

## **Liberty, Land, and Commerce in English Republican Thought, 1649 –1700**

### **Abstract**

Post-regicidal English republicanism as a tradition of thinking in the seventeenth century is most commonly, closely, and famously analysed in relation to its polemic against absolute monarchy and its core political concepts of liberty and virtue. In this talk I will explore how republican notions of liberty as independence and an associated virtue ethics were interwoven with overlooked and innovative thinking about landownership, trade, and public finance. Core to my analysis, but not only, will be work by James Harrington (1611-1677) and Algernon Sidney (1623-1683) as well as their editor, John Toland (1670-1722). Harrington proposed how political power and constitutional forms were ultimately rooted in material foundations of property ownership, proposing an agrarian law to ensure constitutional balance. While Sidney developed this understanding of economic foundations, he also – and in stark contrast with writers like John Locke – explicitly subordinated the value of property to public liberty and insisted that property owners must only utilise their property in ways that did not damage the common good. Intriguingly, this common good included the material environment – one had a duty to *not* damage rivers, coasts, and material property, such as by fire, that would threaten the public liberty. The demands of liberty for Sidney also led him to reject trading monopolies. Indeed, although mid-century English republican thought is commonly associated with landed elites, a rejection of luxury, and an aversion to commerce, both Harrington and Sidney did acknowledge the value of trade to a republic, even one centred on landowners. This commercial dimension was developed further by Toland when he edited their works for publication in a context defined by the political, fiscal, and military revolutions of the 1690s.