



Seminar

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On the Greek Origins of Biopolitics

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In the Thunberg Lecture Hall
SCAS, Linneanum, Thunbergsvägen 2, Uppsala
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S W E D I S H
C O L L E G I U M
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ABOUT MIKA OJAKANGAS

Mika Ojakangas received his Ph.D. from the University of Helsinki in 1997. Before his appointment as Professor of Political Thought at the University of Jyväskylä in 2010, he worked as a Research Fellow of the Academy of Finland (2005–2010) and of the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies (2002–2005).

Ojakangas' research areas are continental political theory, the history of political and ethical thought, conceptual history and political theology. Ojakangas' books include *The Voice of Conscience: A Political Genealogy of Western Ethical Experience* (2013) and *A Philosophy of Concrete Life: Carl Schmitt and the Political Thought of Late Modernity* (2006). He is a co-editor (with Susanna Lindberg and Sergei Prozorov) of the volume *Europe Beyond Universalism and Particularism* (2014).

Ojakangas is currently the director of the project 'The Intellectual Heritage of Radical Cultural Conservatism', financed by the Academy of Finland (2013–2017). He has also been the director of the project 'Rethinking Cultural Diversity in Europe: Beyond Universalism and Particularism', financed by the University of Helsinki (2010–2012).

During his stay at SCAS, Ojakangas will work on biopolitics in ancient Greece, focusing particularly on the political thought of Plato and Aristotle.

ABSTRACT

This presentation deals with biopolitics in classical Greek thought. Its aim is to demonstrate, contrary to Michel Foucault's argument in *The History of Sexuality I*, that biopolitics is not a distinctively modern phenomenon. It is as old a phenomenon as western political thought itself. Focusing on Aristotle's *Politics* as well as Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*, I argue that the politico-philosophical categories of classical thought were already biopolitical categories. In their books on politics, Plato and Aristotle do not only deal with all the central topics of biopolitics (sexual intercourse, marriage, pregnancy, childcare, public health, education, population, and so forth) from the political point of view but for them these topics are the very keystone of politics and the art of government. At issue is a politics for which the question how 'to organize life' (Plato, *Polit.* 307e) is the most important question. This politics is not characterized by what Foucault calls the juridico-institutional model of politics revolving around laws, legal subjects, contracts, liberties, obligations, rights, and duties. Platonic and Aristotelian politics concern the technologies of power over the natural life of the 'tame animals' (Plato, *Leg.* 6.766a) called human beings. By focusing primarily on 'the quantity and the quality of population' (Aristotle, *Pol.* 7.1326a5-7) it aims at controlling and regulating the domain of the living (Plato, *Polit.* 261c-d) in order to obtain the ultimate aim of politics: the prosperity and happiness of the city-state. Yet although I argue that the western understanding of politics was already essentially biopolitical in ancient Greece, this is not to say that the history of biopolitics would constitute a continuum from antiquity to the 20th century. This history is marked by several ruptures understood as obstacles preventing the diffusion of the Platonic-Aristotelian biopolitical model of politics – despite the influence these philosophers have otherwise had on the Roman and Christian thought. Among these ruptures, we may include: 1) the legalization of politics and the political subject in the Roman Republic, 2) the privatization of everyday life in the Roman Empire, 3) the de-regularization of biological life and 4) the absolutization of law in Christianity. Hence, the decline of the Greek city-state also entailed the decline of the biopolitical vision of politics. It was not until the renaissance of the classical culture and literature – including the translation of Aristotle's and Plato's political works – that the biopolitical vision of politics originating in Greek political thought became topical gain.