



Claude Lefort, *Dante's Modernity: An Introduction to the 'Monarchia'. With an Essay by Judith Revel*, ed. by Christiane Frey, Manuele Gragnolati, Christoph F. E. Holzhey, and Arnd Wedemeyer, trans. by Jennifer Rushworth, Cultural Inquiry, 16 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2020), pp. vii–xiii

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## Preface

CITE AS:

Christiane Frey, 'Preface', in Claude Lefort, *Dante's Modernity: An Introduction to the 'Monarchia'. With an Essay by Judith Revel*, ed. by Christiane Frey, Manuele Gragnolati, Christoph F. E. Holzhey, and Arnd Wedemeyer, trans. by Jennifer Rushworth, Cultural Inquiry, 16 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2020), pp. vii–xiii <[https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-16\\_01](https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-16_01)>

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ABSTRACT: 'Dante's Modernity' pursues ambitions that go far beyond its ostensible editorial function as a preface to the medieval author's early 14th-century political treatise. The text exemplifies Lefort's signature method of taking political philosophy in new directions by drawing on the fundamental indeterminacy and openness of key works from the history of political philosophy. The result is as much an interpretation of the *Monarchia* as it is of political modernity itself.

# Preface

BY CHRISTIANE FREY

This volume presents for the first time in English translation a lengthy essay on Dante's *Monarchia* — one of the most important, if often overlooked, political treatises of the late medieval period — by the French political philosopher Claude Lefort. The essay was written to appear with a new translation of Dante's text published in 1993 at Lefort's instigation in a book series he edited for the French publisher Belin.<sup>1</sup>

As is already evident from its length, Lefort's essay pursues ambitions that go far beyond its ostensible editorial function as a preface to Dante's treatise. Indeed, many of the texts through which Lefort developed his thought and intervened in public debate took the form of forewords, introductions, prefatory notes, and ancillary essays that appeared in editions and translations of both historical as well as recent works of political philosophy and history — a fact that speaks both to the dialogical character of Lefort's thought and to the central role that *reading* plays in his work.<sup>2</sup> As Judith Revel shows in her essay for this

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1 Claude Lefort, 'La Modernité de Dante', in Dante, *La Monarchie*, trans. by Michèle Gally (Paris: Belin, 1993), pp. 6–76. The book was reissued by Belin as a paperback in 2010.

2 Among his more substantial ancillary texts are 'Le Nom d'Un', in Étienne de La Boétie, *Le Discours de la servitude volontaire*, ed. by Pierre Léonard, intro. by Miguel Abensour and Marcel Gauchet, accompanying essays by Pierre Clastres and Claude Lefort, with additional texts by Félicité Lamennais, Pierre Leroux, Auguste Vermorel, Gustav Landauer, and Simone Weil (Paris: Payot, 1976), pp. 247–307; 'La Cité des vivants et des morts', in Jules Michelet, *La Cité des vivants et des morts. Préfaces et Introductions* (Paris: Belin, 2002), pp. 5–65; 'Préface', in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Souvenirs*, ed. by Luc Monnier, with notes by J. P. Mayer and B. M. Wicks-Boisson (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), pp. i–l.

volume, 'Lefort/Dante: Reading, Misreading, Transforming', Lefort's exercises in revisiting works of the past are one of his preferred ways of intervening in the present. This is particularly true of the essay on Dante. It presents a highly original interpretation of the *Monarchia* and of its significance for the history of modern politics and political thought, and it allows Lefort further to develop his own political theory while taking it in new directions.

From his critique of the Communist Party's bureaucratization of working-class politics, through his dramatic break with Sartre, the undisputed leader of French post-war intellectual Marxism, to his criticism of the Left's apologetic response to the Polish and Hungarian uprisings in 1956, Claude Lefort established himself early on as a thinker who did not hesitate to criticize the Left from within its own ranks. A major point of contention was the tendency, which Lefort observed in many Marxist thinkers, to posit an overarching theory impervious to the unforeseeable contingencies of historical change. With his signature notion of the 'work of the oeuvre', as developed most notably in his magisterial study of Machiavelli, Lefort insisted on what he saw as the fundamental indeterminacy of the works of the past not as a problem to be overcome, but as a valuable resource with which to counter political dogmatism — to vitiate any claim to have established, once and for all, the truth of the political.<sup>3</sup> Vehement objections of his colleagues on the Left notwithstanding, in the 1970s and 1980s Lefort advanced a defence of democ-

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3 See Dick Howard, *The Specter of Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 75–76. Lefort's *thèse d'état* on Machiavelli was directed by Raymond Aron: Claude Lefort, *Le Travail de l'œuvre Machiavel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), partially translated into English as *Machiavelli in the Making*, trans. by Michael B. Smith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2012).

racy as a form of open and radical politics while engaging in a sustained analysis and critique of ‘totalitarianism’, a term others on the Left found unusable. Many of Lefort’s most influential writings from this period reflect this development of his thinking, most prominently his critique of bureaucracy and the essays on the political collected in 1986.<sup>4</sup> Another focus of Lefort’s work in these years, inspired in part by his continuing engagement with the work of Hannah Arendt, concerned the question of human rights and, more specifically, the possibilities of thinking the ‘idea of perpetual peace’ in a time in which ‘all figures of transcendence have become blurred.’<sup>5</sup> This led Lefort to concern himself — and this is less well known — with the concept of a ‘universal empire’ that could base itself on a concept of a single humanity,<sup>6</sup> albeit one that would neither rely on the ‘old certainties’ of exclusive absolute values nor relate merely to circumstantial considerations or ‘drift off into utopia.’<sup>7</sup> It was in the context of these considerations that Lefort began to attribute a central im-

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4 Claude Lefort, *Éléments d’une critique de la bureaucratie* (Geneva: Droz, 1971), a small selection of which is translated and included in Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, ed. and intro. by John B. Thompson, trans. by Alan Sheridan, Terry Karten, and John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Polity, 1986), pp. 29–136; Claude Lefort, *Essais sur le politique, XIX<sup>e</sup>–XX<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), English as *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. by David Macey (Cambridge: Polity, 1988).

5 Claude Lefort, *Writing: The Political Test*, trans. and ed. by David Ames Curtis (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 144. English translation of Claude Lefort, *Écrire. À l’épreuve du politique* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1992).

6 On the concept of a ‘humanité-une’, see, for example, Lefort, ‘La Nation élue et le rêve de l’empire universel’, in *L’Idée d’humanité. Données et Débats, actes du xxxiv<sup>e</sup> Colloque des intellectuels juifs de la langue française*, ed. by Jean Halpérin and Georges Lévitte (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), pp. 97–112 (p. 98).

7 Lefort, *Writing*, p. 142.

portance — as he explicitly and repeatedly states himself — to Dante’s *Monarchia*.<sup>8</sup>

The three books of Dante’s *Monarchia* were written in the second decade of the fourteenth century, and it is still debated whether the treatise was designed to support Emperor Henry VII’s campaign to Italy or was composed only after his death in 1313. The condemnation of the treatise by the Church was immediate and long-lasting: burned as heretical by Cardinal Bertrand du Pouget in Bologna in 1329, attacked by the Dominican friar Guido Vernani in his treatise *De reprobatione ‘Monarchie’ composite a Dante* (written between 1327 and 1334), it was placed on the Vatican’s Index of prohibited books in 1554, where it remained until 1881. The *editio princeps* did not appear until 1559 and was printed in protestant Basle.<sup>9</sup> As Lefort shows in his essay, the influence of the *Monarchia* on both the politics and the political thought of the following centuries, while often hidden, could scarcely be disputed. But while the treatise had always been in the focus of theologians, historians, and scholars of Dante, contemporary political science had shown little interest in it, to the point that it was almost unknown to students of political philosophy.

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8 See, for example, 1981: Claude Lefort, ‘The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?’, in *Democracy and Political Theory*, pp. 213–55; 1982: ‘The Death of Immortality’, in *Democracy and Political Theory*, pp. 256–82 and ‘The Idea of Humanity and the Project of Universal Peace’, in *Writing*, pp. 142–58; 1995: ‘La Nation élue’; and 2002: ‘La Cité des vivants et des morts’.

9 For a modern English translation see Dante Alighieri, *Monarchy*, ed. and trans. by Prue Shaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Shaw is also the editor of the critical Latin edition: Dante Alighieri, *Monarchia*, ed. by Prue Shaw, Edizione Nazionale delle opere di Dante Alighieri a cura della Società Dantesca Italiana, v (Florence: Le Lettere, 2009). Both the Latin text of the *Edizione Nazionale* and Shaw’s English translation are now available online: <<https://www.danteonline.it/monarchia>> [accessed 5 December 2019].

Lefort's choice of the treatise to appear in his book series with Belin was clearly designed in part to remedy this neglect. But in provocatively titling his accompanying essay 'Dante's Modernity', Lefort signalled as well that Dante's treatise was of more than merely historical importance.

The 'modernity' in question is laid out at the outset in a series of claims for Dante's originality: he was the first who thought of humanity as the whole of the human race, the first to imagine a universal society in political terms, and the first to reveal the formative role of force, of wars and division in the advent of such a society. Particularly the third observation begs the question of how we are to understand Lefort's use of the term 'modern'. Is Dante's treatise being measured against a concept of the modern that was already determined in advance? Or is the 'modernity' that Lefort discovers in Dante something that emerges only in the course of his encounter with the text? In the second half of the essay, Lefort patiently pursues the career of Dante's innovations in the political thought and praxis of the succeeding centuries. It is crucial not to confuse these observations with a 'reception history'. Clearly, for Lefort, what is 'new' in Dante cannot be separated from its later avatars — from the varied realizations, distortions, and misapplications it would inspire at later historical junctures. Lefort's method, therefore, presents a direct challenge to prevalent modes of historicization: the work of the oeuvre is not bounded by the moment of its historical emergence, and, however contingent, even errant its fate may be, both interpreters and political reality have to be understood as participating in the unfolding of the work.<sup>10</sup>

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10 This edition is also motivated by the hope that such a wager will resonate with medievalists in particular, who have long known that the all-too-neat distinction between single-author artefact, canonized at its

Thus, the concept of a single, universal sovereignty that Lefort sees emerging for the first time in Dante takes on a new form and function when it re-emerges in the context of the early modern kingdom, and it is transformed again in the age of the modern nation-state. It is remarkable that Lefort largely abstains from passing judgement on any of these formations. Of the unprecedented efficacy of the *dominus mundi* representation under the conditions of the nation state, for example, we hear merely that it is ‘troubling’.<sup>11</sup> One has the impression that, in his probing re-reading of the history of political thought in the wake of Dante, Lefort avoids any appeal, even implicit, to a transhistorical standard of what ‘modernity’ is or should be. If this is so, then what the essay leaves us with is not just a rethinking of the late medieval poet and political philosopher, but also, and just as importantly, of modernity itself.

This embracing of the present as informed but not determined by the past is characteristic of Lefort’s oeuvre as a whole. It is evident here in the way Lefort ends his essay: not by presenting a specific view or interpretation of Dante’s innovative idea of sovereignty, but by advocating for the project of ‘disentangling’ the links between universalism, imperialism, and nationalism that have been instituted in its name. Characteristically for Lefort, the result of this project is left open. As Revel’s seminal essay emphasizes, one should not mistake this lack of determinacy regarding any ultimate lesson to be drawn from Dante’s

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inception, and a subsequent and separate ‘reception’ is a modern and not always helpful construction. For a discussion of Dante’s authorship, including the way it is constructed in the *Monarchia*, and its intricate relationship to authority and institutional *auctoritas*, see Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), esp. chapter 5: “‘No judgment among equals’: Dividing authority in Dante’s *Monarchia*’, pp. 229–73.

11 In this volume, p. 45.

treatise as a disengagement from present concerns. On the contrary: Lefort's way of doing justice to the modernity of this late-medieval treatise that was often neglected outside the field of Dante studies, as becomes clear through his concluding gesture, is to enjoin his readers to continue the 'work of the oeuvre' his essay traces and models.



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