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RETHINKING THE CANON: CONTRIBUTION OF CLASSICAL CIVILIZATION TO THE FORMATION OF WESTERN POLITICAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT. This study seeks to deconstruct the linear "Great Books" narrative in the history of Western political thought using Reinhart Koselleck's lens of *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history). Through a biography-of-ideas analysis, it traces the transformation of key concepts such as justice, citizenship, and sovereignty across three layers of civilization: Greco-Roman, Islamic, and Judeo-Christian. The findings suggest that modern Western politics is not a direct, static inheritance from antiquity but the result of "conceptual alchemy"—a process of meaning sedimentation where Greek rationalism was filtered through Islamic administrative and philosophical lenses, synthesized by scholastic theology, and finally secularized during the *Sattelzeit* period. Hence, we argue that contemporary political crises are manifestations of temporal and linguistic mismatches between inherited classical concepts and a modern state machinery that has lost its historical consciousness. Consequently, the "West" must be understood not as a monolithic entity but as a discursive palimpsest shaped by cross-cultural collisions and translations.

Keywords: Western Political Thought; Koselleck; Greco-Roman Civilization; Islamic Civilization; Judeo-Christian Civilization.

INTRODUCTION

More and more political scientists are turning back to the past to better understand the roots of contemporary Western political issues. The rise of authoritarian populism (Baro & Jenssen, 2025), democratic fatigue and the resulting openness to authoritarian rule (Malka et al., 2022; Wuttke et al., 2022), the erosion of political trust (Valgarðsson et al., 2025), political inequality (Elsässer & Schäfer, 2023), and affective polarization (Gidron et al., 2023)—all are increasingly read as manifestations of political structural tensions formed centuries ago rather than mere modern anomalies. In this discourse, following Toynbee's (1946/1974) thesis that the most comprehensive unit of historical analysis is neither the nation-state nor the individual but civilization, classical civilizations—spanning antiquity (8th century BCE–5th century CE) and medieval (5th–15th centuries CE)—are often regarded as the primary locus for the formation of Western political foundations.

This mainstream discourse specifically associates antiquity with Greco-Roman civilization, whereas the medieval period is linked with the Judeo-Christian tradition. A range of canonical thinkers, from Plato and Aristotle to Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas, are recognized as the principal architects who formulated the vocabulary of Western politics (Carlyle & Carlyle, 1903/2016; McClelland, 1998; Wood, 2011). Although they did not separate political speculation from the kind of measured observation that today would be considered empirical political science, they established the archetypal patterns of what we now recognize as the "Western political tradition": the rule of law as a binding norm, political authority based on legitimacy rather than pure dominance, a conception of citizenship linking rights with active participation, and the conviction that the political order can and should be rationally criticized (Lane, 2014; Wood, 2011).

Much of the literature regarding Western political identity rests on a narrative we might call the "Great Books" tradition, a teleological scheme that posits a direct and linear inheritance of classical ideas from the Greco-Roman world to the modern liberal state (Harlan-Haughey, 2014). Through the lens of classical education as championed by Leo Strauss and Allan Bloom, Western civilization is understood as a "Great Conversation" spanning three unbroken millennia. It assumes that twenty-first-century citizens can engage directly with Plato or Cicero because the true nature of political humanity has never changed. It also treats the movement from the Greek *polis* to the Roman *res publica*, and ultimately to the Enlightenment state, as a purposeful perfection of human freedom. From this vantage point, rather than layers of conflict, the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian heritages are complementary currents that ultimately converge into the modern democratic ideal. This creates a sense of shared civic continuity and cultural literacy, and through it, a bulwark against moral and cultural relativism.

A notable consequence of this narrative is its propensity to portray political evolution as a linear phenomenon exclusive to the Western world

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(Ghazanfar, 1991; Yavari, 2019). This produces a significant lacuna in which the significance of "other" civilizations, such as (and indeed especially) Islam, is frequently diminished. The standard narrative tends to leap from late antiquity to medieval, casting the Islamic world as little more than a "warehouse" that mechanically preserved Greek texts until Europe was ready to retrieve them. Yet during the Islamic Enlightenment (8th–14th centuries), there occurred an intense process of original research and philosophical reinterpretation. Translators and philosophers under the Abbasid Caliphate did not merely seek equivalents for source texts; they synthesized meaning with their own knowledge and experience, reframing Aristotelian political philosophy within Islamic metaphysics and jurisprudence and integrating it into debates on prophecy, law, and the virtuous city (Aly, 2023; Ghazanfar, 1991; Goldstein, 1980; Yavari, 2019). When these thoughts re-entered the Latin Christian world, they carried an Arabic intellectual charge that fundamentally transformed scholastic theology and Western political organization.

This article thus attempts to challenge the "Great Books" narrative by drawing upon Reinhart Koselleck's primary theses regarding historiography and temporality. Koselleck (2002) argued that historical reality is not a linear sequence of events, but a structure of differentiated functional relationships, stratified and capable of undergoing varying speeds of acceleration and deceleration, where social and political conflicts are reflected in the evolution of language. Through the concept of *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history), he emphasized that concepts—in this case, political concepts—possess layers of time or "sediments of meaning" (*Zeitschichten*). A term may maintain its lexical stability for centuries while undergoing radical semantic transformations in response to changes in the "space of experience" and the "horizon of expectation." The tension between the continuity of language and the change in meaning is what enables the acceleration of concepts, particularly during transitional periods (*Sattelzeit*), where classical terms are transformed into "combat concepts" (*Kampfbegriffe*) used to legitimize new orders.

Building on this framework, the present article argues that what we call the "Western political tradition" is in fact a temporal hybrid, a *contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous*, in which sedimentations of Greco-Roman, Islamic, and Judeo-Christian thought continue to collide and shape the dynamics of power beneath the surface of the modern state. Through processes of translation and theological reinterpretation, ancient concepts such as law, citizenship, republic, and sovereignty were accelerated and transformed into the "asymmetric counter-concepts" of modern statecraft. This means the current Western political structure is not a simple descendant of classical antiquity; it is neither purely Greco-Roman nor Judeo-Christian. Instead, it is the result of a kind of "conceptual alchemy," a transformative process where the translation of Greek logic through Islamic science, the reinterpretation of Hebraic covenant law into Christian political theology, and the subsequent secularization of these ideas during the formation of the centralized state created instruments of governance that would be largely unrecognizable to their original initiators.

A few acknowledgments are necessary before proceeding. This argument is not intended to reject historical continuity, let alone discard the existing canon. Modern political theory did indeed develop through a long evolution of reflections from the ancient world (Carlyle & Carlyle, 1903/2016; Wood, 2011). However, continuity is not synonymous with linearity. Acknowledging a canon does not mean accepting its dominance uncritically, just as rejecting the canon outright obscures the historical fact that certain ideas did acquire a hegemony of their own. What matters more is recognizing that this dominance has a history—one shaped by specific social relations, conflicts, and practical needs. It is on these grounds that this article does not attempt to catalogue biographical details of individual thinkers or merely provide "historical background." To understand the Western political tradition historically, we must examine how these currents shaped one another. From this we establish the premise that understanding political theory means uncovering the concrete preoccupations that thinkers faced within their specific historical contexts. This article therefore seeks to illuminate the points at which these concepts met, collided, and ultimately changed form.

The structure of the article follows this logic. The first section explains the research design, data sources, and conceptual-historical analysis techniques employed. The sections that follow examine, in turn, the contributions of Greco-Roman, Islamic, and Judeo-Christian civilizations. The placement of Islamic civilization in the second position, despite being chronologically younger than the Judeo-Christian roots, is a deliberate strategic choice to demonstrate its role as a catalyst that enabled late scholastic thinkers to reconceive political authority. The analysis is conducted through the *Begriffsgeschichte* framework to show how each civilization reshaped the political lexicon it inherited. With this revisionist approach, the study rejects

teleological history and offers a narrative of mediated transformation, in which political categories are understood as contingent historical products rather than fixed and immutable inheritances.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative-interpretative approach grounded in Reinhart Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history) as its primary analytical framework. In contrast to traditional histories of ideas that treat concepts as static entities, this framework dissects political concepts as "sediments of meaning" that undergo temporal transformation through processes of acceleration, deceleration, and semantic shift—attending to the synchronization between the "space of experience" of the past and the "horizon of expectation" emerging at each cultural intersection.

Data were collected through a textual study of canonical works representing the three pillars of classical civilization, contextualized within the socio-political structures of their respective eras. Building on this corpus, we applied a comparative-diachronic analysis to trace the intellectual biographies of key lexicons—such as *polis/civitas*, *lex*, *imperium/dominium*, and *covenant*—identifying "asymmetric counter-concepts" and the linguistic tensions that arose as these texts migrated across languages, from Greek to Arabic and from Arabic to Latin. By foregrounding the contingent nature of history, the methodology aims not merely to describe terminological change but, more fundamentally, to demonstrate that lexical stability often masks radical semantic transformation—thereby providing a historical explanation for the contemporary crisis of Western political identity.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Greco-Roman Civilization

Systematic reflection on Western politics is customarily traced back to Ancient Greece. This is not because the Greeks were the first to contemplate politics, nor because they held a monopoly on such reflection, but because it was from this specific geographic space and historical period that the vocabulary framing political analysis and aspirations (particularly in the West) was born. It was in Greece that a distinctive Western political tradition was partially created, characterized by meticulous definitions, adversarial argumentation, and the application of critical reason to question the legitimacy of traditional moral rules and political rights (Lane, 2014).

What primarily made this civilization such a rich site for political thought was the structure of Greek politics itself. Unlike modern nation-states, which are massive and centralized, Greece consisted of hundreds of independent city-states (*polis*), whose territories and settlements typically combined an urban center, usually walled, with a surrounding agrarian hinterland. Social cohesion in Greece was secured through loyalty to this *polis*. It is unsurprising, then, that Greek thought up until the time of Aristotle was dominated by religious and patriotic devotion to the *polis*; its ethical systems were tailored to the life of the citizen and possessed a significant political element. However, the level of individual freedom within these states varied. In Sparta, freedom was severely restricted, perhaps approaching the conditions of Nazi Germany or Russia. In Athens, although slavery was still rampant, citizens during its peak periods enjoyed an extraordinary degree of freedom from restrictions imposed by the state.

The most famous *polis*, during the classical era and thereafter, was Athens. From the early 5th century to the late 4th century BCE, it developed a direct democracy with the people's assembly (*ekklesia*) at its center. Citizens had the right to speak and vote; many public offices were filled by lottery to ensure rotation and equality of opportunity, while even positions requiring specific competence, such as generals, were chosen by vote. Critics of the time may have had a point that this was excessive, as the equalization of public and military office selection left Athens weak in the latter's affairs. This culminated in their conquest by Sparta in 404 BCE during the Peloponnesian War, which lasted 27 years (431–404 BCE). Indeed, unlike Athens, which focused on political affairs, Sparta made war the sole business of its citizens, for which they were prepared from birth. The Athenians, who were far wealthier in culture and science compared to the Spartans, mourned the defeat and destruction of their *polis*. Nevertheless, this military defeat actually stimulated extraordinary intellectual growth. Deep reflection on the collapse of the political order drove the birth of the most sublime political thoughts from Plato and Aristotle.

However, before reaching those two, we must first understand Socrates as the main catalyst. Rather than continuing his father's work as a sculptor, he chose to spend his time in dialectic with leading intellectual and political figures, including aspiring youths, to expose the glaring contradictions in everything they claimed to be true or wished to pursue. This process, in turn, helped dismantle what

could be called anomalies in the logic of the Athenian *polis*. Amidst a democratic culture that emphasized persuasion and quantitative support, as practiced by Sophists such as Gorgias and Thrasymachus, Socrates asserted that good decisions must be based on knowledge (*episteme*), not merely the majority vote. Politics, for him, was not about rhetoric for short-term collective gain, but the pursuit of individual virtue as the true good. This critique was radical for its time: it revealed the tension between procedural legitimacy and substantive truth. Because of this, around the age of seventy, Socrates was accused by several fellow Athenians of violating the laws of the *polis*; he was found guilty by a jury of his peers and sentenced to death by drinking hemlock.

As a verbal philosopher who left no writings behind, our knowledge of Socrates depends heavily on the dedicated—even somewhat excessive—documentation by his loyal student, Plato. Growing up during the Peloponnesian War, coupled with the personal wound of Socrates' tragic death, Plato sought solutions to the political injustice and widespread decline of his era. His work *The Republic* became the first masterpiece in Western political philosophy and represented the first classic attempt by a European philosopher to moralize political life. He identified the democratic system as the cause of Athens' defeat in the war. In its place, he turned his gaze toward non-Athenian *poleis* like Sparta as a rough sketch of his idealized state, and even non-Greek Egypt—or at least Egypt as understood by the Greeks (Wood, 2011). The best state, since he believed Goodness and Reality are eternal, is the one that is the closest copy of its otherworldly model, and its leaders must be those best able to understand that eternal Goodness. This is why Plato believed the leader must be a *philosopher-king* that specifically trained from childhood for leadership. Other humans must be trained for other roles in the city, such as soldiers, merchants, craftsmen, and farmers.

The way Plato's ideal state was run appears close to what we know today as communism. He demanded that the ruling class live simply, without private ownership of property or family, to prevent conflicts of interest and social jealousy. For the rest of the population, though they were not wealthy, there was no reason to be unhappy; the goal of the state's regulations was the welfare of all, not just the pleasure of a specific class. Extreme wealth and poverty were seen as equally destructive to political cohesion. Due to his rejection of private property among rulers and his emphasis on the moral unity of the city, Plato is often accused of being a predecessor to totalitarianism. However, such a reduction ignores its normative dimension: he was a keen analyst of the corruption of desire, the instability of democracy, and the dangers of power without virtue. For Plato, the state must be oriented toward virtue, and virtue is derived from knowledge. That is why education becomes the most fundamental political institution.

Plato's ideas were then challenged by his own loyal student, Aristotle. Man, according to him, is a *zoon politikon*, a creature that by nature lives in a political community, so the state is needed as a means to actualize that nature. Like an organism, he said, a hand is said to no longer be a hand when the body is destroyed; the hand must therefore be defined by its purpose—namely, to grasp—which can only be done if the hand is connected to a living body. Similarly, an individual cannot fulfill their purpose unless they become part of a state. On this basis, throughout his masterpiece *Politics*, he emphasized the importance of the state as the highest type of community aimed at the highest good. He considered those who founded and maintained the state to be the greatest benefactors, because without law, man is the worst of animals, and the existence of law depends on the state.

Unlike Plato's deductive and idealistic approach, Aristotle was more empirical and comparative. In *Politics*, he collected and analyzed various constitutions of the *poleis* to understand variations in forms of government. Therefore, unlike Plato, who was binary in assessing the goodness or badness of a regime, Aristotle offered a more flexible typology of regimes. He distinguished three correct forms—monarchy, aristocracy, and *politeia*—and three deviant forms—tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy in a degenerative sense. However, his categories were not rigid; many regimes were mixed. He recognized that monarchy by a philosopher-king, as idealized by Plato, might be morally ideal but was nearly impossible to realize. Therefore, a law-based and constitutional mixed form, balancing oligarchic and democratic elements, was more realistic and stable. Every regime can degenerate into tyranny, whether a tyranny of the minority or a tyranny of the majority, if not limited by a constitution and civic education. Education, for Aristotle, aims to form practical rationality (*phronesis*) capable of choosing the mean between extremes.

Although the landscape of modern Western thought exhibits vast variations, the core of what we consider the classics remains rooted in the tradition of political theory shaped by the Greeks. By creating a new identity of citizenship, for instance, this tradition compelled Western man to continuously question the meaning of political participation, the distribution of

rights, and whether the hierarchy between the ruler and the ruled is natural or merely a social construct (Wood, 2011). Furthermore, questions regarding the law and the supremacy of legal order; the distinction between political organizations based on violence or coercion and civic communities resting on deliberation or persuasion; and the nature of man and his suitability (or unsuitability) for political life—all these inquiries emerged from the daily reality of life within the *polis* and remain salient issues in the Western political landscape today. In various forms, the autonomy of private property, its relative independence from the state, and the tension between these centers of social power continued to shape the political agenda centuries later.

However, acknowledging an inheritance does not mean assuming a straight and unbroken continuity. Democracy serves as the clearest example of such a misunderstanding. Democracy is often imagined as a Greek invention that progressively evolved and gradually spread until it reached nearly the entire world. This imagery is comforting but historically inaccurate for at least two reasons. First, the history of popular government, even with a loose definition of what may be termed "democratic" or "republican," has actually been marked by drastic regressions. As analogized by Dahl and Shapiro (2015), rather than a steady climb, the history of democracy more closely resembles the path of a traveler across a vast, flat desert, where "hills" of democracy appear only occasionally as anomalies before finally beginning the long ascent toward its current form. Second, democracy was not "invented" once and for all like a specific mechanical tool. The systems of government in Greece and Rome lacked many of the crucial characteristics of modern representative government. In Athens, for example, sharp inequality remained a barrier to substantive justice. What we recognize as democracy today is the result of long ebbs and flows of revolutions, rebellions, and civil wars, rather than a mere legacy passed down intact.

Between the profound political reflections of Plato and Aristotle and modern theory, a hollow void is often assumed to exist. This narrative implies that after the collapse of the independent Greek *polis*, political speculation became abstract and impotent; that freedom of thought was paralyzed by great empires and subsequently drowned in the chaos of barbarian invasions; and that new political theory emerged abruptly in the sixteenth century through a combination of original reflection and the rediscovery of ancient philosophy (e.g., Russell, 2010). However, an examination of medieval conceptions shows that this transition was elegantly bridged by the Roman tradition on the Italian peninsula, which similarly practiced popular government like the Greeks (Carlyle & Carlyle, 1903/2016). Yet, instead of democracy, the Romans called it *res publica*—literally "public affair"—to signify that the political community was the shared property of its citizens. This terminological difference is more than mere semantics. As we shall see, it reflects a Roman orientation that was more legal-institutional compared to Greek democratic experimentation.

The political legacy of Rome lies not primarily in the heroic virtues of its citizens in Livy's works, but in the complex constitutional arguments leading up to the collapse of the Republic, particularly in the works of Cicero. Indeed, Cicero's theory must be read against the backdrop of that republic's collapse: the tension between his admiration for Rome's constitutional design and his anxiety regarding the moral decay eating away at it. Therefore, more than merely understanding his personal position, reading Cicero is equivalent to understanding the horizon of political thought considered plausible by an honorable Roman statesman of his time (Straumann, 2025). His reflections on *res publica*, most fully articulated in *De re publica* and *De legibus*, sought not only to describe Roman institutions but also to rescue the normative foundations of the political community. For Cicero, a regime could only be called a *res publica* if it possessed juridical reciprocity and conformed to the order of reason. A tyrannical regime, though it might demand obedience, was not a republic because it lacked the moral and legal bonds that unite a people. In its original form, Cicero's theory idealized the commonwealth as a rational, legal, and moral association oriented toward the common good (*bonum commune*) and sustained by institutional balance.

Distinct from modern state theories that tend to focus on institutional design, Cicero emphasized that the survival of the *res publica* depends on civic virtue. Laws and balancing mechanisms are inadequate without the moral commitment of the citizens. Influenced by Stoicism, he developed the concept of *officium*—a rational duty that demands the setting aside of private interests for the public welfare. This view was closely intertwined with his defense of the mixed constitution. Following the Hellenistic Greek tradition, particularly Polybius who would later inspire Montesquieu, Cicero argued that the most stable regime combines elements of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. In Roman practice, the consuls represented the monarchic element, the Senate the aristocratic element, and the popular assemblies the democratic element.

The reasoning was both normative and practical. Normatively, each element reflected a dimension of political equality: leadership, wisdom, and popular participation. Practically, each element counterbalanced the excesses of the others. Pure monarchy risked becoming tyranny; pure democracy risked becoming demagoguery; pure aristocracy risked becoming oligarchy. The Roman Republic, in Cicero's view, achieved relative stability precisely because it institutionalized balance.

Although Rome did not produce a tradition of political theory as prolific as Greece, its contribution to the development of law and constitutionalism remains decisive. Ironically, as argued by several scholars, this constitutionalism was not born from the practice of living under a stable constitution. Rather, it was born from the experience of the destruction of the republican order at the end of the Roman period, since the crisis stimulated reflections on the limits of power, legality, and legitimacy (Straumann, 2016; Wu, 2024). The influence of Roman law subsequently permeated various European legal systems—France, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, and the Netherlands—and through codifications such as the Napoleonic *Code civil*, influenced wider regions, including Latin America and European colonies. Even in England, despite the different development of the common law tradition, interaction with Roman concepts remained significant. Through this constitutionalism, the Romans bequeathed the separation between the public and the private, and even between the state and society. This distinction opened the space for the recognition of two distinct centers of power—the state and property—whose tension later became a constant theme in the history of Western political theory (Lane, 2014; Wood, 2011, 2012).

Islamic Civilization

This period, spanning from the 7th century to the mid-13th century, is often regarded as the golden age of Islamic civilization. During this phase, the Islamic world not only expanded its political and military power but also emerged as an intellectual and cultural center that set the direction of global scientific development. Under the Abbasid Dynasty, particularly during the reigns of Harun al-Rashid and his son al-Ma'mun, the *Bayt al-Ḥikmah* (House of Wisdom) arose and flourished in Baghdad—an institution that functioned simultaneously as a library, a translation center, and a research institute. Its ambition was extraordinary: to gather and process the entirety of accessible knowledge, from philosophy and medicine to mathematics and astronomy. As a result of these translation efforts, a vast corpus of ancient scientific and philosophical works was rendered into Arabic, primarily from Greek, but also from Aramaic, Syriac, Sanskrit, and Persian (Aly, 2023).

It is worth noting that, according to the studies of mathematics historian Jan P. Hogendijk, this process occurred at a time when the Greek scientific tradition had long been in decline (Hogendijk, 1996). Among the *Bayt al-Ḥikmah*'s greatest achievements in this regard was the translation of Aristotle's works, which were subsequently adopted and developed by Muslim philosophers such as Al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd. The works then spread throughout the Islamic world and into Europe, laying the groundwork for the development of modern science. Yet this transmission of texts swiftly evolved into a transformation of scientific knowledge that brought it into closer alignment with the practical needs of Islamic civilization itself, from religious affairs to the concerns of everyday economic life (Abattouy et al., 2001). It was embodied by the medieval Islamic "giants," among them Al-Kindi, Al-Razi, Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna in Latin transliteration), Al-Ghazali, and Ibn Rushd (Averroes). There is not sufficient space here to discuss each of them individually, but several figures can serve as guides to how the earlier Greco-Roman classical heritage would be understood, commented upon, and developed in subsequent eras by other civilizations.

To begin, Al-Farabi occupies a pivotal position in the transmission and reinterpretation of Platonic political philosophy. In his *Mabādi' Ārā' Ahl al-Madīnah al-Fāḍilah*, he adapted Plato's vision of the ideal state into an Islamic monotheistic framework. Like Plato, he believed in the possibility of a perfect political order. However, whereas Plato envisioned the philosopher-king as a ruler who comprehends the Idea of the Good, Al-Farabi portrayed the ideal leader as a figure who is simultaneously philosopher and spiritual guide, one who even resembles a prophet. His idealized "virtuous city" (*al-madīnah al-fāḍilah*) is not merely a just community but a microcosm of the divinely willed cosmic order. Here a significant teleological shift occurs. Where the Aristotelian tradition held the goal of political life to be *eudaimonia*, the good life within a worldly horizon, in Al-Farabi the ultimate end of the political community is the highest happiness encompassing both this world and the hereafter (Ali, 2023)the interplay between philosophy and religion often takes the form of conflict in medieval Muslim thought as exemplified by the Al-Ghazali versus Averroes (Ibn Rusd.

A different approach emerges from Ibn Khaldun. In some respects, Ibn Khaldun's relationship to Al-Farabi can be likened to Cicero's relationship to Plato. Just as Al-Farabi, like Plato, articulated a transcendent ideal state, Ibn Khaldun instead sought to derive political principles from a deep understanding of history itself. For Ibn Khaldun, flux is the natural condition of historical experience, and a timeless utopia is therefore nothing more than an abstract intellectual exercise. In emphasizing the study of the concrete and the particular, Ibn Khaldun begins from the same starting point as Aristotle: the nature and necessity of human society as a prerequisite for the survival and development of the individual. Acknowledging that the religious world and spiritual salvation follow their own logic, Ibn Khaldun focused his analysis on explaining the workings of that "other world"—the secular and political one (Ashworth, 2007). He was effectively carving out a separate space for politics from which the pure doctrine of theology and Al-Farabi's philosophical utopianism were excluded.

Writing in the 14th century amid dynastic instability in North Africa and al-Andalus, Ibn Khaldun sought to explain not merely how rulers governed but also the causes behind the rise, flourishing, and decline of political communities. In the *Muqaddimah*, the prolegomena to his work on universal history, he introduced '*aṣabiyyah* (often translated as "group solidarity" or "social cohesion") as the driving force of history. In doing so, unlike the Greco-Roman tradition's emphasis on constitutional justice or institutional balance, Ibn Khaldun located the origins of the state in collective energy and strong social cohesion rather than in rational design or abstract social contracts. This approach is frequently read as a forerunner of political sociology. Yet his thinking does not set aside normativity: justice and law remain essential to the maintenance of power, though they operate within a sociological framework. Nor does he discount the role of religion. In his view, religion can strengthen '*aṣabiyyah*, for instance, by providing a transcendent purpose that surpasses kinship ties, much as religious missions deepened the pre-existing tribal solidarity during the early Islamic expansion.

The culmination of this "conceptual alchemy," bridging the Islamic world and Latin Europe, is found in the figure of Ibn Rushd. Known in the West as Averroes, he wrote in 12th-century al-Andalus and produced systematic commentaries on Aristotle's works, as well as an important commentary on Plato's *Republic* and theological treatises such as *Faṣl al-Maqāl*. With Ibn Sina, he stands as the greatest name in Arab-Islamic philosophy, whose influence spread—in many directions—across the medieval period, through the Renaissance, and to the threshold of the modern era (Debeuf, 2024).

He did not compose a political theory in the form of a standalone treatise, but his political vision can be reconstructed from the full body of his corpus: political community must be governed by demonstrative reason, in harmony with revealed law, and directed toward the perfection of the human intellect. On the relationship between reason and revelation, he argued that no fundamental contradiction exists between the two; conflict arises from hermeneutical misunderstanding. Philosophy, for those possessing demonstrative capacity, is in fact a religious obligation. When translated into Latin, this idea ignited fierce debate in European universities. Aristotle's works alongside Ibn Rushd's commentaries were used in curricula at Naples, Paris, Bologna, and Padua and became one of the foundations of the development of scholasticism. Even the criticism of the "errors of the Arab philosophers" by Latin theologians attests to how deeply these interpretations had penetrated Western discourse.

Thus, from the very beginning, the Greek-Arabic translation movement was never merely a transmission of texts; it was, more crucially, a process of appropriation and transformation of scientific knowledge in a cross-cultural context—a process without which the mere transmission of texts would have been meaningless (Abattouy et al., 2001; Aly, 2023; Ghazanfar, 2003; Yavari, 2019). By the time Aristotle arrived at the universities of Paris or Oxford, therefore, he had already been "saturated" by centuries of Islamic commentary (Yugo & Saepudin, 2024). Likewise, when Christian theologians wrestled with Greek texts, they were in fact engaging with a philosophical system that had been enriched and interrogated by other traditions. These traditions, despite their differing contexts, share a concern with the state as the primary unit of analysis and with the effort to understand the relationship between power and rationality, ideas that would go on to influence the emergence of scholasticism, the Renaissance, and ultimately the modern Western political tradition (Debeuf, 2024).

Judeo-Christian Civilization

Throughout the medieval period, the Greek heritage did not disappear but instead underwent a gradual process of selection and transformation within a Judeo-Christian framework. During this phase, elements that could be reconciled with

theology—such as natural law, the rationality of the cosmos, and virtue ethics—were retained and reinterpreted, while aspects deemed contrary to revelation or excessively speculative tended to be set aside. In this respect, if the Greco-Roman layer provided the institutional framework and the Islamic layer provided the analytical nervous system, the Judeo-Christian contribution supplied the moral and temporal impetus that came to characterize Western politics through its emphasis on salvation history, sin, and the transcendent purpose of humanity. The mediating role of the Islamic world in this process cannot be overlooked. Through the works of Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and above all Ibn Rushd, Greek philosophy re-entered Latin Europe in a form that had already been interpreted and systematized. Figures such as Thomas Aquinas, Dante, and the Renaissance humanists read Aristotle and Plato through the lens of these commentaries. Even when Christian humanists reclaimed the authority of Cicero, Livy, or Tacitus, their historical approach—attentive to context, change, and the dynamics of power—was not entirely alien to the sensibility that had been developed, among others, by Ibn Khaldun (Ashworth, 2007; Idrees & Naazer, 2024).

One of Christianity's foundational contributions to Western politics is the insistence that obligations to God transcend obligations to the state. This idea has roots in the Hebrew prophetic tradition and Stoic ethics, but it received its decisive theological articulation in early Christianity. In the Byzantine Empire, this primacy of religious loyalty was relatively integrated into the imperial structure; church and state existed in a symbiotic relationship. In Western Europe, however, following the collapse of the Roman Empire and the rise of the barbarian kingdoms, the tension between spiritual and temporal authority grew sharper. This dual loyalty—to the *civitas terrena* and to the community of faith—created a conceptual space for the limitation of political power.

A major transformation occurred when Christianity became the dominant religion under Constantine and subsequently the official religion of the empire under Theodosius. In *De Civitate Dei*, written as Germanic tribes attacked the empire, Augustine of Hippo articulated and consolidated the new division between church and state, as well as the conflict between "matter" and "spirit" rooted in original sin and humanity's Fall from the Garden of Eden. The role of government—and indeed of society itself—was rendered subordinate to the "secular arm," part of the earthly city, set in opposition to the *Civitas Dei* (City of God). The function of government was to maintain order in a world that is in its very nature fallen. Following Cicero, he argued that the source of justice and law is not utility but nature. In this he clearly maintained a position aligned with Chrysippus and other Stoics, as cited by Stobaeus and Plutarch, and opposed to the theory of Epicurus and thinkers such as Carneades, who held that justice is merely a name for a convention devised by human beings for their own benefit.

The intellectual apex of the medieval era came in the 13th century through Thomas Aquinas. He stood at the intersection of the Gospels, the Augustinian tradition, and an Aristotle revived through the mediation of Muslim philosophers. Aquinas's debt to the Islamic tradition is particularly conspicuous, especially to Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, from whom he adopted conceptual strategies for explaining the "unity of God" and the nature of the "Beatific Vision"—the ultimate end of human existence. His relationship with Ibn Rushd, however, was ambivalent. Aquinas frequently cited Ibn Rushd, whom he addressed as "the Commentator," even as he rejected certain "dangerous" views such as the unity of the intellect. At the same time, Aquinas as the most vocal critic of Ibn Rushd was himself not immune to his influence, and his understanding of Aristotle had been conditioned by Ibn Rushd's interpretations. Aquinas could reasonably be called the most formidable adversary that Averroist doctrine ever faced—yet one might go further and say, paradoxically, that he was the Commentator's greatest student.

In the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas argues that law is defined as a rational ordinance directed toward the common good and promulgated by legitimate authority. His legal framework is hierarchical: eternal law (*lex aeterna*), natural law (*lex naturalis*), human law (*lex humana*), and divine law (*lex divina*). Following Aristotle, he regarded human beings as political animals, though he added the dimensions of Stoic universality and Augustinian morality. Aquinas affirmed that legitimate power derives from the community; the ruler is merely the holder of a mandate bound by God's law and the interests of the people. This is why Aquinas is often called the "first Whig," the pioneer of a theory of constitutional government in which legitimacy is not absolute but conditional, placing loyalty to God above blind obedience to the state. He is also frequently regarded as a defender of limited monarchy: while capable of maintaining unity, he rejected tyranny and opened space for resistance against rulers who deviated from the common good.

The intellectual apex of Aquinas was followed, in the 13th and 14th centuries, by a sharp conflict between papal authority and secular power. The disputes between Pope Gregory VII and Emperor Henry IV, and later between Pope Boniface VIII and King Philip IV of France, gave rise to new political treatises that questioned the boundaries of ecclesiastical and state jurisdiction. These debates compelled theologians to systematize law and constitutionalism, ultimately strengthening the position of secular law as an autonomous entity. Ironically, this very conflict between the church and the absolute monarchy enriched the political vocabulary that would later be deployed to constrain them both.

The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century marked a new chapter. Martin Luther began his protest against the practice of indulgences, but its implications reached far beyond that issue. By rejecting papal authority as universal and emphasizing the priesthood of all believers, he relativized the hierarchical structure of the church. His doctrine of the "two kingdoms" drew a sharp distinction between the spiritual and temporal realms. Secular rulers held authority in worldly affairs; the church was not to interfere in the administration of the state. In practice, the Reformation strengthened the role of territorial princes. Protestant churches were frequently placed under state authority, and the universal Christian empire was gradually supplanted by a configuration of increasingly sovereign states. This process contributed to the emergence of the modern nation-state and to a redefinition of political loyalty. Furthermore, the Protestant work ethic—with its emphasis on calling (*Beruf*) and individual responsibility—would later be read as one element consonant with the development of modern capitalism, though the causal relationship remains debated.

Alongside the Lutheran current, the Reformed (Calvinist) tradition revived the concept of the covenant (*berit*) from Hebrew law and developed it into a political theory. Unlike the horizontal Roman contract, the Hebrew covenant carried a vertical dimension that bound the community before God while also being horizontal in forming internal solidarity. In federal theology, society is understood as a network of mutually binding covenants that limit power. Johannes Althusius, in his *Politica*, systematized this idea. He conceived of the political community as a layered symbiotic association—family, city, province, and kingdom—united by covenant. Power arises from consent, is constrained by law, and demands mutual accountability. The concept of covenant was thus transformed from a theological bond into a constitutional framework. The relationship between God and Israel became a model for the relationship between ruler and people.

CONCLUSION

In accordance with Koselleck's (2002) thesis that historical processes are marked by distinct, layered temporalities (sediments of time), we have seen that the contribution of classical civilizations is not found in the "original" meaning of their texts, but rather in the tension created by their ongoing presence in our political vocabulary. "Western" politics is thus not a linear heir to Greece, Rome, or the Abrahamic world; it is a site of layered collisions where concepts from various temporal horizons are forced to coexist. Classical Greek and Roman thinkers bequeathed a vocabulary rich in political ideas—*polis*, *res publica*, *lex*, and so forth—but even in their own era, these terms were contested (e.g., the Athenian *polis* versus the universal Roman *civitas*). They survived through continuous reinterpretation. Through medieval scholasticism, the Western Christian world reworked Aristotle's *Politics* and Cicero's *Republic* from a theological standpoint. Similarly, in the Muslim world, Greek philosophy was absorbed into Islamic learning through Arabic translations. These processes, even the mere act of translation, were never neutral. From Toledo to Baghdad, translators (Christian, Muslim, and Jewish) gave new names to Greek terms in their own languages—and by doing so, they fused them with local norms.

Thus, history indeed demonstrates continuity—but it is a continuity in change. Each stage of development in political practice produced new theoretical variations to respond to shifting social tensions. The relationship between property rights and the state, for example, underwent constant reconfiguration, from debates on the origins and limits of monarchical power to theories of sovereignty and the right of resistance. The rise of the Church as an independent institution complicated the relationship between divine law and civil law. Subsequently, capitalism introduced new conceptual distinctions between "public" and "private," state and society, politics and economics, while simultaneously rearticulating democracy within the horizon of representation and markets—not as a direct challenge to dominant classes, but as a form compatible with the new order of ownership. This condition of coexistence between old and new ways of thinking explains the significant structural variations within Europe. Different transformations gave birth to different discursive traditions, from the city-states in Italy to the commercial republics in

the Netherlands. Despite shared European cultural commonalities, each historical transition produced unique "discursive traditions" that constitute a shared heritage that is both productive and fraught with tension.

What is at stake here is not merely an inconsistency between theory and practice. Rather, paradox lies at the very heart of the tradition itself. Therefore, a more generous vision of human emancipation requires us to move beyond reigning orthodoxies toward a richer tradition of struggle in both action and thought. We can only uncover these limitations if we understand the canonical tradition and the historical experience in which it is rooted. Without such critical historical understanding, we remain trapped in the veneration of classical texts without learning their universal lessons, or conversely, recklessly dismissing them without understanding the conceptual forces that still drive our institutions today.

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