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LANGUAGE AND THE EVOCATION OF ORDER – TOWARD A LINGUISTIC THEORY OF THE POLITICAL

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PART I: Voegelin's Introduction to the History of Political Ideas

Among the many manuscripts of Eric Voegelin that remained unpublished in his lifetime is a short text which apparently was meant as an introduction to the *History of Political Ideas*. It survived only in a barely legible manuscript, while a later typewritten version seems to be lost. A transcription of the manuscript version is now available only now in volume 19 of the *Collected Works*, as an appendix to the first volume of the posthumously published *History of Political Ideas*.

This short, only twelve pages long text is subject of my paper today. As I think, its significance has not sufficiently been recognized neither among the interpreters of Eric Voegelin, nor among the wider circles of political theorists.[1] The text is remarkable for five reasons. Firstly, and most importantly, it contains the sketch of a unique theory of the political and a unique concept of the political. Secondly, the concept of the political emphasizes the role of language which makes it relevant in the context of this panel. Thirdly, and most surprisingly, the key term in this theoretic

[1] There are important exceptions that have been very useful for writing this paper: Jürgen Gebhardt, „Politische Ideengeschichte als Theorie der politischen Evokation," in *Politikwissenschaftliche Spiegelungen. Ideendiskurs – Institutionelle Fragen – Politische Kultur und Sprache. Festschrift für Theo Stammen zum 65. Geburtstag*, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1998, pp. 15-33; Hans-Jörg Sigwart, *Das Politische und die Wissenschaft. Intellektuell-biographische Studien zum Frühwerk Eric Voegelins*, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2005, pp. 265-280; Arpad Szakolczai, „Eric Voegelin's History of Political Ideas," in *European Journal of Social Theory*, no. 4/3 (2001), pp. 351-368.

perspective on language is the term "magic". Fourthly, this theory argues from an existentialist point of view resulting in a relativist perspective. Lastly, the text makes an esoteric argument, not altogether different from the one of Leo Strauss.

The first paragraph of the Introduction reads as follows:

> To set up a government is an essay in world creation. Out of a shapeless vastness of conflicting human desires rises a little world of order, a cosmic analogy, a cosmion, leading a precarious life under the pressure of destructive forces from within and without, and maintaining its existence by the ultimate threat and application of violence against the internal breaker of its law as well as the external aggressor. The application of violence, though, is the ultimate means only of creating and preserving a political order, it is not its ultimate reason: the function proper of order is the creation of a shelter in which man may give to his life a semblance of meaning.[2]

I wish to highlight a few remarkable elements of this programmatic statement, especially the vocabulary employed. First the origin of political order is likened to an act of creation. Certainly, man does not create the cosmos, as God does: he rather creates an analogy to the cosmos, a cosmion. Voegelin takes the analogy even further when he writes that man creates out of a "shapeless vastness". This reminds us of the *tohu wa-bohu* of Genesis 1:2, the formless void, which God faced when he began to create the world. Yet the exact wording "shapeless vastness" is not taken from the Bible but from Walt Whitman's famous poem *Passage to India*, written after the poet personally witnessed the opening of the Suez Channel.[3] *Passage to India* is many ways a poem about human creativity. It seems to say that the glorious technological innovations of man, such as the Suez Channel or the Pacific Railroad, create bridges between the dispersed parts of mankind; they achieve globalization, so to speak, undoubtedly following a providential plan. "The earth to be spann'd, connected by net-work," (l. 32) are Whitman's prophetic words. Yet the true

[2] Introduction, CW 19:225.
[3] My quotations are from Walt Whitman, Selected Poems 1855-1892. A New Edition, ed. Gary Schmidgall, New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1999, pp. 315-323-

spiritual questions of man technology leaves unanswered. Science might discover the structures of the physical world, yet to the human soul physical nature continues to appear as cold, as alien, as "unnatural" (l. 97). With clear allusions to the spirituality of the Upanishads, Whitman explains that only the poet can truly span the earth, – by meditating on the common ground of all being, by uniting with the creative center of the cosmos:

> Bathe me, O God, in thee – mounting to thee,
> I and my soul to range in thee of thee
> O Thou transcendent! Nameless – fibre and the breath!
> Light of the light – shedding forth universes – thou centre of them!
> Thou mightier centre of the true, the good, the loving!
> Thou moral, spiritual fountain! Affection's source! Thou reservoir!
> (O pensive soul of me! O thirst unsatisfied! Waitest not there?
> Waitest not haply for us, somewhere there, the Comrade perfect?)
> Thou pulse! Thou motive of the stars, suns, systems,
> That, circling, move in order, safe, harmonious,
> Athwart the shapeless vastness of space!
> How should I think – how breathe a single breath – how speak – if, out of myself,
> I could not launch, to those, superior universes? (ll. 192-206)

The allusion to Whitman, however, is somewhat misleading. It makes sense only insofar as Voegelin and Whitman both analyze the longing of the soul for meaning and insofar both contemplations arrive at the creative center of order. Yet, at this point the difference could not be more radical. Whitman's faith allows for the optimistic outlook on the reunion of the soul with the Divine as it's "perfect Comrade." In the moment of union the seemingly incompatible natures of physics and of the soul will be revealed as consistent and congruent emanations from the same creative center. Then, the technological and the poetical achievements of mankind will be known as subjects to the same Divine providence.

In the *Introduction*, however, Voegelin shows not a trace of this mystical optimism. He rathe agrees with Giambattista Vico who doubted that man could identify the workings of providence in the physical world. A contemplative participation in God's creation, as invoked by Whitman's poem, is not possible; therefore we will not find meaning in physical nature. Vico famously suggested that, instead, we find it in the historical and political world:

> But in the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and never failing light of a truth beyond all question: that the political world has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind. Whoever reflects on this cannot but marvel that the philosophers should have bent their energies to the study of the world of nature (*mondo naturale*), which since God made it, He alone knows; and that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations, or the political world (*mondo civile*), which, since men had made it, men could come to know.[4]

Vico's *New Science* is given considerable space in the narrative of Voegelin's *History of Political Ideas*[5] and its epistemological principle is echoed in Voegelin's work in multiple ways: in the depreciation of positivist methods, in the programmatic statement of the *History* that the political sphere is the original sphere of meaningful existence,[6] and in the lines quoted in the beginning, which emphasize the role of man as the creator of politics. Nevertheless, in the *Introduction*, Voegelin fundamentally disagrees even with the limited epistemic optimism of Vico. Political Science is not, as Vico thought, a "rational civil theology of divine providence."[7] Other than in Vico, man is not assisted by Divine providence which occasionally becomes manifest in the political creations of man, as it counters the asocial and self-destructive human passions and

[4] Vico, Nuova Scienza §331, quoted with alterations from *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*. Unabridged translation of the Third Edition (1744) with the addition of 'Practice of the New Science,' trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984, pp. 96-7.
[5] History of Political Ideas VI, CW 24:82-148.
[6] History of Political Ideas II, CW 20:107.
[7] Vico, Nuova Scienza §2.

works toward the common good.[8] In Voegelin it is solely human creativity which establishes the meaning structures into which emotions, aspirations, appetites, and desires may be integrated. Man needs to create his own little cosmion in order to find "a semblance of meaning," because the meaning of the surrounding cosmos as well as the meaning of history remains hidden. The human situation before the creation of the cosmion, the pre-political situation so to speak, is a situation of fear; – fear not of an enemy, as in Hobbes, but fear of senselessness. Voegelin summarizes:

> Interpreted in these terms, the political cosmion provides a structure of meaning into which the single human being can fit the results of the biologically and spiritually [productive, procreative] energies of his personal life, thereby [relieving] his life from the [disordering aspects] of existence which always spring up when the possibility of the utter senselessness of a life ending in annihilation is envisaged.[9]

As I said in the beginning, these paragraphs provide a the sketch of a unique theory of the political, that is, a theory of the political order as it emerges from the general existential situation of man and not an analysis of a specific order (such as the national state or constitutional democracy), as it arises in a given historical situation. In line with Carl Schmitt, Voegelin establishes a concept of the political which logically precedes the concept of state.[10] Yet the specific contents of Voegelin's concept of the political are opposed – consciously, as I think – to Schmitt's concept. Schmitt says that the political is determined by the existential distinction between friend and enemy.[11] The enemy, in turn, represents existential "otherness" and is therefore a continuous potential source of conflict and war. Thus the political situation is characterized by the permanent latent possibility of combat, in the most serious sense. As Schmitt writes: "The friend, enemy, and combat concepts receive their real meaning precisely because they refer to the real possibility of physical killing. […] War is the existential negation of

[8] Vico, Nuova Scienza §133.
[9] Introduction, CW 19:226.
[10] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, p.19.
[11] Ibid. 26.

the enemy."[12]

Voegelin, on the contrary, insists that the existential situation of man is in the first place not characterized by the possibility of war but by the fear arising from "the possibility of the utter senselessness of a life ending in annihilation". In other words, the shelter function of the political protects man primarily against the meaninglessness of existence; only in a secondary sense, this shelter must be defended against inner and outer enemies. What the conceptions of Schmitt and Voegelin have in common is their existentialist perspective.[13] Both do not speak of a truth of order that could be derived from philosophical-anthropological or theological contemplation. In Schmitt the truth of one's political order is determined by the existential participation in a given society and by the falsehood of the enemy.[14] Truth is defined by historicity. I have no choice but making the existential decision of committing myself to the truth of the political order, I live in. Otherwise, I turn into a potential enemy and a subject to legitimate annihilation.[15] Voegelin argues differently but also submits truth to historicity. Truth is defined by the participation in a given cosmion. If I question the truth of the cosmion I endanger its existential shelter function. This makes me a public enemy but, more terrifyingly, it exposes me to the meaningless void of existence. In short, Voegelin's concept of the political is less agonistic than Schmitt's, but it is no less relativistic. In order to illustrate my argument I now turn to the role of language in Voegelin's concept of the political.

Understandably, the *Introduction* to the *History of Political Ideas* aims at a clarification of what is meant by "political idea". The text has many things to say about types and functions of ideas, but I want to focus only on the most important insight. The existentialist perspective does not allow for attributing primarily cognitive or descriptive functions to the political idea. In a situation of

[12] Ibid. 33.
[13] The existentialist character of the *Introduction* has also been recognized by Ellis Sandoz and Thomas Hollweck in their general introduction to the *History of Political Ideas*: "[…] the whole burden of making sense of his life rests on man." CW 19:18.
[14] Ibid. 27.
[15] Cf. Karl Löwith, „Der okkasionelle Dezisionismus von C. Schmitt," in *Karl Löwith – Sämtliche Schriften vol. 8: Heidegger – Denker in dürftiger Zeit*, Stuttgart: Metzler, 1984, pp. 32-71.

existential void, "its primary function is not a cognitive but a formative one."[16] Voegelin writes:

> "The political idea is not an instrument of description of a political unit but an instrument of its creation. (…) The linguistic symbols [contained] in a system of political ideas, by calling a ruler and a people by name, call it into existence. The evocative power of language, the primitive magic relation between a name and the object it denotes, makes it possible to transform an amorphous field of human forces into an ordered unit by an act of evocation of such units."[17]

The terminology Voegelin employs is more than interesting. As far as I can see, previous to Voegelin the term "evocation" was not used in linguistic theory.[18] Yet, it had an established place in the tradition of magic. Voegelin shows his awareness of this fact when in the above quotation he refers to the primitive magic relation between name and object. Therefore, we should have a brief look at use of the term in the tradition of magic.

Originally, the Latin term *evocatio* referred to a magical practice in Roman warfare, the calling forth of the enemy's deities before a battle.[19] The classical author on magic evocation in the history of Western esotericism, however, is the German renaissance polymath Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim (1486-1535). In his *De occulta philosophia*, a work that Voegelin knew,[20] he devotes much of the third book to the evocation of angels and demons; yet the practice of evocation is based on Agrippa's theory of language at the end of the first book.[21] After making historical reference to the earlier Roman practice of evocation he explains the evocative power of the word by referring to the twofold meaning of the Greek term *logos*. *Logos* may refer, on the one

[16] Voegelin, Introduction, CW 19:227.
[17] Ibid., p. 228.
[18] In his political linguistics Murray Edelman has applied a vocabulary similar to Voegelin's. Yet Edelman's interest is rather in the creation of meaning *within* a society than in the original linguistic creation *of* the society. Cf. the chapter "Symbolic Evocation and Political Reality," in Murray Edelman, *Political Language: Words That Succeed and Policies That Fail*, New York: Academic Press, 1977, pp. 9ff.
[19] "In the case of war, the god of the enemy could be seduced by *evocatio*, a vow offering them continuance of cult or possibly even a temple in Rome, if they withdrew their protection from their city." Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome vol 1: A History*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998, p. 34.
[20] Cf. Voegelin, History of Political Ideas V, CW 23:171, note 86.
[21] My analysis relies heavily on the philological expertise of my colleague Noel Putnik who also directed me to the relevant chapters in Agrippa's vast oeuvre.

hand, to an inner word (*verbum internum*), meaning the conception of our mind and the motion of our soul (*conceptus mentis et motus animae*) and, on the other hand, the spoken word (*verbum prolatum*). This spoken word, Agrippa says, has a certain force or energy (*quidam actus*) affecting the hearer. I quote:

> Words (*verba*), therefore, are the most appropriate medium between the speaker and the auditor, as they bring along not only conception (*conceptum*) but also the force of the speaker (*virtus loquentis*) transfusing into the auditors and recipients with a certain energy (*energia quadam transfudentes in audientes & suscipientes*). This they sometimes do with such power that they not only transform (*immutare*) the auditors but even bodies and inanimate things."[22]

The metaphysics behind these words are extremely complicated and obscure but need not concern us at this point. The basic claim is clear: Under certain circumstances, language, which has the form of energy, can exercise such transformative powers onto the environment of the speaker that a subjective inner reality, thoughts and emotions, can become an objective reality, accepted by the auditors. Voegelin literally writes in the *Introduction*: "The magic power of language is so strong that the mention of a term is always accompanied by a presumption that in using the term we are referring to an objective reality."[23]

But at this point we have to be careful not to impute an occult dimension to Voegelin's thought. On the contrary, Voegelin insists that political theory must show the greatest possible detachment from the magical operations of political evocation, even though it can never fully overcome the fact theorists do not live outside the cosmion. As he writes, most self-declared political theorists falsely claim a descriptive attitude toward their subject; yet in reality, they participate in the same "magic adventures." I quote: "This type of political theory, if we wish to characterize it more precisely, may be said to have ancillary functions on the enterprise of [re-

[22] Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, *De occulta philosophia* I,69 (ed. Lyon 1550, p. 159); my translation.
[23] Voegelin, Introduction, CW 19:228.

creating], by continuous evocative practices, a cosmion in existence."[24]

True political theory, even if it may never be fully achieved, is something different. Instead of contributing to the perpetuation of the cosmion it contributes to its destruction:

> When contemplative analysis is carried to its limits it has to explain the cosmion as what it is, as a magical entity, existing through the evocative forces of man; it has to explain its relativity, and its essential inability to accomplish what it intends to do – that is, to render an absolute shelter of meaning.[25]

Theory, therefore, is opposed to magic; it is a spell-breaking and disenchanting practice, says Voegelin with reference to Max Weber.[26] It is determined by the attitude of realism,[27] but because of its destructive effect, one could just as well call it anarchic. Readers who know Voegelin only through his *New Science of Politics* will be utterly surprised to read his affirmative remarks on La Boétie's proto-anarchistic *Discours de la servitude volontaire*: "La Boétie's attitude is one of bewildered revolt;" he says. "When the magic has lost its spell and the facade of government becomes transparent, the disillusioned observer can discover nothing but acts determined by tradition and [heredity] or […] and interest and lust of power."[28]

However, Voegelin did not follow La Boétie into revolt. The reason for this is, that he did not identify the lust for power as the most original motive behind political evocations.[29] As he writes in another unpublished text from the same period: "The driving force of the magical creation is the anxiety of existence."[30] And because of the life preserving shelter function of the cosmion needs to be considered by the theorist, Voegelin, at this point, resorts to esotericism:

> […] the individual thinker who cannot resist the intellectual temptation to explore this

[24] Voegelin, Introduction, CW 19:229.
[25] Voegelin, Introduction, CW 19:232; cf. the characterization of the "realists" Machiavelli, Bodin and Hobbes in History of Political Ideas VII, CW 25:59f.
[26] Voegelin, Introduction, CW 19:229.
[27] Voegelin, Introduction, CW 19:230.
[28] Voegelin, Introduction, CW 19:230.
[29] This also distinguishes Voegelin from more recent theorists of political language and political discourse, such as Michel Foucault, Murray Edelman, or Benedict Anderson.
[30] Quoted from Jürgen Gebhardt's introduction to *History of Political Ideas* VII, CW 25:15.

> delicate subject matter to the limit will probably be reluctant to hand over the results of his inquiry to a larger public, not because of any understandable apprehension of personal danger, but for reasons that it would be difficult to explain here and now. Anyway, we know of […] historic instances, as in the case of Plato, that the theorist did not tell all he knew, and we may safely assume that the most important result of political theory never have, and never will, become known except to the more or less happy few.[31]

These somewhat cryptic words encountered fierce criticism already from a contemporary reader, Voegelin's friend Max Mintz.[32] Does it not mean that true and therefore esoteric political theory must be excluded from the exoteric narrative of the *History of Political Ideas*? Does it not mean that the true motives of theorists like Plato must be hidden from the general public and reserved for the esoteric discourse? Does it not mean that despite the new insights into the nature of political ideas, the *History* would exactly become what Voegelin wanted to avoid: a doxographical account of political ideas that leaves the essential things unsaid?

Besides these questions Voegelin encountered the problem of moral responsibility, as he admitted in his reply to Mintz: "Is not the attitude of radical contemplation absurd? Is it not perhaps unethical because it destroys the magic of the idea which is the soul of practice, whereas life, as long as it lasts, is possible only by means of the magic of an idea?" Yet, exactly the moral problem justifies the esoteric practice, "the secret of the wise is not to be laid down in writing", he literally says.[33]

These words, none of them published in Voegelin's lifetime, confront the reader with huge problems. The most radical conclusion one could draw is the "Straussian solution". All of Voegelin's published writings are to be taken as the exoteric message, while the esoteric message was only conveyed orally among selected disciples. However, I do not think that this is the

[31] Voegelin, Introduction, CW 19:233.
[32] Gebhardt 1998, p. 30.
[33] The letter in German language is quoted in Gebhardt 1998, p. 30; and Sigwart 2005, pp. 274-5. The English translation is taken from Jürgen Gebhardt's introduction to *History of Political Ideas* VII, CW 25:19f.

correct answer. First, because it seems that Voegelin did not establish circles of private teaching where he communicated different things than in his books. Secondly, because the esoteric position became irrelevant in the moment Voegelin abandoned the existentialist position.

The introduction to the first volume of *Order and History* redefines existence as "participation in being" or as "partnership in the community of being."[34] The symbolic structure of societies is no longer primarily described as linguistic evocation but as the articulation of experiences of order. These experiences vary in degrees of differentiation but all result from man's existential participation in being.[35] The first paragraph of the chapter on Mesopotamia in *Israel and Revelation* shows clearly the shifts in Voegelin's thought, despite the fact that it begins with exactly the same sentence as the *Introduction*:

> To establish a government is an essay in world creation. When man creates the cosmion of political order, he analogically repeats the divine creation of the cosmos. The analogical repetition is not an act of futile imitation, for in repeating the cosmos man participates, in the measure allowed to his existential limitations, in the creation of cosmic order itself. Moreover, when participating in the creation of order, man experiences his consubstantiality with the being of which he is a creaturely part. Hence, in his creative endeavor man is a partner in the double sense of a creature and a rival of God.[36]

One may regard these shifts as evidence of intellectual progress in Voegelin's thought, even though we find a similar approach already earlier, in the *Political Religions* of 1938.[37] As I would prefer to see it, Eric Voegelin's thought underwent phases of epistemological optimism, and, as we know from his correspondence, phases of deep skepticism, close to epistemic despair. Yet, the intellectual development of Eric Voegelin is not my topic here. I only want to state that in Voegelin's theoretical reorientation in the 1940s something important got lost, namely the central

[34] Voegelin, Israel and Revelation, CW 14:39 and 48.
[35] Voegelin, Israel and Revelation, CW 14:43.
[36] Voegelin, Israel and Revelation, CW 14:55.
[37] Voegelin, The Political Religions, CW 5:30-33.

role of language.

Part II: Toward a linguistic theory of the political

We have seen: In one moment of his intellectual life, when he wrote to *Introduction* to the *History of Political Ideas*, Voegelin had an almost intuitive insight into the creative power and magic of language. A moment of astonishing similarity we find in the work of Hannah Arendt, to which I would like to refer briefly. In *The Human Condition* Arendt writes about the nature of the public realm:

> For us, appearance – something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves – constitutes reality. Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life – the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses – lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance. The most current of such transformations occurs in storytelling and generally in artistic transposition of individual experiences."[38]

The German version of this text, also written by Arendt herself, shows a slight yet significant difference in the last sentence, as it explicitly uses the words of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke: „Solche Umformungen sind uns aus unserer täglichen Erfahrung ganz geläufig, sie finden bereits bei dem einfachsten Erzählen einer Geschichte statt, und wir begegnen ihnen ständig in den ‚unbeschreiblichen Verwandlungen' (Rilke) individuellster Erfahrungen, die in den Gebilden der Kunst vorliegen."[39]

The words are taken from a poem of Rilke which, unsurprisingly, is entitled „Magic" (*Magie*).

[38] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 50.
[39] Hannah Arendt, *Vita Activa oder vom tätigen Leben*, München: Piper, 10th ed., 1998, pp. 62-3.

Here, the poet expresses his astonishment over the fact that he can actually create reality by poetically articulating his inner motions:

> Aus unbeschreiblicher Verwandlung stammen
> solche Gebilde – : Fühl! und glaub!
> Wir leidens oft: zu Asche werden Flammen;
> doch, in der Kunst: zur Flamme wird der Staub.
>
> Hier ist Magie. In das Bereich des Zaubers
> scheint das gemeine Wort hinaufgestuft …
> und ist doch wirklich wie der Ruf des Taubers,
> der nach der unsichtbaren Taube ruft.
>
> (From an indescribable transformation stem
> these creations – : Feel! and believe!
> We suffer this often: the flame turns into ashes,
> yet in art: dust turns into flame.
>
> Here is magic. Into the realm of sorcery
> the simple word seems to be elevated
> and it actually is like the call of the male dove
> calling forth the invisible female dove.)[40]

Obviously, this is a poem about evocation. But the cryptic reference to Rilke is Arendt's final word on magic. I deeply regret that neither Voegelin nor Arendt continued their studies in creative and transformative power of language. As I think and hope to illustrate below, a study of the existential or anthropological origins of the political would have to start exactly here, in the magic moments that Eric Voegelin called the "evocative situations". Yet, Voegelin's theoretical approach in the *Introduction* does not allow him to pursue the topic further. The decisive moment,

[40] Rainer Maria Rilke, „Magie", in *Werke in drei Bänden*, Frankfurt: Insel, 1966, vol. 2, pp. 174f. My English translation attempts to render the poem literally (and not poetically).

the politically creative speech act, remains a blank spot in Voegelin's theory. I now want to refer to a few authors who might be able to help us in filling the gap.

First, I would like to invoke a passage from Plato's *Protagoras* where Socrates tells his sophist counterpart: "For I think that Homer was very right in saying that 'When two go together, one sees before the other,' for all men who have a companion are readier in deed, word, or thought; but if a man 'Sees a thing when he is alone,' he goes about straightway seeking until he finds some one to whom he may show his discoveries, and who may confirm him in them."[41] In this passage Plato, admittedly, does not formulate principles of political theory but the foundations of dialogue. Yet, he has captured something very important: inner realities become firm realities only in the intersubjective realm. Therefore man feels the desire to speak to someone, in order to find confirmation.

Secondly, Hannah Arendt writes in the chapter I have already referred to: "Each time we talk about things that can be experienced only in privacy or intimacy, we bring them out into a sphere where they will assume a kind of reality which, their intensity notwithstanding, they never could have before. The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves […]."[42] Here, one could invoke to other thinkers who have devoted extensive research to this phenomenon, for instance Helmuth Plessner in his study on human expressivity.[43]

What all these authors refer to is missing in Voegelin's *Introduction*, namely the insight that the evocative act responds to a concrete experience – sensuous or intellectual – of a concrete person. The magic of language, therefore, is rather transformative than creative. Evocation is the calling forth of an experience into the intersubjective realm. In Voegelin, on the contrary, the evocative act is motivated only by existential angst. Man creates not for a concrete reason but only because

[41] *Protagoras* 348d, trans. Benjamin Jowett; the Homer quote is from *Iliad* 10:224f.
[42] Arendt 1958, p. 50; cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind vol. 1: Thinking*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978, p.98.
[43] Helmuth Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, 3rd. ed., Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975, pp. 321-341.

otherwise there would be nothing but the shapeless vastness of unstructured desires and emotions. Voegelin's anthropology describes man as a deficient animal, leading an incomplete existence, which needs to be complemented by the meaning structures of the cosmion.[44]

Voegelin has corrected these shortcomings in his later works, when he characterized the symbolic structures of social order no longer as seemingly arbitrary evocations but as articulations of existential experiences, – experiences of order and participation. But I do not think, as other interpreters seem to see it, that this change of perspective eliminates the problem of magic.[45] In *Anamnesis*, for instance, Voegelin writes that the creation of political order is "the process by which concrete persons create a social field, i.e., a field in which their experiences of order are understood by other concrete men who accept them as their own and make them into the motive of their habitual actions"?[46] The magic, obviously, is lost. But we might wonder if we can take this sentence at face value, as a descriptive account of social reality? Because the question of magic remains. Even if, with the help of Plato and Arendt, we have clarified the original motive for the evocative act, other questions are still open: How does this transformation work, which first turns the experience of a concrete person into a meaningfully structured sound, not only recognizable but also, to some degree, understandable? How can it happen that, in a second stage of the process, the auditors understand that the experience of the speaker and their own experiences as being of the same kind? How does it work that the mere reception of words transforms a multitude of more or less contingent auditors into a structured community with common aims and convictions, potentially the nucleus of a new major society, a nation, a state, a church? In other words, is the problem of evocation really solved?

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[44] Similar views are found in Johann Gottfried Herder and Arnold Gehlen. More recently Clifford Geertz, apparently ignorant of the earlier *Mängelwesen*-theories, described symbolic orders as necessary "cultural programs" for ordering man's behavior, as he would otherwise be an "incomplete, unfinished animal." Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture*, New York: Basic Books, 2000, pp. 42-46.

[45] In his introduction to volume VII of the *History*, Jürgen Gebhardt explains Eric Voegelin's shift away from the theory of evocation as follows: "Once the Hellenic and Christian experiences of transcendence had become the pivot for an understanding of the historical process, the 'symbolization of society and its order as an analogue to the cosmos and its order' was supplanted by the 'symbolization of social order by analogy with the order of human existence that is well attuned to being.' Attunement means that the evocative idea does not just magically create a semblance of meaning but articulates the truth about the order of being emerging in the order of history." CW 25:22.

[46] Voegelin, Anamnesis, CW 6:400.

In the next step of bridging gaps we are helped by Ernst Cassirer, whose *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* played an important role in shaping Voegelin's vocabulary of "experience" and "symbolization".[47] Cassirer defined his concept of symbolic form as follows: "By 'symbolic form' we mean any energy of the mind (*Energie des Geistes*), through which a meaningful content of the mind is connected with a concrete sensuous sign and is internally assigned to it."[48] Cassirer's philosophy is only of secondary importance here; because of its neglect of the political and its idealist conception of the mind it does not well connect with Voegelin's theory. The interesting part of Cassirer's definition is the concept of energy which refers us back to the Agrippa of Nettesheim. Agrippa, as we may remember, spoke of a certain energy (*energia quadam*) of the word, an energy by which the speaker can make a transformative impact on his human and non-human environment. This energy is now more clearly described as the energy which transforms an inner content of the mind (or the consciousness, as we may also say) into the symbolic form of language; in other words, an energy which gives experience an effective form. Cassirer does not justify his choice of words but instead betrays his source, the late work of Wilhelm von Humboldt. In *On the Multitude of Human Language Structures and their Influence on the Intellectual Development of Mankind*, written in the early 1830s, Humboldt says:

> Language, if conceived in its real essence, is something continuously and permanently passing. Even its preservation in script always remains an incomplete, mummy-like conservation, which again requires to be re-sensualized in recitation. It is therefore not a work (*ergon*) but an activity (*energeia*). Its true definition, therefore, can only be a genetic one; because it is the eternally self-reiterating labor of the mind to make the articulate sound capable of expressing the thought.[49]

In von Humboldt's work we observe how, by means of comparative linguistics and philosophical

[47] Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, CW 5:96.
[48] Ernst Cassirer, *Wesen und Wirkung des Symbolbegriffs*, 8th ed. (Sonderausgabe), Darmstadt: Wisssenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997, p. 175; my translation.
[49] Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Werke in fünf Bänden vol. 3: Schriften zur Sprachphilosophie*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963, p. 418; my translation.

anthropology, the problem of magic transforms into observations on the human situation, the physical and mental constitution of man, in observation on the historical, social constraints but also the essential liberty of human intellectual activity. We see how the magic dissolves in the same moment as von Humboldt understands that language is not essentially the work of a nation, finished and codified, subject to logical rules of vocabulary and grammar; that it is not the work (*ergon*) of the human mind but its actual and permanent activity (*energeia*), or put differently, that understanding means speaking. Von Humboldt also seems to be the first philosopher to maintain that language does neither reproduce an objective external reality nor a subjective inner reality but that it permanently creates and recreates the "standpoint" from which we perceive internal and external reality. A last quotation from von Humboldt shows that, like Voegelin, he identified the sphere of the political as the primary sphere of perception that is formed by language:

> Just as the single sound intervenes between the object and man, language as a whole intervenes between man and the internal and external nature which are affecting him. He encloses himself in a world of sounds in order to perceive and process the objective world. These articulations in no way transgress the measure of simple truth. Since his perceiving and acting entirely depend on his imaginations, man lives together with objects exclusively in the way language conveys them. In the same act, in which he spins language out of himself, he spins himself into language; and each language draws a circle around the nation it belongs to – a circle one can only leave by entering another one. Learning of a foreign language should therefore mean the same as gaining a new world view […].[50]

Conclusion

As I have shown in the first part of the paper, Voegelin's *Introduction* to the *History of Political Ideas* provides the sketch of a unique theory of the political, centered on the emergence of social

[50] Ibid, p. 434; my translation.

meaning structures from evocative acts. In the second part I invoked other theorist in order to make theoretical gaps visible and to offer some solutions. The references to Plato and Arendt showed that the motive behind concrete evocative acts is not merely the permanent and general existential situation of senselessness and anxiety but the impulse of a concrete experience. The reference to Cassirer and von Humboldt showed that the evocative act needs not to remain in the realm of magic but is open to the illuminations of linguistic theory.

In this paper, however, I did not try to build a complete linguistic theory of the political by taking Voegelin's unfinished framework and complementing it with suitable building blocks. Rather my aim was to show what a modern linguistic theory of the political could look like and what questions and problems it would have to face. Evidently such a theory could not stop at Wilhelm von Humboldt's insights but would have to take the results of more recent linguistic research into account. However, such a theory cannot begin with the consideration of modern socio-linguistics or the even younger discipline of political linguistics, a sub-discipline of socio-linguistics concerned with political rhetoric. It cannot begin there, because in these disciplines, the existence of societies is always presupposed, wherefore the decisive moments of political creation, the evocative acts, never come into sight. Lastly, in order to make such a theory employable for the practice of political science or historiography, it would need to be complemented with an empirical research plan. For this purpose, however, we can return to Eric Voegelin's *History of Political Ideas*. It shows that such a research plan could result in an absolutely singular history of political ideas, as it would not only look at the great theoretical systems marking the "culmination points of evocative periods"[51] but also at the last stages of civilizational decline which, at the same moment, are evocative situations. Periods that commonly have been characterized as the darkest moments of history would become the most illuminating ones, as we learn from Voegelin's remarks on the Carolingian period in the second volume of the *History*: "The evocation of the medieval empire offers the closest approximation we know to the ideal

[51] Voegelin, History of Political Ideas II, CW 20:65.

case of a formative process in the full light of history."[52] I still think that this early and fragmentary approach of Voegelin, despite its gaps and shortcomings, provides the framework for a unique theoretical and empirical research program which is worth pursuing. And since Voegelin himself has abandoned this project, there remains a lot to do.

[52] Voegelin, History of Political Ideas II, CW 20:66.