

The Spartan Ideal in Modern Political Theory

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I began my project with the goal of tracing the ideal of the Spartan regime, as depicted in such places as Xenophon's *Regime of the Lacedaemonians* and Plutarch's *Life of Lycurgus*, into the political thought of the Moderns. I wanted to investigate how this tradition was perceived at the advent of liberal democracy, and gain insight which could inform a critique of liberalism as we find it in the present day. However, I encountered a few challenges with my project as it was originally conceived.

On the ancient side of things, I additionally read Plato's *Republic* and Leo Strauss's essay, "The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon." These texts raised a concern as to whether the ancient writers themselves considered the Spartan ideal an undesirable or otherwise reckless pursuit. In the *Republic*, when Socrates and his interlocutors attempt to articulate the best regime, they establish many practices which were known to be distinctly Spartan. However, a question quickly arises as to whether these proposals should be taken seriously, or if they are meant to demonstrate broader problems in political philosophy and the founding of political community. Leo Strauss argues that Xenophon's aforementioned encomium to Sparta actually conceals comprehensive criticism of Spartan institutions, and the brutishness and license they create.

In the modern era, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* is the most historically notable for its appeals to the Spartan ideal. Even if we grant that this ideal may be undesirable if realized in its entirety, Rousseau identifies certain Spartan practices, such as an emphasis on leisure and education in virtue, which offer legitimate insight for our own time. However, I became concerned that there would be few other modern thinkers who would reference this tradition explicitly. I still wanted to better understand modern and contemporary traditions of liberal criticism – particularly those I thought would most align with the Spartan ideal – even if they owed no direct intellectual legacy to it.

For this reason, I read Karl Marx's *On the Jewish Question*, where he posits that liberal rights exist for the protection of capital (and Sparta was known for its prohibitions against the accumulation of wealth and a more communal view of property); Carl Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political*, for his thoughts on war and identification with the state; and Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, which is often classed in the communitarian tradition of liberal critique, and is notable for its attention to the ancients in a call for a revival of virtue ethics. Each of these critics align insofar as they claim citizens desperately need a more robust, shared conception of the good. However, I realized that there exist two primary approaches for the achievement of this goal: political violence (which, for example, Marx and Schmitt advocate), or education (where we find MacIntyre).

All of these developments led me to reorient my project, with the approval of Professor Sobak, around leisure and its relation to liberal education. It became clear to me that a comprehensive revision of current educational practices would be the best strategy for tempering the ills of liberalism, while preserving the peace characteristic of it. In his book *Why Liberalism Failed*, Patrick Deneen suggests that this would require a return to classical conceptions of the liberal arts. Going into the academic year, my honors project will focus on the usage and understanding of the Ancient Greek word "*schole*" in primary literature. *Schole* is the etymological origin of the word "school," and translates to "leisure." As with the previous iteration of my project, I hope that close study of the origination of the liberal arts in Ancient Greece will provide me with insight on contemporary debates at the intersection of political philosophy and educational pedagogy. In accordance with this plan, I have also read contemporary books related to leisure and liberal education, including Josef Pieper's *Leisure, the Basis of Culture* and Hannah Arendt's *Human Condition*. This summer has proved incredibly helpful in clarifying what I wanted to write about for my honors project, and I now feel well prepared to continue and complete my research this upcoming year.

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