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## RESEARCH CENTRE FOR THEORY AND HISTORY OF SCIENCE

with

**Veronika Szántó:**

### *Vitalism and Political Radicalism in 17<sup>th</sup>-century England*

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INVESTICE DO ROZVOJE VZDĚLÁVÁNÍ

## VITALISM AND POLITICAL RADICALISM IN 17<sup>th</sup>-CENTURY ENGLAND

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The claim that vitalistic natural philosophy (understood in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century context as a monist position which attributes inherent activity to matter) and radical political philosophy corresponded to each other during the early modern period has been stated many times in versatile forms by scholars from different disciplines such as literary history (e.g. J. Rogers, *The Matter of Revolution*, 1996), sociology of knowledge (e. g. works of D. Bloor), ecofeminist criticism (C. Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, 1980), and history of philosophy (works by J. and M. Jacob). According to this conception the new mechanical philosophy was used as an ideological weapon in the defense of a more or less authoritarian but essentially hierarchical and centralized society after the Restoration and perhaps even more so after the Glorious Revolution. But the triumph of the new mechanical philosophy allegedly came at the expense of the suppression of vitalistic radicalism which surfaced during and immediately after the Civil War and the Interregnum, in the works of radical sectarians (e.g. Gerrard Winstanley, Richard Overton) and other revolutionary intellectuals (James Harrington, John Milton).

The claim that vitalistic natural philosophy is revolutionary (the strong thesis) is a specific formulation of a more general, more plausible but also more unspecific assertion according to which natural philosophy and political philosophy were closely interrelated during the era (weak thesis). I argue that close textual analysis of authors cited as positive exemplars of the strong thesis does not substantiate its validity. In particular, it has been claimed that the republican James Harrington capitalized on the vitalism of William Harvey in order to justify the viability (even the immortality) of a decentralized body politic which was based on principles that by the age's standards were regarded as extremely democratic. I argue that the justification takes place in a manner contradictory to the expectations formed on the basis of the strong thesis. In fact, in the *Oceana* and the *System of Politics* Harrington applies the vitalistic rhetoric for the description of centralizing mechanisms that counterbalance possible destabilizing factors, in an effort to demonstrate that his elective system is safe from anarchistic tendencies. As Harrington attests, republican liberty is perfectly consistent with an imaginative description of the state where agents do not act as self-sufficient, un-coerced actors but as puppets acting as the iron laws of mechanism dictate. Thus, in agreement with the weak thesis there is a correspondence between natural and political philosophy but it is much more complex than the correspondence suggested by the strong thesis, the latter having been prone to give rise to erroneous or oversimplifying interpretations concerning the nature of this relationship.