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***A Social and Cultural History of Early Modern Keywords and Concepts***

**Monday 7 November 2011**

**Introduction**

This seminar offers an opportunity to hear about and engage with a substantial collaborative research project in the field of the history of political thought. The project, which is funded by the British Academy, is intended to explore the possibilities of a virtual research environment for the history of political discourse. It has two strands: one technical, to experiment with virtual research environments, the other intellectual, focussing on the concept of 'commonwealth'. Preliminary results of the second strand are discussed in the accompanying article, recently published in the *Historical Journal*. Both this article and its companion in the *History of Political Thought* (to which a link is provided below) are the product of a series of virtual meetings between a group of over a dozen historians, literary scholars and a political scientist.

Professor Knights and Dr Withington will introduce the project together. MK will talk about the methodology adopted by the research group. He will discuss whether 'commonwealth' is a keyword or a concept; and the different approaches to the history of political discourse offered by the Cambridge School and the Begriffsgeschichte; the role that a more social and cultural context might play in analysis of commonwealth and terms like it; the importance of evaluative language, often associated with vices and virtues in creating charged networks of words; and the problem of charting change over time and space. He will end with some reflections about our experiment in collaborative research and writing, and how technologies are transforming what we do and how we might do it. PW will discuss the contributions made by different types of contributors to the article on commonwealth and then talk about the importance of local politics to formulating a political consciousness which can be extended on a national plane. He will emphasise the importance of the archive to the study of political discourse.

In addition to the article posted on the website for the seminar, please also read:

Mark Knights, 'Towards a social and cultural history of keywords and concepts. By the Early Modern Research Group', *History of Political Thought*, 31, 3 (2010), 427-448.

Available as a UL electronic resource (raven access):

<http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/imp/hpt/2010/00000031/00000003/art00004>

## **The speakers**

**Mark Knights** read Modern History at Oxford, before undertaking research for his doctorate under Blair Worden. He served a further apprenticeship at the *History of Parliament*, under the editorship of David Hayton, before taking up a post at the University of East Anglia, where he was a colleague of Colin Davis. He is now Professor of History at the University of Warwick, where he is Co-Director of the Eighteenth-Century Centre. His first monograph was a study of politics and opinion during the Exclusion Crisis; from there his work has broadened to explore the ways in which opinion shaped and promoted partisanship in politics between 1660 and 1720, and, more darkly, the role of scandal in arousing public interest, studied through the misdemeanours of a Whig family, the Cowpers of Hertford. His current research interests include Petitioning in Britain and British America 1650-1750, and the theme of 'Corruption' from 1550 to 1850. He has an article forthcoming in *Past and Present* on John Locke and the franchise, and is now developing a transatlantic virtual research network. His principal publications include:

*Politics and Opinion in Crisis 1678-1681* (Cambridge 1994)

*Representation and Misrepresentation in Later Stuart Britain: Partisanship and Political Culture* (Oxford, 2005)

*The Devil in Disguise: Deception, delusion and Fanaticism in the Early English Enlightenment* (Oxford 2010)

**Phil Withington** read History at Cambridge, where his Director of Studies at Jesus was Richard Tuck. He remained there while studying for his doctorate under the supervision of Keith Wrightson, and became a Junior Research Fellow of the college. After holding posts at Aberdeen and Leeds, he was appointed Lecturer in Early Modern History at Cambridge, where he is now a Fellow of Christ's College. His interests lie in the way political ideas have been adopted and moulded to shape the identities of groups, notably the idea of citizenship by the governing elites of English towns. His most recent work is an ambitious study of the origins of the idea of 'society' in English political culture in the seventeenth century. His major publications include:

*Communities in Early Modern England*, co-edited with Alex Shepard (Manchester 2000)

*The Politics of Commonwealth: Citizens and Freemen in early modern England* (Cambridge 2005)

*Society in Early Modern England: the vernacular origins of some powerful ideas* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010)

*Citizens and Soldiers*, edited special number of the *Journal of Early Modern History* (2011)