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Harro Hopfl
Excerpt
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Introduction

What follows is an attempt to uncover the relationship between Calvin's practical experience as a political actor and his political theology. My purpose, therefore, is as much to explain how Calvin came to put forward the views he did, as to specify, for each point of his career, what precisely those views were. The guiding thought that informs these pages is that Calvin's practice as a framer of ecclesiastical polity is not a matter of the simple application of principle to practice; this I take to be an impossibility, both in general, for political conduct is always a matter of political judgement as well as principle, and in this particular case, for, as I hope to show, Calvin's theology did not yield any direct injunctions to conduct. Nor is Calvin's political theology a simple rationalization of preceding practice, if for no other reason than that I think his political theology did not adequately assimilate his practice – he wrought better than he knew. Again, I think Calvin's later writings in many respects more satisfactory than his earlier ones, but the reader will find here no echo of that debate of the higher Marxist scholasticism about the 'young' versus the 'mature' Marx; and 'development' seems to me a dispensable concept in intellectual history. There is, in short, no simple account to be given of the relationship between experience and ratiocinative thought, and no such story is told here.

The ground I cover is familiar, the material excellently predigested. Scholars of learning and intelligence have covered every inch of it and a precedent is no doubt discoverable for every assertion I make. I have not attempted to note every assertion which borrows from, depends on, echoes or denies the assertion of some other scholar. In the first place, I have no

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intention of reworking Calvin's biography; the reader is referred to the many works that already exist. And, more important, scholarship, industry and intelligence have not prevented crimes against history, and even were it the case (and it is not) that the literature on Calvin's political thought were studded with gems, the fact remains that to set oneself to write about any historical topic requires a choice of themes and emphases, the range of which is for practical purposes inexhaustible. Indeed, this need for an orientation or choice of perspective (to use those visual metaphors so beloved by partisans of the sociology of knowledge), coupled with the desire to be faithful to historical evidence, confronts one with some problems not unlike those faced by the Reformers themselves in their attempts to found their truth on the autonomous authority of a written text. What the interpreter seeks is the whole drift and tenor of a work, but all he can point to as evidence is specific sentences and passages. This not only provides opportunities for arbitrariness in interpretation, but it also poses in an acute form the question of how one resolves disagreements, not about the precise sense of this or that sentence, but about the character of Calvin's thought as a whole.

It may be said that such problems of interpretation have been not avoided, but mostly ignored, in the existing literature, and a good few others have been irrelevantly introduced. The whole literature (for example, Galiffe, Doumergue, Kampshulte, Bohatec, Niesel, Pfisterer) is replete with unhistorical orientation. Thus the interpreter's stand about the place of Calvin in history and the contemporary world – a question eminently unhistorical and immaterial – has been taken to be the crux of interpretation. This preliminary orientation – the felt need to take a stand *pro* or *contra* – displays itself in the habit of making verdicts on Calvin's 'guilt' or 'innocence' with regard to various 'accusations', 'charges', 'condemnations' and so forth. Doumergue is perhaps the most notorious public sinner in this respect. In his account of the trial of Servetus, for example, having made several properly historical points, such as that Calvin did not indict, try, condemn or execute Servetus, nor thirst after his blood, he then proceeded to appeal to the 'spirit of the age', in order not to make the historically acceptable point that Calvin's actions are explicable, but to make the

quite unhistorical and extraneous point that Calvin should not be 'condemned'.

If the starting-point of scholarly discussion has often been an unacceptable one, methods of validation employed have also left a great deal to be desired. The primary method of validating assertions about Calvin has been by amassing quotations, proof-texts. Such a procedure is incapable of demonstrating anything, and not only when, as so often, the quotations are contextless and random, taken from works of unequal level and from different periods. Rather is the defect in such a procedure one of principle, for the meaning of the lines adduced depends on a particular reading of the context in which they appear, and such a reading must in turn have a reference back to a view of the larger context of Calvin's thought as a whole, and of his times – the celebrated problem of the hermeneutical circle. About such problems the literature is silent.

Given the difficulties in judging between competing interpretations of the master-conceptions of Calvin's thought, precision and sensitivity in the names to be applied to such conceptions is a *sine qua non*. On this ground terms like 'organischer Staatsgedanke' (Bohatec), 'theologia naturalis' (Gloede), 'individualism' (Bohatec), 'true liberalism' (Doumergue), 'anthropologie et sociologie' (Biéler), 'constitutionalism' (Chenevière), 'Romanizing' (Sohm, Seeberg) are all recognizable non-starters, and no purpose is served by continuing to discuss their appropriateness.

It was, of course, as was customary with this style of writing, an assumption of the scholarly tradition that there was a coherence in Calvin's writings, and that the only difficulty was to find it. While this assumption was either gratuitous, or as likely to conceal as to enlighten, it did have one consequence which to some extent mitigated the harm done by the other assumptions. If one looked for coherence, it was only consequent to seek it in the most coherent and comprehensive of Calvin's writings, namely the successive editions of the *Institution* and especially the last, 1559, edition which was taken (again naturally) to be the fruit of the 'development' of Calvin's thought. Now, both Calvin himself and his contemporaries so regarded the *Institution*; indeed, a Genevan edict threatened with punishment anyone who spoke ill of M. Calvin or his *Institution*. But the *Institution* and Calvin's other writings and

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utterances are not related as text and gloss: the matter is more complex than that.¹ I take it then that there is no justification for treating Calvin as a one-book man, but neither is there any reason to treat everything recorded in the *Corpus Reformatorum* as constituting part of a 'Summa Theologica', equal in all its parts as to authoritativeness, coherence and weight.² In this book I have conscientiously attempted to determine the weight to be attached to Calvin's assertions by considering the circumstances in which they were made and the audience to which they were addressed.

I

The training of a lawgiver

In April 1532, there issued from a Parisian printer a volume entitled *Two Books Concerning Clemency, Written by the Distinguished Roman Senator and Philosopher L. Annaeus Seneca for the Emperor Nero, Elucidated by the Commentaries of Jean Calvin of Noyon*. The volume, which was in Latin and therefore intended solely for the erudite, aroused no interest at the time,¹ and would be of consequence now only to the specialist in humanist Latinity, but for its authorship. The temptation to treat it as the little acorn which contains *in nuce* the mighty oak of the Reformer's later work is to be resisted.² It is explored here simply for what light it may shed on the education and political sentiments of a man who, without having any inkling of it then, was to become the teacher of ecclesiastical polity to generations of evangelicals.

In 1532 Calvin was twenty-three years old. He is thought to have begun the work when he was little more than twenty,³ prior to his graduation as *licencié ès lois* from the University of Orleans (in early 1531). He had long been Master of Arts, proceeding to that degree at the University of Paris in 1525 or 1526.⁴ His intention in publishing at such an early age and at his own expense was to make his mark on the world of the humanist literati, and the choice of Seneca for a subject was well thought out, for the most recent edition of the work by Erasmus, the *stupor mundi* of the northern humanists, had contained an invitation to those of greater ability and leisure to do better. Calvin was picking up that gauntlet, but was not to have the success for which he had hoped.⁵

That Seneca should have been chosen as the subject for a commentary by a clever young postgraduate in law requires

some explanation. The academic study of law in sixteenth-century France was in the process of bifurcation. Some continued to follow that medieval tradition which, bowing to no one in its admiration for the Civil Law, that is to say, the law of the Roman *civitas*, as opposed to Canon Law, attempted to make that law relevant to current circumstances by way of glosses and glosses upon the glossators.⁶ Others were striking out along the path pioneered in France by Guillaume Budé, described by Calvin as the chief glory of good literature,⁷ who attempted to return to the pure foundations of Roman law unsullied by glosses, and inclined to see it as a crystallization, so to say, of the mores, institutions and wisdom of the Ancients. The point here was not to find the relevance of Roman law to current circumstances, although such a relevance was taken for granted, but to determine the place of Roman law within what might be known of the Ancients. To describe this as an 'historical approach' is somewhat misleading, for its inspiration was a belief in the superior wisdom and *humanitas*, not to mention elegance, of the Ancients. It is, however, arguable that the approach adopted led eventually, without anyone intending it, to the discovery of a context for Roman law which was so specific as to make that law irrelevant to current circumstances altogether.⁸ But in 1530 this was far from apparent: even so celebrated a humanist civilian as Andrea Alciati (attracted to the University of Bourges from Italy at great expense, and in his turn attracting quantities of students there, including Calvin in 1529) was both a humanist and a practical lawyer.⁹ The century had in any case no justification available for studies which did not claim religious, moral or practical utility, even though only a pure, disinterested love of Antiquity and all its aspects can explain tomes like Budé's *Annotationes in Pandectas* (1508), *De Asse et Partibus Eius* (1514), *Commentarii Graecae Linguae* (1529), and Alciati's *De Verborum Significatione* (1535), which found not only authors to write them, but also enthusiastic readers. A warm regard for Roman law¹⁰ and an incapacity to ignore the opinions of Greek and Roman philosophers even when it would have made for the streamlining of his theology¹¹ was to remain with Calvin all his days. When called upon to contribute to the codification of the 'laws and edicts' of Geneva, he turned to the *Corpus Juris Civilis* for models of contract, property law and judicial procedure.¹²

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It was the humanist approach to the Roman law which attracted Calvin – it is for this reason that he migrated to Bourges from Orleans – but a career in law seems never to have appealed to him; that he should study law was his father's decision, not his own. It was thus singularly fortunate that Budé should have shown how the study of law and that of 'good literature' (*bonae litterae*, a humanist slogan) could be united. Indeed the *De Clementia Commentary* is, rather circularly, the clearest but not the only evidence that Calvin was in the process of forsaking the law for *humaniores litterae*; witness also his private study of Greek, begun at Orleans under the tuition of his friend Wolmar.

The fact remains, however, that the *De Clementia* is not only a signal instance of 'philosophy' as humanists understood it, but also moral advice lavished by a philosopher upon his imperial pupil (who, alas, proved unteachable), and was a conspicuous example of a 'mirror for princes'. We are therefore left wondering about the significance of this particular choice of subject-matter. An additional problem is that of relating Calvin's 'conversion' to the commentary: was it the work of a man who had already become an evangelical? If so, how would this affect our interpretation of the commentary?

As to the latter question, it does not require discussion at this point,¹³ for there is nothing in the work which presupposes evangelical conviction to render it intelligible, nor is there a single point made in it which might be construed as evangelical or as advocacy on behalf of evangelicals. In any case: advocacy to or before whom? Before the abbot to whom it was dedicated? Or before the king? It is true that the *De Clementia* is a 'mirror for princes', but Calvin's work was not aimed at Francis I, nor was it even a bid for royal patronage,¹⁴ and its subject-matter was of secondary interest to Calvin, as will be seen in the sequel. In any case, had Calvin been pleading for evangelicals, he would have asked the king for justice, not clemency which presupposes a crime committed and admitted.¹⁵

We may say, then, that in 1532 Calvin was a humanist who considered a commentary on Seneca a proper employment of his time, and ambitious for a reputation as a scholar. He had friends, especially Pierre Robert (Olivetanus) and Wolmar, who entertained evangelical views, and he was hostile to the Sorbonne and its works. How much further his thinking had

proceeded in an evangelical direction it is impossible to say: there is simply no unambiguous evidence, such as would be afforded by an avowal of the doctrine of *sola fide* or a rejection of the Mass as an 'abomination'. Nor need we stipulate any particular affection for Seneca or interest in the subject-matter of the *De Clementia* to explain why Calvin thought it worthwhile to spend two years of his leisure on the work. Even in the text, Calvin made it clear that he preferred Cicero to Seneca; it happens that there was no room for another commentary on the former. Calvin's description of Seneca as 'the best of authors' and as 'a man of eximious erudition and signal eloquence'¹⁶ are little more than examples of the humanist predilection for superlatives, and his claim that he was defending 'his' author against his many detractors¹⁷ was a mere touting of his wares: no student of rhetoric, such as Calvin, is unaware of the publicity value of claiming to stand against all the world, *Athanasius contra mundum*. Little about Calvin's personal literary predilections and nothing about a desire to teach anything whatever to princes can be inferred from such claims. It seems *prima facie* unlikely that a man should devote two years to the exposition of an author he deems intolerable or fundamentally wrong-headed,¹⁸ but this consideration is of no great moment, as will be seen shortly.

If we are to read the *De Clementia Commentary* for what it tells us about Calvin rather than about Seneca, it is necessary to remind ourselves that the first duty of the commentator (and Calvin all his life was a dutiful man) is to elucidate his text, not to obtrude his own opinions. It is only when we find assertions unwarranted by the text, or when the discussion is skewed in quite another way than the text, that we can be sure we are dealing with Calvin the man, not Calvin the expositor. Explicit dissent from, or criticism of, the text obviously comes in the same category, as does explicit endorsement of opinions expressed there. Both are, in fact, uncommon in this work, and the conventions of the time, as well as the skills of the rhetorician would have permitted a great deal more latitude than Calvin chose to exercise. Somewhat more hazardous as a ground for inference, but not to be disregarded, are those occasions when Calvin failed to comment on some conspicuous part of the text. Arguments from silence are always tendentious, but some of Calvin's silences are altogether too pregnant to be overlooked.

The training of a lawgiver

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Before we consider what Calvin thought, we may pause to notice what he knew. Even allowing for the compendia of choice sayings he had to hand,¹⁹ Calvin emerges as for his years prodigiously well read in the literature of Antiquity, both historical and ‘philosophical’. It may be remarked in passing that neither he nor his preceptors displayed any interest in epistemology, a central concern of what is now understood by ‘philosophy’, irrespective of school or tradition; as the humanists used the term, ‘philosophy’ meant discourse about the good life,²⁰ and even here the issue was not so much to explore the foundations of moral judgements as to set down instructions for conduct in a form deemed particularly high-minded, sage and well turned. In short, philosophy was for Calvin, as for Erasmus and More, a matter of teaching men how to live by exercising the arts of persuasion. Calvin was said to have been a strict censor of the morals of his fellows when still a school-boy;²¹ that he should have approved a censorious writer like Seneca is no cause for surprise.

Calvin’s learning was Latin; Greek was an accomplishment he was still acquiring; Hebrew he seems to have begun at Basel under Sebastian Münster in 1535. It is not clear how restrictive being confined to Latin actually was; a good many Latin translations of Greek writings were available. The learned editors of the commentary are inclined to attribute much of his Greek material to secondary sources, in which case it would have come to Calvin in a rather contextless form aside from its ordering under general headings, which again would suggest doctrine rather than enquiry. Certainly nothing in the commentary bespeaks any sympathetic and sustained entering into the spirit of Greek philosophical treatises, and especially not treatises on political theory.

It is evident, too, that Calvin knew his way around the history of Antiquity. In the manner of the scholarship of the time he never mentioned a single date according to the Christian calendar; humanists in general tended not to treat history as an ordered, sequential account of transitions, from which point of view attention to chronology might assume great importance.²² Instead, Calvin would offer isolated and rather disjointed pieces of information drawn from various sources when he felt that the text called for it, with little concern for the reliability of that information. Thus, prompted by the text to

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display his erudition about the size and organization of a Roman legion, Calvin contented himself with citing several discrepant authorities from various times, and attributing the discrepancies to habits of inexact speech (*De Clem. Comm.*, pp. 98/9). He made no attempt to order the various figures and data into a coherent account of changing circumstances. Again, confronted by the claim that vast numbers of prominent Roman citizens were slain by Sulla, Calvin simply related various figures given by various historians, without any enquiry into their reliability (pp. 206–11). Nor was he embarrassed by the fact that by his reckoning (based mainly on Tacitus), the age of Seneca at death was 115 years (pp. 16/17). In short, ‘history’ was what it remained to him throughout his life, that is to say, a useful ancillary to other preoccupations, and in particular it was *histories*, the relating of edifying episodes. It cannot be said, then, that ‘the chief historical labour in annotating the *De Clementia* was to provide the reader with a grasp of the period of the Civil Wars and the Augustan Age’ (p. 118, intro.). On the contrary, the chief historical labour was to clear away obstacles to the understanding of Seneca as rhetorician and philosopher, such as were set up by Seneca’s contemporary allusions. The displays of an heterogeneous erudition do not amount to the provision of any sort of grasp of a ‘period’, and periodicity does not seem to have been a category of Calvin’s secular historiography at any point in his career.

If ‘history’ as he understood it was strictly a secondary concern, what is perhaps rather more striking is the tepid character of Calvin’s endorsements of Seneca’s moral and religious sentiments. While he dissented emphatically and in a highly patronizing manner from Seneca’s stoic view of pity as a disorder of the mind, a violation of the ideal of *apathia* which Calvin also rejected,²³ he never praised Seneca’s views on morality and religion with any degree of warmth. Still less did he show any inclination to Christianize Seneca: even the latter’s exclamation ‘We have all sinned’ prompted no adducing of parallels from Christian doctrine.²⁴ And the lines: ‘Now assuredly it were fitting that men, thrusting out desire of another’s goods from which springs every evil of the heart, should conspire for righteousness and equity, so that *pietas* and uprightness, along with *fides* and temperance, might arise, and that vice, having misused its long reign, should at