

REVIEW

Vilfredo Pareto: Advocate of the Right Middle Path**ALASDAIR MARSHALL**

G. Barbieri, *An Introduction to Pareto's Social and Political Thought* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2025)

The last few years have witnessed a marked revival of interest in Pareto scholarship (see Adair-Toteff (ed.) 2024). One prominent contributor to the revival is Giovanni Barbieri, political sociologist at the University of Perugia and creator of a new Paretian Network website¹ intended to bring interested scholars together. Barbieri's recent work on Pareto aligns to his broader research interest into how recent populist waves manifest a deep underlying fault line between peoples and their elites. The present review of his (2025) book *Introduction to Pareto's Social and Political Thought* applauds its timely engagement with Pareto's living legacy, emphasising especially how it addresses today's need for more and better sociological theory for making sense of mounting pressure along elite versus non-elite fault lines.

The book's focus is not itself upon contemporary application—as per my own new book on Paretian analysis of contemporary political polarisation (Marshall, 2025). Rather it offers the reader a solid introduction to the man, to how his key ideas evolved through his economic and (mostly political) sociological writings, and to how these ideas continue to resonate within contemporary academic literatures. Synthesising these concerns throughout, Barbieri's monograph provides arguably the best literary enticement to dive into the Paretian sociological imagination that has so far been written for the new Pareto revival.

What distinguishes the book most of all is the central guiderail it provides, inviting us to approach Pareto as an advocate of something called the '*right middle path*'. To do so, Barbieri argues, is to come to know the basic problem-solutions frame through which Pareto saw the world as both economist and sociologist. In the present review I will try to direct the reader's critical interest towards what makes this concept fascinating yet highly problematic in various respects.

On preliminary inspection of the book, and seeing what its six chapters promise, seasoned Pareto academics may quickly discern (as the author of the present review did) that Barbieri's book design is sensitive to a particular enduring problem with the voluminous secondary literature on Pareto's sociology; namely that it has always struggled to carry the reader through the theory's core meanings and contemporary implications without getting bogged down in stale arguments over various odd theoretical abstractions which Pareto hoped would set the emerging discipline of sociology off on a scientific footing, but which didn't catch on at all. Instead, Barbieri's book offers new readers a distinctive fast track towards focused understanding of core ideas and why they matter. More particularly, Pareto's concept of 'social equilibrium' gets pushed to the fore as the foundation for theorising him as an advocate of the right middle path.

Like all models, Pareto's conception of social equilibrium reduces complexity to achieve analytical economy. Yet it also makes a bold theoretical claim to match complexity, insofar as the countervailing social forces that constitute the social system as an equilibrium—whether stable or unstable, static or

dynamic—are understood to operate across economy, polity and culture more-or-less simultaneously, thereby resisting conventional reductionist modes of analysis. Set within this context of social equilibrium, the right middle path becomes an abstract ideal—a simultaneously economic, political and more broadly cultural formula for social peace and stability in which these countervailing social forces balance and dampen one another before they can perturb equilibrium to produce extreme political and economic outcomes.

It follows that we might value the right middle path as a simple heuristic for making subjective judgments about escalating problems which have a complex metapolitical character, or as a guide to evidence-based statecraft which aspires to take a whole-of-society use of things. The latter view obviously requires validating Pareto's equilibrium model through empirical specification and measurement of the constituent social forces. While we should certainly value Barbieri's distinctive approach to reading Pareto for centring our attention upon the ideal itself, and for steering Pareto scholarship to debate its use for various purposes and at all levels of scale, in this review I will nonetheless draw on those of Pareto's own ideas which should lead us to question our competency to ever find and follow the right middle path.

There are six chapters. Barbieri's introductory chapter surveys Pareto's sociology and its legacy, highlighting key reasons for reading Pareto today while also offering valuable guidance on how to approach his work. Central to this discussion is Pareto's longest and most systematic sociological text, the *Treatise on General Sociology*. This was originally written during the First World War. It was published in English years later (see Pareto, 1935) and can be accessed today at www.archive.org. Barbieri presents this work as methodologically ambitious yet stylistically opaque. Like most other Pareto commentators, he regards it as encumbered by disorganisation, proliferating binary schemes, and concepts—most notably residues and derivations—that resist straightforward empirical application. Nevertheless, Barbieri points out that these difficulties do not undermine Pareto's achievement as a sociologist whose work succeeds by capturing the enormous political and economic significance of the 'emotions'—although he reminds us that Pareto preferred to use the word 'sentiments' instead.

This view of social system as an arena where emotions slosh around generating misbehaviour and conflict, is indeed very useful for positioning the reader at the centre of what Pareto's sociology is most fundamentally all about—and I would go further and add that its emphasis on emotional incontinence at grand social scale is ultimately what qualifies it as tragic social realism. Barbieri explains that his defence of Pareto as a sociologist of the emotions rests on a close re-reading that treats his residues not as rigid classifications but as heuristic devices which can attune us, if we let them, to key psycho-social factors at play within the social system.

More specifically, while Pareto's '*class one residues*' correspond to the logics of sentiment that provide behavioural animus for *foxes* in the political elites and for *speculators* in the economic elites, the '*class two residues*' correspond to logics of sentiment that animate *lions* in the political elites and *rentiers* in the economic elites. For Pareto, the class one residues tend to dominate atop social structure while the class two residues tend to persist towards the bottom. Readers are encouraged to persist through these awkward conceptual structures linking the emotions to social structure and hierarchy, for what ultimately emerges, Barbieri argues, is a plausible and surprisingly simple equilibrium model for understanding the dynamics of highly complex societies, with the balance of the class one and class two residues always at the centre of it all.

Excesses of class one residues in the elites may perturb social equilibrium by generating political and economic behaviours which provoke violent forces of re-equilibration—animated of course by leonine public sentiment (Pareto's class two residues). Only by reading Pareto as a conflict theorist for whom social equilibrium dynamics resolve down into counter-balancing class one and class two residues, then, can we fully appreciate Barbieri's interpretation of Pareto as an advocate of the stabilising principle of elite stewardship he calls the right middle path. Finding and following the path would therefore seem to require quite precise technical understanding of these two general residue classes, their referent objects, and associated social harms.

Notably this residue-balanced view of the right middle path aligns directly with Pareto's implicit normative preference for 'open elites' as discussed by Marshall (2025). Pareto's descriptive theory of elite circulation focuses on the extent to which elite-concentrating class one residues and non-elite concentrating class two residues can circulate together and counterbalance one another within the lower and middle elite echelons. While more *foxes* and *speculators* boost adaptivity for prosperous times, more *lions* and *rentiers* boost adaptivity for austerity. Elite openness enables ongoing adaptation in both directions, while also ensuring a continual flow of talent into the elites from below. Hence it becomes hard to regard substantial measures of elite openness as anything other than desirable for almost all societies and at almost all times. Yet this normative view of Pareto merely specifies elite characteristics which favour alignment of spontaneous elite order to the right middle path—which is very different to specifying how the path itself might translate into economic and political formulae of elite stewardship for any given moment in the life of a society.

Chapter two of Barbieri's book then offers a detailed and carefully contextualised reconstruction of Pareto's intellectual formation, convincingly challenging the conventional division drawn between 'Pareto the economist' and 'Pareto the sociologist'. Through a rich biographical narrative, the chapter demonstrates how Pareto's early experiences as an engineer, manager, and public intellectual in post-unification Italy informed his lifelong concern with social equilibrium, elite institutional design, and the unintended consequences of sentiment-driven collective action. Of particular relevance to *Cosmos + Taxis* is the emphasis placed on Pareto's liberal commitments, methodological realism, and scepticism toward constructivist political projects, especially state interventionism, protectionism, and militarism—all of which can support us to form our impressions of the Paretian right middle path in various respects. Perhaps what really stands out about this chapter, though, is how brilliantly it integrates Pareto's key writings into its biographical discussions—and that these discussions offer valuable detail not easily found elsewhere.

Chapter three provides the conceptual core of the book, offering a systematic reconstruction of Pareto's *Treatise* through its theory of action, of social equilibrium dynamics, and of the roles and limitations of social science. Barbieri carefully explicates Pareto's logico-experimental method and his insistence on studying society as a complex system irreducible to individual intentions—a stance closely aligned with *Cosmos + Taxis*' interest in emergent order and the methodological realism of the Aristotelian tradition. The extended discussion of logical and non-logical actions is particularly effective in showing how Pareto anticipates later debates in social epistemology, rationality, the limits of constructivist reason, and of course the sociology of the emotions which has become a subject of great interest today. Now that it has become commonplace to view emotions as structurally shaped, socially performed, and theoretically central to understanding human behaviour, the to-ing and fro-ing of the class one and class two residues in the social system as Pareto described it should command much more attention today—and Barbieri's chapter provides excellent orientation.

A careful and largely sympathetic reconstruction of Pareto's analysis of economic and political systems then follows in chapter four—supported by intensive reference to key economic and sociological texts and once more offering rich detail. Emphasis is now placed on elite theory and its Machiavellian lineage—notably including valuable scholarship which situates Pareto within the Machiavellian realist tradition. Also impressive is where the chapter discusses Pareto's distinctions between *speculators* and *rentiers*, emphasising the contributions of both to economic order and the associated need for balance—as reveals the right middle path in its economic aspect. The chapter then turns attention from economic to political elites. Now highlighting the social importance of the class one and class two residues in terms of elite circulation and how they shape strategic elite deployments of force and persuasion, Barbieri convincingly shows how Pareto sought to explain political stability and change in terms of sentiment-driven strategic preferences for ruling over the masses that are best balanced out by taking the right middle path.

Chapter five turns attention to Pareto's theory of *demagogic plutocracy*, whose most systematic and mature formulation appears in his *Transformation of Democracy* writings (see Pareto, 1984). Written in the years immediately preceding his death in 1923, these texts describe the ruling systems of fledgling liberal

democracy then prevalent across Europe as ones in which real power is held by wealthy elites—*speculator-plutocrats*—who secure their dominance by mobilising mass emotions through popular slogans and appeals. Pareto interpreted fascism as an emerging reaction to the impending exhaustion of demagogic plutocracy. While Barbieri emphasises that Pareto remained, for a while at least, hopeful that fascism might remain liberal in its basic character, the view he formed of it through the lens of his theory of demagogic plutocracy is nonetheless one that envisioned some redirection of demagoguery by force-oriented elites, against demagoguery in its failing democratic form—thus preserving demagogic elite domination under a new political configuration.

In this way the chapter reveals the right middle path which Pareto envisioned for Europe of the early 1920s as offering temporary stability through an arrested transformation of democracy—a compromise between unpleasant options which recognises that history does not give us the emancipatory choice architectures which idealists of all kinds believe in. Here we are told that Pareto favoured a ‘soft Bonapartism’, albeit one which, as Barbieri clarifies at the chapter’s outset, had little to do with the version Mussolini went on to create after Pareto’s death. Directly addressing the vexed question of Pareto’s relationship to fascism and the extent to which his political sociology converged with the institutional trajectory of the new regime, the chapter reconstructs the evolution of Pareto’s judgments—from initial scepticism and irony, through guarded benevolence, to a cautious endorsement of Mussolini as a possible restorer of stable social equilibrium. This reconstruction avoids caricature and persuasively demonstrates that Pareto’s position was neither static nor reducible to ideological sympathy.

Of particular interest to *Cosmos + Taxis* readers, perhaps, is the chapter’s sustained emphasis on Pareto’s conception of political equilibrium as a shifting balance between force and consent, authority and liberty. The discussions of demagogic plutocracy, centrifugal and centripetal forces, and the limits of parliamentary governance, resonate strongly with classical liberal and Austrian concerns about institutional fragility under mass democracy. Pareto emerges here not as an apologist for dictatorship, but as a theorist of order confronting systemic disintegration.

Pareto’s seeming endorsement of a soft Bonapartist regime, showing us what right middle paths can look like, warts and all, is perhaps what should interest us most about this chapter. To reiterate, Pareto did not endorse dictatorship in an illiberal or totalitarian sense. He consistently warned against the abuse of force, ideological extremism, and the suppression of core freedoms (press, religion, teaching). His ideal regime resembles a Bonapartist model that preserves the *appearance* of popular consent, limits parliamentary power, relies on elite competence, and restores state authority—while remaining pragmatic, non-ideological, and ultimately compatible with liberal principles. Barbieri directs us to a key text by Losurdo (1993/2024) for more detailed reading of Pareto as a liberal-Bonapartist along these lines.

Chapter six then concludes the book by tracing the diverse and often unexpected afterlives of Pareto’s ideas across economics, psychology, sociology, and elite theory. The chapter very effectively demonstrates how Pareto’s insistence on observable behaviour, equilibrium, and systemic interdependence shaped later developments in rational choice and behavioural approaches, even where his broader sociology was set aside. The account of the Harvard Pareto Circle is especially illuminating, showing how general equilibrium concepts functioned as boundary objects capable of coordinating interdisciplinary inquiry without normative consensus. The later sections on the sociology of emotions and contemporary elite theory further underscore Pareto’s continuing relevance for analyses of political instability arising through elite versus non-elite polarisation.

Let me conclude with some final thoughts on Pareto’s right middle path. Pareto’s sociology offers a bleak historical pessimist vision of society as doomed to cycle endlessly through the same mistakes. It challenges liberal progressivism from a tragic realist view of history, of politics, of economics, of elites, of non-elites, indeed of mind itself—and all because the vulpine and leonine aspects of our natures keep messing up in the same old ways throughout history. Considered as a tool of predictive doomsaying for our own era, a direct comparison can be drawn with Peter Turchin’s contemporary *cliodynamics* social forecasting agenda. The big difference is that whereas Turchin forecasts impending social conflict using large

longitudinal datasets, Pareto relied mainly on history books and his faculty of pattern recognition when he forecasted political and economic trauma in Europe just over a century ago. Perhaps one day, big data analysis will finally succeed in collapsing multivariate realities far too complex for the individual mind to grasp into the class one and class two residues, revealing them as the key causal factors we need most of all for social forecasting. Accurate technical prescriptions of ‘right middle path’ for Paretian steering through changing times will then become calculable. And, who knows, maybe AI will use these gyroscopically to manage human affairs—working from the deeply Paretian insight that we are not ourselves capable because of our natures.

Until that day, though, we should remain extremely cautious over speculation regarding what Pareto’s ‘soft Bonapartism’—where elite stewardship purports to shepherd society along the right middle path—might look like. If attempted today, its central purpose would surely be to arbitrate some kind of elite versus counter-elite settlement to arrest political de-stabilisation into factional bipolarisation between elites and non-elites. We absolutely do need more and better theory to address this present crisis moment—and so we should thank Barbieri for running a golden thread through social equilibrium, right middle path and soft Bonapartism to complexify how we understand Pareto. My own view is that Pareto’s sociological framework lends itself to a vision of soft Bonapartist compromise in which elite circulation functions as the primary mechanism of control during periods of elite crisis. Tolstoy famously said that while everyone thinks of changing the world, no one thinks of changing themselves. That insight, applied to entire elites, does seem to give us a deeply Paretian view of what soft Bonapartism might most usefully try to achieve. Notice how this view stands in contrast with Gramscian Caesarism, where the decisive lever is the arbitration of class forces, and with Schmitt’s concept of commissarial dictatorship, where control is exercised through juridical exceptionalism. In the Paretian view, then, the focus should surely be on rebalancing the class one and class two residues within the elites so that they change normally with the times—as can mean many things, and as strongly implies political agendas of tolerance and pluralism.

When asking more precisely what Pareto’s right middle path might mean for any given economic and political moment, we should perhaps pause and attune to the concept’s productive ambiguity. What it might most usefully guide, I would suggest, is not attainment of that optimal political and economic balance to which it most directly refers, but rather restless critical thought about what such optimisation might mean amidst the relentless flux of complex social reality. There is a big difference between the two usages. While human societies will almost certainly never use Pareto’s right middle path to balance themselves, there are no limits to its academic use for detecting precarious imbalance in all sorts of political and economic phenomena—including those that purport to take the right middle path.

No Pareto-inspired design of government, law or policy for following the right middle path can be exempt from Pareto-inspired scrutiny. Pareto is well known for his mercilessness towards *all* ideological formulations for elite rule. He was a grand master of that Machiavellian critical wit which adroitly toggles its concerns between the truthfulness and the utility of every idea it contemplates—and which is therefore given to understand that no matter whether Bonapartism plays out as tragedy or as farce, it will always be someone’s demagogic manipulation as carries them in due course to that graveyard which Pareto famously said awaits all aristocracies. For elites in crisis perhaps the last thing they need is someone on a white horse professing Carlylean great man powers for overriding the elite foolishness of the age and making things great again—but if they can open themselves up to more metapolitical tolerance and pluralism then the solutions they really need may start to seed.

I strongly recommend Barbieri’s book. For readers of *Cosmos + Taxis*, his reading offers a timely and unsettling reminder that social order is rarely spontaneous, never secure, and only kept precariously stable amidst crisis through uneasy compromises which fallible and unreliable minds shaped by flawed human nature strike between liberty, authority, and elite restraint.

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NOTES

- 1 <https://paretiannetwork.ddns.net/>