

Simone Weil's Political Theory for Today

Politics and/or Mysticism?

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Can political action (as understood today by the liberation, feminist, gay, lesbian movements, etc.) eliminate oppression? It would seem that, according to Simone Weil, social action cannot eliminate oppression, for the latter "lies at the very foundations of social life [collectivities], and cannot be destroyed by any political and juridical transformation." At best, political and juridical action can but contain oppression, for "if evil cannot be eliminated, then at least it can be contained. Such is the function of politics."¹ As a result, structural, systemic change is impossible to achieve, for a 'new' liberated collectivity (considered to be *qualitatively* different from a previous oppressive collectivity) eventually merely replicates the oppression of past collectivities.

In this article,² my purpose is (1) to analyse Simone Weil's complex

¹ Bertrand SAINT-SERNIN, *L'action politique selon Simone Weil* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1988), p. 144: "si le mal n'est pas éliminable, du moins peut-il être contenu. Telle est la fonction de la politique."

² A note on abbreviations used in this article. Simone Weil's *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), written in 1934, will henceforth be referred to as *Réflexions*. *Réflexions* is also found in *Oppression et Liberté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), Collection *Espoir* dirigée par Albert Camus, pp. 55-162, henceforth referred to as *O&L*. The English translation of *Réflexions* is found in *Oppression and Liberty [=OL]* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts, 1973), translated by Arthur Wills & John Petrie, pp. 37-124. Works about Simone Weil which were consulted – some of which are referred to in this paper: (1) Michel NARCY, *Simone Weil: Malheur et beauté du monde* (Paris: Centurion, 1967); (2) Philippe CORMIER, "Métaxu et 'Gros Animal': Simone Weil devant l'Église catholique," in *Cahiers Simone Weil*, tome II – n° 1, mars 1979, pp. 42-45; (3) Patrice ROLLAND, "Approche

political theory³ and (2) to argue that in order to understand Weil's political thought, one must extend her personal understanding of salvation (her experience of grace [mysticism]) into the realm of social and political liberation.

There appears to exist two Weilian political theories: an 'early Weil' and a 'later Weil';⁴ namely, a pre-1943 deterministic political Weilian view

politique de 'L'enracinement,'" in *Cahiers Simone Weil: Première introduction à la pensée politique de Simone Weil*, tome VI – n° 4, décembre 1983, pp. 297-318; (4) J.-P. LITTLE, "Cité et médiation chez Simone Weil," in *Cahiers Simone Weil: La pensée politique et sociale de Simone Weil (I)*, tome VII – n° 1, mars 1984, pp. 39-50; (5) Michel NARCY, "Simone Weil, mystique ou politique?" in *Cahiers Simone Weil: La pensée politique et sociale de Simone Weil (II)*, tome VII – n° 2, juin 1984, pp. 105-19; (6) Anne ROCHE, "Simone Weil et 'La critique Sociale,'" in *Cahiers Simone Weil: La pensée politique et sociale de Simone Weil (III)*, tome VII – n° 3, septembre 1984, pp. 233-42; (7) (a) Eugène FLEURÉ, "Le 'Social' dans 'la Condition ouvrière': Un anniversaire: il y a cinquante ans, Simone Weil se faisait ouvrière d'usine," pp. 341-46; (b) Marie HÉRAUD, "Unité de la pensée mystique et de la pensée politique de Simone Weil," pp. 360-67; (c) Patrice ROLLAND, "Religion et politique: expérience et pensée de Simone Weil," pp. 368-91; (d) Béatrice-Clémentine FARRON-LANDRY, "L'attente, ou la porte conduisant à la croix-balance," pp. 392-402; all in *Cahiers Simone Weil: La pensée sociale de Simone Weil (IV)*, tome VII – n° 4, décembre 1984. Florence de LUSSY, "Le problème du 'nous' entre l'individu et le collectif," in *Recherches sur la philosophie et le langage: Simone Weil et les langues*, *Cahier du groupe de recherches sur la philosophie et le langage: Département de philosophie: Université P. Mendès-France*, n° 13–1991, pp. 193-213; Luce BLECH-LIDOLF, *La pensée philosophique et sociale de Simone Weil* (Berne, Suisse: Herbert Lang & Cie, 1976).

³ On the one hand, by 'political theory,' I mean the descriptive structure as well as the moral implications of a given political thought. 'Descriptive' and 'moral' refer to two independent meanings of 'political theory,' which are proposed by Robert BROWN, in *Classical Political Theories: From Plato to Marx* (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1990), p. 1. For an exclusively 'moral' understanding of 'political theory,' see Robert Booth FOWLER and Jeffrey R. ORENSTEIN, *Contemporary Issues in Political Theory* (New York, NY: Praeger Publishers, 1985), Revised Edition. On the other hand, by the expression 'political thought,' the adjective 'political' derives from the noun 'politics' in the traditional etymological Greek meaning of *polis* (city or state) or, (in this paper), a theory that relates to the governance of the *polis*, the state: see, for example, Herbert M. LEVINE, *Political Issues Debated: An Introduction to Politics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), Third Edition, pp. 3-5. In addition to the 'state,' Levine offers two other meanings of 'politics'; namely, those of 'power' and 'public policy,' (pp. 5-6). In a more specific way, Bhikhu PAREKH has described 'politics' as "a practical activity which is concerned with how we collectively live together, conduct our affairs, make choices, resolve differences and so on, and [Parekh added] it [politics as 'a practical activity'] necessarily raises moral issues" (*Contemporary Political Thinkers* [Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982], "Preface," p. ix).

⁴ Quite strikingly, a year after I made this distinction between 'the early and later Weil political thought' before the members of the *American Weil Society* at Princeton University (1995), a Weil scholar (from the *Weil Society*) wrote a paper for the *Society* stating: "The development of Weil's political philosophy has generally been divided into two phases

(which might be called the *pesanteur*/gravity⁵ phase) and a 1943 modified deterministic mystical political Weilian view (which might be called the *grâce*/grace phase) – with 1942 as possibly a transitional year.⁶ It appears to me, however, that according to both the early and the later Weilian political views, the ‘state/city’ (the *polis*, that which deals with the ‘political’) is intrinsically evil.⁷ Yet, on closer examination, one discerns a distinction: in the ‘early Weil,’ the emphasis is on the state as bedeviled by affliction (*malheur*);⁸ whereas in the ‘later Weil,’ the emphasis is on the state as

[without references].” The scholar continues: “The early phase culminates in *Oppression and Liberty* and is preoccupied with gravity, that is, with spelling out the necessities within which individuals must live [...]. The later phase [...] culminated in *The Need for Roots* [...] and [...] expresses a new appreciation of collectivities as *métaxu*, that is, the sacramental bridges which helps to grace and ground individuals in relation to time, space and eternity.”

⁵ In George PANICHAS (ed.), *Simone Weil Reader* (Mt. Kisco, NY: Moyer Bell Limited, 1977), one reads about ‘gravity’ and ‘grace’ according to Weil: “Man’s love of power distorts his sense of proportion and accounts for what is a base phenomenon, of which physical ‘gravity’ is symbolic. ‘Humanism,’ [Weil] asserts, ‘was not wrong in thinking that truth, beauty, equality are of infinite worth, but in thinking that man can obtain them for himself without grace’” (p. xxx).

⁶ Although the transitional year (from *pesanteur* to *grâce*, from the ‘early Weil’ to the ‘later Weil’), in fact, might have been 1938. In 1938, during Holy Week, Weil was on retreat at the French Benedictine Monastery of Solesmes. Sometimes later, she experienced Christ. Then, “*le Christ est descendu et m’a prise*,” she wrote (Marie-Madeleine DAVY, *Simone Weil* [Paris: Témoins du XX^{ème} siècle, 1956], p. 27. In S. Weil, *Attente de Dieu* [Paris: Fayard, 1966], p. 38.) The context for that mystical experience, according to Weil, was George Herbert’s poem entitled “Love” – “the most beautiful poem in the world,” Weil once said. In some way, Weil’s mystical experience, according to Pétrement, might relate to the Solesmes retreat (Simone PÉTREMENT, *Simone Weil: A Life* [New York: Pantheon Books, 1976], p. 330 and between pp. 434-35, the 7th page of illustrations. In a personal letter (12/4/91), Michel Narcy wrote: “Comme elle [Simone] dit, [e]lle a découvert ce poème [‘Love’] ‘plus tard’ que son séjour à Solesmes pendant qu’elle écoutait du chant grégorien” (WEIL, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 37).

⁷ Within this context, one reads in PANICHAS, *Simone Weil Reader*: “Gustave Thibon, the religious thinker who befriended Simone Weil and, along with the Reverend Father Jean-Marie Perrin, acted as her spiritual legatee, observes that ‘Simone Weil oscillates between a pessimism which reduces man to nothingness and an optimism which raises him prematurely to divinity.’ If, then, she sees the social order as essentially evil, she emphasizes that ‘the world must be regarded as containing something of a void in order that it may have need of God’” (p. xxxi).

⁸ See Narcy, *Simone Weil: Malheur et beauté du monde*. In PANICHAS, *Simone Weil Reader*, affliction is described as that which characterized human life (according to Weil). “[I]n short [it is] the absence of God and the condition of anonymity which ‘deprives its victims of their personality and turns them into things’ and places them ‘at the foot of the cross, almost at the greatest possible distance from God’” (p. xxi). See in PANICHAS, “Evil,” pp. 381-90.

sacramental mediation (*métaxu*)⁹ of transcendence.¹⁰ In both instances, whether as 'affliction' or 'sacrament,' politics appears to be equated with or at least grounded in mysticism.

The Early Weil: The Pre-1943 Deterministic Political View

(The *Pesanteur*/Gravity Phase)

According to the early Weil (pre-1943), the state is the collectivity¹¹ *par excellence* (OL 115):¹² a "blind social mechanism," *the big beast*,¹³ the centre and controller of social life.¹⁴ In *Attente de Dieu* (1942), however, Weil attempts to clarify what she means by 'social': she does not include all that relates to a city; only the collective feelings.¹⁵ Referring to *Attente*,

⁹ In PANICHAS, *Simone Weil Reader*, one reads: "Simone Weil never fails to affirm the existence of bridges, of the Platonic *metaxu*, or intermediaries, between the temporal and the fullness of being, between nature and supernature, between man and God" (p. 363). See also Eric O. SPRINGSTED, *Christus Mediator: Platonic Mediation in the Thought of Simone Weil* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983).

¹⁰ CORMIER, "Métaxu et 'Gros Animal'" Simone Weil devant l'Église catholique," in *Cahiers Simone Weil*, t. II - n° 1, mars 1979, pp. 42-45; see also J.P. LITTLE, "Cité et médiation chez Simone Weil," in *Cahiers Simone Weil*, t. VII, n° 1, mars 1984, pp. 39-50; see also a personal letter from Dr. SPRINGSTED, president of the the *American Weil Society*, accepting my proposal for a presentation before the *Weil Society* on the issue of Weil's political thought (1/3/95): "In looking at the proposal I am tempted to point out one matter. Much of what you say seems essentially correct, but I would also like to note that what Weil says in 'Reflections...' about mind has to be somewhat reconsidered in light of the place of mind in her later, Christian thought. As I have tried to express it, this reconsideration is what led her in *The Need for Roots* to go beyond the problems of social action (which you rightly note) in 'Reflections...' because she could conceive collectivities not simply as instances of social power, but, more positively, as *metaxu*."

¹¹ For the several meanings of the expression 'collectivity' in Weil, see for example Mary G. DIETZ, in *Between the Human and the Divine: The Political Thought of Simone Weil* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1988), especially, pp. 50-60. See also SAINT-SERNIN, *L'action politique*, "La masse," pp. 133-37; and Gabriella FIORI, *Simone Weil: An Intellectual Biography* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press), "The History of Her Social Thought," especially pp. 258-65; Lawrence A. BLUM - Victor J. SEIDLER, *A Truer Liberty: Simone Weil and Marxism* (New York, NY: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1089), especially "Liberty," pp. 80-106 and "Oppression," pp. 107-42. See also references in note 1 above.

¹² WEIL, *O&L*, p. 151; *Réflexions*, p. 137.

¹³ S. WEIL, *La pesanteur et la grâce* (Paris: Plon, 1948), pp. 160-65.

¹⁴ As characterized by DIETZ, in *Between the Human and the Divine*, p. 51.

¹⁵ WEIL, *Attente de Dieu*, p. 25; *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper Colophon Books / Harper & Row, 1973), p. 54. ("Par social je n'entends pas tout ce qui se rapporte à une cité, mais seulement les sentiments collectifs.")

Michel Narcy explains that the 'sentiments collectifs' are patriotic feelings: feelings "through which [a] group is preoccupied above all by itself, whereby its awareness becomes exclusively an awareness of itself and thus turns itself away from what is real"¹⁶ – the 'real' which, later in this article, will be referred to as the transcendent, the spiritual, the mystical, the Absolute: a presupposition of the 'later Weil.'

It remains that in her 1934 work, *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale*¹⁷ – a work that reflects the 'early' Weilian political view – Weil claims that oppression, whether economic, political, or religious, is rooted primarily in society itself, the state: the 'collectivity.' Only secondarily is oppression connected with class conflict between oppressor and oppressed. Oppression, Weil writes, "lies at the very foundations of social life, and cannot be destroyed by any political and juridical transformation" (OL 41).¹⁸ For example, regarding oppression as rooted in "the very foundation of social life," and specifically in religious structures, Weil writes: "The collective is the object of all idolatry; it is this which chains us to the earth." Regarding the Church as 'collectivity,' Weil maintains:

A society like the Church, which claims to be divine is perhaps more dangerous on account of the *ersatz* good which it contains than on account of the evil which sullies it. Something of the social labeled divine: an intoxicating mixture which carries with it every sort of licence. Devil disguised.¹⁹

¹⁶ NARCY, *Simone Weil: Malheur et beauté*, p. 119. The context here is the 'patriotism of the Church': "ce sentiment par lequel le groupe se préoccupe avant tout de lui-même, par où sa conscience devient exclusivement conscience de soi et ainsi se détourne du réel."

¹⁷ In *Between the Human and the Divine*, DIETZ referred to *Réflexions* as follows: "[I]n 1934, [Weil] had completed [this] essay that set out in more theoretical and analytical terms what her year of work and her factory journal confirmed" (p. 37). In its 1951 published form, the factory journal is part of *La condition ouvrière* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), "Journal d'usine," pp. 45-145. A chapter of *La condition ouvrière*, (by the same name, pp. 317-25, has also been published in *Œuvres complètes de Simone Weil*, "Écrits historiques et politiques" (Vers la guerre, 1937-1940), tome II, volume 2, "Condition ouvrière" (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), pp. 257-64. The chapter from *La condition ouvrière* entitled "Journal d'usine" (pp. 45-145) has been translated in Simone Weil, *Formative Writings, 1929-1941*, edited and translated by Dorothy Tuck McFARLAND and Wilhelmina VAN NESS (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts, 1987), "Factory Journal," pp. 155-226.

¹⁸ WEIL, *O&L*, p. 61; *Réflexions*, p. 15.

¹⁹ S. WEIL, *Gravity and Grace* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952 / 1963), pp. 144-45. In *La pesanteur et la grâce*, "Le gros animal," pp. 160-61. ["Le collectif est l'objet de toute idolâtrie, c'est lui qui nous enchaîne à la terre." / "Une société à prétension divine comme l'Église est peut-être plus dangereuse par l'ersatz de bien qu'elle contient que par le mal qui la souille. Une étiquette divine sur le social: mélange enivrant qui enferme toute licence. Diable déguisé."] *La pesanteur et la grâce* consists of some of Weil's thoughts written between 1940

Weil describes as 'novel' her *status quaestionis*. She asks: "[W]hat is it that links oppression in general and each form of oppression in particular to the system of production [...]?" Weil believes that for one "to succeed in grasping the mechanism of oppression, [one must understand] by what means it arises, subsists, transforms itself, [and] by what means, perhaps, it might theoretically disappear." For in the past, she writes: "[N]oble minds have regarded the power of oppressors as constituting a usurpation pure and simple, which one had to try to oppose either by simply expressing a radical disapproval of it, or else by armed forces placed at the service of justice." It is Weil's diagnosis that "[i]n either case, failure has always been complete." A most striking example of 'armed forces placed at the service of justice': the French Revolution, "when, after having effectively succeeded in bringing about the disappearance of a certain form of oppression, people stood by, helpless, watching a new oppression immediately being set up in its place" (OL 57). In other words, with time, oppression replicates itself even in the so-called 'new' collectivities that are supposed to have liberated the oppressed from the 'old' ones.

Political and juridical actions cannot eliminate oppression. At best, they can but contain it.²⁰ As for conflicts between oppressors and oppressed, they are but symptoms of a deeper conflict; namely, that between the collectivity and the individual, whenever the individual surrenders his or her mind to the collectivity. In *Oppression and Liberty*, Weil described how collectivities oppress:

Such terms as oppressors and oppressed, the idea of classes – all that sort of thing is near to losing all meaning, so obvious are the impotence and distress of all men in the face of the social machine, which has become a machine for breaking hearts and crushing spirits, a machine for manufacturing irresponsibility, stupidity, corruption, slackness and, above all, dizziness (OL 108).²¹

"The social order, though necessary," Weil believes, "is essentially evil, whatever it may be": Church, State, or otherwise (OL 146).²² In all

and 1942. In note 1, p. 144, *Gravity and Grace*, one reads: "On the origin of this myth [that is, the Great Beast], see PLATO, *Republic*, Book VI. To adore the 'Great Beast' is to think and act in conformity with the prejudices and reactions of the multitude to the detriment of all personal search for truth and goodness." [Editor's note.]

²⁰ This is Saint-Sernin's understanding of Weil's view on political action. See SAINT-SERNIN, *L'action politique*, p. 144. See also chapter 28, "La politique," pp. 179-84. Regarding Saint-Sernin, see note below. See also John HELLMAN, *Simone Weil: An Introduction to Her Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), "The Insufficiency of Politics," pp. 17-36.

²¹ WEIL, *O&L*, p. 142; *Réflexions*, p. 125.

²² WEIL, *O&L*, "Méditation sur l'obéissance et la liberté," p. 193 (this section falls under the more general title "Fragments 1933-1938").

instances, oppression arises where the individual mind surrenders itself to the social machine, "the blind collectivity." As a result, not only are individuals incapable of submitting their actions to thought but also are they rendered incapable even of thinking (OL 108).²³ A collectivity cannot think. For Weil, no such condition exists as *collective thinking*. She illustrates:

The number 2 thought of by one man cannot be added to the number 2 thought of by another man so as to make the number 4; similarly, the idea that one of the co-operators has of the partial work he is carrying out cannot be combined with the idea that each of the others has of his respective task so as to form a coherent piece of work. Several human minds cannot become united in one collective mind, and the expressions "collective soul", and "collective thought", so commonly employed nowadays, are altogether devoid of meaning (OL 82).²⁴

The Later Weil: The 1943 Modified Deterministic Mystical Political View

(The *Grâce/Grace* Phase)

In *L'enracinement*,²⁵ written in 1943, after the fall of France into the hands of the Nazis and the Vichy government, Weil appears to have a higher esteem for collectivities. For example, she writes:

[T]here are certain occasions when the march of public events occupies so much more important a place in the personal life of each of us than does the course of individual affairs, that a number of hidden thoughts and hidden needs of this sort are found to be the same with practically all the human beings that go to make up a people.²⁶

In *L'enracinement* Weil distinguishes between 'collectivities' that enable individuals to think and those that do not. Thus, in this 1943 work, Weil speaks of *pays* (country) rather than *état* (state). *État* in *Réflexions* is based on power; whereas *pays* in *L'enracinement* is what the French movement, located in London in 1943, speaks in the name of. She describes *pays* cryptically as:

Not possessing any governmental authority [...] over the French people [which would be *état*], based entirely upon free consent, [*pays*] has something of a spiritual power about it. The unswerving loyalty displayed in the darkest hours, the blood spilled freely every day in its name, give it the right freely to use the most exalted words in the language [*pays*]. Its position is exactly as it should be for making known to the world the voice of France; a voice whose authority is not based on physical power, which was

²³ WEIL, *O&L*, p. 142; *Réflexions*, pp. 124-25.

²⁴ WEIL, *O&L*, p. 111; *Réflexions*, p. 82.

²⁵ WEIL, *L'enracinement* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949); English: *Need for Roots* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1952), translated by Arthur WILLS with a Preface by T. S. ELIOT.

²⁶ WEIL, *The Need for Roots*, pp. 191-92; *L'enracinement*, p. 243.

destroyed by the defeat, nor on glory, which was wiped out in shame; but, first, on an elevated plane of thought in keeping with the present tragedy, and, secondly, on a spiritual tradition graven in the hearts of all people.²⁷

Saint-Sernin, in *L'action politique selon Simone Weil*, explains how a state (*état*) becomes country (*pays* or *patrie*):

The dissociation between state [*État*] and country [*patrie ou pays*] will be overcome if the state becomes the guardian of the milieus within which free men find the food necessary to their physical and spiritual life. [In Weil], this is the vocation of the art of politics. Since its goal here on earth is to assure the salvation of human collectivities, it implies the management of forces; but it attains, in a certain measure at least, its destination, if it avoids the diabolical 'going back' [*retournement*] which threatens all power: that of inverting means into ends. Politics does not only set up a link between men within the city or relationships between sovereign states; it also establishes – in each of those who attempt to escape the "social idol" as well as in the societies that they create – a new and immemorial link, an alliance "of the spirit with the universe." Thus is infleshed in the human heart a cosmic dimension of the political.²⁸ (The distinction between 'force' and 'power' is explained below.)

It is within the context of *pays* (country), and not that of *état* (state), that the notion of patriotism in *L'enracinement* must be analyzed.²⁹ In *La pesanteur et la grâce* under *Patriotisme*, a similar distinction is made by Weil between 'nation' (state) and 'pays' (country). She writes: "We must not have any love other than charity. A nation cannot be the object of charity. But a country can be such, as an environment bearing traditions which are eternal. Every country can be that."³⁰

²⁷ WEIL, *The Need for Roots*, p. 198; *L'enracinement*, p. 250.

²⁸ SAINT-SERNIN, *L'action politique*, p. 177. (English translation is mine). ("La dissociation entre l'État et patrie [ou *pays*] sera surmontée, si l'état devient le gardien des milieux au sein desquels des hommes libres trouvent les aliments nécessaires à leur vie physique et spirituelle. Telle est la vocation de l'art politique [chez Weil]. Sa finalité [celle de l'art politique] étant d'assurer ici-bas le salut des collectivités humaines, il implique le maniement des forces; mais il atteint, dans une certaine mesure au moins, sa destination, s'il évite le retournement diabolique qui menace tout pouvoir, celui d'inverser les moyens en fins. La politique n'instaure pas seulement un lien entre les hommes au sein de la cité ou des relations entre les états souverains; elle établit, dans chacun des hommes qui tentent de se soustraire à l'«idole sociale» comme dans les sociétés qu'ils édifient, un lien nouveau et immémorial, une alliance, 'de l'esprit avec l'univers'. Ainsi s'incarne, dans le cœur humain, la dimension cosmique du politique.") See also in SAINT-SERNIN, *L'action politique*, "La masse," pp. 133-37; "Le groupe: Sartre et Simone Weil," pp. 139-44; "Le groupe: Simone Weil et Spinoza," pp. 145-48.

²⁹ Regarding 'patriotism' in Weil, see HELLMAN, *Simone Weil: An Introduction to Her Thought*, pp. 37-46.

³⁰ S. WEIL, *Gravity and Grace*, translated by Arthur WILLS (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1952), p. 222. "On ne doit pas avoir d'autre amour que la charité. Une nation ne peut pas être un objet de charité. Mais un pays peut l'être, comme milieu porteur de traditions éternelles. Tous les pays peuvent l'être" (WEIL, *La pesanteur et la grâce*, p. 165).

Thus, in *L'enracinement*, 'collectivities' appear to have priority over individual thought. Nevertheless, traces of the 'early Weil' prevail. The central theme of *Réflexions* (about the individual *versus* collectivities) appears in *L'enracinement*. For example, in the latter she states:

This [an occasion such as the fall of France] provides the opportunity for carrying out an action, which, while it is directed toward a whole people, remains *essentially a personal, not a collective one*. Thus, far from stifling the resources concealed in the depths of each mind, which is what all collective action, in the nature of things, inevitably does, however lofty the ends pursued may be, this type of action awakens them, stirs up, and stimulates their growth.³¹ (Italics added.)

For Weil, the causes of oppression are found in objective conditions of societal systems themselves (*OL* 63-65).³² And the most pervasive condition that feeds oppression is the struggle for power. "[F]or oppression," Weil writes, "is exercised by force, and in the long run all force originates in nature" (*OL* 63).³³ According to Weil:

[I]n primitive forms of production – hunting, fishing, gathering – human effort appears as a simple reaction to the inexorable pressure continually exercised on man by nature [...]. At higher states of production, nature's compulsion continues certainly to be exercised, and still pitilessly, but in an apparent less immediate fashion [...]. [M]an seems to pass by stages, with respect to nature, from servitude to dominion. At the same time nature gradually loses her divine character, and divinity more and more takes on human shape [...]. In reality, at these higher stages, human action continues, as a whole, to be nothing but pure obedience to the brutal spur of an immediate necessity; only, instead of being harried by nature, man is henceforth harried by man. However, it is still the same pressure exerted by nature.³⁴

In *L'action politique selon Simone Weil*, Saint-Sernin distinguishes in Weil between 'force' and 'power' (*force et pouvoir*):

Whereas forces act as causes to proportionate and calculable effects, power, in essence, is unlimited, and therefore illusory. Forces, ultimately, come from nature; power exists but in relation to men. It consists in splitting effective force from the desire to

³¹ WEIL, *The Need for Roots*, p. 192; *L'enracinement*, p. 243. In French, the last sentence goes as follows: "Ainsi, loin d'étouffer les ressources profondes situées au secret de chaque âme, ce que fait inévitablement, par nature des choses, toute action collective, quelle que soit l'élévation des buts poursuivis, cette espèce d'action les réveille, les excite, et les fait croître."

³² "Weil's sociological scheme of oppression is an application of biological principle, reflecting the strength of Darwin's influence on Weil's view of sociology" (Betty McLANE-ISLE, *Uprooting and Integration in the Writings of Simone Weil* [New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1987], p. 77). In WEIL, see *OL* pp. 58-60 and *La pesanteur et la grâce*, pp. 174-75.

³³ WEIL, *O&L*, p. 88; *Réflexions*, p. 52.

³⁴ WEIL, *OL*, pp. 62-63 / *O & L*, pp. 87-88; *Réflexions*, pp. 50-52.

impose one's will beyond one's authority [...]. [Since] the instruments of power, arms, techniques, or, industries, organization, etc., are exterior to those who use them or who are victimized by them, a permanent struggle is fought in order to possess them [so that in effect] "not men, but things set the limit and the laws to this dizzying race toward power."³⁵

With regard to the collectivity called the state, the struggle for power shows itself in two ways: against inferiors (within the state) and against rivals (outside the state); that is, against the led on the one hand, and against other nations on the other (*OL* 65-66).³⁶ And Weil demonstrates that the two ways are "inextricably bound up."

A power, whatever it may be, must always tend toward strengthening itself at home by means of successes gained abroad, for such successes provide it with more powerful means of coercion; besides, the struggle against its rivals rallied behind it its own slaves, who are under the illusion they have a personal interest in the results of the battle. But, in order to obtain from the slaves the obedience and sacrifices indispensable to victory, that power has to make itself more oppressive; to be in a position to exercise oppression, it is still more imperatively compelled to turn outwards; and so on (*OL* 66).³⁷

Dietz summarizes Weil's analysis of oppression:

Oppression [...] is a ubiquitous aspect of the human experience. It is an implacable condition that, regardless of the pattern of social transformations, remains steadfastly a part of all social conditions – not always and everywhere in the same form or to the same degree, but nevertheless present, beneath or underlying the realm of human activity. Likewise, the struggle for power, which is both the manifestation of oppression and gives way to oppression, is a hidden reality of human life [...]. [I]n the face of the immutable structure of the "collectivity," the individual is impotent.³⁸

As impotent as Weil believes the individual to be as he or she faces the "immutable structure of the collectivity," still she discovers something in the individual that strives for freedom. "It would seem that man is born a slave, and that servitude is his natural condition [...]. And yet nothing on

³⁵ SAINT-SERNIN, *L'action politique*, p. 155. (English translation is mine.) In WEIL, *O&L*, pp. 95-96 for the quotation within Saint-Sernin's text ("Alors que les forces agissent comme des causes aux effets proportionnés et calculables, le pouvoir est par essence illimité, et donc illusoire. Les forces, en dernière instance, proviennent de la nature, le pouvoir n'existe que comme relation entre les hommes. Il consiste dans l'écart entre la force effective et le désir d'imposer sa volonté au delà de sa puissance [...]. Les instruments de pouvoir, armes, techniques, ou, industries, organisations, etc., étant extérieurs à ceux qui les manient ou qui les subissent, une lutte permanente se livre pour leur possession [de sorte que] 'ce ne sont pas les hommes, mais les choses qui donnent à cette course vertigineuse au pouvoir sa limite et ses lois.'")

³⁶ WEIL, *O&L*, p. 91; *Réflexions*, p. 55.

³⁷ WEIL, *O&L*, pp. 91-92; *Réflexions*, pp. 55-56.

³⁸ DIETZ, *Between the Human and the Divine*, p. 61.

earth can stop him from feeling himself born for liberty" (OL 83). And a relative liberty is possible because we can "think, imagine, and strive for conditions of existence beyond our immediate experience."³⁹ It is 'the individual as a methodical thinker' which is discussed in Weil's third section of her *Réflexions sur les causes de la liberté et de l'oppression sociale*, entitled "Tableau théorique d'une société libre."

How did Weil describe liberty? It is "a relationship between thought and action," not a relationship between desire and satisfaction. For such a relationship of true liberty to take place action must proceed "from a preliminary judgment concerning the end which [a person] sets [...] and the sequence of means suitable for attaining this end" (OL 85). Dietz explains that "Weil's approach [to liberty] is fundamentally a pragmatic or 'problem-solving' one in which a certain end or result is anticipated, a particular plan, or principle, or 'means' is devised, and action is taken in accordance with that plan."⁴⁰ For example, Weil argues that a sailor is incapable of calming a raging sea: "[T]he intelligence is powerless to get its bearings amid the innumerable eddies formed by wind and water on the high seas [...]." The sailor, however, is not helpless. Weil explains: "[I]f we place in the midst of these swirling waters a boat whose sails and rudder are fixed in such and such a manner it is possible to draw up a list of the actions which they can cause it to undergo" (OL 88).⁴¹

Dietz interprets this passage as follows:

[T]he sailor who draws up a list of actions (which are, of course, limited) can challenge the swirling waters. The boat, then, is the instrument through which the world is 'met' (just as the body is interposed between the mind and the universe) but having the boat alone is not sufficient to conquer force. What is necessary is the control of the mind, the ability to understand as well as apply the craft of sailing. The sailor 'defines' the context for action because he keeps in mind the use of craft and strategy, the meaning of setting the sails and rudder, and the significance of the thrust of the wind. His knowledge of these things serves to guide his actions, and by acting in accordance with method, he greatly reduces his chances of being drowned at sea, or dashed on the rocks. What the sailor actually *does*, then, after he circumscribes chance, *appears* necessary; his particular course of action seems to be compulsory. This exact relationship between necessity and autonomy is what Weil refers to as pure freedom or *liberté*.⁴²

³⁹ DIETZ, *Between the Human and the Divine*, p. 61.

⁴⁰ DIETZ, *Between the Human and the Divine*, p. 62.

⁴¹ WEIL, *O&L*, p. 119; *Réflexions*, p. 93. The English translation is inadequate here. The French reads: "Ainsi l'esprit est impuissant à se reconnaître dans les remous innombrables que forment en pleine mer le vent et l'eau; mais si on place au milieu des ces remous un bateau dont voiles et gouvernail soient disposés de telle ou telle manière, on peut faire la liste des actions qu'ils peuvent lui faire subir."

⁴² DIETZ, *Between the Human and the Divine*, p. 64.

Weil offers another image, again related to the sea, to explain her understanding of liberty. She writes:

[A] fisherman battling against wind and waves in his little boat, although he suffers from cold, fatigue, lack of leisure and even of sleep, danger and a primitive level of existence, has a more enviable lot than the manual worker on a production line, who is nevertheless better off as regards nearly all these matters (*OL* 101).⁴³

Dietz explains:

The fisherman is free because he controls his activities in a way that the factory worker does not. To put it in Weil's vocabulary, the fisherman understands and executes the method that governs his labors; his efforts are directed by methodological thought and self-imposed discipline. The factory worker, however, has method, movement, and discipline externally imposed upon him.⁴⁴

Thus, while liberty consists of a relationship between thought and action, it is equally a relationship between necessity and autonomy.⁴⁵ Dietz quotes Weil in *OL*: "If one were to understand by liberty the mere absence of all necessity, the word would be emptied of all concrete meaning; but it would not then represent for us that which, when we are deprived of it, takes away from the value of life."⁴⁶

Weil captures her thesis about liberty in very crisp terms where she writes: "[W]e live in a world in which man has only himself to look to for miracles" (*OL* 89). This does not mean that every time we follow the process of methodological thinking (which expresses liberty as explained above) that, through a definite action, a solution will be found.⁴⁷

⁴³ WEIL, *Réflexions*, p. 112.

⁴⁴ DIETZ, *Between the Human and the Divine*, pp. 67-68.

⁴⁵ DIETZ, *Between the Human and the Divine*, p. 64.

⁴⁶ Quoted in DIETZ, *Between the Human and the Divine*, on p. 81, note 1. The last sentence reads in French as follows: "mais il [le mot liberté] ne représenterait pas alors pour nous ce dont la privation ôte à la vie sa valeur" [WEIL, *Réflexions*, p. 87 / *OL*, p. 115] which the English translators Wills and Petrie in *OL* translate as "but it [the word liberty] would not then represent for us that which, when we are deprived of it, takes away the value from life" (WEIL, *OL*, p. 85). I would translate the latter part of the sentence "takes away from life its value."

⁴⁷ Weil distinguishes between two meanings of 'method.' "But, unfortunately," she writes, "even if you did manage strictly and in full detail to subject all forms of work without exception to methodical thought, a new obstacle to liberty would immediately arise on account of the profound difference in kind which separates theoretical speculation from action. In reality, there is nothing in common between solutions of a problem and the carrying out of an even perfectly methodological piece of work, between the sequence of ideas and the sequence of movements. The man who tackles a difficulty of the theoretical order proceeds by moving from what is simple to what is complex, from what is clear to what is obscure; the movements of the manual worker, on the other hand, are not some of them clearer and simpler than others, it is merely that those which come before are the condition of those which come after" (WEIL, *Réflexions*, p. 97).

In *OL*, pp. 106-107 (*Réflexions* 122), Weil writes that

Bacon was the first to put forward this idea [the idea of labor considered as a human value]. For the ancient and heart-breaking curse contained in Genesis, which made the world appear as a convict prison and labour as the sign of men's servitude and abasement, he [Bacon] substituted in a flash of genius the veritable charter expressing the relation between man and the world: "We cannot command Nature except by obeying her." This simple pronouncement ought to form by itself the Bible of our times.

In *Réflexions*, Weil refers to what she believes to be Marx's truly greatest idea:

that in human society as well as in nature nothing takes place otherwise than through material transformations. "Men make their own history, but within certain fixed conditions." To desire is nothing; we have got to know the material conditions which determine our possibilities of action;⁴⁸ and in the social sphere these conditions are

Moreover, the mind more often than not musters together what execution has to separate, or separates what execution has to link up. That is why, when some piece of work or other presents the mind with difficulties that cannot immediately be overcome, it is impossible to combine the examination of these difficulties with the accomplishment of the work; the mind has first of all to solve the theoretical problem by its own particular methods, and afterwards the solution can be applied to the action. You cannot say in such a case that the action is, strictly speaking, methodological; it is in accordance with method, which is a very different thing. The difference is capital; for he who applies method has no need to conceive it in his mind at the moment he is applying it [...]. Thus for one single flash of thought there are an unlimited number of blind actions. It goes without saying that those who go on applying indefinitely such and such a method of work have often never given themselves the trouble of understanding it; furthermore, it frequently happens that each of them is only charged with a part of the job of execution, always the same, while his companions do the rest. Hence one is brought face to face with a paradoxical situation; namely, that there is method in the motions of work, but none in the mind of the worker. Then Weil shows that "this contrast" between application and the understanding of the method is found again, in absolutely identical form, in the realm of pure theory itself (WEIL, *OL*, pp. 91-95).

By method, in this last meaning, Weil means that the process allows for a methodological way of understanding the world: of coming to the point of knowing what we are capable and incapable of achieving. Weil's methodological way of thinking allows us to accept the necessity of nature, while not expecting anything except the creativity that arises from [one's thoughts] in the sense that one produces "the conditions of [one's] own existence and thus indirectly [one produces oneself]" (WEIL, *OL*, p. 108; *Réflexions*, p. 124).

⁴⁸ In "Science and Perception in Descartes" [1929-1930], (*Formative Writings 1929-1941*, Dorothy Tuck McFARLANE and Wilhelmina VAN NESS, Editors & Translators [Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987]), Weil reinterpreted René Descartes: "Je puis, donc je suis" (I can, therefore I am). She explained: "[A]s for knowing my own being, what I am is defined by what I can do. So there is one thing I can know: myself. And I cannot know anything else. To know is to know what I can; and I know to the degree that I substitute 'to act' and 'to be acted upon' for 'to enjoy,' 'to suffer,' 'to feel,' and 'to imagine.' In this way I transform illusion into certainty and change into necessity" (p. 59).

defined by the way in which man obeys material necessities in supplying his own needs, in other words, by the method of production (*OL* 45).

For Weil,

labor is not a metaphor for discussing freedom; when it is liberated, labor is the realization of freedom, the condition that makes the human relationship to necessity – human existence as ‘born for liberty’ and ‘born a slave’ – concrete and conscious. Or, to put this otherwise, unalienated labor is methodological thought; it is the reunification of the understanding and application of ‘method,’ concretized in the world.⁴⁹

Weil believes firmly and deeply that we are not made to be the plaything of the blind collectivity any more than we are made to be the plaything of nature (*OL* 97-98). The mastery over the collectivity and nature can only happen through the mind. According to Weil,

collective strength infinitely surpasses individual strength [...]. But in reality there is one exception and one only, namely, the sphere of the mind. In the case of the mind, the relation is reversed; here the individual surpasses the collectivity to the same extent as something surpasses nothing, for thought only takes shape in a mind that is alone face to face with itself; collectivities do not think (*OL* 98).

The Contemporary Question Revisited and Conclusion

To come back to our initial question: Can political action (as understood today by the liberation, feminist, gay, lesbian movements, etc.) eliminate oppression?

As deterministic as Simone Weil’s pre-1943 political thought may appear, there is still hope that political action may go beyond ‘containment,’ and that evil might indeed be eliminated.

Michel Narcy believes that Weil’s understanding of social justice does not primarily have a ‘social’ meaning. It contains an existential/mystical one: “Justice is what Job asks, what the unfortunate (*malheureux/se*) asks when s/he cries out: Why are you hurting me?” At this moment, if I can transfer my own being into the being of the unfortunate and bear his or her misery for a moment, then I will be motivated to do more than ‘contain’ evil. I will be motivated to change it. But this can only happen, according to Simone Weil, through a mystical experience: “Christ alone can do this and people whose souls are filled entirely by Christ.” According to Narcy, those who have been able to transfer their being into that of the unfortunate they are helping transfer in them not their own being but Christ’s.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ DIETZ, *Between the Human and the Divine*, p. 65.

⁵⁰ NARCY, *Simone Weil et la beauté du monde*, p. 110. Narcy’s references here are to Weil’s *Pensée sans ordre*, p. 119.

Narcy concludes that according to Weil political action – to be effective – must be situated within the spiritual or mystical realm,⁵¹ which he relates to Weil's understanding of decreation and obedience.⁵² Whereas decreation translates itself into a subjective anguish (the anguish to be oneself), obedience focuses on God's will.⁵³ Narcy relates the latter to Weil's readiness to prefer personal damnation were it God's will for her. For Weil wrote: "Were it conceivable that one would damn himself by obeying God and be saved by disobeying him, even then, I would choose obedience."⁵⁴

Patrice Rolland also suggests that the spiritual or mystical dimensions to Weil's political thought is grounded in her personal experiences: religious and human. He refers to the concluding chapter of *L'enracinement*: a meditation on both consenting to die and work, which seems to forego any attempt of revolt on the part of the working class against oppression.⁵⁵ However, Rolland concludes that this is not Weil's point. In *L'enracinement*, Weil proposes that an authentic relation to the Absolute grounds the relationship among people.⁵⁶ The source of all social and political action must be anchored in the spiritual realm.

It seems to me that in order to understand Weil's political thought, one must extend her personal understanding of salvation (her experience of *grâce*) into the realm of social and political liberation. If so, then Weil has a multifold and complex political message. She is saying: unless you truly experience the anguish of the oppressed by living their life (as she did through her 'factory years,' an experience of decreation that counteracts the experience of gravity [*pesanteur*]), then you will not discover within yourself the authentic motivation to change unjust social structures. She is also saying: be that as it may, the experience that you have of living the life of the oppressed is not really yours but that of Christ living in you (that is, the experience of grace). Finally, she says: But even then, as together you and the oppressed struggle for just social structures, liberation happens in God's good time. Hence, in the midst of the struggle for justice, obedience to God's will (or what she calls 'attention') remains the primary focus. In fact Weil herself wrote: "It is only by entering the transcendental, the supernatu-

⁵¹ NARCY, *Simone Weil*, p. 111.

⁵² Obedience in Weil is also 'attention.' See Richard J. BEAUCHESNE, "Attention in Simone Weil, and Dying as Supreme Attention," in *Église et Théologie*, 24 (1993), pp. 259-71.

⁵³ NARCY, *Simone Weil: Malheur et beauté du monde*, p. 123.

⁵⁴ NARCY, *Simone Weil: Malheur et beauté du monde*, p. 123.

⁵⁵ ROLLAND, "Approche politique de 'L'enracinement,'" in *Cahiers Simone Weil*, t. VI – n° 4, décembre 1983, p. 301.

⁵⁶ ROLLAND, "Approche politique," in *Cahiers Simone Weil*, t. VI – n° 4, p. 318.

ral, the authentically spiritual order that man rises above the social. Until then, whatever he may do, the social is transcendent in relation to him."⁵⁷

⁵⁷ WEIL, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 218.