

A Hermeneutics for the Human Barnyard:

The Nascent Political Radicality of Gadamer's Theory of Experience

"The toad beneath the barrow knows exactly where each tooth point goes."

Rudyard Kipling

In any family, group, community, or society to which any of us belong, we have to hope that the contentious differences of belief and value that almost invariably arise among us as finite creatures coming from limited perspectives can be approached with dialogic openness. In the middle part of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer explicates how someone does this.¹ The description of the dialogic principles of openness in this section is pitched at a level that allows for a general (i.e., universal) application—not just textual interpretation or artistic judgment—and because the descriptive model Gadamer employs to bring the theory to this level of generality is that of ordinary conversation, it translates quite easily to civic debate and deliberation. Gadamer always felt comfortable writing about the understanding that comes about in face-to-face conversation, since his chief model for the process of seeking-an-understanding had been from the beginning the Platonic dialogue, a ready analog for a universal hermeneutics. So it was relatively straightforward for him to transfer his hermeneutic theory from its traditional focus on texts and works of art to the immediacy of conversation — a universal terrain “of human life and communication,” which included public life, “where communication as the exchange of words in use structures the whole of social reality and encompasses the cultural features of this reality.”²

¹ This model is explicated mainly in the section “Elements of a Theory of Hermeneutic Experience.”

In the 1994 translation the main texts are on pp. 266-68, 291-311, and 346-79.

² “Reflections on My Philosophical Journey,” 29; “The Conflict of Interpretations,” 221.

That this universal scope did not have much specificity in Gadamer's vision of the political is patent. Although he would eventually develop his humanistic principles of social reasoning out into areas such as health care and education, the sphere of public and political deliberation remained at quite an abstract level. To the extent that he had a trenchant social critique, it was directed at the technical rationality of our age, which is certainly a valuable contribution, but it did not extend to a deep analysis of political power in all its dimensions. He acknowledged in passing "real life factors conditioning human life, such as hunger, love, labor, and domination," but the public sphere for him remained pitched on the high ground of "our speaking to each other and listening to each other . . . our finding a common language."³ Gadamer was himself candid about the limits his own areas of expertise placed on his ability to appreciate the practical ramifications of this transposition. In a 1985 interview he was asked whether his work "can be of direct help in making political decisions and forming moral judgements," and he responded:

As you know, I am located with a special cultural tradition. We might loosely call it romanticism. My field is the humanities: the classics, art and literature. This is not say that I have no interest in social question; but they concern me more as a citizen than as a philosopher. I have, of course, my experiences, social and political, and these helped to form my convictions. I would not connect these immediately with my philosophical ideas.⁴

Rather than faulting Gadamer for this deficit of expertise, I simply want to ask if his dialogic principles do usefully translate to the hurly burly of real-world politics that Kenneth Burke called

³ Gadamer, "Reflections," 28-29. I am not persuaded by Robert Sullivan's deeply argued thesis that Gadamer's political theory does lend itself to this translation effectively (Sullivan, *Political Hermeneutics, passim*).

⁴ *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, 31.

“the Wrangel of the Market Place, the flurries and flare-ups of the Human Barnyard, the Give and Take, the wavering line of pressure and counterpressure, the Logomachy, the onus of ownership, the Wars of Nerves.”⁵

My own hope is that a positive answer to this question would be valuable, especially in our current political era. In the United States, ideological polarization has entrenched itself in the body politic as the central reality, with structures and technologies of public communication, whether unintentionally or by design, deepening and exacerbating ideological tensions, and deep pocketed private interests more and more willing to tolerate anti-democratic impulses. In this context the hermeneutic ideal of dialogic openness might seem quaintly naïve. The institutions that were created to temper, broker, or negotiate political differences and make understanding possible — the courts, political parties, the media — have been so weakened by this assault that they are in danger of being entirely coopted or of simply breaking.

Moreover, the entire tenor of Gadamer’s approach and orientation, early and late, was manifestly idealistic, from a political perspective. This more than anything else, I believe, is the reason his star dimmed so precipitously, after such a meteoric ascension, in the cultural firmament of intellectual celebrity in the last half of the twentieth century. From the time of the English translation of *Truth and Method* through perhaps late into the 1970s hermeneutics had the cachet in theory circles of what Gadamer described deprecatingly as a “wonder-weapon.”⁶ But lapping this privileged reputation in the period formed by the revolutionary passions of the sixties, intellectual culture hungered more for the spirit of critique, for theoretical tools designed to pry open and expose the mechanisms of privilege, interest, and power that organize our social realities and

⁵ *Rhetoric of Motives*, 23.

⁶ “Conflict of Interpretations,” 220.

political economies. A perspective so fervently turned toward dialogue and coming-to-an-understanding seemed quickly out of tune.

And yet we should remember that the impulse animating hermeneutics going all the way back to its dissident beginnings in Martin Luther is a remonstrance against the ossified presumptions of a system of norms—not just a mistaken presupposition, but the network of values that supports it. That is all still there in Gadamer, who grounds hermeneutic logic in a prejudice that is surprised by the strangeness of reality. The event of understanding, he never tires of telling us, is a transformation of the interlocutor by a voice from without.

I imagine that most of us believe it is crucial especially in this moment that societies continue trying to cultivate the values and habits of dialogic openness, if only as a regulative ideal, a north star, so that as we come face to face with an increasingly brutal human barnyard, to use Kenneth Burke's famous image, we can figure out how to navigate between idealistic and calculative communication, which means understanding the complex interplay of both registers. It is my contention that an effective hermeneutic theory and practice, in the political realm, has to include this competence, that there is a place *within* Gadamer's formulation of this practice that contains what I believe to be the kernel for such a bridge, a way to navigate between the cultivation of openness and the analysis of labor and domination, the pathologies of communication, and the distortions and manipulations of discourse structures.

The kernel I am referring to is not the role that *Vorurteil* plays in Gadamer's explication as the deep unconscious, cultural, or historical background of our finite, sedimented perspectives. We need that analysis of course, but what I regard as even more to the point is what happens when such hidden and sedimented horizons collide. If we look closely at the exposition of hermeneutic experience in *Truth and Method*, what Gadamer calls understanding is a determinate process that contains *three* moments: (1) an initial state or condition (the complacency of settled presumptions),

(2) a rude interruption of that unthinking trust (a counterthrust coming from the alien other which we had not taken into account), and (3) a growth of consciousness (the opening of horizons that this friction encourages). It is the second of these moments that I wish to identify as having the greatest potential for an extension of the hermeneutic franchise. To show why, I will explicate that moment carefully, and then say how it can be opened up to its radical possibilities.

Moment One: “The Smooth Front of Popular Opinion”

The first of the three moments is, as we know, one of the greatest themes of 20th century hermeneutics—the identification of the structuring presence of an invisible background of culture and history that is insensibly directing our understanding and acting. This principle, slowly emerging as central to Nietzsche, Freud and Marx, takes a hermeneutic character in Heidegger. We should remember that the most frequently cited illustration from *Being & Time*, the broken hammer, and all of §16 (“How the Worldly Character of the Environment Announces Itself”) is meant to help us understand how the world so rudely announces itself, how it obtrudes on our complacent presupposition and reconfigures our perspectives, how the rupture in the smooth front of our normal expectations causes us to rethink our relationship to things.⁷

Distinct from the masters of suspicion, Heidegger developed the positive as well as the negative side of these hidden and receding continents of truth in all their phenomenological and hermeneutic richness. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer continued to emphasize this double-sided nature of our sedimented biases—much to the consternation of his critics—as a necessary starting point for understanding. Indeed, most of the first third of *Truth and Method* attempts to disarm in advance the anticipated critical attacks on the conventional role of *Bildung*, *sensus communis*, taste, tradition, and norms by showing how they all, as products of a prudential humanism operating

⁷ 102-07.

outside of the monological reductions of Enlightenment rationalism, involve flexible attributes of openness and self-correction in “the constant task of ‘renewed adaptation to new situations’.”⁸

Gadamer makes one exception to this inventive flexibility of adaptation. The stubborn close-mindedness of popular opinion (*doxa*) seems immune to self-correction:

It is the power of opinion against which it is so hard to obtain an admission of ignorance. It is opinion that suppresses questions. Opinion [*Meinung*] has a curious tendency to propagate itself. It would always like to be the general opinion [*Allgemeinheit*].⁹

Indeed, the essence of popular opinion is that it “does not reach the state of openness but precludes reaching it by retaining false presuppositions.”¹⁰ The “tyranny of hidden prejudices” arises from a defective reliance on authority: “Either the respect we have for others and their authority leads us into error, or else an overhastiness in ourselves.”¹¹

As an outlier, popular opinion’s “blind obedience to commands” is quickly subsumed under the dialectical movement of prejudice and its more hopeful hermeneutic.¹² This is where I want to make my intervention. Had Gadamer rested a bit longer with the kind of *doxa* that feeds on the

⁸ 26.

⁹ *Truth and Method*, 366. Plato is interested in the problematic relation of *aletheia* (philosophical truth) to *doxa* (common or public opinion). Gadamer transposes this Platonic theme to the modern public sphere (*öffentlicher Bereich*), and plays on the linguistic connection between *Meinung* (opinion, sentiment) and *Allgemeinheit* (the general, common, or universal). He is also thinking of Heidegger’s concept of the open (*das Offene*).

¹⁰ 364.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 270, 271.

¹² *Ibid.*, 279.

retention of false suppositions, he would have had to excavate more thoroughly what it is that counteracts the understanding's "constant adaptation to new situations." Such work, in my view, has to be done, and I believe it can be done within Gadamer's hermeneutic framework. But first we need to finish outlining the three moments as they stand.

Moment Two: Disruption

The second moment of hermeneutic experience, the shock that upsets our complacent presumptions, presuppositions and prejudices, is what Gadamer describes as a *Stoß* (an unexpected blow from without).¹³ When that happens, suddenly "something is not what we supposed it to be."¹⁴ The embeddedness of our learned behaviors, normative education, and ideological worldviews is often so great that it takes a fateful confrontation, a rude awakening, to break through its calcified layers. Gadamer consistently refers to this breach or break as "a painful and disagreeable experience," a rude jolt or hammer blow that "sets us back on our feet."¹⁵ It is "a shattering and a demolition of the familiar," "something by which we are struck, by which we are awakened."¹⁶

Drawing on a topos that runs from Hegel and Fichte up through Heidegger and Benjamin, Gadamer goes to great lengths to describe this psychology of the sudden blow (*Stoß*) that sets us back on our heels, that pulls us up short, a disconcerting or even mortifying confrontation with reality: "It is impossible to make ourselves aware of a prejudice while it is constantly operating unnoticed, but only when it is, so to speak, provoked."¹⁷ This scrambling effect works on the level

¹³ This is a word with a long history in Germany philosophy that I will be telling elsewhere.

¹⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 354.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 356.

¹⁶ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics* 104; *Hermeneutics, Religion, & Ethics*, 25.

¹⁷ *Truth and Method*, 299.

society as well — Only such interruptions can cause “a breach in the smooth front of popular opinion.”¹⁸ Otherwise, if “a person fails to hear what the other person is really saying, he will not be able to fit what he has misunderstood into the range of his own various expectations of meaning.”¹⁹ The encounter is not localized; it is an instruction in being the-kind-of-person-who is remains open to this kind of work, who as a result of the experience becomes “radically undogmatic.”²⁰

Gadamer’s original exemplar for this reversal is the encounter with a great work of art or literature. A great work “shakes us because we are always unprepared and defenseless when exposed to the overpowering impact of” what it is saying to us.²¹ “Suddenly we become aware” of something awry in our complacent assumptions about what we are seeing and hearing and are “brought to a standstill.”²² This state of discomposure is only resolved by reorienting ourselves to the work. But the work this experience triggers in undermining us is profound. The experience of truly great art is transformative. It commands us: “You must change your life.”²³

In the second part of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer relates this sudden blow from without, the push-back that wasn’t expected, to his notion of hermeneutic experience: “[O]nly something different and unexpected can provide someone who has experience with a new one.”²⁴ Gadamer’s universalist doctrine of practical experience is firmly planted in the Hegelian logic of negative

¹⁸ Ibid., 366.

¹⁹ Ibid., 269.

²⁰ Ibid., 335.

²¹ Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful*, 37.

²² Ibid., 42.

²³ Ibid., 34.

²⁴ 535.

determination, a connection about which Gadamer is explicit: “[E]xperience has the structure of a reversal of consciousness.”²⁵ Just as the adventure of the dialectic in Hegel is moved by the force of immanent contradiction, so the motor engine of hermeneutic understanding is the self-correction of prejudice: “Thus the experiencing consciousness has reversed its direction—i.e., it has turned back on itself.”²⁶ A person who suffers a reversal of expectations and benefits by it “has acquired a new horizon.”²⁷

It is the sheer force of such confrontations that sparks the kind of self-examination that leads to a change of heart or perspective, a worldview or paradigm shift. The instigation of the operation “lies in the impact by which [that initial counter-thrust] overwhelms us.”²⁸ I want to stress that what Gadamer describes here is more severe than what typically goes by the name of interruption, which is why I have chosen to call this moment “disruption.” What scrambles a perspective, a worldview, an ideology, what encourages a person to reconfigure their entire outlook, is genuinely disruptive.

And here there is an important difference between Hegel and Gadamer on reversal, which Gadamer makes clear in his description of the “radically undogmatic” person.²⁹ Hegel defines experience as the process by which speculation’s “new, true object emerges,” so that not only is something “not what we supposed it to be,” but the “new object contains the truth about the old

²⁵ Ibid., 354.

²⁶ Ibid., 354.

²⁷ Ibid., 354.

²⁸ *Relevance*, 34.

²⁹ *Truth and Method*, 355.

one."³⁰ By contrast, experience for Gadamer does not mean the attainment of full knowledge, but rather a recognition of one's own ignorance, which places us only on the way to a broader understanding. Thus a reversal of expectations is not the immediate acquisition of a new horizon, a new paradigm. The speculative movement is the interruption of determination, of the subsumption of an instance under a category, but only that. The determination of meaning "is blocked," "arrested," and as a result "forces us to go back to the subject".³¹ We are then only in "a transition to something else."³² The more accurate model for Gadamer is Socrates, who leads us for a space of time lost into "bewilderment," where we will need time to reconfigure our common sense.³³

Now, the transposition from Hegelian dialectic to Gadamerian conversation also involves a change of scale. The reversals that Hegel typically analyzed work at the level of history, at those epochal phase changes in which the cultural tectonic plates shift – the French Revolution, the passage from a religious to a secular society, etc. Gadamer finds that same Hegelian dynamic of reversal in the structure of ordinary conversation, or in our encounters with a text or work of art. His description of the experienced person, the *phronimos*, makes that shift of scale and scope clear:

That is why a person who is called experienced has become so not only *through* experiences but is also open *to* new experiences. . . . the experience person proves to be . . . someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the

³⁰ Ibid., 354.

³¹ *Relevance*, 34.

³² Ibid., 20.

³³ Ibid., 24.

knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them.³⁴

But even though hermeneutic reversal typically works at the level of debate and discussion rather than on the scale of history, it is for Gadamer analogously transformative, in large cases and small, “an increase of being.”³⁵ It turns out that, by making this leap of scale, Gadamer can then argue that this dynamic is a universal phenomenon that “belongs to human experience of the world in general.”³⁶ Indeed, he says, it is “common to all modes of understanding.”³⁷

Moment Three: The Positive Outcome of Hermeneutic Experience

The experience that we undergo when our presuppositions are exposed requires some repair work from us. The breach in the smooth front of our presuppositions is a kind of fateful suffering, the kind of experience that human beings are destined to have in order to learn what life has to teach us: “This experience is always to be acquired, and from it no one can be exempt . . . [E]xperience in this sense inevitably involves many disappointments of one’s expectations and only thus is experience is acquired.”³⁸ The *Stoß*, the mechanism that triggers a shift from prejudice to openness, is therefore the proximate cause of the third moment, the dawning of understanding: “It is impossible to make ourselves aware of a prejudice while it is constantly operating unnoticed, but only when it is, so to speak, provoked.”³⁹ But then we become aware, or at least partially aware, and

³⁴ *Truth and Method*, 355.

³⁵ *Relevance*, 35.

³⁶ *Truth and Method*, xxi.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, xxxi.

³⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 356.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 299.

are taught by the experience to be more aware of our prejudices in general. It is our repeated exposure to such rude corrections that create the kind of person that Gadamer considers prudent in the Aristotelian sense — hard experience accrues to and becomes resident in the experienced person as a person. We learn to cultivate a *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*. This is the hopeful side of hermeneutics, and again, as I say, I embrace this teaching and make it foundational to my own pedagogy, because I think we owe it to the students we are entrusted with to offer a standard toward which we might all aspire.

The Need for an Adjustment to Gadamer's Formula

The vulnerability I find in Gadamer's theory of understanding, when applied to the polis of today, is how little applicable, in reality, the psychic shock of being pulled up short, stopped in our tracks, disabused of our cherished beliefs, is susceptible, in the political context, to an opening of horizons. Is the cultivation of openness (a rarified virtue indeed) any match for the ideological blindness in even the most well-meaning individuals and enlightened communities, let alone the power of entrenched belief systems in the body politic, which carry most of the agency we attribute in the liberal imaginary to deliberative reason? How realistic for a political hermeneutics is Gadamer's idealistic vision of an "openness to the other" that comes with the "readiness" of "the hermeneutically trained mind"?⁴⁰ Gadamer himself acknowledged that his hermeneutics was not a theory of the political, rooted as it was in the traditions of art and philosophy, so I am proposing an adjustment rather than an amendment, because I take Gadamer's claim for universality seriously.

This adjustment involves how precisely we become "aware of our own bias," which is the issue Gadamer tackles in his "Elements of a Theory of Hermeneutic Experience."⁴¹ Michael Fanone,

⁴⁰ Ibid., 361, 362, 299.

⁴¹ Ibid., 269.

the capital police officer who was beaten by MAGA rioters on January 6, 2021, described his efforts to confront rioters with the folly of their blind loyalty:

I thought maybe naïvely that being a former Trump supporter, a police officer, a white guy, that maybe I could communicate with some other trump supporters as to why, you know, how I was bamboozled so to speak, lied to by the former president, but unfortunately their . . . messaging apparatus is strong enough to withstand even my country ass.⁴²

As we all know, confronting someone with a blindness in their presuppositions is just as likely to put them on the defensive, to excite rationalizations, to push them deeper into their cherished investments. So undoing the accretion of embedded, self-reinforcing frames, I would say in life in general, is a much bigger project than hermeneutic theory entertains.

The genius of the hegemonic propaganda of mass politics is the mutually reinforcing relation of ideological identification with the structural privilege of invisible power, which work together to encourage and reinforce the closing of the public mind. To apply the ideal of coming-to-an-understanding to the modern political realm will require far more than what Gadamer calls a “hermeneutically trained consciousness.”⁴³ The trained skills of the interpreter, he taught us, “consist in correcting (and refining) the way in which constantly exercised understanding understands itself.”⁴⁴ A hermeneutically trained consciousness, he concluded, is one in which “all that is asked is that we remain open to the meaning of the other.”⁴⁵ My call for an amendment to Gadamer’s model,

⁴² Interview on *Deadline Whitehouse*, MSNBC, April 26, 2024.

⁴³ *Truth and Method*, 269.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 268.

if it is to become useful as a theory of the political, requires that we question what lead Gadamer to say “all that is asked.” A hermeneutics adjusted to the political reality that you and I live in needs to include far more in its model to unwind “the tyranny of hidden prejudices that makes us deaf to” the perspectives of others.⁴⁶

To be sure, Gadamer is very clear that, for understanding to occur, “no like-mindedness is necessary,” no “mysterious communion of souls.”⁴⁷ To put this in political terms, we can have a deliberative practice that is not based on consensus, as long as we respect democratic governance and the rule of law.⁴⁸ But this also means that what Heidegger and Gadamer called attunement, the resonance to be found in the voice of history and tradition, the historical and cultural resonance of linguistic being, is far too idealistic a description for the polis of today. Not being focused on this political truth, Gadamer gave only cursory attention the sapce in which almost the entirety of our political life occurs—the terrain of contestation that Burke described as the wrangle of human barnyard, the onus of ownership, the wars of nerves.

Understanding in this human barnyard *might* be achieved in the agon of a democratic practice, where the ongoing process of political accommodation can create the social, cultural, and economic conditions within which social consciousness is shaped. Another way of saying this is that the original pairing of rhetoric and hermeneutics that Schleiermacher recommended and that Gadamer himself endorsed—if we understand rhetoric as the civic contestation of relations of power, value, and interest—is in fact a political project that engages the ongoing formation of just institutions, laws, and practices.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 270.

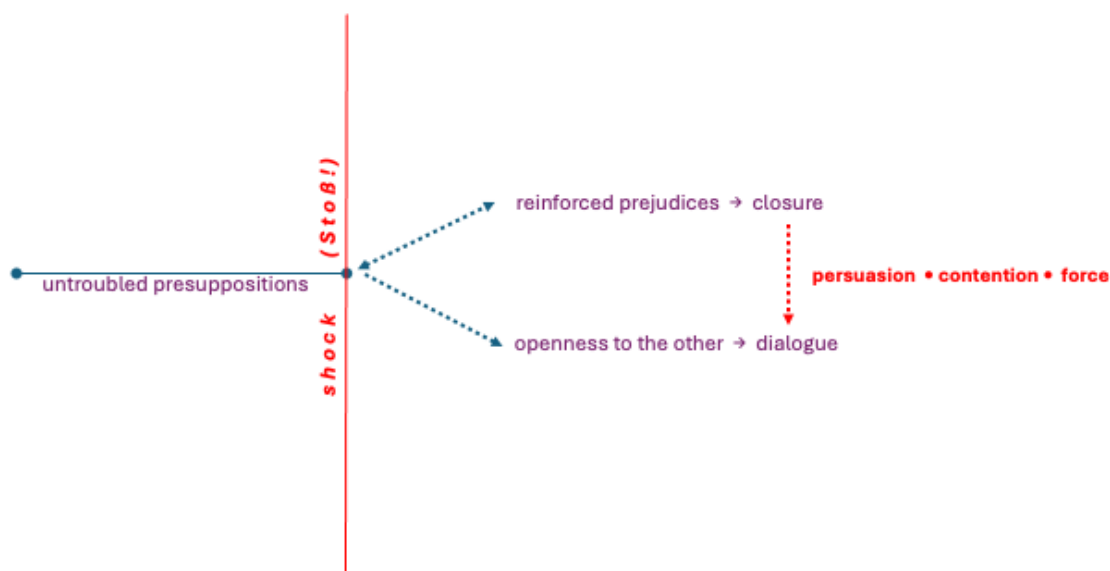
⁴⁷ Ibid., 311, 292.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 311.

Breaking Down Hardened Resistance: A Model

So what I think we need to develop is how a hermeneutic perspective can craft interruptions to carefully cultivated belief systems in the polis of today, and allow for a more complicated path to openness than Gadamer's theory advances. I want to argue that we should insert into the hermeneutic formula the fuller repertoire of responses, readily available in adjacent political theories, for overcoming ideological resistance. These techniques obviously vary according to the discursive situation (e.g., the therapeutic setting, the social movement, the administrative state, etc.), and depending on whether one is responding to a sclerotic bureaucracy, a well-funded and entrenched economic interest, or the ingrained cultural belief system of a community. But this complexity is the cost of bringing a hermeneutic theory of communication into the *actual* public sphere.

To put this in the context of the three moments of hermeneutic experience, my argument is that we have to shift the emphasis in hermeneutic logic from the moment of fusion back to the moment of rupture, and allow into that space a variety of responses to the initial rupture of expectations. The little graphic I have sketched here is meant to help visualize the widened space for that play of forces within the three moments of hermeneutic experience:



This is a branching path model. It expands the range of resources for shifting to openness (*b*) if varied responses can be applied to the resistance we more regularly have to disruption (*a*). The paths leading away and back to understanding might be political persuasion, “war of positions,” structural change, etc. What much of 20th century critical theory did was to theorize how the prior conditions of some such shocks are not just seven miles deep, but cunningly constructed to withstand the shocks mounted against them. Such are the ideological constructs and apparatuses of power that a century of critical suspicion so diligently excavated. What I will assert, though, and this comes as much from my lifetime’s use of Gadamer’s “elements of hermeneutic experience,” is that the basic logic of his tripartite formula can appropriate this work without damage to its own structure. Not only can it bear the weight of those additions, I think they need it.⁴⁹ With adjustment, the basic hermeneutic schema of experience, I am arguing, is eminently applicable to the contemporary political realm.

To illustrate this expanded formula, I will offer a concrete example from my own life. A campus memo from the Vice Provost for Student Life at my university from the spring of 2024 chastised student activists for erecting a tent city on the campus mall to protest the military occupation of Gaza just as graduation ceremonies loomed. He remonstrated against any problematic “interruption of . . . a host of year-end events, campus tours, and other scheduled activities that contribute to the vibrancy of our campus,” and called upon students to “minimize risks that could

⁴⁹ This is something that I have nowhere found Miranda Fricker to have acknowledged. She borrows the term hermeneutical (“hermeneutical injustice”) without considering the working logic at its source. She does, however, start to fill the structural void that I have pointed to (within the idioms of a familiar Anglo-Kantianism).

diminish the success of these experiences and ensure university operations proceed smoothly.”⁵⁰

Campus protests of the kind students at my campus mounted broke out across the country in April 2024, although it should be noted that at Indiana University Bloomington (hereafter IUB) the protests were without exception peaceful. Across the country, university administrations reacted to these interruptions variously. Some were allowed to go forward unimpeded as expressions of free speech (Wellesley College), some resulted in successful negotiations with administrators (Brown University), others resulted in stalemate, and still others in intensified violence (UCLA). In our case the state legislature and our president doubled down, as MAGA Senator Jim Banks’s statement about police violence at IUB attests:

Indiana is a Republican state, and our Republican governor and Republican legislators should be praising Pamela Whitten [IUB’s president] for her courage, and they should make it clear that if the unlawful protesters at Dunn Meadow refuse to disburse, the state will mobilize as many ISP officers and, if necessary, national guardsmen, as public order require.⁵¹

The protests were taken as a pretext for clamping down on Indiana University as a woke campus that needed to be brought to heel. The protesters with their tents dug in, did not leave, and paid a heavy cost. Dozens of students and several faculty were seized by phalanxes of state police, arrested and banned from campus for a year. As problematic, flawed, and messy as the student encampment actions were, their and other student disruptions across the country had to be contended with in the

⁵⁰ April 24, 2024.

⁵¹ Banks, April 24, 2024.

national politics around Gaza.⁵² Probably something as disruptive would have been necessary to have any such effect.⁵³ What this notion of the political ramifies across and extends the second moment (*b*). The normal resistance to challenges from without—psychologically, culturally, politically—develops the most elaborate mechanisms of self-preservation, which therefore requires its own analytic.



A sniper in the security detail on the rooftop of the student union during the Gaza protests.⁵⁴

⁵² A vivid example of this effect was President Biden’s Morehouse College commencement speech on May 19, 2024. The interactions between the students and Biden on the Gaza question resemble very much the structure of a hermeneutic conversation (Vera, May 19, 2024).

⁵³ This example is devilishly complicated from a political perspective, which is one of the reasons I chose it.

⁵⁴ <https://indianapublicradio.org/news/2024/04/indiana-state-police-leader-on-indiana-university-protests-if-in-fact-we-have-to-come-back-then-we-will/>

So, the rupture that opens up a space (to use Heidegger's imagery) of turbulence in which all kinds of things are put in play is a *contingent* space that *could* be as direct and immediate as a conversion (on the rode to Damascus), or as involved and protracted as the unforeseen consequences of an act of war (assassination of Ferdinand). Those are the two polar extremes, but there are obviously many other responses that can fill that space, and we hermeneuts can elaborate them as repertoires of response.

In his most direct approach to this kind of application I know of, Gadamer addressed a South African audience in September, 1980, where he reflected deeply and movingly about the frailty of the political-ethical choices that face political communities. To contextualize this date, Steve Biko was killed in police custody in 1977, the Dumbutshena Report was commissioned in 1981, in 1983 white farmers were permitted by the government to arm, in 1988 an amnesty was accounted for all dissidents, and in 1990 the ban against the African National Congress was lifted, so 1980 was at the dead center of a century's old conflict. As I read his Pretorian lectures, Gadamer wanted his audience to rise above the seductions of short-term self-interest, "the traps of our illusions," "the irrationality and error which lie at the heart of our existence."⁵⁵ He warned his audience of the temptation "to make an exception for oneself but not for the other!"⁵⁶ He reminded them that the universal principles contained in a political constitution have to be honored in the observance. This was all in 1980.

⁵⁵ "Lecture on Philosophical Hermeneutics," 17.

⁵⁶ 16. What the Pretoria lectures make clear is that the language of otherness and openness—to place in the open, openness to the other, to think otherwise, to be challenged by the other, etc.—has multiple ontological facets and locations.

The South African renunciation of Apartheid has certainly to be a hopeful contemporary example of the possibility of moving toward a better understanding in the political realm, but even so, that outcome came out of prodigious struggle, heroism, sacrifice, organizing, luck, strategy, and power politics. We might take this long and involved effort as an exemplar of the expansive structure of disruption that constitutes hermeneutic experience in the political realm. If philosophical hermeneutics is going to remain relevant to political deliberation, I conclude, it will need to incorporate a deeper engagement with the vast empire of political and cultural manipulations that amass every conceivable means for the promulgation, protection, and manipulation of entrenched and unconsidered prejudice — the mechanisms of social power that seek to overwhelm the movement toward understanding. Today we are first hand witnesses to how effective these mechanisms are — it is an open question whether the planet will survive their assault — so I have no hesitation recommending that we turn our hermeneutic focus in their direction.

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