



## Politics and ‘Spiritual Education’ in Simone Weil’s Last Writings

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**Abstract.** The aim of this article is to relate the concept of ‘force’ to that of ‘spiritual education’. Starting from it, we can better understand the link, fundamental for Simone Weil also in the political sphere, between immanence and transcendence. The predominance of force over immanence seems, indeed, to decree the impossibility of a ‘just’ politics. Weil shows that awareness of the predominance of force in this world is a first and indispensable step towards justice. This explains the centrality that Weil attaches to the education of attention, particularly for those who are to assume governmental roles. Reflection on politics and justice thus assumes, in the last years of Weil’s life, the role of an ‘otherwise than power’, effective on two levels: firstly, as a reflection on power and the forms of government to be given to France liberated from the Nazis; secondly, as a project of true spiritual education for those who will be called to govern at any level.

**Keywords:** Simone Weil; politics; force; rights; justice; vulnerability; dignity.

**Summary:** 1. Force and Vulnerability: a Preliminary Reflection; 2. Justice and Dignity: a Link between Immanence and Transcendence; Bibliographic references.

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## 1. Force and Vulnerability: a Preliminary Reflection

The relationship between matter and spirit is one of the most important theoretical concepts in Simone Weil's thought. This relationship becomes fundamental whenever Weil writes about politics<sup>2</sup>. How to connect the dimension of good, which is the supernatural one, with the dimension of the domination of force, which characterizes the world? One of the most important writings from the last years of Simone Weil's life is certainly *The Iliad or the Poem of Force*. In this article the dimensions of immanence and transcendence are firmly linked. For this reason, I think it is important, in order to discuss the relationship between politics and 'spiritual education'<sup>3</sup>, to begin with an analysis of the issues addressed in that essay.

Simone Weil had a particular fondness for the *Iliad*. This predilection is already evident in her writings dating back to 1936, in which there are some reflections on the Homeric poem<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, her biographer Simone Pétrement tells us that when Weil was in Marseille in 1941, she was convinced that she would soon be arrested, and she carried with her only some clothes and the *Iliad*. It is likely that the predilection for the *Iliad* came from the teaching of the philosopher Alain, her teacher during her formative years. He frequently taught philosophy from commentaries on literary works<sup>5</sup>.

However, it is true that the theme of force, in those years, was often at the centre of intellectuals' discussions. It was in this atmosphere that Simone Weil wrote *Iliad or the Poem of Force*. Originally this essay was intended for the famous journal "La Nouvelle Revue française", but in 1940 Paris was occupied and the Weils fled. The essay, therefore, is published in Marseille, in the journal "Cahiers du Sud", between December 1940 and January 1941. Simone Weil signs it with the anagram Émile Novis.

Certainly, this is one of the most beautiful and vibrant texts Weil has written. The scholar who introduces the French edition, Simone Fraisse, says: "Never has anyone turned a more penetrating gaze on Homer and, at the same time, more imbued with tenderness. Never had a deeper meditation on human destiny been drawn from it"<sup>6</sup>.

What is the underlying assumption of the essay? Just as every animate and

<sup>2</sup> This is strongly reiterated by Chenavier, R.: "Les fondements d'un 'pouvoir spirituel'", in S. Weil, *Écrits de New York et de Londres (1943). L'Enracinement. Prélude à une déclaration des devoirs envers l'être humain, Œuvres complètes*, tome V, vol. 2, textes établis, présentés et annotés par R. Chenavier et P. Rolland avec la collaboration de M.N. Chenavier-Jullien, Paris, Gallimard, 2013, pp. 46-86; Id.: "Le condizioni dell'assimilazione del soprannaturale nella vita sociale", in M. Durst, L. A. Manfreda, A. Meccariello (eds.), *Simone Weil tra politica e mistica*, Roma, Aracne, 2011, pp. 101-122; Id., "L'Enracinement, un second 'Grand Œuvre'", *Cahiers Simone Weil*, 3, 2015, pp. 224-226. On the link between mysticism and politics, with particular attention to the specificity of women, see Bea, E.: "Mystique et politique. Un nouveau discours féminin", *Cahiers Simone Weil*, 1, 2011, pp. 75-91.

<sup>3</sup> In this writing I often use the term "spiritual" in quotation marks. This is to signal that in Weil's thought such a term does not point directly to issues related to the religious horizon. Rather, it refers to everything that concerns the interiority of the self, particularly the capacity for attention, which can be directed as much to the world, as to other human beings, as to the supernatural sphere.

<sup>4</sup> See Fraisse, S.: "Genèse de l'article sur l'Iliade", in Weil, S: *Écrits historiques et politiques (juillet 1934 - juin 1937). L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution*, in *Œuvres complètes*, tome II, vol. 2, textes rassemblés, introduits et annotés par Géraldy Leroy et Anne Roche, Paris, Gallimard, 1991, pp. 304-309.

<sup>5</sup> On Alain's influence on Simone Weil's political thought see Bea, E.: "Alain e Simone Weil. Cittadini contro lo spirito di partito", in R. Fulco, T. Greco, *L'Europa di Simone Weil. Filosofia e nuove istituzioni*, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2019, pp. 87-101.

<sup>6</sup> Fraisse, S.: "Genèse de l'article sur l'Iliade", p. 33.

inanimate being is subjected to a force of physical order, the force of gravity, so the feelings and relations between human beings are subjected to a spiritual “force of gravity”, due to mere being-in-the-world: a tendency to “baseness”, evil, violence, which turns out to be more powerful than the will to do good. A dark force of which we also find evidence in Paul’s letter to the Romans, in which (Rom. 7:14-25), Paul complains of being driven to do the evil he does not want, rather than the good he desires. For Simone Weil this ‘natural’ pre-eminence of evil over good, of strength over weakness was perfectly clear already to the ancient Greeks, particularly to the author of the *Iliad*: “this poem is a miracle. Its bitterness is the only justifiable bitterness, for it springs from the subjections of the human spirit to force, that is, in the last analysis, to matter. This subjection is the common lot, although each spirit will bear it differently, in proportion to its own virtue. No one in the *Iliad* is spared by it, as no one on earth is”<sup>7</sup>. In *God’s Descent*, she also writes that often, when faced with an act of violence, some have sympathy for those who exercise violence, others to those who suffer it. In her opinion, in both attitudes there is a certain cowardice. On the contrary, the best among the Greeks, in particular the poet of the *Iliad*, knew that whoever exercises or suffers force is equally and in equal measure subject to its degrading domination. Only that which escapes this contact deserves the name of good. But only God, Weil underlines, escapes this contact, and, partially, so do men who out of love have transferred and hidden a part of their souls in him. To avoid becoming complicit in the domination of force, the first step is to recognize that everyone is subject to its unchallenged rule. According to Weil, the Greeks were able to see this universal law better than any other ancient civilization:

By its very blindness, destiny establishes a kind of justice. Blind also is she who decrees to warriors punishment in kind. He that takes the sword, will perish by the sword. The *Iliad* formulated the principle long before the Gospels did, and in almost the same terms: ‘Ares is just, and kills those who kill’. Perhaps all men, by the very act of being born, are destined to suffer violence; yet this is a truth to which circumstance shuts men’s eyes<sup>8</sup>.

Justice is present throughout the *Iliad* precisely because the author knew this truth well. In the *Iliad*, indeed, the prevailing theme is not war or mere violence, or heroic virtues, but precisely the unchallenged dominance of force. Force that will lead to the destruction of Troy, the quintessential city whose wonders had fascinated heroes and poets alike. The destruction of Troy seems to decree that there is no possibility for ‘just’ politics, since it is inevitably part of this world, in which force is sovereign.

Even if ‘righteous’ people were to assume power, perseverance in the practice of justice would not be guaranteed because power has a special blinding power, linked to the will to expand. It is no accident that Simone Weil, often quotes Thucydides’ well-known statement, “everyone, by a necessity of nature, commands wherever he has the power”<sup>9</sup>. Command and power, then, are dominated by force more than

<sup>7</sup> Weil, S.: *The Iliad or The Poem of Force*, Wallingford (Pennsylvania), Pendle Hill, 1991, p. 33. See Gold, B. K.: “Simone Weil: Receiving the *Iliad*”, in R. Wyles, E. Hall (eds.), *Women Classical Scholars: Unsealing the Fountain from the Renaissance to Jacqueline de Romilly*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 359-376. On the issue of ‘force’ see the excellent monography by E. Jane Doering, *Simone Weil and the Specter of Self-Perpetuating Force*, Notre Dame - Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Weil, S.: *The Iliad or The Poem of Force*, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> Thucydides: *The Peloponnesian War*, V, 89, 105.

any other human sphere. That “necessity of nature”, which Thucydides had well identified, contributes to an irreparable distancing from goodness and respect for the other. It drags, rather, toward the expansion of a subject, be it individual or collective, which considers itself entitled to use force and acts accordingly. What makes men—and particularly those who attain dominant positions—irrevocably subject to “gravity” is a lack of awareness or total ignorance of the nature of the force they believe they are dominating. Interestingly, in the essay devoted to the Homeric poem, the mere violence of weapons and the unchallenged power of force are highlighted from another kind of force that is inherent in every human being, but which has opposite characteristics to those of power. It is, actually, pure exposure, vulnerability without protection. Simone Weil describes it through an example:

Anybody who is in our vicinity exercises a certain power over us by his very presence, and a power that belongs to him alone, that is, the power of halting, repressing, modifying each movement that our body sketches out. If we step aside for a passer-by on the road, it is not the same thing as stepping aside to avoid a billboard; alone in our rooms, we get up, walk about, sit down again quite differently from the way we do when we have a visitor<sup>10</sup>.

This elementary evidence—if one pays attention to it—allows one to understand that there is other force, intrinsic to each human being, but opposed to power and which urges our responsibility; a force that, perhaps, curbs the will to power and domination. Attention has to be educated to recognise the vulnerability of each human being to which we are beholden to respond, to be responsible for, before claiming any rights for ourselves. The obligation towards another human being is neither recognised nor acknowledged when the human being is reduced to “bare life”. Precisely because of this, Weil recalls that, even if unrecognised, the obligation *exists* and persists: “the object of any obligation, in the realm of human affairs, is always the human being as such. There exists an obligation towards every human being for the sole reason that he or she is a human being, without any other condition requiring to be fulfilled, and even without any recognition of such obligation on the part of the individual concerned”<sup>11</sup>. However, only those with a certain ethical posture or spiritual path<sup>12</sup> are able to perceive what we might call the “force of weakness”.

<sup>10</sup> Weil, S.: *The Iliad or The Poem of Force*, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Weil, S.: *The Need for Roots. Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind*, London, Routledge, 2002, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> The underlying question, which Weil addresses less systematically than, for example, Judith Butler, is that of “recognition” of the other, and, consequently, of responsibility to him or her. Indeed, the recognition of the other as a being to be protected or, at least, not to be attacked, seems to derive – in Weil’s frame – from any subject’s perception of such heartbreak. This analysis seems, thus, to confer relevant importance on personal sensitivity, on the ability to allow oneself to be “touched” by the suffering of the other, which assumes, thus, a key role in questions of recognition and responsibility. Personal sensitivity, however, cannot be sufficient, as Butler points out: “If my face is readable at all, it becomes so only by entering into a visual frame that conditions its readability. If some can ‘read’ me when others cannot, is it only because those who can read me have internal talents that others lack? Or is it that a certain practice of reading becomes possible in relation to certain frames and images that over time produce what we call ‘capacity’? For instance, if one is to respond ethically to a human face, there must first be a frame for the human, one that can include any number of variations as ready instances. But given how contested the visual representation of the ‘human’ is, it would appear that our capacity to respond to a face as a human face is conditioned and mediated by frames of reference that are variably humanizing and dehumanizing” (Judith Butler, *Giving an account of oneself*, New York, Fordham University

For all other human beings, it remains invisible. The “face of the other”, as Levinas would say, remains invisible and, therefore, the helpless human being is considered killable, a mere obstacle to the will to power and expansion. Weil’s description of the stage of absolute helplessness is strikingly close to that of those who described the horror of concentration and extermination camps:

From its first property (the ability to turn a human being into a thing by the simple method of killing him) flows another, quite prodigious too in its own way, the ability to turn a human being into a thing while he is still alive. He is alive; he has a soul; and yet-he is a thing. [...] A man stands disarmed and naked with a weapon pointing at him; this person becomes a corpse before anybody or anything touches him<sup>13</sup>.

It is precisely because of their inherent fragility that some human beings are totally overwhelmed by the force and violence they are subjected to: “In their presence, people move about as if they were not there; they, on their side, running the risk of being reduced to nothing in a single instant, imitate nothingness in their own persons. Pushed, they fall. Fallen, they lie where they are”<sup>14</sup>. Weil stresses that their life isn’t harder than other men’s and they do not occupy a lower place in the social hierarchy. It is a deeper and difficult question: “they are another human species, a compromise between a man and a corpse”<sup>15</sup>. The thought, inevitably, runs to extreme situations, such as those suffered by Jews during the terrible years when Weil was writing: Primo Levi, Robert Antelme wrote unforgettable pages precisely about the no-more-men who wandered like ghosts in prison or extermination camps.

Briefly, the *Iliad* shows that those on the side of the force, cannot, and will not be challenged by others, especially, the helpless: “The man who is the possessor of force seems to walk through a non-resistant element; in the human substance that surrounds him nothing has the power to interpose, between the impulse and the act, the tiny interval that is reflection. Where there is no room for reflection, there is none either for justice or prudence”<sup>16</sup>.

The abysmal ‘fault’ of the West consists in having lost the awareness that force, violence– even that of indifference– makes everyone vulnerable, albeit at different times. This is precisely what the *Iliad* shows: all the protagonists, from Hector to Achilles to Priam, find themselves, albeit each in different forms and at different times, subject to force. The “historical crime”, as Weil calls the Trojan War, aroused in the Greeks an awareness that anyone who employs force without understanding its essence is contaminated by it, captured by it. So much so, Weil argues, “A moderate use of force, which alone would enable man to escape being enmeshed in its machinery, would require superhuman virtue, which is as rare as dignity in weakness”<sup>17</sup>.

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Press, 2005, p. 29). So, in order for a face to be recognized as human – and thus be able to interpellate us – appropriate normative frames are needed that can condition the recognition of the other’s humanity, dignity, and vulnerability. This presupposes the intervention of an operation of power, as Butler again points out (in the wake of Foucault) that preliminarily decides which faces can be recognized as human and which, on the other hand, are not even recognized as such.

<sup>13</sup> Weil, S.: *The Iliad or The Poem of Force*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>14</sup> Ivi, pp. 7-8.

<sup>15</sup> Ivi, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Ivi, pp. 13-14.

<sup>17</sup> Ivi, p. 19.

Reasonableness, mediation, appear doomed to failure, as the *Iliad* itself seems to show, where attempts at calm argumentation are found, which, however, fail irretrievably: “But words of reason drop into the void. If they come from an inferior, he is punished and shuts up; if from a chief, his actions betray them. And failing everything else, there is always a god handy to advise him to be unreasonable”<sup>18</sup>.

The compromise of power with force is total. Also, for this reason, unlike Benjamin, Weil will never think of a possible ‘right’ use, in an absolute sense, of violence or force<sup>19</sup>. Weil admits that in certain exceptional cases force must be used: one example is her own participation in the Spanish Civil War. Another example is her reflections on the need to conduct the war against Nazi Germany to the end. However, Weil believes that none of those who use violence, if only out of necessity, can ever claim to be totally just and exempt from the ‘contamination’ caused by the use of violence. There are force and violence that may appear necessary, but never good: the gulf that separates the necessary from the good is not surmountable.

One of the strongest allies of force is social prestige. It masks its violence and those characters that would cause revulsion if they explicitly appeared. It is no accident that prestige is desired not only by individuals but also by the institutions that govern human communities. Social prestige and justice, however, are almost always placed on opposite shores. Simone Weil attempts to make clear, even provocatively, the connivance of the Western institutions that are most universally admired –such as Law– with dynamics of the exercise of violence. She puts, then, other ‘untouchable’ institutions under scrutiny such as democracy or political parties and highlights their ever-possible compromise with force. The adoption of a ‘collective’ label constitutes, in her opinion, an effective mask for the logic of self-empowerment that governs, for example, both the political parties and those groups or movements that, while rejecting the appellation and institutional form of party, have absorbed its core dynamics. In political institutions Simone Weil denounces the same will to power that marks the Subject, as it has been conceived in Western thought from Descartes onward<sup>20</sup>.

## 2. Justice and Dignity: a Link between Immanence and Transcendence

There was one thing Simone Weil was sure about: France’s alliance with the Nazis was not the result of a *contingency*<sup>21</sup>. Weil affirmed that the evolution of French politics could be understood only from a perspective that described the process leading to such alliance<sup>22</sup>. According to Weil, what led to the political and ethical *débâcle* of France was a “moral” collapse of the entire nation: an endless succession of governments had seriously affected the relationship between citizens and institutions

<sup>18</sup> Ivi, p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> In this regard, an interesting comparison is that proposed by Basili, C.: “La memoria de los vencidos: historia y justicia en el pensamiento de Simone Weil”, *Revista de Filosofía*, 1, 2017, pp. 41-57.

<sup>20</sup> See Fulco, R.: *Soggettività e potere. Ontologia della vulnerabilità in Simone Weil*, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2020; Poma, I.: *Per una decostruzione religiosa del soggetto moderno*, Milano-Udine, Mimesis, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> See Weil, S.: *Écrits de New York et de Londres (1942–1943). Questions politiques et religieuses*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, tome V, vol. 1, textes établis, présentés et annotés par R. Chenavier, J. Riaud, P. Rolland avec la collaboration de M.-N. Chenavier-Jullien et F. Durand-Échard, Paris, Gallimard, 2019.

<sup>22</sup> On weilian critique of French politics see Daigle, J.: *Thoughts on a Weilian Republicanism*, in S. Bourgault, and J. Daigle (eds.): *Simone Weil, Beyond Ideology?*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 232-233.



well before the outbreak of the Second World War. For instance, long ago, ideas as *Homeland* and *Nation* had aroused in citizens a longing for goals and ideals to which they could devote themselves:

When one talks about national sovereignty nowadays, all it really means is the sovereignty of the State. Thus, we have witnessed this strange spectacle—a State, the object of hatred, repugnance, derision, disdain and fear, which, under the name of *patrie*, demanded absolute loyalty, total self-abnegation, the supreme sacrifice, and obtained them, from 1914 to 1918, to an extent which surpassed all expectations<sup>23</sup>.

Weil, particularly in *L'Enracinement*, took a severe position against the “religion” of the State and the Homeland connected with the growing role of nationalism in the inter-war years: “The country was beyond good and evil. It is what is expressed in the English saying: ‘Right or wrong, my country.’ But people often go farther. They refuse to admit that their country can ever be wrong”<sup>24</sup>. For instance, the condescension shown for Deladier’s decree-laws<sup>25</sup> proved that even judicial power, which should have been the guardian of the power to judge wisely and fairly—even *against* the State—had relinquished its role, provoking the disappearance of the sense of legitimacy. That absence had led to the moral and political defeat of the nation: “June 1940 was not a conspiracy by a treacherous élite. It was a failure, an abdication, on the part of the whole nation. In July the black comedy which ended the Third Republic took place at Vichy without casting a shadow of regret, sadness or anger on Frenchmen’s hearts for the passing of the regime”<sup>26</sup>.

This is why, for Weil, a lack of legitimacy is inextricably bound to a lack of “dignity”, that had become an empty word or one associated with ‘moralizing’. If one wants to avoid the ethical and political *débâcle* of a whole country, then legitimacy and dignity need to be reconnected: “There is no legitimacy without dignity”<sup>27</sup>. However, it was precisely the dignity of politics and politicians, as well as that of voters, that had been deeply undermined by the methods with which nominees stood for election: “the use of methods invented for commercial advertising turned electoral campaigns into a sort of prostitution. Elections looked like a farce in which everything combined to give an impression of illegitimacy to both electors and elected”<sup>28</sup>. To elevate politics then, according to Weil, it is necessary to consider moral dignity as the prerequisite to take any political power whatsoever. Moreover, political posts should not be deemed tantamount to a profession<sup>29</sup>. So, as explained, dignity, according to Weil, means, first and foremost, taking responsibility for an idea of justice. In the political sphere, justice needs to strike a fair balance between the power in one’s role and the responsibility that is inherent in such role: “Relative to power, justice

<sup>23</sup> Weil, S.: *The Need for Roots. Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind*, p. 124.

<sup>24</sup> Weil, S.: *The Need for Roots*, pp. 126-127.

<sup>25</sup> I have reflected on these themes in Fulco, R.: “Per un’Europa mediatrice: filosofia, istituzioni, migrazioni,” in R. Fulco and T. Greco (eds.), *L’Europa di Simone Weil. Filosofia e nuove istituzioni*, Macerata, Quodlibet, pp. 31-51, to which I would like to refer. The Decree is available online: <http://pages.livresdeguerre.net/pages/sujet.php?id=docddp&su=103&np=780>.

<sup>26</sup> Weil, S.: “The Legitimacy Of The Provisional Government”, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2, 1987, p. 88.

<sup>27</sup> Ivi, p. 93. On the issue of *débâcle*, see Ch. A. Evans, *The French Historical Narrative and the Fall of France: Simone Weil and Her Contemporaries Face the Debacle*, Lanham - Maryland, Lexington Books, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Weil, S.: “The Legitimacy of The Provisional Government”, pp. 93-94.

<sup>29</sup> See *ivi*, p. 94.

requires above all else an equilibrium between power and responsibility”<sup>30</sup>. So, if the ways to acquire political power need to be carefully scrutinized, the same care must be applied to the way the political pledges are fulfilled once power has been taken. Responsibility should be the weight needed to balance power, to make it, as it were, fairer: politicians’ personal behaviors must be irreproachable in their compliance with the law; they must adhere to the law without exceptions in the event of a crime. In addition, political responsibility involves the duty to *be accountable to those* who rely on the politicians they have given the power to rule. Legitimacy and dignity are therefore bound to the action of a judicial power that fulfills its role freely and independently from legislative and executive powers alike.

However, also the word ‘legitimacy’ has been increasingly understood as synonymous with mere *lawfulness*. The ultimate meaning of the word legitimacy can therefore dramatically change, depending on the legal notions and values to which one refers: “Legitimacy is one of those beautiful words which the human mind cannot link with any conception but which, considered simply as words, have a power infinitely greater than any human conception [...] This beautiful word draws marvellous power from its ability to direct intention, desire, will”<sup>31</sup>. Legitimacy should, therefore, define a deep political bond based on a responsibility that has been freely undertaken by the elected ones, on the one hand, and endorsed by the consent of the voters, on the other hand. Political institutions are a place in which wills, hopes, needs, and plans are addressed and take shape on the basis of some shared value: “The first objective of forms of political institutions is to allow the head of government and the people to express their feelings. They are analogous to love letters, exchanges of rings, and other tokens between lovers [...] Political institutions essentially constitute a symbolic language”<sup>32</sup>.

Simone Weil’s hope is that the symbolic language of institutions can *translate* the needs of the people who help maintain and innovate the institutions themselves and who, therefore, pin their hopes on them. Laws then play a preferential role in building and maintaining the institutions, because the legislative and judicial apparatus reflect the values of a specific community. In the political sphere, in fact, the choice of which idea of justice and legitimacy should rule over the public sphere determines the fate of the entire political community as well.

The most important question, then, is how to select the most ‘spiritually elevated’ ruling class. The prerequisite for *fair politics* is actually having *fair* people in power, people who, as yeast makes bread rise, can make the good rise in the political community, for instance, by issuing fair laws.

Judicial power, for example, should never boil down to the mere enforcement of some procedural mechanism laid down by the applicable law. It should instead interpret law, in the attempt to keep its universal character as close as possible to the

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>31</sup> Ivi, p. 87. I have discussed this issue in Fulco, R.: “‘Seul ce qui est juste est légitime’. Limite du politique et obligation de justice”, eds. R. Chenavier, Th. Pavel, *Simone Weil, réception et transposition*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2019, pp. 307-320.

<sup>32</sup> Weil, S.: “The Legitimacy of the Provisional Government”, pp. 87-88. On this issue see Greco, T.: “‘Distinguere la vera grandezza da quella falsa’. Sulla legittimità delle istituzioni in Simone Weil”, in R. Fulco, T. Greco (eds.), *L’Europa di Simone Weil. Filosofia e nuove istituzioni*, pp. 53-72. On institutions see Esposito, R.: *Instituting Thought: Three Paradigms of Political Ontology*, trans. M. Epstein, Boston-New York, Polity, 2021; Id.: *Vitam instituere. Genealogia dell’istituzione*, Torino, Einaudi, 2023.



specific case to which it is applied. Failing such tension, judicial power is merely a cog in the regulatory wheel; it can obviously lend itself to the most arbitrary use of dishonest lawmakers. For this reason, Simone Weil believes all those people who have chosen to be judges—even more than other institutional figures—should receive spiritual education that could inspire their judgment.

The urgency of such analyses by Simone Weil shows that politics should be able to respond not just to the needs that are inherent in the biological life of human beings, but likewise to those “earthly needs of the human soul” that should be the preferential object of the ‘obligation’ that all politicians undertake as soon as they decide to serve the *polis*. However, while the needs that concern the materiality of life are obvious, the needs that are inherent in the inner order or, in the broadest sense, in the “spiritual” order of every human being, are more difficult to pinpoint and therefore more difficult to address. Once again, it is for this reason that Weil believes those who accept political responsibilities should have a sound “spiritual” education<sup>33</sup>. In order to concern oneself with the needs of the *polis* and to re-legitimize the roles of government as extremely high roles to which one is called, and to which one must respond as if it were a religious vocation, one must set aside greed for power, the pursuit of social status, the desire for wealth and personal ambition. Government should be regarded as a vocation: a vocation to justice.

One of Weil’s finest definitions of “justice” can be found near the end of the essay *Human Personality*: “Justice consists in seeing that no harm is done to men. Whenever a man cries inwardly: ‘Why am I being hurt?’ harm is being done to him”<sup>34</sup>, and also: “To maintain justice and preserve men from all harm means first of all to prevent harm being done to them”<sup>35</sup>. Therefore justice is, first and foremost, doing no harm and preserving men from harm, which means taking care of every single individuality. Yet, in the political arena, it would be impossible to bind anyone to such a hyperbolic precept, which sounds more like an excess of love than a political task.

Weil wisely translates such hyperbolic need into a politically more useable concept in the first few pages of *L’Enracinement*: the obligation to respect human beings as such. It is the fact of being in front of a human being that obliges one to be respectful. However, respect is not a simple principle; to be effective it must be put in practice by fulfilling the material and spiritual needs of the human beings for whom one is responsible.<sup>36</sup>

At this stage, we have a more comprehensive definition of justice, which helps us understand Weil’s peremptory statements that inextricably bind together legitimacy and justice, and, therefore, the crisis of one and the crisis of the other: “Legitimacy is not a primitive notion. It is derived from justice”<sup>37</sup>, but, above all, “only what is just can be legitimate”<sup>38</sup>.

<sup>33</sup> We note only in the margin that attention is a central concept for Weil. A concept that underlies all spiritual education, or, rather, all education tout court. On this theme see, in particular, Weil, S., *Reflections on the right use of school studies with a view to the love of God*, in *Waiting for God*, trans. E. Craufurd, New York, Harper & Row, 1973.

<sup>34</sup> Weil, S.: “Human Personality,” in *An Antology*, London, Penguin, 2005, p. 93.

<sup>35</sup> Ivi, p. 94. On the question of justice in relation to needs, see Negri, F.: “Il valore del bisogno. Responsabilità e giustizia nell’ultima Simone Weil”, *Paradosso*, 2, 2020, pp. 99-116.

<sup>36</sup> See Weil, S.: *The Need for Roots*, pp. 2-9.

<sup>37</sup> Weil, S.: “The Legitimacy of the Provisional Government”, p. 94.

<sup>38</sup> Weil, S.: *On the Abolition of All Political Parties*, New York, New York Review Books, 2014, p. 7.

So, the question goes back to those who take a political office and exercise power in a country. They should be above anyone else in their ability to represent embodied justice. Indeed, the notion of legitimacy takes on a high meaning when the governed esteem the rulers as supremely trustworthy persons. Should even a few of such human beings be found, then the main goal of politics should be to put them in positions that could give them enough power and enough influence to steer society towards justice and the common good: “How is it to be put there? Much could be done by those whose function it is to advise the public what to praise, what to admire, what to hope and strive and seek for. It would be a great advance if even a few of these makers of opinion were to resolve in their hearts to eschew absolutely and without exception everything that is not pure good, perfection, truth, justice, love”<sup>39</sup>.

The question of sovereignty, and the related one regarding political representation, is therefore still open<sup>40</sup>. Perhaps it is a question that can never be settled once and for all. Because democracy, apart from its flaws and the recurring crises it thrusts upon us, is the only institutional form that can turn a crisis into an opportunity for improvement, into a constant movement towards an increasingly fair justice. The task that is always ongoing and never finished may be that of thinking, well beyond the form of the State, of some in-between institution that may rebuild—in new and deeper ways—a connection between rulers and ruled outside of those routes of power that, more often than not, have turned out to be blind alleys.

It seems, then, that the only alternative to power is not an “alternative power” but rather a “non-power”, an “otherwise than power” not reducible, however, to a mere renunciation of action.

Weil, in forced exile in London, continued to exercise this affirmative type of non-power, with her gaze oriented toward her beloved Paris and beloved France—beloved in their vulnerability and fragility, in the disaster of the Nazi occupation. Beloved, then, not in a nationalistic or patriotic spirit, but with Weil’s concern for the hopeless.

Weil, in fact, never stops writing and hoping for those who would want to work in France liberated from the Nazis. Perhaps it is this the form of “non-power”, or “otherwise than power”, a “spiritual” power perhaps, that she chose after her decision to abandon all involvement in active politics.

This is why reading her writings, and, in particular, the last writing, seems truly indispensable for thinking, even today, about ‘another’ Europe. In particular for those institutions that Simone Weil hoped to see come into being, against all hope, in the darkest years that Europe has so far experienced.

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<sup>39</sup> Weil, S.: “Human Personality”, p. 96.

<sup>40</sup> On this issue see Tarantino, S.: “Di spazi politici inediti aperti dal pensiero di Simone Weil”, in R. Fulco, T. Greco (eds.), *L'Europa di Simone Weil. Filosofia e nuove istituzioni*, pp.187-201.

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