

Craiutu, Aurelian. 2017. *Faces of Moderation: The Art of Balance in an Age of Extremes*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.

Bryan-Paul Frost  
University of Louisiana at Lafayette

An entire *book* about *moderation* in the *twentieth* century? Please, give me a break! What was Aurelian Craiutu (professor of political science at Indiana University, Bloomington) thinking when he wrote this book, and what was the University of Pennsylvania Press thinking when they agreed to publish it? It is easy to imagine a longish scholarly article on the subject, or perhaps even a pithy monograph—but an entire book? The twentieth century was perhaps the most *immoderate* century in all of human history, both in its world-wide scope, inhuman ferocity, and phantasmagoric character: one could easily fill an entire library with books on the subject of immoderation, while one could doubtfully fill even a small shelf with books on the opposite subject.

But in all seriousness, Craiutu shows us that this is not the case: Although the names of the great immoderates of the twentieth century are certainly more familiar to us (Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Castro, to name just a few), there are a number of figures that deserve our admiration and careful study for how they navigated those treacherous waters. And Craiutu is well versed to instruct us on these matters. In the first place, he has written a number of books and articles related to moderation, including *Liberalism Under Siege: The Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires* (Lexington Books, 2003) and more recently *A Virtue for Courageous Minds: Moderation in French Political Thought, 1748–1830* (Princeton University Press, 2012). In the second place, Craiutu was born and raised during *les trente glorieuses*—but regrettably on the wrong side (Eastern) of the Iron Curtain, in Romania. But rather than corrupt or debase him, these times actually informed him of “two important lessons”—lessons that so many Leftists

have yet to understand or to acknowledge. As Craiutu succinctly and accurately puts it early on in the book:

The first one was that, after all, there is no fundamental distinction between the “brilliant” future envisaged by the founders of Marxism and the real communism that was offered to us as a gateway to a perfect tomorrow. What I saw with my own eyes was not a perversion of the ideals of Marx or Lenin; it was actually, for the most part, the realization or consequences of their own principles.... The second lesson that life under a totalitarian regime taught me was about the fragility of freedom and the importance of political moderation as an antidote to zealotry and fanaticism (15-16).

One could therefore say that by *training* and *temperament* Craiutu has those qualities whereby we can profitably listen to his analysis and insights, even if and when we might disagree with some of them.

*Faces of Moderation* offers us five portraits of twentieth-century European philosophers/scholars and/or politicians/activists: Raymond Aron (French), Isaiah Berlin and Michael Oakeshott (English), Norberto Bobbio (Italian), and Adam Michnik (Polish). These portraits are neither a systematic philosophical interpretation or investigation of each thinker’s thought as a whole (although they contain that in part), nor are they complete intellectual biographies or histories (although they contain these in part as well). Instead, Craiutu is intent on tracing a certain strand or theme in their thoughts and lives, and that is of course their understanding and practice of moderation (broadly construed). It should be emphasized that these are not the only important figures in the book. Indeed, in almost every chapter there are ancillary examples who are juxtaposed to the main figures in order to illuminate further and

more precisely the overarching character of moderation (e.g., Ortega y Gasset with Aron, Judith Shklar with Berlin, and Leszek Kołakowski with Michnik). There is also a very touching tribute to François Furet in the penultimate paragraph, allowing him to have the “last word.” Craiutu would have wished to have drawn a portrait of Furet himself, but space did not permit it (244). This is unfortunate indeed, for Furet is yet another wonderful example of what Craiutu is seeking to illustrate, and this not only because of Furet’s singular expertise, the French Revolution. In *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), Furet admits that he was a communist between 1949 and 1956. But unlike others, Furet does not “regret” or shy away from or try to bury this period in his life. Just the opposite:

Should I regret that period of my life as I write its history? I do not think so. Forty years later I judge my erstwhile blindness with neither indulgence nor acrimony—without indulgence because the excuses one often draws from intentions in no way cancel out ignorance and presumptuousness; without acrimony because that unfortunate engagement taught me something. I came away from Communism with a curiosity about the revolutionary passion and with an immunity to pseudo-religious investment in political action (xi).

A more moderate—and instructive—confession can hardly be imagined.

So what is the criteria for why Craiutu picks the five examples that he does out of the many others he could have chosen? One is inclined to say simply that these are the examples closest to his heart, mind, and intellectual affinities (and there is some truth to this when one reads the portraits). But more specifically, Craiutu wanted to avoid a narrow parochialism or provincialism in his selection. In the “Prologue,” he states that the “thinkers discussed or

mentioned in these pages came from several national cultures”; they “belonged to different disciplines”; they did not necessarily identify “themselves primarily as moderates”; and they pursued “different trajectories and ideas,” inhabited “different intellectual and spiritual constellations,” and followed different career paths (4-5). “Yet, at the same time, they also shared many important things in common such as their belief in dialogue, their rejection of Manichaeism and ideological thinking, their embrace of trimming and political eclecticism, and their opposition to extremism and fanaticism in all their forms” (5). Craiutu wishes to emphasize that moderation cannot be confused with conservatism per se, let alone be identified with a particular ideology or political party: Moderation generally eschews party and partisanship even while a moderate might belong to or endorse a particular party or party agenda. But moderates, for the most part, are rarely comfortable with, or at ease in, any one particular party, and moderation can therefore be exhibited and/or manifested across a wide political spectrum.

It should be noted, however, that at the end of the book the reason for focusing on these five thinkers shifts somewhat. While Craiutu continues to argue that these thinkers “were for the most part detached from party platforms” and that they “were too skeptical to engage in conventional party politics,” he adds the following:

They all were caught in the orbit of—and reacted to—the struggle against the twin totalitarianisms of the twentieth century: fascism and communism. It is in response to these two doctrines that a tradition of political moderation as an art of balance emerged over time in defense of the values and principles of open society (234–35).

Fascism, however, plays a relatively small role in the book as a whole—it is communism that looms large. But perhaps this is not so surprising on second reflection. While many individuals

of all stripes were seduced by fascism's murderous, pseudo-scientific, totalitarian ideology, it had little staying power once it was defeated, and supporters were discredited (at the very least) accordingly. Not so with the murderous, pseudo-scientific, totalitarian ideology of communism! This had a staying power beyond any imaginable belief, both in the twentieth century and beyond: very few can get away with being an avowed fascist today (especially in politics or the academic community); but many can easily get away with being a self-proclaimed communist and/or socialist. One is therefore tempted to say that the theme of moderation in the twentieth century is the stance one took toward communism. Certainly the frequent references to Albert Camus in the book lead one to think this (cf. 14 and *passim*).

So how does Craiutu define moderation precisely? Those hoping for modern scientific clarity will be disappointed: There is no such articulation. It might therefore be best to begin with an understanding of what moderation is *not*:

I insist at the outset that there is no "ideology" (or party) of moderation in the proper sense of the word and that moderation cannot be studied in the abstract, but only as instantiated in specific historical and political contexts and discourses. What is moderate in one context and period may significantly differ from what is moderate at another point in time, which is another way of saying that moderation is not a virtue for all seasons and for everyone (3; cf. 33, 228-29).

Nonetheless, as suggested above, the way in which these figures comported themselves toward communism and other extremes helps to draw a rough portrait of moderation—or at the very least, to limn some salient characteristics of what moderation looks like in practice in particular circumstances.

I focus on two essential aspects of moderation: as a synonym of civility and

openness and as an antonym of fanaticism and dogmatism. As such, moderation appears as an essential ingredient in the functioning of all open societies because it acts as a buffer against extremism and promotes a civil form of politics indispensable to the smooth running of democratic institutions (5).

Craiutu avers (correctly so) that moderation is a “fighting creed”: It is “a combination of prudence, commitment, and courage far from the image of a lukewarm and indecisive mean between extremes with which it is often equated” (20). Two of the most frequent metaphors Craiutu uses to describe moderation are the rejection of Manichaeism and the attempt to keep the ship of state on an even keel. The rejection of Manichaeism entails the refusal to see the world as all black or all white, all good or all evil; it means not describing your opponent as the devil incarnate (and you yourself as history’s savior); and it implies that you might not have all the answers to life’s riddles and puzzles. In other words, the rejection of Manichaeism, or “monist conceptions of the public good and the good life,” means preferring “gradual reforms over radical revolutionary breakthroughs and sometimes—though not always—searches for a *juste milieu* or ‘golden mean’ between extremes that would maintain the equipoise of the community” (228). As for keeping the ship of state on an even keel: “It refers to adjusting one’s opinions or viewpoints so as to moderate the zeal of opposing factions . . . by offering necessary and timely concessions in order to prevent anarchy, violence, or civil war” (30; cf. 33). Obviously, these two metaphors are two sides of the same coin. Let us now briefly turn to how these five figures put these principles (and others) into practice.

Of the many facets of Aron’s moderation, two are quite *shocking* (but only because they should *not* be shocking for a moderate like Aron, except in the twentieth century). In the first place, Aron seems to have been one of the few people in France who actually *read* and seriously

*studied* Karl Marx! Aron's life-long dedication to understanding Marx (as Marx understood himself) is on full display throughout Aron's magisterial corpus (even if Aron was never able to write that *magnus opus* on Marx that he himself and so many others had hoped he would write). Indeed, if one gave a multiple-choice exam to figures like Jean-Paul Sartre or Maurice Merleau-Ponty on the subject, they would have failed miserably compared to a conservative liberal like Aron (cf. 41ff.)! Aron knew his opponents better than they knew themselves. In the second place, Aron was a severe critic throughout his career of that very institution from which he profited, namely the French university system (51-55). In interviews, editorials, and articles, Aron frequently railed against the calcified nature of French education and how it needed to be transformed and improved—but when the events of May 1968 unfolded, to the consternation of so many of his opponents and enemies (many, of course, who were die-hard communists), he rallied to support the Fifth Republic and rejected the radical proposals of Daniel Cohn-Bendit and others. *Reform, renewal, renaissance, and reinvigoration* are the hallmarks of Aron's lexicon—he was too keen a student of history not to know what *revolution* entailed. The lessons from this opening portrait are clear. A moderate knows the writings of their opponents and can speak cogently on them (perhaps, if not always, better than the so-called partisan expert); and a moderate is not out (strictly speaking) to gain or to profit from their viewpoints but rather to instruct the community as a whole on needed, but measured, reforms.

One sees these lessons reiterated, amplified, and modified in the portraits of Bobbio and Michnik. A self-described “liberal socialist,” Bobbio is truly impressive for his belief in genuine dialogue with Italian communists—a group of individuals, of course, who wished to lecture, to dominate, and if need be to coerce others to accept their beliefs and agenda. And yet Bobbio persisted in his efforts, through what he called a politics of “meekness” (138-43). But one

wonders whether he gave his opponents too much credit—indeed, one wonders whether he might have been, not so much too meek himself, but too gracious in his appraisal of his adversary (cf. 122ff.). Too say nothing of communist sympathizers, are not most of us (to borrow a classical example from Plato’s *Republic*) rather Thrasymachus-like in our approach to conversation? Words are weapons, and the point of dialogue is to win and to destroy the opponent (especially in front of others). How many of us are Polemarchus-like (or Socratic) in our understanding, where the point of dialectic is to instruct and to learn? There is no doubt that Bobbio’s incredible humility and gentleness has its place in politics, and he was certainly firm and resilient; but one also needs to appraise the opponent accurately. This is especially true for an individual (like Bobbio) who was “deeply preoccupied by the twin issues of cruelty and political evil,” and who argued that the “key trait of an open society” was “the rule of law”: There was no “third way,” or miraculous synthesis of communism, socialism, capitalism, liberal democracy, or what-have-you (118–22). How many communists truly believe in (and practice) the rule of law, dialogue, and political liberty (cf. 146–47)?

In respect to Michnik, one can only be awed by his dissident activities and noble self-sacrifice, and especially the way in which he fostered small but needed changes in Poland through what he called the “new evolutionism” and the “self-limiting revolution” (195). To a very great degree, these ideas and applications allowed all citizens to participate in modest civic and social change at the “grassroots level” without massive bloodshed and full-scale violence (let’s face it, only a very few individuals are ultimately willing and capable of thoroughly heroic actions involving life and limb) and thereafter to set the stage for healing and reform (197–200, 212). His opposition to lustration, therefore, must be understood in this context—and it is hard to disagree with that policy when Michnik himself was so intimately involved in the dissident



movement. Lustration is always a very tricky policy, and cannot be applied in every situation: Sad to say but truth to tell, strict justice often has to take a backseat to amnesty for reconciliation to occur. Michnik knew this better than most, and he courageously positioned himself early on with those who did not want lustration precisely because they had “ugly skeletons to hide in their own closets and their secret files” (Michnik himself had none) (206–11). “The reason for Michnik’s trimming attitude was simple. While acknowledging the importance of truth and moral testimony, he was skeptical toward moralizing postures and self-righteous calls for moral purity that displayed a considerable dose of narcissism and extremism” (217). Nonetheless, Michnik seems to have taken this idea to an unhealthy extreme with his friendship or partnership with General Wojciech Jaruzelski (206, 215–16, 218; cf. 221). Although Craiutu does not say so, these two portraits suggest that these two moderates sometimes let moderation get the better of them. In other words, moderation, taken to an extreme, can lead to a certain kind of appeasement—which is hardly moderate at all. This remark is in no way to detract from the phenomenal achievements of both Bobbio and Michnik. Aron, however, seems to have escaped this temptation and to have maintained throughout a “fighting creed.”

It was suggested above that moderation in the twentieth century revolved around the stance one took toward communism—but this does not really do justice to the Berlin and Oakeshott. Perhaps because they were both citizens of a country that was never really tempted or threatened by communism (cf. 87), their highest themes revolve around the power of the state in the twentieth century and its character or purpose or import (themes, of course, that are intimately related to communism, fascism, and all forms of fanaticism and extremism). Similar to Aron, Berlin fervently believed in studying one’s philosophical opponents as they understood themselves (75ff., 89), and he repeatedly emphasized the need and capacity in one’s own

thinking for “self-examination, doubt, and skepticism” (79, 88, 100, 111). Berlin went further, however, describing himself as a “pluralist” at heart and as one who therefore had a “pluralistic” conception of the human good: as Craiutu explains, the only thing “certain [for Berlin] is that any attempt to impose a single pattern of perfection and a unique set of values on all individuals, irrespective of their uniqueness and particular condition, is bound to have nefarious consequences in the long term.” Interestingly, these “rights to self-direction and self-development” are not pluralistic but absolute and cannot be compromised: “These rights are sacred and must be unconditionally respected” (82). The massive question remains how such a pluralistic conception of the human good can mediate or judge between states and civilizations that have competing and often irreconcilable understandings (e.g., those that might reject pluralism altogether). Here, Berlin demurs: “Reason itself may sometimes be powerless to guide our actions when facing tough choices between incommensurable values” (85). Not surprisingly (and very much *unlike* Aron), Berlin was rather “reserved in political matters,” and his true interests lay elsewhere (73-74).

Similar remarks and conclusions pertain to Oakeshott. Although he thoughtfully delineates and defends civil associations from totalitarian and romantic impulses to politicize all aspects of life (151ff.), he does so only so that individuals can pursue their own conception of the human good. Politics does not *promote* human flourishing; it only *protects* our ability to pursue our conception of it (156-57). Indeed, Oakeshott goes farther than any individual in the book in his seemingly utter denigration of politics.

Politics, Oakeshott believed, are a second-rate form of human activity compared to the salvation of one’s soul or the creation of great works of art. “A general interest and preoccupation with politics,” he noted, “is the surest sign of a general

decay in society. A universal preoccupation with rights, interests, affairs of government, political questions in general is fatal to the public peace and individual happiness” (152).

Oakeshott, like Berlin, denies that reason can offer any comprehensive or substantive guidance between different (artistic) conceptions of the human good, and that most such “normative judgments” are little more than a “function of our personal preferences and as such is problematic and open to question” (160-62). (How Oakeshott *knows* this is unclear.)

Interestingly, Berlin’s understanding of the apparent poverty of reason to make objective pronouncements makes us wonder about the (war-like or peaceful) relations between *states* in the international arena; Oakeshott’s understanding, by contrast, makes us wonder about the (war-like or peaceful) relations between *citizens* in a singular community.

But whether one focuses on Berlin or Oakeshott, the massive question these two portraits raise is how their incarnations of moderation and/or pluralism do not ultimately collapse into relativism: If reason cannot adjudicate authoritatively between competing claims, then are not all competing claims equally valid or invalid, to be arbitrated by force if necessary? Try as one might, there is no such thing as moderate or tepid relativism: It is sort of like pregnancy—you either are or you aren’t. The problem, of course, is that relativism can become the most immoderate of philosophies or principles of action (it should be remembered Benito Mussolini famously *and* correctly said that fascism was relativism). These two Englishmen may have resisted the totalitarian and fascistic temptation and argued against it, but they are less impressive in what they put in its place and the long term implications of their inclinations and arguments. Of course, both Berlin and Oakeshott saw the potential consequences of relativism, but they seemed to deny the full implications of this doctrine to their own thinking.

Two final observations are in order. Craiutu ends the book with six “metanarratives” (229-35) of moderation and then six of its tangible benefits (235-41). They are all cogently summarized and explicated based upon the portraits of the book as a whole. But what is missing, in the first place, is a thorough-going comparison of these five figures themselves: Who had the best understanding and practice of moderation and why? This question Craiutu leaves to the reader. One cannot infer his preferences by the order of the chapters, because all the chapters are impressively drawn. It would seem that Craiutu wanted to be a bit elliptical in his presentation, letting us draw the comparisons for ourselves (albeit giving us the tools to do so). After all, the title of the book is *Faces of Moderation* and not “*The Face of Moderation.*”

In the second place, and more importantly, there is a startling lack of religious themes in the book: This is a *secular* treatment of moderation. At the outset of the book, Craiutu makes the following claim:

Furthermore, there can be no moderation and trimming about the principles of what is scientifically known to be true or what is universally acknowledged to be beyond dispute; moderation and trimming are about things that are neither demonstrable nor scientifically known. They concern particular things that are uncertain and open to deliberation and are by nature controversial and unsettled, requiring experience and prudence (31; cf. 79, 167, 236-37).

To say nothing of the fact that what science says in one epoch as indisputably true can be overturned in the next, is there not a hidden immoderation with those who claim that science has all, or even some, of the answers—as if science itself is not without its own unacknowledged or unquestioned presuppositions? But more to the point: Is it possible to be moderate in Craiutu’s sense when it comes to issues like abortion and same-sex marriage, to name only a few? Can one

avoid black-and-white distinctions and conclusions, or Manichaeism, when it comes to religious injunctions? How does one fuse toleration and moderation while being faithful to religion and respectful of moderation? Until religion can be fully incorporated into a discussion of moderation, that discussion will always be incomplete.

In conclusion, moderation has fifty shades of grey, and the favorite color of moderates is grey (cf. 189, 204, 236). Grey is not, traditionally, a very sexy color (recent books and movies to the contrary), but let us hope that it never goes out of style, and that Craiutu continues to celebrate and to inform us of this vibrant but under-appreciated color.