Review Essay of


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Eric Voegelin (1901-1985) was born in Cologne, Germany and lived in Vienna, from 1910 until 1938, where in his twenties he began his career in political science as principal assistant to Hans Kelsen and was promoted to assistant professor at the University of Vienna. In 1938 he emigrated to the United States, eventually becoming an American citizen. For many years he was a chair professor in Political Science at Louisiana State University. In 1958 he became the first Director of the Geschwister-Scholl-Institut fUr Politische Wissenschaft at the University of Munich. Upon his retirement in 1969 he became Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, a position he held until his death. His magnum opus is Order and History (5 volumes, 1956-1987).

Voegelin’s objective might be said to have been to contribute to the recovery of a philosophically grounded science of politics after the manner of the Platonic-Aristotelian episteme politike, but on a basis which reflected the fruits of modern scholarship in the human sciences. Voegelin conceived of politics grosso modo.

In a way, his teaching can be compared to an Unfinished Symphony—rather like that of Schubert—in two movements. The first part of his life saw him concentrate on the elaboration of a theory of "evocations": the uncertainties of the human condition were said to "evoke" ideas that shelter human being within a cosmion (or little world) of meaning. This is the period of his study of the American Geist and of his mammoth (and unfinished) History of Political Ideas.

The second period, or movement, of his life was concerned with penetrating to the experiences behind the symbols which ordered --and disordered-- societies, and he found that they could be distinguished according to the degree of "compactness" and "differentiation" contained within them. Order and History began with the sentence "The order of history emerges from the history of order." Even within this second period, however, there was a break between the first three volumes—wherein the compactness of cosmological myth was followed by the differentiated symbolic forms of Greek philosophy and Israelite revelation-- and the last two volumes, which traced lines of meaning that criss-crossed time periods and civilizations. Thus, in the end, history too is left by Voegelin as an Unfinished Symphony. I emphasize the words "might be said to have been" which preceded the above summary account, because (as will be clear from my review article) I think that it is impossible to offer a summary of Voegelin’s work that will not result in distorting it in some fashion, and that there is no substitute for reading Voegelin himself in extenso. With all of this in mind, let us turn to an examination of the work by Govert J. Buijs here under review.
This is the first book-length treatment of Voegelin’s political theory in Dutch, and it comes at a propitious time, when new critical editions of Voegelin’s works, including the previously unpublished History of Political Ideas are appearing in English and German at a rapid rate. Because of the ambitious nature of Buijs’s project, as well as the fact that he has read omnivorously in Voegelin and has special skills in philosophy, it is important to give the volume close attention, for otherwise its very massiveness alone --and presumably it will be translated into English-- might establish it as authoritative. The first 90 pages deal with a great many themes, some of which indeed are related to Voegelin, and with which the present reviewer is in sympathy both with the subjects treated and the judgments made about them, among which are the poverty of mainstream political science in the area of theory, its inability to make sense out of totalitarianism, its sinking into the accumulation of irrelevant facts, and the near death of "grand theory" followed by its recovery by Voegelin, Strauss, Arendt, and others. The remainder of the book concentrates upon Voegelin’s vast and multiform oeuvre, with the spotlight on what the author calls "the substitution thesis"--the idea that with the decline of traditional religion in modernity, politics has gradually taken its place, with disastrous consequences for both. The author takes Eric Voegelin’s early book Die politische Religionen as paradigmatic for the entire Voegelinian corpus, despite the fact that, as the author himself acknowledges, Voegelin himself quickly came to see the concept of "political religion" as in need of profound modification, if not abandonment.

The author has delved deeply and extensively into Voegelin and is to be congratulated for having done so. A merit of the book is that no one who reads it can ever again mistake the whole of Voegelin for his 1952 book The New Science of Politics, a work which despite its merits suffers from the cramming of an enormous amount of material within the confines of the six Walgreen lectures at the University of Chicago, and which on occasion reveals Voegelin’s tendency at times to shoot from the hip, thus providing canon fodder for those who like Julian Franklin have wished to portray him as a de Maistre redivivus. There is considerable learning displayed in Dr. Buijs’s study, and it deserves to be taken seriously, and it is in that vein that I offer the mainly negative remarks that follow.

Unfortunately, this book is burdened with serious defects, chief among them the author’s strange determination to present Voegelin as the architect of a "systematic (political) ontology."

Indeed, it is a common complaint among academics that while, for example, Leo Strauss can be explained in a paragraph or two, Voegelin has resisted such encapsulation. But is this undoubted fact--Voegelin’s having deliberately written in a way that defies being summed up in ten points or so--a worthy excuse for Dr. Buijs’s jamming into a bed of Procrustes the man who may well turn out to have been our century’s greatest political theorist and who in any event must be recognized by any serious political theorist as one of the leading figures in the recovery of "grand" or "cosmic" theory in our time?
Another major defect is that the author overconcentrates on epistemological and "ontological" questions to the neglect of the fact that Voegelin was always first and foremost a political scientist, in the tradition of the Platonic-Aristotelian *episteme politike*. It is admittedly extremely difficult if not impossible for most interpreters to acquire competence in all of the areas in which Voegelin possessed mastery, but this fact should make interpreters wary of assuming that they can dispense with the labors of others in the Voegelinian vineyard who possess a competence the individual researcher may lack. The work presently under review claims to present Voegelin's views on "politics" and "totalitarianism" and yet the author is clearly much more at home in the Voegelinian analysis of experience and its modes than he is of the political science erected on the basis of that analysis.

Perhaps something has escaped me, but I believe it to be the case that Eric Voegelin taught and was in the main interested in political science, and in political theory as the indispensable partner of same. I find it rather amazing, therefore, that Buijs accuses Voegelin of being too much interested in politics. If I have read Buijs correctly, his main argument is that for all of his creativity and originality Voegelin was not a genuine philosopher but a thinker with an "aprioristic" "political" project. Boiled down to its essentials, Buijs seems to argue that Voegelin's experience of narrowly escaping arrest by the SS in Vienna in 1938 left an indelible mark on his consciousness, to such an extent that henceforth all of his thought was directed toward combatting totalitarianism. What is above all disturbing to Buijs is that this "political" project caused Voegelin allegedly to view Christianity in too otherworldly a fashion and somehow to undermine Christian --or at least some kinds of Protestant--belief. However, because of his lack of skill in political science Buijs nowhere makes clear why it is objectionable for a political theorist to be interested in politics or why Voegelin is not entitled on the basis of scholarship to have a different reading of Christianity than does, say, Calvinism. Indeed, even after hundreds of pages, Buijs does not succeed in showing why "politics, totalitarianism, and transcendence" are improperly blended in Voegelin, for the very simple reason that he does not appear to know what "politics" and "totalitarianism"--on "transcendence" Buijs seem quite competent--mean.

The book further suffers further from the mistaken idea that the author's task is to provide information about all manner of things, some only distantly related to Voegelin at best. Indeed, one witnesses what Augustine called "vain and perishing curiosity" at work. The reader is made to feel like a spectator at a parade, in this case of the author's omnivorous reading, as book after book marches by in review. Such a parade of the author's erudition is perhaps excusable in a doctoral dissertation, but it should be toned down or excised for a book. Moreover, the author's not infrequent tone of condescending omniscience is more appropriate to a scholar about to retire after a distinguished career than it is for someone who appears to have published one short article, in addition to the present dissertation--if it be appropriate at all.

To continue my obligation of cataloguing the defects of the volume under review, the author clearly lacks--or at any rate fails to display--the ability to distinguish between thinkers of the first rank such as Voegelin and writers of secondary or tertiary intellectual achievement. (Anyone, like Ellis Sandoz, for example, with this capacity to distinguish differences of rank and to accord Voegelin a place of eminence tends to be dismissed as a "disciple.") And so we have Eric Voegelin mentioned in the same breath as the likes of Samuel P. Huntington (since when did he...
qualify as a philosopher of history?), the verbose and dogmatic Dutch theologian Herman Dooyeweerd, and even Sir Karl Popper, about whose wretched book on Plato as the "arch-enemy" of the "open society" Voegelin had some choice words in his published correspondence with Leo Strauss.

Buijs's book, while giving the surface impression of being favorable to Voegelin, upon closer inspection appears to have the objective of unmasking him as someone with a hidden project of a "political" character (in the pejorative sense of the word): to force reality to conform to his "hidden framework." (p. 353) "What to our way of thinking are purely speculative ontological questions--over the Boundless, Time, the One, etc.--appear in Voegelin's analysis to carry a highly charged political cargo," writes our author on p. 320. Unlike Strauss, Voegelin examines the Athens-Jerusalem question with a political "interest" in mind: "to tie Athens and Jerusalem together."

Voegelin's teaching, then, in Buijs's eyes is not what it claims to be--an empirical science of politics conceived of as a "philosophy of order," but a political philosophy with an ulterior motive: to "protect transcendence," for which Voegelin is said to have paid "too high a price." (p. 351) (Voegelin would presumably have smiled at the idea that he was an intellectual mafioso in the business of offering "protection" to transcendence.) Thus, Buijs's own not-so-hidden message is that Voegelin is not a genuine philosopher. By contrast with his treatment of Leo Strauss, whom he unreservedly praises as having had a "phenomenal knowledge of the classics" and "a profound knowledge of modernity" (p. 311), Buijs treats Voegelin with suspicion and reserve, as a thinker with a "political project," in the sense of being burdened with a party interest instead of being an impartial searcher for truth. (p. 320)

Voegelin in Buijs's version is a thinker operating from "an aprioristic position" (p. 349). Thus, for example, the New Testament is allegedly for Voegelin an answer book for the fundamental questions of the human condition." (p. 345) Buijs undertakes radical surgery amounting to butchery on what he calls Voegelin's "Christology," wherein Voegelin stands accused of offering a political-ontological interpretation of the Incarnation." (p. 349) "Simply put," Dr. Buijs tells us, "for Voegelin Christ does not save (men) from sin but from an earlier inadequate conception of God." Looked at from the Christian perspective (emphasis by this reviewer), Voegelin attempts to "smooth away the rough edges of the Jewish-Christian conception of sin." (p. 356) Indeed, for Buijs Voegelin stands convicted as an heretical "polytheist." (p. 381)

And so one could continue multiplying similar examples from this ingenious but flawed book, which presents a portrait of Voegelin difficult to recognize in the whole by this reviewer, who was privileged to know him for the last 25 years of his life and has studied and written about him for 40 years. Thus, there is in the book by Buijs no consideration whatever of Voegelin's exposition of the universal implications of Aquinas's dictum that "Christ is the head of all mankind," with Voegelin adding that the presence of Christ may be found in a Buddhist hymn, the prayer of a Muslim mystic, etc. Voegelin's tolerance of equivalently differentiated symbolizations of the divine ground does not sit well with our author. That is his right: to criticize Voegelin's teaching, but he should do it in a forthright and sustained way and not in the form of asides which assert self-evident truth.
As I have just said, Dr. Buijs of course has every right to criticize from his avowedly "early Reformation perspective" what Voegelin had to say about Christianity and in particular about the Reformation version of same. Strangely, however, he has nothing whatever to say about Voegelin's detailed criticism of Luther and Calvin in his History of Political Ideas and in The New Science of Politcs. 7 That Voegelin, a nominal Lutheran all his life, should have so ferociously attacked the intellectual Godfathers of Dr. Buijs should have called forth from him both a detailed exposition of Voegelin's argument together with his answer to it, but all we get is a comment that Voegelin "had hardly a single good word for the Reformation," implying some kind of blind prejudice on his part.7

To complete this reviewer's catalogue of the Buijs book's defects, mention must be made of the skimpy and inadequate account of Voegelin's treatment of gnosticism, 8 and of the highly compressed and superficial account of Voegelin's book-length reinterpretation of Plato in Order and History III. In the end, Voegelin's Plato is reduced to just another subjective account, on the same level as the Plato of Popper, when in fact Plato for Voegelin was the creator of the first "philosophy of order" in the Republic and of the myth in the Timaeus. 9

Finally, both the title and subtitle of the present study are unfortunate. Voegelin almost never used the word "devil," presumably because he regarded the term as a folkloristic, anthropomorphic image of the problem of evil and of the demonic in the metaxy. 10 As for the subtitle, one would have thought that a serious book on Voegelin would have centered itself on his center: the articulation of a "philosophy of order" in human existence.

As for the book's style, the author constantly interrupts the flow of the text to offer yet another in an endless series of outlines of four, six, or ten points, rather as if he were lecturing to a somewhat backward University class. 11 The result is that he leaves the reader in a comatose condition, assuming that said reader has had the strength to plow through the endless lists, recapitulations of recapitulations, homely asides, and feeble attempts at humor, all bearing the mark of excessive authorial self-indulgence.

One finds welcome exceptions to the above policy by the author in the following passages, which do indeed make an important contribution to Voegelinian scholarship: (1) the expositions of the argument of Voegelin's two Race books (104-08), of his first book on the American Geist, (142-48) and of the lengthy epistolary dissection of Husserl (127-142); (2) the rejection by the author of ignorant and even malicious portrayals of Voegelin as at best an ideological "conservative" 12 and at worst a kind of "crypto-Fascist" 13; and (3) his sensitive treatment of Jewish concerns about the use by Christians of such terms as the Old Testament to stand for the Hebrew Bible and of Christian insensitivity to the liturgical prohibition of rendering in discourse the tetragrammaton.14

A cursory check of some of the citations from only one of Voegelin's books--Order and History I: Israel and Revelation reveals a number of unnecessary errors. (I refer to pp. 150, last quotation in English, where the beginning conjunction "But" is omitted as well as omission marks in the middle of the quote;182, bottom line which should read OH I,xi instead of the non-existent page OH I,i; 250, quoted ♦ at end of the page should begin with "But" which has been omitted; 251, quote eleven lines from bottom which should begin "the two experiential
forces. "--here the meaning is changed by needlessly omitting the definite article; and 259 quotation at top beginning with "From the succession of imperial disasters" cannot be found on OH I, 504 but turns up with the leading conjunction missing on 506, this after twenty minutes of searching. If there are this many errors with regard to the citing and quoting of only one of Voegelin's within a relatively few pages of the work under review, how many can there be in the book as a whole? One prays that a proofreader with a fine-toothed comb goes to work on the volume if it is translated.

Hegel wrote that philosophy is like the owl of Minerva, which flies only after dusk is falling. As dusk settles on our awful century, Minerva's owl may be said to have again taken flight in the form of Eric Voegelin's philosophy. If Dr. Buijs will only allow it to fly, that is, for from reading his book I must regretfully conclude that if Voegelin were as too much of Buijs's interpretation presents him, then Minerva's owl would remain forever stuck on its perch.

Endnotes

1 On Voegelin's alleged production of a "systematiek" see inter alia pp. 69, 274-75, 305, 336, 363. On the last of these pages Buijs declares his objective of offering "een samenvattend en systematiserende analyse" ("an all-encompassing and systematic analysis") of Voegelin.

2 Buijs could have learned to avoid such major blunders as maintaining that "Voegelin's work has hardly anything to say about power" (p. 268) from reading expositions of Voegelin's political thought in the publications of Juergen Gebhardt, Thomas Hollweck, and Manfred Henningsen, all former students of Voegelin and now distinguished scholars in their own right. None of them is cited in the book or in the bibliography. Even a reading of just what Voegelin wrote about Machiavelli would have prevented this erroneous statement.

3 What purpose is served, for example, in giving us a page dismissing Hans Kelsen as a "superficial" person? (pp. 420-21, n. 59) This qualifies as gossip, not scholarship.

4 The dissertation's self-indulgent garrulity might perhaps have been restrained by its supervisors at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam.

5 See for example Buijs's dismissive remarks about two of Voegelin's earliest interpreters as having written "at some distance from their academic competence." (p. 74) No doubt it is difficult indeed to be "competent" in all areas explored by Voegelin, but has Dr. Buijs himself demonstrated that his own "academic competence" is as great as he obviously thinks that it is? See also p. 465, n. 19 where in an unfortunate tone of self-congratulation Buijs declares his own analysis of modernity "more adequate" than that or a more recent Voegelinian scholar. Most questionable of all is Buijs's presumption of having understood Voegelin better than he understood himself.
6 Voegelin’s withering evaluation of Popper--solicited by Leo Strauss--may be found in P. Emberly and B. Cooper, eds., Faith and Political Philosophy (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).

7 Buijs further contends that Voegelin was ignorant of the fact that "the Reformation strove as hard against the radical left as it did against the Roman Catholic Church," (p. 404) This is totally false, as even a reading of the New Science of Politics would show, to say nothing of the relevant chapters in D. Morse and William Thompson, eds., Eric Voegelin: Collected Works XII (University of Missouri Press, 1998). Buijs was aware of this volume, (p. 426, n.2), which he writes appeared just as his own book was going to press. He could easily have acquired the manuscript at an earlier date, given his extraordinary access to the various Voegelinian archives.

8 See Dante Germino, "Eric Voegelin on the Gnostic Roots of Violence" (Universität München, Eric-Voegelin-Archiv, Occasional Papers VII, 1998) for an account of Voegelin’s treatment of gnosticism dating from his reading of Hans Urs von Balthasar in the late thirties and extending to the end of his life.

9 Plato as "systematized" by Buijs is poles removed from Voegelin’s own treatment of him. See Introduction by Dante Germino to Eric Voegelin, Collected Works XVI (University of Missouri Press, Fall, 1999) for an account of how important the Phaedrus, Timaeus, and Laws were in Voegelin’s analysis of Plato. These three dialogues together receive only five pages (290-95) of attention in Buijs.

10 Buijs twice misspells "anthropomorphic" in quoting Voegelin in English on pp. 300 and 301. He renders it with the Dutch spelling: "anthropomorfic."

11 Despite its endless outlines, lists of propositions, etc. this remains a diffuse book, in part because the author cannot seem really to make up his mind between a "genetic" approach or whether to force Voegelin into his rather pretentiously named "substituition-thesis" approach. The latter wins out, but at no gain in clarity.

12 On p. 69, however, Buijs is incorrect in attributing the slogan "Don’t let THEM immanentize the eschaton" (which he also misquotes, leaving out the THEM) to Voegelin himself. It was actually a joke by William F. Buckley, Jr., a thoughtful conservative with an extensive knowledge of political theory and an admirer of Voegelin, who had the slogan produced as a bumper sticker, partly to poke good-natured fun at Voegelin for his at times difficult terminology and partly to stimulate interest in The New Science of Politics, wherein the words "the fallacious attempt to immanentize the eschaton" may indeed be found. Buijs also errs also in implying that Buckley was a "populist neo-Conservative," whatever that may mean. Buckley has always despised "populism" and has never claimed to be a "neo-" anything. He is in the Burkean tradition. But as Buijs shows, Voegelin himself always fiercely refused to be labelled a conservative, writing George Nash that "Just because I am not stupid enough to be a liberal does not mean that I am stupid enough to be a conservative."
13. On p. 416, n. 6, Buijs calls attention to two 1984 (!) publications by one Richard Faber, which indeed display a remarkable ignorance of Voegelin's works. However, Dr. Buijs's contention that Faber single-handedly "blocked an authentic reception of Voegelin's work" (416, n. 8) is unconvincing. Nor can it be said as the author claims that "the neo-Marxist presence in the academic world" is responsible for the neglect of Voegelin, commensurate to his importance. How many people have ever heard of Richard Faber? And certainly there are neo-Marxist scholars, influenced by Gramsci, for example, with an interest in Voegelin--talk like that of a sinister Marxist "presence" amounts to scapegoating, not scholarship. The venial sin of intellectual sloth seems a more likely candidate to this reviewer for the inadequate reception of Voegelin to date: it does indeed require sustained intellectual hard work and a willingness to abandon attitudes of "positionism"--the automatic rejection of writers who do not occupy the same position on the left-right political spectrum as the reader--to understand Voegelin.

14. On p. 445, n.2 and n.5 Buijs shows commendable empathy for Judaism.

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