries exclusively analysis should take place.

Therefore, the statement “Do you agree with Oakeshott and Rengger that ‘tragedy’ is an aesthetic rather than a political category?” must be answered twofold. Yes, tragedy is an aesthetic category, but it is also a political one: in fifth-century Greek tragedy, theatre spilled over into the political sphere by putting into the limelight political concerns of the time. Therefore, the link between the “rigid conception” that “we are all prisoners of”, and, analogically, the link between Aesthetics and Politics, is tragedy.

Still, why would a centuries old art form be of concern to 21st century political theory and practice? Richard Ned Lebow reaffirms that

Tragedy suggests, and classical realists affirm, that all knowledge is local, temporally bound and quickly negated because of the feedback loop between logos and erga. Such understandings, moreover, should never be confused with wisdom, which represents a holistic understanding of the human condition and the possible ends of human life. Tragedians and classical realists make no pretence about knowing the ends of life, but believe that such a question is approached by integrating the understandings we derive from theory, experience and the arts. Some of this knowledge is reflective, and some takes the form of understandings that go beyond words. Knowledge of both kinds can feed back into our theoretical inquiries and help create a positive, reinforcing cycle of discovery. (Lebow 2003, 360)

Consequently, two ideas are underlined. First, there is an essence of human condition that can be captured through the examination of old wisdom. Second, like the fifth-century Athenians, we live in an era of transition where values shift, but most of all conflict with one another: old and new values, cultural values from different countries brought to the fore by globalization, yet quelled by the ever-expanding Western culture. Following Roland Barthes' idea that narration is one of the most important categories of knowledge we use to understand and structure the world, we can assert that, in this sense, tragedy nowadays has the same utility as it had many centuries ago.

Therefore, it is possible to argue that tragedy transcends aesthetic and political categories to form a path towards the truth. Indeed, the aesthetic and political components of tragedy put together transcend their paradoxical status and become complementary. In doing so, tragedy forms a method for progressing towards the truth, through the deconstruction of pre-packaged discourses initiated by the possibility it offers to see things under a new angle. Finally, we can conclude that tragedy, both in its aesthetic and political expression, is an Art leading to the possibility of a new, dynamic reality that might announce the returning to a sensible and authentic use of language and symbols in the political realm.

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At first sight, tragedy is purely an aesthetic form of expression, far removed from constituting a political category. How does this apparent paradox transmute into a solid complementarity of the two spheres?

What exactly lies beneath the concepts of tragedy and theory, and are those concepts compatible? Tragedy will here be examined in its primary sense of Greek tragedy: it is a theatre play constructed around a dilemma posed by dichotomic values. Antigone's brother has died outside the walls of Thebes, and Antigone, bound by the values of family, wants to perform the funerary rites. Creon, her uncle and the King of Thebes, forbids this, for it would be treason to the city. Here, two logics confront each other: the logic of the family, and that of the political sphere, i.e. the logics of private and public sphere. The politics are those tied in naturally with tragedy, bridging the aesthetic with the political category. Artistic expression has always been an essential way for societies to express emotions, but also collective thoughts and political issues. Antonin Artaud, in his *Théâtre de la cruauté*, explains that theatre's role is to unfold reality in the most brutal way (Artaud, 2005). Likewise, Greek tragedy's function was to politically educate the people...

Tragedy validated the city's institutions and called them into question; reaffirmed its structure of order and pushed the mind beyond that order to face the chaos those structures exorcised. (Euben 1986, 29)

... as well as to perform catharsis (Aristotle, *Poétique*, 1449b28).

Nevertheless, Michael Oakeshott and Nicholas Rengger doubt the usefulness of those ties. If tragedy is linked with politics, this doesn't mean it serves politics. Both suggest that the political realm is one of repetition. Thus, a permanent tension will exist that we will not be able to counter (Rengger, 2005): tragedy will only make us more sensitive to the fact that, however thoroughly we think through our decisions when we are in a tragic situation—i.e. one in which we have to choose between contradictory sets of values—we can't avoid coming out of it with 'dirty hands' (Michael Walzer). Therefore, tragedy is of no use since the only thing it has to offer is the deepening our understanding of it.

But this better understanding is exactly what is so valuable! Political theory—i.e. the theoretical discourse on politics—is based upon a refined understanding of reality. Since the very beginning of tragedy, there is an alleged chasm between tragedy and theory, the first symbolizing the past, regression and stability, the latter representing the future, mutability and progress if we consider its purpose to be to guide politicians in shaping policies[1]. But this dichotomy is factice: tragedy *is part* of theory. Both function on the same principle.

Clausewitz and Morgenthau wrote for doers as well as thinkers, and understood that dramatic and narrative forms speak to task-oriented people in a way that the language of social science never can. They conceived of theory as a means to help such people organize and make explicit sense of the insights and sensitivities they had gleaned through experience and reading. Theory was to help free people from the concerns of the moment, and, like the double vision of tragedy, provide them with another perspective from which to assess their situation. (Lebow 2003, 380)

"Is a belief in progress compatible with tragedy?", asks Lebow (2005, 336). The paradox must be acknowledged. Still, the nature of Art reconciles progress and tragedy, for Art is often ahead of its time, and strives for progress and the expression of perfection. Isn't this the nature of progress, and shouldn't this be the ultimate—although admittedly unattainable—goal of politics as well?

Chris Brown makes a radical claim: not accepting the importance and insight tragedy can bring to international relations would be "intellectually harmful and politically debilitating" (2007, 5). What leads Chris Brown to such a forceful affirmation of the necessity for tragedy in international politics?

Tragedy is a method for finding the truth. And striving for the Truth in the sense Plato gives to it *must* be the ultimate goal of politics. In the same line as Brown, Euben denounces the danger analytical reasoning represents for reality, as it transforms practical wisdom into technical knowledge, thus distorting ancient wisdom and leaving out important parameters of thought (2003, 15). We must thus seize the possibility tragedy gives us for dialogue—because

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dialectical thought offers the possibility of deconstructing certainties and thus advancing on the path to truth. Hence, tragedy is a dialogue—between the characters, between opposed values, between the audience and the play... Dialogue

is not so much a method, as a philosophical enterprise that puts people in touch with themselves and others, and reveals to them the prior determinations, anticipations, and imprints that reside in their concepts. Experiencing the other through dialogue can lead to ekstasis, or the experience of being outside of oneself. Dialogue can help people who start with different understandings to reach a binding philosophical or political consensus. (Lebow 2003: 358)

Tragedy is a lesson of methodology, it advocates the deconstruction of our “rigid conceptions” (Kundera, 1981). Deconstruction pre-existing structures, at least mentally, helps to conceive of an alternative. Contemporary political theorists must focus their interests on the political realm again, and take into accounts contributions from other disciplines, times and arts.

This suggests that political theorists should *not* on the political realm, at least in a narrow sense. Despite the apparent paradox, tragedy is a way of seeing politics anew, of focusing on the political realm precisely by taking a step back and seeing it from other viewpoints – tragedy offers a discourse on the world, depicts it from another point of view theorists would. Understanding a system is the major step in making it better; tragedy thus allows for a transformation of sclerosed systems. While Rengger (2005) asserts that there is no progress towards the good and that tragedy is nothing more than the romanticisation of human’s life vicissitudes (which, by the way, we should accept, full stop), we say otherwise. Why is tragedy useful to politics? Well, because it serves for breaking conventional boundaries (Euben 2007, 22), forcing us to acknowledge otherness and to use it in our own, renewed thinking. Greek tragedy is not alone in using this method: Montesquieu in his *Lettres Persanes* sets his epistolary novel in the Middle East, forcing his readers to use analogical thinking[2] to reflect upon themselves and upon 18th century society in France. In bringing the audience to altering their points of view, tragedy, juxtaposed with political theory, might accomplish “The Greek distinction between nature (what is naturally given, or essential, completed and proper) and convention (what has come into the world by human effort, what differs according to circumstance and time)” (Euben 1986, 37). More importantly, it gives visibility to ethical dilemmas and brings to the fore clashing structures of our political and social system of values.

Tragedy opens the way to a dynamic approach to the political realm, both in theory and practice. By initiating a dialogue and permitting new points of view to be of importance, tragedy helps the political get rid of repackaged knowledge and opens the possibility for movement and dynamism again. It creates the possibility of escaping inertia of a single all-mighty and overruling theory or political world system. This comes from the essence of tragedy. As Richard Ned Lebow suggests:

Tragedy is comfortable with this kind of diversity. In contrast to most theories that take stable structures, societies and identities as the norm, tragedy emphasizes the dynamism of social life. It recognizes that the accommodations individuals and societies make with the tragic polarities are always temporary. (Lebow 2003, 378)

In embracing this possibility for dynamic change, we encompass Nietzsche’s ideal, to whom “the task of art is to interrogate and undermine all perspectives to keep them from hardening into life-restricting concepts. He urged his contemporaries to “frolic in images” and recognize that creative life consists of replacing one set of metaphors and illusions with another” (Lebow 2003, 388).

Thus, tragedy is an art leading to the possibility of a new, dynamic reality returning to a sensible and truthful use of language and symbols in the political realm.

Using tragedy in political science, and considering it as a proper political category for the analysis of political facts and structures, corresponds to an attempt to make our system of values more coherent. The discourse of tragedy on dichotomic values is nevertheless ambiguous: tragedy warns about the dangers of this dichotomy, but in the mean time highlights the fact that we cannot avoid it completely. Still, tragedy teaches the necessary plurality of thinking

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and seeing the world, in the aesthetic domain, but also in the private as well as the political realm.

Tzvetan Todorov, in a recently published article, warns us about the distortion of the discourse of plurality in our present times. He points out the struggle between classical realism, which embraces the usefulness of tragedy in politics, and ultraliberalism, which cuts down its necessity:

Alors que [la pensée libérale classique] respecte et défend la pluralité des forces et des principes à l'oeuvre dans un pays, l'ultralibéralisme est un monisme, il prône la soumission de la société à une force unique, celle du marché illimité. Partant d'un postulat anthropologique fantaisiste, selon lequel l'individu se suffit à lui-même, et réduisant ledit individu à un animal aux besoins exclusivement économiques, l'ultralibéralisme ne laisse aucune place pour le pouvoir politique, qui est pourtant responsable du bien commun.[3]

(Todorov, 14.11.2009)

Concretely, tragedy can thus warn us about the abuse of language-constructed concepts which can seduce societies into believing that one realm is auto-sufficient, or can, on the contrary, be completely replaced by an other. Tragedy teaches us that the political realm is absolutely necessary to structured societies, but that it must maintain its plurality of ideals, while being careful of not structuring it around conflicting sets of values — a harsh task, one might say.

Ultimately, tragedy can be read as the denunciation of the manipulation of language and symbols in the political realm. Political discourses, political theory and policies are all culprits—or more accurately, the people who formulate them. Theory is a jargon accessible only to elites, while policies are often an acted-out manipulation of discourse. It is what Christian Salmon calls “storytelling”...

Les grands récits qui jalonnent l'histoire humaine, d'Homère à Tolstoï et de Sophocle à Shakespeare, racontaient les mythes universels et transmettaient les leçons des générations passées, leçons de sagesse, fruit de l'expérience accumulée. Le storytelling parcourt le chemin en sens inverse. Il plaque sur la réalité des récifs artificiels, bloque les échanges, sature sa symbolique de séries et de stories. Il ne raconte pas l'expérience passée, il trace les conduites et oriente les flux d'émotion. Loin de céder au « parcours de la reconnaissance » que Paul Ricoeur décryptait dans l'activité narrative, le storytelling met en place des engrenages narratifs, suivant lesquels les individus sont conduits à s'identifier à des modèles et à se conformer à des protocoles.[4] (Salmon 2001, 16-17)

... and tragedy is a protection against it, if we acknowledge its value and take the pain of analyzing it in-depth through creative analogies. It points out the importance of language, words and symbols, and the impact they have on our reality. Tragedy is at the cross roads of political, philosophical, poetic and dramatic discourses. It must bring the political discourse back to one of truth and on truth[5].

So, do I agree with Rengger and Oakeshott that tragedy is an aesthetic rather than a political category? No. Nor do I believe in the utility of categories as a whole, for they leave out the tremendous complementarity of disciplines in viewing the world as a whole. Kundera points us to the solution: tragedy helps us get rid of the conceptual constraining boxes, which condition our thoughts into pre-packages, empty concepts.

Yet, two questions remain: although conceptual boxes strip analysis of depth, how do we live, study and explore the world without any guidelines or pre-manufactured tools? And assuming this to be possible, isn't tragedy only accessible to the few elites that are read enough to extract the very substance of tragedy that can be useful in our contemporariness? Maybe popular culture is the tragedy of our time, disguised in a new jacket: what if what we deem “low culture” was the key to rethinking the political realm through aesthetic terms?

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[1] This is opposed to Waltz' theory, for whom theory has not and should not depend on reality.

[2] The usefulness of analogical thinking in politics is defended by Margaret Leslie, and extensively explained by Richard Ned Lebow in his article "Tragedy, Politics and Political Science" (2005).

[3] My translation of Todorov's excerpt: "While classical liberal thought respects and protects the plurality of forces and principles coexisting in a country, ultraliberalism is a monism; it advocates society's submission to a single force, that of an "unlimited free market". Starting from a whimsical anthropological assumption stating that the individual is self-sufficient, and restricting the-fore-said to an animal with only economic needs, ultraliberalism doesn't leave space for political power, which is nevertheless responsible for the common good."

[4] My translation of Salmon's excerpt: "The great narratives that mark human histoire – from Homer to Tolstoy and from Sophocles to Shakespeare – were the narration of universal myths and passed on the lessons of generations past: lessons of wisdom, fruit of cumulated experience. Storytelling follows the path in the opposite direction. It plates artificial stories on reality, it blocks exchanges, it saturates its symbolic with series and stories. It doesn't recount past experience, it traces behaviour and directs flows of emotion. Far from yielding to the "journey of reconnaissance"

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deconstructed by Paul Ricoeur in narrative activity, storytelling sets up narrative chains. Relating to those, people are led to identify themselves with models and to conform to protocols.

[5] I must admit here that this is an ideal, for politics that would say the truth crudely would be bound to fail. Political discourse is by essence infused with manipulation of the discourse: it is re-presenting rather than presenting. Nevertheless, the aim of political discourse and theory should be at finding a greater harmony and striving to uncover the truth.

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