

OUTLINE OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

In this work, the Italian philosopher Vittorio Possenti, a professor of the Ca'Foscari University of Venice, covers problems in western social and political philosophy with a view to the whole, systematically, and in terms of problems¹. They are presented mainly in the context of the crisis of contemporary liberal thought. Liberal societies stand at the crossroads, as the title of book states.

The work is composed of two basic parts: one part can be described as written in the style of textbook, while the second part may be described as critical. In the second part the problems of contemporary liberal societies are developed and analyzed, mainly in the theoretical or philosophical context, that is, liberalism in the aspect of political and social philosophy. In this respect the author presents the theoretical limitations of liberalism, the practical consequences, and proposes a way out of the impasse.

The book can be read systematically from the beginning or from any part one might choose. It is rich with many references to the thoughts of contemporary Italian philosophers.

The main philosophical perspective presented in Possenti's work, as in many other works by him, is the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition. In the work the emphasis is on philosophical foundationalism, that is, metaphysical and epistemological realism. The political and ethical thought of Jacques Maritain occupies an especially important position in contemporary philosophy. Possenti's work is an important part of the movement of communitarian personalism that arose in the 1970s. The movement in

¹ The fact that Possenti looks at questions in terms of problems does not mean that he neglects the historical perspective. The book contains many historical reconstructions.

Italy has been strongly connected with Catholic social teaching. In particular, in the spirit of communitarian thought, a critique has been made of contemporary liberal thought, especially John Rawls theory of justice.

The volume is composed of the following parts: „Historical-Methodological Introduction”; Part. I. „The Theory of Political Form” (chapters: „Political Form and Social Philosophy”; „The Concept of Natural Law”; „The Question of the Common Good”; „On the Concept of the People”; Part II. „The Practical Reason and Social Philosophy”; („Intermezzo on the Practical Reason”; „Thoughts on John Rawls’ »Theory of Justice« and the works of Norberto Bobbio”; „Work and Technology”; „Religion and Social Philosophy”); Part III. „Democracy, the State” („Rational Justifications of Democracy”; „Aporiai of the Establishment of Democracy in Kelsen”; „The State, Society, Social Formations”); „Conclusion. Liberal Societies at the Crossroads.”

When in the first part Possenti writes about political form, he has in mind the political realm (Germ. *das Politischen*, Fr. *le politique*), and so, the essence of politics, which is *ordo*, in other words, the recognition and giving of order („the purpose of politics is to set in order”). The four properties and component elements of political form are as follows: the common good, the (natural) law, the nation, and political authority. According to Possenti, the properties of political form correspond to the classical doctrine of the four causes: the common good as the final cause; the law (and justice) as the formal cause; society as the material cause; and authority as the efficient cause. The investigation of these four political properties constitutes the essence of the cultivation of social philosophy as a science.

Possenti regards Europe as the daughter of natural law. The natural law through the thought of successive epigones, from Solon, then Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, to St. Augustine and St. Thomas, led to the „Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” Thomas defined the natural law as follows: *»nihil aliud est quam participatio legis aeternae in rationali creatura«* (*Summa Th.*, I-II, q. 91, a. 2). The common constitutes the end and essence of every political society. According to Possenti, the common good has in large measure been lost in liberal societies. Liberalism as an individualistic conception rejects the constitutive dimension of the community, and thereby it concentrates on individual goods. Possenti says that in a democratic and pluralistic society, man „spontaneously desires for his society a certain group of goods and ends that are irreducible to personal or individual ones.” In this perspective, as in com-

munitarian thought, the common good turns out to be one of the conditions for human happiness. Possenti presents the people, the political community, as an end „in itself,“ and not as an instrument or the effect of an artificially formed social contract.

In the second part, which deals with the relation of the practical reason to social philosophy, Possenti formulates arguments in the spirit of Platonic idealism for the existence of an indissoluble link between ethics and politics, and between particular philosophy and epistemology. Those links are supposed result from the fact that the purpose of social philosophy is to know the nature of political reality (hence it is necessary properly to describe or define the essence of human knowledge), and to describe or define what a good political system is (hence we should recognize that ethics is a component of politics). The good as a constitutive idea of the sphere of human *praxis* appears as a metaphysical category. Possenti therefore is opposed to social neutrality and social agnosticism. They cannot form the foundation of democracy, and the author believes that this was confirmed by the instances of totalitarianism in the twentieth century.

According to Possenti, the idea of the good, even today after the epoch of totalitarianisms, has its opponents, or at least there are those who do not properly recognize, do not appreciate, or sometimes indeed discriminate against the idea of the good. Possenti has in mind mainly Rawls, probably the most important representative of liberalism in the final decades of the twentieth century, and who was often called a modern or moderate liberal. Possenti shows the essential shortcomings of Rawls' theory of justice as impartiality, a vision in which rightness and justice are above the good or prior to the good. Rawls believes that the good as a moral category should be a matter of personal choice because every man has the right to choose his own way of happiness. Hence Rawls, like Hans Kelsen, supports proceduralism: the right theory of justice should constitute a procedural minimum that sets the boundaries (in essence the legal boundaries) of human action. Possenti sees that every theory of justice implies or assumes a least from „primary goods“ such as rights and freedom, rights and duties, and the awareness of one's own value. Thus it cannot be argued that principles of justice are prior to or above the good.

The author refers to the question of human work. He shows the superiority of the Christian conception over the theory of Aristotle and the Marxist conception. He understands work as one of the spheres that set

man apart from the animals. It is at the same time an action of duty, a „necessary” action (in great measure work is toil), since it serves to provide the means necessary for life. At the same time it is the plane of the development and manifestation of the subject, and as such it serves to complete the human essence. Work is therefore an immanent end of human life.

Possenti remarks on the sphere of *otium*, which is not work, but it „the active rest of the soul in which man turns toward being and the cosmos in order to contemplate.”

In the third part, with the title „Democracy and the State,” the author tries to convince us that how we understand democracy or the state depends in large measure the anthropological perspective we take. There are many theories of democracy and theories of the state, and only a proper conception of man in his individual and social dimension can lead to the indication of a suitable theory of democracy and a right theory of the state. In the theory of democracy, Possenti supports Abraham Lincoln’s definition (democracy as *government of the people, by the people, for the people*) and supports personalistic-communitarian philosophy. Possenti thinks that personalistic-communitarian philosophy is the only philosophy that integrates the three planes typical of and essential to man: the theological, the ontological, and the social plane. In this vision, man is defined as an ambivalent and dynamic being in the aspect of good and evil, which does not eliminate the mark of the *imago Dei*. At the same time, man is defined as a unity of *essentia-esse*, that is, as a person in his totality, and as free, which marks man with inalienable dignity. In the personalistic-communitarian tradition, as the name indicates, man is also *zoon politikon*, a social being. Man’s identity is therefore also constituted with an indissoluble link with the community. Only this sort of ontological theory of the person’s unity, together with full acceptance of the person’s social nature, can constitute a proper starting point in the rational justification of democracy. It is also a necessary condition in the aspect of the conception of the state.

In the chapter „The State, Society, Social Formations” Possenti shows how the devaluation of the individual in the ethical, legal, and political dimension, which occurred mainly because of Marxist theory, led to a crisis of the state going back to the late nineteenth century, and took an especially complex character in the liberal societies of recent decades when the pursuit of economic prosperity caused the decline of strong forms of integration. The almost exclusive concentration on the material

sphere in the liberal *welfare state* led to a situation where government become administration, and the idea of distributive justice almost become the only recognized sphere of justice. According to Possenti, the essence of political authority, which consists in the realization of the political and moral ends of the people and the state, was thereby also lost. The neglect of the moral plane goes hand in hand with the rejection of the normative and universal dimension of law. In this respect the author sees rescue in a return to the conception of the political virtues, and in the restoration of the right conception of the person and the community. In this perspective, Possenti discusses in detail what the state is, what political (civil) society is, and the significance that „indirect social formations” have for both those spheres, including the recognition of social pluralism.

Political society is the highest form of society. It is people gathered together around common purposes, working together, and remaining in dialogue. The state is the highest structure of this organization. According to the author, political society and the state are related as a part to the whole. Thus he disagrees with the social dualism of the state and political society that is generally accepted in philosophy today. He is an adherent of the classical tradition that defined the *polis* and the *civitas* as identical with political and civil society (the *polis* is a *koinonia politiké*; the *civitas* is the *societas civilis*). They are successive and increasingly developed degrees of socialization. Therefore the greatest benefit resulting from the classical model of politics and society is realism, which is most fully shown by social pluralism. With reference to Bobbio, Possenti thinks that only in the Aristotelian perspective is it possible to describe that future phases that will develop under the sign of overcoming »closed sovereignty» for a world society. In that communitarian vision, however, the personalistic dimension remains fundamental. The reference point for every degree of socialization, beginning with the family, followed by various intermediate formations, then the state, political society, and world society, must always be the person.