

GRACEH
New Histories of Politics
Central European University (Budapest) 18-20 May 2007

Panel title: Discourses and Political Power. Constructions of Knowledge
II

***The Renunciation of Kingship in Early Modern European Political Culture:
The Case of Emperor Charles V***

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SHORT OUTLINE OF CONFERENCE PAPER

The organisation of human societies has often been conceived in terms of political metaphors which are strictly organicistic, so as to represent the state as an undividable whole, where all parts are mutually indispensable. If the *res publica* was described as a human body and the king as its head, how could a ruler relinquish his or her office? Despite these logical premises, between the 16th and the 18th centuries we find several cases of 'abdication' which do not concern solely that part of Europe known as the 'Europe of the great dynasties'. While resistance theory has been widely investigated, in the extensive literature on kingship the topic of spontaneous resignation has received little attention, so we still ignore what happens if the ruler decides to resolve the political obligation.

This paper suggests that in order to confer moral, political and legal legitimacy upon his abdications, Charles V deployed a complex strategy of persuasion started long before 1555-56, when the actual abdication ceremonies took place. I will show that Charles's strategy was based upon the discourse of power as burden. On the other hand, I shall attempt a concise analysis of the diverse comprehension processes adopted by contemporaries

in order to represent such an unprecedented and extraordinary act. Finally, I will argue that the paradox of abdication, both as communicated by Charles V and as received by his contemporaries, did not question the dominant conception of supreme power. Nor was the consolidated image of Charles V undermined; on the contrary, this image was sublimated into that of the king-monk, who has defeated his worst enemy: himself.

A key event in the communication of the abdications was the famous ceremony staged by Charles in Brussels on 25 October 1555 and designed to persuade the States General of the Low Countries to ratify the renunciation and confirm their allegiance to his son Philip. Charles's oration is founded on the idea of power as burden. The public display of Charles's physical weakness and ill body is paralleled by the rhetoric of the discourse of power as burden: while the body of the king has been consumed by the yoke, the *dignitas quae nunquam moritur* is passed on to his son.

Due to the very complexity of the abdication process itself, these strategies for the incorporation of the successor had started long before 1555. Charles had undertaken a thorough operation of political pedagogy back in the early 1540s, when Philip was appointed governor of the Spanish kingdoms, and which culminated in the ceremonial journey of 1548 through Northern Italy, Southern Germany and the Low Countries, which Juan Cristóbal Calvete de Estrella, a humanist belonging to Philip's household, relates in his account *El felicísimo viaje del muy alto y muy poderoso principe don Phelippe*, published in 1552 (Antwerp, Martin Nucio). While the *joyeuses entrées* (the royal entries) organised in Philip's honour by Charles's entourage and by the local communities represented the political and legal prerequisite for his succession, they were also used as means of political propaganda for Philip as future ruler of the Low Countries and as candidate to the Imperial title. A rich series of metaphors of succession was deployed in the vast array of triumphal arches, *tableaux vivants* and other performances which were organised to praise the king-to-be.

While Philip, on the one hand, appropriated his father's imperial iconography, on the other hand he inherited his political legacy particularly through the biblical story of David and Solomon. Philip, like Solomon, is left to accomplish the mission which was started by his father, who had not been able to build the temple. This image was widely circulated at the time. The abdication led many contemporaries to see Philip as a new Solomon, who would take on Charles's legacy, thus becoming the incarnation of a vast number of expectations which had been associated with the initial phase of Charles V's reign. The transfer of power from Charles to Philip therefore revived a series of themes which had characterised Mercurino da Gattinara's years as imperial Chancellor, when the dream of the Universal Monarchy had been at the core of his political programme.

Charles decided to spend the last years of his life in the solitude of the monastery of Yuste, in order to prepare for death and devote himself to *otium*. In a broadsheet announcing the abdication that was released in Spain by the Crown, the motivations underlying the renunciation were given special religious and spiritual nuances compared to the emphasis put on the inability to govern expressed in the Brussels ceremony: Charles's entourage adapted its discursive strategy to the Spanish cultural milieu, which was deeply pervaded with stoic and bucolic ideals merged with Christian humanism. Charles's retirement found fertile soil in an existing tradition which was especially sensitive to the theme of the contempt of worldly matters and the praise for a life of tranquillity and contemplation as epitomised by Horatius's *Beatus ille*. According to this cultural milieu, Charles combines the figure of the stoic Christian knight who fights against his passions and that of the wise man who despises the *vanitas* of this world by reviving the ancient *topos* of the king-monk, who abandons the sword for the plough.

Thus, the sublimation of the image of Charles V into the figure of the king-monk confers moral and political legitimacy on the unprecedented act of his abdication: in the context of a cultural milieu founded upon Erasmian and

stoic doctrines, Charles's renunciation, rather than as a violation of the duties of kingship, is portrayed as his greatest deed. The transfer of power, on the other hand, revived a number of messianic expectations around the succession of Philip II, who, while inheriting the imperial imagery of his father through the abdication, will not be able to pursue his father's political legacy in what was to be a completely different political scenario. The paradox of abdication was justified through a paradoxical and dialectical conception of political power founded upon the discourse of power as burden as well as domination.