

Marsilius of Padua and the History of Political Thought in a Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Review of Vasileios Syros: *Marsilius of Padua at the Intersection of Ancient and Medieval Traditions of Political Thought*. Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2012. ISBN 978-1-4426-4144-0

Marsilius of Padua at the Intersection of Ancient and Medieval Traditions of Political Thought is Vasileios Syros's most recent contribution to the growing literature on political theory of late medieval physician from Padua. For a long period, Marsilius of Padua has been relegated to the margins of political science, although the fact that only a few theoretical works in the history of political thought have had such an impact on the actual political context of the time as his major book *Defensor Pacis*. Indeed, soon after its publishing in 1324, the book has become a highly controversial political issue and an object of the political struggle on power relations between the two medieval supreme powers, the emperor and pope. Because of Marsilius's clear support for the emperor and his strong commitment to the concept of 'human legislator', he has widely been interpreted by scholars as an early pioneer of modern secular political theory, an exponent of the idea of the popular sovereignty, and an important theoretical bridge between the work of ancient Aristotle and modern Machiavelli in the history of Western political thought.

Syros's new book supplements and challenges those prevailing interpretations of Marsilius's theory by focusing on the various intellectual influences on his thought rather than on the impact of his heritage on the later development of modern political theory. Thus, the aim of Syros's research is not to place Marsilius on the map of modern political thought. Attempting neither to demonstrate the timeless relevance of Marsilius's thought, nor to determine it exclusively with the context of fourteenth-century politico-ecclesiastical rivalry, Syros instead focuses on identifying the ancient and medieval "sources that Marsilius may have used" (p. 3).

This approach allows Syros not only to offer readers a unique perspective on the 'composition of thought' of this late medieval political theorist, but also to give a critical account of some of the ways in which Marsilius's work has been understood. The book contains two theoretical strengths related to an in-depth analysis of Marsilius's political ideas. One is the thesis that Marsilius was not such a staunch Aristotelian as described by many scholars (p. 114). The other is that Marsilius's political theory drew from a variety of sources and intellectual traditions, including Byzantine, Islamic, and Jewish political writers, particularly Maimonides and Averroes (p. 114). But, the main originality of the Syros's

research, which is characterised by conceptual clarity, admirable scientific rigour and impressive number of primary sources of Jewish, Muslim and Byzantine authors who are not often used to discuss the history of Western political thought, lies elsewhere – in his methodological approach.

In the history of political thought the theoretical innovations or new perspectives are usually related to the new methodology that allows us to understand the concepts, theories and theorists in a new way. In his attempt to grasp the Marsilius's political thought, Syros places Marsilius's thought in the cross-cultural perspective (p. 115) and intellectual context beyond the medieval Christian world. In particular, he explores "the ways in which the Byzantine, Islamic, and Jewish political writers relied on classical political and ethical literature and engaged with some of the themes that lie at the core of Marsilius's thought, such as the functional specialization of the members of the political community, the interconnectedness of the various social groupings, the structure and constitutive features of the perfect polity, and the duties and attributes of the exemplary ruler" (p. 115). His efforts to find the links between Marsilius and other medieval, especially Arabic and Jewish traditions, have brought him to the interesting conclusion that goes beyond the scope of the book in its significance and potential: "interaction among these traditions has been much more intensive than typically assumed" (p. 115).

Syros's methodology and its theoretical conclusions are therefore highly relevant for further research in conceptual and intellectual history. Namely, Syros shows, as is the case in Marsilius's theory, that already the medieval political theories have been formed not only as the response to actual political context, but also as the result of discursive and material interactions among diverse intellectual traditions, which seem to have little in common. Moreover, Syros's account provides a deeply thoughtful explanation of how the history of Western political thought arises and evolves not in isolation, but in close interaction with the non-Western traditions of political thought since its very beginning.

Syros's book is structured in five chapters that are systematically interconnected and supported by remarkable set of *Notes* that give an additional theoretical weight to the book and provide the readers with extensive references on the subject. In the first chapter, *Marsilius's Live and Works*, the author briefly explains the relation of Marsilius's political theory to the actual political context of the thirteenth and fourteenth century. But already the second chapter, *Major Intellectual Influences on Marsilius*, puts Marsilius's political thought in theoretical conversation with several sources and intellectual traditions, including the works of Albertino Mussato, Peter of Abano, John of Jardun and Moses Maimonides (p. 19-24).

The insight into the major intellectual influences on Marsilius thought is analysed in greater depth in the following three chapters, *Marsilius's Political Theory*, *Marsilius's Legal Theory*, and *Marsilius's Theory of Government*, which

constitute the centerpiece of Syros's reading of Marsilius's political thought. Here the author convincingly shows that Marsilius's understanding of the emergence, evolution, structure and functioning of political community has been developed through his theoretical encounter not only with Aristotle's teleology and organic imaginery (p. 25-27) but also with Augustinian perspective on men's societal nature (p. 28), Cicero's theory on the genesis of human societies (p. 40) and definition of the commonwealth (p. 53), the medical line of reasoning by Nemesios of Emesa (p. 31) and al-Bīrūnī (p. 33), etc. But this is less important issue in comparison to the similarities and points of convergence between Marsilius and Maimonides found by Syros. Particularly in discussing the Marsilius's theory of political community the book is clearly successful in demonstrating both the potential influence of Maimonides on Marsilius and the limited extent to which Marsilius was Aristotelian.

According to Syros, Moses Maimonides, the great twelfth-century Jewish scholar, "is a likely candidate for being one of the direct sources of the Marsilian teaching about human acts" (p. 9). Marsilius and Maimonides share the idea that the political community "is composed of diverse individuals coming together to seek their mutual advantage" (p. 60). Marsilius's political community is therefore "made up of heterogeneous parts with varying dispositions and divergent interests and suffers from dissent and conflict" (p. 8). In order to remove these obstacles, Marsilius claims that "the perpetuation of social life requires a standard of justice and an agency responsible for implementing the laws" (p. 8). Unlike Aristotle, Marsilius identifies the law, not friendship, as the bond that holds the various forces within the political community in the right balance (p. 11). In other words, for Marsilius the unity of political community "is intimately tied to his idea that political community is founded upon a general agreement about the common good and justice" (p. 55). Consequently, as Syros shows, "Marsilius is unconcerned with friendship as one of the pillars of domestic unity and lays emphasis on the significance of laws as a medium for regulating the relations among the citizens" (p. 55).

Syros rightly notices the centrality of the concept of the unity of political community in Marsilius's political theory. As a result, Syros outlines all three core aspects essential to guarantee of domestic unity: enforcement of justice, the assembly of the citizenry for the purpose of discussing and deciding matters of common concern, and the division of labour and assignment of different functions to the citizens (p. 55). It is shown in the book that "Marsilius's definition of the purpose of the political community as the satisfaction of material needs and functional division of labour has little in common with Aristotle's ideas about the good life and the ultimate end of the city" (p. 47). This is because Marsilius differentiates, in the language of the body politics, the parts of the political community according to the criterion of their functions (p. 48). At this point, Syros grasps a new Marsilius's departure from Aristotle's legacy in

saying that “Marsilius divests the concept of social tranquility from any moral connotations” (p. 49) because he is concerned with “the functional, not the moral, dimensions of the concept of unity” (p. 53) of the political community.

Furthermore, unlike most of his medieval contemporaries, “Marsilius sees social peace as coterminous with harmonious coexistence of the various segments of the body politics, so that all its members can satisfy their material needs” (p. 49). As Syros points out, this means that Marsilius, unlike Aristotle, in fact “looks upon peace from a socioeconomic point of view, i.e., as the foundation for the harmonious coexistence of the members of society” (p. 47). This Syros’s argument is worth examining closely in the future, because it relates directly to the Marsilius’s notion that “social harmony depends on the existence of mechanisms and a set of rules designed to regulate the interaction among the members of society as well as an agency in charge of enforcing the laws, restraining malefactors, and repelling internal and external menaces” (p. 47). Indeed, it is precisely this Syros’s argument that helps to understand the Marsilius’s thinking about these mechanisms and rules, which are indispensable entry point in the process of trying to understand the concept of *legislator humanus*, “the supreme instance and ultimate source of legislative and governmental authority within the political community” (p. 9). This, perhaps the most famous and studied concept in Marsilius’s political thought is based, first of all, on Marsilius’s perception of the laws as “a binding standard according to which human acts are regulated” (p. 11), and his statement that “it is necessary for the political community to have a single supreme government or a single ruler with respect not to person but to office” (p. 53). What is of most importance here is that a closer look at these two important elements of Marsilius’s political thought allows Syros to see that Marsilius and Maimonides, again, “stand on the same ground in highlighting the need for the existence of a political authority or a ruler whose primary function is to guarantee the domestic order of the political community” (60).

Syros’s suggestion on possible reliance of Marsilius on Maimonides and other lines of thought that in other aspects seem very different from that in the Latin West, is significant because it throws new light not only on Marsilius’s political thought, but also on the whole genealogy of Western political thought. Although we already know a lot about this genealogy, particularly thanks to the great Foucault’s, Skinner’s and conceptual history’s methodological guidelines for conducting the investigation into the history of ideas, Syros’s book is highly welcome because it waters a barren desert in the methodology of history of political thought. Without doubt, Syros’s methodological and theoretical offerings are original, usefull and invaluable contribution to this field.