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## Response to Aurelian Craiutu's review of the meaning of partisanship

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# Critical Dialogue, *Perspectives on Politics*

Aurelian Craiutu (2016), *Faces of Moderation: The Art of Balance in an Age of Extremes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).

**Reviewed by Jonathan White and Lea Ypi, London School of Economics**

Craiutu's book is an exploration, and a cautious defence, of the virtue of moderation. He has in mind a political outlook rather different from conservatism, scepticism, or the centrist disposition to plump for the middle way. For Craiutu, the moderate can be a spirited defender of controversial views when the situation demands it. What defines the moderate is not so much the unwillingness to take a stand as the willingness to take it in a certain way: to question oneself, to avoid Manichean simplifications and ideological rigidities, to engage in dialogue with adversaries, and to resist the temptation of ethical monism (p.5, pp.20ff.).

More a sensibility than a defined body of commitments, moderation takes different forms in different contexts. Moderates have worn many 'masks' over time (p.9), and the challenge for the scholar is to convey the similarities. Craiutu does this through a series of sympathetic profiles of (white, male) thinkers associated with the virtue in question – Aron, Berlin, Bobbio, Oakeshott and Michnik. Each of these faces of moderation, as Craiutu sees them, is the subject of a chapter that explores the contours and context of their political outlook. The book is framed by two more theoretical chapters that engage more abstractly with the concept of moderation, the methodological challenges of the project, and – very much in the spirit of moderation – the weaknesses to which the outlook may be prone (p.233).

The author's selection of interlocutors underlines his contention that moderation is not to be assigned to any one ideological tradition. Bobbio and Oakeshott are presented as figures of the Left and Right respectively, and Berlin and Aron as thinkers 'in the middle' (p.10). Moderation it seems is a virtue that can be displayed across the political spectrum, and – perhaps more intriguingly – is compatible with the possibility of placing an individual thereon. Liberalism is the category one might instinctively associate with several of these figures, but Craiutu describes moderation and liberalism as not quite the same. Moderates do not see freedom as the first value, any more than equality. Indeed, they are reluctant to see any value as prior to all others, preferring instead to set their priorities according to context (see e.g. p.158). And nor does moderation fit well with any '-ism', if this means a doctrine that can be systematised and written down. It is a virtue displayed in practice – an *art*, as the sub-title has it.

One of the book's challenges is how to write theoretically about a practical virtue, and the choice of a series of individual portraits is an intelligent response. It is surprising nonetheless that much of the focus is on *thinkers* – on individuals who thought and wrote about politics, rather than people embroiled in other ways. Certainly, interventions in public debate demand the exercise of judgement and can be a form of political action, and some of Craiutu's interlocutors did more than just this. But one wonders whether the art of moderation is not practiced most critically in other places – by political representatives, decision-makers, constitutional drafters, or even just street-level bureaucrats. It would be interesting to think further about what moderation entails in these practical settings. It would be worthwhile to explore whether moderation can be exercised collectively, or whether – as the structure of the book might suggest – it is the stuff of individuals acting

alone. And what might it mean for the practices of ordinary citizens little versed in the skills of public deliberation? Craiutu's is a study primarily of what eloquent individuals have had to say about moderation, and how they have spoken in moderate ways.

As something other than an ideology or doctrine of beliefs, moderation resists being pinned down substantively. We are dealing with a large space of possible opinion, to which anything short of open violence can probably be credibly ascribed. The moderate voice, willing to take a stand but 'without going to extremes and without displaying excessive zeal' (p.21), is one that can say many things. Does that mean it is just in the eye of the beholder? Clearly one suspicion will be that sometimes moderation is just a label by which to dignify a stance one agrees with. (Indeed, if one does not already have some sympathy with the stance, perhaps it will always have a touch of the extreme and the zealous about it.) How does one avoid that the notion of moderation becomes the kind of ideological weapon its adherents would presumably recoil from? And what resources does one have to spot the impostors – those who adopt the moderate pose, but who have an agenda that is anything but? Such challenges are surely not unique to the study of moderation, but are more visible in the light of the claims made.

Another point of interest concerns the relation between moderates and others. Both conceptually and politically, one may wonder whether the virtue of moderation is not somehow dependent, even parasitic, on the existence of *immoderation*. Craiutu's moderates all find themselves in the crossfire of contending opinion, the existence of which is the condition of their capacity to be moderate. Like Berlin, they find themselves inclined to step back from 'the conflict of ideas and principles' (p.109) that others intemperately engage in, and to look for the right equilibrium. The moderates come last to the feast, just in time to help clear up the mess.

Conceptually, this suggests that not everyone can be a moderate, certainly not all of the time – those with firmer commitments must always be there first (a point Craiutu acknowledges in passing – p.21, p.99). Politically, it suggests moderation is a reactive position, always responding to tendencies and events initiated by others. In the darker times, is this sufficient to achieve a defensible society? Is it sufficient even to achieve just the minimum conditions of stability the moderate is likely to value? If, as a mediating and pragmatic figure, the moderate denies herself a self-standing intellectual framework of diagnosis and prognosis for society's ills, preferring instead to trim in reaction to the views of others, what hope does she have to stand tall in the winds of prevailing opinion? Is it the fate of the moderate – as the case of Michnik might suggest – to oppose one ideological system only to end up inadvertently doing the work of another?

Dependent as the moderate is on the commitments of others, there seem to be some substantive commitments she is drawn to: amongst others, the rule of law, the separation of powers, political pluralism, the channelling of disagreement, and toleration. What does the moderate do in a society in which these qualities are missing or under-developed? Must she become politically active on their behalf, and thus turn towards immoderation? Craiutu acknowledges that 'sometimes we may even need to abandon moderation for a while' (p.18; cf. p.234). But are the circumstances that demand this really the exception, or part of the normal conditions of politics? Can the consistent, uncompromising pursuit of such commitments really be no more than a temporary stance, adopted just 'for a while'?

Today's political situation puts an interesting spin on these questions. The figures of moderation that loom large in the book are all figures of the twentieth century, concentrated in the Cold War period. Though Craiutu has explored themes of moderation in earlier periods elsewhere in his research, it is worth asking whether his thoughts on moderation have a particular affinity with the 'age of extremes'. For the most part, his interlocutors are preoccupied in some way with communism and its adversaries.

Moderation is their response to an era of clearly defined ideologies and dichotomies. How does the same outlook fare in the contemporary world, where the contours of opinion are arguably more irregular, and where a form of technocratic centrism has held sway until recently? Can a dominant neoliberalism be tempered with moderation in the same way that a stand-off between communism and libertarianism might be? Or if the ‘alt-Right’ now musters a serious challenge to neoliberalism in the western world, is it enough simply to moderate between the two? Could it be that the present moment is one in which moderation is much less a virtue than it might have been in the Cold War context?

Craiutu writes thoughtfully and compellingly about a sensibility that is commonly overlooked and yet surely deserves its place. Nuanced and unwilling to overstate its case, the book is an exhibition of moderation in political theory. But is moderation the virtue that contemporary politics lacks most?

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### **Aurelian Craiutu’s Response:**

I am grateful to Jonathan White and Lea Ypi for raising a host of interesting and difficult questions in their perceptive review of *Faces of Moderation*. The difficulty has to do, in part, with the little faith that some of us may have in the power of moderation at the present moment. How can one fight against people like Donald Trump or Vladimir Putin with the aid of moderation?

Having written two books on this concept, I am aware that moderation is an inconspicuous virtue prone to understatement and misunderstanding. Moderation is sometimes equated with docility and indecision, and is perceived as a bland and incoherent virtue. Occasionally, the initiatives and ideas of moderates are dismissed as expressions of political opportunism or are criticized for being insufficiently democratic. Lastly, moderation is sometimes invoked by impostors who adopt the moderate pose purely for strategic reasons that have nothing to do with moderation.

As far as I can see, White and Ypi believe that moderation is more a sensibility than a defined body of specific commitments. In their view, it amounts to the willingness “to question oneself, to avoid Manichean simplifications and ideological rigidities, to engage in dialogue with adversaries, and to resist the temptation of ethical monism.” I agree that moderation implies a certain political style and it is a virtue displayed in practice, but I also want to emphasize that it involves a robust core of normative commitments. While the moderates’ ideas do not fit well with any “-ism,” they defend the principles of an open society and constitutionalism and seek to maintain balance among various groups and interests in society. As trimmers who seek to prevent the ship of state from capsizing in rough seas, moderates are also committed to creating and maintaining an inclusive community. To this end, they favor change and reform but recognize that they must always work with many shades of gray and contradictions. Last but not least, moderates favor complex political systems and hybrid solutions, including checks and balances, veto power, judicial review, neutral power, subsidiarity, and federalism, among other things. They prefer competing centers of power over centralization.

After noting that much of the focus is on thinkers— that is, on individuals who thought and wrote about politics—White and Ypi ask whether moderation can also be exercised collectively, or whether it is the stuff of individuals acting alone. This is an interesting point. When choosing the main characters for my book, I made a deliberate decision to have an ideologically diverse group, including thinkers like Aron, Bobbio, and Michnik who were directly involved in politics or participated actively in the

political life of their countries. What might moderation mean for the practices of ordinary citizens, though?

As I mentioned in the book, we have a few examples showing that moderates can successfully organize at the grassroots level in order to propose concrete reforms, put pressure on elected politicians, and keep them accountable. For example, the Charter '77 was a moderate dissident movement based on what Vaclav Havel called the “power of the powerless” that was supposed to create a “parallel polis” (V. Benda) in which people could “live in truth.” Similarly, at the heart of the Solidarity movement in Poland were the concepts of “self-limiting revolution” and “new evolutionism.” Both movements marked the beginning of the end for Soviet power in Central and Eastern Europe. They show that moderation can be effectively practiced by political activists pursuing concrete and well-defined goals.

One last point. While moderates respond to various forms of immoderation, their positions are not merely reactive, nor are they an endorsement of the status quo. Aron, for example, suggested a bold agenda for education reform in 1968 in France while simultaneously reacting to his critics (whose reformism limited itself to slogans such as “Be realists, demand the impossible!”). The same goes for Michnik and his colleagues in KOR and the Solidarity movement. They reacted against the unjust practices of the communist authorities while also proposing concrete measures for political reform meant to secure the rule of law, political pluralism, and toleration of dissent.

These refreshing examples prove that in a society in which these principles are missing or underdeveloped, moderates can (and must) become politically active on their behalf. That is why moderation remains a virtue that we still need today, in a world in which the rule of law, constitutionalism, civil dialogue, and toleration are again under assault from the extremes.

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Jonathan White and Lea Ypi (2016), *The Meaning of Partisanship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

**Reviewed by Aurelian Craiutu, Indiana University, Bloomington**

Jonathan White and Lea Ypi have written an ambitious book that seeks to contribute to contemporary democratic theory by rejuvenating the study of partisanship. They want to retrieve from oblivion a meaning of partisanship that “emphasizes principled constraints on partisan action” (p. 155). In this regard, they follow in the footsteps of Nancy Rosenblum’s *On the Side of Angels* and Russell Muirhead’s *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age*. Their goal is to sketch a novel ethics of partisanship that can strengthen the unity and integrity of our political order.

Many political theorists agree that a viable democracy depends on the existence of a vibrant associational life consisting of a multiplicity of social networks, associations, trade unions, churches, and parties. All these associations are credited with enhancing the quality of democracy by promoting open fora for public deliberation, self-government, and collective rule. Yet, pluralism often entails messy partisanship and civil and political associations can also divide citizens by making dialogue and cooperation extremely difficult.

White and Ypi are sanguine about the concept of partisanship and believe that, properly defined, it is indispensable to democratic societies in which the exercise of collective authority and individual rights must take into account larger normative

concerns. Their definition of partisanship, relying at times on Hans Kelsen's, is that of "an associative practice that brings like-minded individuals together in order to secure them actual influence in shaping public affairs" (p. 78). Their preferred form of partisanship emphasizes ideals of public justification as a constitutive element of partisanship distinguished by "a commitment to persuade others of their views through the appeal to reasons that can be generally shared" (p. 3). These principles and aims are thought to be generalizable in a Kantian, Rousseauian, and Rawlsian way.

In chapter 3, the authors situate their account of partisanship in a tradition of democratic theory committed to the importance of political justification and then highlight both the dangers of power politics and the pathologies of partisanship. They point out a set of obligations based on the principles of contract, reliance, and reciprocity analyzed in chapter 5. Any partisan demands, they argue, "need to be widely accessible, involving an attempt to move beyond a particularist viewpoint with the aim of demonstrating public appeal" (p. 61). In their view, partisanship must always be constrained by standards of public reason and should contribute to "the articulation and channeling of principled disagreements by rendering political projects visible and susceptible to comparison" (p. 76).

White and Ypi maintain throughout the book a clear distinction between parties and interest groups, and insist that parties properly conceived should not be primarily about interest representation and must remain distinct from corporatist actors. According to this view, parties are expected to offer "principled justification for the particular combination of the ends they promote" (p. 26). By conceiving partisanship as a form of "trial by discussion vital to advancing the democratic ideal of collective rule" (p. 77), the two authors are led to making a distinction between good/great and bad/small parties as well as between good and bad forms of partisanship. The first type of parties are those that seek to articulate "a *non-partial* view of the public good" and "contribute to identifying the general interest rather than undermining it" (p. 48). This view accords with an older conception of parties that White and Ypi derive in part from the work of Johann Bluntschli. On this account, if parties seek to gain power, they are expected to do so only in order to advance a certain conception of the common good and national interest. Rather than being a mere mechanism for representing group interests, parties aspire to become "a vehicle for channeling the general will" (p. 54). The question then arises on what grounds a distinction can be made between good and bad parties other than by appealing to the elusive and always contested concepts of general will and common good. One might wonder then how such an approach can help us distinguish partisan claims that only seek to advance sectoral interests from those that take into account the demands of public justification and common interest.

White and Ypi believe that partisanship must not be limited to a single issue or within the confines of the nation-state, but should develop a wide-ranging agenda over a longer term and on a global stage. This would entail cross-temporal and delocalized projects based on ongoing associative practices formed and sustained by all those sharing a particular interpretation of a set of common values and a common view on how power should be exercised. Although the authors discuss briefly the center-right transnational partisanship that lasted until the 1960s in Western Europe and mention in passing the transnationalism of the Socialist Internationals, their conception of transnational partisanship (sketched in chapter 9) remains ambivalent. Their argument might have been stronger if the two authors devoted more attention to the current debates about the future of the European Union.

If the authors' intention is admirable, one wonders then if they chose the best method for studying such a complex concept as partisanship. For in spite of their

interest in developing a *political* political theory, to use Jeremy Waldron's term, their perspective seems too abstract and leaves out several groups that have an important say in today's politics. The first comprises those fixated on a single issue (abortion, gun rights, immigration, identity politics etc.) with whom it is often difficult to compromise because their arguments are couched in ideological, "either-or" rather than "more or less" negotiable terms. The authors claim that "an uncompromising stance violates the ethics of partisanship by choosing single-mindedness over the continuation of joint struggle," (p. 150), but they don't really demonstrate this point in the end. I looked in vain for the concept of extremism in the book and missed it especially in chapters 7 ("Partisan Compromise") and 8 ("Revolutionary Compromise") where it should have been discussed at some length. Not surprisingly, the book has little or nothing to say about the partisan echo chambers that encourage ignorance, alternative facts, fake news, and a Manichaeian view of the world.

The second missing group consists of independents, centrists, and moderates who form different categories that would need to be included in any realistic picture of democratic politics. It is not a coincidence that the concept of moderation, too, is absent from the index of the book (the same also applies to Rosenblum and Muirhead's books!). In reality, partisanship, civility, compromise, and moderation belong to a larger semantic field from which they derive their significance. Scholars who want to study any one of them must explore both their synonyms and antonyms, including fanaticism, radicalism, and zealotry. That is why a normative approach inspired, to a great extent, by analytical philosophy—which White and Ypi define as "rational reconstruction"—may not be able to render full justice to the complexity of these concepts and should be complemented by the *Begriffsgeschichte* approach. Otherwise, it risks glossing over a good part of the substance of real politics and veers into the realm of ideal theory in which ideological, ethnic, and religious considerations play a very limited role. In reality, partisanship often feeds upon identity-based divisions and "friend-foe" relations, often furthered by religion and ethnicity, which cast doubt on the possibility of trans-national partisanship, world state, and cosmopolitanism.

To conclude, White and Ypi must be applauded for tackling such a complex topic as the relation between partisanship and democracy. Yet, if the latter needs open-minded partisans, it is not clear how we should go about making sure that most of them are enlightened ones who have read and assimilated the lessons of Kant, Rousseau, and Rawls. Since the approach presented in this book applies to consolidated democratic settings, one wonders if and how it might also be used for the study of fledgling democracies and nondemocratic or illiberal regimes. Moreover, one would need some guidance on the type of institutional design capable of fostering habits of compromise, moderation, and civility. Without a discussion on this topic, it remains unclear how the normative type of partisanship defended in this book could work even in societies that take diversity and pluralism of ideas seriously. We certainly need better forms of partisanship and more enlightened citizens, but one wonders how exactly improving the quality of partisanship could serve as a compass in an increasingly confusing world, dominated by the likes of Donald Trump, Nigel Farage, Vladimir Putin, or Nicolás Maduro.

Perhaps what we (really) need is a new institutional design and a new culture that would put a premium on moderation and compromise. Our first President might be a good example in this regard. "I was no party man myself," Washington once confessed in a letter to Jefferson from July 6, 1796, "and the first wish of my heart was, if parties did exist, to reconcile them." While he tried to be non-partisan, Washington was never neutral, lukewarm, or indifferent to the common good, nor was he ever

fanatic or single-minded in his devotion to his principles. Instead, Washington had a sound sense of direction and balance and knew how to trim between the interests and claims of different groups, by sacrificing the non-essential in order to preserve the essential. As such, he continues to remind us that the proper functioning of democratic institutions depends on a sound balance of powers and a set of virtues such as common sense, responsibility, and moderation which could offset party animosities, populist demagogues, and local prejudices.

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### **White and Ypi's Response**

One of the important points in Craiutu's thoughtful review concerns our study's method. Has an analytical-philosophical approach taken us too deep into abstract theorizing, detached from the historical reference-points a *Begriffsgeschichte* might highlight? We frame the book as a contribution to contemporary democratic theory. Its approach is designed to address the debates central to present-day scholarship. Justification, deliberation, obligation and compromise – these are some of the key themes of democratic theory today, and ones we try to shed light on. But a sharp distinction between analytical and genealogical approaches is something the book resists. The first two chapters are historical in focus, looking at how the concept of party has developed over time, and how neighbouring concepts such as faction evolved in parallel and contra-distinction. We take some care to embed our analysis in a conceptual frame sensitive to past usage.

Presumably one reason Craiutu asks about method is he feels choices here have substantive implications for the account. Could an analytical orientation have led us to exclude too much of the complexity of real-world politics? Where are the abortion activists, firearms advocates, religious extremists and others who belong 'in any realistic picture of democratic politics'? Our intention in focusing on the partisan was not to wish them away. Clearly there are influential figures in contemporary politics who are far removed from the partisan ethos we describe, and indeed who may feature in the ranks of groups that call themselves parties. Rather than a description of politics as one finds it, we wanted an account that could orient critique. The book tries to highlight the relevant standards to which partisan collectives may be held, as well as to challenge some currently popular catch-all terms such as populism, which have been used to cluster such diverse phenomena as Trump's alt-right ascendancy and the Corbyn-led transformation of the British Labour Party. Ideal types may simplify, but hopefully they can be the basis of important distinctions too.

More profoundly, Craiutu seems to fear not just that we have overlooked the place of the non-partisan in politics but that we have missed the dangers intrinsic to partisanship. He suggests we are silent on such everyday features as bias, echo chambers, and dichotomous thinking. Have we air-brushed these bad habits from our account? Our argument is in fact more challenging: we offer a conditional defence of exactly these things. The single-mindedness of the partisan can be a positive or negative quality, depending on how it is exercised and the ends to which it is put (Chap. 3). A good political project, just like a bad one, prospers or fails in part by the energies of its adherents. Commitment – the willingness to stick to a cause and consistently oppose those who would thwart it – is a basic ingredient in positive change. Sometimes it may be put to bad uses, as perhaps with the ethnic and sectarian movements Craiutu highlights. But if one tries to banish the commitment of partisans



from politics one loses a powerful resource for carving a more just and legitimate order.

How can one ensure partisans are the enlightened kind who have ‘assimilated the lessons of Kant, Rousseau, and Rawls’? Difficult indeed, and certainly no easier than cultivating those moderate souls who have absorbed the lessons of Raymond Aron and co. But whatever the challenges facing party democracy today, the contemporary world is not without its promising partisan formations, some discussed in the text. A principal aim of our book is to defend their like from the charge of irrationality, reconstructing the principled stance that the best of them already adopt.