

Mario Thomas Vassallo:

**GODFREY PIROTTA:
IL-POLITIKA TA' HAJTI.**

Malta: Horizons. 2021, 396 pages.

DOI: 10.5817/PC2022-2-218

The publication *Godfrey Pirotta: Il-Politika ta' Hajti*, which translates as 'Godfrey Pirotta: The Politics of My Life', is written in Maltese, a language derived from late medieval Siculo-Arabic and which evolved through a process of Latinization. Its morphology was significantly influenced by Romance languages, notably Italian, from which it has imported a considerable vocabulary (Aquilina, 1961). It replaced Italian as the official language of the courts in 1943; given that the language is a bit more than a century old, its literature is not yet rich, according to Boissevain (1965).

This book is far from being a typical biographical work on Godfrey Pirotta by Mario Thomas Vassallo, a former student of Pirotta, and now Head of the Department of Public Policy of which Pirotta was both a founding member and former head. This is the first extensive research on the political philosophy of Pirotta, a Professor of Government and Policy Studies, who helped pioneer the study of small states and public administration in Malta. He is currently chairperson of the Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies, ambassador, official historian for Malta's Parliament, and a former promoter of trade unionism and consumer rights. The book is written in the style of an extended interview, which at some stages recalls the Socratic dialogues.

Following a general introduction outlining the methodology used in this study – which provides a virtual template which maps the forma mentis of Pirotta – the book includes

twelve chapters, all of approximately equal length, on the following themes: (1) fear and courage, (2) ideological credo, (3) intellectual independence, (4) humility, (5) trust, (6) justice, (7) loyalty, (8) commitment to society, (9) humour, (10) learning, (11) the truth, and (12) love of life. The book tries to at one and the same time bring out how Pirotta strove to address the challenges of public life and his analytical approach to these challenges. References to his life experiences add support to his arguments. Key ideas addressed in this publication include the notion of the ideal society, the definition of power, and the individual's pursuit of truth. These themes – illustrated through initiatives and projects which Pirotta undertook throughout his life – emerge from the virtues and values of the political credo which guides his life principles.

The first chapter is not the story of the life of Pirotta from childhood to adulthood, but utilizes such a trajectory to chart the upbringing and social engagement which led him to conclude that overcoming fear is never a *fait accompli*: 'Nowadays I am no longer preoccupied that I will die, as in childhood, but I am afraid about how to die. More than courage, this is about the acceptance of situations which we have no control over – being as we are from a race which dies!' (p. 43). His ideological credo is grounded in the Christian faith and ironically this has often put him at odds with institutionalized religion. From an early age, he questioned the church as an institution and the source of private property. Pirotta is against war and pro peace, and pro the teachings included in the gospels. Yet his faith did not isolate him from other faiths. On the contrary, he engaged with all faiths in search of ideas which could help build bridges. Faith and the failings of society impressed upon him a sense of solidarity. He noted that some teachings of the church run contrary to the gospels. This led him to read religion and

politics, the gospels providing a source of inspiration on the notion of solidarity. His preferred model for society, notably in the world of work, is the co-operative model.

Politics and power can be a lethal alliance; Pirotta demonstrates a strong preoccupation with power and this is evident in his life history as well as his academic writings. He admits that he is frightened by the prospect of power and this is never far from his mind, whether when dealing with students, politicians or ordinary people. An Orwellian notion of the Left is Pirotta's political credo; in Malta this movement is a theist one: although including socialist secular ideas, it is rooted in the gospels. The third chapter highlights the need for intellectual independence. Such independence is mainly manifested through one's actions or proposals which are not linked with personal interests or the times when one needs a favour. Free from ties and vested interests, one's actions or proposals will be truly for the common good.

The call for humility is the subject of the fourth chapter. Pirotta illustrates a humanity-grounded political philosophy of humility through his encounter with Terry Waite – who was kidnapped in Lebanon when, as an envoy for the Church of England, he tried to secure the release of four hostages, and was then himself held captive for four years. A book about Waite's experiences in a prison cell in Beirut, *Taken on Trust* (2010), provides a preamble to the chapter addressing trust in people. Pirotta calls for respect, not submission, and to be true to facts. He argues that humility opens new opportunities and he makes a plea to protect the innocence of children, notably from manipulative media.

The opening sections of chapter five address political vision, trust and education, and give a critical reading of Mikiel Anton Vassalli (1764–1829) – a Maltese philosopher and writer, and author of the first Prot-

stant Gospels in Maltese – and George Orwell (1903–1950). Pirotta tackles topics such as knowledge and idealism, trust and power. He discusses trust in institutions and persons of trust in ministries and, whilst underlining the risks of trust, he argues that it is linked with valour. Having the courage to face people, believing in the hidden abilities that some may have, and being generous in helping them to succeed are characteristics of a courageous person. Cooperatives are an illustration of an infrastructure erected on trust; they are built on the mutual trust amongst its members. The notion of social justice is founded on the social teaching of the Catholic Church and socialism. It is intrinsically linked with solidarity and action. He calls for a revolution of conscience: 'Social justice requires revolution. Not an upside-down change which impinges on who is in power but a total change in the hearts of the people. We have to challenge the culture of competitiveness in which we have been formed/educated since we were toddlers. ...A certain degree of individualism is necessary because it encourages one to be creative' (pp. 178–179). Indifference undermines the creation of a fair community where those who can afford it help those who cannot; where despair exists, hope is strengthened.

The seventh chapter is about the virtue of loyalty. What matters is the leap from principle to action. Whilst noting the significance of loyalty within a given organization, loyalty in politics transcends the party. Pirotta refers to the role and the abuse of the establishment and addresses political ideology, arguing that loyalty may not be absolute. Some may question the significance of loyalty in an authentic politics for the people, the truth for party followers. For Pirotta, there are three degrees of loyalty, the highest being to the principle of truth. This is followed by loyalty to institutions/organizations which share the same ideals and loyalty to the people. For Pirotta

loyalty is synonymous with professionalism, the carrying out of your duties to the best of your abilities irrespective of whether your party is in government or not.

Commitment to citizen engagement is the main theme of the following chapter. Pirotta perceives the civic engagement of citizens not as some form of Cinderella story; he believes in the effective, tangible engagement of various publics, whether students, people with disabilities, or trade unions. He demonstrates this through a number of case studies which includes support for the church in Malta. The chapter on humour is about political philosophy as much as it is a biographical note. A natural sense of humour defines Pirotta the man. Humour is about truth; it is a form of tranquilizer. Indeed, humour that hurts those it is directed against is not humour but malice. Humour brings a smile to people's faces and lightens their hearts. According to Pirotta even political satire should not be malicious; while striking right at the heart of an issue, it should never target individuals. When hate or an attempt to provoke hate is at the heart of humour or satire, for Pirotta the boundaries of human decency have been breached. Alfred Sant, one of his friends, who later became Prime Minister of Malta and is currently a Member of the European Parliament, recounts a prank he and others played on Pirotta and notes how 'extremely impressed by how Godfrey took the whole joke in his stride' (Sant, 2021, p. 207). At another point Sant also describes Pirotta 'as an earnest and methodical scholar' (Sant, 2021, p. 115).

Politics is an art and a science. The ninth chapter is dedicated to learning. It traces the rationale and the effective commitment behind Pirotta's ground-breaking contribution in establishing politics as an academic discipline at the University of Malta. Such a contribution has to be read in the context of the tribal, often primitive, politics in Mal-

ta as practiced by the two main rival political parties which have dominated the parliament since it was first established. Although in persuasive politics, the emotional beats the rational, politics as a scientific discipline is rational rather than emotional.

The penultimate chapter is on truth. Pirotta's political philosophy is a never-ending quest to attain the truth. Truth is the beacon for a politics for all and the cornerstone of a materially and spiritually healthy society and its good governance. He stresses the distinction between manipulation and truth; truth is subject to no-one's monopoly. Intention and action, and silence and reflection, are important for the pursuit of truth. Whilst Malta's gaining of independence was a moment of truth, becoming a republic free from any foreign military presence was the ultimate call of the Maltese nation.

The book concludes with Pirotta's essential fulcrum, his love of life – love life and love people. The beauty of life emerges from the struggle between good and evil. He is an idealist and stresses the importance of utopia. Yet, he provides sensible interpretations for his utopian social ideals: 'Solidarity between us is crucial to support one another, give weight to who is suffering and offer hope to those who have started giving up in the unbridled race of life. As we expect by right to be helped when required and not be abandoned, likewise we have the revered duty that we do not shy away when others need us. This is the basis of human solidarity that, after all, is the pivot of every civilized society' (p. 355).

Godfrey Pirotta: Il-Politika ta' Ħajti is an exploration of the theoretical and pragmatic dynamics of Pirotta's thinking. The various chapters reveal how he articulated, conveyed and realized politics in life through values which promote humanity; human dignity and solidarity are the ultimate aim of politics. His tertiary education at the Universities of Ox-

ford, Reading and Bath and his activism in his socio-political environment are the canvas on which his philosophy and ideology are explored and critically analyzed. Mostly completed by the seventieth birthday of Pirotta – in the year when he retired from his academic post at the Department of Public Policy of the University of Malta – this publication can be read as a Festschrift authored by one of his disciples and the current head of the same department. Given the impeccable Maltese used in this publication, this book will further prove to be in the future a standalone piece of scientific literature in this language of Semitic origin.

References:

- Aquilina, J. (1961). *Papers in Maltese Linguistics*. Valletta: Royal University of Malta.
- Boissevain, J. (1965). *Saints and Fireworks: Religion and politics in rural Malta*. London: The Anthlone Press.
- Sant, A. (2021). *Confessions of a European Maltese, The Middle Years 1975–1992*. Malta: SKS Publications.
- Waite, T. (2010). *Taken on Trust*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Lino Bianco
Ambassador of Malta to Romania
and the Republic of Moldova
Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs,
Valletta, Malta