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Aurelian Craiutu
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PROLOGUE

Why Radical Moderation?

We have now sunk to a depth at which the restatement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men.[1]

(George Orwell)

When George Orwell published these words in January 1939, Europe was about to embark on a dangerous and suicidal path. Restating the obvious was then the duty of all intelligent and decent individuals who sought to stop the avalanche of murderous ideologies.

Although written over eighty years ago, Orwell's words still ring true today. Restating the obvious – assuming, of course, we can still agree on what is evident (a big if!) – is again the duty of anyone who cares about the future of our democratic institutions and way of life. If we still believe in liberty, then we have the right – indeed, the duty – to remind the people of the truth they may not want to hear. Yet, telling the truth or admitting that 2+2 equals 4 rather than 5 may sometimes be a risky or revolutionary act.

This point is more relevant than ever in our post-truth age. We suffocate among self-righteous people who think they are always right and are full of fiery zeal for their own tribe and hatred toward outsiders. We gasp for air among individuals who blacklist and excommunicate those whose views they consider impure, dangerous, or unorthodox. Wherever we turn our eyes, we encounter many who are firm and confident in their beliefs and are not shy at voicing them loudly in the public sphere. These self-righteous confidants of Providence do not want dialogue, and dismiss those who embrace moderation as weak, lukewarm, and indecisive. They ignore that the latter may, in fact, be a sign and source of strength and lucidity and is a "radical" virtue suitable only to courageous and non-conformist minds.

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But what does it mean to be a "radical" moderate? Can moderates be effective in politics in the present hyper-polarized and fractured political environment? Perhaps, as the *New York Times* columnist David Brooks put it, the greatest challenge is that moderation lacks "a magnetic idea."[2] Some equate moderation with treason, appeasement, and complicity with evil, while others believe that anyone who embraces moderation is condemned to be a loser. Be that as it may, moderation remains a notoriously difficult, complex, and elusive concept that challenges our imagination and is constantly misrepresented and misunderstood in public and political debates.

If you want to read a short book about *political* moderation, you will have a hard time finding one. This lack of attention to – and interest in – political moderation is not accidental; it reveals the scant faith many have in this virtue today. Yet, enlightened minds from the past, from Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero to Montaigne, Montesquieu, Burke, and Tocqueville, held a different view. They saw something valuable in political moderation that its present critics seem to miss. They praised moderation as the "supreme virtue of legislators" and "the silken string that runs through the pearl-chain of all virtues."[3]

It is not easy to recommend political moderation as a fighting virtue to an audience of young and restless radicals. They may want something else that has little to do with this virtue. At the same time, I also want to resist the suggestion that moderation only comes with being older and is suitable exclusively to older people. That is certainly not the case. Moderation has no lower age limit and is a virtue that everyone can practice almost anywhere and anytime.

I hasten to add that the moderation defended in these pages is a strong and muscular virtue which has several faces – epistemological, moral, constitutional, political, religious – and a rich tradition. As an eclectic virtue, it can be found on all sides of the political spectrum and contains both liberal and conservative elements. Properly understood, moderation is much more than the proverbial golden mean between the extremes. It is embedded in a complex institutional framework that includes, among others, balance and separation of powers, bicameralism, judicial

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review, federalism, polycentricity, and subsidiarity. Moderates are inspired by a few big ideas such as pluralism, solidarity in diversity, and dialogue across political differences. They seek to enlarge public sympathy for the common good and help solve deep disagreements in a civil and peaceful manner.

In what follows, I will emphasize the eclecticism, realism, and radicalism of moderation by resorting to a wide range of sources from philosophy, political science, literature, history, art, journalism, and, of course, real politics. The book makes a case for a bold type of moderation as a *fighting* creed, though not for everyone or for all seasons. We cannot understand what political moderation is unless we study both its synonyms (like prudence, civility, modesty, and compromise) and antonyms (like radicalism, zealotry, fanaticism, and extremism). In other words, it is as important to know what moderates stand *for* as it is essential to figure out what they fight *against*. The critics of moderation can often teach us as much as its friends, if not more.

I agree that merely thinking about moderation will not make us automatically more moderate, though it might help us realize its complexity and difficulty. In my view, moderation is an exotic archipelago for which there are few travel guides and no handbooks. Readers are invited to discover this rough planet on their own and at their own pace. As Montesquieu once put it, "there are certain truths for which it is not enough to be persuaded, but which one must also be made to feel."[4] Such, I believe, is the truth of political moderation.

In writing this book, I did not seek to serve the agenda of any party. Frustrated with the dogmatism, hyper-polarization, and immoderation that dominate our public and political scene, I set out to see "not differently, but farther than parties," to use Tocqueville's words. While parties are concerned with maintaining their influence or gaining power tomorrow, I also wanted to think about the long-term future.[5] The topics discussed in these pages reflect my own priorities and preferences but also take into account objections that may be raised against moderation.

I must emphasize that I use the word *radical* in a broad sense that is *not* meant to be pejorative. Like moderates, radicals – who must *not* be equated with extremists – perform an important role

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in our democratic society. They hold all of us accountable and keep us focused on our task. Does it mean, however, that we should reclaim political radicalism or utopianism?[6] I don't want to deny that occasional moments of radicalism may be necessary to stave off the decline of liberal democracy and reinvigorate its institutions. But it is essential to acknowledge that there are important nuances and differences between various types of radicalism, as the views of my (imaginary) interlocutors show.

At the core of *Why Not Moderation? Letters to Young Radicals* lie three strong beliefs. *First*, we may not afford to bargain away the liberal civilization and the open society we have inherited from our forefathers; instead, we must be prepared to fight for their values and principles and never give up on them. On fundamental issues such as civil equality, the rule of law, the integrity of elections, and the independence of the judiciary there can be no reasonable compromises with those whose actions endanger our democratic and free way of life.

Second, moderation can be found in many religious and cultural traditions, beyond the confines of what is known as Western civilization. It has a place in Christianity but also in other religions such as Judaism, Confucianism, and Islam. As such, it draws upon a wide range of resources and can have universal appeal across the entire world.

Third, to maintain our free way of life, we should burst out of our bubbles and echo chambers and work hard to rebuild civic bridges. Our task is to rediscover what unites rather than what separates us. To do that, we ought to have the courage to be eclectic and ignore "the arithmetic of easy ideological classifications."[7] That is why we should search for flaws in our own beliefs, not only in the ideas of our adversaries and critics. Only in this way, *sine ira et studio*, may we become aware of the reasonableness (and unreasonableness) of our opponents and grow less dogmatic and cocksure of our own views.

There are many who believe that the distemper of our times and the crisis of liberal democracy are too serious to be healed with gentle remedies like moderation which, in their view, is a mere privilege of the wealthy and the powerful. Young radicals are thirsting today for grand narratives and believe that

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unbounded enthusiasm and zeal can only lead to good outcomes as long as their intentions are pure. Yet, history invites us to be skeptical. Ardor comes in many flavors – some good, others bad – and excessive enthusiasm applied to political causes can often produce fundamentalism, extremism, and fanaticism.[8]

That's why we (also) need moderation, combined with prudence, courage, and justice, to save us from the zealotry and extremism of those who seek to impose their own views and ideals, no matter the costs. Although moderation does not have all the answers to our social and political problems, it provides a much-needed compass as we anxiously sail stormy and dark seas toward an unknown port.

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