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a cura di Paolo Evangelisti

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The Power of Ideas: Some Remarks about Two Recent Books on the History of Medieval Political Thought*

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This essay discusses the historiography of Western medieval political thought, as reflected in *Il pensiero politico medievale* by Gianluca Briguglia and *Il potere al plurale: un profilo di storia del pensiero politico medievale* by Roberto Lambertini and Mario Conetti. These two volumes propose vastly different approaches to the topic both in terms of chronology and focus, the first focusing mainly on texts, the other primarily on practices and institutions. Read in conjunction with one another, these books testify to the complexities involved in conceptualizing the emergence and development of political ideas in Europe between the fall of the Roman Empire in the West and the era of the Renaissance and the Reformation.

Middle Ages; Aristotelianism; medieval political ideas; Thomas Aquinas; Christine de Pizan.

I wish to preface my remarks about these two excellent books by commending the Italian scholarly community generally for supporting the publication of such volumes. To state it bluntly, Italy has the clear advantage over the United States (and the English-speaking world more generally) in its considerable interest in medieval political thought to the extent that the books by Briguglia and by Lambertini and Conetti could see the light of print in consecutive years. There is essentially nothing comparable in recent times published in English. During the twenty-first century, only the second volume of Janet Coleman's *A History of Political Thought* covering the Middle Ages and Renaissance (from 2000) and the updated 2005 edition of Joseph Canning's *A History of Medieval Political Thought, 300-1450* (originally released in 1996) have the same breadth. The latter is really just modified from its initial version by the addition of a bibliographical introduction indicating some of the scholarship that had been produced in the intervening years. Otherwise, the most recent surveys of medieval political thought in English date

* Review Essay on Gianluca Briguglia, *Il pensiero politico medievale*, Torino, Einaudi, 2018, and Roberto Lambertini and Mario Conetti, *Il potere al plurale: Un profilo di storia del pensiero politico medievale*, Milano, Jouvence, 2019.

from the 1980s and 1990s. The magisterial six-volume *History of Mediaeval Political Theory in the West* by the Carlyle brothers from the early twentieth century continues to be cited (although it deserves to be, since it does not rely on secondary literature and is a treasure-trove of primary documentation). Certainly, research into the political ideas of the Middle Ages has advanced considerably in all major European languages (Italian, French, German, and Spanish as well as English), but this has not been reflected in new syntheses on the order of the accomplishments of Briguglia and of Lambertini and Conetti. Italy has been especially blessed with talented scholars who possess broad visions of the field absent from those working in my own native language (and I include myself among the guilty parties).

There is, of course, the problem of defining the nature and chronology of «medieval» political thought itself. Between the end of the Western Roman Empire and the dawn of modernity – the exact datings of which are admittedly themselves matters of controversy – the rudiments of a distinctively European approach to political theory emerged. This vision was etched out of ancient Greco-Roman and Christian sources (with aid from the Arabic and Jewish traditions), along with a confrontation with the realities of political life arising from the practice of institutions within and alongside the Roman church. Scholars commonly divide up this period into two more or less hermetically sealed eras: one before, the other after, the circulation beginning in the mid-thirteenth century of William of Moerbeke's complete Latin translation of Aristotle's *Politics*. (Only semi-facetiously might one describe this as the postulation of an «epistemological break» occurring around the year 1260 between periods that could plausibly be labeled «B.P.» [«Before the *Politics*»] and «A.P.» [«After the *Politics*»]). The bulk of attention has been devoted to the second epoch, as reflected in the Aristotelianism of Thomas Aquinas and the other scholastics of the late thirteenth and fourteenth century, whose approach to politics is philosophically grounded in principles of human reason and nature distinct from revealed Christian dogma.

Both *Il pensiero politico medievale* and *Il potere al plurale* decline to indulge in this conventional historiography, although they embrace different approaches, each of which yields insights valuable in their own right. The former book adopts a chronology that begins the story of medieval political thought in the 1100s and employs the technique of concentrating on archetypical authors and texts. After a substantial chapter on John of Salisbury's mid-twelfth century political theory focused on monarchic government, Briguglia subsequently dedicates considerable attention to Brunetto Latini, whose French-language *Li livres dou tresor* contains a lengthy discussion of the foundations and operation of the communal, republican cities of Italy. Writing c. 1260, Latini evinced no knowledge of the newly available *Politics* while nevertheless espousing many of the ideas that are commonly ascribed to the introduction of Aristotle. (He did know the *Nicomachean Ethics*, however). For these concepts, he relied primarily on Roman sources such as Cicero and Seneca and on their medieval adaptations. Briguglia's extended discussion is

singular, in the sense that Latini received little or no detailed examination in previous histories of medieval political ideas.

For Briguglia, the dissemination of the *Politics* is not about transporting specific doctrines from ancient Athens to early Europe so much as about providing an additional «language» through which to speak about political matters. Indeed, he suggests that the commonplace terminology of «aristotelismo politico» ought to be replaced by what he calls «post-aristotelismo». The distinction is not trivial. The central tenet of so-called medieval «aristotelismo politico» is fidelity to core teachings of The Philosopher above all else, or at least to the extent possible without threatening Christian doctrine. This is the case, for example, with Aristotle's doctrine of political naturalism. According to proponents of ascribing an «aristotelismo politico» framework to medieval thinkers, Aristotelianism requires a slavish acceptance of the principle that man is a *zoon politikon* (a "political animal"). In this case among many others, many scholars have maintained that to be an Aristotelian requires deference in all matters to those words of the *Politics* that do not blatantly conflict with Christianity, an outlook said to overturn completely preceding medieval theories of politics.

By contrast, Briguglia refuses to attribute to Aristotle's *Politics* any such magical, mind-altering powers. The phrase «post-aristotelismo» acknowledges the obvious fact that the availability of the *Politics* demonstrably contributed to the way authors reflected on political questions. Yet it also connotes that not every feature of political thought changed in the «A.P.» era. Briguglia emphasizes this point time and again in the later chapters of *Il pensiero politico medievale*. Perhaps nowhere in the book does this become more evident than in its treatment of Marsiglio of Padua, who is almost universally viewed as the quintessential medieval exponent of political Aristotelianism. Briguglia studiously distances himself from this received wisdom:

> Marsilio utilizza abbondantemente il linguaggio politico aristotelico, ma lo governa secondo le proprie esigenze concettuali e lo combina in modo creativo con altri materiali, come alcune idee ciceroniane, come determinate concezioni della formazione della vita della medicina, e con altri saperi, come il concreto esercizio della politica nelle istituzioni cittadine, la storia, il diritto, le teologia e le narrazioni bibliche (p. 161).

Seldom have more judicious words been written about the overarching framework within which Marsiglio articulated his political theory. And what holds in the case of this alleged «über Aristotelian» is all the more germane to other thirteenth- and fourteenth-century philosophers, whose reliance on the *Politics* was decidedly more muted.

Briguglia's book is mainly organized around major political thinkers of the Middle Ages. Lambertini and Conetti adopt a different strategy. They construct their survey thematically and start their narrative much earlier than does Briguglia. Two features of their book deserve note. First, the work sheds considerable light on the significance of ecclesiology's contribution to the formulation of medieval thought and of the church's dynamic relationship

with the secular realm. This approach requires them to commence their story with the Christianization of the West during the late Roman Empire and carry through to authors working during the very early Middle Ages, to whom most scholars evince scant consideration. The Investiture Controversy of the later eleventh century, which is often treated as a key moment in defining later conflicts between the spiritual and temporal spheres, is contextualized, as a result of which Lambertini and Conetti evidently do not regard it to be a particularly decisive historical event. The emergence of papal monarchy and parallel claims for the «sovereignty» of the Holy Roman Emperor constitute the primary topics on which they concentrate for more than half of the book, by my count of pages. (In passing, I have always been uncomfortable with the application of the term «sovereignty» to any doctrine before the time of Bodin – I prefer something like «supremacy» when talking about the Middle Ages – but I am not going to quibble here). For Lambertini and Conetti, the persistent conflicts between church and empire, and also later between papacy and national monarchies such as France, as well as disputed conceptions of the nature of church government itself, should be viewed as perhaps the main driving forces behind the entire history of medieval political thought.

The second, and related, facet of *Il potere al plurale* worthy of acknowledgement is its recurrent recognition of the interplay between philosophical teachings, juridical principles, and theological precepts. This theme permeates the book's analysis of medieval conceptualizations of both ecclesiastical and temporal institutions, which had commenced already in later antiquity. The intersections between philosophy, law and theology put into play such issues as the roles appropriate to popes and their secular analogues, emperors and kings, and the relative magnification or diminution of papal power. To be clear, for Lambertini and Conetti there is no single path to be charted in the pattern of this dialectic. The problems posed by the triangulation of philosophical, legal and theological dimensions of political thought recurrently challenged thinkers over the course of a millennium. In some ways, matters were no more settled in 1400 than in 400.

In greater measure even than Briguglia, Lambertini and Conetti accord only very cursory significance to the introduction of the *Politics* into Western Europe, which receives all of eight pages of consideration in a book that runs to slightly over 200 pages. As may be evident, the way they recount the history of medieval political thought renders Aristotle's allegedly sudden appearance in the Latin world to be a phenomenon of secondary significance. («Allegedly» here refers to the fact that a host of Aristotelian political ideas may in fact be found in texts that predated the Latin translation of the *Politics*, a result of available alternate sources for them, as I have demonstrated in some of my own research.) This comports well with what my doctoral supervisor, the late John Brückmann, used to call the history of «operative political thought». In other words, the real story of medieval political ideas is to be found not in the study of philosophy but in the controversies that roiled the times. Thus, the notion that the mere appearance of the *Politics* occasioned a "transformation"

is relegated to secondary status. In the purely intellectual realm, Lambertini and Conetti seem rather to view the emergence of the institutionalized university as the development of greatest impact.

I have thus far highlighted the distinctive ways in which Briguglia, on the one hand, and Lambertini and Conetti, on the other, recount the history of medieval political thought. On one point, however, they are in complete accord: the relegation of Thomas Aquinas to a very limited role in the story. More than 60 years ago, the great historian of medieval and Renaissance philosophy Paul Oskar Kristeller in his famous essay on *The Aristotelian Tradition* issued this warning to his readers:

> Thomas Aquinas... enjoyed no monopoly of authority or orthodoxy; his teachings were in competition with many others, and sometimes even condemned, and much of his work belonged, by medieval standards, to theology rather than philosophy.

I do not mean to suggest that Briguglia and Lambertini and Conetti were actually familiar with Kristeller's words, but they implicitly take his point to heart, regardless of any awareness of it. In the more than the 200 pages of Briguglia's book, Aquinas receives discussion in only ten of them, roughly the same as most of the other scholastic authors he examines. Lambertini and Conetti are even more dismissive: they accord Thomas slightly less than three pages. Contrast this with the 35 or so pages that Coleman's *History*, cited above, dedicates to Aquinas. To be on the side of Kristeller is (nearly) to be on the side of the angels.

While minimizing Aquinas's place in the history of political thought during the Middle Ages, both books seek to be inclusive in the thinkers whom they choose to examine. The best example is their recognition of the signal importance of Christine de Pizan, an extremely prolific author who flourished at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Try as you might, you will not find even the slightest reference to her in most English-language surveys. I suspect the reason is less misogyny (although that probably played a role) than the fact that she doesn't fit into the standard Aristotelianizing narrative and that she wrote in the French vernacular. She doubtless knew Aristotle's *Politics* by means of Nicole Oresme's translation of it into French. But Aristotle plays a tiny role at best in the formulation of her political ideas.

One other feature that I deem worthy of mention that unites *Il pensiero politico medievale* and *Il potere al plurale* is their acknowledgement that the political theory of the Middle Ages can never properly be disengaged from a deep understanding of the historical events of the time. This point comes more to the fore in the Lambertini and Conetti volume. But neither book neglects that political theory during the Middle Ages was never confined to arcane and arcane academic debate. Many political treatises were lively interventions in the deep disputes between the church and the earthly powers, as well as within the church itself, that roiled the period. For example, prominent teachers associated with the University of Paris wrote numerous tracts favoring or opposing the claims of the French king Philip IV to tax the property of the

church without the permission of the pope. Likewise, the conflict between the Franciscan Order and the papacy concerning the question of "spiritual poverty" led authors to apply scholastic lessons to the constitution of the church, especially in regard to the powers enjoyed by the pope. Quite often historians of so-called political philosophy have rushed to identify this direct engagement with contemporary concerns as a fault of medieval theories that can justify their dismissal in comparison with the supposed «eternal truths» espoused by Plato and Aristotle, Machiavelli and Hobbes, and all the rest. (By the way, this is also an implicit rationale for the valorization of Aquinas in the canon of Western political philosophers — he is somehow «timeless»). The very fact that the preponderance of political theories of the Western Middle Ages *are* so self-consciously *political* affords them greater, not lesser, strength, in my opinion. For heaven's sake, political theory can be *political* without also sacrificing its value and power as *theory*.

I conclude my remarks at the point where I began, with an expression of jealousy from the perspective of an English-language scholar about the advanced state of the study of medieval political theory in Italian scholarship. I do not mean to appear fawning. But speaking as a relatively rarity in the English-speaking world — namely, a researcher who specializes in the political thought of the Western Middle Ages — my admiration for the achievements of these two books cannot be understated. As I hope to have illustrated, each volume stands on its own as a monument to the possibility, as well as the desirability, of "big picture" scholarship on the history of medieval political ideas. Obviously, the ways in which they present that history differ considerably. Yet they complement one another to a very high degree. Reading them together one gleans a quite robust account of the highly creative political theory that flourished in the medieval West.

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