

RETHINKING DESPOTISM

Classical Antiquity and Its Afterlives

INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM

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University of Cyprus · University Campus

Learning Resource Centre – Library “Stelios Ioannou” · Amphitheatre LRC 014

Organised by

Cyprus Academy of Sciences, Letters and Arts

Research Unit on the Reception of Greco-Roman Antiquity

Department of Social and Political Sciences

University of Cyprus

PROGRAMME

10.00–10.10 Welcome and Opening Remarks

SESSION I | Chair: Kyriakos Demetriou (University of Cyprus; Cyprus Academy)

- 10.10–10.50** **Christos Kyriacou** (University of Cyprus)
Spinoza on Natural Rights and Democracy
- Hugo Toudic** (Sorbonne University)
- 10.50–11.30** *From Ancient Tyranny to Modern Despotism: Montesquieu and the Institutionalization of Political Corruption*
- Mikko Tolonen** (University of Helsinki)
- 11.30–12.10** *The Changing Uses of Ancient Political Thought in Eighteenth-Century Anglo-Atlantic Writings on Monarchy*
- 12.10–12.30** **COFFEE BREAK**

SESSION II | Chair: Spyros Tegos (University of Crete)

- 12.30–13.10** **Tamás Demeter** (Hungarian Academy of Sciences)
Despotic Organisations: Hume on the Institutional Conditions of Inquiry
- Filimon Peonidis** (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki)
- 13.10–13.50** *Reactions to Despotism: Greek Arguments in Favour of Democracy*
- Panagiotis Christias** (University of Cyprus)
- 13.50–14.30** *On Tyranny 2.0*

ABSTRACTS

Christos Kyriacou

Spinoza on Natural Rights and Democracy

Spinoza in the *Ethics* and the *Theologico-Political Treatise* argues in favour of basic natural rights that ground democracy, such as the right to life and freedom of thought/expression. But there is an exegetical puzzle at the heart of his moral and political philosophy. On the one hand, he seems to endorse a Hobbesian conception of natural right, where everybody is entitled to what their individual power permits. On the other hand, he endorses natural rights, such as to life and freedom of expression/thought that constrain what our individual power permits. This creates an obvious puzzle about his conception of natural law and rights. Is he incoherent? Or is he a Hobbesian arguing for a conventionalist-positivist understanding of natural rights and law? Perhaps he is a Lockean about natural rights, conceiving them as a natural endowment by a Creator God?

I argue for an interpretation that restores exegetical coherence and explains how, although influenced by Hobbes' philosophy, Spinoza's rights are neither mere conventional positive law, nor theistic Lockean natural rights. Rather, Spinoza reconceptualizes the tradition of natural law and rights in a way that allows him to understand natural rights as self-evident basic moral truths (but not endowed to us in virtue of a personal, creator God as in Locke). It is in virtue of such basic moral truths that democracy is the best political system of governance.

Hugo Toudic

From Ancient Tyranny to Modern Despotism: Montesquieu and the Institutionalization of Political Corruption

Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* introduces despotism as a distinct form of government, irreducible to the tyranny inherited from classical political thought. This paper asks why Montesquieu needed a new concept at all: why could tyranny — the corruption of legitimate rule by a vicious ruler — not account for the political evil he sought to describe? I argue that Montesquieu's innovation lies in relocating the source of corruption from the ruler's character to the structure of government itself. Whereas ancient tyranny designates a reversible moral failing, located in a single man and correctable by a change of heart, despotism names an irreversible structural pathology: a regime whose very principle — fear — corrupts it "by its own nature." This shift allows Montesquieu to wage a double polemic, against Machiavellian statecraft and against the Enlightenment myth of 'enlightened despotism', both of which mistake a structural disease for a matter of will. I test this framework against Montesquieu's extended treatment of Russia, where Peter the Great's reforms illustrate the impossibility of returning to moderation once despotism has set in: "Moscovy would like to descend from its despotism, and cannot." Despotism, on this reading, is less a regime among others than the name Montesquieu gives to the political evil that tyranny, as an ancient and moralized category, could no longer capture.

Mikko Tolonen

The Changing Uses of Ancient Political Thought in Eighteenth-Century Anglo-Atlantic Writings on Monarchy

Ancient warnings about tyranny could support limited monarchy, constitutional balance and confidence in an elected executive. This paper argues that eighteenth-century uses of ancient sources changed the conditions under which political power was presented as protective. The decisive differences concerned the dangers identified, the people entitled to protection and the restraints attached to the authority offering it.

Using passage-level text reuse in ECCO and EEBO-TCP, alongside contextual reading, the paper examines arguments involving Mandeville, Hume, John Adams and Adam Ferguson. Hume's accounts of ancient civil conflict supplied evidence for defenders of established monarchy and for Adams's defence of reciprocal constitutional checks. Adams explicitly invoked Mandeville when questioning Polybius's charitable account of human motives. Mandeville's favourable treatment of Julian, meanwhile, placed imperial authority on the side of religious toleration, although fuller versions of the ancient letter complicate that assessment.

Ferguson provides a particularly clear comparison. His discussion joined Roman military command to citizens' continuing capacity for political action. Sullivan selected its coercive features to favour limited monarchy; a later American essay selected its confidence maxim to defend Adams's elected administration. Each receiver supplied different qualifications.

These comparisons place monarchy within a wider debate about legal security, civic independence, moral restraint and dependence. They show how quotation made particular conditions of protection authoritative while leaving others to be altered or disputed. Text reuse makes these choices traceable and connects close textual comparisons to the broader political work performed by ancient authority.

Tamás Demeter

Despotic Organisations: Hume on the Institutional Conditions of Inquiry

In his essays, Hume explores how social and institutional conditions influence the prospects of inquiry. In 'Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences' he explains why philosophy arose among the Greeks rather than the Persians, and in a passage he later suppressed he argues that an absolute prince makes subordinate magistrates as absolute as himself and this alone undermines industry, curiosity, and science. Hume credits forms of government with the capacity to foster character traits relevant to intellectual creativity and curiosity, and to facilitate or prevent through them the development of arts and sciences. Institutional forms that facilitate this development are organised like healthy minds, animal bodies, and political bodies through a principle of sympathy: in a distributed and reciprocally responsive manner that generates coordination without a centre ruling and overseeing the system. Despotism exhibits a contrary principle of organisation: government from a central source without responsive feedback mechanisms. This paper reconstructs Hume's arguments as contributions to a historical sociology of knowledge that reflects a Humean 'analogy of nature', and traces both its ancient sources and its afterlife.

Filimon Peonidis

Reactions to Despotism: Greek Arguments in Favour of Democracy

The aim of my presentation is twofold. First, given the absence of the term δεσποτισμός (despotism) from the surviving ancient Greek texts, to offer an account of despotism that is likely to be acceptable to democrats of the classical period. In my view, for them despotism could have signified being subject to the power of one ruler or a group of rulers, who govern according to their own interests (τὸ ἐκείνοις συμφέρον) and according to their own judgment (κατὰ τὴν αὐτῶν γνώμην). There is some evidence that Aristotle himself would not object to this inclusive formulation. Second, to review certain 'comparative' arguments put forward by philosophers and orators to show the moral superiority of democracy in contrast to oligarchy and other non-democratic constitutions. These arguments taken together could be seen as a theoretical reaction to despotism as defined above.

Panagiotis Christias

On Tyranny 2.0

In the famous exchange *On Tyranny* (ed. 1948) between Leo Strauss and Alexandre Kojève (ed. 1963, 1991) appear two diametrically opposed visions of the political philosopher. Should the philosopher keep his distance from political affairs of the city or should he engage advising the prince or the tyrant? Following Spinoza's *caute*, Strauss argues for a critical distance between politics and philosophy, while Kojève, adopting a Hegelian-Marxist position, advocates for the full implementation of philosophically guided ideology in the making of a world state-regime, a rational regime that would globally meet societal expectations. Strauss' reply is platonic: a global regime would necessarily be tyrannical, human society's future is open and absolute knowledge is unattainable. It is commonly admitted that the difference between ancient and modern philosophy lies in the fact that the first follows critically the political development of the city (or the empire), whilst the latter precedes and participates in the creation of the modern state. Modern advisers of the prince or the tyrant provide ideological frameworks for state implementation, at least until the fall of the Berlin Wall. After that, communist regimes lost any ideological coverage and became nude tyrannies, like the one of Hiero in Syracuse. After the failure of Kojève's modern vision of the philosopher, it is probably time to return to the origins of classical philosophy that advised caution when dealing with politics. In the opposite case, it is not the philosopher that is in danger, it is the city.