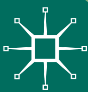

Simone Weil, Beyond Ideology?

Edited by
Sophie Bourgault · Julie Daigle

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Editors
Sophie Bourgault
School of Political Studies
University of Ottawa
Ottawa, ON, Canada

Julie Daigle
School of Political Studies
University of Ottawa
Ottawa, ON, Canada

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Notes on Contributors

Sophie Bourgault is an Associate Professor at the School of Political Studies (University of Ottawa, Canada) and current president of the American Weil Society. Her main research interests gravitate around contemporary feminist theory, care ethics, and Weil's political thought.

Julie Daigle, Ph.D., is a political theorist whose main research focuses on the history of ideas and particularly on the work of Simone Weil. She has also taught at the University of Ottawa's School of Political Studies.

Benjamin P. Davis is Postdoctoral Fellow in Ethics at the University of Toronto, Centre for Ethics. His research focuses on Édouard Glissant, human rights, and an ethics of responsibility.

K. G. M. Earl is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Political Science at the University of Ottawa, specializing in Simone Weil's theory of justice.

Alexandra Féret is a Doctoral candidate at the Université Sorbonne (France) and the Università del Salento (Italy). She has written extensively on Simone Weil.

Casey Ford is a Philosophy Fellow at Marlboro College. He received his Ph.D. from University of Guelph in 2016. He works in the traditions of nineteenth and twentieth century European philosophy, focusing on questions of ontology, ethics, and social and political thought.

Suzanne McCullagh is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Athabasca University. Her work explores ways of thinking about ethical and political community and the formation of subjectivity and capacity.

Michael P. A. Murphy is a SSHRC doctoral fellow in International Relations and an Associate Member of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Research Unit at the University of Ottawa. He has published over a dozen peer-reviewed articles on philosophy, pedagogy, and International Relations. His work can be found at bit.ly/37NJMkZ.

Oriol Quintana is a lecturer in the Chair of Ethics and Christian Thought at IQS, Universitat Ramon Llull. His Ph.D. dissertation on George Orwell won the Fundació Joan Maragall Prize. In 2019, he was the chief organizer of the 39th Annual Colloquy of the American Weil Society, in Barcelona.

A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone is Director of the Honors Program and Associate Professor of Philosophy at University of North Dakota. She served as President of the American Weil Society, and has published *The Relevance of the Radical: Simone Weil 100 Years Later*, *Simone Weil and Theology*, and *Simone Weil and Continental Philosophy*.

Scott B. Ritner is Assistant Professor (Instructional) of Political Science at Temple University. He is the author of numerous chapters and articles on Simone Weil's thought and is Vice President of the American Weil Society. He lives with his human partner, their baby, a large dog, and a small cat.

Eric O. Springsted is the co-founder of the American Weil Society, and was its president for thirty-three years. A teacher, scholar, and pastor, he is the author and editor of thirteen books and numerous articles, including several on Weil. His *How to Love and Think in a Flattened World: The Witness of Simone Weil in the Twenty-First Century* will appear in 2020. Retired, he lives in Santa Fe, NM.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Weil, Politics and Ideology

Sophie Bourgault and Julie Daigle

At a scholarly event devoted to her work held in 1972, Hannah Arendt was asked to clarify her ideological commitments. Political scientist Hans Morgenthau inquired: "What are you? Are you a conservative? Are you a liberal? Where is your position in the contemporary possibilities?" The biting answer Arendt offered would soon become a widely cited response of hers: "I really don't know and I've never known. [...] And I must say I couldn't care less."[1] It is tempting to suggest that French philosopher Simone Weil (1909–1943) may have answered in a similar manner had she been urged during her own lifetime to take a clear-cut position

[1] See "Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt", in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvin Hill (New York: St-Martin's Press, 1979), 333–334.

S. Bourgault (✉) · J. Daigle
School of Political Studies, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON, Canada
e-mail: sbourgau@uottawa.ca

J. Daigle
e-mail: jdaig103@uottawa.ca

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on ideologies and on where she stood politically.[2] Indeed, any attentive reader perusing Weil's early and later writings will quickly realize the variegated scope of ideologies Weil's *oeuvre* addresses and the biting concerns she expressed about most of them.

Simone Weil's critiques of French imperialism and colonialism in the 1930s and 1940s certainly made her a forerunner of later criticism, and have in recent years increasingly been the object of scholarly discussion.[3] But the ideology that has been the main object of study among Weil specialists in the past decades is above all Marxism, namely her complex relationship with Marx and Marxist militants of various stripes.[4] Simone Pétrement, Weil's close friend and biographer, believes that if we understand the term "communist" in a broad sense, then it would be fair to say that, at a certain point in her life, Weil was a communist.[5] However, she was always reluctant to officially join the Communist Party. Her brother, the mathematician André Weil, recalls seeing a letter penned by his sister, requesting membership to the Communist Party, lying around in Simone's room for many months, but there is no proof that she ever

[2] Had she done so, Weil's stern answer would certainly not have indicated a lack of concern for the world of politics, but rather the very opposite—an observation equally applicable to Arendt. Not surprisingly, numerous studies have put these two authors in conversation. E.g. *Modernité, Démocratie et Totalitarisme: Simone Weil et Hannah Arendt*, ed. Marina Cedronio (Paris: Kincksieck, 1996); Sylvie Courtine-Denamy, *Three Women in Dark Times: Edith Stein, Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); Deborah Nelson, *Tough Enough: Arbus, Arendt, Didion, McCarthy, Sontag, Weil* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Roberto Esposito, *The Origin of the Political: Hannah Arendt or Simone Weil?* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

[3] See *Simone Weil On Colonialism. An Ethic of the Other*, ed. and trans. J.P. Little (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 10; also Gilles Manceron, "Réflexions sur l'anticolonialisme de Simone Weil", *Cahiers Simone Weil* XXXVII, no. 1 (March 2014); Inese Radzins, "Simone Weil's Social Philosophy: Toward a Post-Colonial Ethic", in *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, ed. P.S. Anderson (New York: Springer, 2009). Readers will here be offered a detailed treatment of Weil's relation to colonialism in Benjamin P. Davis' contribution (see chapter 6 in this volume).

[4] A detailed treatment of Weil's engagement with Marxism and Marxists can be found in Lawrence A. Blum and Victor J. Seidler, *A Truer Liberty: Simone Weil and Marxism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010). Cf. Robert Sparling, "Theory and Praxis: Simone Weil and Marx on the Dignity of Labor," *The Review of Politics* 74, no. 1 (2012).

[5] Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 46.

sent it.[6] What we do know is that she enjoyed encouraging the belief that she was a Communist by doing things like reading *L'Humanité* (the voice of the French Communist Party) in public, and drawing the hammer and sickle on her student's work.[7] Weil was also involved in revolutionary trade-unionism in the early 1930s, during her brief stint as a philosophy teacher in various *lycées*, but she quickly distanced herself from these groups.[8] At the beginning of the Second World War, she wrote that she had always "wanted a social transformation to the advantage of the less fortunate, but [that she] was never favourably inclined toward the Communist party [...]." She added that the trade union movement had attracted her when she was eighteen, but that "[s]ince then, [she] ha[d] never stopped going farther and farther away from the Communists, even to the point of regarding them as the principal enemy."[9]

After spending nearly two months in Berlin, in the summer of 1932, Weil would finally come to lose all respect for the Communist Party.[10] The time spent in Germany inspired her to condemn the Party's incapacity to stand up to the dangerous rise to power of Hitler; she did so by penning several articles for journals like *La Révolution prolétarienne*, *L'École émancipée* and *Libres Propos*. In an important piece from 1933 titled "Prospects: Are We Heading for the Proletarian Revolution?," Weil submits the hypothesis to her comrades that the Stalin/Soviet regime is not, as Leon Trotsky believed, "a dictatorship of the proletariat" with "bureaucratic deformations."[11] Rather, it is a "new species of oppression [...] exercised in the name of management,"[12] threatening to eliminate what remains of the October Revolution.[13] Weil also makes a case here

[6] Ibid., 47.

[7] Ibid., 120.

[8] Weil was a member of the United Federation of Teachers, as well as an elected member of the trade union teachers' council when she taught in Le Puy during the 1931–1932 school year. Ibid., 119–120.

[9] Ibid., 118.

[10] She describes this shift in a letter to her friends Urbain and Albertine Thévenon. See Weil, *Simone Weil. Oeuvres*, ed. Florence de Lussy (Paris: Quarto Gallimard, 1999), 53.

[11] Weil quotes Trotsky here. Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, trans. Arthur Wills and John Petrie (New York, London: Routledge, 2006), 4.

[12] Ibid., 9.

[13] Ibid., 17. Readers should also see Weil's "Reflections Concerning Technocracy, National-Socialism, the U.S.S.R. and Certain Other Matters", in *Oppression and Liberty.*

for the supreme value of the individual over the collective,[14] since the latter tends to destroy the conditions necessary for the well-being and free reflectivity of the individual. She writes: "In the subordination of society to the individual lies the definition of true democracy and that of socialism as well."[15] As Pétrement recounts, Trotsky responded acerbically to Weil's article: "Simone Weil has found consolation in a new mission: to defend her personality against society. A formula of the old liberalism, refurbished by a cheaply bought anarchist exaltation. [...] Many years will have to pass for her and her like before they free themselves of the most reactionary petty bourgeois prejudices."[16]

A few months later, when Trotsky was in exile in France, Weil seized the opportunity to further discuss these questions with him, whom she otherwise greatly admired for his criticism of Stalinism. She invited him to stay at her parents' apartment in Paris at the end of December 1933, and took that opportunity to subject him to an intense and memorable discussion-turned-argument. Pétrement recounts how Trotsky's wife, Natalia Sédov, who was listening in the next room with Weil's parents, was astounded by "[t]his child [Weil was 24 years old] holding her own with Trotsky."[17]

This sharp philosophical spirit was in part nourished by Weil's teacher at *Lycée Henri IV*, Alain (Émile-Auguste Chartier). What Alain may also have stimulated in his student is her individualism, her critique of power, as well as a general wariness toward the collective (what Plato called the "Great Beast"[18]) and toward all forms of authority.[19] In many of the chapters of this edited volume, readers will have the opportunity to learn much more about Weil's critique of "collectivities" and the "social" (e.g.,

[14] Ibid., 18.

[15] Ibid., 19. On Weil and socialism, see Louis Patsouras, *Simone Weil and the Socialist Tradition* (San Francisco: EMText, 1992).

[16] An excerpt of Trotsky's reaction was published in *La Vérité* and is quoted in Pétrement, *Simone Weil*, 178.

[17] Ibid., 188.

[18] Plato, *The Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 493a-d. Weil wrote that: "The whole of Marxism, in so far as it is true, is contained in the page of Plato on the Great Beast; and its refutation is there too." *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Siân Miles (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 124.

[19] See Rozelle-Stone's chapter in this volume for a discussion of one of the places where Weil parted ways with her teacher Alain: namely, around the question of happiness.

bureaucracy, political parties, churches, unions, industry, or the state more generally).

Weil passed on these critical teachings about collectivities to some of her own students. In Anne Reynaud-Guérithault's notes from Weil's philosophy lectures given at Roanne during the 1933–1934 school year, we find the following duties of the individual toward the state: "[O]ne has a duty, and not a right, never to let one atom of the liberty which the state allows to disappear; never to accept official ideology, but to create centres of independent thought."[20] Weil would never abandon this deep concern for the importance of individual thought. Indeed, it would be at the heart of what she affectionately called her *grand oeuvre* (her *magnus opus*), her "Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression" (1934). Analyzing capitalism's oppression of workers, the essay deplores the progressive disappearance of methodical thought in social life: "Never has the individual been so completely delivered up to a blind collectivity, and never have men been less capable, not only of subordinating their actions to their thoughts, but even of thinking."[21]

According to Mary G. Dietz, "[d]espite her deep engagement in the French left in general and the working class movement in particular, Weil's thought in ["Reflections"] is launched from a philosophical position closer to Kant than to Marx, and more inclined toward humanism and respect for the individual than toward any of the varieties of modern antiliberalisms that were emerging in the twentieth century."[22] Certainly Weil's relationship to Marx and Marxism is a complex and debated one. For scholars Lawrence A. Blum and Victor J. Seidler, Weil's work ought to be seen as alternative to both Marxism and Liberalism—if not in fact, more generally, as a radical challenge to most "received notions of what

[20] Simone Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 152. Casey Ford in this volume (ch. 9) considers several dimensions of Weil's critique of the State.

[21] See Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, trans. Arthur Wills and John Petrie (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 102.

[22] Mary G. Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine. The Political Thought of Simone Weil* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1988), 38. Compare with the treatments offered by Scott B. Ritner (ch. 10) and by Suzanne McCullagh (ch. 11) in this volume.

'politics' is."[23] For his part, Alain believed that Weil's 1934 "Reflections" and her discussion of Marx brought philosophical conversations on a wholly new terrain. After reading her essay, he enthusiastically wrote to his student that her writings would give courage to generations disappointed by ontology and ideology.[24]

Weil's defense of individual thought was bolstered by a profound commitment to truth that made her allergic to anything that sacrificed the individual's personal search for truth through careful attention (e.g., strong party discipline, dogma, bureaucratic rules). For André A. Devaux, this uncompromising commitment underlies Weil's critique of the prevailing ideologies of her time, and perhaps particularly Marxism, personalism, and existentialism.[25] This attachment to the unveiling of truth would lead her to seek out— as Robert Chenavier has eloquently shown— experiences of the real (most notably through manual labor).[26] Indeed, after writing her "Reflections," Weil would go on to fulfil one of her deepest desires by working in three factories in the Paris region, thereby deepening her analysis of social oppression and her criticism of capitalism. The *affliction* she experienced during this year would have profound effects on her thinking. So much so, in fact, that she would see herself as a slave for the rest of her life.[27] In August of 1936, despite her pacifism (another conviction she picked up from Alain, who had been

[23] Blum and Seidler, *A Truer Liberty*, p.xi. David McLellan reads Weil as an insightful critic of liberalism and as a friend of contemporary communitarians in "Simone Weil et la philosophie politique libérale contemporaine," *Cahiers Simone Weil* XXII, no. 2 (June 1999). Eric O. Springsted (in this volume, chapter two) offers a detailed treatment of the resonances between Weil and communitarian political theorist Michael Sandel.

[24] Weil, *Oeuvres*, 64.

[25] André A. Devaux, "Préface" to *Simone Weil. Oeuvres Complètes 1*, *Premiers écrits philosophiques*, ed. Gilbert Kahn and Rolf Kühn (Paris: Gallimard, 1988, 15).

[26] Robert Chenavier, *Simone Weil. Attention to the Real*, trans. Bernard E. Doering (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012). On manual work's great significance for Weil, see e.g. Inese Radzins, "Simone Weil on Labor and Spirit," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 45, no. 2 (2017); Sparling, "Theory and Praxis". The most comprehensive treatment remains Robert Chenavier, *Simone Weil. Une philosophie du travail* (Paris: Cerf, 2001).

[27] Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), 25.

deeply scarred by the First World War),[28] she would enlist in the Spanish Civil War on the side of the Republicans. She joined the ranks of the anarchists' Durruti column in the fight against Franco, but a bad burn from setting foot in a pot of boiling oil forced her back to France by the end of September.[29]

After the brutality of factory work and war, the "older" Weil claims to have been forever transformed by three profound mystical experiences that drew her progressively closer to Catholicism. But this in no way meant that she relinquished her personal search for truth to the authority of the Church. In fact, she was convinced, as she would write in her "Spiritual Autobiography" (the letters sent to her Dominican friend Father Perrin) that she should always remain "on the threshold of the Church."[30] What kept her there was the Church's use of the words *anathema sit*. She believed that her vocation was to remain loyal to all those things, including her own intelligence, that were denied entry into the Church.[31] "The special function of the intelligence requires total liberty, implying the right to deny everything, and allowing of no domination. Wherever it usurps control there is an excess of individualism. Wherever it is hampered or uneasy there is an oppressive collectivism, or several of them."[32]

According to Philippe Dujardin, Weil's mystical turn would exacerbate, *inter alia*, her individualism, confirm her break from Marxism, and justify

[28] Weil remained a pacifist up until March of 1939, when Hitler violated the Munich Agreement and annexed the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Weil would deeply regret this pacifism, which she would later describe as her "criminal error". Weil, *First and Last Notebooks. Supernatural Knowledge*, trans. Richard Rees (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 345.

[29] Her rapid departure was hence not the result of a sudden disillusionment with the Spanish anarchist cause. Nonetheless, as many Weil scholars have noted, Weil's anarchist "sympathies" progressively dwindled with time. According to A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Benjamin P. Davis, for instance, Weil's London writings are "markedly different from her early writings as an anarchist informed principally by Descartes, Marx, and Kant. While those influences remain, her later writings must be read through the lens of her Christian Platonism." https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/simone-weil/.

[30] Weil, *Waiting for God*, 32.

[31] Ibid., 33.

[32] Ibid., 34.

what Dujardin describes as her deep contempt for politics.[33] This transformation, he believes, also led Weil to recognize the primacy of spiritual values above all others, and it brought her ideological convictions close to those of the Vichy government.[34] Dujardin goes so far as stating that there are noticeable totalitarian inclinations in Weil, which become especially evident in her discussion of public liberties and the organization of political power in her second *grand oeuvre*, *The Need for Roots*.[35]

In reality, Weil was, as she herself saw it, particularly interested in the historical genealogy of totalitarianism and in criticizing this ideology.[36] She saw totalitarianism's roots in the Roman Empire, and thought that the Church of the thirteenth century constituted a kind of totalitarianism stemming specifically from its use of the words *anathema sit*. Her rejection of political parties, which she defends most fully in her 1942 note "On the Abolition of All Political Parties," originated from her belief that, having somehow transposed the use of *anathema sit*, parties were, in essence, totalitarian.[37] In that provocative short piece, Weil explains that the demands of strong party discipline are radically at odds with individuals' free thought, that they feed toxic collective passions, and that their obsessive concern with electoral victory and fundraising necessarily makes them unable to attend to the socially marginalized (the *afflicted*, to use Weil's term).

Weil unfortunately experienced firsthand some of the effects of totalitarianism. Because her family was Jewish, she was forced to flee German occupation, first by joining with her parents the *free zone* in Marseille, then briefly in Casablanca and New York in May and July of 1942. These numerous months of exile and travel were very active for Weil both in terms of intellectual life and political engagement. After what

[33] Philippe Dujardin, *Simone Weil. Idéologie et politique* (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1975), 152.

[34] Ibid., 169.

[35] Ibid., 170.

[36] In her "Reflections concerning the causes of liberty and social oppression", she clearly expresses her deep concern for the rise of totalitarian regimes in Europe. In her view, there was an "appearance of 'totalitarian' régimes unprecedented in history". See Weil, *Oppression and Liberty,* 112; also 129 and 152–154.

[37] Weil, *Waiting for God*, 37. See Weil, *On the Abolition of All Political Parties*, trans. Simon Leys (New York: New York Review Books, 2013), 27. Readers should also see Julie Daigle's chapter in this volume (ch. 12), which discusses Weil's criticisms of parties.

she describes as an excruciating period of waiting in New York, Weil joined the Free French Forces (the government-in-exile led by Charles de Gaulle) in London, in November 1942. Once in London (where she wrote some of her most remarkable essays), she nevertheless refused to embrace Gaullism, seeing it as a kind of political party that was potentially fascist.[38]

Once again, it seems that Weil's wariness of ideologies was, in a sense, exacerbated by her religious convictions. Nonetheless, these religious convictions never put in question her deep commitment to the individual. Indeed, her rapprochement late in life with Catholicism didn't lead her to embrace anything akin to dogmatism. On the contrary, she found in her spiritual convictions, it would seem, a fresh vocabulary for talking about ideologies, as words like "grace," "the supernatural," and "idolatry" began to appear in her later writings. Being in touch with this transcendent dimension of life, Weil believed, allowed human beings to rise above the limits and dangers of the social, that "great beast" of which she was always so leery. Marie Cabaud Meaney writes that, for Weil:

> the supernatural is man's firm foundation, which alone gives him the strength to resist the *Zeitgeist*. In contrast, ideological systems such as Communism and Nazism cut man off at his roots by denying the existence of our true foundation, thus letting him starve and wither away, for the *Ersatz*-nourishment that the ideologies offer cannot feed him. Hence, as Weil pointed out, Marxism – standing for all ideologies here – rather than religion is an opiate, promising a fulfillment which only God can give.[39]

A form of sanctity is essential, according to Weil, to prevent against the threat of ideologies and the collective. Cabaud Meaney adds: "Instead of following the *Zeitgeist*, [the saints] are in touch with the true, unchangeable center of the universe, namely God Himself. Thus, they are the only

[38] Pétrement, *Simone Weil,* 533.

[39] "The Supernatural as a Remedy to Totalitarian Regimes: Simone Weil on Sanctity and the Eucharist," in A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Lucian W. Stone, eds., *The Relevance of the Radical: Simone Weil 100 Years Later* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), 44–45. In this volume, Alexandra Féret (ch. 8) offers a detailed analysis of Weil's account of idolatry.

ones with a fixed anchor, while other human beings are swept along by opinion and become part of the 'great beast'."[40]

What did Weil make of ideology at the end of her life? In her small office in London in 1942, she was extremely prolific, working to the point of exhaustion on what would become her "*Écrits de Londres*" [writings from London], and, perhaps most importantly, *The Need for Roots*. In fragments written at this time, she notes, quite surprisingly, that a doctrine is necessary to avoid being duped by those that already exist.[41] According to Daniel Lindenberg we should take Weil seriously when, a few pages later, she calls for a third way between liberalism and totalitarianism.[42] The elaboration of this sort of doctrine might be precisely what Weil was *trying* to accomplish in *The Need for Roots*. Indeed, it is important to emphasize *trying* because Weil regarded all this as an impossible task—and yet as one that must nevertheless be attempted.[43] The difficulty, explains Weil, is not conceiving, understanding or adopting an ideal doctrine, since truths are fairly easily recognizable in her view. Rather, it is *applying* this doctrine, and above all, *finding the appropriate words* so that the right actions may follow. Truths are simple, Weil believes, but they are so far hidden in the hearts of individuals that their translation into words is nearly impossible.[44] Whether the terms "third way" proposed by Lindenberg are the correct ones is debatable, yet it is striking to see how much Weil engaged throughout her life with several ideologies in order to flesh out a *new* radical vision of politics (one which, paradoxically, often drew on *old* or classical sources of inspiration). It is with good reason that A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Lucian Stone have proposed the term "radical" to capture Weil's thought, justifying the label in the following

[40] Ibid., 46.

[41] Weil, *Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), 151.

[42] Daniel Lindenberg, "Politique de Simone Weil," *Esprit* 8/9 (August-Sept. 2012), 48. Consider the following passage from Weil's notebooks (key for Lindenberg's reading): « No liberalism (say why) – no totalitarianism (say why) – something inhuman." Weil, *Écrits de Londres et dernières lettres*, 173. (Translation ours.).

[43] This speaks in part to what is proposed by Scott Ritner in this volume (ch. 10): namely, that Weil embraced a 'revolutionary pessimism' (i.e. a radical politics of resistance, but resistance "without hope" (Ritner's terms)). For one book-length reading of Weil as an idiosyncratic type of pessimist, see David McLellan, *Utopian Pessimist: The Life and Thought of Simone Weil* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1990).

[44] Weil, *Écrits de Londres*, 151.

way: "radical both in the sense of 'unconventional' and in the sense of [...] 'returning to essential roots'."[45]

What this edited volume demonstrates is that it is precisely Weil's unclassifiable nature, her idiosyncratic ideological commitments, combined with her sharp and sometimes ambivalent criticisms of socio-political institutions, that makes her work a captivating object of study for contemporary political philosophy. It is surprising, as such, that relatively few monographs in the English-speaking world have been devoted *exclusively* to her political thought.[46] Indeed, while there has been a great surge of interest in Weil's political theory over the last decade in France and in the United States,[47] this edited volume is the first collection of essays in English devoted exclusively to Simone Weil's political thought and in particular, to her complex perspective on various ideologies.[48]

This book proposes a two-pronged approach to Weil's political thought: first, via a series of conversations set up between Simone Weil and key authors in modern and contemporary political theory (Michael Sandel, John Rawls, Sara Ahmed, Giorgio Agamben, George Orwell); and secondly, via a close study of Weil's reflections on various ideologies (colonialism, Marxism, Nazism, republicanism, nationalism, liberalism). Naturally, this volume could not cover the whole gamut of ideologies; some readers may, for instance, lament the absence of chapters on Weil's relationship to conservatism, anarchism, or feminism. But readers should

[45] Rozelle-Stone and Stone, *The Relevance,* p. xxv.

[46] Notable exceptions include Mary G. Dietz, *Between the Human and the Divine,* and E. Jane Doering's *Simone Weil and the Specter of Self-Perpetuating Force* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

[47] For French scholarship, think of the work of Christine Delsol; Philippe Riviale; Valérie Gérard; Pascale Devette and Étienne Tassin; Bertrand Saint-Sernin (please see our bibliography for complete references). For the Anglo-Saxon world, see e.g. the work of A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone (including her recent *Simone Weil and Continental Philosophy*). The Italian scholarly scene has also witnessed a great rise in interest for Weil's political thought. For book-length treatments translated in English, see most notably Roberto Esposito, *The Origin of the Political*, and *Categories of the Impolitical,* trans. Connal Parsley (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

[48] Naturally, previous edited volumes have sometimes included some contributions that explored parts of Weil's political philosophy. See e.g. Diogenes Allen and Eric O. Springsted eds., *Spirit, Nature and Community: Issues in the Thought of Simone Weil* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994); Richard Bell ed. *Simone Weil's Philosophy of Culture. Readings Toward a Divine Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

note that if none of the book's chapters are devoted *exclusively* to feminism, several contributors explicitly underscore the ways Weil's political thought speaks to contemporary feminist philosophy.[49] Once again, our goal in this volume is evidently not to position Weil squarely within a *single* ideological tradition. As the very title of our book suggests, we propose that Weil's thought resists such a straightforward categorization or labeling. A much more fruitful approach to her *oeuvre*, in our view, is to examine how it might allow us to engage with, criticize, and trouble existing ideologies.

The volume brings together emerging scholars and established ones, all writing from slightly different methodological and disciplinary perspectives. As such, this book does not propose a single or consistent interpretative line— something that would be at odds, in any case, with Weil's political philosophy— but rather, a variety of readings. If some contributors underscore Weil's striking individualism, others locate her vision of the political slightly closer to the community. And while some authors emphasize the pessimist undercurrents in her political philosophy, others opt for stressing the more buoyant and optimistic. Nonetheless, there is still one— simple but crucial— claim running through most essays gathered here: namely, that at the heart of Weil's political thought lies an insistent call to better *attend* to the afflicted, and to organize our lives— and theorize our ideologico-political commitments— on the basis of this call.

Overview of the Book

This volume opens up with a series of chapters proposing conversations between Weil and important contemporary political philosophers. Chapter two, written by **Eric O. Springsted**, offers a critical Weilian perspective on language and values through an examination of Michael Sandel's *What Money Can't Buy*. Springsted focuses on a hierarchical distinction Weil makes between two types of values, which inform the language we use to talk about these values: first, the open language of the market place (which uses words of the "middle realm"); second, the language of intimacy (employed to talk about deeper human experiences). Springsted believes that Sandel's book can give weight to Weil's

[49] See most notably the chapters of Rozelle-Stone and Davis.

distinction, as it defends, contrary to the levelling arguments of many economists, the idea that some values aren't market place values and shouldn't be given a price, as doing so would degrade and cheapen them. Sandel brings to light the corrupting effects of using the language of the marketplace in situations that were formerly talked about with the language of morality and virtue. Weil's work, according to Springsted, pushes this argument further than Sandel by explaining why values of intimacy are not to be confused with the private. Springsted demonstrates this by arguing that, for Weil, inner values are reflected in moral responsibilities and personal commitments in the public space. As such, he insists, the language of the inner self has significant effects on actions and words in both the public and private spheres.

The following chapter pursues further this critique of our contemporary liberal ethos, proposing a Weilian critique of (Rawlsian) contemporary distributivist accounts of justice and of rights discourse. Rights discourse chiefly conceives of politics, according to Weil, as *quantifiable* squabbles over "who gets what." **K.G.M. Earl** shows that for Weil, distributive justice models are not only reductive, but also harmful and "morally deforming." This is partially because they assign an excessive amount of significance to *what* a person possesses, which distracts from *attending* adequately to them. Weil does not deny the importance of material redistribution of course, but Earl insists that she invites us to *begin* with attention. Offering a brief but stimulating contrast between Rawlsian impartiality and Weilian impersonality, this chapter also proposes timely reflections on vulnerability and relational models of subjectivity. Earl draws out of Weil's writings an account of the self that is thoroughly embodied and relational: we cannot will away the fact that we are always already tied to others—affected and potentially harmed by them. Earl insists that it is because of this fundamental vulnerability and interdependency that attention to the afflicted holds such central importance in a Weilian ethics. This is a thesis that resonates with much contemporary feminist theory in our view (particularly the scholarship inspired by Judith Butler's work on vulnerability and that of feminist care ethicists).

The following chapter also indicates the relevance of Weil for contemporary feminist philosophy. More specifically, **A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone** takes a sober look at contemporary "happiness discourse" (and "positive psychology" talk), which she argues functions as a kind of ideology and regulative political tool that sustain injustices and hegemonic practices by concealing painful and oppressive realities in the name of "positive

thinking." Rozelle-Stone first compares Weil's critical account of happiness with the more positive one of Alain—whose *On Happiness* described happiness as a matter of self-control and will, and as a goal to be actively pursued. Weil was suspicious of Alain's account—a suspicion tied to her view of the imagination as a faculty that allows one to "fantasize" and ignore suffering. Rozelle-Stone then takes Weil's analysis a step further by setting it in conversation with that of feminist Sara Ahmed, who shares Weil's view that a decent ethical life necessitates a critical distance vis-à-vis "happiness discourse." This distanciation does not entail embracing *unhappiness*; there is no fetichization of unhappiness in Weil nor in Ahmed. Rather, what is proposed is "a politics of hap"—one carefully attuned to the unpredictability and fragility of things and to what happens to others. One of the many takeaways of Rozelle-Stone's chapter is that the still common interpretation of Weil as a masochistic lover of suffering is simply unconvincing.

If Weil's views on suffering have often been the object of facile or dismissive interpretations, so has Weil's account of "decreation," which is at the heart of the next chapter.[50] Chapter five proposes a comparative analysis between Weil's concept of decreation and Giorgio Agamben's notion of "destituent potential." Author **Michael P.A. Murphy** justifies this rapprochement by noting the similar "mystical" character of both concepts, and by suggesting that destituent potential and decreation are helpful for illuminating the respective works of Agamben and Weil. Murphy calls attention to three aspects of decreation that find echoes in Agamben's notion of destituent potential. First, decreation and destituent potential both call for a shedding of the superfluous aspects of life, leaving only that which sustains existence: divine love (for Weil) and *zoe* (for Agamben). Second, both destituent potential and decreation can only be realized, Murphy argues, when the illusions of the *polis* are rejected and the dangers and exclusionary character of the collective are recognized. Finally, both decreation and destituent potential reject existing systems—without, however, envisioning destruction or violence as legitimate means to do so. Acknowledging Agamben's debts to Weil allows us to appreciate,

[50] The concept has been the object of much scholarship over the years. One recent and very rich treatment can be found in Yoon Sook Cha, *Decreation and the Ethical Bind* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017). On Weil and Agamben, readers should see Alessia Ricciardi, "From Decreation to Bare Life: Weil, Agamben, and the Impolitical," *Diacritics* 39, no. 2 (2009).

according to Murphy, Weil's significant (if at times implicit) influence on contemporary continental philosophers.

The following chapter also considers some of the dangers of "collectivities," but this time by proposing a comparative discussion of the work of Weil and George Orwell. Chapter six shows the striking resonances between their works around the issue of rootedness (explored via a discussion of their views on force, affliction, and beauty). **Oriol Quintana** boldly proposes to characterize Weil as "the French Orwell" and Orwell as "the English Weil." The chief question that informs Quintana's discussion is whether the feeling of belonging to the world necessarily depends on religious convictions or on a religious renewal. One of the main arguments put forth by the author is that what matters *most* for rootedness today may not be a religious renewal but rather, the possibility of experiencing a deep sense of connection with beauty—of experiencing a kind of "resonance" with the world, to use the term of sociologist Hartmut Rosa (briefly invoked in the chapter's conclusion).

Part Two of the volume then proposes a series of chapters exploring Weil's relationship to specific ideologies—namely, colonialism, Nazism, patriotism, Marxism, liberalism, and republicanism. Chapter seven discusses Weil's writings on colonialism—a contribution that indicates the pertinence of Weil for contemporary postcolonial thought. Drawing on Butler's *Frames of War,* **Benjamin P. Davis** analyses the way ideologies like colonialism frame or orient the way we perceive/recognize others, which then serves to reinforce oppression. With Butler, Davis argues that the colonial subject is *perceived* by the powerful as a subject not worth grieving for; and it is the selectivity and partiality of the colonial frame that makes the colonial subject appear invisible. Davis then shows that Weil uncovered the colonial frame by performing a "critical phenomenology"—one that reveals the contingency and partiality of interpretative schemes, and that proposes an *alternative* framing. Weil challenged the colonial frame by inviting her contemporaries to feel shame at the horrors of colonialism and to be more critical of themselves.

The following chapter considers another particularly horrific ideology Weil engaged with: namely, Nazism. Chapter eight examines Weil's analysis of Nazi ideology via a discussion of her short essay "This war is a war of religions," which Weil penned while she was in London, working for the Free French Forces. This is a striking essay where Weil proposes an unusual interpretation of the Second World War as a "religious drama."

Placing Weil's work in conversation with Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, contributor **Alexandra Féret** seeks to better understand why Weil had recourse to a theological term— idolatry (or adoration of a false god)— to describe Nazi ideology. Féret's main argument is that Weil's recourse to the term idolatry allowed her both to explain how religion could be used so disturbingly for domination, and to suggest how one might find a positive function for faith (in a kind of mysticism). After a brief discussion of the geopolitical and historical context of the Second World War, Féret tackles Weil's rich reflections on Nazism via a consideration of three different levels of explanation of this ideology: sociological, anthropological, and theological. The chapter concludes with brief reflections on the implications of Weil's perspective on idolatry for political theology.

In Chapter nine, **Casey Ford** furthers reflections on the notion of idolatry by looking at how the idolatry of the State can profoundly shape our experience of time. In the first part of the chapter, Ford considers Weil's understanding of time itself, showing that the latter is highly political because it is as much an object of power as it is a *locus* of resistance. According to Ford, the idolatry of the State described by Weil operates as a nationalist ideology that aims at determining historical time. As such, it can be understood, he believes, along the lines of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of *appareil de capture* (apparatus of capture). This notion refers to both physical territory as well as the means by which people think and experience the world in time. Specifically, the State's nationalist ideology establishes a specific relationship to all dimensions of time (past, present, and future). Allegiance to the State, in the present, takes on the form of idolatry, whereas the relationship to the past involves the construction of a mythology. For Ford, capturing the past through a mythology requires, among other things, the erasure of the past's diversity and richness. The capturing of the future relates, for its part, to the idea of progress in conformity with the ideology established by the State. In Ford's view, if revolutionary thought took seriously Weil's writings, this would mean affirming the indeterminacy of the future and reclaiming a diversity of pasts.

Like Ford, **Scott B. Ritner,** in the next chapter, considers the relevance of Weil for revolutionary thought—this time via a discussion of Weil's reflections on Marxism. Taking some distance from Blum and Seidler's interpretation of Weil, Ritner shows in Chapter ten that Weil is an active participant and interlocutor *within* the Marxist tradition. Ritner

argues that Weil can be included in the Marxist tradition if the latter is understood not as an economic system or as a party-based theory of revolution, but chiefly as a method of analysis aimed at decreasing oppression. Pointing out along the way the great variety of Marxisms in the 1930s and 1940s, Ritner argues that Weil is best described as a heterodox Marxist. But Ritner also indicates that Weil differs from other heterodox Marxists in the way she uses and interprets Marx's method and refuses Hegelian dialectic and its synthetic resolution—opting for a *Platonic* dialectic that eschews resolution. If Weil's Marxism clearly favours resistance *over* revolution, it nevertheless leaves room for the possibility of a revolution— but without expecting realization (it is, in a sense, "without hope"). It is here, in this pessimistic account of "resistance without expectations" that Ritner locates one of Weil's most crucial insights for contemporary Marxist politics.

In Chapter eleven, **Suzanne McCullagh** compares the political thought of Weil with that of liberal and republican thinkers. The chapter begins by underscoring a few resonances between arch-liberal John Locke and Weil around the need for private property. But McCullagh ultimately argues that Weil significantly parts ways with the liberal/Lockean tradition by insisting on the community's role in fulfilling *spiritual* needs and by assigning great significance to labor for "soulcraft." Indeed, it is labour that can transform us into *attentive beings* for Weil. Inspired by Marxist theorist C.B. Macpherson's critique of liberalism's "possessive individualism," McCullagh suggestively describes Weil's thought as *attentive individualism*. In the chapter's second section, readers are then invited to consider similarities between Weil and a particular strand of republicanism McCullagh identifies with Marx and Arendt (here the discussion focuses in part on their shared critiques of rights discourse). The chapter concludes by arguing that Weil's political thought does not ultimately sit very comfortably with either liberalism or republicanism; it rather invites us to rethink our existing ideologies and our militant commitments.

Like McCullagh, **Julie Daigle** is also convinced that there are some striking resonances between Weil's thought and the republican tradition. In Chapter twelve, in addition to offering some reflections on the nature of obedience in Weil's work, Daigle explores the affinities between Weil and republicanism via a consideration of classical republican and neo-republican authors like Niccolò Machiavelli, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Maurizio Viroli, and Philip Pettit. The chapter begins by considering potential counter-arguments to a rapprochement between republicanism