

Democracy in Early Modern England, vom 18. bis 19. Juli 2017

The Workshop “Democracy and Anti-democracy in Early Modern England 1603–1689” took place on 18 and 19 July 2017 at the Max-Weber-Kolleg in Erfurt. Co-organised with Professor Markku Peltonen (University of Helsinki), the event brought to Erfurt a pool of 14 international scholars at different stages of their careers from the United Kingdom, the US, Germany, Finland, France and the United Arab Emirates as well as an audience of both faculty members and graduate students from the University of Erfurt. One of the chief objectives of the Workshop was to enhance the University of Erfurt’s presence on the international academic map. Another key outcome of the Erfurt Workshop is the editing with Prof. Peltonen of a collection of essays titled *Democracy and Anti-Democracy in Early-Modern England, 1603–1689*.

The Workshop was part of my COFUND project and was financed thanks to the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the “Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 665958”. It also received financial aid from the University of Erfurt. Moreover, during both the preparation and the running of the Workshop we benefited from outstanding practical and financial support from the Max-Weber-Kolleg and its staff. As a result of this, all participants expressed their great satisfaction of having had the opportunity to attend our event in what they defined as a very congenial and highly intellectually stimulating environment. Part of a broader commitment to entertain fruitful academic exchanges between the University of Erfurt and fellow partners in Europe and elsewhere, the Workshop was also held under the auspices of the European Society for the History of Political Thought of which I am the current Vice-President.

From a scholarly perspective, together with a range of insightful, innovative and provocative papers, the Workshop – grounded on a solid interdisciplinary basis – offered a series of new reflections on a historiographically neglected topic and highlighted novel trajectories of research in the fields of the history of political thought, early modern religious studies and cultural history. More in detail, the papers presented in Erfurt focused on democracy and its role in the political and social thought of the period. Hence the historically-anchored question: what did “democracy”, “popular rule” or “the people” mean in the seventeenth century? Several papers explored the themes of liberty, citizenship and slavery, interests, law and religion. They also engaged with the issue of how a variegated spectrum of definitions and understandings of “the people” led to radically different conclusions. Other speakers recovered a series of anti-democratic voices which through satire, poetry, sermons, loyal addresses, tracts and pamphlets attacked popular government not only politically, but also with regard to the moral codes, emotional sympathies and intellectual faculties of its governors as well as of its inhabitants. By underlining the linguistic shifts and conceptual developments that affected democracy throughout the Stuart era, some contributions provided an original analysis of how anti-democratic discourse contributed to more positive understandings of democratic ideas and practices that emerged in the post-1649 context. This turning point also brought our studies to confront the much-debated scholarly question of the role of republican principles at this historically decisive juncture in England and their relation to democratic ideals. Equally innovative was the approach chosen in some of the papers where the major issues of democracy and its complex relations to and with slavery, the spiritual poverty of the vulgar, toleration vis-à-vis the American Indians, women and their participation in politics were thoroughly examined. This attitude enabled us to investigate the connections between seventeenth-century reflection on democracy and freedom, natural law paradigms, petitioning, notions of citizenship and gendered outlooks on the polity. At the same time, our aim was to reveal the importance of some of these trends and dynamics for our understanding of the various illiberal and populist solutions nowadays proposed to the perceived difficulties of democratic governance in several regions of the world (from Hungary and Poland to Venezuela and Turkey).

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