

TRUST IN THE SYMPOSIUM

*Lecture by Steve Johnstone at the Central-European University*

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*(Abstract)* Steve Johnstone's keynote endeavoured to introduce the trust and “untrust”, suspicion present in Antique Greek interpersonal relations, for this goal the texts of four great Greek philosopher were analysed. The professor chose to approach the problem from a strictly lexical viewpoint to show the audience proof of interpersonal trust in the works of Theognis, Aeneas Tacticus, Thucydides and Aristotle. The speech used these four great men to give the keynote of the conference and also to place its main question; “[w]hich governmental system promotes the most trust among citizens?”; into a sociological and linguistic context.

*Keywords:* Antique Greece, Theognis, Aeneas Tacticus, Thucydides, Aristotle, trust, pistis, suspicion

*Outline*

The Rise of the Research of Political Thought  
Antique Greece and Trust  
The Poems of Theognis  
Aeneas Tacticus: How to survive under siege?  
Thucydides and the Two Sides of *Pistis*  
Pistis in Aristotle's Rhetorics

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Introduction

Between 17-19th of September 2014 the conference for *Trust and Happiness in the History of Political Thought: Third International Conference of the European Society for the History of Political Thought* was held in the Central-European University of Budapest, Hungary. CEU, by giving place to the gathering where renown researchers and historians gave presentations on the topic of the connection between political thought and human happiness and trust, followed in the footsteps of Florence and Athens, where the previous conferences were held. In his opening speech John Schattuck, the rector of CEU, pointed out that the conference is especially opportune because of the global unrest that has been unfolding in the world for the past few years. Governmental crises, economic crisis, general xenophobia and the revolution of communications all place enormous pressure upon the institute of democracy. Quoting Winston Churchill Rector Schattuck made it clear that he unrelentingly believed in democracy, yet as a closure to his speech he raised the following, very provocative, question: *“Is the happiness and well-being of a country's citizens related to the form of their government? If so what form could conduce the greatest happiness?”*

With these words Rector Schattuck gave the stage over to Professor Steve Johnstone,<sup>1</sup> who, with his speech on interpersonal trust and “untrust” in Antique Greece, gave the keynote of the conference.

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Johnstone (University of Arizona, Tucson) is the author of *Disputes and Democracy: The Consequences of Litigation in Ancient Athens* (1999) and *A History of Trust in Ancient Greece* (2011).

*Pistis, or trust in Antique Greece*

In his energetic speech Professor Steve Johnstone presented the auditorium of CEU with the concept of *pistis*, or trust, as understood by four well-known Greek characters. It is important to note, as also underlined by the Professor during his speech, that during this presentation *pistis* is strictly only examined as a lexical, linguistic phenomenon. Thus, he was not looking for the answer to a grand question, only for proof whether trust had a place in Antique Greek political thought at all. However, through the texts of Theognis, Aeneas Tacticus, Thucydides and Aristotle he had to realize that no, *pistis* had no place in Antique Greek politics. Even so, before returning to his “dusty little town” in Arizona, the Professor proved that, though not in a political context but in an interpersonal one, *pistis* is present in the works of the four Greek men. These texts, called “How to manuals” by Professor Johnstone provide us with a window into the minds of antique Greek aristocrats and free men to see how they related to other people, or to the political speakers of the era.

Written for young aristocrats and to be performed in the Symposium, Theognis (5-6 B.C.) spelt many an advice into his poems. The “How to manuals” advised the young men on morals, politics and proper deportment. The world depicted by Theognis is rather pessimistic though, his most important teaching is: “Don't trust anyone, they'll just betray you anyway”. This fear of betrayal can be felt throughout his lessons, in his opinion everyone plays a role in their interpersonal interactions, what is more, one has to play roles since otherwise we would become vulnerable. Hence, a true friend can only be known by weathering some hardships together. Two metaphors are used by Theognis to describe this, the adulterated and the unadulterated medal. In his description, false friends are like adulterated medals, whose shiny outer covers are easy to wipe down to reveal their inner worthlessness. There is a paradox in his words however, when he himself is likened to an unadulterated medal, which is just as precious on the inside as it seems on the outside. Thus, Theognis himself does not play roles, does not try to hide behind masks in his interpersonal relations, which is in opposition to his advices. This epistemological opposition may be considered as a simple paradox in the poet's works, or as Professor Johnstone had highlighted, it may refer to Theognis always staying true to his own self as others should also do.

The second antique Greek philosopher mentioned in the speech was Aeneas Tacticus (4 B.C.), the writer of *How to survive under siege?* He is one of the people mentioned by the Professor, who very obviously created a real “How to manual”.

Only the second half of this book deals with the besiegers outside of the city. The first half however, deals with the people inside the city walls, and their possible betrayal of the stronghold. Their betrayal may be caused by many things as said by Aeneas; promotion, material goods or any form of personal gain. According to the military writer Aeneas, this betrayal from the inside can only be avoided by *homonoia*, meaning that “the city dwellers are of the same mind”. Yet, this is a practically unachievable goal, Aeneas urges every general and any sort of leader to stay suspicious of his people. For he did not write this book exclusively for democrats, he wrote it so that it would be just as useful for an autocrat or a tyrant. Cautioning for paranoia, he even depicts how someone could betray the city by crafting a fake key for example. He gives specific instructions on how to chose guards who not only are trusted by the leaders, but also have some sort of collateral in the city, that they would not want to lose to the enemy. Such collateral was in Aeneas' mind a shop, a house or even family. Aeneas encouraged leaders to keep their citizens under surveillance, without their knowledge of course, so that he himself does not lose their trust. Professor Johnstone's speech of Aeneas Tacticus paints a much more pessimistic world than that of Theognis, here betrayal is not only personal but on a much grander scale.

Thirdly, Professor Johnstone introduced us to how Thucydides considered *pistis*. For him *pistis* was, first and foremost, the credibility of a political speaker. His text, mostly consists of example speeches for the politicians of the future, and also his theory that the credibility of speakers does not necessarily equal reality. More than likely, it stems from the expectations of the audience. Meaning, that incredible, though true, events and truths may cause the speaker to lose his credibility simply because the audience, lacking experience and belief, cannot accept the information. According to Thucydides the problem in this case is with words, with language itself, that tries and fails to convey something. The situation is easy to solve though, through experience. If the audience lives through an earthquake for example, they will not find it incredible anymore when mentioned in speeches. The other meaning of *pistis*, in the reading of Thucydides is a guarantee. This verbal guarantee means promises and oaths which also operate based on the trust the

speakers have in each other. Thucydides however outlines a situation in which this *pistis* becomes useless. The moment, in which the breaking of a verbal oath becomes a source of special pleasure, the chance of peaceful reconciliation is gone. The role of language, that inspires and keeps emotions and passions in order is lost. Thucydides' text eerily reminds us of our current world, when verbal promises mean next to nothing.

The last antique Greek philosopher of Professor Johnstone's speech was Aristotle and his Rhetoric. Rhetoric, just like Aeneas Tacticus' book is a real "How to" manual. Aristotle gives specific instructions on how to create and give a speech. How to relate to the audience, how to become a credible orator. Hence, *pistis* here plays a very similar role to that what we have seen in Thucydides' interpretation. The goal is for the speaker to gain the trust of the audience but here, placed in a clearly political context. As such, half of the Rhetoric deals with the speaker, while the other half focuses on the speech itself. *Pistis*, yet again, takes the role of a verbal guarantee. For example, in criminal court it was not physical proof that decided the outcome, but competing speeches. Thus, it was extremely important that both speaker and speech inspire trust in the audience. Aristotle lists a series of qualities which an ideal orator must possess, such as goodness or honesty. A not so ideal orator must, at least, seem to possess the qualities given. In effect, just like the other philosophers mentioned in Professor Steve Johnstone's presentation, Aristotle also placed great importance on appearances.

### Conclusion

Professor Steve Johnstone presentation on Theognis, Aeneas Tacticus, Thucydides and Aristotle showed that in the cradle of democracy, Antique Greece, the idea of trust did not really exist at all. During the speech the idea, later also stressed by the Professor, that "the history of trust, is also the history of "untrust" was enforced in the audience. We could draw the conclusion together that trust is rather a means to an end, than the end itself, be our goal happiness or material goods. It became apparent that trust depends greatly on the expectations of the audience and of how the signs, spontaneous or learned to promote trust, are interpreted by different people. Hence, trust and suspicion are epistemological problems which have their origins in language itself.

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Edina Szendi: Trust in the Symposium. *International Relations Quarterly*, Vol. 5. No.3 (Fall 2014) 3 p.  
Thank you for your kind collaboration. *Editor-in-Chief*