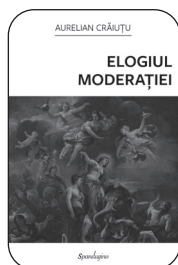


RADICAL MODERATION: POLITICS AS THE ART OF RECONCILIATION

Aurelian Crăiuțu, *Elogiul moderației*,
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Abstract: In his philosophical history of moderate thought, Aurelian Crăiuțu searches for the common thread connecting thinkers from various historical and political contexts. Instead of attempting to determine the principal traits of political moderation by extrapolating a theoretical model from their works, the author chooses to present each author's perspective as shaped by the political horizon of his age. He closely follows the relationship between their ideas and their careers, seeing moderation as a chiefly pragmatic quality that has little to do with abstract political and philosophical theories. In addition to the scholarly purpose of the book, Crăiuțu aims to counteract the proliferation of extremist movements in the contemporary world by returning to more nuanced perspectives promoting a prudent and skeptical manner of conducting politics.

Keywords: Moderation; Intellectual History; History of Ideas; Political Philosophy; Political Theory.

LUCA MĂȚĂSARU

Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
luca.matasaru@gmail.com

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What is the true meaning of moderation? Do moderates always represent the centre of the political spectrum? Is moderation merely a weak excuse for a lukewarm political stance or an opportunistic mentality towards politics? Adopting the moderate position he simultaneously analyses, Aurelian Crăiuțu does not seek simple, definitive answers to these questions. Instead, he offers a plurality of perspectives that illuminate the multifaceted and contested history of moderation in political thought. The author's favourable view of moderation is evident from the book's title, *Elogiul moderației* (*In Praise of Moderation*), yet he does not gloss over the shortcomings of the thinkers he discusses, especially with regard to their political activity. Accordingly, Crăiuțu aims to show that a theory of moderation has little value if its practice leads to unsatisfactory results.

This revised edition of the original 2006 book adds considerable new material, reflecting the author's ongoing research. Crăiuțu's inquiry sits alongside other works on the history of political thought, such as Pierre Manent's *Histoire intellectuelle du libéralisme*, which surveys the history of liberalism by focusing on key figures in its development, whether proponents or critics of its doctrine: Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Constant, Guizot, and Tocqueville¹. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Crăiuțu's selection is not far from Manent's, since it becomes clear that, in his view, moderation shares many features with (classical) liberalism, both philosophically and politically.

Firmly believing that “moderation is a virtue especially for courageous spirits that are not afraid to swim against the current,”² the author begins the foreword by presenting himself as a defender of the principles of liberal democracy. For him, moderation implies conviction in one’s position, without allegiance to any single ideology or political party. This fundamental insight is developed in the introduction, “Dilemele moderației” (“The Dilemmas of Moderation”), where Crăiuțu notes that, unlike the romanticism of political radicalism, which imposes a black-and-white filter on a far more complex reality, moderates are less categorical. From their perspective, politics is not a battle between good and evil, but a debate between “what is preferable and what is detestable.”³ He locates the essence of moderation in what Alexandru Paleologu calls “le bon sens comme paradoxe,” an intuitive capacity to discern the truth behind appearances, distinct from the common sense that tends to deal in unambiguous platitudes.⁴ The turbulence of today’s world calls for “fanatical moderates” or “centre extremists,”⁵ willing to question their beliefs and able to step back from the whirlpool of the present in order to attend to nuance rather than to abstract general principles. More concretely, Crăiuțu pursues two lines of inquiry throughout the book: the relationship between moderation, practical wisdom, and political intuition, and the development of institutions capable of sustaining a moderate political regime.

The first part of the book, “Prudența și moderația” (“Prudence and Moderation”), comprises two chapters: the first addresses the differences between Plato’s and Aristotle’s views on good governance; the second discusses three Renaissance

thinkers, Niccolò Machiavelli, Francesco Guicciardini, and Baltasar Gracián, in relation to the concept of *raison d’état*. The author begins from the observation that radicalism is a common trait among philosophers and intellectuals in general, since their search for universal principles can make them susceptible to irrational impulses. This tendency is particularly evident in Plato’s political perspective in the *Republic* and the *Seventh Letter* (though Crăiuțu acknowledges that Plato’s later dialogues exhibit a more temperate political philosophy). Both texts depict the city as a corrupt entity that must be purified under the leadership of philosophers, because it cannot be saved merely by reforming the institutions on which its government rests. Philosophers must therefore seize power and rule according to the universal principles of Truth, the Good, and the Beautiful. Crăiuțu consequently asks whether the philosopher, in effect, wishes the city to be corrupt so that he may become its moral and spiritual saviour. This insight is valuable, as it may explain the propensity of ‘the philotyrannical intellectual’ to offer his services to dictators, whose deplorable actions are transfigured into noble deeds on the sacrificial altar of an ideology.⁶

By contrast with Plato’s *Republic*, whose gaze is fixed on the ideal city that exists only in the philosopher’s mind, Aristotle’s *Politics* is concerned with “the best possible political constitution in relation to the existing historical circumstances at a given moment.”⁷ Aristotle recognises that human beings generally pursue their own interests, which makes a perfectly unified society impossible. Yet individuals can come together to make better decisions by exercising practical wisdom (*phronēsis*)

and choosing how to act in specific contexts. Practical wisdom thus does not rest on universal truths, but on circumstantial judgements that are not universally applicable. Crăiuțu argues that the foundations of political moderation are to be found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and its account of virtue. For Aristotle, virtue is the appropriate mean between excess and deficiency. Crucially, it is not the mathematical halfway point between two extremes, since its exact location shifts with the circumstances. Politics is therefore essentially an 'art of prudence', seeking to make the best of a given situation without lapsing into opportunism or cunning.

In comparison to the ancient conception of politics as grounded in virtue, the Renaissance introduces another political term: *raison d'état*. Thinkers such as Machiavelli, Guicciardini, and Gracián, who may seem out of place in a history of political moderation, understood that most people judge leaders not by the instruments they use but by the results they achieve. In the political arena, appearance often takes precedence over reality. This means the politician must learn what Machiavelli calls "the science of not being good."⁸ At times, immoral acts may become necessary, and partially defensible, on grounds of *raison d'état* (especially when the defence of the city is at stake), even if they remain illegitimate. In an ideal world this would not be required, but our world is far from perfect and thus sometimes compels such means of survival. Prudence is, once again, the crucial trait that allows the politician to gauge the gravity of a situation and decide on the best course of action.

In the first chapter of the second part, "Guvernarea moderată" ("Moderate

Governance"), the author presents Montesquieu's concern with the constitutional and institutional preconditions of political moderation. Unlike the earlier philosophers discussed, he treats moderation not only as a virtue, but also as the product of an institutional and constitutional framework founded on the separation of powers. Strictly speaking, "separation" is not the most apt term: even if executive, legislative, and judicial powers are entrusted to different persons, good governance requires their cooperation. Montesquieu distinguishes two principal forms of political organisation, those based on moderate government – republics (democratic or aristocratic) and constitutional monarchies – and those in which absolute power rests with a despot. Only moderate regimes can promote liberty, since they place obstacles in the path of absolute power. Accordingly, Montesquieu opposes theories of absolute sovereignty and holds that political and social pluralism are essential to the harmony of society and state.

In the second chapter, Crăiuțu analyses *The Federalist Papers* as an attempt to put Montesquieu's theses on moderation into practice. Writing under the collective pseudonym Publius, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay advocated the creation of a moderate government grounded in federalism, constitutionalism, and bicameralism. For them, good governance requires an acute understanding of human nature, since laws are needed to "tame" the thirst for power and glory for the benefit of the community. Promoting freedom and pluralism does not entail endorsing a weak state unable to ensure social order or cooperation among individuals. Anarchy is as undesirable as tyranny in

Publius's view. Government may be strong, but its reach must be limited so that it cannot infringe individual liberties. Citizens must possess effective means of holding leaders to account. Even equality is subject to the principle of moderation, since the power of the people cannot be allowed to degenerate into "mobocracy."⁹ The moderation of the United States' founding figures stands in stark contrast to the radicalism of their French contemporaries.

The third part of Crăiutu's study, "Moderația și spectrul revoluției" ("Moderation and the Spectre of Revolution"), examines political thinkers writing in the aftermath of the upheavals that England and France experienced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The first chapter focuses on Edmund Burke, "a conservative liberal respecting tradition,"¹⁰ who offers a severe critique of the excesses of the French Revolution, particularly the atrocities of the Reign of Terror (1793–1794). A staunch opponent of the revolutionary rhetoric of his time, he holds that radicals are as dogmatic as unwavering worshippers of tradition, since both ignore reality and retreat into pure political speculation. For instance, he criticises the perfectionism of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, arguing that there is little point in discussing human rights in the abstract; the real question is how such rights would operate in practice. By contrast, Burke advances an "ethics of responsibility"¹¹: defending one's convictions while acknowledging they may be mistaken. Compromise is thus the foundation of rational politics. Accordingly, Burke prefers Britain's reconciliatory politics to the French revolutionary model, which treats any form of compromise as treason¹². The

philosopher may inhabit the realm of universal principles, whereas the politician must exercise practical reason to broker reconciliation between the extremes of rigid preservation and violent demolition. Although Tocqueville thought Burke praised the virtues of the *ancien régime* too highly, Burke himself was aware of his heightened tone, regarding it as a justified counter-attack against radical minds intent on destroying long-standing traditions and institutions. Thus Burke shows that the moderate must define his position in order to re-establish the fragile balance of the political arena.

In *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke casts the mediating politician as a trimmer, striving to keep his ship on an even keel. Taking this metaphor as a point of departure, Crăiutu addresses the problem of compromise in politics through two English thinkers, Halifax (from whom Burke borrowed the image of the trimmer) and Macaulay, in the next chapter. Halifax has too often been remembered as a byword for political opportunism and cynicism because he changed allegiance several times during the turbulent years of the English Civil War, the Stuart Restoration, and the Glorious Revolution of 1688–1689. In reality, as a moderate, he sought to balance the radical positions of each faction, a stance that ultimately made him a political outcast. In his view, there is no perfect form of government, but moderation can serve as a safeguard against the outbreak of another civil war in England by strengthening the institutions of the new constitutional monarchy. Living more than a century after Halifax, Macaulay admired his conviction that political principles must be applicable in concrete situations.

He concluded that one cannot evaluate a constitution without knowing the people it is meant to govern. A reformer, he argued forcefully for the Reform Act of 1832, yet no radical, Macaulay recognised that political extremism is best avoided when elites accept the necessary concessions required at particular moments in history. He is perhaps best known for a maxim that encapsulates the moderate attitude to traditional institutions: "Reform, that you may preserve."¹³

The dilemma of striking the right balance between tradition and reform was debated not only in England, but also in post-Napoleonic France by liberal thinkers such as Alexis de Tocqueville and François Guizot, the subjects of the next part of the book, "A modera democrația" ("Moderating Democracy"). A moderate liberal who wished to preserve the ideals of the French Revolution of 1789 while avoiding the excesses of the Terror, Tocqueville is at once drawn to the virtues of democracy and alert to its limitations. Influenced by Guizot's *The History of Civilization in Europe*, he regards the democratic revolution as an ongoing civilising process in European history and adopts an ambivalent stance towards it: on the one hand he recognises its inevitability; on the other he retains a contemplative attachment to the old aristocratic world and its aspirations. Nowhere is this clearer than in his most famous work, *Democracy in America*, where he describes the institutions that founded American democracy and prophesies its future trajectory. Tocqueville maintains that a democratic regime can endure only if politicians use democratic means to counter the levelling tendencies that threaten it. In his view, liberty is the

foremost value of civilised nations, and it can be preserved only through pluralism and free association.

As noted above, Guizot exerted a strong influence on Tocqueville through his *History of Civilization in Europe*, "a defence of constitutional monarchy"¹⁴ concerned with the study of social order, which enables the author to analyse the evolution of political institutions. Throughout this work, Guizot reflects on the uniqueness of European civilisation. The fact that no single form of social organisation has managed to impose itself fully upon others is, for him, proof that conflict among principles is the primary engine of Europe's development. Thus class conflict is "the engine of social progress,"¹⁵ not a purely negative consequence of exploitation to be abolished, as Marx contends. For Guizot, civilisation entails not only social improvement but also moral betterment. A key concept is the sovereignty of reason, which holds that no individual or group should attain absolute sovereignty, since only a transcendental principle (reason, truth, justice) can legitimately claim it. As Horia-Roman Patapievicu observes, liberty requires that "a principle be neither completely defeated, nor completely victorious,"¹⁶ a view consonant with political liberalism's promotion of pluralism. In other words, democracy must be balanced by its institutions so that it does not indulge its excesses, an idea common to all moderate thinkers.

The final part of Crăiutu's book, "Moderația astăzi" ("Moderation Today"), addresses the importance of moderation in the contemporary social and political landscape. The opening chapter sketches the portrait of a twentieth-century moderate,

Raymond Aron, who continues the legacy of Montesquieu, Tocqueville, and Burke by promoting an ethics of responsibility. For Aron, politics is always dependent on its actors, which means that one must choose not between good and evil, but between what is “detestable (unacceptable)” and what is “preferable (tolerable).”¹⁷ Moderation is a form of “epistemic modesty,” “a hygiene of the spirit,”¹⁸ requiring the politician to remain open to dialogue. Politics is the “art of compromise,”¹⁹ the ability to determine one’s priorities and the values that can never be sacrificed. Compromise, however, is impossible without listening to the other side; it entails being prepared to question one’s sense of righteousness and to admit error. This, in Aron’s view, is the foundation of civilisation.

In the second chapter, Crăiuțu draws a number of conclusions following his excursus into the history of moderate political thought. He emphasises that being a moderate does not necessarily mean occupying the centre of the political spectrum or adopting an impartial stance, since moderation is always context-dependent. Crucially, moderates are never persuaded of the infallibility of any theory or its capacity to offer an accurate portrait of reality, because they value a diversity of perspectives. They respect tradition, yet also recognise the need for reform. Moderates are rarely certain they have made the right decision at any given moment, but they are guided by the search for the lesser evil. Crăiuțu compares political dialogue to a duel, though one marked by civility and respect for opposing views. Here the politician must show courage, since it is always harder to debate an adversary than to agree with an ally.

The book’s conclusion encourages a realistic attitude towards politics. We do not inhabit the philosopher’s ideal city, but a merely decent one, “one of nuances and shadows that define the horizon of our life.”²⁰ Displaying a deeply moderate and sceptical disposition, Crăiuțu underlines that historical inquiry does not yield satisfactory answers to our present circumstances. On the contrary, the obsession with finding clear answers in politics is a sign of radicalism rather than moderation. Following Adam Michnik,²¹ the author finds beauty in the greyness of democracy, an imperfect political system in which we can enjoy “the unique privilege of making mistakes and correcting them freely at the same time.”²² Democracy enables people with distinct, even antagonistic, views to come together and create an open space for debate about the common good. This is the essence of politics, as opposed to ideology, its degraded form.²³

In sum, Aurelian Crăiuțu’s comprehensive study of the history and virtues of moderation is not only of scholarly value, but also offers important political and ethical lessons for today’s strained and radicalised landscape. By returning to thinkers who themselves lived through turbulent times, the author shows how moderates are often the unsung heroes of their age, overshadowed by their more outspoken and revolutionary contemporaries. Readers expecting a rigid conceptual framework may be disappointed by the book’s limited theorising, but this is not Crăiuțu’s aim. Instead, he offers a set of perspectives that do not always converge, yet enter a long-running conversation, encouraging readers to adopt a moderate voice and resist extremist outbursts.

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NOTES

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4. Alexandru Paleologu, *Bunul-simț ca paradox*, București, Cartea Românească, 2005, p. 8-10.
5. Crăiuțu, *op. cit.*, p. 24.
6. Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics*, New York, New York Review of Books, 2001, p. 197-198.
7. Crăiuțu, *op. cit.*, p. 39.
8. *Ibidem*, p. 65.
9. *Ibidem*, p. 112.
10. *Ibidem*, p. 120.
11. *Ibidem*, p. 124.
12. Adrian-Paul Iliescu, *Supremația experienței. Conservatorismul pragmatic – viziunea anglo-saxonă*, București, EuroPress Group, 2012, p. 105.
13. Crăiuțu, *op. cit.*, p. 155.
14. *Ibidem*, p. 193.
15. *Ibidem*, p. 199.
16. Horia-Roman Patapievici, *Omul recent: o critică a modernității din perspectiva întrebării „Ce se pierde atunci când ceva se câștigă?”*, București, Humanitas, 2001, p. 215.
17. Crăiuțu, *op. cit.*, p. 222.
18. *Ibidem*, p. 224.
19. *Ibidem*, p. 226.
20. *Ibidem*, p. 239.
21. Adam Michnik, "Gray is Beautiful: Thoughts on Democracy in Central Europe", in *Dissent*, vol. 44, no. 2, 1997, p. 14-19.
22. Crăiuțu, *op. cit.*, p. 242.
23. Patapievici, *op. cit.*, p. 203-205.