Algernon Sidney, born 1623
Denouncing the English Kings: Algernon Sidney and the Role of Monarchy

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From the time of William the Conqueror until the introduction of the House of Hanover, the English monarchy rarely experienced times of prolonged governmental stability. The precise responsibilities and amount of authority possessed by the monarch stood as a crucial topic of utmost importance in English society, with perhaps no period experiencing more radical alterations and prolonged confusion than that of the English Civil War and Commonwealth of 1642-1660. This era saw the execution of a king, the dramatic shift from fledgling republic to totalitarian regime, the reestablishment of monarchy, and the rise of a myriad of political theorists attacking oppressive government – monarchy in particular. Chief among these was Algernon Sidney, an outspoken young nobleman who served in both the Roundhead army and the Long Parliament as well as presiding at the trial and execution of Charles I in 1649. Sidney’s vocal and fearless criticism of both the Stuart monarchs and Cromwell’s tyranny earned him exile and ultimately execution for treason against the Crown; nevertheless, these same courageous

declarations of the rights of the common man ensured both him and his writing a lasting place in the hearts and the lore of the people’s patriots, who saw Sidney as one of the leaders in the battle to eradicate monarchy. However, despite this overwhelming acceptance of Sidney as a preceptor in the struggle for freedom, the enthusiasts who idolized Sidney as a stark adversary of institution of monarchy over-simplified Sidney’s actual teachings. Although Sidney’s writings and personal life may seem to ring with a polemic and total rejection of all implementation of monarchy, his actual stance was less absolute: Sidney allowed concessions for a monarchial government that is purposely constructed to protect the interests and rights of the people. Algernon Sidney rejected all institutes of government that abused power, yet allowed any institute of government, including monarchy, provided its structure protected the people – as illustrated and defended by both the theoretical allowance of functioning monarchies in his writings and the underlying philosophy by which he lived and was able to harmonize both ideas.

Sidney resided a favorite in the eyes of the majority of English people throughout his life due to his scorching attacks on tyranny and his great powers of oration, but his last work sealed their image of him as the people’s martyr. In *The Apology of Algernon Sydney, in the Day of his Death*, Sidney wrote that he had spent his life simply fighting to, “uphold the Common rights of mankind, the lawes [sic] of this land, and the true Protestant religion…I do now willingly lay down my life for the same.”² With this genius stroke of self-modesty, Sidney clinched his future fate as a champion of the people and led to the devouring of his writings, which in turned encouraged the ignition of the fires of revolution across Europe and partially inspired readers to interpret him as “one of the

most passionate and bellicose rebels of his age” and “an enemy to every thing that looked like monarchy.” These claims, though somewhat inaccurate and incomplete, found root in the apparent hatred of monarchy exhibited in Sidney’s life and writing.

The earliest and most observable indication of Sidney’s rejection of monarchy appears not so much in his writings as in his activities – the interactions between Sidney and the Stuart monarchs. Sidney first made his way to Parliament in July of 1646, during the spirited standoff between the Long Parliament and Charles I. Historian Blair Worden records that early in Sidney’s political career, his outspoken antagonism towards the king and the skill with which he maneuvered his way through the hierarchy of Parliament attracted attention to his leadership abilities. Despite occasional clashes with Parliamentary authority over the way in which government was conducted, Sidney still gathered enough respect and support to be chosen as one of the commissioners to oversee the trial and execution of King Charles I, an event that Sidney would later fondly describe as “the justest and bravest act...that ever was done in England, or anywhere.” After Charles II was restored to the throne by Parliament in 1660, Sidney embarked on an individual campaign throughout Europe and for seventeen years tried to raise an army to overthrow the English monarchy again. Despite his lack of success in the second

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6 Popock, 189.
venture, these two struggles between Sidney and the reigning monarch of England illustrated to Sidney’s peers and the common-folk of England his level of dedication to the cause of overthrowing the monarchy.

Although less influential on Sidney’s contemporaries than his physical behavior towards the Crown, Sidney’s political treatises comprised the direct link of communication between his governmental theories and the patriotic revolutionary thinkers of the following generations. The earlier and more obscure of Sidney’s two major works is titled *Court Maxims*, constructed as a short dialogue between a naïve courtier and a common sense farmer, written by Sidney during his self-imposed exile in the hope that it would persuade the people of England to reject the newly crowned Charles II and attempt to create a republic again. As Scott says, “The *Court Maxims* is itself nothing less than a maxim by maxim refutation of the amoral ‘policy’ of the Stuart tyranny,” and this vivid and unrestrained polemic against the Stuart monarchy easily attracted the attention of later revolutionaries who sought to take Sidney’s arguments and apply them to the tyranny that they faced. The book makes heavy use of satire as it presents a lively discussion about the structure and driving purposes of government, mostly driven by foolish Philalethes and his eager presentation of why he believes monarchy to be beneficial to a state: how the people should be suppressed since “the happiness of the people is hurtful to the kings,” how lawyers and politicians “cannot steal enough money from the state” unless it is a state ruled by a monarch, how by only having a monarchy can the common people “be quickly subjected to beggary and slavery,” and

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7 Scott, 187.
other such satirical arguments. The wiser Eunomius makes numerous strong arguments against monarchy, several of which will be repeated later in Sidney’s *Discourses*, but one line became the strongest single statement – “And as death is the greatest evil that can befall a person, Monarchy is the worst evil that can befall a nation.”

Lastly, Sidney’s second great and unfortunately unfinished work, *Discourses Concerning Government*, also presents his arguments against monarchy. Unlike *Court Maxims*, *Discourses* was not directed at any single entity of government and was instead meant to be a comprehensive classic defense of republicanism and popular government. *Discourses*, penned much later in Sidney’s life, reflects none of the frivolity and satirical language of *Court Maxims*; in its place, readers find Sidney’s resolute denouncements of monarchy saying, “Civil war is a disease; but tyranny is the death of a state,” “the people [will be] exposed to all the calamities that may be brought upon them by the weakness, vices, and malice of the prince,” and “[kings] will always be more bitterly bent to destroy all that is good, knowing that the deformity of their own vices is rendered most manifest when they are compared with the good qualities of those who are most unlike them.”

Taken together with the invectives of monarchy in *Court Maxims* and Sidney’s behavior towards Charles I and Charles II, it becomes understandable why many of those who followed Sidney felt that he completely rejected all elements of the institution of monarchy.

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9 Sidney, *Court Maxims*, 20.
However, postulating (as many of Sidney’s devotees did) that he absolutely rejected monarchy establishes incorrect interpretations and stems from a limited examination of his theories and writings. Though Sidney disliked the monarchical form of government and believed that it was the most likely to abuse power and tyrannize the people, he refused to completely rule it out as a possible form of just and functional government.\textsuperscript{11} In the final chapter of \textit{Court Maxims}, having exhausted his satire for the piece and turned to a more solemn style of conclusion, Sidney admits, “I dare not say all monarchy is absolutely unlawful, for monarchy in the largest sense, as signifying a government where one man has a pre-eminence above others, may be distinguished into sorts…good and bad, just and unjust, which we will examine according to the rules of Scripture, reason, and human authors.”\textsuperscript{12} Similarly, in the speech given at his execution, he said, “I am persuaded to believe that God had left nations to the liberty of setting up such governments as best pleased themselves, and that magistrates were set up for the good of nations, not nations for the honor and glory of magistrates.”\textsuperscript{13}

The difficulty and confusion of the issue arises from the differing objectives of Sidney’s writings and endeavors. The execution of Charles I, the opposition of Charles II, and the writing of \textit{Court Maxims} all came about due to Sidney’s disgust with and disapproval of the abuse of power routinely exercised by the English monarchy, and therefore these were focused at English monarchy alone. However, Sidney attempts to

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\item \textsuperscript{11} J. R. Jones, \textit{The First Whigs: The Politics of the Exclusion Crisis, 1678-1683} (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 215.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Sidney, \textit{Court Maxims}, 193.
\end{enumerate}
differentiate in *Discourses*, though perhaps not completely clearly, between his passionate criticism of the English monarchy and his reluctant acceptance of the theory of monarchy in general. As recorded by the historian Lee Ward, despite his essential mistrust of monarchy, Sidney recognizes that monarchy fulfills the requirements for a possible good government and “presents monarchy as one of several regimes available to satisfy the needs and aspirations of naturally free and equal beings.”

According to Sidney, government has the duty to protect the rights of the people, and any type of government structure that satisfied this criterion could serve as a functional form of government. Thus, in the realm of theoretical possibilities, a monarchy could actually be a more just and fair form of government than a democracy or aristocracy, though Sidney believed that to be unlikely. Nevertheless, as long as it was a discussion of theoretical governments, Sidney argued for determining whichever form preserved rights for the people the best, and choosing the government “that is most conducing to the establishment of justice and liberty.”

Based on these premises, Sidney did not consider absolute monarchy to be a viable form of government, even in a theoretical sense, due to humanity’s tendency to become corrupted by so much power. Instead, he both proposed and advocated the implementation of what he termed a ‘mixed government;’ monarchy held in check by a body or legislature of the people. He noted that “the variety of forms between mere democracy and absolute monarchy is almost infinite: And if I should undertake to say,


\[15\] Sidney, *Discourses*, 366.
there never was a good government in the world that did not consist of the three simple species of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy.” Sidney continued to cite and describe the example of ancient Greeks and Hebrews and described a form of government that, incidentally, would be introduced to the world only five years later in 1688 as constitutional monarchy that would indeed function as a monarchy that protected the rights of the people.

Despite the initial successful implementation of his ideas in 1688, Sidney’s views and principles on the issue of monarchy were misinterpreted in coming years primarily due to the simple fact that he was executed in 1683 and Discourses Concerning Government, intended to be his complete and polished description of how government operates, never progressed past its rough draft stage. Although heavy in bold rhetoric and logical arguments, Discourses never reached the refined and eloquent stage shown by Sidney’s previous works and therefore failed to clearly communicate his nuanced assertions with precision. However, the rough draft that survived and became the modern classic brimmed with elements of a philosophic view strongly exhibited among European academics in the 17th and 18th centuries and which combated the arguments presented by absolute monarchists. By comparing Discourses with the similar works published in the same period, modern historians bypassed the mistakes of the earlier students of Sydney and discovered both how Sidney reconciled the seemingly opposing aspects of his views on monarchy by way of the social contract theory.

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16 Sidney, Discourses, 166.
The publication of *Discourses* and similar political treatises that utilized the social contract theory traces to the Stuarts’ persistent arguments in defense of absolute monarchy. In 1680, Charles II ordered the posthumous publication of Sir Robert Filmer’s *Patriarcha*, a short book that borrowed from Thomas Hobbes and attempted to provide a theory defending absolute monarchy and the divine right of kings.\(^\text{17}\) Sidney had already at this point begun to group his ideas to write *Discourses Concerning Government*, but on reading the offensive treatise *Patriarcha*, he swiftly, and vociferously, changed the purpose of *Discourses* to be an answer to *Patriarcha*. Nor was he alone in this endeavor; a slew of other writers began preparing rebuttals to Filmer, most famously John Locke with his *Two Treatises of Government*. Yet whereas Sidney was extremely vocal in his opposition to *Patriarcha*, Locke kept his writing secret and published it anonymously, ensuring that unlike Sidney, he would be left undisturbed to finish his thoughts. Both Locke and Sidney drew heavily from the earlier philosopher Hugo Grotius’s social contract theory which argued that government answered to the people; building from that starting point, the traces of Grotius’s social contract theory are discernable throughout the crux of Sidney’s work as he argues that “A general consent…is the ground of all just government.”\(^\text{18}\)

Hugo Grotius, an early 17\(^{\text{th}}\) century Dutch jurist, adapted the ancient idea of natural law and proposed it in a new form as a proponent of democracy – the idea of the social contract. Grotius argued that all humans had the same fundamental rights at conception,\(^\text{17}\) Robert Filmer, *Patriarcha and Other Writings*, ed. J.P. Sommerville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 2.
\(^\text{18}\) Sidney, *Discourses*, 23, 236.
and that they surrendered some of these rights in order to create forms of governments. These governments, having come from the people, were answerable to the people and charged with protecting the people’s rights rather than the government’s interests.19 This principle formed the basis of Locke’s arguments, and it can be seen creeping into the fundamentals of Sidney’s undeveloped thoughts as well, as shown by his declarations of “That which is not just, is not Law; and that which is not Law, ought not to be obeyed” and “God leaves to Man the choice of Forms in Government; and those who constitute one Form, may abrogate it.”20

Sidney’s incorporation of the social contract theory provided a solid framework to structure his further assertions around and furnished clear foundations of thought that most could understand. As Locke eloquently wrote in his similar definition, “Men are, as has been said, by nature all free, equal, and Independent to join and unite into a community for their comfortable, safe, and peaceable living, one amongst another, in a secure enjoyment of their properties, and a greater security against any that are not of it.”21 Essentially, the social contract is an agreement between individuals and government that secures life, liberty, and property. Individuals grant authority to government and the tacit contract is valid as long as government protects natural rights. Governments lose legitimacy when they violate natural rights and individuals have a duty to revolt in this

20 Sidney, Discourses, 20, 380.
Therefore, this returns to Sidney’s argument that a monarchy is a theoretically functional form of government, yet the English monarchy can no longer be trusted; any form of government that is specifically designed to preserve the contract and maintain individual rights, such as a theoretical monarchy or specifically a constitutional monarchy, is a good and functional form of government. Alternatively, any government that has overstepped the authority entrusted to it and usurped the individual’s rights, such as the Stuart monarchical system, is no longer a legitimate government and must cease.

Algernon Sidney rejected the English monarchy not as a complete repudiation of all monarchial systems, but rather from his disillusionment with tyrannical English rulers and his motivating belief that mankind possessed the right and duty to change any oppressive government. In coming years, patriots around the world seized Sidney’s theories on changing government and ensured that they would be felt around the world; within a century, established governments in America, France and Britain came toppling down or at the very least experienced radical change. In the American colonies, the two great architects of the Declaration of Independence – John Adams and Thomas Jefferson – devoutly studied and copied Sidney’s arguments against the Crown for use in their own works. Equal success transpired in France, where Sidney’s points were taken and repeated by Montesquieu and Rousseau, the infatuation with Sidney running so far as to the publication of “Sidney’s Resurrection,” a pamphlet that offered Sidney’s ‘heavenly’ congratulation and advice. The swiftest result manifested in England with the creation

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22 Locke, 378; Sidney, Discourses, 20.
of the Bill of Rights that shifted England from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy.

Admittedly, each of these transformations experienced difficulties in finding a precise, functional balance of power between role of the executive and the people. Yet despite the initial error of overlooking Sidney’s subtle allowance of monarchy, each of the countries which enlisted Sidney’s principles rebounded from their mistake and grew into strong nations that utilized his ideal of a powerful executive figure held in check by a body of legislature, the mixed government. Although Sidney’s contributions to the monumental changes in government have largely lapsed from the memory of modern western culture, his relevancy and contributions to the development of the balanced system of government that has spread with authority to much of the globe remains. Algernon Sidney, both when he was understood and when he was not, created the fiery words that were employed by the masses to throw off chains of bondage and remove the governments that withheld their rights, leading to the world wide spread of democracy, government stability, and people’s rights.