

## THE (DIS)CONTINUOUS HISTORY OF THE POLITICAL

AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE POLITICAL: REGIMES OF POWER FROM THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY TO THE PRESENT. By Elías José Palti. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. Pp. xx, 235.

### ABSTRACT

The political is not given. Understood as the space in which collectives think about how they should live together, the political has existed only since the seventeenth century—according to the thesis of Elías José Palti’s *Archaeology of the Political*. Since then, a central problem of the political, namely how transcendence can be founded on immanence, has been posed in a completely new way. Palti follows this development from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, illustrated by a few individual examples. His reading of the problem is a possible one. But aren’t the political questions arising from the combination of transcendence and immanence much older? Can the political really be reduced to the period so often referred to as “modernity”? In contrast to Palti, I would like to emphasize more strongly the continuities in the field of the political—continuities that can be attached to a void, to the search for a foundation that cannot be justified. But even if one may and should argue about the thesis of the book, it proves to be above all a stimulating study and an important contribution to the understanding of the political.

*Keywords:* political, continuity, discontinuity, modernity, immanence, transcendence, absolutism, emptiness

After the upheavals of 1989–90, there it was for a brief moment: this idea that all ideological disputes had finally (or unfortunately?) come to an end, that at least the global “differend” (in Lyotard’s sense)<sup>1</sup> had dissolved, because one system of world interpretation and world domination, the liberal market economy, had prevailed over all others. The *posthistoire* seemed to have won out for a brief historical moment, this simultaneously liberating and frightening and decadent vision of a world society in which something is still going on, but nothing fundamental is happening.<sup>2</sup> This would also have brought the political to its end, understood as the social form of negotiation and debate over the organization of collectives, as concretized in communications, standardizations, and institutionalizations. After the end of history, the political would then be replaced by the

1. Jean François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

2. Lutz Niethammer, *Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End?* (New York: Verso, 1992); Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

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functioning of a politics that would only have had to administer what had been achieved by 1989–90.

As is generally known, things turned out differently. The binary scheme of the twentieth century<sup>3</sup> did not dissolve into the unambiguity of a market-liberal world domination, but led to a new obscurity.<sup>4</sup> The political proved to be very resistant to politics. It was obviously not finished with a bored administration of what had been achieved. Rather, the space of the political, in which the formations and institutions of collectives are disputed, proved to be still unfinished and inconclusive. The lines of conflict have multiplied and changed constantly since the end of the Cold War. The world appeared to be confused by the resurrection of actors long believed to have been overcome, who suddenly populated the field of politics again: Nationalisms, fundamentalisms, and populisms have since experienced an unforeseen renaissance, even though not only the teachings of the Enlightenment, but also the dialectics of the Enlightenment<sup>5</sup> had promised that all this would finally be overcome.

Since the end of the twentieth century, one can continue to wonder how lively, tricky, and imaginative the political is. Neither political nor historical analysis has stopped asserting that atavistic elements could reappear, that historical backwardness could creep into our present, or that a relapse into the Middle Ages could be observed (quite apart from the fact that this would be an insult to the Middle Ages). Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Brexit, nationalist governments in Hungary, Poland, Austria, Italy, or talk of a struggle between believers and unbelievers—all these phenomena are not simply undead from the past who do not want to disappear. Instead, we are dealing with a new constitution of the political, for the appropriate description of which we do not yet seem to have the right language.

Against this background, it is only too understandable to ask the question of what this political could be in a historical and theoretical sense, this political in which fundamental questions of collectives are disputed. The Argentine historian Elías José Palti chooses a double approach in his “archaeology of the political.” He doubts the existence of a quasi time-independent essence of the political and tries to emphasize its historical emergence. He recognizes three decisive phases in the history of the political that can be roughly discerned in the seventeenth century, around 1800, and in the twentieth century. In addition to the historical description, Palti also undertakes a theoretical reflection, beginning with the almost classical starting point of Carl Schmitt, followed by the discussion as it has developed in particular since the late twentieth century with the participation of Lefort, Rancière, Badiou, Agamben, Mouffe, Laclau, and others. One cannot claim that since then it has really been clarified what exactly this substantiated adjective “the political” is supposed to address. But that is probably what makes this concept so attractive (for me as well), that, unlike “politics,” it does not

3. Alain Badiou, *The Century* (New York: Polity Press, 2007).

4. Jürgen Habermas, “The New Obscurity: The Crisis of the Welfare State and the Exhaustion of Utopian Energies,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 11, no. 2 (1986), 1-18.

5. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [1947] (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

pretend to be clearly definable. It is precisely blurriness and flexibility that characterize the political.

Palti wants to nail this jelly to the wall with historical tools. He marks the beginning of the political in the seventeenth century:

The opening up of the horizon of the political is the result of a crucial inflection that was produced in the West in the seventeenth century as a consequence of a series of changes in the regimes of exercise of power brought about by the affirmation of absolute monarchies. It is at this point that the series of dualisms articulating the horizon of the political emerged, giving rise to the play of immanence and transcendence hitherto unknown. (xviii)

Even though I have great sympathy for a privileging of the seventeenth century due to my own research focus, I am not sure whether this setting is convincing. Especially in the world of (formerly) Roman Catholic Christendom after the Reformation, one can certainly find many reasons to let the political begin in this constellation. But to identify the “absolutist monarchies” as a starting point then runs the risk of appearing a little too Hegelian (for it was Hegelianism that contributed decisively to the establishment of the concept of “absolutism,” because it regarded it as a necessary step in the establishment of the “modern state”).<sup>6</sup>

Why should the political have become relevant only in absolutism? One can hardly imagine a form of human cooperation and opposition in which the political should not have been important. Let’s take the fresco cycle by Ambrogio Lorenzetti from the fourteenth century about good and bad government in the Palazzo Pubblico of Siena, a popular example to illustrate medieval understandings of politics—but also an example of a problematization of the political.<sup>7</sup> Or let us take the even more well-known metaphor of the king’s two bodies.<sup>8</sup> In my opinion, both examples could serve to explain Palti’s central concern, namely the relationship between immanence and transcendence. It is their mediation that for him is at the center of the question of the political, namely how the meaning and goal of the political can be justified with a view to a superordinate context (whatever name it may answer to). Palti calls this connection the “justice effect.” But this question also arose before the seventeenth century, albeit perhaps in the opposite direction: it was not so much the transcendent that was in question, but the immanent that had to prove itself in the name of the transcendent.

Palti has this connection in mind. The first chapter of his book is devoted to the “theological genesis of the political.” In it he explicitly poses the question of how the political has developed out of the theological, namely in clear demarcation from this precursor model. For Palti, the political is thus fundamentally new and fundamentally different from the theological attempt to determine the relationship between transcendence and immanence. Thus, he distinguishes himself from

6. Reinhard Blänkner, *“Absolutismus”: Eine begriffsgeschichtliche Studie zur politischen Theorie und zur Geschichtswissenschaft in Deutschland, 1830–1870* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2011).

7. Quentin Skinner, “Ambrogio Lorenzetti: The Artist as Political Philosopher,” in *Malerei und Stadtkultur in der Dantezeit: die Argumentation der Bilder*, ed. H. Belting and D. Blume (Munich: Hirmer, 1989), 85–103.

8. Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

Giorgio Agamben, who in *The Kingdom and the Glory*<sup>9</sup> emphasized the continuity between the two discourses. Palti even understands his entire argumentation as a reply to Agamben, whose argument he wants to refute (184).

If it were up to me to choose between Palti and Agamben, I would vote for Agamben. In the context of this review, this will lead me to disagree with some of Palti's arguments. These responses do not mean, however, that this is a bad book. On the contrary, I would strongly recommend reading it for thematic, methodological, and theoretical reasons. However, my view of the problems presented here is partly different.

Let us begin with some methodological considerations: Palti presents a conceptual history with which he explicitly wants to set himself apart from a history of ideas. For quite understandable reasons, he considers the history of ideas to be anachronistic because it transfers current ideas to past conditions and examines their occurrence there.

One may, however, suspect that his conceptual history does not escape anachronism either. For example, if Palti (in parallel to Koselleck's "Sattelzeit"<sup>10</sup>) identifies a "Schwellenzeit" (threshold time) between 1550 and 1650 in which the political gradually detached itself from the theological—isn't that already an anachronistic statement? Doesn't one have to know already that one has crossed a threshold before one can state that there was a corresponding threshold time? Isn't it fundamentally anachronistic to have information at one's disposal of which past contemporaries could not yet know anything, namely that their approach to the questions of transcendence and immanence could still be relevant in the early twenty-first century?

In other words, can there be any historical approach at all that is free of anachronism? And by that I don't mean the case of chronologically wrong classification, of manual error. I mean the mixing of times: Historical questioning must be anachronistic insofar as it brings times that are not simultaneous into contact with one another—and this happens in a highly productive way.

Another difficulty with conceptual history arises from Palti's claim not to want to rely on ideas alone, like the history of ideas (whatever might be meant by "ideas"). He aims rather at "analyzing how the terrain within which those options could take shape was historically articulated" (28). However, if you look at the terrain that is being paced here, it turns out to be rather sparsely populated. Palti bases his argumentation on a few selected examples whose representativeness is not always plausible. He analyzes extensively Greco's painting *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, the writing "Defensio fidei" by Francisco Suarez, plays by Shakespeare, Calderón, Racine, and Lope de Vega, the essay by the Capuchin monk Joaquin de Finestrada entitled "El vasallo instruido" from the late eighteenth century, examples from serial music, as well as political and legal theoretical treatises by Carl Schmitt and Hans Kelsen. This is not a complete enumeration, but these are the essential examples that Palti refers to in order to prove the

9. Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

10. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).

conceptual development of the political over three centuries. Why these persons and artifacts should be representative for the corresponding development is not always clear. One could well have imagined a different selection—above all, a selection that could have illustrated completely different paths of development.

I would like to explain this by using the example of the discussion about absolutism. Palti assumes that absolutism, with the changed position of the monarch, also fundamentally changed the constitution of the political. One can see it that way. This has often been done in traditional historiography on this subject. But what Palti completely ignores are the other stories that can be told about the European seventeenth century and about absolutism.

Doubts about the model of absolutism have been expressed for decades. They condensed into an international debate in 1992, when Nicholas Henshall's book *The Myth of Absolutism* was published.<sup>11</sup> Since then, the general assessment has been that although there was a political *theory* of absolutism in the seventeenth century, in *practice* it permanently failed and reached its limits. This can be well substantiated for the supposed prime example of absolutism, the French monarchy.

Now the debate about whether absolutism has functioned as political practice or not would not have to play a major role for Palti's conceptual history—because he does not care about the question of actual implementation. What is striking, however, is the limitation that Palti imposes in his description of absolutism and the seventeenth century. He describes this period at least with a view to the political as if absolutism had been the clearly dominant model. And that is not the case. There have been numerous other strands of discussion and practices in which the political has become relevant in this period: republicanism, utopias, communalism, resistance theory, uprisings, revolutions. With reduction and unification, however, Palti's conceptual history, which claims to take the historical contexts into account, falls into a similar imbalance as the history of ideas itself, from which he wants to distinguish himself.

The reductionism Palti applies is ultimately intended to illustrate the break that he needs in the history of the political in order to make his thesis plausible. He superimposes his idea of the birth of the political in absolutism with a secularization thesis à la Max Weber: the disenchantment of the world. Now, in absolutism, the monarch has the task of creating the unity that no longer goes without saying. I would rather say: Absolutism brings with it (on the theoretical level) a shift in the political discussion, but does not represent a discursive rupture. The theological does not disappear. It moves to new places.

An essential concern of Palti's becomes clear with this supposed break caused by absolutism—as well as a clear difference from Agamben's argumentation in *The Kingdom and the Glory*. Whereas Agamben emphasizes the continuity that exists between theological and secular justifications of the political, Palti emphasizes the break. The political, which raises its head in the seventeenth century, represents something fundamentally new for him.

11. Nicholas Henshall, *The Myth of Absolutism: Change and Continuity in Early Modern European Monarchy* (London: Longman, 1992).

I, too, would rather emphasize continuity—and this with examples that are in part quite similar to those of Palti. It is therefore less a matter of diametrical views, but of different interpretations of quite similar facts.

What is connected with this is not least the question of the historical location and the essential characteristics of modernity. If one emphasizes with Palti a break in the seventeenth century (the otherwise classic historical site of modern self-affirmation, the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, plays a rather minor role in its depiction), then one first identifies *ex negativo* a period that is characterized above all by not yet being like “the present” and by not yet living in the circumstances that “we” do. Those in the present can constitute themselves by distinguishing themselves from the premodern (living in a different time or a different space).

If one understands, as already said, the political (in contrast to politics) as the unfinished and unclosable space in which questions of the organization of collectives are negotiated, then Palti is certainly right when he states that something not insignificant changed in this space in the seventeenth century. But is it a clear rupture?

I would rather say it is a reversal of the signs while retaining the basic problem—and in this respect I also distrust the self-description of modernity. The problem of the political is shifting into transcendence. Although until the seventeenth century, the afterlife could be regarded as a fixed point and the here and now an uncertain problem zone, the transcendent increasingly became a problem in the wake of the Reformation. In this world one had to come to other forms of (self-)insurance.<sup>12</sup> And in this immanent world, other (modern) forms of transcendentally oriented ways of faith were developed, which structurally had (and have) similarities with the supposedly premodern ones: the belief in growth, progress, nation, subject, and so on.<sup>13</sup>

With the help of Niklas Luhmann, the question could be raised as to how system–environment relations were redesigned and which boundaries were actually used to enable the distinction between immanence and transcendence.<sup>14</sup> One could then probably conclude that in the seventeenth century this distinction underwent a new shaping. The question now gradually became conceivable whether God makes decisions for the world, or whether transcendent connections must be created from immanent processes. Legitimation, one could say with Luhmann, succeeded now less and less with an otherworldly God, but had to be achieved with worldly procedures.<sup>15</sup>

The question now, however, is whether with this shift a new epoch dawned, even a new world arose in which the political, which had never existed before, first came to light.

12. The sociologist Elena Esposito has convincingly described this process with respect to the seventeenth century insofar as she has shown the new possibilities of designing other realities by means of probability calculus and fictional literature: Elena Esposito, *Die Fiktion der wahrscheinlichen Realität* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007).

13. Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

14. Niklas Luhmann, *Die Religion der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000).

15. Niklas Luhmann, *Legitimation durch Verfahren* (Neuwied and Berlin: Luchterhand, 1969).

Starting from the break with absolutism, Palti's depiction takes further steps in chronological order. One chapter is devoted to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and the emergence of democracy. It refers to Latin America, and more specifically to the political theory of Joaquín de Finestrada. Also in this historical context, which is usually identified with the code "French Revolution," the argumentation continues: How can a new transcendence be founded from immanence?

Around 1800, this question arises in the context of the emergence of the nation. Here, with "history," another God-substitute is used to answer the question of transcendence. With the help of "history," the nation is detached from the political and becomes naturalized (103). And in such procedures I see more continuities than Palti does, because there are structural similarities between the functions that "God" and "history" take over.

Palti then describes the twentieth century in the sense of a return to the Baroque—on the one hand. For as in the seventeenth century, dualisms break open, reason and history, truth and knowledge, politics and society fall apart. On the other hand, however, in the twentieth century (unlike in the Baroque) transcendence no longer holds the promise of an all-encompassing unity. Rather, it is the source of contingency that causes systems and orders to falter. To explain this development with the help of serial music, as Palti does, is possible, but not immediately comprehensible. Palti at least claims that the fundamental matrix that can be observed in serial music is underpinned by contemporary thinking about the political. In spite of sympathy for twentieth-century new music, this connection is not immediately obvious to me. Here a little more argumentative reasoning would have been necessary.<sup>16</sup>

Palti summarizes the developments of the twentieth century as an age of form in which the historical and evolutionary of the nineteenth century were replaced by the discontinuous. Every new form (and serial music is an example of this) is made possible by a comprehensive reconfiguration of the system (125-126).

Finally, Palti identifies three epochs in his archaeology of the political: the epochs of representation (Baroque), of history (around 1800), and of form (twentieth century). In each of these epochs, the question of the relationship between transcendence and immanence is clarified in different ways.

If we move from Palti's analysis further into our own present in the early twenty-first century, we might conclude that, after the three phases of the constitution of the political that Palti introduced, we now find ourselves in the already implied situation of exuberant complexity of the political, precisely because coordinates believed to be certain have been lost, and established strategies no longer seem to function. The closer Palti moves to the early twenty-first century, the more important emptiness becomes in describing the political. He identifies the concept of the subject as an empty signifier (51, 142) and treats paintings by Kazimir Malevich and Robert Rauschenberg that deal with the emptying of the picture surface (172-176).

16. For another description of the connection between politics and New Music, see Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Picador, 2007).



In this very emptiness, I would also like to identify the culmination point that is constitutive for discussions about the political. Because the unfinished and unclosable space of the political has no ultimate anchor point, some collectives are quite desperately busy setting such a point. In the afterlife, in the origin, in the telos—wherever it may be found, sooner or later it turns out to be a void. And it is precisely with such empty spaces that collectives seem to have problems. Therefore, I consider postfundamentalist theories (also treated by Palti) to be very helpful in tackling this problem.<sup>17</sup>

Palti seems to me, however, to meet the problem of the empty foundation of the political only halfway, because he names and describes it, but immediately encloses it again in a historical representation including an epoch model. So Palti's three phases are too simple. They are too simple because there are only three, and they are too simple because they are too clear. Palti is thus stymied in the interpretation he analyzed for the nineteenth century, the epoch of history. The linear sequence of the models of the political in his argument ultimately becomes the foundation of the political par excellence: the political exists because there is the specific history of the political. This entails the danger that everything is subject to the historical—with the exception of history itself.

Palti's epochalization of the political thus goes hand in hand with the danger of fundamentalization. Each epoch designation carries the message that, thanks to it, one has found out what a certain time now really "is." However, the critic of the "jargon of authenticity," Theodor W. Adorno, has already stated (and explicitly with respect to the Baroque) that epoch designations are incapable of expressing historical complexity. They grasp only mediocrity, but could hardly cover anything that was not subordinate to this average.<sup>18</sup> The same must be said of Palti's *Archaeology of the Political*: an instructive, scholarly book that offers many insights, but which, with its epochalization, does not do justice to the complexity that arises in the dynamics between the temporal and the political. For these dynamics we probably need a new language, new forms of description, which are not yet available to us as a matter of course.

How about taking seriously the offers of avant-garde painting that Palti quotes toward the end of his book? What if the white surface of a painting by Malevich or the erased drawings of a Rauschenberg were taken as an opportunity to reflect more closely on questions of emptiness, negation, representability, and unrepresentability, especially in the historiographical context? Then it would not only be a matter of the possibilities of describing the political, but also of the possibilities of depicting the historical.

It is here that a problem with Palti reveals itself, which seems to me worth discussing about his approach. He relies too much on the historical as the backbone of his argumentation and presentation. For as right and important as

17. Oliver Marchart, *Post-foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007). Similar arguments can be found in a still very current book by Leo Shestov, *All Things Are Possible* (New York: R. M. McBride & Co., 1920).

18. Theodor W. Adorno, "Der mißbrauchte Barock," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 10/1: *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 401-422.



it is to question the constitution of the political, it must seem strange to use the historical as its unquestioned support.

It would have been interesting to see how Palti's argumentation would have changed if he had not relied on the linear logic of chronology, but had made even clearer the respective references and actualizations over time. His view from the seventeenth century to the present would have offered some clues, because it was not by chance that the Baroque was revalued by the discussions about postmodernism and that philosophers such as Spinoza, Pascal, or Leibniz have received much more attention since the end of the twentieth century.

The subject of the political would thus enable the investigation of the folds of time that become relevant when presences refer to absent times. These references are indeed not always linear, but much more creative and complex than the idea of the timeline suggests. Another history of the political would arise in this way. But it, too, would show (in another way) what Palti had intended in his book: that the political is not time-independent in character.

ACHIM LANDWEHR

*Heinrich Heine Universität Düsseldorf*