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Vittorio Bufacchi. "Why Cicero Matters"

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See table of contents

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Vittorio Bufacchi. *Why Cicero Matters*. Bloomsbury 2023. 175 pp. $131.50 USD (Hardcover 9781350376670); $39.50 USD (Paperback 9781350376687).

Historical figures can be idols or exemplars. The idol is the result of the reduction of something complex to an image (the Greek prefix id- (ΓΙΔ) means image, and it is the same as in ideology). As in the religious sphere, the idol demands sole adoration and reverence, to occupy all the spaces of our lives, and to be placed before any experience and value. Why the idol matters to us is secondary; idolatry is all about why we matter to the idol. Conversely, the exemplar is the result of embracing the complexity of historical figures because, in this way, they speak to us today; they indicate behavioral patterns and ideas that matter to us and our societies. Exemplars do not demand forced obedience, but they elicit free responses by which we introduce them to our reality and, sometimes, transform it accordingly. Vittorio Buffacchi's book convincingly shows that the Roman statesman and philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero constitutes an exemplar for 21st-century people and, in this sense, why Cicero matters.

Considering the numerous existing studies on Cicero, including biographies, monographs on his philosophical teachings, and various articles, is there a need for a new book on Cicero? If so, why? Buffacchi explains in the Introduction: 'This book is not about understanding Cicero in his historical, intellectual or philosophical context … Instead, this book is written from the point of view of the twenty-first century … This book is for readers who, like me, are concerned about the current state of affairs in global politics, where authoritarian far-right populists are all rallying against the foundation of our democratic practice'(14). Cicero is a secret ingredient in the antidote to cure poisoned liberal democracies. In his time, Cicero defended the Roman Republic against the authoritarian tendencies of despots and emperors. Likewise, Cicero can help us today to rediscover lost lessons and points of view to (re)understand what we, as citizens, might, and should do. Before engaging with the content directly, I want to offer a methodological and aesthetic reason as to why Buffacchi's book deserves to be read.

Scholars focusing on the crisis of liberal democracies are often looking for different perspectives. Biodiversity of ideas is the key to solving any kind of crisis. The alternatives are often searched horizontally: if our Western liberal democracies are in crisis, we should look at other (non-Western) political systems or lifestyles. While this way can be fruitful and generative, another road can be taken. The biodiversity of ideas can be reached vertically when we look back

at the complexity of the history of ideas and find old-new ideas to address contemporary problems. Buffacchi's book goes back vertically into Western history and brings Cicero with him on his way back. Here, the aesthetic reason also comes into play. Buffacchi deeply admires Cicero, and he tries to translate not only the admiration, but also the reasons behind it in the book. In this way, the text has traits of historical romance, where Cicero and his ideas are the heroes without being blindly idolized. The reader is caught in the reading, which might be the added value of this book with respect to the other (monumental and extensively documented) biographies and monographs.

The lenses through which Buffacchi addresses Cicero's life and thinking are double. Firstly, we find Cicero as a philosopher who was forced to retire from active political life and wrote about political, moral, social, and philosophical issues. In this respect, the book contains chapters devoted to Cicero's view on the Roman Republic, citizenship, duties, common good, respect for old age, and so on. Secondly, we see Cicero's political figure opposed to another political figure of those times, Julius Cesar. The latter represents the tendency to authoritarianism, concentration of power, and search for glory. The former stand against this corrupted view of political life by praising democracy, political debates, civic friendship, costumes, and virtues such as honesty and justice. As Buffacchi explains, the two lenses are part of the same pair of glasses when it comes to Cicero: '[he] was not simply an outstanding philosopher and politician; he was a better philosopher because of his experience in politics, and his political leadership was enlightened by his philosophical interest' (36). Cicero is an exemplar for contemporary (academic) philosophers who are progressively detaching from public life and seeking refuge in their citadels-bubbles (universities, peer-reviewed journals) as well as to those politicians who dismiss philosophical wisdom as wishful thinking, completely useless for contemporary competitive democracies that looks more like a marketplace (political parties as sellers, citizens as consumers).

I believe the most convincing argument for showing that Cicero matters today is exposed in chapter 3, where Buffacchi explores the concept of (Civic) Republicanism as a response to the populist and authoritarian threats to contemporary liberal democracies. Liberalism fails in addressing these issues because it conceives citizens as individuals with rights. While this is true, 'the Republican conception of politics wants to facilitate interdependent, equal citizens to cooperate and realize the common good. Essentially, Civic Republicanism is a set of institutions that enables citizens to shape their collective destiny through political participation, deliberation and collective decision making, and citizenship is at the heart of it' (64). The idea that citizens have

rights but also duties fits perfectly with Cicero's ethical view grounded on *officiis*, i.e., duties. What kind of duties did Cicero have in mind? Buffacchi described some of them—honesty as the duty to truth, justice as the duty to maintain social order—but the common denominator is the idea of common good. Both citizens and politicians should prioritize the good of the community over their own desires and aims. The former should follow the imperative of political participation. Following the example of Cicero's political career, the latter should make proposals (even during electoral campaigns) related not only to a part of the citizens but to the good of everyone (the common good). In my view, this is an important (and forgotten) lesson that goes beyond the political sphere. Today, there is a widespread fascination with the idea that we need one person in charge or as a problem solver. This can be seen in the diffusion of leadership theories in economics, management, education, etc. Cicero and Buffacchi (jointly) remind us that it is foolish and dangerous to seek more Cesars—i.e., more exceptional human beings that alone can save the world—and that we should rather take our responsibilities and be part of the decision-making in politics and beyond. The common good can be reached if and only if it becomes part of everyone's intentions and actions, even when it is costly and risky. Cicero's public and private activity as a philosopher-politician should inspire us to avoid the most dangerous risk for democracies, meaning citizens' indifference. Civic Republicanism is an antidote to indifference and a powerful call to everyone to make a difference.

Cicero is an exemplar, not an idol. Buffacchi makes it clear when he stresses some shortcomings of Cicero's life and ideas. One is his praise for equality in a republican wake. Cicero, who had harsh words for the masses (plebs), advocated for a formal (rights and duties) rather than a substantial (resources, income, living conditions) one. As Buffacchi argues, Cicero 'seemed to be almost uninterested in economic analysis, or even political economy' (120). I would add that Cicero did not go beyond his time when he saw a trade-off between profit and the common good. For him, as for all the Romans, the market is a zero-sum game. My profit is your losses; Cicero's profit is something subtracted from the common good of Rome. Buffacchi provides a passage where this is very clear: 'For a man to take something from his neighbour and to profit by his neighbour's loss is more contrary to Nature than is death or poverty' (58). This is contrary to the basic understanding of Political Economy, where market is conceived as a positive sum game (I might have a bigger profit than yours, but, at the end of the day, we are better off). Buffacchi thinks that Cicero's *homo philosophicus* can contrast the contemporary success of *homo oeconomicus*. I

do agree to some extent, but I am not fully convinced as I think that free markets can still play a role in a Republican view of society. Differently from idols, exemplars leave room for generative disagreement between their followers. Buffacchi's Cicero became my Cicero and the Cicero of all the readers of this book. In the end, this is what really matters.

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