

## **23rd Annual Meeting of the *Collegium Politicum***

Thursday and Friday; June 13 and 14, Alghero, Sardegna,

organized by Diego Zucca (Università di Sassari) and Manuel Knoll (Universität München, LMU)

### **Call for Abstracts**

## **Ancient Critiques of Democracy and their Contemporary Relevance**

In the contemporary debate, democracy and criticisms of democracy have become much-discussed issues. The number of existing autocracies in the world is rising, in many countries populist leaders claim to represent the will of the people, and the US-democracy is extremely polarized and not in good shape. On a more intellectual level, several criticisms of democracy have appeared, e.g. Jason Brennan's *Against Democracy* (2016) and Christopher Achen and Larry Bartes's *Democracy for Realists* (2016).

Considering the current interest in democracy and criticisms of democracy, this conference will examine ancient critiques of democracy and their contemporary relevance. A first difficulty this enterprise faces is to understand what political system the ancient concept "demokratia" exactly refers to and how it is related to contemporary conceptions of a "democracy". For instance, Aristotle defines *demokratia* as the rule of the many poor citizens for their own advantage. This does not square with today's understanding of democracy. As has been pointed out by Dolf Sternberger (1985), the political system Aristotle calls "politeia" is much closer to today's conception of a democracy. While Aristotle views *demokratia* as a mistaken political system, he holds *politeia*, the rule of the many for the common good, to be a good one. Ancient democracies were direct democracies, contemporary democracies are representative democracies. Ancient democracies allocated most political offices by lot, contemporary democracies distribute the central political offices by elections.

Keeping such differences and difficulties in mind, this conference welcomes papers on topics related to questions and themes such as:

- How do the sophists assess democracy? Of course, Athens was the ideal place for their profession and there are good arguments for the thesis that Protagoras's myth is a defense of democracy. Nevertheless, are there also critical views of democracy among the sophists?
- What is Socrates' evaluation of democracy? Despite the considerable difficulty to distinguish the historical Socrates from the character that appears in Plato's dialogues, it

seems that the historical Socrates did not run away from prison because he respected the laws of the Athenian democracy.

- Plato is clearly a severe aristocratic critic of democracy. But what are his main criticisms of this political system? Of course, the masses lack the knowledge required to judge political matters and to govern well. But what about Plato's exact views of ordinary people? What about his criticism of the democratic conception of justice? And what about the power of rhetoric and the role of demagogues misusing it to manipulate the people?

- As previously mentioned, Aristotle's view of what we call democracy today is not easy to analyze. This is also due to the fact that in Book 4 of the *Politics* he distinguishes between five different forms of democracy. Is Aristotle not indeed agreeing in his political philosophy with Plato's view that the morally and intellectually best should rule? But what about his famous "summation argument" (*Pol.* 3.11.)? Could this not be interpreted as a defense of democracy?

- Of course, democracy was not only discussed and criticized by philosophers. Therefore, the conference also welcomes proposals on Greek comedians, tragedians, and historians reflecting on democracy.

- Finally, what is the relation between contemporary and ancient critiques of democracy? How relevant are the ancient criticisms of democracy for today's debates and political systems? To what extent were 19<sup>th</sup> century critiques of democracy by the likes of Burkhardt, Bachofen, Taine, de Tocqueville, Mill, and Nietzsche informed by their readings of ancient authors?

### **Submissions:**

We ask for your understanding that we only have a limited amount of available slots for this two-day conference and need to make all reservations soon. Therefore, we ask you kindly to email an abstract, between 200 and 400 words, as soon as possible to both Diego Zucca ([dizucca@uniss.it](mailto:dizucca@uniss.it)) and Manuel Knoll ([Manuel.Knoll@lrz.uni-muenchen.de](mailto:Manuel.Knoll@lrz.uni-muenchen.de)), latest by **the end of February 1, 2024**. Decisions regarding the acceptance of proposals will be communicated by February 15, 2024.

### **Additional information:**

Speakers will have 30 minutes for the presentation, followed by 15 minutes of discussion. We ask the colleagues who are not planning to present a paper and are nevertheless willing to participate in the meeting to confirm their attendance by the end of February. We can only cover costs for accommodation and food of those who will both give a talk and are either principal investigators of the PRIN *The Fragility of Athens: The Greek Philosophers' Criticism of demokratia as an Opportunity to Rethink Democratic Citizenship* or are regular members of the *Collegium Politicum*. For further practical information and updates, please consult [www.collegiumpoliticum.org](http://www.collegiumpoliticum.org).