


Narrative and Violence in Just Institutions

Reading National Identity Stories with Ricœur

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Beginning with images of rampant destruction and violence in our day, Paul Ricœur's reflections on the political paradox and his "little ethics" (contained in *Oneself as Another*) are responses to peace and understanding. Ricœur is concerned with questions not only of narrative and embodiment, but also of violence. In situating his theory of personal identity as well as narrative in a country's identity, is there a role for overcoming violence in understanding oneself through one's nationality? How might the question of personal and national identity help us understand ethics and politics as mirroring one another, even in cases of religious peace-building?

There are many people who still haven't understood their place in organizing demonstrations. Then there is the question of egos and emotions, weakened by the individual situations of each one.

—Azadeh Thiriez-Arjangi, quoted in "One year after the death of Mahsa Amini"

This notion of narrative identity is of the greatest importance in inquiry into the identity of peoples and nations, for it bears the same dramatic and narrative character we all too often confuse

with the identity of a substance or a structure.

—Paul Ricœur, *The Just*

Introduction

In his article "The Political Paradox," Paul Ricœur expresses his unexpected and deep shock at political events such as the squashed Hungarian uprising in Budapest, the Algerian war, and the October Revolution in Warsaw (Ricœur 1965, 247). There are equally powerful if not deeply tragic events from our day that intrude upon our daily life. Take the image of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian woman who died after being severely beaten at the hands of the morality police for wearing her veil "improperly" (Satrapi 2024, 1); or the image of Nahal Oz, a kibbutz that began life in 1951 and where five years later shots were fired at half past six in the morning when unarmed Roi Rotberg "rode into an ambush" (Yaron 2024, 81–2). These disparate images from Iran and the Gazan border respectively represent in different ways the political paradox Ricœur spoke of when he recognized the emotional impact of events and their ability to "rekindle, confirm, inflect, and radicalize a reflection on

political power”: “What surprised me in these events”, Ricœur writes, “is that they reveal the stability [...] of the problematic of power” (1965, 247–8; cf. 1991; 1998). Already here Ricœur, in speaking of both stability and surprise, prefigures the relationship of *idem* and *ipse*: “the *same* in the *same* time [*idem* and *ipse*], that of one’s life before death and that of the survivors who will survive me” (2009, 41, emphases in the original). Thinking about politics, says Pierre-Olivier Monteil, “implies envisaging the rationality of the law at the same time as the irrationality of violence” (2024, 34, my translation). None of these stories makes sense without the political and religious background of the states and individuals, that is, the local and national historical narratives in which they are embedded and embodied (Jurgens 2024, 22).¹

Stories such as Mahsa Amini’s and Roi Rotberg’s demonstrate the difficulty of one’s national and religious identity being

a burden or responsibility: narrative identity comes with a prescription in which one must act on behalf of the story. This is what Ricœur means by describing, narrating, and prescribing in *Oneself as Another*. Ricœur’s reflections on the political paradox and his “little ethics” can provide responses of peace and understanding in the face of stories of devastation and violence. What Ricœur described in the 1950s as the political paradox has some striking analogies, if not “an infinite capacity for shocking” (1965, 247), with his analysis of history and fiction and of *idem* and *ipse*, another way to put narrative identity. Within narrative identity, “a paradox is an opposition or contradiction that cannot be solved in *theory*, but that must instead be dealt with in *practice*” (Wolff 2021, 13–14, emphases in the original). While retaining this paradox and recognizing there is no solution, I will try to show here that by means of the practice of religious peacebuilding it is possible to respond to this paradox in a constructive way. The power of the narrative points to a historical “debt” (Ricœur 2004, 89) and “stands for” (Ricœur 2004, 179–80) the potential for non-violent action resisting the nation-state, as it has been given to us in nineteenth-century conceptions of nationalism and sovereignty following Hobbes. By looking at the state as having two meanings, according to Weber, the “legitimate power” of violence and the power-in-common of the people to respond in return, it is the latter “more powerful force” that responds in love to violent repression or domination (Ricœur 1998, 39–40; Deckard 2017). Both meanings of the state allow for description and narration, but the latter definition means that the people collectively begin to truly

1 How each of the narratives tells a different story of the power of the state, whether intra-state (as in the case of Iran) or between states (as in Israel/Palestine and Russia/Ukraine) is not the focus of this article and thus can only be alluded to here. Earlier versions included different stories, for example of the Tunisian Mohammad Bouazizi, who set himself on fire, sparking the Arab Spring; Mamou Maiga, who was chased by French troops in Mali; and an unnamed Ukrainian soldier, who lost a leg (Meek 2023). Many of the events of these earlier earth-shaking stories are lost to history, and thus I have tried to use narratives of the past of those who have resisted the violence of the state in their afterlives: Amini against the morality police, and Rotberg, who was an unarmed security coordinator. Sometimes these other (Arab Spring, Ukraine/Russia) narratives quietly enter the scene as if from off-stage.

understand and consciously respond to the state's attempt to squash the story and the action (Ricoeur 1992, 155–56).

Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another* situates a theory of personal and narrative identity in relation to a country's identity. Through particular stories, such as Mahsa Amini's and Roi Rotberg's, as well as my own experience of an academic conference in Armenia and religious peace-builders in Bosnia, Ricoeur's theory can be applied to Iran or Gaza, and other places, so that the stories and events from these disparate settings contain the seeds for narratives of transformation. Each of these stories contains both the stability (the rational or *idem* quality of sameness through "character") and the revolutionary capacity (a seemingly irrational or *ipse* quality of selfhood, such as in making a promise, Ricoeur 1998, 90) that constitutes the political paradox. As early as 1950, Ricoeur describes this important distinction: "My character is myself—it is my nature, what is most stable about me, beyond changing mood and bodily and mental rhythms. Thus it is at the same time my manifestation for others and my secret existence: in one case it has the consistency of a terminated, fixed portrait, in the other it is a fleeting reality which can only be discovered at the heart of my actions" (1966, 356). What is said here of myself and my character can also be said of my national identity. The political paradox is how, on the one hand, the autonomous state made up of individuals and not separate from them acts rationally towards its own citizens to retain a stable *polis*, and on the other, how citizens of that very same state may act revolutionarily or irrationally towards their leaders. Since 1979 in Iran women have protested against the hijab law

and continue to do so from a deep passion for what is right, and what the morality police understand only in terms of domination (*Herrschaft*). Amini's death sparked a feminist revolt that gained the support of men, and the Iranian diaspora mobilized around the world. According to Azadeh Thiriez-Arjangi, "This is one of the first Iranian movements that is not ephemeral. This diaspora is very connected around the world." She mentions the sense of guilt and a "debt" to mobilize collectively. This ethical duty spurs them to action and Iranian youth are at the forefront of the movement (Time News, 2023). Thiriez-Arjangi articulates the narrative action embodied and embedded in the claim: "Femme, vie, liberté" (2023).

Similarly, the same year Ricoeur was shocked by the events of Budapest, a eulogy in Nahal Oz went like this:

Early yesterday morning Roi was murdered. The quiet of the spring morning dazzled him and he did not see those waiting in ambush for him, at the edge of the furrow. Let us not cast the blame on the murderers today. Why should we declare their burning hatred for us? For eight years they have been sitting in the refugee camps in Gaza, and before their eyes we have been transforming the lands and the villages, where they and their fathers dwelt, into our estate. It is not among the Arabs in Gaza, but in our own midst that we must seek Roi's blood. (Yaron 2024, 83; cf. Tibon 2024)

This religiously inspired eulogy by Moshe Dayan is truly remarkable, given that it was spoken during the worst of

tragedies. He goes on to describe why this story on the border with Gaza contains “a sea of hatred and desire for revenge”: “Roi’s blood is crying out to us and only to us from his torn body” (Yaron 2024, 83). Stories in Iran and Gaza like the recent Arab Spring and Women’s March events are exemplifications of the intersection of narrative and violence in just institutions. According to Ernst Wolff, “We are only able to understand the violence of Budapest [Iran, Gaza, etc.], if we understand what is specific about politics [...] [Ricoeur] attempts to grasp this specificity with the help of the history of political philosophy” (2021, 12). Perhaps the most elemental way of humanizing the shock of the stories we hear is to renarrate “the truth of a tradition stretching from Aristotle to Rousseau to Hegel” (ibid.) through our lives as citizens of a state. This means that the individual and national stories we tell ourselves in order to understand how the state such as Iran, Israel, or Russia justifies its power contain the paradoxical admonition, both ethical and political, that it is by means of just institutions that change happens. The tragic events Amini and Rotberg share with multitudes of others, named and unnamed, have sparked a feminist and wider revolution of unprecedented proportions. By understanding the setting in terms of a historical plot with individual characters, narratives bring about the following powerful transformations. First, “they provide syntheses of conceptual and affective knowledge that present particular ways of perceiving and experiencing the world. Second, narratives and narrative understanding underly the foundation of our capacity to understand others and ourselves and shape our ways of being in the world” (Jurgens 2024, 21).

In this article, I will outline the following imperatives regarding how the question of power is situated in a complex interweaving of sameness, selfhood, and statehood: first, my own stories of shock in Armenia and Bosnia-Herzegovina; second, how one’s state needs to be seen as Other; third, how the violence at the heart of just institutions is a potential place for religious peace-builders to respond with love; lastly, how it is necessary to renarrate the political.

Case studies

Armenia

According to Ricoeur, it is necessary to move from theory to practice, or from text to action, and this occurs best in a particular conflict, whether internal (within the same country, as in Quebec in Canada) or external, as in the early-twentieth-century conflict between Turkey and Armenia. When I was invited by the Armenian government in 2011 to attend a conference and speak on national-identity stories, it appeared to me an impossible task. While I had lived and spent time with religious peace-builders and practitioners in Bosnia-Herzegovina, my main question to them was whether what I had learned in Bosnia could apply to Armenia, since the genocides were eighty years apart. I spoke of Ricoeur’s claim of “designat[ing] one of the places in which practical wisdom is exercised, namely the hierarchy of institutional mediation through which practical wisdom must pass if justice is truly to deserve the name of fairness [*équité*]” (1992, 250). This allows for a hermeneutic to exist between the ethical and the political. “The possibility of conflict seemed to us to be already inscribed in the equivocal structure of just distribution” (ibid.), Ricoeur writes. This

seemed too theoretical and too abstract for the people that I talked to and listened to, yet it contains in theory what can be applied through practice in each particular place.

While I was asking a fundamentally Aristotelian question regarding properly fair distribution (of land, resources, etc.), there seemed to be deeper questions of cooperation among individuals within a society—a politics of friendship. Shortly after my trip to Armenia, I organized several panels on peace theories in Istanbul, Turkey, in August 2014, where each of the panellists examined different conflicts that spanned the globe from Myanmar to the south side of Chicago. I asked myself the question: what is it like to live in a country in which the perpetrators of genocide have not admitted, either to themselves or to the world, that this genocide occurred? In Turkey it is illegal to say that the Armenian genocide took place, while in France it is illegal to say that genocide did *not* occur. What does this say about narrative and violence in just institutions? After listening to many speakers on both sides, I learned that the very basis of Islamic and Christian understandings of just institutions is shared; it is not dependent on the intrinsic nature of the religion. The fact is that the genocide occurred over the possession of land, and that what is at stake within a discussion of “sharing” lands that were once part of “Greater Armenia” prompted the mass killing, after which Hitler at the start of his campaign had been known to ask, “Who has noticed Armenia?” (Hovannisian 1997; Dadrian 1995; Kalayjian 1996, 2002, 2009; Balakian 1997, 2003; Ishkanian 2008; De Waal 2010; Adalian 2013).

The theory behind national identity becomes practical when a country invades

another without recourse to a just notion of fairness. Before scientifically (i.e., archeologically, sociologically, anthropologically, etc.) or historically analysing these lands outside modern-day Armenia, the philosopher of just institutions poses a question of motivation and intention within the narratives. There was much discussion of “Western Armenia” (i.e., the lands in present-day Turkey that were once part of Greater Armenia, for example where Mount Ararat is situated; see Seppälä 2016, 33). As with Nagorno-Karabakh, this is a very heated issue and thus bound to raise ire on either side of the debate. As Serafim Seppälä writes, “in Jerusalem visitors to Yad Vashem may observe lists of endless names of the annihilated individuals. In Yerevan, the lack of names is just as striking” (Seppälä 2016, 34; Raudvere 2016). While standing in Yerevan at the genocide memorial Seppälä describes, I felt emotions rise and began weeping. This overwhelming feeling is exactly what Ricœur described at the beginning of “The Political Paradox” (Ricœur, 1965). All that I had read concerning the genocide began to make sense at this moment. The narratives and history that seem flat in a textbook became full of life. Since returning to the United States, I have included in many of my courses discussions concerning the Armenian genocide, inviting the grandchildren of refugees to speak of their experience in front of the students. One friend whom I invited to speak at an undergraduate class published a book about his grandmother’s story of genocide and survival: *Silences: My Mother’s Will to Survive* (Tashjian 1995), which tells the story of the victims without reducing the national-identity story to one of victimhood. When students hear

and read *Silences*, they experience what it is like to live one's state as Other as a form of religious peace-building. What can be read or learned concerning narrative and violence in Armenia can be also be applied to present-day Iran, Gaza, or Ukraine. As the diaspora is speaking, protesting, and revolting on behalf of women's rights inside and outside Iran and thereby challenging the dictator and the morality police, the potential for power-in-common in Armenia has equally revealed the just institution that inspires youngsters today across the world.

Bosnia-Herzegovina

The first time I finished reading *Oneself as Another* was on a bus from Munich to Sarajevo in December 2011. I had already lived several summers in various towns such as Sanski Most and Banja Luka in the Krajina as well as in Sarajevo. I spent time with religious peace-builders, who develop workshops for survivors. The prefiguration of "Narrative and Violence in Just Institutions" was being formed. With the permission of the imam, I practised Ramadan and attended the mosque at Eid. The day I saw my friend Vahidin's hometown and heard his narrative about how every single person in the village was affected by the genocide was when I began religious peace-building. We visited a cemetery in which every stone had the year 1992 on it, from infants to the elderly. As with the genocide memorial in Yerevan, the experience fundamentally changed me. On the fourteenth anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre, I participated in a ceremony in which we carried 534 coffins of those men and children whose bones had been identified the previous year. The number 534 became etched in my mind, and the cere-

mony at Potočari was closure for the families who had wondered what had happened to their loved ones. I watched religious peace-builders such as Amra Pandzo and Vahidin Omanović create institutions like CIM. CIM stands for Centar za Izgradnju Mira (Centre for Peace-building). It organizes peace camps, offers training in conflict transformation, and does craniosacral therapy. It is easy for a westerner who has never been to Bosnia-Herzegovina to spurn such stories. But the reality and the history of Bosnia became alive in these narrative moments (Davis 1996; Malcolm 1996; Manuel 1996; Mahmutćehajić 2000; Cousens and Cater 2001; Karabegović and Karamehić-Oates 2022).

The philosopher Eldar Sarajlić writes, "Although huge progress was made after the war in terms of rebuilding the basic institutional infrastructure of the country, most of the country still lingers in the state of inefficiency, deadlock and ineptitude" (2011, 10). Sarajlić believes one of the primary reasons for this ineptitude is the "conceptual tension between the notions of nation and state, which underlies most of the transformation efforts and political conflicts present in the country" (2011, 11). During my several stays in Bosnia and my reading of much post-genocide work, I heard these stories differently. As with the case study of Armenia, I brought this knowledge to the classroom in Belgium, Romania, and the United States as well as conferences in South Africa, Australia, Canada, and many other countries. I began to see how nineteenth-century nationalism influenced many of the conflicts. More importantly, I began to hear the silenced voices of religious peace-builders. I knew that there had been Christian and Hindu non-violence

activists such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi, but now I began learning about this history of Islamic and Jewish activists; even Hamas includes an enclave of religious peace-builders. These narratives, however, have mostly been suppressed by the seemingly all-powerful nation-states. The way the Enlightenment and the nineteenth to twentieth centuries theorized the nation-state should no longer be applied to Armenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Gaza, Iran, or Ukraine. In 1957, Ricœur looked to Yugoslavia to “invent new ways for citizens to participate in power” (2021, 9). Now it is all the more our political task to take each particular narrative, each story, and to re-narrativize these in light of the desire to live well with and for others in just institutions.

One's state as Another

Chronologically, the war in Ukraine (starting 28 February 2022), the death of Mahsa Amini (16 September 2022), and 7 October 2023, are examples of three narratives in which the political paradox becomes salient. My two personal narratives of Armenia and Bosnia-Herzegovina are not the same (*idem*) stories. Part of the importance of these events, as with Ricœur's analyses of Budapest, Algeria, Warsaw, or Israel (1991), are their capacity to shock and move the citizen to action. “The paradox arises from both an insistence on the difficulty and uncertainty of action and an affirmation of the urgency to deal with it (because something is at stake in it),” Wolff writes (2021, 14). The particularity of each of these events cannot be universalized into one overarching ideology or meta-narrative. This is the crucial meaning of paradox, which no theory has the capacity to solve. My personal experiences in Armenia

and Bosnia-Herzegovina opened my eyes to what occurs in the rest of the world and moved me to do something about it. What then does it mean to apply Ricœur's notion of narrative identity and his equally important distinction between *idem* and *ipse* in *Oneself as Another* to stories such as Amini's, Rotberg's, or the besieged political state of Ukraine? Put simply, unlike Hume's and Parfit's scepticism with regards to personal identity (Ricœur 1992, 125–39), national identity can be understood through narrative and violence with particular reference to narrative unity. Hume and Parfit do not question the ipseity of the self. They only deny its *idem* quality. But most importantly for our purposes, the identity of the self is analogous to the identity of a polis, that is, a city or country that is unified (Ricœur 2000, 1–10). Telling (or reading) the story of a city, much like a biography, may allow for justice, a universal, to better incorporate the particular. Narratives have the danger of being too open, but they also have the virtue of being universal at the same time as particular. The Islamic regime's reaction to the particular in this case, the body of Mahsa Amini, reveals state-sanctioned violence in which racism and misogyny are equally at play (Delgado 2020, 4; Satrapi 2023, 18–23). This supports Ricœur's claim that just as “the question of personal or narrative identity leads to the question of what it means to be a self” (Pellauer 2007, 90), the question of national or ethnic identity leads to the question of what it means to be a group (Arendt 1951; May 1987; 2010).

Before addressing institutions, narrative identity is introduced in the fifth study of Ricœur's *Oneself as Another*, “Personal Identity and Narrative Identity”, in which he claims “what specifies the self” is

implied “in the power-to-do, at the junction of acting and the agent” (1992, 113). Previously in the study of selfhood, under the aegis of the analytic conception of language concerning semantics and pragmatics, the temporal dimension of the self did not enter in. What was needed was the historical, “the fact that the person of whom we are speaking and the agent on whom the action depends have a history, are their own history” (ibid.). Instead of only considering personal identity, Ricœur’s insights apply to national identity as well. For the case studies above, including Amini and Rotberg, there is no personal identity without religion which coincides with national identity. For example, what makes the same (*idem*) nation over time, is much akin to what makes the same self (*ipse*) over time. Likewise, what happens when identity goes wrong? What kind of reversals and recognitions, in the Aristotelian sense, are needed to avoid or recognize tragedy (such as Mahsa Amini’s and Roi Rotberg’s), when it comes to national identity stories? It is within the framework of narrative theory that the “concrete dialectic of [nationhood] and sameness—and not simply the nominal distinction between the two terms [...] —attains its fullest development” (1992, 114). This touches on the fundamental paradox between *idem* and *ipse*. As a middle ground between descriptive and prescriptive analyses, narrative identity is intended to overcome some of the puzzles and paradoxes found in Locke’s analysis of personal identity (Deckard and Williamson 2020). As when Hume or Parfit consider the metaphysical theory of identity, they are missing its essential practical nature. In the same way that lives are understood in terms of a “whole,” so “narrative theory can genuinely

mediate between description and prescription only if the broadening of the practical field and the anticipation of ethical considerations are implied in the very structure of the act of narrating” (1992, 115). Ricœur’s analysis proposes as an imperative the fact that narrative situates the story of a life between ethics and politics by seeing one’s self or state as another. The violence of the state shocks the self into action.

To be a Ukrainian or a Russian, a Hutu or Tutsi in Rwanda, Québécois or Ontarian in Canada, a Flem or Walloon in Belgium, Finnish or Swedish in Turku (Åbo), a Turk or a Kurd, a Cherokee or an American, requires the imperative of a specific claim about one’s national identity at the intersection of *idem* and *ipse*. The salience of seeing one’s own national identity in light of another’s sense of national identity is never static. I must question my own national identity in light of another’s without necessarily making my story the dominant one, but rather a relational and invitational one. National identity is simultaneously thought of in terms of human individuals and the community, in which individuals only have this identity in terms of the group that they belong to. In a significant sense, then, narrative is unlike “substance” or “structure” (as pointed out in the epigraph). Instead, narrative is something told or recounted to others that gives some purpose or form to events or actions, not just a list or outline, but a relationship. It is always dynamic and intended to tie together disparate moments of a person’s or country’s story—in other words, it is an extremely selective process.

Furthermore, my narrative may contain parts of my own or my country’s story that cannot be proved, but for Ricœur, whether these narratives are “historical”

or “fictional”, these two aspects of the self and the state interweave and cannot be fully disentangled (1992, 114). While careful not to minimize this potential falsity of narrative, the fact is that both historical and fictional accounts tell a story of a country’s identity, that is, they explain what it means to be from a particular place in ways that cannot be achieved without narrative. Told through an art form, such as novels, films, or music, or traditionally through story-telling, these stories become more than just a temporal object. For example, in the films *Hotel Rwanda* or *In the Land of Blood and Honey*, the viewer becomes better acquainted with the genocides that occurred in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina through these narratives many years after these events occurred. Reading a film, a history book, or one’s own birth certificate in which a particular nationality is described is broader than the word may suggest: “It could be spoken, written down, drawn, acted, sung, mimed, danced, filmed, or communicated through some combination of these” (Goldie 2012, 4). There is thus a hermeneutic (interpretative) act concerning what it means to develop a national identity through reading one’s own narrative identity.

Whereas the way in which scholars of identity, specifically ethnic identity, have developed this notion have included a great deal of anthropology, among many other disciplines, the purpose of narrative identity simplifies this structural or semiotic story (Gleach 2002). The important point for Ricœur, unlike a philosopher like Galen Strawson, who believes that identity cannot be composed of things forgotten, is how identity requires stories—a country’s as much as a person’s—even when these

stories cannot be remembered or proved (Strawson 2017, 123–35). Ricœur, as a French citizen, writes to be read by a particular audience (Wolff 2021, 168). There is a “thirst for freedom that drives separatist movements [...] at the origin of our [French] history of 1789 and Valmy, of 1848 and June 1940”, Ricœur writes regarding his own national identity (Wolff 2021, 169). Taking then the model of a French person, “we take as our guide the narrative model of a character who, in ordinary narratives, whether fictional or historical, is emplotted along with the story told” (Ricœur 2007, 79). For Ricœur, there is a “relational character of identity” that cannot be reduced to structure or system (1992, 117). This relational character “conceiv[es] of change as happening to something which does not change”—this is the paradox of identity: permanence in time. A country, much like a self, with all its multifarious narratives, is characterized by sameness over time.²

In an essay by Alain Badiou concerning NATO strikes against Serbia in the 1990s, he asks “Who strikes Whom?” (2006). What kind of identity do we ascribe to the “warring” parties? Ascription is very important to Ricœur, following the legal theorist H. L. A. Hart (Ricœur 1992, 107; 2000, 2). “Is there a form of permanence in time which can be connected to the question ‘who?’ inasmuch as it is irreducible to any question of ‘what?’” (Ricœur 1992, 118). The answer to this question begins with character, and character applies to persons as much as to countries. It is narrative thus, for Ricœur, that must bring these together, but there is a political sense of

2 Cf., however, “the paradox of genocide remembrance” in Seppälä (2016, 27).

violence even in the way in which the narrative is constructed (Taylor 2021, 74–76). With respect to Badiou’s analysis, even if NATO bombed Serbia, and it was French planes that did so, one cannot ascribe the bombing to France and thus one cannot ascribe a particular characteristic to French diplomacy. Applying this same logic, how might Russia or Iran characterize America’s funding Ukraine or Israel? The hermeneutic of reading national identity stories truly becomes salient as regards violence. For this logic to become clearer, I will now turn to the concept of just institutions.

The violence at the heart of just institutions

Summing up Max Weber’s understanding of the Greek conception of ethos, Ricœur writes, “by ‘institution,’ we are to understand here the structure of living together as this belongs to a historical community—people, nation, region, and so forth—a structure irreducible to interpersonal relations and yet bound up with these in a remarkable sense” (1992, 194; cf. 2021, 3–12). Crucial here is that, on the one hand, the state can be defined as a “relation of domination (*Herrschaft*) of man over man on the basis of the means of legitimate violence” or, on the other hand, as “power-in-common” (Weber 1966, 2; Ricœur 1992, 195). This distinction is the point of departure for understanding an analysis of just institutions, which Ricœur had earlier seen in terms of the political paradox (1965, 223–84) and “The Adventures of the State and the Task of Christians” (2021, 3–12): How much force does a country use against its own people in order to retain power? The morality police in Iran are perceived as an institution in Weber’s first sense above as a “gatekeeper” for legiti-

mate violence. Alternatively, the mobilization of the Iranian diaspora may be a prime example of power-in-common, which includes the Arendtian notions of plurality and action in concert (Arendt 1958). In the case of the morality police accosting Mahsa Amini over not wearing the hijab, the state’s oppressive “domination” is absolutely clear. Remembering the movements of the Arab Spring, which began in 2011, and the Occupy Movement as well as Women’s Marches, each country has reacted to their protesters differently and with different degrees of violence. Some countries exercised absolute force against their own citizens, and some allowed for peaceful protest. And yet all institutions perform a kind of “domination” with violence as the basis of their statehood (Ricœur 1998, 97–98). The use of batons, pepper-spray, bullets, tanks, or torture all touch upon this delicate balance between keeping order and allowing freedom.

As the definition of institution indicated, a distinguishing characteristic of institutions is how they bridge the interpersonal and the public through “action in concert” (cf. Yacoubian 2009, 224). Insofar as law, distribution of resources, and equality fully tie in to the term “just”, institutions which claim they are just require proportionate equality. This idea of equality is elemental to any just institution. But equality must also apply to all of humanity, not just any specific nation. The danger that keeps institutions from thriving is the use of violence, or the coercion a country exerts to prove itself right. “The occasion of violence, not to mention the turn toward violence, resides in the power exerted over one will by another will” (Ricœur 1992, 220). Here, the distinction between two notions

of power mentioned above with regards to institutions is that of “power over”, from power to do, or power to act, and power-in-common, “the capacity of the members of a historical community to exercise in an indivisible manner their desire to live together” (ibid.). Violence occurs when “power over” diminishes or destroys the power to do of others. “The power over”, Ricœur continues, “grafted onto the initial dissymmetry between what one does and what is done to another—in other words, what the other suffers—can be held to be the occasion par excellence of the evil of violence” (ibid.). Justice arises or fails in such a case where the question of symmetry is blurred, and punishment exacted. “In all these diverse forms, violence is equivalent to the diminishment or the destruction of the power-to-do of others” (ibid.).

The best response to such evils or violence is through morality: “To all the figures of evil responds the no of morality” (Ricœur 1992, 221). When Russia invades Ukraine or when the morality police silence women, there is a kind of betrayal of the very ethical norm. The reason the Iranian diaspora cries out for justice with overwhelming solidarity, and the Western powers of NATO support Ukraine (with Sweden and Finland joining their ranks), is a moral response to violence. The most ethicists or historians can do is affirm the indignity of the acts of genocide and ask for the perpetrator, as governmental institutions that have outlived those who committed the acts themselves, to acknowledge, ask forgiveness for their actions and try to make amends.³ At the very centre of

3 Cf. Yacoubian (2009, 223): “Recent research on peace psychology has suggested there is

justice, in terms of distributive justice in Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*, but also in Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals*, is the distinction between mine and yours, even at the state level. However, there are two senses of equality at work here: equality versus equity. Should each person or state receive the same amount or what is proportionate to what they deserve? This follows from the logic discussed above of Badiou’s question: Who strikes whom? The golden rule, then, as Ricœur points out, “represents the simplest formula that can serve as a transition between solicitude and the second Kantian imperative” (1992, 222; cf. Dierckx 2015, 41). In the heat of protests and a moral reply to violence, the will of a people against the state appears to question the justice of the institution. It is not enough to trust institutions to always make the best decisions for their populace. Protest movements provide the people with true “power-in-common” to say no to the state.

While asking the question of fair distribution (of land, resources, etc.), the equally profound question of cooperation among individuals within a society, who cannot be entirely disinterested or autonomous, must also be asked. The way in which an institution derives justice from principles has to do with the ontology of the state. A Greek *polis* is not a Roman *republic* let alone a modern nation-state. This is also the way in which scholars such as Johan Galtung (1930–2024) or Enrique Dussel (1934–2023)

an inseparable link between peace building and social justice movements, implying that acts of forgiveness and reconciliation must emanate from ‘equitable and cooperative interpersonal and social arrangements’”. See also Butler (2020); Deckard (2017); Wolff (2021).

transcend a neoliberal economics. Galtung sees the being of the state as based on a concept of equity overcoming structural and cultural violence (2010). His personal experience of peace-building, both from an academic and practical perspective since the 1950s, corresponds to the overcoming of national identities and the way in which these identities promote violence. Dussel, in his *Ethics of Liberation* (2013, 399–412), builds a just institution from Marxist and revisionist history, in which a communicative praxis lies at the heart of society. Ricœur, for his part, points out in his last chapter of *Oneself as Another*, how the term power expresses “either the power-to-act of an agent to whom an action is ascribed or imputed or the power-in-common of a historical community, which we hold to be more fundamental than the hierarchical relations of domination between governing and governed” (1992, 303). This recognition of the violence at the heart of just institutions, what Weber calls “legitimate violence” (2007, 225), is also balanced by a recognition of an equal power on behalf of citizens. For Ricœur, following Hans Jonas on this point, “the political, by reason of its own fragility, is placed under the watch and under the care of the citizens” (2021, 64). The way in which power-in-common is now conceived beckons us anew into the power of love, as when Ricœur writes about the movement from “thou shalt not kill” to “thou shalt love” (Deckard 2017, 575). As Thiriez-Arjangi and the diaspora responded to the injustice of Iran’s morality police and Doyan’s eulogy concerns Israel, so too must religious peace-builders respond in love to the Moslem Amini’s and Jewish Rotberg’s deaths.

Re-narrativizing political philosophy

The history of political philosophy enables a deeper understanding of this conception of just institutions. When Arendt, Ricœur, Dussel or Galtung write about the polis, or the nation-state, this background is assumed. They at times expect their reader to have read the entirety of political philosophy to follow their argument. I can only briefly tell part of this story insofar as the case studies of reading national identity stories builds on this narrative. Political philosophy, then, not only illuminates what it is about building a polis that is constructive, but it also reveals deep rifts in the Enlightenment optimism of achieving a better society through knowledge, history, or philosophy. The way in which the narrative is told entails both what Ricœur has called the political paradox (1965, 247–70) and a prescription for action following Weber’s sociology (Ricœur 2007, 133–48). Beginning with Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates asks the question of fellow city-dwellers, “what is justice?” All of the answers he receives, such as paying what you owe (Plato 1997, 331e), benefiting friends and harming enemies (ibid., 334a), or most famously Thrasymachus’ advantage of the stronger party (ibid., 339a), Socrates is easily able to debunk or criticize. Justice cannot be reduced to a technique (*techné*) or an easily digestible formula. In fact, by the end of the *Republic*, the state of harmony in the soul mirrors the city, and justice lies in the parts of the soul/city being in harmony with each other. Akin to a mathematician, teacher, doctor, or musician, they must try out cures that do not work before finding what does work or is at harmony with the system (see ibid., 340a–342e). As early as Plato, all authority, government,

and coercion is centred in a small city (the Republic) about the size of Athens in the fourth century BCE. Plato's system, which applies primarily to a polis is very difficult if not impossible to apply to modern-day nation-states.

Aristotle, in books VIII–IX of *Nicomachean Ethics*, argues for the parallelism of friendship and justice. Whereas it was “harmony” that was crucial for Plato, Aristotle thinks in terms of equity (1941, 1158b30) or what he earlier calls distributive justice (ibid.: 1131a10ff.). The measure of all friendship for Aristotle is the mother, whom he holds up as being the most honourable: “It seems to lie in loving rather than in being loved, as is indicated by the delight mothers take in loving; for some mothers hand over their children to be brought up, and so long as they know their fate they love them and do not seek to be loved in return, but seem to be satisfied if they see them prospering” (ibid.: 1159a27ff.). Already, it appears that justice may be better modelled on friendship (Derrida 1997) than domination, coercion, or authority: the mother(land) rather than the father(land). Whereas Plato modelled the city on the parts of the soul, Aristotle models it on relations between people, like the family.

The seventeenth-century political philosopher Thomas Hobbes is well known to be one of the first to articulate a theory that starts from the “state of nature”. As one commentator writes, “humans, including both moderates and dominators, because of their very nature, are condemned to violence in the state of nature because the behaviour that leads to such violence is frequently rational [...] given the circumstances of nature” (Brandon 2008, 28). The

claim is that the very essence of human nature is seemingly rational violent behaviour. In fact, to mention one of the most famous Hobbesian claims, in the state of nature, “life is nasty, brutish, and short”, and the most primary passion of all humans is fear. One cannot have peace or conflict without understanding human striving and desires. Unlike the ancient or medieval theories of the state (*polis* or *civitas*), Hobbes is particularly modern in centring his theory on the human being as such. It is because the human feels fear that he becomes violent. In other words, violence is born of self-preservation or self-interest, a need or drive to preserve one's own state of being; or at least this is the narrative that has been told about Hobbes. Nevertheless, the flipside of this theory of human nature is that one should overcome this fear and leave the state of nature. This means that if “it is rational for humans to behave violently in the state of nature, it must be made rational for them to behave peacefully if any change is to be brought about” (Brandon 2008, 28).

In an attempt not to oversimplify, it is possible now to look in retrospect to see that many of the twentieth-century atrocities are products of Max Weber's first definition of the state as domination—influenced as it is by modern political philosophy, starting with Hobbes. This could be summed up in “the principle of sovereignty, which Grotius identified as the foundation of state security [and] which proved to be an impediment to the development of the structures of international law that he believed were needed to enhance collective security” (Cortright 2008, 49). In other words, when each country has a self-interested “me-first” attitude instead of a more collective “we” attitude, the results are disastrous. “The clash

between individual sovereignty and collective responsibility has been and remains a fundamental contradiction within the nation-state system, limiting the prospects for cooperative peace” (ibid.). Narrative identities make sense on the basis of the composition of developments in political philosophy over many centuries on the matters of nationalism and sovereignty that have affected (in my view, negatively) contemporary identity.

Even if before 1914 internationalism (or, to put it in Kant’s terms, “cosmopolitanism”) was at its peak, but “failed to prevent the horrors of WWI” (Cortright 2008, 52), it does not mean it is not possible to look to internationalism over nationalism as one way of helping solve the “nation-state” failure: namely, to see one’s state and national identity in terms of Another State. There is a continual conflict between primordialism, nationalism, and internationalism that cuts to the core of the distinction between power and domination. A similar conflict exists between the polis, the republic, and the nation-state. “The virtue of justice, in the sense of *isotes* in Pericles and in Aristotle, aims precisely at balancing this relation, that is, at placing domination under the control of power-in-common” (Ricoeur 1992, 257). As seen in the comments of Azadeh Thiriez-Arjangi above regarding the Iranian diaspora and movements from Occupy to Women’s Marches, the “feeling” or pathos of home, belonging, rootedness is what is shared. Following Hannah Arendt and Ricoeur, the Republic is the real power of politics, but the power on behalf of the citizen is fragile. “Whence the paradox of the political: the polis, in the broadest sense of the word, is the living organism capable of conferring duration,

permanence, on all things human, in themselves so ephemeral, so fragile” (2021, 72), Ricoeur writes. Or as Galtung has said, “America? I love the Republic, but I hate the Empire” (Zarni 2024).

Conclusion

To conclude, I believe that the notion of nation-state and its relationship to political philosophy, as it has been handed down to us by the nineteenth-century conceptions of nationalism and sovereignty following Hobbes needs to be re-imagined and re-narrativized and given new life in terms of both senses of identity, *idem* and *ipse*. One way of re-narrativizing identity is to think of the state as a motherland, a polis, or a republic in place of a nation-state. Listening to stories such as Mahsa Amini’s, or what occurred on 7 October on the Gazan border and since, the religious peace-builders in Bosnia, and the narratives of conflict in Ukraine, the religious peace-builders’ response may build on a matriarchal and matrilineal sense of sovereignty in which a mother must allow for growth, healing, and separation but also bonding (Lefler and Belt 2022, 16–28). This is not a disguise or a mask for patriarchal domination. Following Ricoeur’s “little ethics”, religious peace-builders, whom I have discussed here, contribute towards peace and understanding through re-narrativizing the challenge of friendship as much as enmity in seeing one’s state as Another. Ricoeur has emphasized the importance of narrative identity as the responsibility of the citizen. “The citizen has to know that the great polis is fragile, that it rests on a horizontal tie constitutive of the desire-to-live-together” (2021, 73). In each narrative, there is a story of solidarity through non-

violence at work, unmasking the domination of the state. Thus, to begin to answer the question of narrative and violence posed in just institutions, I have begun here to uncover the ontology of the second of Weber's notions of the state, the nature of "the force more powerful"—power-in-common—over against the nature of "power over". Following Ricœur's imperative of the golden rule, the life of Mahsa Amini, the eulogy of Moshe Dayan, and so many other tragic instances are places for stories and hope, "a voice of conscience" that does not exclude thinking anew with "a genuine capacity for discovery" (Ricœur 1992, 342) in the possibility of revolution. But it must also include the deep recognition of the fragile reality of the political paradox, the perplexity involved in political action, or what Thiriez-Arjangi calls "the question of egos and emotions" that can so easily be silenced or, even worse, reduced to bloodshed and death.⁴ ■

4 Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the conferences "Nation, State, Motherland, Ideology of State", in Tsaghkadzor, Republic of Armenia; at the Peace Theories Commission of the International Peace Research Association in Istanbul, Turkey; at the North Carolina Philosophical Society in Greenville, NC (USA), and at "Peace and Understanding: A Ricœurian View", at Åbo Akademi University, Turku (Åbo), Finland. Deep thanks to the audiences and the comments offered at each of these places and to the two peer reviewers, Clive Tolley, and Johanna Havimäki for their suggestions.

Michael Deckard is a settler colonial professor of philosophy and programme coordinator for philosophy at Lenoir-Rhyne University in Western North Carolina. He received a Ph. D. from KU Leuven, Belgium, in 2007. He has taught



courses in historical and environmental aesthetics, ethics, social and political philosophy, philosophy of religion, hermeneutics and phenomenology, applied ethics (particularly medical ethics and the ethics of war and peace) and Native American philosophy. He has three co-edited books, *Philosophy Begins in Wonder* (2010), *The Science of Sensibility* (2012), and *Le mal et la symbolique: Ricœur lecteur de Freud* (2022). Recently he guest-edited a special issue of the *Journal of the Philosophy of Emotion* on the mind-body politic (2024). This article is part of a forthcoming book, *A Character in Search of an Author: Restoring the Self and the State in Cases of Genocide and Rape*. He was a past peace-theories commissions convener for the International Peace Research Association and has lived in many conflict regions such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Russia. His current research concerns re-narrativizing and decolonializing early modern conceptions of power and sovereignty by incorporating Native and Indigenous voices. He spends his free time cycling, hiking, and baking as well as taking part in activism in his community.

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