

Towards a New Political History of the Court – Delineating Practices of Power in Gender, Culture, and Sociability

Veranstalter: Pascal Firges, German Historical Institute Paris; Regine Maritz, Universität Bern

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The pre- and early-modern court was a multi-faceted space for innovation in arts, sciences, religion, and political thought. Moreover, and most importantly, it was also a centre for the deployment of power. Consequently, court-history is a complex and extensive field of research. In recent years, thanks to the cultural turn, this field has become particularly vibrant and innovative. For this reason, the conference aimed at bringing together researchers working on these new approaches and asked them to present their research in the light of the role of courts from a historical-political perspective as well as also highlighting their significance for the formation of states, institutions, and political practices. The two-day conference brought together experts working on diverse aspects of court history covering a wide chronology, from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century, and overcoming disciplinary boundaries by including also research on art history and the history of music. The organizers encouraged the participants to take a step back and to rethink together how the political dimension of their work could be best incorporated in the framework of a „new political history“. This, as well as the great variety of the presented research, gave the conference an experimental character. In five thematic panels, the participants presented their own approaches, tying their research back to politics.

In their introduction, PASCAL FIRGES (German Historical Institute Paris) and REGINE MARITZ (Universität Bern) reminded the plenum of some classic working definitions and key concepts of the historical research on power, political culture, and state formation. The conference also marked the completion of their joint research project

at the German Historical Institute, entitled „Practices of Power and Interpersonal Relationships at Dynastic Centres (1500-1800)“.

The first panel, chaired by BRITTA KÄGLER (NTNU Trondheim), focused on „Gender“. PERNILLE ARENFELDT (American University of Sharjah) opened the discussion by stating that historiography continues to be influenced more deeply by nineteenth century liberal ideas than is usually acknowledged. For instance, gender history, which is steeped in feminist traditions, has continued to rely on a distinction between formal and informal politics, which mirrors the public and private divide of liberal theory. For Arenfeldt this is unhelpful when considering prince consorts at court, as they were viewed as fully implicated in matters concerning the order of their territories and the well-being of their subjects. Arenfeldt concluded that women at court had trans-dynastic and trans-territorial roles and that even childbearing and corporeality did not remove them from power, as had previously been assumed.

Regine Maritz argued that it is necessary to include both men and women in a gendered political history of the court, since such a perspective would open up a view of previously neglected dynastic processes. Using the strained marital relationship of Duke Friedrich I and Duchess Sibylla of Württemberg as a case in point, Maritz argued that the negotiation of the task-sharing of ruling couples was a highly political affair. Whilst Friedrich insisted on focusing decision-making power on himself – within the marital relationship as well as in any negotiations with councils and local elites – Sibylla performed extensive, emotionally charged labour in order to maintain her female entourage's representative attire and visibility, and to keep channels of communication with her husband open.

The next two panels (panels 2 and 3) dealt with „Bodies, Sexuality, and Emotions“. TOM TÖLLE (Universität Hamburg) discussed in his contribution the role of corporeality at courts. He argued that the body was only acknowledged when in crisis, for example in the case of premature death, illness, or failing reproduction. Bodies and corporeality have not been a central category in current politi-

cal history. Despite that, Tölle claims that, for a better understanding of courts, historians must give corporeality a central role in political and cultural history. As the speaker put it: „This politics was as much a matter of impotent princes, pregnant women, and frail heirs as of statesmen and administrators“.

NADINE AMSLER (Universität Bern) also highlighted the political importance of bodies, by looking at the relationships between royal infants and their wet nurses. These „milk relationships“ could gain great emotional intensity, lasting until adulthood of the future monarch and could thus open milk nurses and their families (for example the royal children’s „milk-siblings“) access the court. Amsler’s paper furthermore investigated the medical and moral discourses about choosing a milk nurse, especially the theory of „*le sang blanc*“ which drew a direct line between blood and milk.

MIRKO VAGNONI (Université de Fribourg) presented his ongoing research about the Angevin and Aragonese courts of the kingdom of Naples and Sicily (1266-1343). Building upon the traditional debate on the royal body and its functions as a means of political power, Vagnoni argued in favour of broadening the focus by reading royal bodily representations in written and figurative sources as a wider communication strategy between the royal power and society.

AUORE CHÉRY (Laboratoire de recherche historique Rhône-Alpes) used the long phase of childlessness of Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI as a starting point for investigating the role of gender related taboos. In this context, contemporaries’ difficulties to discuss sexual problems, especially medical questions about sexuality at European courts, became apparent. Chéry interpreted the letters between Emperor Joseph II, who visited the couple, and Leopold, Grand Duke of Tuscany, both siblings of Marie Antoinette, as documents of sexual education and assistance at that time. The speaker furthermore included the Danish court and sexual issues of Christian VII in her consideration and discussed similarities between the cases.

LANA MARTYSHEVA’s (Université Paris-Sorbonne) paper on the political role of court

clerics opened panel 4, which alongside panel 5 addressed „Religion, Intellectual Production, and Material Culture“. Martysheva studied the court of King Henri IV of France, where a group of Catholic clerics significantly eased his ascension to the throne in their role as guarantors of the king’s confessional trustworthiness.

That politics at court must always be thought in connection with religion – not only as a source of influence and power but also with regards to emotions and beliefs concerning faith and God – was the conclusion of HELEN WATANABE O’KELLY’s (University of Oxford) paper. Religious worship played an important role in society, disciplining behaviour, and structuring daily life at court. This is not only true for the (often) male ruler, but also for the consort, as Watanabe O’Kelly exemplified with the case of „*Sachsens Betssäule*“, prince-electress Christiane of Saxony. Religious aspects were hence omnipresent in court culture.

In her paper, ELISABETH C. NATOUR (Regensburg) argued that, despite the rich research on court music in musicology, the relevance of music as part of politics has so far hardly been incorporated in the historiography of the early modern court. On the basis of the courts of Ferdinand III (Vienna) and Charles I (London), Natour revealed strong connections between the political programme and the musical style and thus referred to music as a means of cultural politics as well as a powerful instrument of royal (self-)representation.

KARL KÜGLE (University of Oxford) analysed the negative image of the duke Louis of Savoy and his spouse, Anne of Lusignan, which was created by an anonymous late medieval chronicler. Kügle argued against this portrayal, which bears signs of xenophobia and misogyny, and underlined the importance of the expenses made by the Savoy court in order to attract well-known musicians of the time as an investment, which furthered the court’s prestige and status.

Panels 6 and 7 focused on the interconnectedness of „Family, Household, and State“. LEONARD HOROWSKI (Humboldt Universität Berlin) retraced and compared the processes of elite integration in France and

Brandenburg-Prussia. While in both cases elites were divided into old chivalric and new judicial nobility, French nobility never really opened up to the „newcomers“, whereas both groups could fuse in the Prussian elites. Horowski explained this difference with the role of university education for the elites in Prussia.

GIORA STERNBERG (University of Oxford) analysed letters from the seventeenth century and the titles, writers accorded to their correspondence partners. He focused on the emergence and independent development of the forms of address of „*monseigneur*“ and „*grand seigneur*“, which referred to a new system of social hierarchy at the Bourbon court. The disputes over questions of epistolary etiquette were an important aspect of the aristocratic strategies for social mobility.

DRIES RAEYMAEKERS (Radboud Universiteit) presented a new project that will provide an analytical comparative perspective on how the role of royal bastards influenced the institutions and the functioning of European dynasties. According to Raeymaekers, bastards were not a threat, but instead a human resource and capital for a noble house. By revealing the integration, representation, and legitimization of royal bastards, Raeymaekers argued, a better way of understanding European courts can be reached.

In his paper, PHILIP MANSEL (Society for Court Studies London) explained how royal stables not only provided transport, entertainment, and prestige for the king and the court, but also possibilities to escape from enemies in times of turmoil. Underpinned by examples, inter alia Louis' XVI failed escape from Versailles of in 1789 – due to badly situated stables – Mansel concluded that the fate of French monarchs often depended on their carriages and horses.

In the final panel, GIULIA CALVI (New Europe College, Bucharest) and JEROEN DUINDAM (Universiteit Leiden) extended the view beyond Europe and opened it towards „Global Historical and Transcultural Perspectives“. The panel was chaired by PINAR KAYAALP (Ramapo College of New Jersey), a scholar of Ottoman history.

Giulia Calvi called attention to transcultural communication and transfers of knowl-

edge. Calvi analysed the late seventeenth-century correspondence between the young Florentine physician, Michelangelo Tilli, who was sent to the Ottoman Empire, and the Florentine court physician Francesco Redi. Practices of translation concerning languages and cultures, performed by go-betweens like Tilli, she concluded, were crucial features of the circulation of knowledge between courts.

Jeroen Duindam advocated in favour of a more global comparison in court-history. According to Duindam, this approach is both possible (as courts are a global phenomenon) and necessary. Since history is always written from a certain perspective, comparative history helps scholars to become conscious of their specific points of view. Moreover, comparison can help to analyse, which aspects of court culture are rather common among many dynastic centres and which elements are exceptional. A global approach therefore leads to a more precise understanding of patterns and structures at court.

The conference featured rich and lively discussions throughout, and towards the end of the event the participants took some time to reflect on what had been achieved and which challenges still needed to be tackled. There was a broad agreement that historians still need to further challenge and rethink their own categories and concepts, such as, in this instance, the court and the political. It was evident that the conference had focused to a significant extent on the European early modern period, and it was discussed that specifically the conceptual work on this topic would benefit from being tried and measured against further examples stemming from the medieval and the modern period, or from outside of Europe. Furthermore, Amsler importantly raised the point that the majority of the papers heard had focused on the monarch or the ruling couple, but that the numerous courtly actors of lower social status had not yet found the attention they deserved in these discussions. Despite these limitations, the conference fostered important dialogues on the writing of a prospective new political history of the court and how such an undertaking could usefully build on the recent interest in rituals and symbolic communication. The discussions reflected that such a prospective nar-

rative needs to further historicise the experience and practice of power by taking into account the contemporary attitudes towards religion, family, emotion, and gendered corporeality, and the ways in which they shaped the creation and functionality of music, art, and equestrianism, as well as other areas of creative expression with which people at court engaged.

Conference Overview:

Panel 1: Gender

Chair: Britta Kägler (NTNU Trondheim)

Pernille Arenfeldt (American University of Sharjah): Gendering Politics at the Courts of Sixteenth-Century Germany

Regine Maritz (Universität Bern): Gender Difference and the Practice of Power at the Early Modern Court of Württemberg

Panel 2: Bodies, Sexuality and Emotions I

Chair: Regine Maritz (Universität Bern)

Tom Tölle (Universität Hamburg): Courts, Politics, Corporeality: Reflections on a History of Court Politics with the Ailing Bodies Put Back In

Nadine Amsler (Universität Bern): Wet Nurses and the Power of Milk Relationships at Court

Panel 3: Bodies, Sexuality and Emotions I

Chair: Pascal Friges (DHIP)

Mirko Vagnoni (Université de Fribourg): The *Mise-en-scene* of the King's Body at the Angevin and Aragonese Courts of Naples and Palermo (1266–1343)

Aurore Chery (Laboratoire de recherche historique Rhône- Alpes): A New Vision of Sexuality and Power at the French Court through Two Famous Letters from Joseph II

Panel 4: Religion, Intellectual Production, and Material Culture I

Chair: Britta Kägler (NTNU Trondheim)

Lana Martysheva (Université Paris-Sorbonne): The Shifting Political Roles of Court Clerics

Helen Watanabe O'Kelly (University of Oxford): Religion and Confession as the Bedrock

of Monarchy and Court

Panel 5: Religion, Intellectual Production, and Material Culture II

Chair: Helen Watanabe O'Kelly (University of Oxford)

Elisabeth C. Natour (Universität Regensburg): (Un)heard Practices of Power: Toward a Musical History of Court Politics

Karl Kügle (University of Oxford): The Duchess Virago: Gender, Religious and Cultural Politics, and their Narratives, in Fifteenth-Century Savoy

Panel 6: Family, Household, State I

Chair: Niels May (DHIP)

Leonhard Horowski (Humboldt Universität Berlin): Useful Ink-Shitters and Decorative Excellencies: The Difficult Relationship between Ministers of State and Courtiers in Brandenburg-Prussia and France, c. 1650–1800

Giora Sternberg (University of Oxford): The *Monseigneur* and the *grands seigneurs*: Politics of Priority at the Bourbon Court

Panel 7: Family, Household, State II

Chair: Nadine Amsler (Universität Bern)

Dries Raeymaekers (Radboud Universiteit): Dynasty and Bastardy: The Fate of Illegitimate Royal Children in European Courts, c. 1500–1800

Philip Mansel (Society for Court Studies): The Reins of Power: The Politics of the French Royal Stables, from Henri III to Louis XVI

Panel 8: Global Historical and Transcultural Perspectives

Chair: Pinar Kayaalp (Ramapo College of New Jersey)

Giulia Calvi (New Europe College, Bucharest): Translating Court Cultures. Medical Practice, Scientific Knowledge, and Political Information between the Ottomans and the Medici (1682–1688)

Jeroen Duindam (Universiteit Leiden): Why Global Comparison? The Example of the Court

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