

TIME ECHOES: POLITICAL LESSONS FROM THE PRE-MODERN WORLD

Vladimir N. Cvetković, *Sociology of Politics II: Pre-Modern Political Communities – values, institutions, actors* [Sociologija politike (knjiga druga): Predmoderne političke zajednice – vrednosti, institucije i akteri], Belgrade, Faculty of Security Studies and Čigoja, 2023, pp. 458.

The book *Sociology of Politics II: Pre-Modern Political Communities – values, institutions, actors*, published in Serbian language, in 2023, represents a new contribution to the complex mosaic of thinking about the “political” – its processes, formations, actorhood – within the rich opus of work by Prof. Dr. Vladimir N. Cvetković of the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Security Studies. He undertakes a challenging yet necessary intellectual endeavor – to think historically and sociologically about the formation of political communities in the epochs preceding modernity. Embracing both the sterile abstractions of formal theory and the redundancy of mere factual chronology, the book navigates between philosophical reflection and historical narrative, offering a vision of political life as simultaneously material and symbolic, contingent and structured, empirical and conceptual.

This dual commitment is made explicit from the very first pages, where Cvetković introduces the metaphorical framework of “Babylon” and “Athens”, two approaches of knowing that complements and reinforce each other, offering a more holistic understanding. The former, marked by detailed recording and practical experience, evokes the richness of civilizational memory, the cataloging of institutional forms, and the patient collection of empirical facts. The latter, more abstract and speculative, speaks to the construction of concepts, theoretical models, and the pursuit of principles that give meaning to political phenomena. For Cvetković, these are not mutually exclusive approaches, but two necessary poles of any serious inquiry into the history of political life. In this spirit, the book reveals a thoughtful intertwining of case studies and conceptual reflections.

At its core, *Sociology of Politics II* is concerned with the genesis and development of pre-modern political communities; how they came into being, by what values they were governed, through which institutions they acquired

permanence, and by whose actions they were shaped. But the book does more than simply chart the succession of empires, kingdoms, and republics. It asks fundamental questions: What constitutes legitimate authority? How are communities held together? What roles do religion, myth, and tradition play in stabilizing – or disrupting – political order? And crucially, what is the relationship between the historical particularity of political forms and the universalizing tendencies of sociological explanation?

Rather than offering a linear history, Cvetković constructs a conceptual cartography. The chapters move geographically and temporally, from the city-states of Mesopotamia to the bureaucracies of imperial China, from the democratic experiments of classical Greece to the hierarchical sacred monarchies of the medieval Christian and Islamic worlds. Each political form is examined not as a static entity, but as a dynamic articulation of values, institutions, and actors situated within specific historical constellations.

One of the book's most compelling aspects is its refusal to idealize any single model of political life. The *polis* is not elevated over the empire, nor is theocratic order dismissed as irrational. Instead, Cvetković invites the reader to consider each system on its own terms: What conditions enabled its emergence? What internal contradictions marked its trajectory? How did it respond to the perennial challenges of legitimacy, succession, coercion, and belief? By doing so, he resists the teleological impulse that often distorts sociological accounts of political development – a tendency to view the modern liberal state as the inevitable endpoint of history.

The book's methodological sophistication is matched by its intellectual humility. Cvetković is acutely aware of the epistemological limits of social science. The author repeatedly reminds the reader that historical interpretation is shaped by the theoretical lenses through which we view the past. Every sociological theory, he argues, does more than interpret data – it selects, frames, and even constructs what counts as relevant data. Thus, the historian or sociologist cannot be a neutral observer; interpretation is always situated, and the facts themselves are never innocent. This does not lead the author into relativism or cynicism, but to a careful and reflective mode of scholarship, where knowledge is pursued with both rigor and a keen awareness of its contingencies.

The prose is dense, often philosophical, and occasionally elliptical, but always anchored in a deep engagement with both classical and contemporary thought. The influence of authors such as Braudel (1990), Weber (1921), and Voegelin (1956–1987) can be felt throughout, but they are never invoked uncritically. Rather, they serve as interlocutors in a broader conversation about the meaning of politics, the role of history, and the fragile architecture of human communities.

Cvetković is particularly attuned to the spiritual and symbolic dimensions of political life. Unlike many sociologists who treat religion as a mere superstructure or instrument of ideology, he sees in the sacred a constitutive force in the shaping of collective identity and authority. From the divine kingship of Egypt and the ritual power of Chinese emperors, to the complex entanglements of church and state in Byzantium and the Holy Roman Empire, the book traces how transcendent claims were translated into institutional permanence. Yet, this is not an exercise in metaphysical speculation. The sacred is understood in sociological terms – as a generator of legitimacy, a mechanism of cohesion, and a source of meaning that undergirds the often-violent machinery of governance.

While the empirical range of the book is impressive, stretching across continents and millennia, it remains unified by a consistent theoretical impulse. The author is not merely recounting the past; he is excavating the political logic embedded in civilizational forms. His goal is not to impose a theory onto history, but to allow theory to emerge from historical understanding. In doing so, he offers a kind of sociological hermeneutics, an interpretative strategy that reads political formations as texts, revealing their underlying structures, tensions, and aspirations.

Certainly, the book is not without its methodological challenges and limitations. Its theoretical density and lack of explicit engagement with contemporary debates in critical theory (Cox 1981; Marcuse 1991), gender studies (Mouffe 2000), or postcolonial (Said 1978) thought may leave some readers wanting. One of them is an author of this book review, whose research interests lie in the field of international law, as well as normative and critical legal theory. In that spirit, it is hoped that the next volume in the *Sociology of Politics* book series will be open to slightly different (theoretical) perspectives on the sustainability of nation-states as such, as well as on the roles, strengths and limitations of the idea of an international order or community. Moreover, the breadth of coverage occasionally comes at the expense of depth; certain chapters – particularly those dealing with non-Western civilizations – might have benefited from closer engagement with indigenous sources or recent historiography. Yet these are not failings so much as invitations for further inquiry. The book does not pretend to be exhaustive, but to provoke thought, to model a mode of inquiry that is as attentive to historical detail as it is to conceptual clarity.

In a time when political discourse is increasingly flattened by ideological polemic or technocratic reductionism, Cvetković's book offers a salutary reminder that political life is not reducible to governance or policy. It is a complex and symbolically charged field of action, grounded in myth, ritual, belief, and power. This book does not offer easy answers, nor does it peddle in

predictions. What it does offer is something far more valuable: a disciplined meditation on the historical foundations of our political being.

Vladimir N. Cvetković's work stands as a compelling contribution to historical sociology and political theory. It challenges the reader to think more deeply, more historically, and more reflectively about the forms of life we call political. It is a book that rewards slow reading, and one that invites ongoing dialogue. In bridging Babylon and Athens, it affirms that political knowledge must be both rooted and reflective, particular and universal, empirical and philosophical. In that delicate balance lies not only the strength of this book, but the promise of sociology itself.

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