

Harvard/Princeton Conference Abstracts

Catherine Abou-Nemeh (Princeton)

Nicolas Hartsoeker (1656-1725) and the legacy of English philosophers in Dutch-French scientific thought

I hope to explore Hartsoeker's intellectual relationship with the Cambridge Neo-platonists Ralph Cudworth and Henry More, whose work helped him see the explanatory pitfalls of Cartesian mechanism. Ralph Cudworth's idea of plastic natures inspired the "organizational" first element that imbued matter particles with motion in Hartsoeker's system of physics. Meanwhile, Henry More's arguments in his letters to Descartes convinced Hartsoeker to begin looking outside the Cartesian framework for answers. In addition, his Remonstrant upbringing and Arminian beliefs will be explored here. Hartsoeker's father had belonged to a group of Arminian theologians that corresponded with Henry More, Ralph Cudworth, and other Cambridge Platonists during the 1660s and 1670s. Arminians were disturbed by the apparent determinism of Cartesian physics, which seemed to deny both human free will and divine intervention in the world. This chapter, like the previous one, aims to elucidate the philosophical and religious traditions, within which Hartsoeker was developing his understanding of the world.

Alexander Bick (Princeton)

The Boardroom and the Empire: A Micro-History of Dutch Commercial Management in the mid-1640s

Abstract:

The Dutch are justly famous for the financial innovations and commercial tenacity that defined their Golden Age in the 17th century. While the macro-economic contours of this period are now fairly well understood, relatively little attention has been devoted to the daily practices, social groups, and ideas that animated Dutch commerce and overseas expansion. This paper focuses on the management of the Dutch West India Company during the height of its influence in the mid-1640s. By examining the only remaining complete set of minutes for a meeting of the company's directors — held in Middelburg, Zeeland in September and October 1645 — along with the diaries and memoirs of selected participants, the paper provides a detailed portrait of a company at work and explores the mechanisms for decision-making and information-management that knit together four continents.

Hannah Callaway (Harvard)

The Rights of Man and Paris Real Estate in the French Revolution

My paper considers how the seizure of private property in Paris may have shaped Jacobin ideals. The Revolutionary Legislative Assembly, controlled by the Jacobins, called for the seizure of property belonging to émigrés in February 1792, even though private property was protected by the Declaration of the Rights of Man. The ambiguity of the Jacobin stance towards private property calls into question the representation of Jacobinism as a clear, unified set of political ideals that would provide the ideological foundations of the French Republics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In addition, and of more direct interest to early modern history, the study of this episode in the French Revolution provides the opportunity to draw together social and intellectual history, suggesting a different way of thinking about how new ideas emerge and flow through society.

William Deringer (Princeton)

Calculating Crises: Public Finance and the Politics of Arithmetic
from the English Civil War to the American Revolution

Truth and Numbers are always the same; tho' the first may be obscured, yet it can never entirely lose its Lustre; and tho' the latter may be transpos'd, they can never lose their Denomination and true Value, when ranged in their proper place; and 45 in figures, must always be read 45 in words.

[John Crookshanks], *Some Seasonable Remarks on a Book Publish'd in the Month of July, 1718*. (London: s.n., 1718) p. 7.

Are truth and numbers always the same? The above quotation was penned by John Crookshanks, a marginal figure but skilled figurer, in November 1718, amidst a pamphlet battle with MP Archibald Hutcheson over the past and current size of the British national debt. Yet, Crookshanks claim that “Truth and Numbers are always the same” was an *argument*, not a platitude. The role of numerical reasoning in political discourse was an open question when he was writing, and it would remain so throughout the eighteenth century. In my dissertation research, I wish to reconstruct that ongoing conversation about numbers as it played out from the middle of the seventeenth to the end of the eighteenth century. Specifically, I will look at the role of *calculation* in debates about public financial policy, focusing on moments of political-economic crisis. I want to know what was at stake and how the conversation shaped the long-term place of numbers in British political-economic thought and political culture.

My conference paper will first provide an overview of the research program which I am undertaking to attack these questions. It will then explore some central themes in my research through a more detailed discussion of one particularly contested group of financial calculations, concerning Britain's eighteenth-century “Sinking Fund.” This mechanism of the “Sinking Fund” proposed to take advantage of compound interest—and the mathematical power of exponential growth—to reduce Britain's National Debt. First instituted in 1716, the Sinking Fund is often credited to Robert Walpole. Many voices, though, contributed to the conversation on the Sinking Fund in the 1710s, including Crookshank's combatant and future South Sea Bubble gadfly Archibald Hutcheson. Throughout the century, the Fund would return as a supposed means of economic deliverance and a source of political controversy. In 1734-5, for example, a fraught pamphlet war broke out over the Sinking Fund between Walpole and Tory nemesis William Pulteney, while, in the 1780s, the advice of the inimitable democrat-moralist-actuary Richard Price made Prime Minister William Pitt “half mad” for the Sinking Fund.¹ I will especially examine how the Sinking Fund debates reveal an affinity between mathematical computation and ideologies of political opposition, evident in the combative calculations of Hutcheson, Pulteney, and Price.

¹ Quoted in Carl B. Cone, “Richard Price and Pitt's Sinking Fund of 1786,” *The Economic History Review*, New Series, Vol. 4, no. 2 (1951): 243-251, on p. 243.

Robert Persons, the English Succession, and Notes on Modern English Catholic Historiography

F.C. Dominguez (Princeton)

English Jesuit Robert Persons's book, *A conference about the next succession to the crown of England* (1594), sent the Elizabethan regime into bouts of fury, the Scottish King into a cold sweat, and was detested by many English Catholics as well. This paper will note the reasons for this pervasive furor and will briefly summarize the role played by the Conference and related texts in Persons' efforts to facilitate Philip II's succession to the English Crown. This discussion will serve as a platform for broader comments on English Catholic historiography and potential avenues for future research.

Matt Growhoski (Princeton)

"A Fable like a Historie": John Barclay and the Politics of Literature in Early Stuart Britain, 1603-1642.

Amy Houston (Harvard)

Protestant models for Catholic resistance: the sieges of Henri IV's accession, 1590-92

Historians have long recognized how much adherents of the Catholic League, in the early 1590s, drew upon the Protestant monarchomach theories of the 1570s in justifying their own efforts to prevent Henri of Navarre from taking the French throne. In fact, theories of resistance articulated in both the 1570s and the 1590s were largely the product of the exigencies of siege warfare. Drawing on siege narratives and propaganda published by the Catholic League in the early 1590s, this paper explores how the tactical evolution of siege warfare contributed to both the theory and the practice of armed resistance at the sieges of Paris (1590-91), Chartres (1591) and Rouen (1591-1592).

Christopher Moses (Princeton)

Money Matters in the 1690s Atlantic and Beyond

Innovation, improvement, revolution: such Whiggish words still have a deservedly comfortable place in the economic history of 1690s England. Dutch influence lends support; Spain stands as a counter-case of backwardness; and the telos-to-1789 mars Colbert's efforts in France. Britain's fiscal-military state triumphs, and credit enabled this success. State debt, the Bank of England, and fluid capital markets propelled growth and stability—all of it credit-driven.

Yet what about the stuff of money? Gold and silver still provided the unquestioned foundation of wealth and served as the global standard of value. Without bullion, armies went unpaid, trade imbalances remained unanswered, and bills of exchange turned back into mere paper. Without a stable currency and well-determined specie-to-debt ratios, fiscal innovation would have floundered—though these issues have been little explored amidst recent scholarly fervor about credit (or enduring fascination with Anglo-exceptionalism).

My talk will draw from dissertation research on England's Great Recoinage to sketch how states' desired access to hard money played a key role in the Nine Years War, the 1707 British Union, and War of Austrian Succession. Who would control Spain's new world wealth? Would the *asiento* be held by Britain or France—how could the slave trade develop most profitably? What alternative forms of wealth might answer silver's dominance? I will explore these imperial and geopolitical questions in the context of contemporary political and philosophical debates about the nature of money and value as had by figures including Locke, Leibniz, Lowndes and Newton.

Oksana V. Mykhed (Harvard)

Contested Arcadia: the Partitions of Poland and the Transformation of the Dnieper Frontier, 1700 - 1795.

This study will evaluate the influence of frontier regions on the formation and disintegration of multinational states and empires using example of the Dnieper frontier between Poland-Lithuania and the Russian Empire in the eighteenth century. The originality of the study lies in considering this region not as a simple territory contested by the two states, but as a subject on its own. An innovative analysis of various ethnic, religious, social, economic and other groups active in the frontier allows me to propose a holistic picture of the region. This paper argues that both Russian and Polish influences destabilized a peaceful coexistence of the diverse frontier groups and resulted in violent rebellions and repressions.

Suzanne Podhurst (Princeton)

The Defamer's Dilemma: Authorship and Responsibility in Early-Modern England

This paper explores the relationship between defamatory writing and recognized authorship. It first traces the statutory regulation of defamation in early-modern England, arguing that beginning in the reign of Henry VIII, statutory focus gradually shifted to highlight authorial responsibility. It next probes the contemporary development of surveillance and censorship mechanisms, arguing that these influenced how a number of authors composed and transmitted texts as well as how readers interpreted written works.

Ultimately, the regulation and monitoring of texts (even benign ones) called attention to authorial identity and in turn suggested literary ownership.

Monica Poole (Harvard)

"To make oratory do homage to the honor of God": how sermons were delivered in the English Revolution

Attempting to reconstruct how any oral performance looked and sounded two hundred years before either the invention of the phonograph or the motion picture is always an imperfect science. Yet imperfection is not reason enough for neglect. This paper will examine ars praedicandi, personal correspondence, funeral sermons memorializing key preachers, and the printed sermons of the middle 17th century themselves, in order to begin to draw conclusions about the ideal and the reality of the performance of sermons during the English Revolution, c. 1640-1650.
