

Alison Scott-Baumann

Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion.

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People who have not read Paul Ricoeur have usually heard two things about him. One is that he is associated with the idea of a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (1). This phrase, which Ricoeur coined, reflects a belief that the real meanings of our thoughts, experiences, and institutions may not be transparent to us. They may be distorted by ideology and false consciousness, and as a result, interpreting them is an exercise in suspicion, an uncovering of hidden meanings. The second is that Ricoeur is a conciliatory thinker, someone who always looks for the truth in rival positions and who tries to synthesize opposed views. This tendency puts him out of step with his more polemical contemporaries, especially with ‘postmodern trends of a pessimistic tenor, which he himself rejected’ (1). In short, Ricoeur looks like a strange hybrid. He invented a popular label for our age’s critical turn, but he also seems to be a conservative thinker who prizes reconciliation over critique. Alison Scott-Baumann challenges both of these orthodoxies. She argues that Ricoeur’s relation to the hermeneutics of suspicion is less clear and more complex than many assume. She also argues that Ricoeur’s work contains greater resources for critique than is often recognized, since many of his substantive philosophical views are motivated by suspicion of one sort or another. The Ricoeur who emerges from this book is ‘a radical rebel, who can take his place alongside the best activists, showing us that we can face up to the discrepancies, tensions and spaces between meaning and belief’ (184). Scott-Baumann’s Ricoeur is a more subtle thinker than many people realize, and one with more to say to so-called ‘postmodern’ thinkers than we might think.

The book consists of ten chapters arranged in a loose chronological order. They give an overview of the main phases of Ricoeur’s career, from his student days to his last published works. The first three chapters describe his early work. They deal, respectively, with Ricoeur’s youthful studies of Descartes and Husserl; with his writings from the 1950s on evil, symbolism, and the will; and with his engagements with Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Chapter 4 contains the heart of Scott-Baumann’s argument. It looks closely at what Ricoeur does and does not say about suspicion, especially in his influential 1966 book *Freud and Philosophy*. Chapter 5 discusses Ricoeur’s hermeneutical philosophy from the 1970s and 1980s, focusing particularly on *The Rule of Metaphor* and *Time and Narrative*. Chapters 6-8 offer highly original discussions of three philosophical methods used in Ricoeur’s mature work. Chapter 9 extends the discussion to Ricoeur’s last books, *Memory, History, Forgetting* and *The Course of Recognition*. Chapter 10 concludes the book by summarizing the role that suspicion plays in Ricoeur’s main philosophical positions.

Chapter 4 is the most original part of the book, so it deserves the closest consideration. It looks carefully at what Ricoeur says about suspicion, and at the way this topic informs his approach to philosophy. Scott-Baumann begins by distinguishing two phrases that appear in Ricoeur's writings from the 1960s: 'masters of suspicion' and 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (58). The former is Ricoeur's name for Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. These thinkers revolutionize our view of interpretation, offering methods for 'unmasking the deceit' (60) at work in religion, social relations, and our own thoughts. A hermeneutics of suspicion, by contrast, is an interpretive program, one grounded in the belief that interpretation *just is* an exercise in suspicion. The masters of suspicion teach that there *is* deceit; a hermeneutics of suspicion acts as if there is *nothing but* deceit. Ricoeur is the source of both terms, but he uses the phrase 'hermeneutics of suspicion' only briefly. He never exactly endorses a hermeneutics of suspicion, and he eventually stops using the term altogether. Surprisingly, though, many people conflate these terms. When they see Ricoeur's references to the masters of suspicion, they conclude that his approach to interpretation must be relentlessly suspicious as well. Thus they are puzzled when they open his books and find a thinker who seems conciliatory, even conservative. Scott-Baumann points out that many of those who attribute a hermeneutics of suspicion to Ricoeur do so without textual support. They either cite passages from his works that do not actually endorse a hermeneutics of suspicion, as they claim; or else they pick up the idea from secondary literature, without consulting Ricoeur at all.

So what is Ricoeur's attitude toward suspicion? He has learned too much from Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud to interpret naively or uncritically. He realizes that experiences and institutions are often not what they seem, and that any responsible thinker will be suspicious of them. He warns, however, that treating interpretation as nothing but an exercise in suspicion leads to 'cynicism or distress, or simply *stuckness*' (65). Ricoeur sees Foucault as a good example of this stuckness. Foucault is not content to 'discover a hidden reality operative beyond appearances' (66-7); he acts as though 'there is no deep reality at work' (67), nothing behind appearances. Ricoeur sees this unchecked suspicion as self-defeating and unhelpful. Suspicion is productive only when it is 'exactly proportional to the expressions of false consciousness' (70)—no less than is required by specific systems of deception, but no more. This does not make Ricoeur naive or uncritical. Scott-Baumann argues that suspicion plays an important role in his work, but a positive one, as a 'condition of possibility' (73). As Ricoeur sees it, we are right to be suspicious of certain institutions—religion and law, for example. But we should use suspicion as a spur to a deeper understanding of the institutions in question. Instead of being held captive by suspicion, we should strive to make it productive.

Scott-Baumann argues that the way Ricoeur makes suspicion productive is by simultaneously using three philosophical methods, each of which is intended to meet 'the need for critical challenge without excessive use of suspicion' (4). The book devotes a chapter to each. Chapter 6 deals with Ricoeur's use of 'linguistic analysis' (97). It

discusses some familiar topics, such as his theory of narrative, as well as a few lesser known ones, such as his writings on parable and his work as a translator. Chapter 7 describes the role of ‘dialectics’ (114) in Ricoeur’s thought. It sheds significant new light on Ricoeur’s dialectical way of philosophizing, especially on the way he ‘invites us to delay our decision-making for as long as possible’, and thereby ‘introduces temporality into the [dialectical] relationship’ (116). Chapter 8 discusses Ricoeur’s attempts at ‘philosophical anthropology’ (135), both in early works such as *Fallible Man* and in late ones such as *Oneself as Another*. Scott-Baumann’s recognition that Ricoeur has several methods, and her willingness to discuss all of them, is a welcome addition to the literature on him, since many of his readers—including, I must admit, myself—focus on one to the exclusion of others. It does, however, seem odd to describe philosophical anthropology as *a* method. Philosophical anthropology is clearly one of Ricoeur’s main interests. But it seems to be less a method than a domain that Ricoeur investigates using *many* methods, starting with phenomenological description.

Scott-Baumann is an exceptionally well-informed reader of Ricoeur. She gives detailed discussions of works from every stage of his career, whereas most commentators focus on a few texts or a few stages. She is also familiar with Ricoeur’s unpublished manuscripts as well as his published works. Her knowledge of Ricoeur’s unpublished writings on negation is especially helpful, since it sheds helpful new light on his use of dialectics. The book’s biggest strength is its comprehensiveness: no matter which aspect of Ricoeur’s thought interests you, you will find a detailed discussion of it here. This comprehensiveness also presents a challenge to the reader, since the book covers so much ground that parts of it are hard to navigate. This is especially so in the first two chapters, where the theme of suspicion is not yet at the forefront. That said, three types of readers will find the book particularly helpful. Those seeking an overview of Ricoeur’s career as a whole, a framework for making sense of specific texts, will find a good one here. Second, readers interested in some of the neglected themes from Ricoeur’s work—negation and translation, for example—will find some of the only discussions of them in the literature. Finally, the book will be of great interest to those seeking to clarify Ricoeur’s relation to so-called ‘postmodern’ philosophy. It shows that while Ricoeur is not a straightforward practitioner of the hermeneutics of suspicion, neither is he a reactionary blind to the need for critique. His work is more interesting and more useful than that. By pointing this out, Alison Scott-Baumann has put Ricoeur’s readers in her debt.

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