CHAPTER 7

George of Trebizond, Renaissance Libertarian?

James Hankins

It is not easy to find a place for George of Trebizond in the history of Western political thought. The narratives constructed by modern authorities on the Renaissance period emphasize themes like the revival of ancient political thought, civic humanism, republican liberty, Machiavellian political realism, the rise of the state and the idea of sovereignty, the emergence of utopianism, the Reformation’s attack on the ecclesiastical polity, Erastianism and the development of resistance theory, the struggle between constitutionalism and absolutism.1 The most interesting political ideas in George’s writings do not check any of those boxes. He sometimes earns a footnote for his claim that the Venetian mixed constitution had its source in Plato’s Laws, a text he was the first to translate into Latin.2 But for the most part his political thought has been completely neglected.3 In part this may be because his most striking positions are hidden in a few chapters of his extended, three-book rant against Plato and the latter’s malign influence on Christian civilization, the Comparatio philosophorum Aristotelis et Platonis (1457/58), available today only in a few manuscripts and in a single, corrupt edition of 1523.4 But mostly, I believe, he


3 Hankins, Plato, 1: 174–80, sketches some of the themes discussed in more detail and from a different perspective in the present contribution.

4 For the manuscripts and the 1523 edition, see Monfasani, Trapezuntiana, 600–2, and John Monfasani, “A Tale of Two Books: Bessarion’s In Calumniatorem Platonis and George of Trebizond’s Comparatio Philosophorum Platonis et Aristotelis,” Renaissance Studies 22, 1
has been neglected because his ideas about liberty and cosmopolitanism are too far out of the mainstream of Renaissance political thought, or what is perceived as the mainstream. Recent studies of liberty in the Renaissance emphasize the role of the ‘non-domination’ model of liberty in Renaissance republics: liberty as equalization of political power among citizens. Recent studies of empire in the Renaissance focus on the dynamics of imperial expansion, the elaboration of imperial ideologies and the justification of empire. George’s model of personal liberty bears a closer resemblance to that of classical liberalism or even libertarianism than it does to the ‘non-domination’ model. And his advocacy of cosmopolitan empire is founded on arguments quite different from those of either ancient or modern theorists of universal government. Moreover, no one could call mainstream the actual empire George envisaged, which involved a future, providentially destined alliance between an Ottoman universal monarchy and the Roman Catholic Church. Perhaps all this does, in fact, make George sound marginal. My argument here, however, is not that he was typical, but that he was prophetic.

---


7 The Renaissance period has not attracted much interest from historians of cosmopolitanism. There are a few remarks in Derek Heater, World Citizenship and Government: Cosmopolitan Ideas in the History of Western Political Thought (New York: St. Martins, 1996), 48–52 (chiefly on Erasmus and Lipsius).