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Johannes' Kepler's Political Cosmology, Psychological Astrology and the Archaeology of Knowledge in the Seventeenth Century

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Abstract: This paper examines the political cosmology of Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), the last major European scholar who combined the study of astronomy with the practise of astrology. The paper examines Kepler's statements from several texts, *Tertius Interveniens*, *On the More Certain Fundamentals of Astrology*, *Harmonices Mundi*, and his annual predictions for 1618. Kepler argued that, if astrology were to be completely reformed on the basis of empirical observation, then it could be used in the service of government in order to avoid conflict and preserve harmony and stability. The paper describes Kepler's political model as a cosmic state. In that his mechanism for astrology required the soul (or psyche) as it was psychological. The paper also contextualises astrology's role in the history of ideas as a form of the archaeology of knowledge and argues that Kepler's cosmos (in common with the classical and Renaissance tradition to which he belonged) can be described as a hyper-object.

Keywords: Kepler, cosmic state, political cosmology, astrology

7.1.1 Introduction

This paper examines the political uses of astronomy and astrology in the work of Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), the last major European scholar to combine the study of astronomy (defined here as the physical study of the stars and planets) with the practice of astrology (defined here as the identification of significance or meaning in, or influence emanating from, the stars and planets). I will contextualise Kepler's work as a form of the archaeology of knowledge, to adapt Michel Foucault's term, considering the nature and purpose of Kepler's 'world of discourse' (Foucault 2002, 24). Archaeology is commonly defined as concerned with material remains and artefacts (for example, Renfrew and Bahn, 2008, 51–72). However, by the archaeology of knowledge I mean that ideas both exist as a kind of structure, in that models and theories are constructed and deconstructed, much like architectural constructions. In the

history of ideas successive worldviews and interpretations of the cosmos are laid on top of each other, metaphorically-speaking, like a palimpsest, or layers of sediment or foundations at an archaeological site. Beyond this analogical connection, ideas have direct consequences in the material world, shaping and defining the uses of material objects. Kepler himself, like all astronomers, worked from models of the material universe (the movements of the sun, moon and planets), on the basis of which he proposed a model for how political affairs operated in accordance with the wider, cosmic, material, environment, and how solutions as to how such affairs might be better managed. In this sense, my wider rationale for an archaeological context is taken from Clive Ruggles' (2011, 15) statement that,

The sky is of universal importance. Cultural perceptions of the sky are vital in fulfilling humankind's most basic need to comprehend the uni-

verse *Developing an understanding of these perceptions is a crucial component of Western anthropologists', archaeologists' and historians' efforts to comprehend human conceptions and actions both in the past and in the present.*

Regarding Kepler's role as an astronomer and astrologer, and Ruggles' concern with the relationship between cultural astronomy and archaeology, the emerging discipline of skyscape archaeology (Silva, 2015) provides an additional context, the core claim being that astronomy and its cultural applications are important adjuncts to general archaeological - and historical - inquiry.

I also suggest that Kepler's cosmos can be described as what Timothy Morton has described as a hyperobject, a 'thing so vast in both temporal and spatial terms that we can only see slices of it at a time' (Morton 2018, 125). The solar system itself, according to Morton, is a hyperobject (Morton 2013, 1), and for Kepler the solar system provided the key to a system of political management which society might be improved. In addition, in Kepler's view, only a slice of the solar system can be seen, which is why his predictive system was probabilistic, allowing for uncertainty, rather than deterministic, assuming fixed outcomes to current developments.

7.1.2 The Cosmos as a State

Kepler's political cosmology may be understood as a variety of what I have described as characteristic of a 'cosmic state' (Campion 2011). I derived this term from Jacobsen (1946, 125-84), who coined the phrase the 'cosmos as a state', referring to astrology's status as an essential component of political decision making in Mesopotamia. Elsewhere I have described the use of astronomy in order to support the preservation of order through the management of the wider cosmological environment as a 'political cosmology' (Campion 1989). Kepler himself was operating in a milieu in which astronomical cycles were still widely seen to

provide a wider context for historical developments. As Keith Thomas argued, *'During the Italian Renaissance astrological doctrines about the recurrence of planetary conjunctions and their influence upon the course of affairs had helped to form the concept of a historical period'* (Thomas 1971, 386). Even though Kepler himself used traditional medieval astrology in his personal practice, he also believed that, modernised and purged of its medieval dogma, it would offer a valuable tool for managing the state and preserving political order (Campion 1989; Field, 1987; Greenbaum, 2010). His attitude to astrology has been a matter of some debate for, although a practicing astrologer, he was critical of the main body of astrological tradition. In March 1598 he wrote to Michael Maestlin "... *I am a Lutheran astrologer, I throw away the nonsense and keep the hard kernel*" (Kepler to Maestlin, 15 March 1598, letter 89, l. 177, KGW 13, p. 184, cited in Field 1988).

Amongst the key features of Kepler's astrology, two are significant. One is that it contained a core of demonstrable truth – its 'hard kernel'. The other is that part of the mechanism by which it worked was collective psychology, drawing directly on classical antecedents in which the motion of the planets stirs up the irrational levels of the soul, a model of which the earliest known account is found in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, dated to the second-century BCE and translated into Latin in the fifteenth-century. (Libellus XVI, 15–16 in Scott, 1982, 271; See also Copenhagen 15, 60; Campion 2010). In 1610 Kepler wrote that,

"The human being, however, with his soul and its lower powers, has such an affinity with the heavens, as does the surface of the Earth, and this has been tested and proven in many ways, of which each is a noble pearl of astrology, and is not to be rejected along with [all of] astrology, but to be diligently preserved and interpreted."

(Kepler 1997a, Thesis 64, p. 52; see also 2008).

Kepler's psychological theory was derived from interpretations of Aristotle's *De Anima* as articulated influentially by Thomas Aquinas (1920, 2.2.95.5) in the thirteenth-century, and assumed that the inferior part of the soul, the passive soul, is subject to planetary influence, but the superior, active soul, can negotiate with such influences, minimizing associated difficulties and maximizing the benefits.

All powers coming down from above are ruled according to Aristotle's teaching, namely, that inside this lower world or earthly sphere there is a spiritual nature, capable of expression through geometry. This nature is enlivened by geometrical and harmonic connections with the celestial lights, out of an inner drive of the Creator, not guided by reason, and itself is stimulated and driven for the use of their powers (Kepler 1997a, thesis 64, 51–52).

In Kepler's view, following Aquinas, the passive soul '*operates on its own account, is the offspring of the inferior faculties of the soul ... is subject to the powers of nature ... is strong by the motion of the alteration which it brings to its body, so that it is completely subject to the vital faculty*', whereas the active soul, on the other hand, is '*occupied in activity (is subject) to the will of man ... (and) operates outside itself. adapting its operations to the proportions, or bringing the proportions into them*' (Kepler 1997b, IV, 310, see also 309). The entire system operates according to variations in stellar rays as the planets shift their geometrical relationships and, in Kepler's opinion '*this philosophy is strongly confirmed by horoscopes*' Kepler, 1997b, IV, 308).

The central methodology of Kepler's reformed astrology was repetition. The principle was that, if a particular planetary configuration coincided with a certain kind of event, a similar event might be expected next time that the same configuration, or a similar one, recurred. For example, writing in 1601 (1979, Thesis 71, 104), he observed that the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre in Paris in 1572 took place when Mars was conjunct Saturn, while the castle at Eger in Hungary was captured by the Turks in 1596 (a highly significant event at the time,

the region being part of the contested border between Christian and Islamic Europe) when Mars was opposed to Jupiter. His conclusion was that,

experience shows that under these two conjunctions souls are generally stunned and frightened, or aroused in the expectation of revolts, and this fact is very significant for a multitude of people congregated in one place either for some undertaking or for destruction, as military experience testifies.

(1979, Thesis 71, 104).

In Kepler's political cosmology certain planetary configurations, in particular those between Mars, Jupiter and Saturn, would cause volatility in the collective psychology and indicate a possible risk of political violence. The mechanism was one in which the movements of the planets stirred up the collective soul, and such disturbances then expressed themselves through political volatility, resulting in violent disturbance, following models found in both the *Corpus Hematicum* and Aquinas. The theory of repetition dictated that the kind of events which occurred in 1572 and 1596 would therefore recur in 1602. He then looked forward to a series of four planetary configurations in 1602, a solar eclipse at 30 Capricorn, a sextile (60° separation) between Mars and Saturn, a conjunction of Mars and Jupiter (similar to 1569) and a conjunction of Mars and Saturn (the same as in 1572).

In Kepler's view this information was of great importance to governments and that policy should take it into account, specifically its likely consequences, a combination of reform and repression, with reform being the first priority and repression a last resort. For example, referring to the Jupiter-Mars conjunction in July 1602 and the Saturn-Mars conjunction September 1602, both of which he thought might coincide with violent outbreaks, he advised that,

it is preferable for peace and quiet to prevail, and sedition is feared, let

meetings not be held in August and September, or let them be broken up, or better yet, let the causes exasperating people's dispositions be taken quickly away, or by the introduction of some new deterrent, let their minds be changed.
(1979, Thesis 71, 104).

Astrology is therefore probabilistic rather than deterministic, 'these remedies', he wrote, 'are always in our power, however things may happen, and nothing is absolutely predetermined' (1979, Thesis 71, 104). In military terms, once such problems had been foreseen, they could be guarded against by clear leadership, 'a great safeguard for the army lies in their loyalty to and high regard for their commander; for every victory depends on a driving force of the spirit' (1979, Thesis 71, 104).

A later example occurs in Kepler's predictions for 1618. He wrote that May 1618

has very dangerous aspects, as five planets gather together in Taurus, four of which advance from a Sextile to a Quintile with Jupiter. My fundamental argument is this, that a Conjunction of Mars and the Sun takes place next March in Aries, under the influence of which Germany stands; while numerous Conjunctions take place in May in Taurus near the Plejades.

(Kepler, 2010, 186).

In this case the precedents Kepler used in order to predict the likely quality of events in 1618 were the outbreak of the Peasants' War in 1525, the revolt of the Netherlands against Spain in 1565, and the Bocskai uprising in Hungary in 1604.

1.3 Conclusion

Kepler's political cosmology was the single most practical application of his astronomical and cosmological theory. His goal was the preservation of political harmony which, in turn, depends on engagement with the wider

ecology of the cosmos, this was the application of his hard kernel of astrological truth. His methodology proceeded through four stages. The first stage was historical, to examine past correlations between political events and planetary cycles. The second stage was predictive, to examine future planetary cycles in order to identify periods of political crisis. The third stage was political, to warn politicians of future periods of potential crisis. The fourth stage required governments to devise and implement policy, taking the appropriate action. His cosmic state would manage dissent by social and political reform where possible, but propaganda and repression if necessary, to forestall violent revolution. We can, perhaps, see him helping to prepare the groundwork for twentieth century social-democracy, which aimed to introduce socialism through gradual reform and so resist revolution (Heywood, 2012, 125–128). The tragedy of Kepler's reformed political astrology is that, while it provided a significant motive for his remarkable work in mathematical astronomy, it died out when astrology's intellectual credibility collapsed in the latter part of the seventeenth-century.

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