ALGERNON SIDNEY A SEVENTEENTH CENTURY SYNTHESIS OF ARISTOTLE AND MACHIAVELLI

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Abstract: This study explains the evolution of Algernon Sidney's political thought. It offers some insights into his understanding of the works of Aristotle and Niccolò Machiavelli and of republican thought in general. By giving a contextual reading of his political philosophy this article contributes to a better understanding of republican thought in England. It also presents the key arguments against absolute monarchy presented by Algernon Sidney, notably in his *Discourses Concerning Government*. This work can be seen as a point-by-point refutation of Sir Robert Filmer's work justifying the absolute power of kings. Lastly this article contributes to understanding why Algernon Sidney's thought had an influence on the founding fathers of the United States and how his political philosophy influenced modern republicanism despite its relative obscurity today.

Keywords: Sidney, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Filmer, republicanism, liberty

Algernon Sidney: A Seventeenth Century Synthesis of Aristotle's and Machiavelli's Political Thought

The question of defining what is meant by modernity in political philosophy is still a debated one. There is no consensus on when political modernity begins and what it means exactly in terms of ethical values and theoretical positions. Some view it as a break with the past, especially with the teachings of Plato and Aristotle. For example, Leo Strauss affirms that modern political philosophy can best be described in negative terms and as a rejection of classical positions: "[A]ll modern political philosophies belong together because they had a principle in common. This principle can be stated negatively: rejection of the classical scheme as unrealistic" [1]. In this article

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[1] Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?* Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1959, p. 40.

we will present the case of a modern republican thinker, Algernon Sidney (1623-1683), and his efforts to bring together the ancient and the modern in his *Discourses Concerning Government*. In this work of political philosophy, first published more than a decade after his death, Sidney attempted to adapt certain pro-democratic and republican arguments found in Aristotle's *Politics* and *Nicomachean Ethics* to his own times. The efforts of Sidney consisted in discrediting the authoritarian and monarchical views of Sir Robert Filmer (1588-1653) as found in his *Patriarcha*. In this book, Filmer defended the idea that the divine right of kings was the only legitimate political option for humanity. He went so far as to suggest that monarchy was also viewed as the best regime by Aristotle and that when this philosopher distanced himself, even slightly, from pro-monarchical positions, he was wrong. To understand Sidney's defence of republicanism, that often consisted of an original combination of ideas taken from the works of Aristotle and Niccolò Machiavelli, it is first necessary to get a better understanding his historical context.

The Historical Context of Algernon Sidney's Life and Work

In the mid 17th century, major political and military uproars erupted in England following Charles I's defeats in various political entanglements. These reversals and failures forced him to reconvene Parliament. He attempted to reassert his authority, legitimate his reign, and validate his policies. The circumstances were not favourable to stabilization. A rebellion soon broke out in Ireland, followed by a brutal civil war between rival factions, the Puritans, and the Anglican order. Beaten and humiliated on several fronts, both militarily and politically, the monarch was eventually handed over to his opponents, tried by a Rump Parliament and ultimately executed. This event sent shockwaves across Europe that was dominated by monarchies. Beginning his political reign with the elimination of several royalists, Olivier Cromwell soon established a republic (1649-1658) and suppressed any hint of rebellion. What Sidney would, among others, later describe as the despotism of the Lord Protector, did not last for very long. The continual crisis culminated in the restoration of the monarchy in England. These transformations were, in many ways, harbingers of the coming French Revolution. For example, philosophers and historians such as Montesquieu and Rousseau, among others, were directly inspired by the British intellectuals and activists of that time. They began to speculate about political alternatives to absolutism. The English political radicals, led by Harrington,

Sidney, and Locke, among others, frequently discussed themes, such as popular consent and freedom, that would later be taken up by the Enlightenment in Europe. Initially attracted to the Cromwell's regime, as it claimed to possess republican characteristics, Sidney and other radical intellectuals became disillusioned and eventually broke ranks with the powerful despot. In this tumultuous situation, Sidney chose to exile himself to the continent, both to pursue his philosophical studies and to wait out the political storm. Sidney later confided his deepest thoughts and feelings to a Frenchman, Jean-Baptiste Lantin, during some exchanges in the late 1670s. The most important biographer of the republican thinker, Jonathan Scott, summarizes Algernon Sidney's state of mind at the time. It gives us a window into his mind. He describes Sidney's dreams for a free and republican England as follows: "What Sidney said makes it clear that he believed he had been involved, not simply in a great struggle for English liberties, but in an historic political experiment which had made the whole of Europe look Westwards with alarm" [2]. His upbringing also prepared him for the challenges of the era. Sidney's early and active involvement in politics and war made him a privileged witness to the affairs of state. He was learning the mechanisms of politics while still a child. The regular trips with his father, an ambassador in Europe, especially his visits to France, gave him a view of the world of politics and diplomacy. Later, he abandoned his military career, finding that the orders given by the monarch and his counsellors were irreconcilable with his ethical outlook of politics. He fundamentally disagreed with how the kingdom was being governed without the consent of the people.

On parting ways with the Lord Protector and his regime, he withdrew from active political life and devoted himself to the careful reading of classical works of philosophy. In this way, and others, he compensated for his shortened formal education by delving into the works of various philosophers, particularly Aristotle, but also later republican writers such as Machiavelli. It was the beginning of a profound reflection on politics, power, and history that he later synthesized in the *Discourses Concerning Government*: "It was from Aristotle's *Politics* that Sidney, like Milton, took his basic political categories: the 'three simple species', monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy (in Aristotle 'polity'), the one, the few, and the many" [3]. This Aristotelian intellectual legacy concerning politics, we contend, was later transmitted to

[2] Jonathan Scott, *Algernon Sidney and the English Republic, 1623-1677*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 248.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

Europe and North America, in part, through the diffusion of the writings of Algernon Sidney. It is important to mention that to promote political ideas that went against absolutism and favoured republicanism was a risky endeavour in the mid 17th century. In the case of Sidney, his elaboration of republican ideas and his promotion of freedom led to his trial and execution. The key piece of evidence that was used against him was the unpublished manuscript of the *Discourses*, seized illegally by the authorities. They used his own private writings against him and condemned him for being seditious and for promoting regicide among many other accusations. Sidney was sentenced to death. He soon became a martyr for the cause of freedom.

As Quentin Skinner, J.G.A. Pocock, and other historians of political thought have pointed out, an appreciation of the historical context is a prerequisite to understanding the intentions of an author. In a sense, a study of the political career and the causes the thinker championed during his lifetime, help the interpreter to understand the meaning of his works. For example, an analysis of the trial against Sidney shows that the royalist judge resorted to underhanded manoeuvres by referring to several passages of the manuscript of the *Discourses*. The pages served as a prosecution document in the case against Sidney. The accused claimed that he had no intention of ever publishing the manuscript and that it consisted of private musings on politics. Considering the weak evidence and the other legal irregularities in the case, the court should have dropped the prosecution. Moreover, the second prosecution witness failed to appear in court. No clear evidence of treachery or sedition was ever presented to the judge [4]. Some contextual details, taken from his biographers, historians, as well as from commentators of Algernon Sidney's political works, will allow us to better understand the political meaning of his republican writings.

All his life, Sidney was a committed campaigner for freedom and fought against the abuse of absolute power, especially by monarchs. His reputation as a politician and intellectual had its ups and downs in his native country of England. Elsewhere, he gained some degree of posthumous fame. In contrast to England, he was often warmly welcomed in the rest of Europe and America. His writings were avidly studied by intellectuals and men of action. This, however, was a relative fame, for, as Caroline Robbins noted, Sidney's writings gradually fell into comparative oblivion: "Many historians couple Sidney's name with Locke's, but seldom explain his importance or influence. It is doubtful if the *Discourses* stands by the *Essays* on any modern

[4] *Cf., Ibid.,* p. 313.

shelf of required reading" [5]. In his political writings, he tended to refer to the pressing issues of his time and compared them to similar examples taken from antiquity. Sidney often used history and philosophy to guide his ethical and political thinking. This was part of what makes his work both engrossing and confusing at the same time. Moreover, he was an important actor in England's many martial exploits in the war against the Netherlands. Sidney viewed these triumphs as major achievements, comparable to what Athens and Rome had previously performed in antiquity. These cities often defeated more powerful and despotic enemies. The successes of the English republic confirmed his preference for a regime subject to laws established by Parliament and supported by the popular will of citizen soldiers. He concluded from his political observations that ancient republicanism had repeatedly demonstrated its moral, political, and military superiority over authoritarian regimes. The comments by Sidney, among other things, pointed to his attraction to classical antiquity and to the principles which animated political freedom in Athens and Rome. He believed that these principles had a universal and timeless value.

Some Recurring Themes of Algernon Sidney's Thought

According to Sidney, politics must be guided by a certain moral code. On this topic, Sidney was directly inspired by Aristotle's *Politics*. Aristotle emphasized the benefits of a constitution to which people have consented freely. It informed his definition of the citizen: "For this reason our definition of citizen is best applied in a democracy; in the other constitutions it may be applicable, but it need not necessarily be so. For in some constitutions, there is no body comprising the people, nor a recognized assembly" [6]. Tyranny, for both thinkers, was opposed to reason, liberty, and justice. Power and authority should be conferred only on those who possess excellent abilities and who are trusted by the people. They should not be selected by virtue of birth or solely because of their wealth. Like Aristotle, he disapproved of the deviated form of monarchy as much as of pure and unregulated democracy. For Sidney, monarchy naturally tended towards tyranny. The moral foundations of politics, and ethical considerations in general, were central to his thought. He

[5] Caroline Robbins, "Algernon Sidney's Discourses Concerning Government: Textbook of Revolution", *The William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 4, no 3, 1947, p. 227.

[6] Aristotle, *The Politics*, translated by T.A. Sinclair, revised and re-presented by Trevor J. Saunders, London: Penguin books, 1992, p. 170 (1275b 5-8).

believed, as did Aristotle, that good legislators should be masters of ethics and psychology. During his exile on the European continent, for example, Sidney came to extol the merits of Aristotle's rational and ethical political thinking. This sensitivity to moral issues and the importance accorded to human reason is noted, among others, by Blair Worden: "Like Locke, Sidney looked to politics to raise men above beasts and to secure the victory of reason and understanding over passion and will" [7]. In Sidney's view, political legitimacy was always based on the informed consent of the multitude. Without this consent, no government could last for long. When he sat in Parliament, for example, he insisted that all votes be preceded by a debate.

Sidney understood that the legislator worked in the service of the common man. For example, concerned with the material conditions of soldiers, Sidney generally sympathized with the economic demands of the regular combatant. He tended to favour the cause of the middle class. He agreed that only where such a class existed could one find a stable and free government. Otherwise, the tensions between the haves and the have-nots would be too great to manage. His preoccupation with liberty and equality pushed him oppose various attempts to bring Parliament under the control of the military. Thus, in his own practice, he put the common good of the ordinary citizen at the centre of his policy positions. Drawing on Aristotle, Sidney believed that popular rule was beneficial when the community was composed of reasonable men. Giving power to one man in this situation was unreasonable: "But if this excellency of virtue do not appear in one […] the right and power to is by nature equally lodged in all; and to assume or appropriate that power to one […] is unnatural and tyrannical, which in Aristotle's language comprehends all that is detestable and abominable" [8]. Although he considered monarchy could sometimes be a just form of government, Sidney thought Aristotle did not unconditionally favour the monarchical form. For him, if a people could lead a virtuous life, hereditary monarchy was never suitable. It was too defective: "Hereditary monarchy, however, over a people who were capable of virtue, and therefore of liberty, was objectionable to Sidney not simply for denying men the God-given liberty to rule themselves, but […] 'irrational in itself'" [9]. In the *Discourses*

[7] Blair Worden, "The Commonwealth Kidney of Algernon Sidney", *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 74, no 1, 1985, p. 22.
[8] Algernon Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government*, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1996, p. 453.
[9] Scott, 1988, *op.cit.*, p. 39.

Concerning Government, the English people are described by Sidney as free and relatively equal men who, through a common history of struggle against tyranny, have always preferred freedom to subjugation.

The social and political animal that is man cannot live alone, nor happily, under the domination of another person without degrading himself and his fellow citizens. A free man needs the protection of a community to which he adheres of his own free accord. According to Sidney, to obtain this collective well-being and harmony, he consciously gave up part of his freedom in exchange for stability and security. In many ancient civilizations, according to Sidney, the gregarious nature of the human being binds the individual to his fellows and leads the newly formed community to first institute a kingship. During the progressive steps that lead from servitude to freedom, men did not collectively possess the knowledge and virtue to set up better regimes. Time, experience, and collective tribulations would demonstrate that superior ways of governing themselves were not only possible, but also highly desirable. The men themselves, having taken the steps to give authority to one of their own, it is up to them or their descendants, Sidney maintained, to change the situation. They could then adopt another, more suitable and beneficial, regime.

Sidney shared with Aristotle the aim of reducing the effects of the arbitrariness expressed in the excessive desires of rulers. Aristotle distinguished between the animal and the rational aspects of man. He considered that leaders often tended to lower themselves to the level of beasts. He therefore preferred the government guided by laws rather than simply to the will of men: "Therefore he who asks law to rule is asking God and intelligence and no others to rule; while he who asks for the rule of a human being is importing a wild beast too" [10]. The tyrant was nothing more than a wicked king, fallen to a bestial level and governing in his own self-interest. His will overruled the law. The tyrant was also characterized by his incapacity to control his baser and more violent desires. For example, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle reiterated his aversion to tyrannical rule, a repugnance that Sidney fully shared: "In the case of the deviations, in the same way as what is just exists there to a small degree, so too does friendship, and it exists least of all in the worst one: in tyranny, there is little or no friendship" [11]. In such regimes there was little justice, and what laws existed,

[10] Aristotle, 1992, *op.cit*., p. 226 (1228a 28-31).

[11] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by Robert C. Bartlett and Susan B. Collins, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011, p. 180 (Aristotle, 1161a 30-33).

reflected the interests of the ruler. Men became suspicious of one another and, most of all, feared and hated their ruler. Tyranny was, for Aristotle and Sidney, the worst possible regime. Indeed, when the people lived under the power of a tyrant, there was no real political community or freedom. Distinguishing, as did Aristotle, between the different forms of government, Sidney emphasized their unique features. In a well-balanced mixed regime, the rights and liberties of the people were protected by good laws that encouraged virtue. Sidney recommended that the governed should not tolerate arbitrariness: "[N]o government was thought to be well constituted unless the laws prevailed above the commands of men; and they were accounted as the worst of beasts, who did not prefer such a condition before a subjection to the fluctuating and irregular will of a man" [12]. We can therefore see that Sidney was convinced that the only way to escape the tyranny of absolute monarchy was to go back to the political wisdom of Aristotle and the Greeks.

Following Aristotle, Sidney distinguished between power exercised over individuals capable of using their reason and power exercised over humans who do not possess this capacity. Where such capacity is completely lacking, despotism is the only possible political outcome. In presenting the case for republicanism, Sidney argued that English liberties were based on a long tradition of popular consent, going back even further than the Normand conquest. Sidney saw the English people, as Aristotle generally saw the Greek citizens. They were, in his view, essentially born free. The struggles of the English nobility, as well as of the rest of the population, against the abuses of kings throughout history are proof of the free nature of the English people. He also took up Aristotle's idea that a numerous, hardworking, and moderate middle class promoted political stability and fairness by strengthening the authority of the law and of established political institutions that promote freedom: "The state aims to consist as far as possible of those who are like and equal, a condition found chiefly among the middle people. And so therefore the best run constitution is certain to be found in this state" [13]. If the sovereign did not rule in the interest of the multitude, especially of what Aristotle called the "middle people", it was even legitimate to overthrow him. For Sidney, when equal men adopted a popular form of government, the political results were always optimal. He found in Aristotle's works an ally in his argument against Filmer and absolutism. He also believed that collective virtue was transmissible: "As a man begets a man, and a beast a

[12] Sidney, 1996, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
[13] Aristotle, 1992, *op.cit.*, p. 267 (1295 b 22-27).

beast, that society of men which constitutes a government upon the foundation of justice, virtue, and the common good, will always have men to promote those ends" [14]. Sidney thus endorsed Aristotle's idea that the sovereign must serve the people who elevated him. As we have seen, Aristotle preferred the government of good laws over the will of man. Moreover, he was apprehensive about the risks associated with the government of one individual. Even aristocratic government was more desirable: "Now the aristocracy which we dealt with earlier in this work is aptly named, for this name is justly given only to that constitution which is composed of those who are without qualification best in virtue" [15]. Sidney, at various times, seemed inclined to reject any form of monarchy, no matter the circumstances. He believed it went against reason and was only suitable for the most primitive type of men. In his view, monarchy lent itself more easily to weakness, and deviated rapidly from the guidance of good laws. Sidney also believed that monarchy, especially when not mixed with other, less arbitrary forms of government, tended to have numerous disadvantages.

Whether the whole population participated whether an elite of virtue dominated, or whether a single, exceptional man, governed, depended on various conditions, social, political, and ethical. Relying in part on the authority of the best elements of the society, Sidney was often in favour of mixed forms of government, provided that the various components respected certain precise proportions. In other words, an equilibrated, mixed regime, was one in which no single faction dominated or oppressed another. When the people did not feel oppressed by the rich or the elites and sensed that their voice was heard in political matters, stability and prosperity could be increased and maintained. As regards the designation of a given political mixture, he gave it, following Aristotle, the name of its predominant constituent element in the body politic. Balance was the key concept for Sidney and informed his political thought: "The liberty of one is thwarted by that of another; and whilst they are all equal, none yield to any, otherwise than by a general consent. This is the ground of all just governments; for violence or fraud can create no right" [16]. He held a lifelong grudge against corrupt kings who were often susceptible to vices, and who, misguided by the flatterers they generated, were leading their people towards servitude. His view of tyrants was directly inspired by the vision of Aristotle. They were the

[14] Sidney, 1996, *op.cit*., p. 112.
[15] Aristote, 1992, *op. cit*., p. 257 (1283b 1-5, 257).
[16] Sidney, 1996, *op.cit*., p. 31.

worst men and he condemned them: "They who naturally incline to pride and cruelty, are more violently tempted to usurp dominion; and the wicked advices of flatterers, always concurring with their passions, incite them to exercise the power they have gotten with the utmost rigour, to satiate their own rage" [17]. Those with authoritarian tendencies were tempted to take power by force.

Of course, according to Sidney, monarchy was not the only regime that lent itself to corruption. But corruption was more probable in a monarchy. In his discussion of this key distinction between regimes, Sidney attached great importance to Aristotle's idea that everything depreciated over time. This was especially the case with things that are defective at their roots: "[A]ll governments are subject to corruption and decay; but with this difference, that absolute monarchy is by principle led unto, or rooted in it; whereas mixed or popular governments are only in a possibility of falling into it" [18]. When a ruler is corrupted, the defeatist and apathetic attitude of the people is likely to make the political situation worse, encouraging vice and destroying what is left of virtue. The people gradually lose the will to defend their rights and to resist oppression, thus increasing the abuses of power. Sidney agreed with Machiavelli when he stated that the process of corruption took longer for those who once lived freely. Machiavelli explained that liberty is long remembered: "[S]uch a city [a once-free city] always has as a refuge in any rebellion in the name of liberty and its ancient institutions, neither of which is ever forgotten either because of the passing of time or because of the bestowal of benefits"[19]. The primary way to prevent such corruption and decay from occurring in the first place was to uphold the laws and maintain political freedom for all citizens.

For Sidney, the unalienable right of the people to defend themselves against the excesses of a corrupt ruler was essential to the maintenance of the political community. The disadvantages associated with popular resistance to tyranny were, according to Sidney, far less grave than the perpetuation of injustice. All men have a right to live freely if they choose: "[N]o human condition being perfect, such a one is to be chosen, which carries with it the most tolerable inconveniences: And it being much better that the irregularities and excesses of a prince should be restrained or suppressed, than that whole

[17] *Ibid*., p. 234.
[18] *Ibid*., p. 189.
[19] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, translated and edited by Peter Bondanella, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 19.

nations should perish by them" [20]. For Sidney, the multitude feared above all the loss of freedom at the hands of a tyrant or sometimes a corrupt and greedy oligarchy. According to Sidney, this recurring fear of ordinary people is justified, for there is never a shortage of ambitious and cruel men. Sidney was committed to the cause of liberty and spoke out against monarchy mainly because of the risk it posed to human freedom. Based on an original reading of Aristotle, Sidney considered it unjust for a monarch to arbitrarily interfere with the natural freedom of man. The welfare, security, and respect for the freedom of citizens must be the main priorities of any sovereign worthy of the title: "But if the safety of nations be the end for which governments are instituted, such as take upon them to govern, by what title soever, are by the law of nature bound to procure it" [21]. The true magistrate and ruler, according to Aristotle, was one who was devoted to the service and happiness of the governed. This is the point of distinction between a just king and a tyrant who does care not for the people: "A king aims to be a protector - of the owners of possessions against injustice, of the people against any ill-treatment. But a tyrant, as has often been said, does not look to the public interest at all" [22]. The righteous leader upholds the laws and forbids the mistreatment of the people. For Sidney, the popularity of the righteous leader rested on his devotion to his subjects. According to him, such monarchs were the exception in human history. These rare leaders respected the people. In this way, Sidney took up Aristotle's idea that the ruler must follow reason, apply the laws, and govern fairly. If he ruled according to these simple political principles, all men would be loyal to him: "But if kings desire that in their word there should be power, let them take care that it be always accompanied with truth and justice. Let them seek the good of their people, and the hands of all good men will be with them" [23]. Filmer's monarchist doctrine cared not for such political and ethical distinctions. What mattered to him was the obedience of the people to the rightful heir to the kingdom. If he ruled like a tyrant, the people must endure it no matter what.

Directly equating and justifying paternal and royal powers, Filmer often asserted that God sanctioned monarchic power in every nation and for all time. Any questioning or rebelling against this notion was viewed as sacrilegious and seditious. Often mixing religious arguments with

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[20] Sidney, 1996, *op.cit*., p. 523.
[21] *Ibid*., p. 405.
[22] Aristotle, 1992, *op.cit*., p. 335 (1311a 1-5).
[23] Sidney, 1996, *op.cit*., p. 365.

philosophical propositions, Filmer argued that the monarchical regime was the only suitable form of government for humanity. Sidney criticized each of Filmer's main theses and argued in favour of republicanism. Simultaneously, Sidney explicitly sought to restore the ancient principles of political science. This implied the ability to demonstrate the obscurantism of the absolutists. Sidney presented the total fallacy of Filmer's propositions: "And that it may be evident that he [Filmer] hath made use of means suitable to the ends he proposed for the service of his great master, I hope to shew that he hath not used one argument that is not false, nor cited one author whom he hath not perverted and abused" [24]. According to Sidney, Filmer did not clearly distinguish between economic and political ends. He notably confused the management of the *oikos* (the household), the governance of the family and its servants, with that of a state or kingdom. To put it in other words, Filmer believed there was only a quantitative difference between these two forms of government. Managing a household, a city or a state was essentially the same thing for Filmer, except for the scale and number of subjects.

Filmer insisted on the idea that all authorities had their ultimate source and justification in eternal patriarchal laws that instituted the head of the family. The monarch was to the nation what the father was to his children within the household. To prove this, he argued, one must go further back in history than the Greek world of antiquity. One should go back to the time of Adam: "Not only until the Flood, but after it, this patriarchal power did continue – as the very name of patriarch doth prove. The three sons of Noah had the whole world divided among them by their father" [25]. Filmer took the biblical story of Creation very seriously and in the religious era in which he lived in, even his most brilliant opponents dared not repudiate it openly. Nonetheless, both Sidney and John Locke believed that the conclusions Filmer arrived at, based on his literal interpretation of biblical stories, were erroneous. Filmer did not simply rest his case on religious texts, mysticism, and revelation. Even though he claimed to be fundamentally inspired by Aristotle's *Politics*, he never hesitated to denounce Aristotle when he departed, even slightly, from Plato's authoritarianism. Indeed, Plato tended, in some passages of the *Republic*, to associate the power of rulers to that of a wise and just paternal figure guiding his children. Disobedience to the ruler was viewed as an act of ignorance and insubordination to a father figure.

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[24] *Ibid*., p. 7.

[25] Robert Filmer, *Patriarcha and Other Writings*, edited by Johann P. Sommerville, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 7.

Political and Religious Questions

Quite keen not to miss any argument made by his monarchist opponent, Sidney followed Filmer's narrative back to the time of Moses, a religious and political leader whom he mentioned often. Sidney also noted that it was the ancient Israelites themselves who pleaded with God to send them a strong monarch to rule over them as in foreign nations. After some time, God eventually complied with their demands but with an ironic twist. He granted them what they desired by sending them tyrants rather than rightly guided monarchs. He did this to punish them for putting their faith in the power of men rather than in him. The ancient Israelites were choosing to put their faith in an idol rather than in their deity. According to Sidney, by doing so, they were demonstrating their lack of faith and were duly punished. As Perl-Rosenthal, an interpreter of Sidney explains, Sidney insisted on God's preference for republican governments and went so far as to completely exclude any other type of regime: "Using sacred history and a selective account of Europe's past, the second half of *Discourses Concerning Government* advanced a fully fledged republican exclusivist argument" [26]. In presenting arguments in favour of political systems that valued freedom and equality, Sidney tended to downplay the differences between the different mixed forms of government of the ancient Hebrews and those adopted by other societies. He argued that the government of the chosen people was often aristocratic and mixed rather than purely monarchical, and therefore, Filmer was mistaken. He inferred that God allowed the tribes of Israel to choose a form of government other than monarchy, thus undermining the theological basis of Filmer's argument. Continuing his criticism of Filmer, he sometimes drew on Calvin's writings and those of other theologians, protestant and catholic, to suggest that the theocratic government of the Hebrews also had a democratic component: "After the death of Solomon all Israel met together to treat with Rehoboam; and not receiving satisfaction from him, ten of the tribes abrogated his kingdom" [27]. The point made here by Sidney was to illustrate that the power to make and unmake monarchs rested with the majority of the

[26] Nathan R. Perl-Rosenthal, "The Divine Right of Republics: Hebraic Republicanism and the Debate over Kingless Government in Revolutionary America", *The William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 66, no 3, 2009, p. 540.
[27] Sidney, 1996, *op.cit*., p. 128.

tribes, who, according to Sidney's understanding, represented the fundamental political will of the people of Israel.

In any case, Sidney concluded that God accepted several nonmonarchic forms of government as legitimate. On this basis, he felt entitled to freely assess the merits of different regimes throughout history. He often chose to concentrate on the Athenian model, which stood out from the rest. Also, there were undeniably arguments in favour of popular power to be found in Aristotle's writings. There were also many important criticisms of monarchical rule: "When kingships are destroyed it is most often from within, and in two ways : one, when those who participate in the royal rule form factions among themselves, the other when kings try to run affairs too tyrannically" [28]. Sidney went on to affirm that monarchs tended to run affairs in an authoritarian manner when they went beyond their legal rights. For his part, Filmer argued that the authority and sovereignty of a king is almost limitless. At the very least, he argued that none of the subjects nor any of the institutions within the body politic have any right to limit his power in any way. The absolute monarch is, according to Filmer, the source of all power. Any rights given to the people are merely royal concessions. Sidney believed that Aristotle and other philosophers thought that the people should ideally have a say in political matters. They could change regimes whenever they wanted. Rather than addressing this difficulty, Filmer turned to other passages in the *Politics* that seem to him to be favourable to autocratic rule. In doing so, however, driven by the fixed idea of the sanctity of absolute monarchy, he tended to distort several Aristotelian ideas on politics and freedom.

Thus, according to Filmer, Aristotle, when attacking monarchy, contradicted himself. This procedure, typical of Filmer's writings, reveals his complete political dogmatism. When Aristotle affirmed anything that might enhance monarchical power, Filmer judged that he was on the right path. In contrast, whenever Aristotle developed arguments in favour of freedom, equality, or the merits of non-monarchical regimes, he was simply wrong or confused. Who better than the master Plato, firmly believed Filmer, to bring his rebellious disciple back to some good sense. Filmer argued that all governments were derived from a divinely ordained paternal power. He therefore allowed himself to invalidate the proposals of authors whom he sometimes respected for other reasons. Thus, for Filmer, neither merit nor the will of the people ever justified political power. Only the birthright of a royal lineage could legitimize the absolute power of a king over his nation.

[28] Aristotle, 1992, *op.cit*., p. 342 (1312b 38 – 1313a 2)

Therefore, the people were obliged to submit to the king and to resign themselves to the abuses he inflicted upon them: "There is, and always shall be continued to the end of the world, a natural right of a supreme father over very multitude" [29]. For Sidney, these patriarchal ideas are completely false. Laws apply to all men, including the monarch: "Nay, all laws must fall […] and all innocent persons be exposed to the violence of the most wicked, if men might not justly defend themselves against injustice by their own natural right, when the ways prescribed by publick authority cannot be taken" [30]. The idea of power being instituted to serve the will of autocratic authorities was, according to Sidney, both naïve and irresponsible. History is filled with tyrants and corrupt rulers that have left the people no legal mechanism to resist or remove them. Therefore, he believed that power must be controlled by the law and, ideally, there should be a legal mechanism for removing a depraved sovereign. If not, armed revolt and political rebellion was permitted.

According to Aristotle, a city is not built all at once. It takes time to complete itself politically: "The final association, formed of several villages, is the state. For all practical purposes the process is now complete; self-sufficiency has been reached, and while the state came about as a means of securing life itself, it continues in being to secure the good life" [31]. Many peoples, depending on the degree of virtue they possessed, were condemned to live under despotic rulers until such time as they no longer tolerated authoritarian practices and were prepared to adopt a superior regime. In the context of our examination of the political oppositions between Sidney and Filmer, the deviation from monarchy to tyranny accentuated by Aristotle is key. Even in passages where the appreciation of monarchy is clearest, Aristotle warned against its tyrannical elements. These passages should prevent us from admitting that, according to Aristotle, a monarchy could legitimately be absolute, hereditary, or divinely ordained. Inheriting the throne by right of primogeniture has nothing to do with the ability to rule in the best interests of the multitude. Even a good monarch, or one of his descendants, affirmed Aristotle, eventually turned into a tyrant. The longevity of a monarchy depended mainly on its ability not to overstep certain legal boundaries, and to respect the rights and property of its subjects. If it abused its power, it lost all legitimacy.

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[29] Filmer, 1991, *op.cit*., p. 11.
[30] Sidney, 1996, *op.cit*., p. 340.
[31] Aristotle, 1992, op.cit., p. 59 (1252b 27-32).

At the end of this section, we can confirm the vigour with which Filmer, in *Patriarcha*, manifested his admiration for the absolutism of his era and throughout human history. For him, other forms of government were not only inferior, but unacceptable. When Aristotle began to weigh the pros and cons, to dissert, to make comparisons, Filmer lost all patience and severely reproached him for not concluding on any political topic. For Filmer, when Aristotle drew any political conclusions, he attributed them to others, without stating his own opinions clearly. What irritated Filmer the most was that such a voluminous philosophical work, written by such a penetrating author as Aristotle, rarely mentioned the merits of absolute royalty and often tended to discuss the merits of other political regimes. Sidney wished to set the record straight and correct his opponent. Thomas West, who wrote the preface to the *Discourses*, affirms, for example, that John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, two of the Founding Fathers of the United States, praised Sidney as a strong advocate of human liberty: "Sidney was emphatically a political man and a partisan of republicanism. For a century and more he was celebrated as a martyr to free government, as Socrates is still celebrated as a martyr to the philosophic way of life" [32]. Among other things, Sidney emphasized Aristotle's focus on the question of the number of virtuous citizens existing in each city at a given time to determine the best regime. As soon as these citizens existed in sufficient numbers, the exercise of power should be equally shared among them. From his reading of Aristotle, Sidney considered the respective merits of the different political regimes: "But Aristotle speaking like a philosopher, and not like a publick enemy of mankind, examines what is just, reasonable, and beneficial to men" [33]. Sidney notably took up the idea that Aristotle was an authentic and profound philosopher, whereas Filmer was simply a confused proponent and ideologue of absolutism, mixing dogmatism, mysticism, and sophistry to justify absolute monarchical power. This kind of critical stance towards absolutism has led several commentators, notably West, to point out the proximity of Sidney and John Locke's respective political doctrines. However, West also points to some differences, particularly the attention Sidney paid to the fragmentation of power in mixed regimes. Locke focused his attention more on the criticism of royal abuses of power and its possible remedies. Sidney's vision, according to West and others, was closer to the classical authors than was Locke's: "[Sidney] restates

[32] Thomas West, "Foreword", in Algernon Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government*, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1996, p. xvi.
[33] Sidney, 1996, *op.cit*., p. 452.

a classical teaching shared by Aristotle, Cicero and others. In the classical scheme, the division of powers is based on social classes" [34]. Considering what we have learned so far, it is not surprising, therefore, that Sidney joined Cromwell's revolt against absolutism. He devoted his life to the principle that Parliament was the only source of political legitimacy. A biographer of Sidney, John Carswell, affirmed the correctness of these views, but nonetheless questioned his devotion to republicanism: "[A]s throughout his subsequent life, the determining factor was his devotion to the new idea of Parliament as the sole legitimate source of authority. Republican in the strict sense he may not have been, but there can be no doubt about his opposition to King Charles" [35]. This political involvement with Charles I's opponents did not disable Sidney's moral compass. The ethical breaking point came when Cromwell awarded himself the title of Lord Protector. According to Sidney, Cromwell behaved like a tyrant and was surrounded by flatterers.

The Political Hopes of Sidney

Sidney hoped for a republican outcome to the English political crisis of his era. He believed that the defence of the country from its enemies and of Parliament would lead to a freer England. Thus, the value and freedom of ancient Greece and Rome would be reborn in a new and prosperous context. Ultimately, his hopes were crushed, and the monarchy restored. Actively involved in politics as an officer, member of parliament and diplomatic ambassador, Sidney became a key figure of resistance to tyranny during his lifetime. It was during this period that Sidney formed an informal alliance with famous people such as Vane, Petty and Harrington, among other illustrious political figures. It was as a hardworking legislator who based himself on philosophical principles taken directly from the writings of Aristotle, Cicero, and others, that Sidney wanted to be remembered. The failure of the republican cause, exile, and execution at the hands of a restored monarchy in England prevented him from realizing his political and ethical dreams. Only his writings, and their influence on future generations remained, especially in the case of the *Discourses*. As Blair Worden argues, although Sidney's reputation was never exceptionally great in England, his sacrifice and doctrine made him a leading political thinker elsewhere. He was

[34] West, 1996, *op. cit.*, p. xxvii.

[35] John Carswell, *The Porcupine. The Life of Algernon Sidney*, London: John Murray Publishers, 1989, p. 57.

welcomed on both sides of the Atlantic, by such political luminaries as Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Jefferson. This legacy to future generations was his key contribution. As Worden puts it: "[T]he posthumous reputation of Algernon Sidney is a Continental as well as an English one. Sidney's *Discourses* […] were often printed in translation […] and it was partly through them that Montesquieu found his way back to the political humanism of Machiavelli" [36]. As suggested earlier, as a participant in England's exploits in the war with the Low Countries, Sidney viewed them in retrospect as an achievement comparable to the military successes of republics in antiquity. As Worden points out, Sidney's admiration for Greece and Rome, and their political freedom, were mainly inspired by the republican works of Niccolò Machiavelli: "As his conception of corruption might suggest, Sidney's thought is profoundly influenced by the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli: not the Machiavelli of *Il Principe* […] but the republican Machiavelli of the *Discorsi*" [37]. It was also as a reader of the classical philosophers previously mentioned in this article that Sidney argued that a free people benefited most from the right to assemble for deliberation. It was often the case that charismatic individuals in power had tyrannical plans and ambitions. Sidney believed that the people had the right to rebel against all forms of despotism. Regardless of culture, religion or geographical location, disobedience to tyranny was justified on the level of fundamental philosophic principles.

By contrasting the golden ages of Greece and Rome with some of the more degrading episodes of mid 17th century England, Sidney pointed to the inherent corruption of his time. In his view, the virtuous peoples of the ancient world only declined when they stopped actively defending their freedom. He insinuated that his fellow countrymen were setting themselves up for more decadence and weakness if they hesitated to wage a struggle against oppression. The best political principles of civilized mankind must, according to Sidney, be reclaimed by the men of his own era: "Sidney's call to resistance rests on a radical contract theory […] His thesis, although buttressed by extensive historical support, appeals ultimately not to history but to reason"[38]. Like Machiavelli, and much like his republican contemporary, John Milton (1608-1674), Sidney considered tyranny so odious that he justified popular revolt. For Machiavelli, popular revolt, however horrible it might be, was usually better than passive resignation to the dictatorship of a tyrant. As he

[36] Worden, 1985, *op.cit*., p. 2.
[37] *Ibid*., p. 18.
[38] Ibid., p. 16.

stated: “I say that every city ought to have its modes with which the people can vent its ambition, especially those cities that wish to avail themselves of the people in important things” [39]. Sidney differed slightly with him in that, for him, regicide was only permissible if it was a question of preserving fundamental rights and liberties, and if the people had absolutely no other choice. For him, absolute monarchs, were always power hungry. They wanted to retain a strict monopoly on political power: “It seems absurd to speak of kings admitting the nobility or people to part of the government: for tho there may be, and are nations without kings, yet no man can conceive a king without a people. These must necessarily have all the power originally in themselves” [40]. He did not hesitate to denounce all excessive regimes, especially monarchies.

Sidney often adopted Aristotle’s traditional sequence of regime transitions, starting with the archaic monarchy, and ending with more popular and free forms of government. In a small city, still in the process of political formation, it was likely that the most virtuous person could have been offered supreme authority with few restrictions to his power. However, in Sidney’s view, this situation was unlikely in a large city where morals were far more refined and developed. As the people increased in number and developed their political and ethical views, it was likely that they would desire to restrict monarchical power and its abuses. This could become a critical situation, requiring considerable efforts on the part of the people. According to Sidney, what qualified a person to be at the helm of the state was virtue rather than wealth or birth. For him, absolute power was closely linked to nepotism, servility, and patronage. Since the holder of absolute power was accountable to no one, he always took advantage of it to serve only his interests. According to Sidney, a free, equal, and rational people would never accept arbitrary political power: “But ’tis madness to think, that the whole body [politick] would not rather to be as it was when virtue flourished, and nothing upon earth was able to resist their power, than weak, miserable, base, slavish, and trampled under foot by any that would invade them” [41]. This presentation of his arguments allows for a much clearer idea of Sidney’s critique of Filmer’s absolutism, as well as of many of the political arguments that made him popular in republican circles.

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[39] Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998, I, 5, 17.
[40] Sidney, 1996, op.cit., p. 287.
[41] *Ibid*., p. 190.

The heated political debates in England in the mid 17th century pitted the proponents of absolute monarchy by divine right against the supporters of republican forms of government. While the latter had a rich doctrinal diversity, they generally promoted constitutions that were conducive to the active participation of the people. For the theme of freedom, Sidney's strategy consisted in demonstrating the absurdity of Filmer's positions. Indeed, he often began his arguments by pretending to admit the validity of Filmer's propositions to better undermine them later. If, as we have seen, Sidney agreed with Aristotle that it was crucial that the constitution and laws were adapted to the nature of the citizens of a given time and place, the republican regime possessed decisive qualities. Affirming the freedom of all citizens, it was the regime that was most appropriate where virtuous and educated men were found in large numbers. In other words, the better and more virtuous the men, the more necessary it was to adopt a republican constitution. Here is the basic reasoning behind these propositions. According to Sidney, the descendants of Adam learned to manage their affairs according to their own laws. They were free to disregard or change them, according to their needs. This position was in stark contrast to Filmer's authoritarian vision of politics.

Concerning the compatibility between freedom and law, Aristotle proposed an idea central to republican thought, later taken up by Machiavelli, Milton, Sidney, and many others. For a republican, aristocratic or mixed regime to last, Aristotle argued, there must be a balance between democratic and oligarchic forces. This implied, first, that the rich do not further oppress the poor and that the latter do not attempt to systematically despoil the rich. Hence the importance of the middle class. Sidney argued that governments were created for the benefit of the people who established them. Consequently, they could be overthrown when they became tyrannical and dispossessed the majority. If a political leader assumed absolute power without the consent of the people and sought to satisfy his own desires, he lost his legitimacy. As the primary guarantors of the welfare of their subjects, rulers were obliged to take responsibility and the ruled were obliged to check their power: "The Athenians and the Romans, as was said before, were so far from resigning the absolute power without appeal to themselves, that nothing done by their magistrates was of any force, till it was enacted by the people"[42]. Filmer's monarchist position, as we have seen, is fundamentally incompatible with these considerations. He submitted the rights and liberties of the people to the sovereign by divine right. For him, this supposed divine right should

[42] *Ibid*., p. 394.

be enough for free men to submit willingly to his authority. The author of *Patriarcha* did not believe that freedom was an inherent quality in human beings. Only the ruler of a nation had a measure of authentic freedom granted to him directly by God. Yet, Sidney replied, history is full of examples of free and industrious peoples who were able to freely, and legally, establish governments other than absolute monarchies.

Following Aristotle, Sidney valued the figure of the legislator, who assumed the responsibility of enacting good laws and guaranteeing the rights and liberties of the people. According to Sidney, a free citizen could never accept indefinite submission to the abuses of a monarch. Such submission was only achieved through coercion. On this point, the recurring theme of "oriental despotism" also appeared, inspired by certain passages in which Aristotle discussed the stability of corrupt regimes. There was a limit to repeating, as Filmer often did, that Aristotle was merely passing on the opinion of others when discussing the merits of different regimes and cities. Indeed, this required ignoring too many passages of his political and ethical works. Passages where, for example, Aristotle denounced the unnatural, unbalanced, and unfair character of the absolute power of an individual over his subjects. If there was a political lesson to be learned from Aristotle, Sidney affirmed, it was that the granting of absolute power to a monarch, reduced men to mere servants. Similarly, if most wise philosophers agreed that citizens were sometimes unequal, the inequality in question related to their varying degrees of virtue and was not attributable to birth. In other words, Sidney argued that while Aristotle posited a certain qualitative difference between some men, he did not thereby justify that any one man could, or should, dominate all others. Sidney was prepared to accept that merit could sometimes justify the position a political leader temporarily occupied, but only if he remained worthy of it. This merit must be recognized by the people, not simply affirmed by flatterers.

According to Sidney, tyrants subjugated large portions of the earth and reduced men to the condition of slaves. For him, to praise such evil rulers, as Filmer did, was a moral perversion. Presumably, Filmer believed that stifling the freedom of the people was enough to avoid sedition. However, as this article has demonstrated, Sidney's reading of Aristotle led to the assertion that no free man would agree to surrender his rights. The free individual received these goods from nature and from God. Thinkers like Harrington, Milton, Locke, and Sidney associated absolute monarchy with a form of political idolatry. Absolute monarchy was thus considered a corrupt and blasphemous regime. The fact that political institutions sometimes allowed a

tyrant to be removed from office and a man chosen for his qualities to take his place gave Sidney some measure of hope. He also remarked that the threshold of endurance of a community to oppression varied from one people to another. Without being too optimistic, he believed that insurrections led by virtuous men could eventually overcome tyranny and oppression. Aristotle saw the participation of the people in politics as a sign of freedom, since it implied that they chose their leaders from among the most virtuous. Free and equal men naturally preferred democracy, in which everyone enjoyed equality before the law and exercised power in turn. Sidney detected in Filmer a logic of political opportunism that instrumentalized the Christian religion to legitimize the absolute power and abuses of monarchs. This increased the servitude of the people. In contrast, Sidney attempted to validate his perspective of God and freedom: "[W]e may justly conclude that God having never given the whole world to be governed by one man […] we may safely affirm that the whole is forever left to the will and discretion of man: We may enter into, form, and continue in greater or lesser societies" [43]. In addition to borrowing elements of history and a certain democratic impetus from Aristotle and Machiavelli, Sidney found, especially in the writings of Machiavelli, something to flesh out and complete his republican doctrine.

Kingship, at the dawn of human civilization was deemed entirely appropriate. It needed to change when more virtuous men appeared in larger numbers. A perspective that was incompatible with Filmer's, for whom absolute monarchy was the only, and unsurpassable, model. Sidney looked to Machiavelli for elements to complete his republican vision. At the heart of his considerations was the freedom of the people to institute a regime that most pleased them. Achieving and maintaining the support of most of the population through good governance was a precept endorsed by Machiavelli and Sidney. Both thinkers were inspired by Aristotle. Let us point out the important role played by Machiavelli in the adoption of the idea that liberty was best preserved in a regime that left power in the hands of the people. Although Machiavelli also suggested that doing evil may be necessary and perhaps advantageous in certain circumstances, Sidney was not tempted to condemn him outright for such statements. He saw in Machiavelli a penetrating political mind that approved the actions of virtuous leaders. This willingness of Machiavelli to promote evil behaviour in certain circumstances tended to generate distrust in Sidney, insofar as it departed too much from Aristotle's ethical doctrine. Felix Raab, a specialist of Machiavelli and

[43] *Ibid*., p. 56.

English political history, presents Sidney's nuanced relationship with Machiavelli's ethical thought: "Sidney was the 'classical' republican *par excellence*, with no feeling whatever for the shifting possibilities of political life. He cites Machiavelli on civic virtue as a necessary prerequisite for republican 'liberty', on the moral superiority of 'a Scipio' over a 'a Caesar'"[44]. This mixed reaction to Machiavelli's writings runs through all of Sidney's work. Referring to certain passages in the *Prince*, Sidney stated that good princes, who possessed superior intelligence, always surrounded themselves with wise advisors. Monarchs who lacked proper political education were unable to distinguish right from wrong or to perceive good advice. Following this logic, Sidney insisted on the Aristotelian legacy and argued that no man was perfect and even the best political leaders could make mistakes. Drawing on the works of Aristotle and Machiavelli, Sidney argued that the earliest human communities that sought to organize political life took the form of loosely settled groupings and large families. These newly unified peoples assembled themselves into confederated villages and, gradually, into large cities and ultimately a city state or empire. These first steps in politics were not based on any mystical view of humanity and did not point to any eternal, God-given, form of government, such as Filmer claimed was the case. The monarchical system, no more sacred than any other, it had its advantages and obvious flaws. For Sidney, when we look at history, we can observe that many peoples, in their political beginnings, gave themselves monarchs, due mainly to the primitive conditions in which they found themselves.

During their political development, people discovered that better regimes were possible. The willingness to institute such regimes was a sign of the attainment of a higher degree of collective wisdom. It pointed to the refinement of the ability to choose leaders and to establish just institutions: "Tho it should be granted, that all nations had at the first been governed by kings, it were nothing to the question; for no man or number of men was ever obliged to continue in the errors of his predecessors" [45]. Although Machiavelli often asserted that republics were not the product of pure philosophical imagination, he still agreed with Plato that one must sometimes return to the essence of a thing if one is to understand its nature. This also applied to republics, which he believed had a better chance of enduring if the changes that affected them brought them back to their founding principles. Siding

[44] Felix Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli, a Changing Interpretation, 1500-1700*, London-Toronto: Routledge – University of Toronto Press, 1965.
[45] Sidney, 1996, *op.cit*., p. 459.

more with Aristotle on this point, Sidney suggested that Machiavelli underestimated the potential for political and ethical improvements. In politics, the same ethical principles could be good in various situations. There was therefore an advantage in sticking to the principles of the past that demonstrated their benefits, while also looking for ways to improve them. According to Sidney, Machiavelli rightly noted that everything in this world, including political bodies, were subject to degeneration and demise. However, innovations could help good regimes to last longer. As Sidney affirmed: "No natural body was ever so well temper'd and organiz'd, as not to be subject to diseases, wounds or other accidents, and to need medicines and other occasional helps as well as nourishment and exercise" [46]. The Machiavellian idea of a return to the original perfection of institutions perhaps points to a certain affinity of the Florentine with the metaphysics Plato.

Sidney was always sceptical of the legitimacy of monarchies, especially when they were absolute, believing them to be detrimental to the happiness and prosperity of the people. This type of regime tended to deviate from the natural end of a political community. It was necessary to respond to popular dissatisfaction when it arose, which could sometimes mean changing institutions to make them compatible with the principles of the good life according to Aristotelian philosophy. For Sidney, Filmer supported the indefensible when he equated monarchy with fatherhood, religion, and divine justice. If he neglected his duty to look after the welfare and happiness of his subjects, the absolute monarch was unworthy of his station. For Sidney, the use of royal titles was meaningless unless it was based on the admiration and respect of the people. Like Aristotle, Sidney argued that there was probably a time, at the dawn of mankind, when monarchy was the only way for backward peoples to achieve some political cohesion and happiness. When a ruler was corrupt and the laws he established, outdated and unjust, Sidney recommended that people first attempt to resolve the situation by exhausting all legal avenues for change. In some ways, he adopted Machiavelli's idea that skillful adaptation to changing circumstances was the true sign of a politician's wisdom. Sidney noted that tyrants are usually unwilling to give up control or change their behaviour, which ultimately makes them bad leaders. In such situations, Sidney encouraged the people to use force to regain their rights: "But those who seek after truth, will easily find, that there can be no such thing in the world as the rebellion of a nation against its own

[46] *Ibid*., p. 462.

magistrates, and that rebellion is not always evil" [47]. Here Sidney attempted to revise the pejorative meaning most thinkers tended to attribute to the term 'rebel' and 'rebellion'. Sidney spoke rather of the idea of 'resuming hostilities' referring to the natural reaction of a people who have been constantly abused by their ruler. Thus, in the pursuit of collective happiness, political rebellion to tyranny was sometimes the only possible method of obtaining freedom. For example, the Founding Fathers of the United States justified their rebellion against the British crown following this idea, as can be clearly seen in the *Declaration of Independence*. For these leaders, political freedom had become unattainable under the rule of a monarch. Among the objections to sedition raised by monarchists such as Filmer was the idea that it was dangerous for the people to allow themselves to revolt against the monarch or to establish a new regime. To counter this idea, Sidney argued, drawing on the writings of Aristotle and Machiavelli, that in all regimes, power ultimately rested on popular consent. According to Sidney, the people who established a monarchy can overthrow it if necessary, especially when it devolves into a tyranny. Aristotle, Machiavelli, and Sidney dealt in a very similar way with the problem of what political reforms were needed to ensure the longevity of any regime. In opposition to this shared view, Filmer believed that efforts to reform or overthrow monarchies always have worse effects than the abuses of established authoritarian regimes.

Concluding Remarks

The unapologetic disapproval of tyrants is thus a key point of agreement between Aristotle, Machiavelli, and Sidney. All three philosophers conceived that a king could, and should, respect the laws, protect his people, and constantly prove himself worthy of his high office. It should be noted in passing that, in Machiavelli's works, the reference to cunning and force is merely an observation describing how princes maintain their position in a hostile world. A people composed of free and relatively equal men could not support for any extended period the kind of regime that Filmer advocated. Aristotle, Machiavelli, and Sidney also agreed that tyrants knew how to make themselves hated by their people. Moreover, they shared the idea that associated the figure of the tyrant with deceit and the use of force against the ordinary citizens. Rarely opposed to Aristotle, Sidney did sometimes disapprove of Machiavelli's more subversive ideas. He was particularly uncomfortable with the apparent promotion of deceit and fraud by the leader. He referred to Machiavelli more readily when he perceived him denouncing

[47] *Ibid*., p. 519.

those who crushed freedom, justice, and the legal foundations of well-organized states. In this respect, we can recall passages in Machiavelli's *Discourses* where he argues that Roman emperors with tyrannical tendencies were never able to surround themselves with enough guards to fully protect themselves from the wrath engendered by their despotism and cruelty. We can thus see that Aristotle's influence on Sidney was fruitfully combined with Machiavelli's views on politics.