



Partecipazione e Conflitto

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 17(3) 2024: 767-770

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v17i3p767

Published 15 November, 2024

Work licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non commercial-Share alike 3.0 Italian License

BOOK REVIEW

Andrea Millefiorini (2024), *Politica. Concetti per una definizione*, Milano: Mondadori.

Giovanni Barbieri
Università di Perugia

The contemporary world is undoubtedly one characterized by high complexity. Technological progress has reached an impressive pace, yet it appears not to be accompanied by a parallel moral advancement. The advent of the digital society and artificial intelligence suggest future scenarios that are not easily decipherable. The succession of crises – ranging from the economic and pandemic crises to those that have sparked the Russo-Ukrainian and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts – seem to depict contemporary societies not as societies of risk, but rather as societies in a perpetual state of danger. The inability to manage the phenomena of globalization, coupled with the anticipated rise of the so called “turbo-capitalism”, can be considered the primary factors behind the growing inequalities and the exploitation of marginal countries rich in vital mineral resources essential for the production of the technological tools we all rely on today.

In this context, which has only been briefly outlined here (with many other factors that could also be mentioned), politics appears to have ceded its place to other spheres of power, such as the economy, which seems to merge with it in increasingly surprising ways. New protagonists – large corporations, financial funds, the world’s wealthiest entrepreneurs, etc. – appear to be gaining ever greater influence in shaping the world in which we live. Yet, a “return” to politics would be entirely desirable and necessary in order to govern the overwhelming social complexity. Only politics, in other words, could be capable of managing this complexity by taking into account the multiplicity of interests at play and the need to reduce the risks that threaten the very survival of humankind.

It is precisely the concept of “politics” – as it actually is, rather than as it should be – that is the focus of Andrea Millefiorini’s latest work. The book should thus be understood as a treatise on the anatomy

of politics, in which the author carefully dissects its “body” to reveal its functioning, its roles, its goals, and its constituent organs. In doing so, the author reflects on the limits, potentials, and certainties that sociological thought on politics, from its origins to the present, has brought to light.

The text is structured into four chapters. The first, introductory in nature, focuses on the original characteristics of politics, specifically the origins and meaning of the term, the protagonists of politics, the objects of contention, and the subjects who hold the levers of command. The second chapter addresses one of the central themes of the entire work: the attempt to arrive at a definition of politics that is as precise and valid as possible across different historical periods and geographical contexts. The third chapter analyses the relationship between politics, society, and change, focusing particularly on some key turning points in socio-political thought, such as the consideration of politics both as an activity and as a system, the relationship between the state and politics, and the relationship between politics and morality. Finally, the fourth chapter seeks to understand whether, and to what extent, the fundamental characteristics of politics identified earlier are still applicable to the forms it has taken in the twenty-first century.

In the opening chapter, the author sets out the key characteristics that define politics as such, which can be summarised as follows:

1. Politics predates the first urban settlements of human beings. It is specifically characterised as the possibility that humans give themselves to decide on matters of war or peace, and the conditions and means that can lead to either;
2. Conflict is the foundational premise upon which politics is based;
3. Politics is also a struggle for power, rooted in a desire for power; however, political action is also shaped by other dimensions, such as interests or values;
4. Power has a dual aspect. It consists both in the ability to assert one’s will even in the face of opposition, and in the capacity to give meaning, definition, and sense to indeterminate situations;
5. The specificity of political power lies in the possibility of using physical force;
6. Politics is conducted by groups, although the role and importance of leadership should not be underestimated.

In the opening section of the second chapter, the author surveys the main definitions of politics that have been proposed throughout history. The analysis begins with the thought of Aristotle and Plato, who associated the concept of politics with that of the city-state and attributed to politics an eminently ethical function. The discussion then moves to consider an opposing approach already present in ancient Greece, that of Heraclitus and the Sophists, which in some ways anticipates many of the arguments later advanced by Niccolò Machiavelli, a thinker to whom Millefiorini rightly devotes particular attention. The author also examines Carl Schmitt and his theory, which links politics to the intensity of conflict and the friend-enemy opposition. Finally, the review turns to some German thinkers from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, such as Hegel, Mohl, and Bülow.

This thorough and meticulous survey of the literature leads the author to reiterate the importance of several points already highlighted in the previous chapter and to add that the concept of politics is not intrinsically tied to that of the state, and that politics cannot be defined solely by reference to the different objectives it may pursue. Furthermore, the author continues, it is important to note the

essentially ambivalent character of politics, its long-standing connection to the use of force (not least because it is tasked with maintaining peace or waging war), its primacy over other spheres, and, finally, its capacity to produce meaning for the members of the community in which it operates.

Given these premises, “politics” can be understood as the struggle between groups aimed at the pursuit of interests, the assertion of values, and the attribution of meanings for a specific community, through binding arrangements that ultimately involve the use of physical force.

The relationship between politics and society constitutes the focus of the third chapter. Here, Millefiorini first addresses the opposition within the literature between those – Spencer, Parsons, Easton, and Luhmann – who conceive of politics as a sphere or subsystem of the social system, and those – Marx, Pareto, and Weber – who, on the other hand, view it as a mere activity. The author expresses a preference for the latter position. The concept of politics as an activity, in other words, seems to the author more inclusive and explanatory than the notion of politics as a social subsystem, and it also has the merit of providing essential insights into the motivations behind the decisions and consequent actions of political and social actors.

After highlighting that the existence of politics arises both from the diversity of human beings and from the fact that there is always someone willing to engage in politics and another willing to accept it, the author focuses on politics in its narrower sense, as the art of governance. He elucidates its objectives, particularly in reference to the historical context marked by the presence of the modern democratic state. However, the author clarifies that governing and legislating are nothing more than the result, or the residue, of a complex layering of activities involving many people and groups who are engaged in competition and struggle, rather than in producing decisions.

Particularly interesting is the section of the chapter dedicated to analysing the relationship between politics, civil society, and the state. Here, Millefiorini observes that politics functions as a sort of “bridge” between civil society and the state, linking the inputs from the former with the outputs produced by the latter. He astutely points out that while the optimal condition in the relationship between politics and society is characterised by the maximum fluidity of the traffic across the bridge, this fluidity is hindered by the fact that politics may use its power either entirely or predominantly for its own purposes – and thus against civil society. It is therefore possible that the bridge does not only convey goods (in the form of public decisions), but also harms (in the form of limitations and impediments to such decisions).

Finally, the concluding chapter poses two questions: first, whether the characteristics of politics highlighted earlier continue to define it in the present century; and second, whether politics is currently undergoing a phase of progressive decline. In response to these questions, the author attempts, on the one hand, to subject the previously offered definition of politics to “stress tests” in light of the transformations it has undergone over time, and, on the other hand, to assess the need to include additional characteristics not previously considered, thus updating the definition.

Through a rigorous and convincing analysis, addressing several crucial issues – the possibility that politics is not a struggle between groups, but between individuals, networks, or multitudes; the decline of politics due to the vacuum of meaning-building arising from the weakening of grand narratives, and its transformation into mere administration; the use and monopoly of physical force both within

and outside the political community; the supposed reduction of politics due to the increasingly prominent role of science and technology – Millefiorini concludes that the previously outlined definition of politics remains valid to this day. However, he admits that one element of this definition is particularly controversial and thus open to revision and updating: the recourse to the use of force.

Culturally, in advanced democratic societies, there is a slow but progressive decline in the willingness to use force, while, technologically, there is an increase in the means of control that are at least partly substitutive and alternative to physical interventions by militarised forces. Nevertheless, this does not negate the fact that the legitimate monopoly of force remains the cornerstone of the distinction between the sphere of politics and power and other social spheres.

Overall, the book is undoubtedly valuable and of great interest. The topic addressed is certainly complex, and the anatomical approach adopted by the author is not an easy one to manage. However, Millefiorini skilfully navigates and handles this complexity, penetrating with great expertise into the “body of politics” in order to reveal its morphology, components, and all the elements that contribute to its functioning. In this regard, the book proves particularly useful both for students of political science and for ordinary citizens interested in politics, but especially for scholars in the field who wish to deepen their understanding of the subject and who continue, even today, to question the meaning of the word “politics” and of “doing politics.”