



ARTICLE

BETWEEN UTOPIA
AND OPPOSITION TO
ABSOLUTISM:
SPARTA'S PRESENCE ON
17TH CENTURY ENGLISH
AND FRENCH LITERATURE
AND POLITICAL
THOUGHT¹

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Abstract

Sparta was a paradigm in both Antiquity and Modernity, exerting a powerful influence on Western thought and culture. In this article, we focus on the use, appropriation and instrumentalization that was made of ancient Sparta in literature and political thought in England and France in the 17th century, especially in England during the Republican period. We observe that, on the one hand, Sparta was invoked as a model and reference by opponents of monarchical absolutism; on the other hand, it served as inspiration for the construction of utopias, idyllic and timeless societies where equality and virtue prevailed among citizens.

Keywords

Sparta – paradigm – political thought – literature – XVII century – England – France

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ARTIGO

ENTRE A UTOPIA E A OPOSIÇÃO AO ABSOLUTISMO: A PRESENÇA DE ESPARTA NA LITERATURA E NO PENSAMENTO POLÍTICO INGLÊS E FRANCÊS DO SÉCULO XVII

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Resumo

Esparta foi um paradigma na Antiguidade e na Modernidade, exercendo uma poderosa influência sobre o pensamento e a cultura ocidentais. Neste artigo, focamos o uso, a apropriação e a instrumentalização da antiga Esparta na literatura e no pensamento político da Inglaterra e da França do século XVII, especialmente na Inglaterra durante o período republicano. Por um lado, Esparta foi invocada como modelo e ponto de referência pelos oponentes do absolutismo monárquico; por outro, serviu de inspiração para a construção de utopias, de sociedades idílicas e atemporais.

Palavras-chave

Esparta – paradigma – pensamento político – literatura – século XVII – Inglaterra – França

This paper is intended as a natural extension, at least in terms of temporal sequence, of an earlier one (FORNIS, 2012a). In that article, we found that in the 16th century Sparta was, on the one hand and as a state, an explicit political reference for both groups of theorists—who, with their gaze fixed firmly on the classical past, sought, above all, social and constitutional stability for the modern renaissance republics—and those who in their writings resisted the onslaught of monarchical absolutism. On the other hand, Sparta was considered an idyllic and atemporal society inhabited by citizens filled with civic virtue and free from corruption, providing inspiration for the utopians who imagined a better world where they would be able to escape the reality they witnessed around them. We believe that, even if the historical context differs, recourse to the Spartan paradigm in literature—especially that of a utopian nature—and political thought finds continuity in England and France in the 17th century and, in particular, in republican-period England.

In England at the dawn of the 17th century, the statesman and philosopher Francis Bacon found in Rome rather than in Sparta an ancient reference for his imperial conception, even if Roman imperialism was not maritime, as Bacon claimed for England. In *On the True Greatness of the Kingdoms and Estates* (1612), while defending in Parliament the naturalization of the Scots, he asserted that, in view of the need for citizens, “all states that are liberal of naturalization towards strangers are fit for empire”, and on this point “the Spartans were a nice people in point of naturalization; whereby, while they kept their compass, they stood firm; but when they did spread, and their boughs were become too great for their stem, they became a windfall upon the sudden”. By contrast, Rome endured as an empire because of the ease with which it received and integrated foreigners.

Later in the same essay, Bacon points out that, in order to achieve empire and greatness, what matters most is “that a nation do profess arms as their principal honour, study, and occupation”. In this regard, Rome was exemplary for him. Of Sparta, he says that “the fabric of the state was wholly (though not wisely) framed and composed to that scope and end”, which is why it was not such a long-lived empire. In any case, Bacon understood that Rome, Athens, Sparta and other ancient states succeeded in persuading their citizens to devote themselves to arms because they had slaves available for “sedentary and within-door arts, and delicate manufactures (they require rather the finger than the arm) that have in their nature a contrariety to a military disposition”; since Christian law forbade slavery, the only solution Bacon prescribes is for the English to leave these activities primarily in the hands of foreigners.

In the first half of the 17th century the references to Sparta continued to revolve around the ephors, who in the second half of the 16th century had been retrieved from the past by the Monarchomachs to inspire the theory of the inferior

magistrate, a representative of the people tasked with keeping watch (the word ἑφορος means “watchman”) over the king to prevent the ruler from tending towards absolutism.³ This role was magnified and strengthened during the civil war that culminated in the execution of King Charles I in 1649. The brief republican period was characterized by both political instability and constitutional experimentation, providing a breeding ground for proposals of government based on the rule of law and the guarantor of the freedom and equality that would replace monarchy, in which endeavour attention naturally turned to the political wisdom of the ancients.⁴ In Chapter XXVIII of *Eikonoklastes* (1649), poet and essayist John Milton, at the time “Secretary for Foreign Tongues” to the Council of State in the Cromwell government, draws on the history of Sparta to justify and provide precedent for the treatment received by the English monarch:

The kings of Sparta, though descended lineally from Hercules, esteemed a god among them, were often judged and sometimes put to death by the most just and renowned laws of Lycurgus, who, though a king, thought it most unequal to bind his subjects by any law to which he bound not himself.⁵

For Milton, a sincere admirer of the Lacedaemonian institutions, there is much of Lycurgus in the Lord Protector who designs a new state.⁶

In the same context, in 1656, James Harrington published *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, which although ascribed to the utopian or placeless literary genre reveals a clear concern with contemporary English politics (starting with the dedication to the Lord Protector himself) and poverty, above all that of Irish and Jewish immigrants in Great Britain. This interest would eventually lead to his imprisonment in the Tower of London following the restoration of the Stuart

³ Calvin had stated that the ephors were defenders of the people, whose duty was to “oppose and resist the intemperance or cruelty of kings” (*Institution of the Christian religion*, sub-chapter XXXI). It was, however, his disciples who took up the baton and formulated the thesis of the inferior magistrate.

⁴ FOXLEY, 2024, p. 138: “Greek thought offered multiple and malleable legacies which could never be disentangled from the political imperatives and new developments in political thought of the early modern period”.

⁵ EPPS, 1960, p. 44. But it is not easy to fit Milton into an English republican tradition that made use of Greek political paradigms (see FOXLEY, 2024, p. 144-151).

⁶ Even if in the end “the British Lycurgus never materialized” (RAWSON, 1969, p. 190). In 1660, after the failure of the Cromwellian Protectorate and barely a month before the Stuart Restoration, Milton published *The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*, in which his republicanism aligns not with Parliament but with a strong senate of lifelong members similar to the Spartan Gerousia or Athenian Areopagus, a line of thought he had already explored in his *Areopagitica* of 1644 (RAWSON, 1969, p. 199-200).

monarchy in 1660; his Oceana was simply a utopian transposition of England and his legislator Olphaeus Megaletor the *alter ego* of Cromwell.⁷

Harrington, whose political thought attributes to “Ancient Prudence” popular or *de iure* government, in other words the rule of law, and to “Modern Prudence” monarchy or *de facto* government, the rule of men, was without a doubt a key voice during those interregnum years.⁸ Since according to his criterion the form of government depends directly on the distribution of land ownership among the citizenry, equality and balance in the latter, as under the agrarian law of Lycurgus (and under that of Israel), would guarantee the stability and balance of the former. The key idea is, therefore, balance: a balance of wealth between citizens, because the helots, as serfs, were excluded from the state; and a balance of power, with a senate that debates issues, a people gathered in congregation (or “church”, the term preferred by Harrington) who decide on them, and a group of magistrates who act in consequence. Harrington compared the functions of his two chambers (which are very reminiscent of the Spartan Gerousia and Apella: see below) to two girls sharing a cake: if one cuts it and the other chooses the portion she wants, the first girl has the incentive to divide it equally. Through an ideal constitution, an “immortal Commonwealth” will be achieved (FOXLEY, 2024, p. 154). In this latter sense, the English republican tradition reformulated the theory of the mixed constitution, now called the mixed monarchy, in other words, bounded monarchy (a term popularised by Sir Philip Hunton in *A Treatise of Monarchy*, 1643), although there were exceptions, such as those of Sir Robert Filmer and Thomas Hobbes, who considered any influence exerted by the ancient republics to be pernicious.⁹ Harrington even went so far as to classify Sparta as a democratic or popular regime.¹⁰ Helotism

⁷ Harrington's main opponent was royalist Matthew Wren (son of the Bishop of Ely of the same name), who stridently attacked his ideas in two essays: *Considerations on Mr. Harrington's Common-Wealth of Oceana, Restrained to the First Part of the Preliminaries* (1657) and *Monarchy Asserted, or The State of Monarchical and Popular Government in Vindication of the Considerations upon Harrington's Oceana* (1659).

⁸ On the Harringtonian concept of prudence, see STRUMIA, 1991, p. 11–20.

⁹ RAWSON, 1969, p. 188–189. In any case, in the third part, Chapter 19, of *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes had claimed that it was in the ephorate that the sovereignty of the Spartan state resided, irrespective of whether the kings had the privilege of leading the army.

¹⁰ In *Considerations*, Wren rails against the idea that the Spartan government was popular and egalitarian: Lycurgus, who intended only to forge effective warriors, would in any case have made the citizenry equal in poverty. A similar interpretation was put forward by puritan Henry Stubbe, who in a 1660 pamphlet contrasted the Spartan model with that of Oceana (*The Common-Wealth of Oceana Put into the Ballance and Found Too Light, or An Account of the Republick of Sparta with Occasional Animadversions upon Mr. James Harrington and the Oceanistical Model*), concluding that Sparta triumphed in achieving stability under a hierarchical society (on this debate between Harrington and Stubbe in the final days of the English republic, see FOXLEY, 2016 and HAMMERSLEY 2019: 179–182). Neither Wren nor Stubbe challenged the

evidently had a distorting influence on the Spartan reference for the new republic. Such was the case that, aware of this, Harrington interpreted the helotic uprisings as *external commotions* and, therefore, alien to the order of the Lacedaemonian polis: “Lacedaemon was externally unquiet, because she was externally unequal, that is as to her helots, and she was internally at rest, because she was equal in herself [that is to say, in its citizenship]”.¹¹

To distance himself from the radicalism of the Levellers, Harrington introduces a destabilizing factor by accepting the existence of a “natural aristocracy” of men of greater talent than others.¹² Once again Sparta, and also Venice,¹³ is the inevitable reference, as there the Gerousia or Council of Elders, representing the “natural aristocracy”, draws up the laws and rules that the Assembly then either endorses or rejects without debate, amendment or the proposal of alternatives. The latter of course was possible in democratic Athens, the ruin of which was due, according to Harrington, to its lack of a true aristocratic class capable of containing popular discontent, which eventually escalated into disorder and anarchy. Neither could Rome, “crooked in her birth”, serve as a model. If the goal is an imperishable republic that would last as long as the human race, change (perceived as corruption of the system) and sedition (and, consequently, a strong monarchy that is seditious by nature) must be prevented. Sparta promised immutability and, like Israel, fulfilled Harrington’s expectations as an aristocratic political hypothesis.¹⁴ As a faithful reader of Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*, for Harrington the demise of Sparta came with

agrarian law that established the equality of land and was modelled by Harrington on that enacted by Lycurgus (HODKINSON, 2000, p. 10). Harrington also engaged in a controversy with Peter Heylyn, who in *The Stumbling-Block of Disobedience and Rebellion, Cunningly laid by Calvin in the Subjects way, Discovered, Censured, and Removed* (1658) devoted a chapter to refuting the notion that the ephors were popular magistrates who limited the power (according to him, absolute) of kings, as well as the idea that the people had benefited from the establishment of a Commonwealth (see HAMMERSLEY, 2019, p. 178-179).

¹¹ Wren, on the other hand, believed that helotism was an intrinsic structural element without which the Spartan way of life becomes inexplicable: “[the helots] were not strangers but spread over the face of the whole Countrey” (see HODKINSON, HALL, 2011, p. 68–69).

¹² “La vera democrazia è insomma, per lui, l’aristocrazia” (Giuliano Gliozzi, in the prologue to STRUMIA, 1991, p. vii).

¹³ The *Serenissima* model was likewise criticised by Wren, although it was above all the Presbyterian Richard Baxter who most ridiculed it in *A Holy Commonwealth, or Political Aphorisms, Opening the True Principles of Government* (1659).

¹⁴ With STRUMIA 1991, *passim*, we used CAMBIANO, 1974, p. 116–119, MACGREGOR MORRIS, 2010, p. 301-303 and VLASSOPOULOS, 2012, p. 54–57. On the mixed constitution of the ancients in relation to Harrington’s concept of rule of law (and not of men), see also NIPPEL, 1994, p. 20–23.

the fall of the Lycurgan system of land ownership attributed to Lysander after the victory over Athens.¹⁵

In the wake of Harrington and his Lycurgan law of agrarian equality — underpinned by Agis IV and Cleomenes III — came *Plato Redivivus* (1681) by Henry Neville, an advocate of the bounded monarchy of Charles II, who considered Lycurgus “the greatest politician that ever founded any government [a democracy] to take a sure way to fix property, by confounding it”, and *An Essay upon the Lacedaemonian Government* (1698, but published posthumously in 1727) by the lawyer and Whig parliamentarian Walter Moyle, in which he emphasised how Lycurgus only succeeded in securing freedom and the rule of law when he ended extreme social inequality, i.e. both opulence and poverty, harmful to all republics. Under the Spartan banner, Moyle insists on the need for reciprocal control among the powers of the state and for a strict and disciplined education that generates virtue and resilience in the face of adversity for a present-day England that lacks clear boundaries between royal prerogative and the freedom of the people, and in need of greater vigour of its citizens.¹⁶

Let us now turn to the Continent, to 17th century France, to observe the Spartan imprint on the country's literary output, particularly in works of a utopian and political nature. We shall start at the end of the previous century, with Michel de Montaigne who, in his *Essays* (1580), makes no effort to hide his almost cult-like devotion to Sparta, which he claims represents the best regime that Western civilisation has ever produced (MASON, 2018, p. 666). Montaigne, however, eschews utopia¹⁷ because he does not question the established political order, only the moral

¹⁵ Adopting the Aristotelian approach, when seeking the cause of Spartan decadence Wren did not place the emphasis as much on land as on the gold and money brought in by Lysander, which encouraged luxury and comfort and corrupted virtue.

¹⁶ STRUMIA, 1991, p. 151–156; NELSON, 2004, p. 131–136; see also RAWSON, 1969, p. 197–201; HODKINSON, 2000, p. 10–11; VLASSOPOULOS, 2012, p. 57–58; HAMMERSLEY, 2019, p. 176–184; FOXLEY, 2024, p. 152–156. Although in his crusade against poverty Harrington did not go so far as to propose communal ownership of property, this step was taken by Italian freethinker Alberto Radicati di Passerano in the Enlightenment tract *Nazarenus et Lycurgos mis en parallèle* in which Jesus Christ and Lycurgus are compared by virtue of the similarity of their ideas and their shared desire to “free men of all tyranny” (and of all hierarchy, even though Radicati held the title of count) and both are praised for their morality and indifference to material wealth, an attitude in sharp contrast to the ecclesiastical corruption of the time. The Nazarene is nonetheless viewed more favourably, firstly because he endeavoured to apply his doctrine to all of humanity and not just the Spartans and, secondly, because he showed greater political skill (on the education, ideology and work of Radicati di Passerano, see VENTURI, 1954, in particular p. 233, 237–239, 257, 267–269 for the *Nazarenus et Lycurgos* and the angry invective received).

¹⁷ Pace MOREAU, 1990: “La cité lacédémonienne ressemble ainsi à une sorte de cité utopique –Eldorado de la vertu (p. 117) ... Ainsi une sorte d’ utopie à coloration lacédémonienne est continuellement tissée

one, and abhors any kind of innovation which, consistent with his noble origin and solid Catholic faith, he equates with upheaval. This is why he recounts how a Spartan ephor brusquely cut the two strings that the poet Phrynnis had added to the seven-stringed lyre (cf. PLUTARCH, *Moralia*, 220C): it did not matter whether this innovation produced better harmony or enhanced the instrument's potential, it was enough that it was a novelty that altered the traditional composition. Yet for Montaigne, within the turbulent religious and political landscape of sixteenth-century Europe, Sparta symbolised something more than mere conservatism and respect for age-old laws and customs. He was among those who defended the affirmation of monarchical authority through association with divine authority: to obey the king was to obey God¹⁸ and, in this respect, Sparta was a school of obedience that shaped minds and bodies.

Following in the footsteps of the Chaeronean erudite, whose credibility he did not question for a moment,¹⁹ in the essay *Of Pedantry* Montaigne understands that Sparta made education, rather than culture, the cornerstone of the state:

At Athens they learned to speak well: here, to do well; there to disengage themselves from a sophistical argument, and to unravel the imposture of captious syllogisms; here to evade the baits and allurements of pleasure, and with a noble courage and resolution to conquer the menaces of fortune and death; those cudgelled their brains about words, these made it their business to inquire into things; there was an eternal babble of the tongue, here a continual exercise of the soul.²⁰

Martial education endowed the individual with a strong and energetic character whereas “the study of sciences more softens and untempers the courage of men than it in any way fortifies and excites them” (TOUCHEFEU, 1999, p. 107;

à l'arrière plan des *Essais*” (p. 119).

¹⁸ FARQUHAR, 2006, p. 40–43, who argues that rather than appealing strictly to natural law, Montaigne emphasized that, for him, it made no sense that an ordinary citizen, a peasant, would willingly suffer violence or to become both victim and hero for a set of ideals that he did not comprehend (it would constitute misconstrued freedom, a negative liberty).

¹⁹ Montaigne wrote an essay entitled *Defence of Seneca and Plutarch* in which he defended the latter's *techné*, or method, as historian since it was, in fact, the same one he himself employed (in this respect, see the analysis by FARQUHAR, 2006; see also MOREAU, 1990, p. 117; TOUCHEFEU, 1999, p. 502; MACPHAIL, 2002, p. 205–206). In *Méthode de l'histoire* (1566), Jean Bodin criticized the imprudence with which Plutarch repeated specious tales, such as the well-known one of the Spartan boy and the fox (*Life of Lycurgus*, 18.1 and *Moralia*, 234A-B) or that of the fine the ephors imposed on Agesilaus “for appropriating citizens belonging to the State” (*Life of Agesilaus*, 5.4). This provoked a reaction from Montaigne, for whom “Spartan History is full of a Thousand more cruel and rare Examples; and is indeed all Miracles in Comparison of this.”

²⁰ Trans. Ch. COTTON. Cf. MOREAU, 1990, p. 122.

MACPHAIL, 2002, p. 203). Montaigne sets aside any reference to socioeconomic structures to emphasize that Sparta stood out for its military valour, certainly, but even more so for the education (ethical, not arts and sciences) its citizens received, which is what allowed it to build a cohesive civic body of virtuous citizens: “disdaining all other subjection but that of virtue, [the Spartans] ought to be supplied, instead of tutors to read to them arts and sciences, with such masters as should only instruct them in valour, prudence, and justice” (CAMBIANO, 1974, p. 121–122; SUPPLE, 1984, p. 98–101; MOREAU, 1990, p. 117; ROSSO, 2005, p. 134–144). Sparta was the “Eldorado of virtue”, and Spartans’ daily life an authentic philosophy of praxis. In this quest for true virtue—moral, non-intellectual virtue—Leonidas and Agesilaus acquire the status of philosopher kings, while Chilon is the sage who formulates the axioms on *sophrosyne*, moderation, in which the harmony of the cosmos is mirrored.²¹ Above all, however, the French thinker pays tribute to the brilliant architect of that idealized Sparta, Lycurgus, whose harsh and restrictive measures he legitimises: “the weakness of our condition often pushes us upon the necessity of making use of ill means to a good end”.²²

In his essay *Of Cannibals* Montaigne writes that the virtue, strength, and simplicity so admirable in the Spartans can also be found in the natural, pre-political life of the natives of the New World, considering them to be as naïve as they are good and pure and providing a preliminary outline of the theory of the Noble Savage to which Mably and Rousseau would return:

[...] This divine Lacedaemonian order, so great, so admirable, and so long flourishing in virtue and happiness, with no institution or exercise of letters; those who return from this new world discovered by the Spaniards in the time of our fathers will bear witness to how many nations, without magistrates and laws, live more legitimately and disciplinedly than ours (TOUCHEFEU, 1999, p. 107; MOREAU, 1990, p. 120–121)

Eric MacPhail has convincingly shown that Montaigne was a master of the *antilogos*, a new Protagoras determined to demonstrate that every question is debatable and that two *logoi*, or discourses, are possible. Thus, his praise of simplicity and ignorance in the face of widespread Renaissance admiration for reason and knowledge is nothing more than “an exercise in rhetoric and an illustration of the flexibility of language”, of taking pleasure in paradox, although it is true that, at its

²¹ PAPADOPOULOS, 2018, p. 27–40 (Agesilaus), 61–72 (Leonidas), 83–92 (Chilon).

²² PAPADOPOULOS, 2018, p. 15–26; see also MOREAU, 1990, p. 119; according to ROSSO, 2005, p. 130, Montaigne did not consider Lycurgus the ideal legislator because his intention had not been to reposition men under the laws of nature.

most extreme, Sparta was the incarnation of anti-rhetoric, as the French essayist himself points out in *Of the Vanity of Words* and *Of Pedantry*.²³

In the second half of the 17th century, Denis Vairas d'Alais wrote the *Histoire des Sévarambes* (1677), a work that strongly bears the imprint of Plutarch. This people, the Sevarambians, live happily and have no knowledge of avarice, poverty, idleness or private property under the egalitarian laws and customs handed down to them by Sevarias —a likeness of Lycurgus— who after numerous “educational” expeditions around the globe created this utopian state isolated from external dangers, where he ruled under the title of hereditary viceroy by divine right (ROSSO, 2005, p. 196–208).

Another work strongly influenced by utopian ideals, *Les aventures de Télémaque* (1699), by François de Salignac de la Mothe, better known as François Fénelon, was decisive in ushering in the fashion and taste for the ancient world that would become so pervasive in 18th-century France (53 editions published in France alone and 81 abroad). His Minos bears some resemblance to Lycurgus in that he is the author of a series of laws —fallen into disuse but retrieved by Telemachus and his guide Mentor (in reality Athena in disguise) applied on a Cretan colony in southern Italy (Salento)— that govern customs, food and the arts and, above all, “It might, perhaps, be expected that there should be some law against luxury and pomp”. It also advocates a public education that promotes patriotism, honor, obedience of the law and, of course, the author being the Archbishop of Cambrai, piety. The Platonic foundations, interwoven with the old clichés regarding the Cretan and Spartan societies, are evident in this ideal construction though filtered through the lens of Christianity. One could, in fact, speak of a kind of “agrarian Christianity” in which agriculture is the main source of wealth and that views urban opulence as the cause of misery: one must live with a *noble et frugal simplicité*, but without going so far as asceticism. Fénelon lived in France in the second half of the 17th century under the monarchical absolutism of Louis XIV where, even while tutor of the Duke of Burgundy, the king's grandson, he can be considered a dissonant and certainly modulated and nuanced voice that, once again, embraces the Spartan political regime as an example of moderation in the exercise of royal power. From this perspective, Fénelon's Telemachus has a strong element of the “mirror for princes” tradition, where the real is juxtaposed against the perfect.

In dialogue XL of his *Dialogues des morts* (1692–1696), Fénelon makes Leonidas, embodiment of wisdom and courage, proclaim before Xerxes:

²³ MACPHAIL, 2002 (quotation on p. 194) sees in these criticisms of the humanistic pedagogy of the time a certain intention to reaffirm the legitimacy of his social position versus the humanists who thrived socially by virtue of their education.

I was a king, upon condition that I should lead a harsh, sober, and laborious life, like my people.
I was a king only to defend my country, and to put the laws in force: my sovereignty gave me
the power of doing good, without permitting me to do what was evil.

It is not that Fénelon wished the “Sun King” to restrain his absolutism — regarding Athens he affirms that “a people corrupted by an excess of liberty is more insupportable than any tyrant”— but that he should govern in accordance with the law and in pursuit of the welfare of his people to a greater extent than he had to date. Nevertheless, Fénelon’s admiration for Sparta is not blind: in his *Dialogues* he also finds room to show his displeasure at the cruel treatment of the helots, the unrestrained militarism and the idleness of Sparta’s privileged class (after all, for the ecclesiastical slaves were human beings and every war was a civil war that entailed unnecessary bloodshed).²⁴

Fénelon’s notion of the monarch’s subjection to the law is opposed to that aired by a contemporary theologian, Jacques Bénigne Bossuet, tutor to the Dauphin and bastion, from his position as Bishop of Condom, of a French providentialism that advocated the divine origin of royal power. In his *Discours sur l’histoire universelle* (1681; part III, chapter V), Bossuet challenged the Greek conviction that “the law was supreme: it appointed the magistrates, controlled their power, and also punished them if their administration was corrupt.” The Lacedaemonians are no more than “rough, fierce, industrious and excessively austere” as opposed to the “more gentle and pleasant Athenians, with celebrations and games never ended”; he continues: “At Sparta, money was held in contempt. Since all its laws aimed at making it into a republic of warriors, the glory of arms was the only inducement that had power over the minds of its citizens. Thus, it was natural that Sparta sought to dominate; and the more it rose above self-interest, the more it became susceptible to the lures of ambition.” In any case, as an apologist for absolute monarchy, Bossuet does not have much admiration for a Greece that “preferred the hazards of liberty to those of lawful submission, which in truth are not nearly so great.”²⁵

The same intellectual and political stance appears in the erudite *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1695–1697)²⁶ by Pierre Bayle, whose six entries on Sparta all

²⁴ RAWSON, 1969, p. 220–223, pages to which the content of this article is greatly indebted and in which the quotation from *Dialogues of the Dead* can be found in the original French. GUERCI, 1979, p. 20–22 concurs with her on certain points. Guerci is not, however, at all convinced that Fénelon makes Sparta a model worthy of imitation for Crete and Salento. See also the analysis by ROSSO, 2005, p. 209–228.

²⁵ Trans. E. FORSTER. See GUERCI, 1979, p. 23–24; MASON, 2012, p. 73.

²⁶ This is the first edition, in two tomes and four volumes. It was followed by others throughout the 18th century before the definitive one, comprising 16 volumes, was finally published between 1820 and 1824 by A.J. BEAUCHOT.

concern its kings: Agesilaus I, Agesilaus II, Agesipolis I, Agis IV, Anaxandridas and Lycurgus (in reality, a regent)²⁷. Contrary to the reforming legacy of the latter, Bayle shows little interest in his socio-political dimension, focusing only on morality. For example, he censures the measures affecting the education of women (particularly nudity in physical exercise, dance or processions) which, in his opinion, made them shameless and lacking in virtue, or those affecting matrimony (particularly consent to adultery which, in his opinion, made husbands procurers), because both offended the sense of decency, which was closely associated with modesty in the 17th century bourgeois mind.²⁸

We shall conclude this necessarily brief review with a reference to the invented societies of Lilliput, Brobdingnag and Houyhnhnmland in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), published in the following century. These fictional worlds embody a nostalgia for many of the elements that the classical and humanist tradition, to which Jonathan Swift was indebted, attributed to ancient Sparta (balance between the “individual”, the “few” and the “many”; a rigid, segregated and hierarchical class structure; the internal threat posed by certain Yahoos, who model themselves on the helots, and the repression of them; collectivism and the primacy of the common good; total submission to authority; the ordered education of the ruling class; eugenics and demographic control; the unimportance of literary culture; primitivism and agrarianism) and that he had already explored in other writings, among them his satires *A Discourse on the Contests and Dissentions in Athens and Rome* (1701) and *The Battle of the Books* (1704), always with the intention of ironising and criticising the setting in which the celebrated Irish author lived.²⁹

In the 18th century, Sparta would hold even greater fascination for Europe's educated classes. During the Enlightenment, several philosophers and men of letters adopted the Spartan citizenry as a model of virtue and a paradigm for the moral regeneration they sought in their own time. There were, nonetheless, other voices, notably those of the physiocrats, who deconstructed this paradigm because in the *homoioi* they saw only militarism, cruelty and cultural sterility (FORNIS, 2015). The sublimation of Sparta would later reach its extreme during the French Revolution under the Jacobins (FORNIS, 2012b).

²⁷ PARADISO 1992 is a convenient bilingual French–Italian edition of the six articles accompanied by an article by the compiler on the method, sources and representation of Spartan women in Bayle, and by an (always provocative) introductory note by Luciano Canfora.

²⁸ PARADISO, 1992, especially p. 28–38; see also ROSSO, 2005, p. 187–188.

²⁹ See HIGGINS, 1983, who concludes that Swift's political and moral imagination was profoundly nostalgic, reactionary and authoritarian.

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Conflict of interests

Nothing to declare

Research data availability

all data are available in the text

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