

**FRONTIERE LIBERALI**



## Book Review

### Justification, Legitimation, and the Self<sup>1</sup>

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In six hundred sixty-two tiny-typed pages, Sebastiano Maffettone covers a variety of traditions, authors, and topics. The book is organized in fifteen chapters, including an introduction that defines concepts and locates the book in the territory of Habermas and Rawls. The first part “Big Themes” features chapters on topics as diverse as Democracy, Utilitarianism, Republicanism, Feminism and Gender Theory, Global and International Relations. The second part “Great Authors” has critical analyses of John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, Amartya Sen, and Karl Marx. The third part “Comparative Political Theory” deals with Multiculturalism, Postcolonial Theory, Chinese Political Thinking, Contemporary Indian Political Theory, Islamic Political Thought.

There is a serious risk of getting lost in such an intellectually expansive text. Maffettone offers an introduction to key issues in contemporary political theory. He also engages with the cultural, economic and political challenges of our time. This is a formidable task. It's one thing to write a textbook. It's quite another to be able to have a sustained argument. And yet, *Politica* does the two things. While presenting ideas and concepts in an accessible way, Maffettone argues that if we want liberal democracy to survive these times, a few changes in the Rawls-Habermas paradigm need to be made.

The book starts from two convictions. The liberal democratic model is in crisis (xi). And, the liberal democratic model is worth defending (xx). Among the causes of this crisis, Maffettone lists several factors: a chronic defi-

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<sup>1</sup> The review is on Sebastiano Maffettone's *Politica. Idee per un mondo che cambia* (Milan, Le Monnier, 2019).

cit of consensus on collectively binding decisions, the impact of superpowers on public communications, structural asymmetries of powers between the wealthiest and the vast majority of the population, lack of trust in the institutions and the subsequent electoral success of political leaders with populist and hyper-nationalist features, the faces of the 2008 financial crisis, with its vocabulary of 'winners', 'losers', and 'left-behinds', eco chambers, social withdrawal, the digital divide, tracking and microtargeting (74-91). For those who are familiar to the genre, this diagnosis reads as a systematic compendium of turn-of-the-century pessimism. In the age of Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, and the likes, references to the death of the democracy, to the perils of democracy, to the failures of liberalism are strong selling propositions. For those who are not familiar to the literature, the text offers an engaging and easy-to-read reconstruction of the debate. The key question is whether and how political philosophy should enter into these dangerous waters (xii, 49). Maffettone's answer is on the affirmative, and, here they come the two normative arguments of the book.

The first thesis is Rawlsian in spirit. It revolves around two concepts: justification and legitimation. Justification makes a State morally acceptable (21). What we may want to call a 'higher level justification' is universal. It should lead to fundamental moral principles that all human beings can accept. What we may want to call a 'lower level justification' is local. It should square such moral principles by the reasons of a specific culture. Legitimation makes power relations acceptable among those affected. What we may want to call a 'global legitimation' is trans-contextual. It should validate rules that have a widespread and long-lasting support across the world (human rights are the main example of the book). What we may want to call 'local legitimation' is regional or national. It should reaffirm such rules within different contexts. On this view, there is justification when States treat all citizens with equal concern and respect; there is legitimation when a unifying and homogeneous narrative makes rules acceptable despite the fact of pluralism (27-31).

According to Maffettone, justification and legitimation should combine in such a way to enhance the quality of each other (21), but ours is an age of unbalanced political institutions (91). This is an important point, and a big problem for liberal democracies. Here is one way of putting it. (I) Justification prescribes how all citizens should be treated. (II) A liberal democratic State ought to treat citizens with equal concern and respect. (III) For justification to be capable of persuading people, citizens should see themselves as part of a community of

equally respected members. Therefore, the first core question is: Do citizens see themselves as members of a community of equally respected individuals? No, they do not (93-94). Hence, (IV) from the perspective of citizens, liberal democratic states lack justification (or they seem unjustified according to their own terms). As the argument goes, (V) citizens search for equality elsewhere, such as procedures, processes and discourses that promise equal concern and respect for all members of the political community. In this way, (VI) citizens see processes of legitimation, rather fundamental principles, as the ones being conducive to equal respect and concern. According to Maffettone, (VII) such a surplus of legitimation is a proof of an ongoing democratic crisis where populisms and nationalisms can promise to fill the gap between day-to-day political practices and the egalitarian aspiration of liberal democratic institutions (95).

Against this background, many responses to the democratic crisis have searched for ways to represent different interests and preferences. Others have tried to construct new collective identities. Someone has tried to find responses to sharp inequalities. We have recipes for all tastes. Maffettone warns readers not to take justification and legitimation as two separate silos. A response to the crisis of liberal democracies should reaffirm (not only ostensibly, but actually) the very fundamental commitment to justice. It should also make certain that in increasingly plural societies, citizens are in the position to recognize the merits of this model. A big takeaway is that a legitimised liberal democracy, in fact, needs to be just.

The second thesis is one you would not expect from a well-established Rawls scholar. The reader will find hints at this argument across the book, but especially in the chapters dealing with Chinese political theory, Foucault, and Indian contemporary philosophy. According to Maffettone, liberal democratic institutions have formalized a divorce of the self as a spiritual subject from the political domain (367, 535, 567). What characterizes the liberal democratic model is an extreme legalism that inhibits agency and cause estrangement (368). A low degree of integration and a high degree of distance between individuals and institutions may denote situations in which norms have broken down, but a good liberal democracy stands in need of virtuous citizens (537).

On these grounds, Maffettone calls for a rethink of the distinction between morality and ethics through spirituality (531-537). Political philosophy should recognize that spiritual transformation of the subject has consequences on the ways one performs her rights as a citizen (367). As meaningful alternatives, he discusses the Foucaultian term 'care of the self', as the practice

of contemplating past and present actions (367), Confucian conception of harmony (367), as a way to combine individual transformations with truth and action (535), and Gandhi's notion of *swaraj* (self-rule), as an example of how individual morality can give politics truth and dignity (554).

Someone might wonder whether these two theses are compatible. Actually, they intersect in a proposal that comes and goes in many passages of the book (95, 282, 366-67, 538, 567, 588). According to Maffettone, virtuous and vicious dispositions have an effect on how citizens make use of available norms and recognize the merits of their institutions. Therefore, by educating individual qualities, we would revitalize our liberal democracies. The lesson is clear: liberal democracies are in troubles, but a way out is at hand. But how soon we get there will be at least partially predicated by how we bring truth, justice and the good into harmony with our institutions and social practices (538). The claim is thought-provoking. It recognizes that spiritual education can orient our public actions and reconcile us to the political order. In this vein, if political philosophy is to inspire an effort to bring about a more just liberal democracy, it must be capable of stimulating our inclination to be moved by moral considerations.

To some readers of Rawls, Maffettone tries to show that spiritual education can promote the sense of justice that a polity needs to be stable despite new and old challenges. But, doesn't spiritual transformation overtake the present state of affairs? How could we avoid the danger of solipsism? What does spirituality add to the Rawlsian progression towards the development of a sense of justice? To readers external to the paradigm, Maffettone reads the liberal-democratic model as an axiomatic truth. But, how do we know that all liberal-democracies are worth-defending? For some, Maffettone will be a virtuoso, whose acts of intellectual bricolage are a breath of fresh air. Someone else will complain about cherry picking.

Notwithstanding our sides on these disputes, this text has the merit of generating philosophical, political and methodological questions. The argument is fascinating. The very broad scope of the book and its ambitious theses make this a meaningful read for scholars and students. Maffettone untangles philosophical problems and introduces difficult concepts with clarity. He gives us good reason to think that many resources can be found outside our philosophical comfort zone. His explanation of the democratic crisis is plausible and worthy of attention. In short, *Politica* delivers on its promises, providing a committed defence of liberal democracies and ideas for a changing world.