

Benedict Wagner-Rundell, *Common Wealth, Common Good. The Politics of Virtue in Early Modern Poland-Lithuania*, Oxford, 2015, Oxford University Press, pp. 189

In analysing the role of the concept of virtue in the political culture and discourse of the Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania, Benedict Wagner-Rundell tackles a problem that is undoubtedly interesting and important but one that has not really featured prominently in Polish studies. The question of virtue, moral aspects of the discussion about the state among the *szlachta* (nobility) has so far failed to arouse any great interest among scholars. As the author rightly notes (p. 5ff), it was often treated as futile moralizing leading to a paralysis of political thought. In an extensive and very interesting introduction Wagner-Rundell adopts two propositions as a starting point for his reflection. The first — that virtue was an indispensable part of the political discourse and vision of the state at the time; the second — that adopting such a vision was neither a barrier to nor a substitute for the discussion about reform of the Commonwealth. Moreover, he believes and tries to demonstrate that the concept of virtue was not only of key significance to political thought of the day, but also had a great potential as a starting point for proposals for reform (p. 13).

Although the title of the book suggests a very broad scope of study, in fact it focuses on a brief period: the first half of Augustus II's reign, 1697–1717. This is somewhat disappointing to readers expecting an analysis of the problem over a longer period. On the other hand, the choice of this particular moment in the history of the Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania as a case study seems to be appropriate. Given what happened during the reign of Jan Kazimierz, I am not sure whether indeed 'this combination of internal and external challenges tested the *szlachta* state as never before' (p. 14), but undoubtedly, as they found themselves in a serious crisis at the time, the *szlachta* had to face some fundamental questions concerning the functioning and, in fact, the very existence of its state.

The author analyses, on the one hand, broader political treatises and on the other — texts written directly in the course of the political debate. This is the basis of the structure of the book, with Chapters Two ('Calls for Moral Revival') and Four ('Proposals for Radical Reform') being devoted to the treatises by Stanisław Herakliusz Lubomirski, Stanisław Dunin Karwicki, Jerzy Dzieduszycki and to

Eclipsis poloniæ (which the author treats as an anonymous work),¹ and Chapters Three, Five and Six — to, respectively, *sejmiki* (regional assemblies), the Sejm (central parliament) of 1712–13 and proposals for reform of the Confederation of Tarnogród. A framework of sorts is provided by the introductory chapter ('The Ideal of the Commonwealth'), and two chapters summing up the book: Seven ('A Reforming Moment?'), in which the author wonders why the rather common proposals for reform did not bring any real effect, and Eight ('Wider Contexts') showing the Polish virtue discourse in a wider European context or, to be more specific, comparing it to the English discourse. The sources used by the author encompass the treatises mentioned above, *sejmiki* records, Sejm diary records as well as official documents produced during the Confederation. Unfortunately, what escaped the author's attention was political literature of the day, that is small but quite numerous pamphlets which emerged, for example, during Augustus II's election and which later also commented on other important events and conflicts. I also include here writings presented some time ago by Henryk Olszewski in his monograph *Doktryny polityczne czasów saskich 1697–1740* (Warsaw, 1960), a book still of significance to studies of political thought of the Saxon era and clearly underestimated by Wagner-Rundell — he refers to it just twice and rather marginally at that. Speaking of the literature, I also miss Jacek Burdowicz-Nowicki's monograph;² although it does not examine the topic explored by Wagner-Rundell, it is nevertheless a fundamental work on the period in question. Notwithstanding these shortcomings, the author is well-versed in the current state of research and discusses it thoroughly in the introduction. When it comes to source texts, another work that perhaps should have been considered is Franciszek Radzewski's treatise *Kwestyje polityczne obojętne* in view of Urszula Kosińska's findings concerning the date of its writing.³ However, in this case the decisive factor may have been, indeed, its much later date of publication, as Radzewski's treatise, even if written in the period analysed in the book, contributed in no way to the discussion going on at the time.

What I find convincing are the conclusions of the introductory chapter, primarily the fact that, as the author rightly emphasizes, despite huge differences in wealth and, consequently, social status between various groups of the *szlachta* in the analysed period, differences in the political ideology, what the author calls republicanism, are hardly visible. The author's remark concerning the differences between the Lithuanian and the Polish *szlachta* (p. 31) is not supported by any reference to sources (or literature); it is an expression of commendable caution and possible suggestion as to the possibilities of further

¹ The author seems to be slightly late (p. 59) with his explanation that the piece was attributed to Stanisław Szczuka; in addition, he fails to mention that Jacek Staszewski's findings, on which his conclusions are based, are disputed by Henryk Palkij in Szczuka's biographical note in *Polski Słownik Biograficzny*.

² Jacek Burdowicz-Nowicki, *Piotr I, August II i Rzeczpospolita. 1697–1706*, Kraków, 2010.

³ Urszula Kosińska, 'Kwestyje polityczne, obojętne [Franciszka Radzewskiego]. Traktat polityczny z roku 1699', *KH*, 102, 1995, 3/4, pp. 91–112.

research rather than statement of fact. Wagner-Rundell provides an accurate list of the foundations of this 'republicanism' — liberty, law and mixed government (p. 28). However, I would advise great caution in applying to the last item the term 'collective sovereignty'. The authors of the theory of mixed government / *monarchia mixta* did not use the notion of sovereignty but that of power, just like their Polish followers. If members of the *szlachta* spoke of what we would call today sovereignty (they did not use such an expression, occasionally using the term *plena potestas* instead), this was referred to either (earlier) the rule of law, or the entire Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania, or the *szlachta* as a community and it is most likely to that community embodied in the *sejmiki* that the expression *communi consultatione*, the basis of '*communi bono* of the fatherland', formulated at the *sejmik* of Liw and cited by the author, refers (p. 24).

This chapter is a good introduction to the foundations of the *szlachta*'s vision of the Commonwealth's government and its link to the attitudes of participants in political life, primarily to the need to place the common over private good, that is virtue. It seems that the author overestimates the importance of Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, to whose theories he devotes much attention, as his impact on the Polish political discourse was rather limited. It may have been better for the author to draw more extensively on the literature on the subject, especially on Claude Backvis's book, unfortunately, not included here.⁴ Chapter One is, in a way, complemented by Chapter Three ('Government of Local Worthies') examining, mainly on the basis of the literature, the functioning of the *sejmiki* and, above all, their growing role in the face of the crisis affecting the central institutions of the state. I do not entirely agree with the author's opinion that the rise of local government at the turn of the eighteenth century and the fact that the *sejmiki* sought to take control over as many affairs of the Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania as possible were an attempt to cleanse the country of corruption and to restore virtuous government for the common good (p. 56).

On the other hand I fully agree with Wagner-Rundell that the 'virtue discourse', if it can be called that way, was a very important component of the Polish political discourse. I also think that his analysis of the above-mentioned treatises presented in Chapters Two and Four has enabled him to convincingly demonstrate that within the traditional discourse it was possible to come across interesting proposals for political reform, that the discourse was not as futile as it might seem.

However, some of the theses associated with proposed interpretations of specific contributions prompt me to enter into a polemic with the author. This concerns in particular his analysis of Lubomirski's and Karwicki's works. In the case of *De vanitate consiliorum* I object to the treatise being treated as a model example of purely moralizing approach to reform of the state. According to Wagner-Rundell, Lubomirski believed that 'the true task of reviving the Commonwealth is one

⁴ Claude Backvis, *Szkice o kulturze staropolskiej*, Warsaw, 1975.

of restoring good behaviour, not of institutional tinkering' (p. 36). *De vanitate* is a difficult text, causing scholars problems for many years, which has led to very different attempts at its interpretation. However, it is not, in my opinion, a programme for a reform of the Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania, nor is it quite a political diagnosis. Rather, it is a paradoxical guide for a ruler — in the form of a perverse king's mirror — showing him how to find his way in the political reality of the Polish-Lithuanian state. The questions of virtue or lack thereof do constitute an element of the description of this reality, but I have the impression that the problem is to some extent secondary when compared with that of the technique of governing the Commonwealth. Hence my serious doubts as to whether the virtue discourse is the right tool in the analysis of the work in question.

I have even more reservations about the treatment of Karwicki's treatise.⁵ Wagner-Rundell has placed Karwicki alongside Dziejuszycki and the author of *Eclipsis* in the chapter devoted to writers whose main goal was about, as he puts it, 'restoring virtuous government'. Yet Karwicki, despite a perfunctory tribute to the traditional understanding of the link between citizens' attitudes and functioning of the state paid in *De ordinanda*,⁶ quite consistently kept the moral aspect of politics out of both his works, which in any case he announced openly in *Egzorbitancyje*, when, having described 'drowning in private interests and profits, and lack of concern for the common good', he said that 'having put this aside for further reform, we shall now proceed to political considerations',⁷ and then consistently followed this through. His proposals for reform, quite radical indeed, were intended to improve the functioning of the Commonwealth and not the virtuousness of its citizens. I do not agree either, at least with regard to Karwicki, with the view that 'The need to address the threat of corruption thus drove the radical reformers to propose a rebalancing of the *forma mixta* in favour of its democratic element' (p. 73). This was meant, as Karwicki explained openly, to avoid confusion stemming from the continuing dispute *inter maiestatem et libertatem*, and not to raise the morale of those participating in political life. I also have serious doubts as to whether in his (and Dziejuszycki's) case it is true that 'the assumption that *szlachta* were essentially virtuous lay behind the radicals' sweeping proposals for reform' (p. 77).

⁵ I consider the information that it appeared in print in 1746 (p. 77) to be a simple mistake — as we know it remained in manuscript form until Krzyżanowski's edition of 1871.

⁶ 'nie tak dobrymi prawami kwitnie każde państwo, jak dobrymi i dzielnymi obywatelami' (for a state flourishes not so much thanks to good laws but thanks to good and brave citizens), Stanisław Dunin Karwicki, 'O potrzebie urzędu Rzeczypospolitej (*De ordinanda Republica*)', in idem, *Dzieła polityczne z początku XVIII wieku*, transl. and ed. Adam Przyboś and Kazimierz Przyboś, Kraków, 1992, p. 123.

⁷ 'utopienie się w prywatnych interesach i pożytkach, a naprzeciw niedbalstwo o dobro pospolite', 'do dalszej niżej poprawy odłożywszy, teraz do politycznych pójdzimy konsyderacyi', Stanisław Dunin Karwicki, 'Egzorbitancyje we wszystkich trzech stanach Rzeczypospolitej krótko zebrane', in idem, *Dzieła polityczne*, pp. 24, 25.

The divergence between my and the author's opinion about Karwicki's work leads to the crucial question of how broadly we will define the 'politics of virtue' mentioned in the title. Will we limit it only to contributions the authors of which saw a clear link between citizens' attitudes and the functioning of the state, and built their programmes or political judgements on that, or will we refer it more broadly to the concept of the state as a community existing for the common good? I am inclined to favour the former, while Wagner-Rundell seems to be opting for the latter, which indeed encompasses virtually all Polish political pronouncements from between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, as the political discourse of the *szlachta* Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania was based on a vision of the state as a community seeking the common good (understood differently in different periods) of the citizens making up this community.

A very broad approach to the problem has prompted the author to analyse such diverging issues as depriving the kings of the right to distribute lands and offices, abuse of power by hetmans and violence perpetrated by the army (the main thread in Chapter Five, 'The Sejm of 1712–13'), demands to withdraw the Saxon troops from the Commonwealth and, finally, the dispute *inter maiestatem et libertatem*. Undoubtedly, judgements expressed with regard to attitudes appeared in all those discussions, for, as Wagner-Rundell rightly points out, 'the political language of corruption has frequently been deployed merely as polemical tool in factional conflicts' (p. 44). It seems to me, however, that the analysis should be more nuanced and should take into account also other factors influencing political programmes. For example, when it comes to the question of distribution, it was important — at least on the level of platitudes — to restore the virtue of officials, though what mattered much more was whose 'men' they would be, thus, in fact, who would wield power. This was discussed openly. Similarly, the possibility of being 'corrupted' by the king was considered not so much on moral grounds, but rather in terms of the monarch's growing influence, that is the threat of *absolutum dominium*. I do not quite understand either why the author associates the proposal to deprive the king of the distribution rights with 'radicals like Karwicki' (p. 126), while in fact the proposal to deprive the king of the right to distribute offices appeared already in the sixteenth century and was one of the most often recurring political demands put forward by the *szlachta*.

On the other hand, the main thread of Chapter Five, the question of abuse of power by hetmans, undoubtedly analysed partly with reference to virtue or, to be more precise, corruption of those holding the highest offices in the army, referred largely, however, to the question of liberty, the threat posed to it (or not) by the hetmans' power; the objective, also avowed objective, of those seeking to limit the hetmans' omnipotence was to prevent them from harming their fellow citizens, irrespective of their virtue or lack thereof. In turn, although complaints about abuses perpetrated by Polish and Saxon troops obviously referred to their misdeeds, what mattered for the participants in the debate was not the

soldiers' virtue but lack of military discipline, the fact that the soldiers were a threat to the liberty and safety of citizens. In the case of the Saxon troops this was compounded by the fact that the king had broken the law and was seeking *absolutum dominium*.

What also slightly worries me is the reduction of the dispute *inter maiestatem et libertatem* to a fight for a virtuous collective government against the ruler's private interests (pp. 98, 105), especially given the fact that the author does not support these particular assertions with source quotes. Assuming a very broad interpretation of the virtue discourse, this interpretation is acceptable, yet it seems to me that it greatly simplifies the problem, that the power struggle aspect disappears in it as does the defence against the king's despotism.

All these reservations concern the placement of emphasis, the need to take into consideration in the analysis also other aspects of talking and thinking about the state, but they do not undermine the main value of Benedict Wagner-Rundell's book, namely the fact that the author demonstrates in it the extremely important role of civic engagement and the ideal of public good in the vision of the state as it functioned at the time. I fully agree with the author that for the *szlachta* it was an important tool to assess the situation of the Commonwealth (p. 151), which is why scholars, too, should pay more attention to it. What also seems important to me is the author's attempt to compare the Polish contributions and the republican discourse of the English. It shows how initially quite similar discourses become increasingly divergent, when in the eighteenth century the English introduce new concepts (prosperity, security), gradually abandoning the language of virtue, to which the Polish political language and the *szlachta*'s concept of the state remained faithful. On my part I would also add that in the late eighteenth century the concept, in a way, met Jean-Jacques Rousseau's vision.

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