

THE ESSENCE OF THE POLITICAL

Including a comparison between the
Ancient Greek and modern conceptions

by **JUSTIN CARMEN**

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It is evident that the state is a natural growth,
and that man is by nature a political animal.
And that he who is citiless is either low in
the scale of humanity or high above it.

——— ARISTOTLE ———

Congratulations and Thank You

While it may sound cheesy, I do think that it is worth welcoming you to this salon by way of both a congratulations and a thank you. Firstly, congratulations for having the resolve to join this salon. I do understand that it takes some courage to speak in public, especially with strangers on the more “touchy-feely” topics which might fall under the banner of “politics”. And secondly, a thank you. This salon exists because of a personal want to speak on politics with an active community. It is through philosophy that I want to firstly be, and exercise myself, politically. Therefore, in that you are here, together with me, you have allowed me that opportunity.

About your Facilitator

As for who I am, my name is Justin Carmien. I grew up in Northern Indiana, where I experienced both a somewhat well-off and also a somewhat poor childhood. On my father's side, my great-grandfather, John Raber, ran for the congressional office of Indiana's second district in 1964. After losing to incumbent Republican leader of the House of Representatives, Charles Helleck, my great-grandfather contributed to the community in another way—he established Raber Golf, an eighteen-hole course located just outside the village of Bristol, Indiana. This business has remained under family operation up until today. My father, for example, oversees lawn and machine maintenance. Then, on my mother's side, my grandfather was a middle school art teacher, and my mother is a nurse. After my mother divorced my father, she moved me, together with my sister and brother, to a trailer park. There I spent formative years of my life—from the age of eleven to fifteen.

In my adult life, I pursued a career within product design and marketing. I began by starting a publishing company here in the States, and then later moved to Denmark. During the last four years of that career, I served as a member of

a leadership team. Together, with four other design managers, I ran a department of forty employees. During those later years in Denmark, I also established my cooperation with Spinderihallerne, a municipality-run community and historical center in the provincial town of Vejle, Denmark. There I partnered with international community developers to host salons on philosophy. The topics of those salons ranged from love and free will to aesthetics. However, my main philosophical interest is metaphysics—particularly a reading of metaphysics which I have named *first economics*. *First Economics* philosophy is founded upon the writing of German philosopher Martin Heidegger, specifically Heidegger’s interpretation of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, as well as Heidegger’s interpretation of Friedrich Nietzsche as a value metaphysician. I understand that this metaphysics not only describes the “artist phenomenon” of the craftsman, but equally describes the metaphysics of the “politician phenomenon”. *First economics* philosophy promises the discipline of metaphysics as a political answer. I have recently completed a book with the title *How to Nurture Truth and Authenticity*. This book marks something of a milestone in the development of this philosophy.

Disclaimer

As part of this introduction to myself, I should also say that I am not an expert on our topic for this salon. I have no university degree in either philosophy or political science. The highest level of public education which I completed was high school. If anyone asked me for a reason, I would simply say that the classroom setting never made sense for me. I am rather inclined towards education by what is commonly referred to as self-directed learning. However, of interest to me currently is what might be called “village learning”, which instead pursues public education by way of tradesmanships (for example, through a master-apprentice-type relationship) and seeks a “collective intelligence”. However, and despite this, you should not be concerned whether or not either myself or anyone else here is undereducated on our topic. As we proceed with this salon, I hope to show you that having no expert among us is actually beneficial to our goal. After all, this is a *philosophy salon*, which means we are here to *philosophize*. By way of our engagement together, we seek to experience something novel and emergent within ourselves. In full disclosure, my personal ambition is to establish such emergent knowledge by way of philosophy, outside of the university.

Setting the Stage

1. The title of our salon

Looking at the title of our salon, the word *political* firstly draws our attention—and rightly so. It is clear to each of us that *here*, in this salon, we are directed by *the political*. However, it is also clear from the title that we are not here to primarily reflect on historical or current political events. Such facts can only provide us with examples for reflection, but could never constitute the actual subject matter of our salon. This is because we are guided by *the political*, as such. This is indicated by the second word which draws our attention—*essence*. The guide which we have for carrying us through this salon is *the essence of the political*. Inasmuch, it should be clear that we are not here to share any grievances or rally support for any particular politician or political party.

Now, not to be mistaken, in asking into the essence of the political, we are not asking into what is common or universal among all political activity or all political objects, generally. A catalog answer such as this might be quite boring. Rather, we are asking into

the essence itself. What does it mean to *be political*? And what does it mean to be political, particularly in today's economy? In this salon, we will prepare ourselves for answering these questions. To do so, we will recount a history of the essence of the political.

2. Historical account of the essence of the political

Our historical account will begin with interpretations of Ancient Greek texts; specifically, we will cite Plato and Aristotle. This history will conclude with considerations on the German socialist philosophers, including both Karl Marx and Martin Heidegger. This is in order to further pronounce the Ancients' conception of the political. Then, in the second half of our historical account, we will revisit literature from the Enlightenment. For sure, we can trace the heritage of what we call "the political" to the philosophers and statesmen of this period of political writing. Specifically, we will reflect on passages from John Locke's *Second Treatise of Civil Government* and Thomas Jefferson's announcement of "*a wall of separation between church and state*". A contrast between the two historical periods will reveal that words such as "liberalism" and "socialism", for example, do not refer to mere business models. Rather, they are ideologies which ask us to *be political*, and

to be so in pronouncedly different ways. Today, we lack *the way of being political* as presented by either. Despite this, and when equipped with our contrast between the Ancient Greek and the Enlightenment conceptions of the political, we will seek to answer our initial questions: *what does it mean to be political*, and particularly in today's economy? Our ambition here is diagnostic. This is the initial step in projecting us towards our governance future.

3. **Method of our salon**

Philosophy, or rather *philosophizing*, will be our method by which we seek the essence of the political. This means that we must assume that *none of us yet knows what the essence of the political is*. Now, in saying this, we should not be mistaken that we are here to flatter our virtue of humility. We are not here to find respect for each other by way of such self-degradation. The reason for this is because degradation (no matter the kind) is not beneficial to our goal. Rather, in order to achieve our goal, each of us requires a bit of audacity. And while this may sound perverse, this audacity is for the sake of respecting our goal, and inasmuch, respecting each other who share in our goal.

Taking up the Platonic dialogues as our model, we will constitute the essence *in practice*. Therefore, we must not be shy. Only by presenting the *εἶδος* or *ἰδέα* (that is, the outward appearance of the world) can the world take its shape. Perhaps we could think of those ideas as tools in our practical dealings within this salon. The truth of any one idea presented here could only be *proven* in the fact that it provides traction, and thus propels our salon further. Insofar as this is the case, only together, with the very people you see around you, will we be able to constitute the essence of the political.

4. **Essentialism as a practice**

What should be clear, then, is that we are not committing ourselves to something like “substantial essentialism” here in this salon. Essentialism is the idea that there is one true essence behind each *ἰδέα*, and that that essence is universal. When coupled with any kind of substantiality (say, materialism or physicalism), such essences could be thought of as *the things-in-themselves*. Today, such reifications (that is, “making into substances”) of our practical descriptions of the phenomenal experience is assumed by the scientific and religious alike—whether the thing-in-itself in question regards physical material

or the soul. Of course, such substantial essentialism is quite favorable to our material needs today. We make a virtue of *objectivity* in order to achieve an established and agreed-upon standard by which to measure the objects of our practical dealings. However, the object of our salon, *the essence of the political*, resists such objective measurability. And because the essence can only be constituted through the practice itself, we free ourselves from the concern that none of us here are educated enough to speak on the essence of the political—a concern which, after all, might render this salon useless.

5. **Purpose of our salon**

The reasons we give when answering the question of *why we seek the essence of the political* is this: that we may step away from politics as we experience it in our daily lives. Firstly, this will allow us to speak more intelligently (and from a higher perspective) about factual political occurrences today. Yet, it is also with a second, and perhaps more important, purpose—namely, to encourage *a spiritual awakening*. Of course, when we use the word “spiritual” here, we refer to *that which puts the spirit into motion*. Our purpose in asking into the essence of the political is to awaken a spirit for *being politi-*

cal. No doubt, pronounced for us today is the fact that our inherited democratic institutions can no longer wholly satisfy the democratic ideal. For sure, the failure of independent new media (post-truth) and market manipulation of free speech (along with gerrymandering and election fraud, among other concerns) tells us that this is the case. Our world is responding organically to such failures. The rise of social justice activism may be the most pronounced of them all. Of course, for those of us who are less concerned with such hype, we must still admit that it would be naïve to ignore the social conditioning which precludes (and therefore takes priority!) over the mechanisms of liberal democracy—that conditioning which no longer occurs at the family dinner table, the office watercooler, and the six o’clock nightly news, but rather through social media. Insofar as communication technology has changed the way in which we encounter political discourse (now as an explicit social activity, exercisable by everyone and in “real time”), each of us bears the burden of acting as politicians. The purpose of our salon is to exercise ourselves and practice such a role.

Structure of our Salon

- About your Facilitator
- Setting the Stage
 - Topic
 - Method
 - Purpose
- Around the Table: who are each of you?
- Preparation for the Guided Discussion
 - The Ancient Greek Conception of the Essence
 - The Enlightenment Conception of the Essence
- Guided Discussion

Salon Materials

- Handout: Opusculum 06
 - Visuals
 - Recording the salon?
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The Essence of the Political: Classical Greece

6. **Ἀγαθόν** (*agathon*, “the good”)

Today, it is trivial to recall that for the Ancient Greeks, *αγαθόν* was paramount. But of course, taking for granted *the good* can only lead to dispute. After all, while any one of us could answer for ourselves the question *what is good?* without too much difficulty, in public we may meet with differences. Therefore, we must ask further still—*good for who or for what exactly?* It is here, in answering *what is good—and who or what for?* that we can come to an understanding of *the good* itself. Of course, it is not arbitrary that we begin the preparation for our salon with *αγαθόν*. Answering the *who* or the *what* will allow us an understanding of the Ancient Greek experience of the political—one which we can take forward as we encounter our own understanding today.

7. **Ποιῆσις** (*poiēsis*, “creation, production”)

In order to answer the *who* or *what* by which *αγαθόν* is to be measured, we must firstly acknowledge that, for

the Ancients, *ποιῆσις* was paramount. Testament to this interpretation can be found recorded throughout their writing. Recalling Plato’s dialogue *Charmides*, for example, we remember Socrates’ interrogation into the virtue of *σωφροσύνη* (*sōfrosynē*, “temperance”) together with the Athenian noble Critias. A definition is put forward: *temperance is knowing oneself*. Of course, we should remain vigilant to our task at hand. What is important for us is not the definition of temperance itself. Rather, we turn towards *Charmides* because the exchange between the two Athenians provides us with evidence of *ποιῆσις*, as something paramount within the Ancient Greek experience. The above definition of temperance as *knowing oneself* provokes an objection. Socrates explains himself,

“If temperance is a knowing, obviously it must be a kind of science, and it must be a science of something, must it not? | If I were asked if medicine, as a science of health, is useful to us, and what it produces | I should say it is of very great benefit, since it produces health; an excellent result. | And so, if you should ask me what result I take to be produced by building, as the builder’s science, I should say houses; and it would be the same with the other arts.”

“Now it is for you, Critias, in your turn, to find an answer to a question regarding temperance—since you say it is a science of self—and to tell me what excellent result it produces for us.”

For those of us acquainted with this dialogue, we know that Critias fails to produce an answer which satisfies Socrates. However, for the sake of our goal here in this salon, we must suspend any want for an answer. In any case, our point has been made. *Ποιησις*, production, is paramount in the Ancient Greek experience, as evidenced in the writing.

8. **Δημιουργος** (*dēmiurgos*, “creator, craftsman”) and **δημος** (*dēmos*, “the public, the people”) Now, given that *αγαθόν* seems to be measured in terms of material production and results—that is, curing our bodies from disease or building shelters for the homeless—we may wonder if we should understand the Ancients as early industrialists. Of course, our conclusion is that, certainly, we should not. This would be, after all, a forced injection of our modern understanding of industry into the Ancient Greek experience. To be sure, *ποιησις* is not merely constituted by a commerce with the material substrate. The Ancients’ economy was equally concerned with the

presencing of the *ἰδέα*—that is, the presencing of the outward appearance of the world within the commerce of public uses of things and communal life.

Etymologically, *ποιησις* is related to the Ancient Greek *ποιεω* (*poieō*, “I make”). Therefore, when we read the word *ποιησις*, we should not simply substitute in our minds the Modern English word “production”. We should instead couple it with something like “personal creation”. Note that the Modern English words *poet*, *poetry*, and *poetic* also derived from Ancient Greek *ποιεω*. The contemporary philosopher John Vervaeke, in his description of “transjektivty”, calls our apprehension and our objectifying of the phenomenal experience as a “poetizing”.

Δημιουργος (*dēmiurgos*, “creator, craftsman”), then, is the Ancient Greek description for that way of being which presences the *ἰδέα* of the *δημος* (*dēmos*, “the public, the people”) through any and all walks of life. Every *πολιτης* (*politēs*, “citizen”) as *πολιτης* has, as their way of being in the Ancient Greek experience, *δημιουργος*. Inasmuch, *ποιητικη* (*poietike*, “production”) was not merely the activity of the craftsman, or *τεχνιτης* (*technitis*)—it was equally that of the *πολιτικος* (*politikos*), the politician, as well.

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9. **Κοινωνία** (*koinonia*, “a joint participation, a share which anyone has in anything, fellowship, or communion”)

What should be noted is that, for these ancients, words such as *society* or *culture* would have no sense. In the works of Aristotle, for example, we do not find a conception of either culture or society, but instead the being of those having a shared language, or rather, *λογος* (*logos*) as a *being with one another*, or *κοινωνία* (“joint participation, or a share which anyone has in anything”). Our Modern English word “communion” is related to the Ancient Greek word *κοινωνία*. Indeed, even the Ancient Greek *πολις* is used to mean both “city” (the material substrate) and “that with which one has communion”—namely, “one’s community”. The *πολις* is that where there is a communion which produces the outward appearance of the world within the commerce of a public use of things and of communal life.

10. **Freedom**

The condition by which a people are free for the production of *ιδεα*, we know today as *freedom*. Such freedom is that of *a people*—it denotes the ability of a people to constitute themselves as a people through production. We can perhaps imagine the

popular legend of the Hebrew people who, during the time before their exodus from Egypt, were not a free people—that is, they were not able to constitute themselves through their own production. Instead, they were subordinated to the Pharaoh, his projects, and the overall projection and preservation of the Ancient Egyptian people.

Now, while this definition of freedom may seem obvious, incontestable, and (on that account) perhaps quite uninteresting, we should not proceed with this definition too quickly. If we do, we may miss all that should be interesting in our reflections about the Ancient Greeks. After all, this conception of freedom is quite unlike what is meant by that word today. What should strike us as peculiar is that in the Ancient Greek experience, various duties and responsibilities may have been imposed upon individuals for the sake of freedom. Thus, it is not an individual freedom, but a freedom to be as *πολιτης*. Indeed, this particular understanding of “citizenship” is what constitutes the human animal, as the type of animal that it is—and that means as distinct from “lesser” animals and from the gods as well. This is, after all, Aristotle’s inceptual claim, as presented at the beginning of his *Πολιτικά* (*Politika*, “the things concerning the *πολις*”),

“It is evident that man is by nature a political animal. And that he who is citiless is either low in the scale of humanity or high above it.”

By way of further reflection on Aristotle’s *Πολιτικά*, we will complete our characterization of the essence of the political, according to the Ancient Greek texts.

11. Aristotle’s claim

Within Aristotle’s *Πολιτικά*, we read that, “*It is evident that man is by nature a political animal*” and that “*the state [πολις] is a natural growth and a prior condition to the individual*”. Aristotle provides proof for his claim. That proof runs as such,

“The proof is that the individual, when isolated, is not self-sufficing; and therefore, he is like a part in relation to the whole.”

Immediately, this claim might strike us as obnoxious. After all, if this is the case, then Aristotle must be thinking of “the state” (πολις) as something other than what we think of today. No doubt, we think of “the state” as a body of laws as well as the officers and administrators of those laws. In this case, the

state (including all of the material which also goes up to constitute the state) must be, without a doubt, a construction of various human animals acting on behalf of a common goal. In this case, the state could not be, as Aristotle claims, “*a prior condition to the individual*”. Now, if Aristotle’s claim that “*the state is a prior condition to the individual*” produces within us feelings of dissonance, then it must be because we have (and are operating with) two quite different positions, each of which seeming to describe reality with some level of truth. One position says that *an individual human animal is a product of the state*, and another says that *the state is a product of those human animals*—or alternatively, that *human animals produce the state*. Note that the difficulty remains even if we substitute the words “state” with “society”. Do individuals acting on behalf of a common goal produce “society”, or does “society” produce those individuals? Or do both arguments retain explanatory power, each within their own contexts and applications? In order to address these questions, and thus arriving at the essence of the political as it was experienced in Ancient Greek life, we must now consider *ενεργεια* and *πραξις*.

12. **Ενεργεια** (*enēргеia*, “human activity”) and **πραξις** (*praxis*, “doing”)

For the Ancient Greeks—at least, the natural philosophers before Plato—there was no theory apart from practice. Theory, as the Ancient Greeks understood it, was the highest mode of *ενεργεια* (“human activity”), but they understood it only as the supreme realization of genuine *πραξις* (“doing”), the innermost determining center of their entire existence as a people. For these ancients, theory springs forth from doing. It is dependent on it. Perhaps we could think of *the doing of a people* by way of an analogy. Imagine, for example, some primordial ooze which (by way of its practical dealing with its environment) draws definition in that environment, such that this ooze not only comes to a “theory” about the world, but also comes to the descriptions which belong to that theory—whether that theory is of a material nature, and includes descriptions such as *food* and *chair*; or whether that theory is moral, and includes *feminism* and *liberty*, for example. We could think of this primordial ooze as a human animal—perhaps a child—and we could then think further about this process of articulation within the environment by way of a child’s development; this process, then, accounts for the way in which the

child learns to operate with the objects *mom* and *spoon*—and even the object *me*, for instance. In this case, we may say that this primordial dealing with the environment is the condition for both language and cognitive representation. Though, we should beware of getting too caught up in this specific psychological analogy. Within socialist or economic theory (say, Marxist literature for example), it might be common to translate this *doing of a people*, *πραξις*, simply as “production”. However, we should equally beware of translating *πραξις* into modern thought solely through the framework of material economics. Instead of using either psychological or material economic terms, we can use our analogy of the primordial ooze to consider exactly this indefinite organism, *a people*—or rather, *the doing of a people*. If we do, then we can say that, just as with the human child, this *doing of a people* allows for the world to be articulated, as the world which it is, in its intellectual or theoretical fashion. This “primordial state”, so to speak, is the condition for knowledge itself. It is the condition for any science, from psychology to economics. Inasmuch, we can say that this commerce is prior to even material description. That is to say, it is prior to the discipline of physics, which is just one type of language or “theory”, after all—and

that is to say, this particular conception of *a doing of a people*, *πραξις* (as a primordial commerce) belongs to the study which we know today as *metaphysics*.

13. **Characterizing *πραξις* as the essence of the political**

With this interpretation of the Ancient Greeks, we can begin to understand Aristotle's claim that "*the state is a prior condition to the individual*". This "primordial state of being" is a condition for the individuation of any particular *you* or *me*, or any individuation of *ourselves*, as who *we* are. Speaking phenomenologically, only first are there Americans, and only on account of there being Americans can an individual American come to be individuated as such.

Of course, if this is the case, then we are now thinking of "the state" (*πολις*) as something more robust than a mere body of laws, along with the officers and administrators of those laws. Indeed, if this is the case, then we are now thinking about "the state" as something more in communion with Aristotle's way of thinking—namely, as that primordial *πραξις* which is the essence of *being political*. In identifying this object, *πραξις*, we have now identified the essence of the political as experienced in Ancient Greek life.

Remembering back to the inception of this salon, when we asked into the essence of the political, we were explicitly not asking into what is common or universal among all political activity. Rather, we were asking into the *essence* itself. What does it mean to *be political*? Our abbreviated answer might be this: being political, according to the Ancient Greek, is to be creatively producing *ourselves*, as who *we* are, within the horizon (*ορισμος*, *horismos*) of the *πολις*. The ideal form of governance, then, would be one which liberates this creative production.

14. **German philosophy and socialism**

Given this characterization, we should not be surprised that the socialist philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries took inspiration from the writings of these ancients. What should not be overlooked is that the socialist thinkers arose, each in their own respective periods and locations, to address the psychological and sociological symptoms arising from changes in labor. Socialism has, since its inception, problematized *πραξις*.

15. **Alienation**

Within communist literature, for example, we find concern regarding the stratification of the social

classes. According to Karl Marx, the industrial worker loses the ability to determine both life and destiny when deprived of the right to think of himself as the director of his own actions, or to determine the character of his actions, and to own the items of value produced by his own labor. The industrial worker is subordinated (much like the Hebrew to the Pharaoh) to the bourgeoisie. Of course, today, looking backward to this period of industrial development, we can surmise that the symptoms described as *alienation* must not have been merely an illness of the proletariat, or for those employed on the assembly line. Instead, these symptoms must have been conditioned by something much more pervasive.

16. **Rootlessness and estrangement**

From the higher vantage point afforded us today, we can understand “industrialization” as referring to the specialization and compartmentalization of system operations, generally. If we consider the “system operation” of an individual’s perpetual interpretation of the sensual experience, then it seems that the very digestion of the modern world (as we experience it through industry journals and other news media) had given cause for a certain type of alienation. This source of alienation is evidenced in the

many critiques we hear waged against that form of government which has been called “technocracy”—a form of governance in which industry specialists contribute to the world picture by way of various public touch points. Today, we can find further evidence of this alienation in the attempted solutions to technocracy. No doubt, the self-help industry has been supplanted with what has been called a meaning- and sense-making industry. This industry then gave rise to YouTube gurus who provide relief to their audience by digesting the various public touch points, from specialists and non-specialist alike, across both broadcast and social media, into digestible world-encompassing “grand narratives”. We may think of personalities such as Tucker Carlson or Russel Brand.

However, what should not be overlooked is that early in the twentieth century, during the period of the German Conservative Revolution, this alienation had already been identified. In the words of the interpreters and translators of this period, we read of a *rootlessness*—an estrangement from that which is produced in the proximity of the workshop, then set out into the world through trades, and is characteristically *of the people and of the land*. This period of

writing produced a romanticized picture of the ancients—a picture which we can still find resonating within ourselves, even today. We only need to consider the thousands of years of conditioning which the human animal must have adjusted for during the polytheistic agricultural period—a time we imagine as characterized by a harmonious feedback loop between labor and the proximal phenomena of our experience. The German Conservative Revolutionaries emphasized this harmonious union. Given such a utopic picture, we should not be surprised that their writing was quickly appropriated by the National Socialist party. Arthur van den Bruck’s “Third Reich”, for example, exists for us today only as an embodiment of imperialism, genocide, and as a warning against acting upon our visions of such socialist utopias.

17. **Affectivity and apathy**

Of course, we would be naïve to believe that the defeat of Nazi Germany and the fall of the Soviet Union had ended all problematizing of *πραξις*. No doubt, Americans have also experienced a profound lack of affectivity in the process of producing the world. Evidence for this can be found in the entertainment produced in the time period starting from around the late second millennium and early third millennium.

Consider the cool-alooof or sarcastic-cynicism of late twentieth century popular culture. Any one of us can sympathize with the apathetic characters of Donn Pearce’s *Cool Hand Luke* and Marshall Mathers’ Eminem. We could also call to mind our comedic political pundits, such as Steven Colbert—but also George Carlin and *South Park*. The name *postmodernist* has been used to describe these works. However, it must be admitted that this name is only partially appropriate. This aesthetic does not so much celebrate a rejection of the ideals of later modernization, as it does romanticize the suffering from within them. The spirit of postmodernism indicates a deep commitment to the pursuit of industrial-liberation—but at the same time it recognizes that this pursuit had realized in a perversion. Simply consider the idolization of the industrialization of knowledge throughout the scientific industries and journalism, but then also the distrust towards authority, deep state conspiracies, and the appeal of populism. Looking at the early third millennium, we find the appearance of *the conservative skeptic*—one who doubted the coronavirus data that was reported by the mainstream news. We can then assume that this is the same skeptical spirit which took up flat earth theory in order to redeem the value of one’s own personal

experience. If we say that Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* is the most pronounced idolization of modernization, imperial value, and technocratic governance in science fiction, then Chris Carter's *X-Files* must be the postmodern sequel. Postmodernism allows us to wrestle indirectly with alienation, rootlessness, estrangement, and apathy. Tuning into this entertainment is cathartic. From within our current governance structure, we worship that experience. However, on this point, I am tempted to recall Marx, particularly to his characterization of religion as "*the opium of the people*".

18. **Closing remarks**

Even though we began with Ancient Greek writing, we have nearly brought ourselves up to the present moment. No doubt, even postmodernist entertainment is showing its age. And if this is the case for you, then it must be because this form of political engagement is no longer satisfactory. If this describes you, then I can testify to the fact that you are not alone. What is required of *us* is to refresh the problematizing of *πραξις*—that *doing of the people* which constitutes us as *a people*. No doubt, this salon exists in an effort to problematize *πραξις* once again.

19. **Personal reflection**

When thinking of socialist theory, Marx undoubtedly demands our attention. He is, after all, likely to be considered the greatest philosopher of social economic theory (or, at the least, the one most likely to be targeted by opponents of social economic theory). However, when reflecting on the Ancient Greeks—and *πραξις-πολις* in particular—it is Martin Heidegger who draws my attention. Of course, Heidegger is a controversial philosopher for some; he did have great hopes for the future of national socialism. However, I cannot ignore the fact that coming later than Marx in the history of ideas, Heidegger appears to have had a more thorough understanding of *πραξις*. Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*) is a book which offers us a description of the conditions by which an individual "produces" the world (again, in the Ancient Greek sense of *ποιησις*), but only so from within his spatial condition and on the backdrop of his historical situation. Heidegger was not merely operating with "man" as an utterly free and independent subject (as is the case with Enlightenment philosophers and statesmen), but neither was he operating solely with the concrete economic reality to which any one of us has been thrown into, and to which we have been mechanically destined

to overcome through, say, a proletariat revolution. Liberalism was encroaching on Germany's western border; Communism was encroaching on the east. A bit of posthumous psychoanalysis might tell us that Heidegger was seeking answers to his specific political position in history through his metaphysical description. His description offers a middle ground and does not ignore the real experience of suffering which comes from being alienated from your work, finding yourself without a home, and estranged from the people around you.

Finally, what should be admitted is that the previous exposition on the Ancient Greeks and, in particular, the interpretation of Aristotle's *Πολιτικά* could not have been possible without the scholarship which has followed from Heidegger's lecture course materials on Ancient Greek writing.



If man in the state of Nature be absolute lord of his own person and possessions, equal to the greatest and subject to nobody, why will he part with his freedom and subject himself to the dominion and control of any other power?

The obvious answer is that though in Nature he hath such a right, the enjoyment of the property he has in this state is very unsafe, very insecure.

This makes him willing to quit this condition [within Nature] which, however free, is full of fears and dangers; and, therefore, it is not without reason that he is willing to join in society with others who are already united in the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties, and estates, [those things] which I call by the general name—property.

The great and chief end, therefore, of men uniting into commonwealths, and putting themselves under government, is the preservation of their property; to which in the state of Nature there are many things wanting.



The Essence of the Political: the Enlightenment

20. Characterizing the Enlightenment

As we proceed into the second half of our preparation for this salon, let us remind ourselves of the purpose of our preparation. We seek to distinguish terminology and tools for use within the salon. Therefore, in pursuing this goal, it will be advantageous for us to firstly *characterize* the Enlightenment, and then place this characterization in clear contrast to our characterization of the Ancient Greeks as presented in the first half of our preparation. While such a diametric positioning of these two human economies could, at other times (outside of this salon), be seen as dramatizing the history, our dramatization will still allow us some distance from either one of the historical lineages. We can use this position to then bring into question liberal values, firstly as they were established in the English Enlightenment, and, secondly, liberal values as they came to serve the American Founding Fathers. This is not

with the purpose of rejecting liberal values outright. Rather, we wish to bring into question a certain *historical liberalism* for the sake of establishing for ourselves, for the first time, the essence of the political, as it stands, here in this room.

21. The project of the Enlightenment

So then, from where do we draw our inspiration to characterize, with some level of truth, the project of the Enlightenment? No doubt, from the Enlightenment literature itself. Within that literature, we find a project to liberate the vessel of human potential, that blank canvas which is “the human subject”, the *tabula rasa*—John Locke’s “*white paper*”. The liberation of this subject is promised by way of *rights*. Now, rights themselves exist in many variations—*inalienable rights*, *natural rights*, and also *human rights*, for example. And while history lessons have a reputation to bore, a history of rights will allow us to emphasize the essence of the political, as understood within Enlightenment literature.

22. Inalienable rights

What should be noted is that long before Thomas Jefferson penned *The Declaration of Independence* and announced “*inalienable Rights*” (which are char-

acterized by “*Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness*”), these rights—namely, inalienable rights—once referred to a purely metaphysical or “mental” category—those of “internal” constitution. Internally, these rights referred to the principle that no matter what earthly rule any man found himself under, his inner world was a realm which was inalienably his own. Consider, as an example of these rights, the story of Christ’s forty lashes as he sat on trial before the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate. Upon Pilate’s interrogation into his kingship, Jesus simply replies, “*my kingdom is not of this world*”. Pilate responds, “*So, you are a king, then!*” To which Jesus rebuts, “*You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth.*” With these words, Jesus qualified the domain of his truth as extraterrestrial. Of course, today we might find this mere “mental” freedom as a slave’s freedom. However, what should be admitted is that as a pre-physical category, these rights were absolutely inalienable. However, within Enlightenment literature, we find that these inalienable rights were replaced by the domain of social and material commerce. We could say that the project of the Enlightenment sought to bring this internal “mental” freedom out into the exterior.

23. Natural rights

Within Enlightenment literature, inalienable rights transformed into something natural. Within the writings of Locke, for example, “*the state of Nature*” refers to that of the individual subject’s primordial commerce. This state is governed by *the law of Nature*, “*which obliges every one, and reason, which is that law, [that] no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions* [insofar as each individual is equally independent and equally governed by the law of Nature]”.

Rights, then, in the writing of Locke, seem to refer to the power which anyone has in this state of Nature. Locke understands these rights as to be exercised by two powers. The first of those powers is to do “*whatsoever he thought fit for the preservation of himself and the rest of mankind*”; the second, “*the power to punish the crimes committed against the law* [of Nature]”—and that is to say, the second power is to punish those who violate the preservation of any other individual and the rest of mankind.

The project of the Enlightenment sought to guard these rights (then appropriately named, “natural rights”) from the violence of the state of Nature,

which (again repeating from John Locke's *Second Treatise of Civil Government*) "*is full of fears and continual dangers*" on account that men are "*biased by their interest, as well as ignorant for want of study of [their interest], are not apt to allow of [the law of Nature] as a law*"; and that, furthermore, men are partial to themselves and "*passion and revenge carry them too far, and with too much heat in their own cases, as well as negligence and unconcernedness, make them too remiss in other men*".

24. **The legislative power**

As part of the Enlightenment's liberation project, natural rights were to be secured through human reason. Reason was manifest in the commerce of the human animal as *law*. Locke recognizes in his treatise that every man entering into society with others must give over his power in the state of Nature (as defined above) to the legislative power. Therefore, the first and most fundamental of any law, in the words of Locke, "*is the establishing of the legislative power*" which is to be governed itself by natural law, for "*the preservation of the society and (as far as will consist with the public good) of every person in it.*" The only superior to man was reason, over any king and before any god. The promise of liberation, then,

was to be achieved by way of democracy—a rule of the people.

25. **"a wall of separation between church and state"**

In 1802, Thomas Jefferson penned a now historical letter to the Danbury Baptist Association in Connecticut. In this letter, we find the kernel of what would later become a foundational mantra of the liberal project—the *separation of church and state*. When we learn of this separation at a young age, we are likely to think of the hocus-pocus of religion and the powers of governance. The blessing of the tsar by the priest, or the consultation of oracles before going to war. Yet, any reckoning which these fanciful images provoke fades beyond the playground imagination. Even a staunch rejection of such magic signals immaturity. Instead, what calls for reckoning today is the function with which each half serves within the whole of the dichotomy. We surmise that this functional division must have been clear in Jefferson's mind—a separation of action over-and-above belief,

"Believing that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach **actions**

only, & not *opinions*, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should ‘make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof’, thus building a wall of separation between Church & State.”

26. **Mercantilism**

Of course, when looking at our historical records, we understand that the foundation for this wall had been trenched long before Jefferson’s pronouncement—and yet, its popularity signals a utility. Insofar as the legislative power regulates, curates and develops fair exchanges in the commerce of man, Jefferson’s separation animates a spirit of *mercantilism*. This animation is in favor of a form of governance which, say, animates a community-bodied projection towards the future. Neither does the legislative power animate other functions within man’s union—pronounced are those which the Church meant to satisfy in the whole of human commerce—namely, *hope*, *inspiration*, and *communion*. Indeed, we find in Jefferson’s pronouncement of a separation between church and state a repetition of Locke. The purpose of uniting men under a commonwealth is “*the preservation of their [liberty and their] property*”.

27. **Contrasting Ancient Greece and the Enlightenment**

What should already be clear now—through our project to characterize the Enlightenment as distinct from Ancient Greece—is the central role which *the state of Nature* comes to serve in determining the essence of the political. Within Locke’s *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, it is clear that man is naturally a lonesome creature, and he is one who is naturally separated from other men. Therefore, their communion can be characterized as neither in nature, nor natural. The essence of the political, then, as characterized by the Enlightenment (and attested for through this particular piece of Enlightenment literature), is the “mutual preservation” of property between individuals. This mutual preservation of property, or “commonwealth” is then with the purpose of securing the ideal of justice from the dangers of a savage world. What should not be overlooked is that the legislative power within this commonwealth is concerned with and animates man’s domain—this domain, therefore, not only provides for a domestication of nature within that domain, but also a domestication of each other who we equally call “man”. However, neither should we overlook the prior condition which is necessary for such

a domestication project. What is required is a *negative* characterization of nature and of the nature of the human animal—perhaps, for example, that the natural state of “man” is as a savage. Through both surveillance and punishment, the liberal project can therefore be characterized by overpowering actions, including an overpowering of one’s self, even. Still today, we hear appeals to the savagery of the world, whether the purpose of this appeal is to encourage the necessary protection of one’s property (this is the popular appeal within contemporary discussions on the right to bear arms, for example), or for appealing to a self-sacrifice for *the benefit of the greater good*. We should not be mistaken. Liberalism has, since its inception, problematized savagery.

28. **The problematizing of savagery**

No doubt, liberalism’s problematizing of savagery stands in stark contrast to the Ancient Greek philosophers. Aristotle in particular understood that man is, by nature, a political animal; and, furthermore, that “*the state is a natural growth*”. However, what was left unstated in the first half of our preparation (but is now invaluable to our contrast) is that, for Aristotle, whatever is natural is necessarily *αγαθόν*. It is exclusively from within a communion with nature

that we can produce *the good*. Therefore, in order to bring the Enlightenment and Ancient Greece into clear contrast, let us now simplify the characterization of each of our two periods of political thought. Let us simply contrast *domesticative rights over nature* with a *creative production of the good within nature*.

29. **Intermediate remarks**

When presented with this contrast, you may be feeling a preference to one characterization over the other. Yet, even if this is true, is it not also true that we operate with and make appeals to both liberal and social traditions today? In fact, we do. No doubt, reckoning with these two traditions has created interesting political positions and movements. But let’s be honest, this reckoning has also created confusion. Who is the “true” liberal? The gun-toting libertarian, or the pink-haired and tattooed activist of wokism? In an attempt to clear up *some* of this confusion, let us continue our historical account of the liberal tradition. Over the next few pages, we will consider *the subject* who is to benefit from *rights*: firstly, the individual-subject, secondly the identity-subject.

30. **The individual-subject**

No doubt, the history of what we call the Enlightenment began with an application of the epistemologist's metaphysical subject to the domain of governance. Note that this word, "subject", is a terminological word within the tradition of philosophy. Today, we remember the French philosopher Rene Descartes for setting forth the tradition of *subjectivity*, later further articulated by the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant. While a metaphysics of subjectivity has propelled us towards a virtue of *objectivity* and, in doing so, expedited the project of modernization, we can also understand the perverse consequences of subjectivity.

If we consider the factual life of the philosopher as informing his or her philosophical doctrine (and this is something we should encourage), then we are granted with a useful perspective in which to understand the philosopher's doctrine. If we consider the factual life of Descartes, we find a world characterized by lonesomeness. In recalling Descartes's second meditation, we can imagine a man sat alone, isolated in his apartment. And in such a place of body and mind, he found himself dependent solely on his reasoning faculty—perhaps we could even say

that Descartes was overly dependent and, therefore, unhealthily dependent on his reason. If we consider Descartes's reflections on his fellow man from within this state of being, then we begin to experience for ourselves exactly the perversions which follow from such an over-dependence on the reasoning faculty. No doubt, through a dependency on reason alone, the human animal appears like an alien and mechanical phenomenon,

"...what do I see from my window, but hats and coats which may cover automatic machines? Yet I judge these to be men."

These are the words which Descartes writes! (A philosopher who has, by the way, been called *the father of the metaphysical foundations for science*.) Should there be any surprise that maintaining a subjectivist metaphysics, as we have done, has produced such an enormous administrative machine?

31. **Critiquing liberalism's individual-subject**

We should not be surprised to find the consequence of this subjectivist paradigm the way we do—namely, falling to critique. Of course, the critiques which follow from this paradigm are so commonplace that it is

hardly worth our time to consider, especially here in this salon. And anyway, if we are to remain committed to our goal, then grieving on what is beyond our control is undoubtedly wastefully spent energy. Rather, we should only mention (but not discuss!) the academic critique which has been waged against liberalism—namely, *neoliberalism*—a term which refers to a period of market-oriented reform policies, eliminated price controls, deregulated capital markets, lowered trade barriers, and reduced state influence—especially through privatization and austerity. Nor would we be honoring our goal if we were to discuss the critique offered by the French philosopher, Étienne Balibar, who had announced that following the Bretton Woods institutions and the end of economic nationalism, the legislative power had come under subjection to market demands. Inasmuch, the legislative power had devolved “*from a protective function to a function of destruction of its own civil society*”—a destruction which Balibar characterizes as “*not ‘totalitarian’ in form, but ‘utilitarian’ in form, which is hardly less violent*”. At most, we should consider the critique waged against the subjectivist paradigm offered by James Gustave Speth. As the American presidential advisor on Climate Change, Speth acknowledged that “*greed, selfishness, and apathy*” were causing destruction to

nature. But he also made the quite dramatic claim that in order to correct ecosystem collapse, biodiversity loss, and climate change, what is required is not science but rather a “*spiritual renewal*”. Of course, even if we do acknowledge Speth’s critique against the subjectivist paradigm, we have to ask ourselves, in all honesty, *how else is the individual supposed to manifest himself within market economy?* Putting aside nasty psychological diagnoses such as the ones offered by Speth, we should not overlook the fact that when the value of a product is determined by the market, the individual creator is forced to look towards his activity, his busyness, as the object of his own value. It is no surprise that career success would become the barometer of anyone’s contribution to his or her people. Only, greed or selfishness might just be the wrong diagnoses.

32. **Modification of the individual-subject as the identity-subject**

Let us now leave behind the considerations and critiques against “neoliberalism”. However, in doing so, we should not proceed all too proudly thinking we have singled out our enemy—and that all that is required now is to defeat the libertarians, or the supporters of the Republican party, which favors the

selfishness of the rich over the poor, or those who value personal wealth and careers over the environment. After all, the Democratic Party too carries on the tradition of subjectivity—and it does so in a fashion likely more subversive, yet more pronouncedly, than the libertarian. We only need to acknowledge the domestication project, as it has manifested most radically in the recent past.

There can be no denying that domestication, today, is not merely conducted by way of administrative law, surveillance, and punishment, but is, instead, conducted by way of social justice activism too. In re-defining the subject of liberalism's rights (which, according to the Left-leaning political marketing narrative, is no longer the individual-subject, but is instead the gender, race, or sexually-orientated identity group), social justice activism carries on liberalism's project of domestication. And while this is perhaps a shocking claim, if we are honest with ourselves, then Greta Thunberg-style climate change activism, Black Lives Matter, feminist activism, and LGBTQ+ activism, while positive in their intentions, do maintain a character of *social domestication*. Notice that each of these movements are only possible from a position of liberalism's problematizing of savagery.

33. **Closing remarks**

Of course, perhaps it might be wise, especially at this point, to remind ourselves of the purpose of this preparation. We are here to distance and liberate ourselves from any historical political ideology. This is so that we can establish for ourselves the essence of the political as we encounter it today. Our presumption is that we lack *the way of being political* as presented by either liberal values or socialistic ones. We are neither isolated individuals, nor simply *subject to* and a *product of* our socio-economic conditions. We resist any established and overly-marketed political narratives. After all, our position *here* and *now* is unlike any before.

34. **Personal reflection (postliberalism and the “feminization of politics”)**

All of what has been said over the past 33 sections is, to be sure, *history*. We stand *here* and *now* in the moment of this salon. This means that we are not here to decide if we are socialists, or if we are liberals (in either of the forms which have been discussed). Today, we lack *the way of being political* as presented by either.

For myself, I would like to share a reflection on a recent political activity which has caught my attention. About a decade ago, a network of grassroots urban-based projects began in Southern Europe and rose to their peak popularity and influence in 2017. By way of city-based infrastructural projects, these movements were contesting local elections and winning seats within public offices. Retroactively, these movements were identified by way of a returning socialist ideology from the nineteenth century: *municipalism*. However, and despite the naming, what is important is that these movements had manifested something of a *prefigurative* approach to politics—an approach not *pre* in the developmental sense, such that the configuration is anticipated, but rather as a constant *pre-configuration*. As such, these movements took on something of a *post-liberal* character—one which was beyond liberalism’s *battle of selfishness*. Repeating testimony by way of an anonymous representative of the Naples-based new municipalist movement, Massa Critica,

“[Municipalism] is not a battle for ourselves, for our identity—we are communist, we are anarchist, we are...No. [Municipalism] is a battle directly from the people. For example, I fight for the hos-

pital, I fight for commons, I fight for water. I fight for these single rights. I fight in a near, near way, for some rights where normal people are directly involved.”

Of course, what should not be overlooked is that because these municipalist movements operated outside of the existing administrative government infrastructure, they could appeal to those with agendas extraneous to what is on offer through colonialization and patriarchy. Repeating what was said by a representative of Argentina’s Ciudad Futura,

“[Municipalism offers] the possibility of constructing a new kind of power in society which is precisely in the hands of ordinary people”. A “local governance, which allows for proximity” and “allows us to project our experience on another scale”.

These two passages have been pulled from a paper published in 2019 by Bertie Russell, titled *Beyond the Local Trap*. I would now like to focus on one section from this paper, titled *The Feminization of Politics*. Firstly, what should be obvious is that this “*feminization*” is quite liberal in character. Plus, Russell explicitly says that, “*the most visible aspect of*

the ‘feminization of politics’ is ensuring that women play a prominent role throughout leadership and representative positions”. Of course, it does feel as though Russell is pandering to those resonating with Left-leaning narratives. However, not to be mistaken, this “*visibility*” does not exhaust the value of such a “feminization”. And after all, what we find upon deeper inspection is that such optics are grounded upon a much more profound and novel political activity. I will repeat again the anonymous contributor of Argentina’s Ciudad Futura,

“[The feminization of politics] managed to turn the conversation about feminism around, about the need for a society of equals where the struggle isn’t anchored in the liberal, from the point of view of individual rights. Rather, it’s the opposite, the idea of a model for society.”

And from Russell herself, we read that,

“The feminization of politics speaks to a shift away from a politics of separation—*they* govern, from afar, alienated from the everyday—towards the politics of proximity—*we* govern, in a close way, connected to the experience of the everyday. It is

fundamentally a radical democratic concept, one that puts a focus on transforming *how* decision-making takes place, who has a right to speak, and how we engage with one another.”

It could be said that the successes of the new municipalist movement signaled for me a potential transformation of modernity’s *grand politics*. They also help us to picture for ourselves a future where politicians might stand beside their public (on both social media and in public gatherings, for example), but not above them, as we find animate in technocratic forms of democracy. Therefore, I say let us join in the “*feminization of politics*”—but I also suggest that we find a new name. I would like to see a new political movement, perhaps one already within one of the existing political parties, which is not grounded in *correcting* deficiencies or discrepancies in gender, race, and/or sexual orientation in the political canvas, but one that is rather grounded in *creative production* by way of civic engagement. At heart, I am an artist and a creator. I am also a futurist.

Congratulations and Personal Disclosure

This, then, is the preparation for our salon. However, before we proceed to the open discussion, I want to take just a few minutes to say congratulations. I do believe this is in order. After all, there can be no doubt that it takes a bit of curiosity, courage, and naivety, or perhaps some other strange cocktail of predispositions, to bring into question our most sacred and cherished values—whether those be our liberal values, or some others. The fact that you are still here, and together with me, signals to me that each of you respect the goal of our salon, and that you also respect each other who are here together with us, in pursuing our goal.

Of course, given my presentation, there is no hiding the fact that I, myself, am animated by theories of *πραξις*; but this also means that I am interested in approaching the questions of politics a bit differently. I am less interested in discussing values, which are often considered irrefutable. Whether we identify as a progressive or as a conservative, a liberal or a socialist—these “value packages” carry a lot of baggage. And, to be honest, I believe that I am looking at

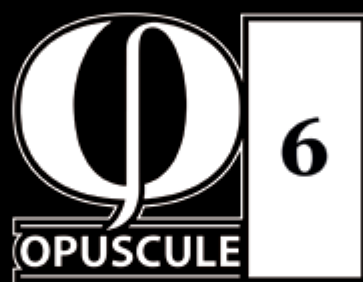
something deeper and more foundational. I understand that values are conditioned by *πραξις*—by our way of *being political* as a people in the commerce of the *πολις* (whether we define the *πολις* as our neighborhood, our city, our nation, or our Western world).

“How are we *being political* today?”

Leads to the question,

“How would we like to be politically engaged in the future?”

—Justin Carmien, November, 16th, 2021



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