

Political Philosophy & Political Art

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The origins of an intellectual preoccupation with public affairs are common: *e. g.*, Plato, Thucydides and Sophocles do belong, recognisably, to the same human horizon or ‘culture’. Until the final decay of the Roman Empire – signalled by Stoicism and Christianity – a non-political art and a non-political philosophy would be an *Unding*. Moreover, a flight from politics is possible only in circumstances where the state is a separate institution and citizens cannot take direct responsibility for the running of public affairs even if they wanted to. Democracy is possible only where there is no state. Plato was the first to propose a state, but this was at the time only a utopia.

But his ‘state’ was based on truth as opposed to the *sensus communis* of the *ekklēsia*, controlled by solid criteria of excellence regarding knowledge. Our term, ‘power’, cannot be translated into ancient Greek.

Modern political writing comes about when there is a state, therefore civic consciousness (*sensus communis*) is

illusory, and when our ability to discover and to enunciate truth is doubted and belief in such an ability is deemed naïve.

The mere question, ‘politics or not’, denotes the absence of democracy (or, if you wish, the absence of a ‘republic’ or of *‘homonoia’*), and it will result in either the politicisation of the non-political or, conversely, in the aestheticisation of the political, a peril discovered long ago by Walter Benjamin.

Today, at one extreme you’ll find what I might call ‘the Czech idea’ (Hrabal, Havel and Kundera) where freedom means freedom from politics – quite in the classical Stoic manner – and at the other, the political rejection of the currently dominant politics as oppression and injustice, in the classical manner of the Left.

Freedom from politics in the late antiquity was an expression of living under tyranny, but ‘the Czechs’ believed that this might be valid also ‘under’ democracy. Democratic freedom as an escape from democratic politics? It is strange, illogical, but significant.

This is what we must explain.