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BOOK REVIEW

Pasi Ihalainen, Rosario López, Kari Palonen, and Henk te Velde. *The Figure of the Politician in Modern and Contemporary Europe*. Berghahn Books, 2025.

Khadija Ismail*

The Figure of the Politician in Modern and Contemporary Europe (2025) is an edited volume by Pasi Ihalainen, Rosario López, Kari Palonen, and Henk te Velde. The editors are the prominent scholars of political history, conceptual history, and parliamentary studies. Their collective work focuses on how political concepts evolve over time and how representative democracy is understood in different European contexts. It is a significant book for people studying political history, conceptual history, and democratic studies which focuses on the idea of a politician that has changed in Europe since the late 1700s. Instead of just talking about famous leaders, the authors look at how people have thought about, described, criticized, and accepted politicians in different parts of Europe.

The introduction of the book provides the insights on the evolution of modern politics and democratic institutions. For a long time in Europe, politicians have often been seen as suspicious, self-serving, and pursuing personal interests rather than serving the public good. The editors underline the ambiguous role of the politicians and how they are necessary but mistrusted at the same time. Democratic government could not function without political representatives able to negotiate competing interests and making collective decisions.

The first chapter, by Kari Palonen, focuses on the professionalization of politics. Palonen highlights how political activity slowly turned into a

* Ms. Khadija Ismail is a MS Scholar at the Area Study Centre for Europe, University of Karachi. Email: khadija.sorathia@gmail.com.

specific job as parliaments expanded across Europe. He emphasized that the emergence of modern representative government altered politics into a distinct field requiring specific skills, experience, and expertise. This professionalization enhanced political effectiveness but also contributed to public concerns about the emergence of a detached political class.

Following chapters compare how politicians were seen in different European countries by drawing the comparison between the “politician” and the “statesman” during the revolutionary era in Britain, France, Sweden, and the Netherlands. The authors show that while statesmen were often praised for their wisdom and devotion, the politicians were often connected with party conflict, ambition, and personal interest. This difference reveals the constant tension between idealized and practical forms of political leadership.

One of the chapters of the book highlighted the rise of professional politicians in Britain, France, Germany, and the Netherlands in the late 1800s and early 1900s. As political parties grew and more people voted, there were new chances for political careers raising concerns regarding political opportunism. The authors also examine how politicians sought legitimacy through appeals to principles, expertise, and public service and analyze critiques of politicians from intellectuals, activists, and technocrats who questioned the value of partisan politics. These discussions reveal the ongoing struggle to define the proper role of politicians within modern democratic societies.

The last chapters of the book widen the focus by looking at politicians in supranational context, especially within European organizations. The authors investigate how political representation has evolved beyond the nation-state and how politicians have adapted to the challenges of European integration and globalization.

The Figure of the Politician in Modern and Contemporary Europe is an insightful take on modern political history. Instead of just looking at individual politicians, the authors dig into the wider historical meanings linked to political leadership. This perspective allows readers to understand how political roles and expectations have evolved over time. By looking at how Europeans have understood and argued about the role of politicians for over two centuries, the book offers new understanding of how

representative democracy grew. The authors evidently show that politicians have always been in a confusing spot in public life, praised for leading but also criticized for pursuing self-interest. The book's comparative scope and emphasis on conceptual history make it a valuable resource for scholars of political science, history, European studies, and democratic theory. At a time when public trust in politicians remains a major concern across many democracies, this book provides important historical background for understanding contemporary debates about political representation and leadership. Overall, *The Figure of the Politician in Modern and Contemporary Europe* is a thought-provoking and highly recommended book that provides fresh perspectives on the central figures of modern democratic politics.