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[https://lehrblick.de/en/constitutional-debates]

In conversation with Plato, Polybius and Cassius Dio –
Constitutional debates as role plays and podcasts
(Dr Birgit Hawelka in conversation with Prof. Dr Angela Ganter,
Elena Maria Eusebi, and Mario Sommer)

Birgit Hawelka:
Hello and welcome to today’s episode of our podcast. My name is Birgit Hawelka, and I’m delighted to be joined by Professor Angela Ganter. She holds the Chair of Ancient History at the University of Regensburg. Back in May, she was awarded the Prize for Innovative Teaching in the category “Course design” for one of her master’s seminar on “Constitutional Debates: Contexts and Media”. Of course, we’re curious to find out what made this seminar so special. Professor Ganter, welcome — it’s a pleasure to have you with us today.

Angela Ganter:
Thank you so much for having me.

Birgit Hawelka:
And she’s not here alone. She has also brought along two of her students. With us today as well is Elena Maria Eusebi. She is working on her PhD in Ancient History and also took part in this seminar.

Elena Maria Eusebi:
That’s right. Hello, it’s a pleasure to be here.

Birgit Hawelka:
And also with us is Mario Sommer. He is a master’s student in Ancient History – Classical Studies and took part in this seminar as a student.

Mario Sommer:
Yes, hello. Thank you very much for the invitation.

Birgit Hawelka:
Professor Ganter, in the seminar you focused on constitutional debates. That seems like a very natural topic for you. For non-historians, could you briefly provide some context: what exactly are constitutional debates, and why is the topic relevant to students?

Angela Ganter:
Constitutional debates deal with the important question of what the best form of government is. This question was really always present in antiquity, but at the latest it became a subject of debate in the 5th century BC. And it's important to note that these were not bloodless, purely theoretical treatises, but part of everyday civic life. We can observe this particularly well in Athens. Specifically, in the 5th and 4th centuries BC, in grappling with the question of how one should govern and how one should be governed, models developed for the three forms of constitution that we still know today: monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy — along with their respective degenerate forms: tyranny — dictatorship, one might say today, though in antiquity it meant something different — oligarchy, and the so-called ochlocracy. People discussed how these degenerate forms arise, in other words, how an established form of government suddenly stops functioning, becomes unstable, and later also how such a cycle comes about. This is indeed highly relevant today. And for our seminar it was also very exciting, because at the same time, first Trump was elected for the second time in the last winter semester, and then — I wouldn't say it was a stroke of luck, but it was a fortunate coincidence for our discussions — the coalition in Germany collapsed, and in fact the Bundestag was newly elected that February. And as we all know, with the spread of autocracy worldwide in particular, this is of course a highly relevant topic to engage with.

Birgit Hawelka:
The topic does indeed seem to be very pressing and relevant. Nevertheless, the ancient constitutional debates are presumably available only in textual form, and at first glance that sounds like a lot of text work and text analysis. But I know that you approached the topic differently. What were the considerations behind your decision to approach this topic in a way that was completely different from just reading texts on the subject?

Angela Ganter:
First of all, that's right — of course we have to work with what has been handed down, and in the case of these constitutional debates those are indeed ancient texts, and complex ones at that. But interestingly, what we are dealing with here are debates. In other words, they emerge from dialogues. And that is itself typical of how these debates originally arose and what kind of lived, everyday background they had — namely, first of all, debates especially in the Greek popular assemblies, and then also, for example, at the symposion, what we might call drinking parties. And this is something that is directly reflected in the Platonic texts. The important point for this seminar — or rather, the idea behind it — can also be seen in the subtitle: on the one hand, it was about the historical contexts, and on the other, about the media of these constitutional debates. So clearly, historians do not discuss politics or scholarly or philosophical arguments purely within the texts themselves, but are especially interested in the historical contexts of the time. An example, the first author we dealt with, is Herodotus. This is in fact the first constitutional debate that has been handed down to us. So here we are in the second half of the 5th century BC. On the one hand, the experiences of the Persian Wars at the beginning of the 5th century BC are reflected in it, and on the other, contemporary experiences in Athens in the 430s and 420s — namely, the expansion of the

Athenian League. And what is very telling in this democracy is that Athens becomes a polis tyrannos, in other words, a tyrannical city-state. And Herodotus works all of this into a fictional dialogue set at the Persian court, with the question: What is the best form of government? Another example is Plato, who processed the experiences of his youth — the oligarchic reign of terror at the end of the Peloponnesian War — and then also the death of his teacher Socrates in 399 BC, when democracy had very quickly been established after those terrible years of war, and yet his revered teacher still had to die. Finally, there is his idealized state, which he wanted to realize in Sicily but could not. All of this is reflected in his debates. Then, thirdly, we had Polybius, who showed the divided Greek world how Rome was able to rise — namely, to become a world power. And he discusses constitutional cycles and then the mixed constitution in Rome, which in his view somehow combined the best of all three forms of government. And finally, as the last example, there is Cassius Dio in the third century AD, who looks back on two hundred years of imperial rule and sees in Augustus the embodiment of the ideal — namely, a union of monarchical and democratic elements. So that is always the background: these historical contexts. And then, of course, the media — that was the special idea. From antiquity we have, so to speak, these oral debates, the dialogues, the written-down versions. But the question is then: first of all, you engage with the ancient conventions, with the transmission. Then the question: what actually is a dialogue? That was what we wanted first of all to recreate — and we can certainly go into this in more detail in a moment — in pro-con debates. And then, finally, to transfer this into a modern medium that also connects to civil society, namely through podcasts, which were creatively designed. In the last quarter of the seminar, one could say, we then developed interview techniques ourselves, and that was essentially the basic idea: to travel through the different media while at the same time uncovering and analyzing the historical contexts, and then also recreating them.

Birgit Hawelka:
A very comprehensive and exciting concept. Let's perhaps go back to the first part of the seminar — the debates. A key element was to take up these debates and then presumably to process them discursively in some form. So maybe my question to the students, Elena Eusebi: how did that actually work in practice? How can we picture a prototypical session of the seminar from the students' perspective?

Elena Maria Eusebi:
Yes, so we had a total of four debate rounds, and before each debate round, each presentation group introduced a constitutional debate from antiquity. As Ms. Ganter already mentioned, Ms. Ganter presented Herodotus first. Then the presentation groups dealt with Plato, Polybius, and Cassius Dio, and that was our preparation for the respective joint discussion. The discussion itself, after the preparation, was somewhat, I imagine, structured like a medieval disputatio. That is, a rhetorical exercise in which each participant was randomly assigned a position, and everyone then had to defend one or the other form of government. Before that, one had about half an hour to review the relevant author's arguments, which we had already discussed in the other sessions. And yes, much was also entrusted to the participants' improvisation. And of course, that also led to some very amusing results.

Birgit Hawelka:
Improvisation can certainly be a lot of fun, but it can also be quite challenging. Mr. Sommer, how did you experience it? What were the particular challenges and difficulties you faced when you had to improvise a role in a constitutional debate?

Mario Sommer:
Well, I think the difficult part was especially that you had to represent views and roles that might not be your own. For me, as a convinced democrat, it was incredibly hard to argue in favor of monarchy or in favor of aristocracy. And then right away came the question of how to present that convincingly on the basis of the ancient sources, since that was our foundation. Leading such a discussion in a lively way, even though you don't actually support that position yourself, was really challenging. But it was also quite a rewarding challenge—in the sense of asking myself: how do I argue so that it comes across as authentic, as credible? And how do I convince the other participants of the constitutional model I had been assigned?

Birgit Hawelka:
So it really was quite a challenge to defend that. Ms. Ganter, how satisfied were you with the discussions? Because it doesn't seem all that easy. Did they go well, or did you often have to have to intervene to make corrections when someone drifted out of their role and perhaps started expressing their own opinion more strongly?

Angela Ganter:
No, I didn't step in these pro-and-con debates at all. That's actually the whole point of this didactic design. The idea was that for each constitutional debate, for each subtopic, we had already held two preparatory sessions beforehand. In those sessions, the group responsible for a particular author prepared him with presentations and source-paper discussions. In other words, everyone already had the know-how from those two prior sessions. And in the pro-and-con debate itself, the point was, of course, that it was truly student-moderated. So there is always a moderator and then the respective roles that people take on. But afterwards there is a reflection round, and I led that part—always at the very end of each block. And that round is about, first of all, reflecting on one's experience of representing a particular position, and then, of course, also moving to a meta-level at the end and asking: "So, what do you actually think about this or that point?" That reflection afterwards is important in order to bring all of that together.

Birgit Hawelka:
But as you already mentioned at the beginning, a second key element was the podcasts. On top of the discussions, there was something additional. How did you prepare the students for the podcast format?

Angela Ganter:
Yes, basically we had already gone through all of that once before, so to speak, in that first block on Herodotus, which I was still running completely myself. After the content

discussions—after that pro-and-con debate based on Herodotus' constitutional debate—we listened to a sample podcast that I had produced earlier in another context on Herodotus Then we talked about: how do you actually go about creating podcasts? After that we looked at different interview techniques and tossed around a few possible podcast formats. That was after the first quarter of the seminar, so roughly in the fourth session. But it wasn't meant as a guideline, rather more as an inspiration—so that, by the time we get around to producing the podcasts in January (in the case of the winter semester), students would already be thinking about how they want to set it up themselves And it was meant to be really creative, of course. We just sketched out different possibilities, and that was, so to speak, the preparation.

Birgit Hawelka:
That's definitely a bit of a challenge for students too—if you've never made a podcast before, then actually putting it into practice creatively. Mr Sommer, what specifically took place in your group? How did you prepare for it and what type of podcast did you end up choosing?

Mario Sommer:
We—or rather I—we also like to listen privately to history podcasts on different topics. There are quite a lot of them these days on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, etc. For example, Eine Stunde History from Deutschlandfunk Nova, or Terra X History from ZDF, or also Geschichten aus der Geschichte. So that was kind of the basis already. But then of course also, as Ms. Ganter mentioned, her own podcast, which was about counterfactual historiography. And that's what we decided to go with. We wanted to do it a bit with counterfactual historiography, but also with some humor, a bit of fiction. And then we eventually decided that we wanted to do a classic interview—but not with contemporary figures, rather with historical figures, namely the principes, the Roman emperors. So we picked three different emperors: Nero, Marcus Aurelius, and Elagabalus. That covered a good stretch of history, and later we also had Elagabalus's mother drop by. We then tried to shape it with a bit of humor, but still preserve the historical foundation. And we also tried to embed it all in the historical context, using our historical sources and our assigned author. In our case, that was Cassius Dio, the historian. And so we tried to introduce it with his texts and then, on that basis, hosted these interviews with the emperors.

Birgit Hawelka:
Ms Eusebi, did you take a different approach or did you do something similar, transferring your experience from podcasting?

Elena Maria Eusebi:
I think it was similar in our group. We also decided on an audio drama. However, the group for Polybius went more for a classic podcast, with explanations, with geographical maps, etc., which was also very interesting and exciting. But yes, we, on the other hand, decided once again to do a audio drama. And yes, we used the news format, so something like "399 BC – Breaking News on the Socrates Trial" and "Socrates has been sentenced to death". And the idea was a bit like this: our reporter interviewed a shocked Plato live at the scene. And Plato

put the outcome of the trial into the context of Athens' general political chaos. That way, he also presented his reflections on the different forms of government.
Preparing the podcast was of course a lot of fun. Our inspiration was a bit the "impossible interview." I've often heard things like that in Italian podcasts, in history podcasts, and I always enjoyed them a lot. The preparation itself was at times also very funny, and I think it was an interesting exercise that brought learning together with creativity.

Birgit Hawelka:
The word creativity has come up quite a lot now, and I also get the impression that there was a great deal of freedom given to you as students. Of course, that always comes with a certain risk, because along with freedom comes responsibility. And that kind of approach can easily backfire. Ms. Ganter, what would you say was the biggest challenge in this seminar overall On the one hand, you had the courage to hand over the reins, of course, but at the same time you were responsible for the learning outcome. What was the most difficult part for you?

Angela Ganter:
Not just in this seminar—this is generally the challenge with the Master's seminars—that we have participants coming together from very different Master's programs. So, some people, I'd say, aren't necessarily interested in antiquity at all, but rather in contemporary history. Then we have others who are really focused on classical studies, and of course we need to bring everyone onto the same page. That's why I usually handle Master's seminars in such a way that, alongside a content-related aspect—in this case, the constitutional debates—I also include a meta-level, which can be methodological in nature or built around a specific guiding question. And in this case, that guiding question was: How are such contexts represented in the media, then and now? That was essentially the central thread. And of course, I mean, that's also the whole point of modern didactics: that you hand over responsibility, and the more advanced the students are, the more responsibility you give them. But that already applies at the school level too. And of course I plan such a seminar before it begins. So I do think in advance about how things might unfold. How it then works out in practice—like in this case, where the presentation or moderation groups ultimately also produced the podcasts—how they cooperate, I can't predict beforehand. And in this seminar it really went outstandingly well. There's always an element of luck involved, one hast to admit. And what was really special here was that the individual presentations on the contexts didn't just appear as thirty-minute stand-alone blocks, but in the end they were all really well integrated. Those two preparatory content sessions for each block truly turned into full group discussions, worked out collectively by the presentation groups. And that became even more apparent later on in the podcast. So one can say the concept really worked. But of course I do think carefully in advance about how to structure the overall design of such a seminar. Meaning: I know when I want to include moments of reflection. So in that sense I still hold the overall plan in my hands—even if I delegate a lot. At least, that's what I like to think.

Birgit Hawelka:
The concept seems to have worked out, after all your students nominated you for the Teaching Innovation Award.

Angela Ganter:
Yes, thank you once again.

Birgit Hawelka:
And to ask the students directly: what were your main reasons for doing it, for saying that it really was an exceptional seminar that deserved the Teaching Innovation Award?

Mario Sommer:
I think the main reason was that it was just an incredibly well-balanced seminar and simply a lot of fun. I can speak for everyone—all the participants—when I say that we looked forward to every single session. Each session was of course similar at its heart, but still different in its own way and really refreshing, especially with the role plays and the podcasts we recorded. It was a lot of work, but because it was so much fun, it never really felt like that much work and in the end it wasn't a problem at all. So we were happy to invest the time.

Birgit Hawelka:
From the instructors' perspective, that's of course wonderful to hear, because sometimes assignments are just treated as something to get done. Meaning, there's a task that students have to complete, and that's it. And that doesn't seem to have been the case in this seminar, despite all the work it took. After all, you had to engage with the constitutional debates, you prepared discussions, and in the end you even produced a podcast. That required quite a broad spectrum of competencies. Perhaps as a final question to you, Ms Eusebi, what was the most important thing you learned from the seminar, aside from the fact that all that work could be fun?

Elena Maria Eusebi:
First of all, I think a historian always has to be a little careful when drawing comparisons between the present and antiquity. But in this seminar on constitutional forms in the ancient world, there were often really clear impulses for thinking about the current challenges facing Western democracies, as Ms. Ganter already pointed out. And I believe the greatest danger for ancient historians is losing touch with the present and hiding away in the past. This master's seminar, by contrast, struck me as a great example of how the ideas of classical authors can inspire the way we think—and even act—today. For me, that was definitely the most important takeaway.

Birgit Hawelka:
I think those were wonderful closing words. It has become very clear that history can be something very alive, even at a high academic level.

I'd like to thank all of you for taking the time today and for sharing your insights with us. The podcasts that were produced in the seminar are publicly available, and of course we'll be happy to provide the links so that our listeners can also get a sense of what was accomplished there, and how ancient history can be presented in such a modern way. Many thanks to all of you for your time today and for your insights.

Angela Ganter:
Of course. Thank you very much.

Elena Maria Eusebi:
Thank you.

Mario Sommer:
Many thanks.