In the Search of the Common Good

Sixth Biannual Conference
European Society for the History of Political Thought:
University of Helsinki 27-29 August 2020

The European Society for the History of Political Thought (ESHPT, https://europoliticalthought.wordpress.com/) invites proposals for individual papers and panels for its next international conference.

The idea of the common good, with its roots in the ancient world and diverse elaborations over the centuries, has become one of the most relevant and problematic issues today. At the international level, rising European nationalisms confront longstanding efforts to work out a *bonum commune* in the European Union, while global agreements about how to regulate trade, immigration, and environmental policies appear to be crumbling. Democratic polities whose citizens once seemed to share basic common values now struggle with partisan extremism, political and cultural polarization, growing economic inequalities, and fierce arguments about how to respond to immigration. Across the globe, marketing techniques and consumerist practices encourage individuals to retreat into their own private spheres, remote from any idea of a public good. New communication technologies and social media tend to create self-affirming ‘bubbles’ of opinion whose inhabitants seldom hear anything that might challenge their version of social reality. Such developments raise concerns that the common good is an idea of the past – one that can now have little more than private or partisan meanings.

In response to these challenges, calls to reassert unifying notions of the common good are heard across the political spectrum. But in the fractured conditions where appeals to the common good seem most needed, how can such a good be found? Who or what should define it? Should it be defined in thick or thin, demanding or minimalist terms, require commitment to strong cultural or moral values or merely an agreement not to overstep public laws? How meaningful are agreements on common values in conditions of extreme inequality? What should be done if a substantial minority of citizens strongly disagrees with a majority’s view of the *bonum commune*?
Our conference, to be held in Helsinki in 2020, welcomes proposals for papers that explore these recurring questions through the history of political thought. Debates about the common good begin with the ancient Greeks, for whom the quality of κοινή or κοινός (‘commonness’ or sharing in institutions, values, and projects) was by definition a positive one. The opposite of κοινή was ἱδία or ἱδιός (idios, meaning private, personal). Greek thinkers from Thucydides to Plato and Aristotle asked: what place does the private have in a well-ordered polis, or in relations between cities that have to live alongside each other? At what point does the pursuit of private or personal aims threaten the common good? Roman authors adapted this Greek distinction in the idea of a bonum commune, seeing the excessive pursuit of ‘private’ interests and ambitions as the chief cause of corruption in republics and the root of tyranny. These republican ideas enjoyed a revival from the late fifteenth century onward, both confronting and combining with Christian and natural law traditions. From the seventeenth century until today, a central problem in political thought has been the tensions between individualism and minority rights, on the one hand, and notions of an overarching common good on the other. Some modern thinkers have seen such tensions as healthy, indeed as necessary for freedom, while others see them as a threat to political stability or an obstacle to social justice. Debates about what role should be assigned to notions of the common good in the face of individual, minority, sectarian, and national claims dominate contemporary political life.

We invite papers that approach such questions from a variety of perspectives. These are suggestions (and in no way intended as limitations)

Our broader aims are

- To recall why the idea of common good seemed so important for political life in the past;
- To explore its uses and alleged abuses over time in different contexts, asking why some understandings of common good became especially controversial in modern times;
- To identify particular contexts and discourse in which notions of common good became particularly important and/or contested;
- To ask whether the idea might still serve as a guide to present-day politics, on both a national and global scale;
- To explore who decides what is common good both in the past and the present day.

Some possible topics and questions:

The common good and civic virtue
The common good, pluralism, and authoritarianism
Democracy and the common good
Common and universal good

Keynote speakers: Janet Coleman (Cambridge)
Martti Koskenniemi (Helsinki)
Lea Ypi (London)
Proposals for individual, 20-minute presentations should be no longer than 250 words. Proposals for panels should not exceed 500 words. Short CVs of the speakers should be added (name, institutional affiliations, major publications – no more than five). Panels at the conference will normally last 90 minutes, with 3 papers each. (Exceptionally, panel proposals consisting of more than 3 papers can be accommodated.)

Please send your proposals by 15 March 2020 to eurohpt@gmail.com
Authors will be notified of paper acceptance or non-acceptance by 15 April 2020.

Participation fee (provisional): 60 EUR and 45 EUR for PhD students to cover catering and organization costs. The fee is calculated to meet unavoidable expenses. The organizing committee is making efforts to secure external funding for the conference. In case these efforts are successful, the participation fee shall be waived.

By ESHPT tradition (see https://europoliticalthought.wordpress.com/publications/) we intend to publish an edited volume selected from papers read at the conference.

Organizing committee:
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Erica Benner
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