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Review of Vasileios Syros's, Marsilius of Padua at the Intersection of Ancient and Medieval Traditions of Political Thought

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Vasileios Syros

***Marsilius of Padua at the
Intersection of Ancient and Medieval
Traditions of Political Thought***

**University of Toronto Press, Toronto
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European medieval urban growth from the twelfth century onwards and the consequent demands for civic autonomy challenged the established political ideas about the divine sources of power and the relations between the king, as the earthly representative of God, and his subjects. Political thought focused on the salient topics that corresponded to the new social and political reality: the organisation of political communities, the definition and the function of the law, the appointment of government, the relations between church and state. In the same vein, the Bible and the traditions of the Church Fathers ceased to be the sole sources of knowledge to understand and interpret politics, while thinkers (political philosophers, theologians, jurists) approached the questions raised through classical political doctrines (Aristotle, Cicero) and Roman law.

It is fair to argue that Marsilius of Padua (c. 1270/90–c.1342) was the most prominent among them. The radicalism of his thought, expressed in his work *Defensor pacis*, brings him closer to the political philosophers of the modern era than to his medieval contemporaries. Formulating a concept of popular sovereignty, Marsilius presented the whole body of the citizens (*universitas civium*) as the primary legislator (*legislator humanus*) and assigned to it the authority not only to legislate but to elect and depose rulers as well. Moreover, understanding the political interventions

of the Roman church as the primary cause of strife and internal division in political communities, Marsilius rejected the divine origins of the church and proclaimed it a human institution. It therefore causes no surprise that Marsilian thought has attracted the interest of researchers since the middle of the last century.

Vasileios Syros' works are the latest contributions to Marsilian studies, especially as far as the sources of Marsilius' political theory are concerned. Apart from a number of relevant articles, Syros has published a monograph,¹ in which he undertakes a comparative analysis of Marsilius' and Aristotle's political thought, highlighting the selective use made by the former of the latter's political doctrines and, thus, challenges the established view on Marsilius' "Aristotelianism".

His book under review could be regarded as an extensive study of Marsilius' sources. The author aims to identify potential influences from a variety of political traditions that include not only the legacy of antiquity (mainly Aristotle, Plato, Cicero, Stoics) but the medieval Christian (western European and Byzantine), Jewish and Muslim world as well. Syros' broader research focusing on the interaction among Christian, Islamic and Jewish traditions of political thought, as well as on cross-cultural encounters in the late medieval and early modern period, offers him the necessary tools to undertake this work.

Following an informative introduction about the aim and the structure of the book, the first two chapters present the historical and intellectual context of Marsilius' life and work. After a brief review of Marsilius' life (chapter one), chapter two points to Marsilius' intellectual circle that may have acquainted him with pre-humanist thought (Albertino Mussato), natural philosophy (Peter of Abano) and Averroes' doctrines (John of Jandun).

The next three chapters deal with Marsilius' political theory as it is formulated in discourse one of *Defensor pacis*. Chapter three focuses on Marsilius' ideas on the origins of social life, the genesis of civic life and eventually the organisation of the political community. Chapter four refers to Marsilius' legal theory, namely the meaning of the law, its function in the political community, the role of the "human legislator" and the relation between sovereignty and legislation. The following chapter deals with Marsilius' theory of government: the typology of constitutions, the modes of establishing monarchy and the appointment of the government. All chapters are well-structured and succeed in acquainting the reader – in particular the nonspecialist – with the main topics of Marsilian political theory.

An appendix (indicating the correspondences between the book under review and the author's first monograph), 103 pages of notes, 11 pages of primary sources, 66 pages of secondary sources, and indexes of subjects, places and proper names conclude the book and provide the reader with a vast bibliography to approach Marsilius' work.

Under a comparative perspective, Syros' purpose is to bring to light the political traditions that possibly inspired Marsilius' thought. The comparison with Aristotelian doctrines is dominant in the book and is, thanks both to the author's last monograph and the results of previous scholarship, based on firm ground. The same could be said as far as the classical political tradition (Plato, Cicero and Stoicism) is concerned. Syros succeeds in elucidating how creatively and selectively Marsilius combines a variety of political doctrines to formulate a coherent theory on the development of the political community and the role played by the body of citizens in this process on the basis of mutual consent and against a completely secular backdrop.

Yet, identifying Marsilius' non-Christian medieval sources is admittedly a challenging task. On the one hand, Marsilius does not reveal his medieval sources; on the other, there is not always evidence for the circulation of these texts and for the access medieval European authors had to them. In order to overcome these "silences", Syros compares Marsilius' ideas with the thought of major non-Christian thinkers – among others, Al-Fārābī (c. 872–950/1), Avicenna (c. 980–1037), Averroes (1126–1198) and Moses Maimonides (1138–1204) – who dealt with similar topics and were influenced by the same classical heritage. Although direct influences are rarely to be traced, Syros succeeds in situating Marsilius' political theory in a broader, cross-cultural context, highlighting the affinities of his ideas to Muslim and Jewish political thought. One example suffices to illustrate the author's perspective. Marsilius argues on the societal function of religion by drawing on pagan examples. Syros demonstrates that Al-Fārābī, in his summary of Plato's *Laws*, deals with the Athenian religious festivals in order to point out their edifying role. A similar approach to religion, as the author highlights, is to be found in works of Averroes and Maimonides.

It is in this cross-cultural approach that the main contribution of the book lies. Moreover, given that in some topics Syros emphasises the continuity of political traditions passing through Marsilius to Renaissance thinkers (among others Machiavelli, Guicciardini, Pietro Pomponazzi), the reader acquires a basic view of medieval and early modern political ideas about the establishment, organisation and government of political communities.

NOTE

- 1 Vasileios Syros, *Die Rezeption der aristotelischen politischen Philosophie bei Marsilius von Padua* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).