

## Nordicum-Mediterraneum

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Francesco Giacomantonio, *Sociologia dell'agire politico* (Rome: Studium, 2014)

[Book review](#) [Arendt](#), [Bauman](#), [Habermas](#), [Marcuse](#), [Philosophy](#), [Politics](#), [imagination](#), [sociology](#), [Žižek](#) [Valeria Ottonelli](#)

In his recently published *Sociologia dell'agire politico* (Sociology of Political Action) Francesco Giacomantonio focuses on the material and cultural conditions that are adversely affecting the possibility for effective political action, where the latter is broadly understood as “the set of all the activities that influence politics or have political repercussions” (16). Notwithstanding the book’s title, in fact, its main concern does not appear to be the study of political action itself, but rather a reflection on the nature and causes of its current crisis.

Giacomantonio understands the analysis undertaken in the book as an exercise in “theoretical sociology”, meaning by this that he does not engage directly with the sociological facts at stake, but tries instead to reconstruct the conceptual coordinates through which such phenomena can be understood and analysed. The central part of the book is devoted to the reconstruction of three leading paradigms that have had an enormous influence on the debate about the sociological conditions in which political action takes place in our societies, as they are expounded in the works of Zygmunt Bauman, Jürgen Habermas and Slavoj Žižek.

Bauman’s account is presented by Giacomantonio as the most “apocalyptic” of the three; its dismal description of the “liquid society” cannot be redeemed by the counter-measures Bauman advocates, such as the appeal to personal responsibility and the re-establishment of a public agora, which appear to be vacuous and unfeasible. A more optimistic outlook, Giacomantonio points out, is the one proposed by Habermas. Even if Habermas insists on the depoliticization of the public sphere brought about by late capitalism and on the technocratic turn of the liberal state, his theory of democracy also points to the communicative resources that can still be mobilized in our societies. Giacomantonio also pauses to consider how Habermas tackles the challenge of multiculturalism and the role of religion in the public sphere. Žižek’s position, finally, is presented as a bold call for radical social change and the re-thinking of the very conceptual landscape on which our politics is taking place. Giacomantonio stresses the importance of Žižek’s reflection on the subject, his appeal to the re-politicization of the economic sphere, and his critique of the neo-liberal order.

In the final part of the book the author draws from the works of the authors discussed in the previous chapters in order to summarize the major sources of the crisis of political action in our societies. The main focus, here, is on the erosion of a shared social space, and of the common meanings and practices that are needed for individual action to have content and purpose, thus creating a world of “freedom without autonomy” (89). The erosion of a shared social space is connected to the privatization of the public sphere, which leaves individuals isolated, vulnerable, and voiceless, as public intellectuals are relinquishing their role and the leading cultural trends promote what Marcuse would have called a “closing of the universe of discourse” (94). Giacomantonio does not seem to have any ready solutions to this predicament; however, he

suggests that a good starting point might consist in the rejection of radical individualism, by “freeing ourselves from egocentrism and utilitarianism” and learning “to be better rather than to have the best” (102). The closing pages of the book also remind us of the importance of imagination in politics, because only through imagination we can open the door to moral, cultural and social progress.

Giacomantonio’s reconstruction of the thought of Bauman’s, Hayek’s and Žižek is clear and accurate (only a couple of reservations might be raised, about the idea that Žižek can be taken as “last true heir” of the tradition of the Frankfurt School (84), and what I believe to be an overstatement of the role of religion in Habermas’s account of cohesion in contemporary societies (61-2)). Moreover, Giacomantonio’s choice of Habermas, Žižek and Bauman as guiding references for the critical analysis developed in the book is considered and fruitful; there is no doubt that these three authors deserve attention by whoever wants to reflect on the sociological conditions in which political action takes place in our societies.

Still, Giacomantonio’s way of tackling the issue of political agency seems to be somehow off-target. His analysis throughout the book focuses on the social processes that are depriving members of contemporary societies of the psychological and social resources that are needed for individual action to be meaningful, effective and genuinely free. There is no doubt that the erosion of these preconditions for successful individual action is also affecting the chances for constructive political engagement. However, in democratic politics – and indeed, we might argue with Arendt and other eminent thinkers of our tradition, in any kind of politics – political action is always and essentially the product of joint or collective action, rather than individual action. The crisis of politics in our time concerns above all the constitution and the operation of collective political subjects, and focusing on the sociology of individual action, like Giacomantonio does, tends to obscure this important fact about the ontology and the sociology of politics.

Giacomantonio’s discussion, then, should be taken as a useful – indeed, necessary – preliminary analysis of the sociological conditions that we need to consider when thinking on the possibility of political action. The study of the modes and sources of present and future political action needs to come next, and should have in view collective action as an essential element of politics.