The Primacy of Politics in Classical Greece

PAUL A. RAHE

Animals less honored than we, have sagacity enough to procure their food, and to find the means of their solitary pleasures; but it is reserved for man to consult, to persuade, to oppose, to kindle in the society of his fellow-creatures, and to lose the sense of his personal interest or safety, in the ardour of his friendships and his oppositions. . . . To act in the view of his fellow-creatures, to produce his mind in public, to give it all the exercise of sentiment and thought, which pertain to man as a member of society, as a friend, or an enemy, seems to be the principal calling and occupation of his nature.

—Adam Ferguson

At the turn of the century the Irish-American journalist Finley Peter Dunne wrote a column of political and social satire for a Chicago newspaper. On one occasion he touched on the ancient world, attributing the following observation to his character the sage of Halsted Street Mr. Dooley:

An earlier version of this essay was delivered as the opening address at the annual meeting of the Conference for the Study of Political Thought held in New York City, March 30–31, 1983. The original draft was prepared while I was a junior fellow at the Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington. I am especially grateful to Bernard M. W. Knox for encouragement. Peter Burian, Jan Bremmer, and James W. Muller drew my attention to evidence of particular importance. J. Joel Farber, Donald Kagan, Ann R. Steiner, Jane B. Woodson, Patrick Leigh Fermor, I. F. Stone, Solomon Wank, Sheldon Wolin, W. G. G. Forrest, Joseph Alsop, and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese read the essay in its entirety and made helpful comments. I am especially indebted to Richard Hoffman, who initiated me into the mysteries of word processing, and to Joyce Sawyer, who handles interlibrary loans for the Shade-Fackenthal Library of Franklin and Marshall College.

I have cited the standard works of modern political philosophy by the divisions and subdivisions employed by the author (that is, by book, part, chapter, section number, and paragraph where designations of this sort are provided). For fragments surviving from works of the classical period now lost, I have followed the practice now standard among classicists of citing the author’s name, the fragment or line numbers, and, in parentheses following those numbers, the surname of the editor of the collection. In this fashion, I cite the following: Ernest Diehl, ed., Anthologia Lyrica Graeca (Leipzig, 1925); Augustus Nauck, ed., Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta (2d edn., Leipzig, 1926); Felix Jacoby, Die Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker (Berlin, 1926–30, and Leiden, 1950–58); Alfred Körte, Menandri quae supersunt (3d edn., Leipzig, 1957–59); John Maxwell Edmonds, The Fragments of Attic Comedy (Leiden, 1957–61); Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker (10th edn., Berlin, 1960); Edgar Lobel and Denys Page, eds., Poetarum Liberalium Fragmenta (Oxford, 1963); Valentin Rose, Aristotelis qui ferrehanit librorum fragmenta collectit (Stuttgart, 1967); Fritz R. Wehrli, Die Schule des Aristoteles (2d edn., Basel, 1967–69); Martin L. West, Iambi et elegi Graeci ante Alexandrum cantati (Oxford, 1971–72); and Bruno Snell et al., eds., Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta (Göttingen, 1971–). For the citation of inscriptions, I have used the abbreviations listed in the Oxford Classical Dictionary. Unless otherwise indicated, the translations in the essay are my own.  


265
I know histhry isn’t threu, Hinnissy, because it ain’t like what I see ivry day in Halsted Sthreet. If any wan comes along with a histhry iv Greece or Rome that’ll show me th’ people fightin’, gettin’ dhrunk, makin’ love, gettin’ married, owin’ th’ grocery man an’ bein’ without hard-coal, I’ll believe they was a Greece or Rome, but not befure. Historyans is like doctors. They are always lookin’ fr symptoms. Thos iv them that writes about their own times examines th’ tongue an’ feels th’ pulse an’ makes a wrong dygnosis. Th’ other kind iv histhry is a postmortem examination. It tells ye what a country died iv. But I’d like to know what it lived iv.²

Mr. Dooley’s complaint reflects with great precision the dilemma faced by the modern historian of antiquity and by his readers as well. Like Mr. Dooley, we are eager to know more about ancient domestic life, and not only about family quarrels, drinking bouts, love, marriage, and the never-ending struggle to make ends meet. But on these and related matters we have very little reliable information. The things Mr. Dooley could see every day on Halsted Street in Chicago are the very things the ancients took great care to hide from each other—and ultimately from us.³

The dearth of evidence regarding the private sphere does nothing to assuage our curiosity, but it may be revealing in itself. We may not be able to say what the Greek cities died of, but the relative silence of our informants regarding domestic affairs suggests that the citizens of the polis lived for something that Mr. Dooley and the residents of Halsted Street would have had a great deal of trouble comprehending. Benjamin Constant hinted at the source of our difficulty when he pointed out that modern circumstances deny us many of the pleasures associated with participation in public affairs while multiplying and invigorating those derived from attentiveness to matters lying outside the political realm.⁴ As the economy has expanded, shattering the relationship between oikonomia and the simple management of a household and its attached estate, the polity has contracted. In a representative democracy situated on an extended territory, politics is but seldom the focus of popular concern; on an ordinary day, family matters and money making engage the passions of the ordinary citizen. If we sometimes find ourselves sharing Mr. Dooley’s incomprehension and disbelief, it is because of the world that we have lost and because of all that we have gained. To recover that world and to revive some sense of the spirit that animated it requires a forgetfulness of contemporary concerns and an imaginative effort at repossession that may tax our intellectual and even our moral resources. Prudence dictates that we begin by pondering the eclipse in ancient Greece of the private sphere that Mr. Dooley considered the chief locus of human endeavor. If Xenophon is to be trusted, it was the peculiar character of

² Dunne, Observations by Mr. Dooley (New York, 1902), 271.
³ It should not, then, be surprising that the little reliable information we do possess concerning the ancient Greek household and economy comes to us mainly from the law courts of Athens, where citizens were forced to divulge and to discuss in broad daylight matters that, under any other circumstances, they would have preferred to keep in the dark. Were it not for the corpus of fourth-century Athenian forensic orations, students of ancient Greek domestic life would be almost entirely at a loss. If we lacked this evidence, we would find it virtually impossible to interpret the little that can be gleaned from the archaeological remains, from the Greek inscriptions, from comedy, and from the rest of Greek literature.
the distinction the Greeks drew between public and private and the relative weight they gave to each of the two spheres which set them apart from the barbarians.\(^5\) That understanding and that evaluation separate them from us in much the same way.

In recent years scholars have commonly alluded to the Greek quest for political solidarity (homōnōia) and to the attendant hostility toward commerce by saying that the ancient economy was embedded in society.\(^6\) This formulation has the great virtue of drawing attention to the Greek practice of rigidly subordinating the concerns generated by the market to the larger needs of the community. This phrasing is enlightening to a degree, but it masks the true character of the pólis. At least in classical Greece the concerns that were primary were not social; they were political. The economy was not embedded in society; the economy and the society were both embedded in the polity. The love of money was not subordinated to the desire for social status; they were alike secondary to the quest for office, for power, and for glory.\(^7\) It was only in postclassical Greece that war ceased to be the chief concern of the citizen and something akin to social competition replaced political rivalry.\(^8\) When the Macedonians and their Roman successors destroyed the full

---

\(^5\) See Xenophon *Anabasis* 5.4.30–34. Also see Herodotus *The Histories* 1.10.3; Thucydides *Peloponnesian War* 1.6.5; and Plato *Republic* 5.452c.


\(^7\) Polanyi’s formula obscures the difference between warrior republics like those of classical Greece and subpolitical artisan communities of the sort Mack Walker described in his remarkable work, *German Home Tows* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1971). G. E. M. de Ste. Croix avoided this difficulty by emphasizing the Greek employment of slave labor; Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981). M. I. Finley achieved much the same end by asserting the fundamental importance of the Greek peasantry’s acquisition of political rights, *The Ancient Economy*, and *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (London, 1980), 67–149. I do not deny the importance of these two men pointed out, but I doubt very much whether an interpretation of the pólis guided by Karl Marx or even Max Weber can adequately answer Mr. Dooley’s question. To interpret instrumentally the fact that the Greeks placed such a high premium on the privilege of citizenship is to dismiss the Hellenic understanding of what made life worth living. See pages 273–88, below.

\(^8\) Even then, the kinship is distant. Early in the second century A.D., the Younger Pliny was dispatched to Bithynia-Pontus as the emperor Trajan’s personal emissary. Pliny’s letters to the emperor indicate that the various Greek cities of the province and their leading citizens had a propensity for bitter rivalry and for extravagant expenditure in a futile quest to outdo each other in constructing grand public edifices. See Pliny the Younger *Epistulae* 10.17a.3–4, 10.17b, 10.18, 10.23–24, 10.37–44, 10.70–71, 10.75–76, 10.81–82, 10.90–91, 10.98–99, 10.108, 10.113, 10.116–17; and A. N. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny* (Oxford, 1966), 525–46, 580–728. Trajan did not allow the formation of a collegium of firefighters at Nicomedia on the grounds that the cities of the province were already “disturbed by factions of this very kind.” As he put it, “Where men are drawn together for a common purpose, their organizations—whatever name we give them and for whatever purpose they exist—turn into political clubs (hetaerae) in a short time.” See Pliny the Younger *Epistulae* 10.34. Also note
independence of the political community, slowly reducing the *polis* to little more than a unit of local administration, politics lost much of its dignity.

There is another, perhaps more telling, way to make this point. Those who speak of the economy as being embedded in society take for granted the distinction between government or state and society. This distinction, introduced by John Locke, foreshadows the world of the modern republic and is inapplicable to the ancient city. There was no Greek state. 9 The ancient Hellenic republic was, as James Madison noted, "a pure democracy, . . . a society consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the government in person." 10 The *polis* was, as the Greeks often remarked, the men. The Hellenes did not speak of the deeds of Athens, Corinth, and Megara. These were places, not polities. As the public inscriptions assert, the real actors were the Athenians, the Corinthians, and the Megarians. 11 The people wielded the power, and they constituted both state and society wrapped up in one. With only trivial exceptions, the Greek cities had no bureaucracies, no magistrates blessed with long tenure, no professional armies. It was futile to try to distinguish the governors from the governed. The *polis* itself depended on the identity of soldier and civilian; the farmer had the right to own land solely by virtue of his status as a citizen. The differentiation of roles that the distinction between state and society presupposes simply did not exist. In principle and to a substantial degree in practice, the body of citizens was homogeneous. 12

Just as there was no Greek state, so there was no civil society. The city was, as Aristotle argued, a political community (*koimonia*). It was a *Gemeinschaft*, not a

---

9 ibid., 10.92—95, 10.96.7. The civic orations of Pliny's contemporary Dio Chrysostom provide much the same impression of affairs in the communities of the province; Dio Chrysostom Orations 38—51.

10 The term "state" was introduced by Machiavelli, who used *lo stato* to allude to "command over men"; see J. H. Hexter, "The Predatory Vision: Niccolo Machiavelli, Il Principe, and lo stato," in his The Vision of Politics on the Eve of the Reformation (New York, 1973), 150—78. It reached its full development in the political science of Thomas Hobbes, who would have agreed with Max Weber's definition of the state as that entity which "(successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory". Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in his From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology (New York, 1946), 78. The state is an abstract entity constituted by power. To the extent that it has a tangible existence, the state is indistinguishable from the arms by which power is exerted—the police forces, the standing army, and the bureaucracy that make up the permanent government in every modern polity. The state is never synonymous with the body politic, and it is never itself a true community. This is evident enough from the manner in which it is consistently coupled with—and distinguished from—the individual, the church, and society. This distinction is crucial to understanding John Locke's *The Second Treatise of Government*, paras. 87—122, 211—43, ed. Peter Laslett in Locke, Two Treatises of Government (Cambridge, 1963). As Friedrich Nietzsche observed in this connection, "State is the name of the coldest of all the cold monsters. Coldly as well does it lie; and this lie creeps out of its mouth: 'I, the State, am the People.'" Nietzsche went on to suggest, it is "a Faith and a Love," not the State, that constitute a People. Nietzsche, Also Sprach Zarathustra, part 1: "Vom neuen Götzen," ed. Karl Schlechta in Nietzsche, Werke (Munich, 1966). Also see Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., "On the Impersonality of the Modern State: A Comment on Machiavelli's Use of Stato," American Political Science Review, 77 (1983): 849—57.


Gesellschaft.\textsuperscript{13} The pólis was not a conspiracy of self-seeking individuals joined for mutual profit and protection in a temporary legal partnership that would be dissolved when it ceased to suit their interests. It was a moral community of men permanently united by a common way of life. As a human being the Greek possessed no rights against the commonwealth. As an adult male citizen he might demand and be granted certain privileges, but these were more than outweighed by his duties to the community at large. Here, as is often the case, language is the shadow of political reality. It is by no means fortuitous that the English word idiot is derived from the Greek term that designates those who prefer private pleasure to public endeavor. Because they were shirkers who took what the city had to offer and gave almost nothing in return, men of this stripe incurred scorn and ill will. In short, the peculiar division between a narrow public and a broad private realm characteristic of bourgeois regimes was alien to the Greek experience. The claim of the civic community was, in principle, total: only the household (oikos) proved capable of resisting absorption because the city depended on the preservation of one refuge of privacy for the procreation, rearing, and nourishment of its future citizens.\textsuperscript{14}

This design left little room for women. Throughout antiquity the female members of the human race shared the fate of the oikos. Physically, they were not up to the rigors of hoplite warfare, and the biological function they performed in reproduction necessarily relegated them to the realm of procreation and child rearing (although it need not have confined them there forever). Prior to the emergence of the pólis and after its decline, when the household was strong and the political community relatively weak, custom and law accorded women a modicum of personal freedom and independence. But in the classical period, when the pólis was in full vigor, they occupied an unenviable status. Women were everywhere denied political rights. In some cities they could neither bring suit in the courts nor own property in their own names.\textsuperscript{15} While the men of the town spent their leisure hours loitering about grand public spaces within sight of marble or stone buildings

\textsuperscript{13} Aristotel, Politic, 1280a25–1281a4. Also see Pseudo-Demostenes 25.16–17. For the import of the Gesellschaft-Gemeinschaft distinction, see Ferdinand Tönnes, Community and Society (London, 1955). The failure to grasp the importance of Tönnes's distinction for understanding the Greek pólis can lead one to attribute a confusion to Aristotle where none exists; R. G. Mulgan, Aristotle's Political Theory (Oxford, 1977), 13–37.

\textsuperscript{14} As Aristotle on one occasion acknowledged, the household is more natural than the pólis because it is prior to and more necessary than the political community. If he elsewhere denied this, it is because the household lacks self-sufficiency (autarkia) and can therefore survive and do its proper work in promoting virtue only as part of a much larger unit. Compare Nichomachean Ethics 1162a17–29 with Politic 1253a18–29. The confusion caused by Aristotle's two statements is purely semantic in origin: from the perspective of efficient causation, the household holds priority; from that of final causation, the pólis is first. The household is a prerequisite for life, the pólis for the good life. The inevitable tension between this private community and the public community is the background for the dramatic action of Aeschylus's Eumenides, Sophocles' Antigone, and Aristophanes' Clouds. It is no accident that Aristophanes' Ecclesiazusae makes no mention of procreation: a city without households would be a city that paid little attention to the rearing of children. For a defense of the household, see Aristotle's critique of Plato's abolition of the household in The Republic; Politic 1261a4–1264b25.

possessed of a magnificence still striking today, their wives and daughters were virtual prisoners, kept in seclusion—all but the wealthiest locked within the squalid, dark, and damp confines of relatively primitive mud-brick houses. Though free by law, Greek women were held captive by custom.\(^6\)

In a community that denied full dignity to private affairs, women had a public existence only through their offspring. A young girl of fourteen who suddenly found herself wed and thrust into the arms of a seasoned warrior more than twice her own age might find the experience disconcerting, but she dared not complain.\(^7\) In all likelihood, this was her one opportunity to achieve that for which, she was told, she had been born. If a woman married, became pregnant, survived the ordeal, and bore her husband a son, she assured for herself a position of respect within the family and the community at large. But by the same token, if she failed, whatever the reason, the life that remained hers was hardly worth living. The ancient medical writers inform us that women denied marriage or unable to conceive were unusually susceptible to “the sacred disease.” For this malady, when contracted under these circumstances, there was only one cure: marriage, pregnancy, and the birth of a child. Psychosomatic illness is not a modern discovery. Even in antiquity, the fear of dishonor was known to generate hysteria and, through it, epilepsy and other disorders.\(^8\) For the whole-hearted commitment to public life

\(^6\) Nepos Praefatio 6–7. For a detailed account of the seclusion of women in one such community, see J. P. Gould, “Law, Custom, and Myth: Aspects of the Social Position of Women in Classical Athens,” Journal of Hellenic Studies, 100 (1980): 38–59. Needless to say, the homes of the wealthy were far from squalid, dark, and damp. Even within the grander houses, however, women were still confined to the women’s quarters (gynaikeia), always the least attractive part of the home. See R. E. Wycherley, How the Greeks Built Cities (2d edn., New York, 1976), 175–97.

\(^7\) In Crete an entire age-class of young men customarily took brides upon induction into manhood; Euphorus FGrH 70 fr. 149 (Jacoby). Elsewhere, it was unusual for a man to wed before age thirty. This practice separated the generations so that a man would come into his inheritance at about the time he married; Aristotle Politics 1335a32–34. It also left him free from household responsibilities during the years when he was at the height of his physical powers and most useful to the city for the purposes of war. Women ordinarily reached menarche about age fourteen; Darrel W. Amundsen and Carol Jean Diers, “The Age of Menarche in Classical Greece and Rome,” Human Biology, 41 (1969): 125–32. No Greek writer recommended marriage at so tender an age, but the eagerness of Greek men to inherit a legitimate succession by marrying a virgin made this the norm everywhere except at Sparta. See Xenophon The Constitution of the Lacedaemonians 1.5–4; and Plutarch Lycurgus 15.3. A similar pattern prevailed at Rome; compare Keith Hopkins, “The Age of Roman Girls at Marriage,” Population Studies, 18 (1965): 309–27, with the Greek evidence; Hesiod Works and Days 695–701; Solon fr. 27 (West): Xenophon Oeconomicus 7.5; Plato Republic 5.459b–460c, and Laws 4.721b–e, 6.772d, 6.785b (note ibid., 8.833c–d); and Aristotle Politics 1335a7–35 (note Historia Animalium 544b14–27, 582a16–33, and De Generatione Animalium 766b29–37). This eagerness explains why an heirless became capable of acting as a vehicle for the transfer of her father’s property at Athens and on Thasos when she was age fourteen and at Gortyn when she was age twelve; see Aristotele Constitution of Athens 56.7; Jean Pouilloux, Recherches sur l’histoire et les cultes de Thasos, volume 1: De la fondation de la cite à 196 avant J.-C. (Paris, 1954), 371, no. 141 (Inscr. Inv. 1032) 1.22; and Gr IV 72 Col. XII 6–19; in Ronald F. Willetts, ed., The Law Code of Gortyn (Berlin, 1967), 50. The young age of women at marriage may explain why the exposure of female infants was common. As Mark Golden remarked, the propensity for men in their prime to marry adolescent girls would otherwise have resulted in a large population of unmarried women. Golden, “Demography and the Exposure of Girls at Athens,” Phronimos, 35 (1981): 316–31; and William V. Harris, “The Theoretical Possibility of Extensive Infanticide in the Graeco-Roman World,” Classical Quarterly, new ser., 32 (1982): 114–16. For the view that this practice must have been uncommon, see Donald Engels, “The Problem of Female Infanticide in the Graeco-Roman World,” Classical Philology 75 (1980): 112–20. Though the marriage of a girl to a man twenty years her elder was common, sexual relations between the very young and the very old were a standard subject for myth; see Aristophanes Congresswomen 877–1111; and Athenaeus Deipnosophistae 13.559f–560a.

\(^8\) Hippocrates De Virginibus 1 (Littere 8: 464–71). Because women were so rarely given the opportunity to speak for themselves, Hippocrates’ observations may provide the best evidence that we have for their outlook. This evidence can be dismissed as the remarks of a man, but the absence of cant in the surrounding discussion
that the laws and customs of the city sought to elicit from their husbands, brothers, and fathers, the women of Greece paid a very high price.

They were not alone. The primacy accorded political life presupposed more than one hierarchy. The oikos served an essential productive as well as a procreative function. Just as the city needed women for the replenishment of its steadily dwindling stock of citizens, so also it required laborers to provide for their nourishment. The visible pólis constituted by the male citizens rested on an invisible and politically inarticulate body of slaves condemned to labor in private so that their masters might be free to devote time and effort to speech and action in public. “As free men,” Euripides observed, “we live off slaves.”

Nearly a century after Euripides’ death, the comic poet Menander composed a variation on the same theme. To support his contention that “farming is work fit for a slave,” he argued that it is not through labor but through “matters pertaining to war that a real man (anér) must outdo his rivals (hyperéchein).” Though brutal in tone, the verses of the Cretan poet Hybias could apply to the active citizens of every Greek pólis:

In my great spear and my sword lies my wealth,
And in my fine shield, a screen for the body.
With these, I plow; with these, I reap; and
With these, I trample out sweet wine from the vine;
For it is with these that I am called the master of churls (moía)
And those who dare not bear the spear and the sword
And the fine shield, a screen for the body,
All fall down, grasping my knee and
Calling me master and Great King.


19 Euripides fr. 1019 (Nauck?). The scholar who cited this passage went on to remark that slaves were called laispona because they did away with (diallógoi) toil (póneus) by their service (therapeía); see the scholia on Pindar Pythian Odes 4.71. If slaves had been given visibility, they might have become politically articulate. According to Seneca, the Roman Senate once debated the prudence of requiring the slaves of the city to wear a special uniform. The senators ultimately decided against such a policy because they feared making the slaves aware of their own numbers. If this were the case, the opponents of the measure argued, the slaves would have been prone to revolt. Seneca De Clementia 1.24.1. Seneca’s testimony on this matter may be suspect, but his point is well taken. The same eagerness to deny slaves every semblance of public existence lies behind the insistent recommendation of the ancient political commentators that the citizens of a community select their slaves from a variety of different nations lest the servile population be united by a common culture, religion, and tongue. Plato Laws 6.777c–d; Aristotle Politics 1330a2528; Pseudo-Aristotle Oeconomica 1344b18. Varro De Re Rustica 1.17.5. Athenaeus Deipnosophistae 5.264f–265a. As the ancients recognized, rebellion is a political act, and successful political action presupposes the prior existence of that shared understanding of the nature of justice which constitutes the common way of life for a people. It can hardly be fortuitous that servile revolts have almost always had cultural, religious, or nationalist roots. See Joseph Vogt, “The Structure of Ancient Slave Wars,” in his Ancient Slavery and the Ideal of Man (Oxford, 1974), 39–92; and Eugene D. Genovese, From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-Amercian Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World (Baton Rouge, La., 1979), 1–81. Also see pages 285–87, below.

20 Menander fr. 560 (Körte?). Also note Heracleides Ponticus fr. 55 (Wehrli?).
21 Athenaeus Deipnosophistae 15.695f–696a. By Greek standards, the servile class of Crete was relatively free. Its members, apart from being denied access to the assembly, suffered a number of deprivations particularly worthy of Greek notice: as Aristotle observed, they were barred from the gymnasion and prohibited from the possession of arms; Politics 1264a20–22. Compare the measures taken in some politics against the poor; ibid., 1297a29–35.
Virtually all members of the political class belonged to what Alexis de Tocqueville so aptly called “the aristocracy of masters.” Such men could do without slaves, Aristotle remarked, but only if they possessed automatons like the statue of Daedalus or the tripods of Homer’s Hephaestus, each able to perform its particular function when ordered and even to anticipate the master’s needs. The desire to be at leisure for political action explains why a world requiring no labor at all was one of the abiding fantasies of the Greek imagination.

Menander’s quip and Hybrjas’s poem are important for more than one reason—for they capture not only the Greek situation but the Greek outlook as well. Heraclitus touched on the central issue: to support his claim that “war is the father of all and king over all,” he noted that it was combat that “made some men slaves and some men free.” Of those condemned to labor for others, the house-born (oikogenei) and the foundlings were but a small minority. Throughout Hellas the ordinary slave was a barbarian taken in war, kidnapped by pirates, or sold by his kin; even where some form of dependent labor other than chattel slavery prevailed, the servile class was held down by force. By displaying cowardice in accepting their fate, its members became objects of scorn. “The race of slaves is ignoble (kakón),” one Euripidean character argues. “They observe everything from the perspective of the stomach (gastér),”

This claim was not peculiar to the last of the great tragedians. In the Plutus,


23 Aristotle Politics 1253b23–38 should be read with Homer Iliad 18.373–81. For the statue of Daedalus, see Euripides fr. 372 (Nauck); Plato Meno 97d, and Euthyphro 11b–c; and Aristotle De Anima 406b18. Also see Crates fr. 14–15 (Edmonds). It says something about the degree to which the quest for mastery over nature has supplanted the desire to participate in public life that the introduction of a myriad of labor-saving devices from the eighteenth century on has been accompanied by an increase, not a reduction, in the number of hours devoted to labor by the ordinary citizen. See E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” Past & Present, no. 38 (1967): 56–97. For the relation of work to time in premodern society, see Jacques Le Goff, Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages (Chicago, 1980), 29–52; and Edmund S. Morgan, “The Labor Problem at Jamestown, 1607–1618,” AHR, 76 (1971): 595–611. Also see Aristophanes Congress-women 651–61, and Plutus 510–26.

24 Heraclitus fr. 53 (Diels-Kranz).

25 There is one intriguing piece of evidence bearing on the proportion of house-born slaves within the servile population of the classical period. The surviving fragments of the Athenian inscriptions recording the sale of the property confiscated in 414 B.C. from those involved in the Hermis and the Mysteries Scandals list forty-five slaves and specify the origins of thirty-five: IG3 421, 426. Of these, only three were oikogenei; see Meiggs and Lewis, Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions, no. 79. In later times, if the Roman evidence is indicative, house-born slaves came to constitute a much larger proportion of the servile population; Ste. Croix, Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World, 229–39.

Unfortunately, although the manumission inscriptions from Hellenistic Delphi confirm the widespread suspicion that the oikogenei (some of them, no doubt, children of their masters) were the slaves most likely to be granted the privilege of freedom, they tell us little regarding the structure of the slave population as a whole. See Keith Hopkins and P. J. Roscoe, “Between Slavery and Freedom: On Freeing Slaves at Delphi,” in Hopkins, Conquerors and Slaves (Cambridge, 1978), 133–71, esp. 140–41. The apparent dramatic increase over time in the proportion of manumitted slaves drawn from the ranks of the oikogenei may be an illusion. The difference may lie in a change in reporting procedures. Over the same period, the number of slaves whose origin is left unspecified in the inscriptions declined precipitously. For evidence concerning the enslavement of foundlings, see William V. Harris, “Towards a Study of the Roman Slave Trade,” in J. H. d’Arms and E. C. Kopff, eds., The Seaborne Commerce of Rome, Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome, no. 36 (Rome, 1980), 117–40, esp. 123. Their existence is presupposed by the conceits of New Comedy, but otherwise they are rarely mentioned.

26 Euripides fr. 49 (Nauck). Also see Sallust Bellum Jugurtinun 85.41. Much the same charge could be leveled against a beggar (ptochés). Consider the manner in which Homer used the gastér of the ptochés as a symbol
Aristophanes sketched the gulf separating the outlook of the master from that of his slave in strikingly similar terms. While under the delusion that wealth is the only good thing of which no human being has ever secured a sufficiency, Chremylus reinforces his point by providing a list of desirables that a man can only too easily possess in excess. One can have a surfeit of sex, poetry, and honor, of courage and ambition, and even of high office as general, he remarks. And his slave adds in response that one can have enough and more than enough of bread, sweet meats, placenta, dried figs, barley cakes, and even lentil soup. This juxtaposition, underlined by the antiphonal form that the poet adopted, was intended to elicit a laughter bred of prior contempt: in keeping with the dictates of convention, the citizen intent on mentioning the good things in life can think only of eros, poetry, and politics while the slave in precisely the same situation ponders nothing but subsistence and the pleasures of filling his belly. The root of servility was taken to be an obsessive and degrading love of mere life.27

Thus, when Plato’s Socrates suggests that men educated for freedom must become accustomed to fearing slavery more than death, he is not saying anything out of the ordinary: he is merely echoing the most profound convictions of a martial and slave-owning people. More than a century before, on the eve of the battle of Platea, the Hellenes united against Persia purportedly took an oath “not to hold life dearer than liberty (eleuthèria).” The document recording the oath may well be a forgery, but this matters little. The point is that the oath’s authenticity seemed plausible to the Greeks. Throughout Hellas, men who preferred servitude to the sacrifice of life were regarded as little better than the beasts of the field. The Euripidean character who asks whether “it is not better not to live at all than to live ignobly (hakós)” spoke for his fellow nationals.28 For the Greeks, courage was more than a prerequisite for citizenship. Like freedom, it was virtually a precondition for the possession of humanity itself.29

The presence of the women and the slaves was a permanent reminder to the citizens that privacy is privative and that a life centered on domestic concerns—on Mr. Dooley’s family quarrels and his drinking bouts, on love, marriage, and the never-ending struggle to make ends meet—is a life of deprivation.30 No one would query Xenophon’s claim that the citizens served each other as bodyguards against

---

27 Aristophanes Plutus 188–93. Consider the slave’s failure to mention meat in light of Plato’s comments; Republic 3.372a–373d, 404b–c.
28 Plato Republic 3.386a–387b; and Euripides fr. 596 (Nauck). Also see Plato Gorgias 483a–b. And note Seneca Epistulae 77.15: “vita si moriendi virtus abest servitus est.” For the oath, see Lycurgus 1.81. For the view that the oath was a later invention, see Christian Habicht, “Falsche Urkunden zur Geschichte Athens im Zeitalter der Perserkriege,” Hermes, 89 (1961): 1–35.
29 For the relationship linking courage, freedom, and the good life, see Thucydides Peloponnesian War 2.36.1, 2.43.4 (note ibid., 2.63.1), 4.126.2, 5.9.1, 5.9.9. Compare what Tacitus has to say of the German tribes on this issue; Germania 20.2.
30 This is the theme of Hannah Arendt’s The Human Condition (Chicago, 1958), a text that deserves much more attention from students of Greek antiquity than it has received.
their own slaves, and no one would deny that the emergence of republican institutions during the archaic period was in large part occasioned by the desire of the peasantry for equal protection under the law. Indeed, more than a century and a half after the close of that age, a comic poet could still speak of “freedom of speech (parhēsia)” as “the shield of poverty” and suggest that “anyone who loses this freedom has thrown away the shield of life.”

But to suppose, as many scholars have, that political liberty was for the ordinary citizen of the Greek polis merely or even primarily instrumental is to surrender to the very incredulity that so blinded Mr. Dooley.

Here, as in all things, Aristotle is a more dependable guide than Karl Marx or even Max Weber. He did not make a practice of explaining away public opinion, treating it as false consciousness, as mere ideology, or even as a product of the historical process. Instead, Aristotle gave the views of ordinary men a respectful hearing and attempted to make sense of them by showing that, when considered as a systematic whole, they point beyond themselves to something both nobler and more intelligible. As a consequence, he was able to give full and coherent expression to the deepest convictions of his fellow Hellenes.

31 Xenophon, Hiero 4.3; and Nicostratus fr. 29 (Edmonds). Also see Plato, Republic 9.578d–579a; and Demosthenes 21.123–25. In the latter passage the struggle against exploitation gains dignity from being linked with the struggle for something nobler—political freedom. Quot setes, so goes the Roman proverb, tot hostes; see Festus 314L; Seneca, Epistulae 47.5; and Macrobius, Saturnalia 1.11.13. For the emergence of republican institutions, see Philip Brook Manville, “The Evolution of Athenian Citizenship: Individual and Society in the Archaic Period” (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1979). The best general discussion of the archaic period is Oswyn Murray’s Early Greece (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1980). Also see Antony Andrews, The Greek Tyrants (London, 1956); and W. G. G. Forrest, The Emergence of Greek Democracy (London, 1966).

32 See M. I. Finley, “The Freedom of the Citizen in the Greek World,” in his Economy and Society in Ancient Greece, 77–94, and Politics in the Ancient World (Cambridge, 1983), 39–49, 97–121, 134. These two works represent the mature scholarship of the ablest and most respected of the sociologically oriented historians of antiquity. As such, they exhibit admirably the virtues, the limitations, and the ultimate inadequacy of the sociological approach. The disciples of Weber and Marx, in keeping with the tendency of social-science and modern political practice since Hobbes, systematically depreciate the value of one’s own and the desire for honor as human motives. As a consequence, they neglect the central importance of civil religion, national culture, and public opinion in general and base their work on a distinction between materialism and idealism that cannot be sustained. See Finley, “The Ancient City from Servile to Cogualnes to Max Weber and Beyond,” in his Economy and Society in Ancient Greece, 3–23, and Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology, 11–66. If J. K. Davies were correct in supposing that “the fundamental vectors of Athenian society” were “the needs for food, shelter, security, and conflict resolution,” then not much more than the accident of circumstance would distinguish the ancient citizen from the modern bourgeoisie; Davies, Wealth and the Power of Wealth in Classical Athens (New York, 1981), vii. In the final analysis, materialism provides no foundation for making sense out of the Greek hostility to marketplace concerns that Finley himself has done so much to unearth; “Land, Debt, and the Man of Property at Athens,” 62–76; and Studies in Land and Credit in Ancient Athens (New Brunswick, N.J., 1952). To understand why the Greeks had contempt for men of mercenary disposition and an aversion to the uninhibited quest for lucre, one must pay attention to what Aristotle meant when he spoke of man as a political animal. By the same token, to understand the roots of the political apathy typical of modern republics, one must pay attention to the manner in which the modern preference for limited, representative government is grounded in a radically new understanding of the purposes for which constitutional government is established. Here again, the sociological approach is enlightening—but only to a degree. See Finley, Democracy Ancient and Modern (New Brunswick, N.J., 1973). And consider Madison, The Federalist, no. 10, in light of the argument advanced by Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr.; see Mansfield, “Party Government and the Settlement of 1688,” American Political Science Review, 58 (1964): 953–46; “Modern and Medieval Representation,” in J. R. Pennock and G. Chapman, eds., Representation: Nomos, 11 (1968): 55–82; and “Hobbes and the Science of Indirect Government,” American Political Science Review, 65 (1971): 97–110. Christian Meier’s work on the Greek understanding of freedom is a useful corrective to the one-dimensional focus on “material benefits” and “material relations” in much recent scholarship; Meier, “Die politische Identität der Griechen,” in Odo Marquand and Karheinz Stierle, eds., Identität (Münich, 1979), 371–406; and the essays collected in Die Erstellung des Politischen bei den Griechen (Frankfurt am Main, 1980).

33 For the approach that Aristotle rejected, see Ste. Croix, The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World, 409–52.

34 Consider Aristotle’s discussion of what he called ἐπίθεσις ("reputable opinions"), compare Topics 100b21–23,
Aristotle was quite prepared to acknowledge that the political community owed its existence to private concerns—to the need for common defense against attack and to the desire for economic cooperation. But he was unwilling to suppose that such an account of the origins of the city could explain its true nature.\(^{35}\) If the desire for mere life brought the polis into being, he observed, the desire to live nobly and well sustains it. Thus, when Aristotle described man as being by nature a political animal, he was not simply asserting that human beings are gregarious. Such a claim fails to distinguish mankind from the ants and the bees. He contended instead that only in the polis could gregarious beings of this sort “have a share in the good life.”

To understand what Aristotle meant by the good life, we must take careful note of those faculties that distinguish man from the beasts. In Aristotle’s view, human beings are set apart from the other animals not by their capacity for self-expression but rather by their capacity for rational speech (logos). Man possesses more than mere voice (phone); he can do more than just intimate that he feels pleasure or pain. Thus, his humanity is in no way constituted by his ability to speak out, to get a load off his chest, to give vent to his spleen. He could just as well purge his emotion by the inarticulate utterance of the beast. For Aristotle logos is something more refined than the capacity to make private feelings public: it enables the human being to perform as no other animal can; it makes it possible for him to perceive and make clear to others through reasoned discourse the difference between what is advantageous and what is harmful, between what is good and what is evil, and between what is just and what is unjust. The sharing of these things, Aristotle insisted, constitutes the household and the polis each as a community (koimonia).

Aristotle could therefore assert that someone who by nature belongs outside the political community must be either a god or a hunted animal (therion)—alone and at war with the world. It matters little whether the individual lives in solitude, in slavery, as a metic, or under the rule of a tyrant or king. Human beings, other than philosophers, are rendered servile and virtually subhuman by the circumstances or

---

with Nichomachean Ethics 1098b9–12, 1098b27–31, 1145b2–7, 1153b25–28, Eudemian Ethics 1216b26–
1217a18, 1235b13–18, Politeia 1280a9–25, 1281a42–b38, and Rhetoric 1355a14–18, 1361a25–27, 1398b20–
1399a6; 1400a5–14. Aristotle’s principle is in keeping with Socrates’ practice in the Platonic dialogues. By the
same token, the task of political science as understood by Aristotle is identical to that of science in general as
understood by Plato and his followers: both aimed at making sense of the ordinary man’s perceptions; both
sought in this way “to save ta phainomena.” Compare Aristotle Eudemian Ethics 1216b26–1217a18, 1235b13–18,
and Nichomachean Ethics 1145b2–7, with the famous claim of Eudemus, as recorded in Simplicius De Carlo
problèmes de méthode (Louvain, 1961), 83–103; and Martha Craven Nussbaum, “Saving Aristotle’s Appearances,”
in Malcolm Schofield and Nussbaum, eds., Language and Logos: Studies in Ancient Greek Philosophy Presented to
G. E. L. Owen (Cambridge, 1982), 267–93. In contrast, the modern political science of Thomas Hobbes and his
successors, like the modern physical science of Descartes and his admirers, aims at the achievement of absolute
certainty and begins with the categorical rejection of “those opinions which are already vulgarly received.”
historical inquiry pursued in accord with Aristotelian principles, see Claude Nicolet, The World of the Citizen in
Republican Rome (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1980).

\(^{35}\) In general, Aristotle was inclined to suppose that the end (telos) rather than the origin of an entity is
determinative. As he put it, “what is posterior in the order of becoming is prior in the order of nature”; compare Physics 261a13–15 with ibid., 260b18–19.
conscious choices that deny them participation in the political life. They are rendered servile and virtually subhuman because they are prevented from developing fully those faculties of rational argument (lógos) and cooperative action (práxis) that men possess and that other nonpolitical animals lack. We exclude slaves from the political community, Aristotle explained, because some men by nature lack the capacity for prudential deliberation (to bouleutikón) regarding the advantageous, the good, and the just; we exclude women even though they possess this capacity because it is without authority (akuros) over them; and we exclude children because they possess it in incomplete form. For all but the handful of men capable of the quasi-divine existence devoted to théoria, the fully human life is a life of práxis conducted in accord with the dictates of lógos.  

Aristotle was not the only Greek writer to suppose that man is fully human only when engrossed in public deliberation. A quarter of a millenium prior to the appearance of The Politics, Alcaeus betrayed much the same outlook. In his song of exile the poet mourned the loss of his native Mytilene, but he did not dwell on the pleasures of the hearth and the comforts of domestic life. He intoned instead a dirge with a political theme. “What a wretch I am,” he wrote,

Condemned by fate to live the life of a country boor.  
I yearn, Agesilaids, to hear the herald summon the assembly  
And the council. These things that my father and my father’s father  
Grew old possessing among the citizens (who do each other harm)—  
From these I am cast out: an exile on the frontiers. Like Onomacles,  
I have made my home in solitude here, and I [plot] war as one  
In whose veins flows the blood of the wolf (lukaimíais).  

There was evidently nothing novel in Aristotle’s conviction that men destined by nature to live outside the pólis were, like Homer’s Cyclops, little better than beasts of prey. Alcaeus even suggested that fortune can act in nature’s place and make a hunted animal of a man.

The Mytilenean poet was not alone in his understanding of exile. Euripides

---


37 Alcaeus fr. 130.16–25 (Lobel-Page). In translating the term lukaimíais and in filling the lacuna in the papyrus, I have followed the lead of C. M. Bowra’s Greek Lyric Poetry (2d edn., Oxford, 1961), 145–47. For a different interpretation of the last two lines, see Denys Page, Sappho and Alcaeus (New York, 1959), 198–209, esp. 205–06.
touches on the same issue in *The Phoenician Women* and dealt with it in a strikingly similar way. When Jocasta asks her banished son Polyneices whether “being deprived of one’s fatherland is really a great evil,” the young man responds that it is “the greatest of evils—worse when experienced than when depicted in speech.” When urged to explain in detail what he means, Polyneices does not at first mention physical insecurity, so often the constant companion of a man without a country. He notes instead that “the most annoying aspect” of his plight is that the exile lacks “freedom of speech (*parrhēsia*).” To be sure, when pressed by his mother, Polyneices does allude to the hardships he faced in the days immediately following his departure from Thebes. Like Aristotle, he is more than willing to grant the desire for survival its due. But even when confronted with maternal concern he makes only passing reference to what James Madison called “the great principle of self-preservation.” Death by violence is not for men of Polyneices’ mettle the *summa malum* that it was for Thomas Hobbes and those within the liberal tradition of political thought that he inspired. This Theban exile nowhere treats citizenship and the political rights that go with it—in the fashion of Locke, Montesquieu, and the American Founding Fathers—as simply, or even chiefly, an instrument for the protection of man’s inalienable right to life, liberty, and property. He treats political freedom instead as an end in itself.

As the son-in-law of Argos’s king, Polyneices is in secure possession of life and the means to sustain it in comfort. What he lacks is that “freedom of speech” which belongs solely to men of independent means participant in politics. Thus, when Jocasta compares the exile’s fate to that “of a slave unable to say what he thinks,” her son signals his assent by remarking that a man without a country “must bear with the brute ignorance of those who wield power.” This is “a painful thing,” Jocasta responds, “to share in the folly (*sunasophein*) of fools.” In such circumstances, Polyneices sadly acknowledges, “one must be servile for the sake of advantage (*kērdos*)—and this contrary to nature (*par à phüsin*).” Even when freed from material want, the exile is no better off than the merchant or slave. All three lack the dignity of public existence, and all three remain trapped within the narrow world of the household: for they are forced by human necessity—by the fear of violence and death, or by the love of money and the sense of security it brings—to pursue *kērdos* at the expense of all honor.38

The value that Alcaeus, Polyneices, and men like them accorded freedom of speech and the weight they gave to political participation help explain why the Greeks harbored such contempt for the barbarians. Even before the appearance of the Mede, when Hellas was but a scattering of obscure settlements hidden in the shadow of distant Assyria, Phocylides could write,

---

38 Euripides *Phoenissae* 385–442; Madison, *The Federalist*, no. 43; and Hobbes, *The Leviathan*, chap. 13. Also see Euripides fr. 313 (Nauck). Note the passage in which an exiled Plataean articulates what it means to have one’s *polis* destroyed. “The loss of our common life,” he remarked, “causes each of us to have private hopes only. I think that you are not ignorant of the other sorts of shame which poverty and exile engender.” Isocrates 14.49–50. The Greek word *parrhēsia* makes its first appearance in the works of Euripides and Democritus; Euripides *Hippolytus* 422, and Ion 672, 675; and Democritus fr. 226 (Diels-Kranz). For a thorough survey of the Athenian evidence, see Kurt Raaflaub, “Des freien Bürgers Recht der freien Rede,” *Studien zur antiken Sozialgeschichte: Festschrift Friedrich Vitte**, ed. Werner Eck et al. (Cologne, 1980), 7–57.
A small pòlis on a headland
Is superior to senseless Nineveh
If its affairs are conducted
In an orderly manner.39

After the Greeks had exhibited their prowess against the conquerors of all Asia, they could not be stopped. Aeschylus was not the first—or was he the last—to suggest that men who submitted to the rule of a king were slaves.40 Herodotus picked up the refrain—and in Aristotle’s day the great minds of the age were disputing whether the subjects of the Great King were obsequious by nature, by education, or because of the climate.41 This attitude touched even the king’s court. Persia’s monarch governed his vast empire as a household; and, when the king spoke of manā badaka (“my subject or vassal”), his Greek scribe—lacking a vocabulary for feudal relations—employed the term doûlos. The great magnates of the royal house were not women; they were not children: they could only be slaves.42

Much the same outlook colored the Greek view of poverty. What the Greeks feared most from penury was not the discomfort but the indignity, not the lack of security but the loss of independence. When Plato equated “being poor” with “lacking power over oneself” and when Demosthenes wrote that “destitution (penia) compels free men to do many things that are slavish and base,” they were restating a theme announced by Theognis centuries before. “To die, my dear Cyrus,” he wrote, “is better for a poor man than to live worn out by an indigence hard to bear.”

Poverty does more to bring a brave (agathós) man under the yoke
Than anything else—more, Cyrus, than grizzled age and the ague.
To flee poverty, such a man must hurl himself from the high rocks
Into the vastness of the sea. For poverty will subdue any man,
And he will be unable to say or do anything of note:
For his tongue will be tied.43

Destitution was for the poor man what exile had been for Alcaeus and for Polynceices. Because these rendered a man subservient to the wealthy and the powerful men, they robbed him of his capacity for great deeds and political speech. Cicero—in paraphrasing a treatise by the Greek philosopher Panaeetus of Rhodes—summed up the situation brilliantly when he wrote that “the workman’s

39 Phocylides fr. 4 (Diehl).
40 I see no reason to doubt the authenticity of the inscription recording Darius’s letter to the satrap Gadatas; see Meeiggs and Lewis, Greek Historical Inscriptions, no. 12.4.
42 Compare Roland Kent, Old Persian (New Haven, 1950), nos. DB I.19, II.19–20, II.29–30, II.49–50, II.82, III.13, III.31, III.36, III.84–85, V.8; with Meeiggs and Lewis, Greek Historical Inscriptions, no. 12.4. Also see Geo Widengren, Der Feudalism im alten Iran (Cologne, 1969), 12–21, 32–34, 38. For the Persian empire as an oikonomia étinon, see Aristotle Politics 1285b29–33.
43 Plato Epistular 7.351a; Demosthenes 57.45; and Theognis 173–78, 181–82 (West). Also see Xenophon Hellenica 2.3.47–49; and Isocrates 14.50. Also note Homer’s treatment of the plight of the beggar; see note 26, above.
wage is itself the pledge of his servitude.”44 In Greece a proud man facing old age in straitened circumstances was able to choose day labor over begging, but, for the sake of his freedom, he was expected to sacrifice every prospect of receiving support when weak and no longer fit for work and to prefer the instability of the labor exchange to dependency bred of prolonged employment in the service of another.45 To be brief: the ancient hierarchy is the reverse of the modern. The Greeks did not value political freedom for the sake of life, liberty, and property; they valued the last three for the sake of the first.

This, more than anything else, explains Mr. Dooley’s confusion: for the opposition of priorities is the root cause of many of the differences that distinguish the world of Halsted Street from that of ancient times. The founders of the liberal tradition explicitly rejected Aristotle’s conviction that the human being is a political animal. They took their bearings not from man’s capacity for public deliberation and cooperative action but rather from his fear of death and aversion to pain. As a consequence, they considered the Greeks’ set of preferences to be a travesty of common sense. No one stated this more clearly than Montesquieu. The Hellenes were guilty, he contended, of having “confounded the power of the people with the liberty of the people.” They established republics that were “not in their nature free states.” Had they understood political freedom in light of its true purpose, they would have recognized that it is not first and foremost a sharing in power but that it “consists in security, or at least in the opinion that one has of one’s security.” In Montesquieu’s view the Greeks placed far too much emphasis on public spiritedness and rendered the citizens of their polities insecure by subjecting them to the purview of their fellows. “Virtue itself has a need for limits,” he argued. True “political liberty is to be found only in moderate governments” that leave the citizens to themselves. Not Sparta but Great Britain and, ultimately, the United States of America—these were to be the models for the constitution of liberty in modern times.46

Although neither Mr. Dooley nor many of the other residents of Halsted Street would have had much use for a theory so abstract, they would certainly have been in agreement with the spirit of Montesquieu’s observations. The citizens of liberal republics are left pretty much to their own devices. They live in commercial and


45 When Socrates’ old comrade Euthenes equates working as another’s epítopos with slavery, he does so on the basis of an appeal to public opinion; Xenophon Memorabilia 2.8.1–6. For further discussion, see Claude Mossé, “Les Saliariés à Athènes au IVème siècle,” Dialogues d’histoire ancienne 3 (1976): 97–101. Throughout antiquity, personal service was equated with servitude; see Lucian De Mercede conductus potestium familiaribus 7–9, 23–25. Note Ulpian’s allusion to “those who occupy the place of slaves ( eos, quos loco servorum habemus)” and must therefore be counted as members of the household (familia); Digest 43.16.1.16–19. One consequence was that full citizens could rarely, if ever, be found to manage a rich man’s farm; Rhona Beare, “Were Bailiffs Ever Free Born?” Classical Quarterly, new ser., 28 (1978): 398–401; and Gert Audring, “Über den Gutsterrhalter (epítopos) in der attischen Landwirtschaft des 5. und des 4. Jh. v. u. Z.” Klio, 55 (1973): 109–16. Where a monarchy had supplanted a popular regime and a single household (res privata) had absorbed the political realm (res publica), painful adjustments had to be made by those who coveted power and fame; Lucian Apologia 11–12; and Tacitus Germania 25.3.

46 Montesquieu, L’Esprit des lois, bk. 11, chaps. 2–5, and bk. 12, chaps. 1–2.
technological societies that multiply the possibilities of private enjoyment. They possess freedom of speech, but the very size of the polities in which they reside generally robs that speech of consequence. As a result, the citizens develop a taste for domesticity. They are quick to resent any invasion of the broad realm of privacy that the regime guarantees them, and they often express the fear, even on the slightest of pretexts, that there will be a wholesale abrogation of their rights as individuals. So long as there are free elections, this fear may lack substance. But, as both Montesquieu and Tocqueville had occasion to note, it is the very anxiety of the citizens that promotes the vigilance which in turn obviates the danger. Even in time of war, the liberal democracies have shown remarkable respect for the privacy of the ordinary citizen.\(^{47}\)

The founders of the liberal tradition foresaw trouble, but not from this quarter. They worried instead that the citizenry would eventually lose all semblance of public vigilance. Adam Ferguson sounded the warning on the eve of the American Revolution. Perhaps because he was a Gaelic-speaker reared among the clans in the wild highlands of eighteenth-century Scotland, perhaps because he had passed nearly a decade in service as chaplain to the Black Watch, Ferguson was more acutely aware than his friends and colleagues David Hume and Adam Smith that the emergence of commercial society would inevitably be accompanied by a decline in the martial fervor that was the ultimate guarantor of political freedom. Ferguson feared “that remissness of spirit, that weakness of soul, that state of national debility, which is likely to end in political slavery.” “Every successive art, by which the individual is taught to improve on his fortune, is, in reality,” he observed, “an addition to his private engagements, and a new avocation of his mind from the public.”

If to any people it be the avowed object of policy, in all its internal refinements, to secure the person and property of the subject, without any regard to his political character, the constitution indeed may be free, but its members may likewise become unworthy of the freedom they possess, and unfit to preserve it. . . . If the pretensions to equal justice and freedom should terminate in rendering every class equally servile and mercenary, we make a nation of helots, and have no free citizens.\(^{48}\)

Benjamin Constant made the same point. “The danger is that we will be so absorbed in the enjoyment of our private independence and in the pursuit of our particular interests that we will renounce too easily our right of participation in


\(^{48}\) Ferguson, \textit{Essay on the History of Civil Society}, pt. 4, sect. 2, pt. 5, sect. 3, and pt. 6, sect. 4. The gap separating Ferguson's outlook from that of his friends is reflected in Hume's finding "almost everything" in the \textit{Essay on the History of Civil Society} so "exceptionable" that he was willing to "concur in any Method to prevent or retard the Publication." Regarding Ferguson's reflections, Hume confided in a letter to a mutual friend, "I do not think them fit to be given to the Public, neither on account of the Style nor the Reasoning; the Form nor the Matter." Hume to the Reverend Hugh Blair, February 11, 1766, in J. Y. T. Greig, ed., \textit{The Letters of David Hume}, 2 (Oxford, 1932): 12. The work's success surprised Hume and caused him to reconsider, but not to alter, his judgment; Hume to Blair, April 1, 1767, \textit{Ibid.}, 135. Apparently, Ferguson was too sympathetic to the rude and unpolished nations of ancient and not-so-ancient times to please a man of Hume's tastes. The latter reported with evident satisfaction the view of one reader that the style of the Highlander's essay (and, one must suspect,
political power.” 49 In modern times the household and the skein of economic and social relations to which it gives support threaten to eclipse the polity altogether.

This danger existed also for the Greeks, but it was not nearly as great. Throughout the classical period, they were in accord with the judgment rendered two millenia later by Giambattista Vico. After reading and rereading the powerful opening paragraphs of Tacitus’s *Histories* and *Annals*, this great Neapolitan philosopher and student of rhetoric paused to consider the politics of his own day and observed that, when “the majority of the citizens no longer concern themselves with the public welfare, . . . the citizens have become aliens in their own nations.” For those who observe everything from the perspective of the stomach, for human beings interested chiefly in what Thomas Hobbes once called “commodious living,” the establishment of great states on extended territories and the other circumstances that inhibit day-by-day participation in political affairs on the highest levels are matters of little concern. 50 But for men like Alcaeus, Polyneices, and Theognis, to live under such conditions would have been the most bitter of fates. For them, the fatherland was more than a place of repose; it was an all-encompassing and all-absorbing way of life.

How this could be the case remains difficult to see. In a nation that concedes primacy to the concerns generated by the marketplace, in a polity whose citizens are dedicated to the quest for “over-all security,” politics becomes “a field of work for punier heads.” Friedrich Nietzsche made this observation, and most of us today tend to agree. In liberal democracies, politicians—particularly on the local level—inspire little respect. There is something dreary, even sordid about much of the business done by governments. The awarding of contracts and the apportionment of jobs, the leasing of public lands and the purchase of equipment, the raising of taxes and the distribution of subsidies—these and similar mundane matters are the stuff and substance of contemporary political life. 51 Their predominance reflects the degree to which administration has supplanted deliberation as the chief function of public officials. It should not be surprising that men reared in such an environment have some trouble understanding the extraordinary appeal exercised in antiquity by political life.

In *The Suppliants*, Euripides gave us an inkling of what it was that aroused the Greeks’ ardor. There, he staged a debate over the relative merits of democracy and tyranny between Theseus, the leader of the “free city” of Athens, and the herald

---

49 Constant, “De la Liberté des anciens comparée à celle des modernes,” 558.
dispatched by Creon, the monarch of Thebes. In attacking one-man rule, Theseus sounds all the familiar themes: the citizens' need for equal protection under the law, the absence of safeguards in a monarchy, and the penchant of tyrants for the murder of the able and hot-blooded young, for the pillaging of those with property, and for the abduction and rape of young virgins. The tone of his discourse verges on the melodramatic, but there is nothing here that the judicious Montesquieu would not have endorsed. Nonetheless, when Theseus comes to speak of political freedom itself (τὸ ελεύθερον), he gives it a definition that goes well beyond the simple guarantee of the safety and well-being of the citizenry. "Being free is this," he argues: "Whoever wishes to bring useful advice before the public (ἐσ μέσον) may do so. In this way, whoever longs for eminence can shine (λαμπρὸς ἀνα) —while the man lacking this desire remains silent. What could be more equitable in a city than this?"

The Greek πόλις offered its citizens more than mere protection. It provided them, in addition, with a middle ground (τὸ μέσον) in which to display those qualities that distinguished them from animals.52 "Learn the political art well," Democritus advises his fellow Hellenes, "for it is the greatest of the arts; and pursue its tools—from which human beings secure greatness and brilliance (τὰ λαμπρά)."53

To be great and to be brilliant, to shine, to be λαμπρός: this was the desire that animated the Greek πόλις.54 Long before Euripides and Democritus voiced the sentiments of their contemporaries, and even longer before Aristotle fully articulated the meaning of citizenship, Homer depicted a luminous world in which men shared in the nature of the gods and sought to shed mortality. Plato called this poet "the education (παιδεύσις) of Hellas," and so he was: the spirit Homer propagated later gave content to a political freedom that he might himself have been unable to imagine. For the development of this understanding of freedom, the Greek conception of the divine opened up the way. Here Homer and his disciples made the decisive contribution. In one passage Herodotus reported that Homer and Hesiod were the poets responsible for giving the Greek gods their titles, their honors, their functions, and even their looks (εἶδος); in another he hinted that the paramount difference between the religion of the Greeks and that of their

52 Euripides Supplices 438–41; also see, more generally, ibid., 399–462. Euripides' choice of metaphor is not fortuitous. If the body is the ground of privacy, speech is the middle ground of publicity. See Theognis 495; Solon fr. 10.2 (West); Herodotus The Histories 1.206.3, 3.80.2, 3.83.1, 4.97.5, 6.129.2, 6.130.1, 7.88.2, 8.74.2; and Demosthenes 18.139. That is why τὸ μέσον came to be identified with the political community itself; compare Herodotus The Histories 3.142.3, 4.161.3, 7.164.1; with Archilochus fr. 91.30; and Theognis 678 (West). Also compare Homer Iliad 23.574; with Herodotus The Histories 3.83.3. Also note ibid., 4.118.2, 8.22.2, 8.73.3. Compare Homer's use of τὸ κομνῖν and its cognates: The Histories 1.67.5, 5.85.1, 5.109.3, 6.14.3, 8.135.2, 9.117, with 3.82.3–4, 3.84.2, with 3.156.2, 5.109.3, and with 6.50.2, 9.87.2. It is characteristic of Finley's Hobbesian reduction of ancient politics to the pursuit of "material benefits" that he managed to cite Theseus's reply to the herald and discuss at length the import of his speech while ignoring altogether what the Athenian leader has to say about eminence and the desire to be λαμπρός: Finley, Politics in the Ancient World, 136–39.

53 Democritus fr. 157 (Diels-Kranz 18).

54 To see what is implicit in the insistent Greek use of λαμπρός and its cognates, see Herodotus The Histories 1.30; and Thucydides Peloponnesian War 2.64. For the root meaning of the term, see Herodotus The Histories 2.96.3, 4.64.3, 4.75.3 (note ibid., 2.96.3); and Thucydides Peloponnesian War 7.44.2. Herodotus also used the term to refer to the glory attached to particular deeds; see The Histories 1.30.4, 1.174.1, 3.72.2, 6.15.1, 9.75. For lamprois as renown, see Herodotus The Histories 2.101. For the exception noted above, Thucydides used this family of terms with an eye to everlasting fame; compare Peloponnesian War 1.138.6, 3.59.2, 6.54.2, 7.55, 7.87.5, with 2.64.5, 4.62.2, 6.16.5, 6.31.6, 7.69.2, with 7.75.6, with 6.16.3, and with 1.49.7, 2.7.1, 7.71.5, 8.67.3, 8.75.2. Also note Aristotle Constitution of Athens 27.5.
barbarian opponents the Persians was the fundamentally human character (anthropopóphüeas) assigned Hellas’s divinities. When the Greeks bowed down, they bowed down before something to which they themselves could aspire. Dionysus and Heracles, though born of mortal women, had both crossed the boundary separating men from the gods.

The poet Pindar spoke for his compatriots when he restated Homer’s great theme:

There is one race of men, and one race of gods
Yet from a single mother, we both draw our breath.
A division of all power keeps them asunder.
The one is nothing—while, for the other,
Brazen heaven remains forever a safe seat.
We bear, this notwithstanding, a certain resemblance
To the immortals (athanatóis) either in our nature
Or in greatness of mind.
Yet we do not know
To what goal
Fate has written that we,
By day and by night,
Must run our great race.  

They too believed that a species of immortality lay within man’s reach, even if it was almost always beyond human grasp. For that reason, they adopted the Heracles of Hesiod’s Theogony and the Achilles of Homer’s Iliad over the wily Odysseus as the models for Greek manhood.

Resplendent in victory (kallínikós) and renowned for defending both men and the gods against evils (alexiakóns), Heracles was famous for his exploits and his labors. By freeing Prometheus from his bonds and by slaying dread monsters like Geryon, the Lernaean Hydra, the Nemean Lion, and the Gigantes, “the strong son of beautiful-ankled Alcmene” transcended the merely human, achieved apotheosis, and came to “live among the immortals as a being blessed (óbluos): freed for all time from pain and from age.” Because of these accomplishments, Heracles exercised an unparalleled sway over the Greek imagination. At least in the archaic period, he was more often celebrated in Greek poetry and art than any other figure. Throughout antiquity he was honored as a patron and chosen as a model not just by athletes but also by those whom the Greeks termed the ephebes, young men undergoing military training and a ritual initiation into the body of full citizens.

55 See Plato Republic 10.606c; and compare Herodotus The Histories 2.53, with ibid., 1.131. It can hardly be fortuitous that Pericles reportedly employed precisely the phrase that Plato later adopted. If Periclean Athens is to need no Homer, it is because the city itself is to be the education of Hellas. That Thucydides is in agreement with Plato regarding Homer is suggested by Thucydides’ remark that the first Hellenes were those who followed Achilles; compare Peloponnesian War 2.41.1–4, with ibid., 1.3.3.


57 Hesiod Theogony 950–55. Also see ibid., 289–94, 313–18, 326–32, 526–34. For a thorough survey of the evidence concerning the various ways in which poets, artists, and philosophers have treated Hesiod’s hero, see G. Karl Galinsky, The Herakles Theme (Oxford, 1972), 1–125. Also see Walter Burkert, Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1979), 78–98; and Susan Woodford, “Exemplum Virtutis: A Study of Heracles in Athens in the Second Half of the Fifth Century B.C.” (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1966). For the ephebes, see Athenaeus Deipnosophistae 11.494f; and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, “The
Homer’s hero played no less important a role in the citizen’s education. Taught from youth to be “a speaker of words and a doer of deeds,” Achilles tried “always to be the best (aristeuein) and to be superior to others.” He neither sought nor achieved godhead, but he was willing to embrace an untimely death in exchange for the promise of undying glory—and the men who came after would regard this defiance of necessity as the distinguishing feature of those who deserved to be free. “The best men,” Heraclitus wrote, “choose one thing above all others—everlasting fame among mortals.” “The many,” he continued, “are easily satisfied—like cattle.”

Heraclitus’s metaphor abides. But the contempt that the sixth-century Ephesian aristocrat had showered on the many the fifth-century Athenian democrat was to reserve for the barbarians. In The Persians, Aeschylus’s chorus compares the Great King Xerxes with a herdsman and his army with “a divine flock driven over the entire earth—both by foot and on the sea.” When Xerxes’ mother, Atossa, asks who is the “shepherd” of the Greeks and who “serves as master (epidespoei) over their army,” the chorus replies that the Hellenes “are said to be the slaves and subjects of no man.” The coming of democracy has evidently opened up to the many the very quest for everlasting glory that Heraclitus had made the preserve of the few. Thus, when Aeschylus spoke of what has been won with the defeat of the Mede, he mentioned not only freedom from the demeaning necessity to pay tribute to a master and to bow down to a man as if to a god; he added the political dimension as well. “No longer will the tongues of mortals be held under guard,” he wrote, “for the commoners (laos) are released and left free (eleuthera) to make speech.” Political liberty was nothing more and nothing less than the opportunity to do or say something of note.

Plato grasped this. He, too, believed that it was the yearning for renown that distinguished man from the animals. “The human race,” he wrote, “possesses by nature a certain share in immortality, and the desire for this belongs naturally to all—for the desire to become famous and not to lie nameless after death is the desire for just such a thing.” In The Symposium, Plato suggested that this longing can be satisfied in a variety of ways. Those who most resemble animals, he hints, will live solely through their offspring. But ambitious women and men like Alcestis, Achilles, and Codrus “are ready to run every risk, to spend their substance, to

---


58 Homer Iliad 6.208, 9.443; and Heraclitus fr. 29 (Diels-Kranz 19). In the story he tells Alcimus, Odysseus represents Achilles as having repudiated after death the heroic ethic by which he was guided in life. Achilles reportedly said that he would prefer the indignity of being a thete on earth—even a thete forced to serve a man so poor that he lacked an estate—to the privilege of being king over the dead. Homer Odyssey 11.488–91. Note, too, Aristotle’s juxtaposition of Heracles and the Dioscuri (heroes who achieved apotheosis) with Achilles and Ajax (heroes who did not); Hymn to Virtue, fr. 675 (Rose).

59 See Aristotle Nichomachean Ethics 1095b19–31; and Plato Republic 9.581c, 9.586a–b. Also consider, in this connection, the titles and the themes of Gustave Flaubert’s Madame Bovary and his Bouvard et Pécuchet. According to Toqueville, one consequence of the emergence of commercial society may be “to reduce each nation in the end to no more than a herd of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd”; Democracy in America, 2: pt. 4, chap. 6.

60 See Aeschylus Persians 73–76, 241–42, 584–97. Also note Thucydides Peloponnesian War 1.70, 2.34–46, 2.60–64; and Plato Laws 3.694e–695a. In this connection, one should consider Herodotus The Histories 5.78.
undergo every sort of labor, and even to die for the sake of achieving a deathless fame for all time.” Among the ambitious Plato included men of intelligence (phrónēsis) like the poets and those responsible for discoveries in the mechanical arts. But he reserved his most emphatic praise for the practitioners of the political art. As he put it, “By far the greatest and the most noble form of phrónēsis is that which deals with the ordering of cities and of households.”

To comprehend fully what Plato had in mind, one must recognize that the pólis was itself a memorial to those who had shaped it. If the classical political philosophers were in accord with their forefathers and contemporaries in supposing that politics is a pursuit endowed with great dignity, it is because they shared the popular belief that the conscious, purposive political action of the lawgiver (nomothetēs) can give form to a people. The Greeks understood well what Marx, Weber, and modern social scientists in general have forgotten: that the articulation of humanity into nations and political communities is of greater fundamental importance than its articulation into economic and social classes. They recognized that to make this assertion is to give primacy to politics and to deny the tyranny of circumstance. Although much may separate Plato from Aristotle, on this fundamental point they were agreed: to take politics seriously, one must be willing to suppose that the political regime (politeia), rather than economic or environmental conditions, determines the way of life of a people and that education in the broadest and most comprehensive sense (paidēia) is more important than anything else in deciding the character of the regime. Thus, when Plato provided examples of the supreme practitioners of the political art, he mentioned most prominently not the lawgivers Solon and Lycurgus but the epic poets Homer and Hesiod. The latter were the education of Hellas. They contributed more than anyone else to the ordering of its cities and households. By providing the Greeks with a common pantheon and with a shared understanding of what constitutes the good life, Homer and Hesiod formed the scattered communities of Greece into a single nation and defined the horizon within which the ancient legislators went about the

---

61 Plato Laws 4.721b–c, and Symposium 207a–209a. In the first passage, the emphasis is procreation, but the implications of Plato’s claim are more extensive. Also see Tyrtaeus fr. 12.31–32 (West); Theognis 245–46 (West); and Cicero Tusculum Disputations 1.45.109–46.111.

62 This conviction explains the prominence of paidēia as a theme in both The Republic and The Laws; see Plato Republic 2.376c–4.445a, 6.487b–497a, 7.518b–541b, 8.548a–b, 8.554a–b, 8.559b–c, 10.600a–608b, and Laws 1.641b–2.674c, 3.693d–701a, 4.722b–9.880c, 11.920a–12.962e. For the politeia as “the one way of life of a whole pólis,” see the scholia on Plato Laws 1.625b. Also note Aristotle Politics 1295a40. In one passage, Aristotle suggested that it is the provision of a common education (koinē paidēia)—and nothing else—that turns a multitude (plethnos) into a unit and constitutes it as a pólis. In another, he indicated that it is the regime (politeia) that defines the pólis as such. Ibid., 1263b36–37, 1276a8–b15. Though apparently contradictory, these two statements are in fact equivalent in the crucial respect: to decide who is to rule or what sorts of human beings are to share in rule is to decide what qualities are to be admired and honored in the city. That decision—more than any other—determines the paidēia, which constitutes “the one way of life of a whole pólis.” Compare ibid., 1273a39–b1, 1278b6–15, with ibid., 1295a40–b2, and see ibid., 1264a24–1266b38, 1277a12–b32, 1283a3–42, 1288a6–b4, 1289a10–25, 1292b11–21, 1297a14–b34, 1323a14–1342b34. Circumstance prevails only when the citizens have allowed it to determine their paidēia. Note the degree to which Polybius’s celebrated discussion of the Roman politeia is, in fact, a discussion of the Roman paidēia; Polybius The Histories 6.19–58. The same can be said for Xenophon’s account of the Persian politeia; Cyropaedia 1.2.15. See Xenophon Vercigal 1.1; Plato Republic 8.544d–e, and Laws 4.711c–712a; Isocrates 2.31, 3.37, 7.14; and Cicero Republic 1.31.47, 5.3.5–5.7 (note Laws 1.4.14–6.19, 3.1.2). Also see Strauss, Natural Right and History, 135–38. For Marx and Weber, see notes 7, 19, 32–33, above.

63 Plato Symposium 207a–e.
business of imposing order on the various póleis and their constituent parts. In the quest for the immortal, the ordinary lawgiver falls short of the epic poet. As an educator, the epic poet is destined to fall short of the philosopher alone. The ordinary citizen of the pólis might well have queried the claim that Plato and Aristotle made on behalf of the philosopher, but the rest he took for granted. Throughout Hellas, there was general accord: an existence eeked out on the periphery of things, outside the middle ground of the political arena, was a subhuman life and hardly worth living. As Aristotle put it, the city existed “for the sake of noble action”; its dignity as a moral community derived from its capacity to provide for men “the sharing of words and of deeds.” Only a handful of Greeks could seek to rival Homer and Solon, and no one supposed that every man could become an Achilles. But as a warrior band in republican form, the pólis offered the ordinary citizen a participation in greatness inconceivable under a monarchy, in a commercial society, or in a polity the size of a nation (éthnos). The existence of middle ground multiplied the opportunities to display eloquence in council and courage in battle. Because the city constituted an audience with the prospect of permanence, it provided the citizen with the hope of achieving through his contributions to its welfare at least a shadow of the eternal fame that Hesiod gave Heracles and Homer, Achilles. We should not follow those who exhort us, being human, to think human thoughts and, being mortal, to think mortal thoughts,” wrote Aristotle, “but, as far as is possible, we should make ourselves immortal (athanattizein) and do everything in life in accord with the most powerful thing in us.” It was this straining after immortality that distinguished a human life (bios), constituted by práxis and possibly worth recounting, from mere animal existence (zôê): the pólis made the maintenance of this distinction intelligible.

The fact that the political community was itself the repository of memory served

64 Compare Plato Symposium 210a–212a, with Republic 10.599b–608b. Theognis was the first to depict the ship of state; not surprisingly, he indicated that the poet himself rightly belongs at the helm; Theognis 667–82 (note ibid., 543–47) (West). The term ainôs—used by the poets to describe the stories, fables, and legends they recounted—denotes legislation as well. Consider Nietzsche, Also Sprach Zarathustra, part 1: “Vom neuen Götzten.”

65 Aristotle Politics 1280b38–1281a3, and Nichomachean Ethics 1126b11–14. The Spartan Tyrtaeus appears to have been the first to conceive of the pólis as an audience with the prospect of permanence; fr. 12 (West). Also see Werner Jaeger, “Tyrtaeus on True Arete,” in his Five Essays (Montreal, 1966), 102–42. The Athenians, and Pericles in particular, soon took up his idea; see Thucydides Peloponnesian War 2.34–46, esp. 2.41–44, and 2.60–64, esp. 2.64.3–6; and Aristophanes Birds 393–99. Also see Felix Jacoby, “Patrios Nomos,” in his Abhandlungen zur griechischen Geschichtsschreibung (Leiden, 1956), 260–315; Arnold W. Gomme, An Historical Commentary on Thucydidès, 2 (New York, 1956): 94–101; and Nicole Loraux, L’Invention d’Athènes: Histoire de l’oraison funèbre dans la cité classique (Paris, 1981). In the fourth century, Plato’s Athenian Stranger can even hint that the city existed for this precise purpose: “In approaching the end (télos) for the political regime (póleis) as a whole,” he remarks, “the lawgiver should see in what manner it is fitting that there be funerals for each of those who have died, and he should observe what honors he ought to allocate to them.” Plato Laws 1.632c. Also note ibid., 7.801e; and Herodotus The Histories 1.30. In keeping with this understanding, Cicero argued that a civitas should be ordered with an eye to its lasting forever: Republic 3.23.34. Also see Plato Laws 4.714a. At Rome, in a manner even more straightforward than in Greece, the family shared with the city the function of being the guarantor of commemoration; Polybius The Histories 6.53–55.

66 Aristotle Nichomachean Ethics 1117b31–34. Although Aristotle here defends the attempt to live the philosophical life, his point applies with equal force to the quest for eternal fame. See the texts to which he was responding: Pindar Isthmian Odes 5.13–16; Sophocles fr. 590 (Radt); and Antiphanes fr. 289 (Edmonds). Note Aristotle’s treatment of this theme in the Hymn to Virtue, which he wrote in memory of his friend Hermeias of Atarneus; fr. 675 (Rose). For the impulse behind marriage and procreation, see Plato Laws 4.721b–c.

67 Life is for action (práxis), not production (poïêsis); Aristotle Politics 1254a7.
to distinguish freedom of speech (lógos) from mere freedom of expression (phônê). The citizen aimed at glory, not at notoriety. He wanted to be famous forever and not merely to be a celebrity.68 For this reason, his speech was tempered and directed by a prudent concern with the common good. Thus, when Euripides’ Theseus comes to define tò eleútheron, he links the quest for eminence with the provision of useful advice (tà chrêstā). In similar circumstances, a Sophoclean character does the same. “Where one is not allowed freely (eleuthérōs) to give voice to tà chrêstā,” he observes, “worse advice (tà cheirona) will triumph in the city and the men will trip up its safety with their blunders.” Prudence is the standard for political speech. The pólis of Phocylides’ poem is “superior to senseless Nineveh” precisely because the opportunity for public deliberation allows its affairs to be conducted “in an orderly manner (kosmiōs).”69

The subordination of the quest for immortality to the needs of the political community is perhaps most strikingly evident in the one field of endeavor that modern thought links most closely with an untrammeled freedom of expression. Euripides may have been at odds with Aeschylus over a good many things, but, if Aristophanes is to be trusted, the two were in agreement on the standard by which poetry should be judged. In The Frogs, when Aeschylus asks why the poet deserves to be an object of wonder, Euripides makes no mention of aesthetic imperatives. Instead, he suggests that the poets should be admired “for cleverness and for advice—and because we make the human beings in the cities better.”70 From Aristophanes’ Aeschylus this reply elicits no objection—and rightly so. For there is no greater indication of the primacy accorded politics and war by the city’s provision of middle ground than the example set by the poet himself: on the epitaph he wrote for his monument Aeschylus made no mention of his tragedies. These were, he elsewhere claimed, mere “slices from the banquet of Homer.” When the time of reckoning came, this great tragedian simply recorded that he had been among those who had fought on Athens’s behalf with the Mede in the battle on Marathon’s plain.71

Despite the general accord that reigned throughout Greece, there were men who rejected the primacy of politics and war. In the Funeral Oration, Pericles inveighs against those with a penchant for avoiding political action (aprágmônes), and in The Suppliants, Euripides’ Theseus hints at the presence in Athens of men of this sort when he remarks that in a free city a man lacking the desire for eminence can choose to remain silent.72

68 The love of honor points beyond itself to the desire to be virtuous—and perhaps beyond virtue, as commonly understood, altogether; Aristotle Nichomachean Ethics 1095b19–31.
69 Sophocles fr. 201b (Radt); and Phocylides fr. 4 (Diehl). For the Sophoclean passage, I have adopted the emendation suggested by Reisig.
70 Aristophanes Frogs 1008–10. Also see ibid., 1030–36. The two quarrel not over the duty of the poet but rather over what constitutes improving the citizens; ibid., 885–1465.
71 Athenaeus Deipnosophistae 8.347α, 14.627c–d. Also see Vita Aeschyli 120 (Westerman); and Plutarch Moralia 604f.
72 Thucydides Peloponnesian War 2.40.2; and Euripides Supplices 438–41. Also see Thucydides Peloponnesian War 2.63.2–3, 2.64.4, 6.18.6–7; and Xenophon Symposium 4.35. As the etymology suggests, the aprágmôn is
The sophist Lycophron appears to have been such a man, and Aristippus, another. If Aristotle and Xenophon can be trusted, neither had much use for the middle ground provided by the public arena. Yet to the best of our knowledge no Greek thinker, not even these, ever elaborated a public-spirited political philosophy grounded in liberal principles. Lycophron did treat the polis as little more than “a military alliance (summachia),” and he reportedly argued that the law was merely “a covenant . . . a pledge to respect each other’s rightful claims” and not an instrument “able to make the citizens good and just.” This denial that the polis is a moral community certainly foreshadows the social-contract theories developed by Hobbes and his successors. But something is missing: Lycophron’s account is wholly descriptive, never prescriptive.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, those who embraced the notion of the social contract did so in order to advocate what the designers of the Great Seal of the United States called “a new order of the ages.” Among these was Britain’s Thomas Pownall, once the royal governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In 1783 Pownall chose to indicate his support for the American Revolution—in a fashion that underlined the radical character of the Founding Fathers’ break with the past. He indicated his support by attacking what he termed “the grand Desideratum of all the ancient Legislators and Institutors of Republics.” As he put it, the great statesmen of ancient times saw the necessity that there was of an exact conformity between the Constitution of the State and the Species of Individuals, the form of the community and [the] nature of the basis on which such [a] State must be founded. No such Basis was there in Nature; they therefore tried a thousand different projects to form such in Art. They forced Nature. Not finding the natural situation of men to be what it was necessary to the System of their Polity it should be, they endeavoured to make it what it never could be, but under force and violence done to nature. They destroyed or perverted all Personal Liberty, in order to force into establishment Political Freedom. While Men were taught by Pride, and by a prospect of Domination over others, to call the State Free, they found themselves cut off from, and from the use of, many of the essential inalienable rights of the Individual which form his happiness as well as freedom.

someone who avoids práxis. For a view opposed to my own, see Donald Lateiner, “The Man Who Does Not Meddle in Politics: A Topos in Lysias,” Classical World, 76 (1982–83): 1–12. The suffering caused by the Peloponnesian War aggravated the tension between rich and poor Athenians, and the emergence of demagogues like Cleon and Cleophon embittered Athenian politics. As a consequence, many of the rich withdrew in disgust from the political arena in the late fifth century while others sought to overthrow the democracy. By the early fourth century (if not before), the wealthy were generally regarded as suspect by supporters of the democratic regime—and a rich man, when hailed into court on one charge or another, often found it expedient to stress that he paid his taxes and performed the liturgies imposed on him but avoided political activity altogether. I doubt very much whether the evidence Lateiner collected really justifies the view that Athenians in general came to regard politics as unsavory. Just as oligarchies denied active citizenship to the poor, so also an extreme democracy might reward the well-to-do for political quiescence. If apropagmodation was thought a virtue, it was the virtue not of the rulers but of the ruled.


74 Pownall, A Memorial Addressed to the Sovereigns of America (London, 1783), 67–68.
Pownall’s critique of the ancient city deserves notice because there is nothing comparable to be found in Lycophron or in any other ancient writer. In antiquity no one ever asserted “the inalienable rights of the Individual.” No one ever claimed that the attempt to establish a moral community on the political plane leads to the destruction or perversion of “all Personal Liberty.” The ethical perspective adopted by admirers of the American experiment and asserted by liberal political theory in general is absent from the ancient argument altogether.

What is true for Lycophron and the other ancient writers is equally true for Aristippus. There is, in fact, no evidence that Aristippus was interested in political problems at all. Yet he was a devotee of personal liberty. He reportedly argued that lying between the alternatives of slavery and rule was a middle path of freedom (eleuthería)—of freedom from the agony of servitude and from the burdens of political participation as well. “Not for a moment do I place myself in the ranks of those wishing to rule,” Aristippus remarked,

For, in light of the great effort required to provide for oneself, it seems to me to be the height of folly not to be satisfied with this, but to take on as well the additional burden of making provision for the needs of the other citizens. How would it not be great folly for a man to give up many of the things that he wants and to incur, as head (proslátēs) of the city, the danger of trial if he fails to accomplish all that the city wishes? The cities think it proper to make use of their rulers just as I make use of my household slaves. For I think it proper for my servants to equip me in abundance with those things I need, but not themselves to lay hands on anything; and the cities think it necessary for their rulers to provide them with as many good things as possible and to abstain themselves from their enjoyment. Should there be those wishing to make trouble for themselves and for others, I would educate them and class them with those fitted to rule. But I would rank myself with those wishing to live as easily and as pleasantly as possible.

Socrates finds this argument unsatisfactory. It would be fine, he retorts, if one encountered no human beings on the path intermediate between slavery and rule. The strong, he warns, have a way of enslaving those who abstain from political life. For Aristippus, however, the danger of enslavement is not a serious problem. “To avoid it,” he explains, “I do not lock myself up in my own city, but am a stranger (xénos) everywhere.” When Socrates responds that the xénos is in all cities an easy mark with little chance of defending himself, Aristippus shifts his ground, tacitly acknowledging that the middle path of personal liberty is an illusion. He is apparently unaware that the polity itself can be refashioned to provide for the needs of those “wishing to live as easily and as pleasantly as possible.” Many centuries would pass before the invention of “a new science of politics” aimed solely at the protection of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.75

The subsequent exchange between Socrates and Aristippus is even more revealing than the first. Defeated on his own ground, Aristippus attacks Socrates on his. Having been forced to concede that the path of personal freedom eventually merges with that of slavery, he argues that the distinction traditionally drawn

---

75 Xenophon Memorabilia 2.1.1–34. Aristippus was not unique; also see Aristotle Politics 1324a5–1325b32, and Nicomachean Ethics 1179a13–16; Diogenes Laertius 2.6–7, 8.63; Plato Hippius Major 283a; and Plutarch Pericles 16.7–9. For “the new science of politics,” see Tocqueville, Démocratie en Amérique, 1: “Introduction”; and Hamilton, The Federalist, no. 9. Note that for Madison, “the first object of Government” is “the protection” of the “different and unequal faculties of acquiring property”; The Federalist, no. 10.
between the path of slavery and that of rule cannot intelligibly be maintained. Here again, the standard he adopts is that of pleasure or, rather, the avoidance of pain. When Socrates has gone through all the evils associated with being a slave, Aristippus responds,

But Socrates! What about those educated in that royal art which you seem to equate with human flourishing (eudaimonia)? If they are to go hungry, to be thirsty, to endure cold, to pass sleepless nights, and voluntarily to undergo every other hardship, how does their condition differ in reality from that of men whose sufferings are forced on them? I cannot understand what difference it makes whether the victim is willing or unwilling if the same back gets flogged and the same body is besieged by all these torments—except, of course, that folly is attributable to anyone who freely chooses to endure pain.

To answer this charge, Socrates must establish that the life devoted to politics offers greater satisfaction than that devoted to pleasure. He begins by noting two advantages that the man who toils voluntarily has over the slave. Such a man can choose when and under what circumstances to cease, and, like the hunter in search of game, he works with pleasure in anticipation of reward. The slaughter of game may not be worth the effort, but other prizes are: “Consider those who labor in order that they might possess good friends, master their enemies, or gain the physical and spiritual capacity to manage their own households well, to help their friends, and to become benefactors of the fatherland. How would they not take pleasure in toil for all this—and live lives full of joy, looking on themselves with admiration and being praised and envied by others!” The man who avoids participation in public life and sidesteps the burdens of politics and war has no opportunity to exercise the faculties that give him dignity and a sense of his own worth. As a consequence, even the mundane pleasures of life lose their attraction.\textsuperscript{76}

Socrates illustrates this last point by retelling the parable in which the sophist Prodicus stages a debate between Virtue (Arete) and Vice (Kakia). When Heracles was still a young man on the verge of beginning his labors and had not yet become a god, Virtue and Vice presented the model for ephebes with a choice. Kakia offered him “a short and easy road to happiness (eudaimonia).” To her blandishments, Arete responded,

Wretch! What do you possess that is any good? What can you know of real pleasure—when you have no wish to do any work for pleasure’s sake? You do not even wait for the desire for pleasant things to come on; you fill yourself full of everything before you even feel the need. Before feeling hunger, you eat; before feeling thirst, you drink. In order that you may take pleasure in dining, you contrive the presence of chefs; in order that you may take pleasure in drinking, you equip yourself with expensive wines and rush about in search of snow in summer; and in order that you may take pleasure in falling asleep, you provide yourself not only with soft bedding, but with a frame for your couch as well. You desire sleep—not because you have labored, but because you have nothing to do; and you force sex before it is needed, contriving everything and using men in place of women. So, you train up your friends, behaving arrogantly at night and sleeping through the most useful hours of the day. . . . You never hear praise, the most pleasant of all things to hear; and you never see the most pleasant of all things to see: for nothing is more pleasant to see than one’s own noble work.

\textsuperscript{76} Xenophon Memorabilia 2.1.1–34.
Socrates’ point is much the same as before, but he manages here to draw attention
to the emptiness and the self-contradictory nature of a life devoted to material
comfort and pleasure. The short and easy road to eudaimonia does not lead there at
all. It leads instead to an existence fraught with boredom and marked by an almost
desperate search for diversion.\textsuperscript{77}

In pondering the emerging bourgeois regime of eighteenth-century Britain,
Montesquieu noticed a similar phenomenon. In England, he observed, “all the
passions are left free.” “Each individual, always independent, follows his caprices
and his fantasies.” The majority care little what anyone else thinks; for that reason,
they tend to “abandon themselves to their own humours.” Unfortunately, this
freedom, although it is as complete as anyone could ask, brings them little
satisfaction. In bourgeois society the people have a “restless spirit.” The men try to
lose themselves in debauchery, and “the majority of those blessed with wit and
intelligence (esprit) are tormented by that very esprit: in the disdain and disgust they
feel for all things, they are unhappy in the midst of so many occasions for felicity.”
This observation is striking and strange, and it would be easy to dismiss it as yet
another French discovery of la maladie Anglaise—were it not for the remarks made
some years later by a student of commercial society no less acute.\textsuperscript{78}

Nearly a century after the publication of Montesquieu’s L’Esprit des lois, Tocque-
ville paid a visit to a new nation even more thoroughly bourgeois than eighteenth-
century Great Britain. On this occasion Tocqueville took note of “that peculiar
melancholy which the inhabitants of democratic countries often exhibit in the
bosom of abundance, and the disgust with life which sometimes seizes them in the
midst of an easy and tranquil existence.” In America, he wrote, “I saw the freest and
most enlightened men placed in the happiest condition that there is in the world; it
seemed to me as if a kind of cloud habitually covered every visage, and I thought
them grave and almost sad, even in their pleasures.” Tocqueville did not find the
Americans prone to debauchery; indeed, he feared “much less for democratic
societies from the audacity than from the mediocrity of desires.” Equality tended to
foster in the United States “a kind of decent materialism” aimed at wealth and
comfort, but not at magnificence. The danger was not that this would corrupt but
that it would “soften the soul and noiselessly unbend its springs of action.”\textsuperscript{79}

Montesquieu nowhere identified the source of the peculiar unhappiness that
afflicted English men of esprit, but for the Americans Tocqueville made the attempt.
He attributed their “secret disquietude” and the danger they ran of becoming
dispirited to the same two causes: to “their taste for material enjoyments” and to the
“universal competition” that democratic society opens up. The first sends demo-
cratic man on a bootless chase in “the single-minded pursuit of the goods of this
world,” and the fact that “he has but a limited time at his disposal to find, to lay hold
of, and to enjoy them . . . fills him with care, with fears and regrets, and maintains
his soul in a kind of ceaseless trepidation.” The second of the two causes only

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{78} Montesquieu, L’Esprit des lois, bk. 19, chap. 27.
\textsuperscript{79} Tocqueville, Démocratie en Amérique, 2: bk. 2, chaps. 11, 13.; bk. 3, chap. 19. Also see ibid., bk. 3, chaps. 13, 17–18, 21.
aggravates his frustration:

When all the prerogatives of birth and of fortune are eliminated, when the professions are open to all, and a man may reach by his own efforts the summit of each, an easy and unbounded career seems to open itself up to the ambition of men, and they readily suppose that they are called to destinies grand. But this is an erroneous view which experience corrects all the days of their lives. The very equality that permits every citizen to conceive vast hopes renders all the citizens, as individuals, weak; it circumscribes their powers on every side at the same time that it permits their desires to increase. . . . When men are almost alike and all follow the same route, it is quite difficult for any one from among them to walk swiftly and cut through the undifferentiated mob (la foule uniforme) that surrounds and presses in on him. The constant opposition between the inclinations to which equality gives birth and the means which it furnishes for their satisfaction torments and wearies the soul.80

For this problem, Tocqueville provided no completely satisfactory solution. He was acutely aware that, for all but a handful of men, the very size of the extended republics of modern times rules out the provision of middle ground adequate as a defined space accessible for the display of the human capacity for rational deliberation and cooperative action. He knew as well that the commercial orientation of these regimes inevitably denied that handful of politically active men the public attention they craved. In pondering ways to prevent the soul's enervation under these conditions, Tocqueville drew attention to the few opportunities that remained for the ordinary citizen to participate in the political process. In the United States, he discovered, local government was vigorous, and the citizens were free to form public associations for almost any purpose. As a consequence, where local government impinged on the interests of individuals, they were willing and able to band together to resist encroachments and to force reform. By the expedient of “self-interest rightly understood,” ordinary men were drawn out of their shells and into a public arena still existent, though diminished in dignity. The citizens’ concern with their own long-term interests might just infect them with a passion for public affairs less robust than the longing for glory that had animated the Greeks, but invigorating nonetheless.81

The observations of Montesquieu and Tocqueville deserve heed largely because they accord so well with the remarks of Xenophon's Socrates. Ordinary human beings born into fully bourgeois societies may not be prone to the vanity and taste for magnificence that hurl those of aristocratic temper into ever greater refinements of pleasure. But, particularly when blessed with affluence, ordinary citizens tend to wander aimlessly, lacking all purpose and afflicted with a weariness of the world. Where men are “accustomed to consider personal fortune as the sole object of care,” Adam Ferguson observed,

they, who, in the vulgar phrase, have not their fortunes to make, are supposed to be at a loss for occupation, and betake themselves to solitary pastimes, or cultivate what they are pleased to call a taste for gardening, building, drawing, or music. With this aid, they endeavour to fill up the blanks of a listless life, and avoid the necessity of curing their languors by any positive service to their country, or to mankind.82

80 Ibid., bk. 2, chap. 13.
81 Ibid., pt. 2, chaps. 1–17.
The way of life advocated by Xenophon’s Socrates is by no means above reproach, particularly in a world made safe for the likes of Aristippus. But for all save the women, the slaves, the metics, and the very poor, the Greek πόλις did have one great advantage. It may not have eased the provision for mere life and for “animal enjoyment,” but it did give men of esprit something to live for by opening up a middle ground on which they could develop and display their capacities for courage, for wisdom, and for eloquence. “Happiness,” Adam Ferguson argued, is not that state of repose, or that imaginary freedom from care, which at a distance is so frequent an object of desire, but with its approach brings a tedium, or a languor, more unsupportable than pain itself. . . . It arises more from the pursuit, than the attainment of any end whatever; and in every new situation to which we arrive, even in the course of a prosperous life, it depends more on the degree to which our minds are properly employed, than it does on the circumstances in which we are destined to act, on the materials which are placed in our hands, or the tools with which we are furnished.83

If in echoing Aristotle Ferguson is right, his remarks go a long way toward explaining the strangest omission from the ancient Greek language: the lack of a specific term for what Finley Peter Dunne’s Mr. Dooley would have called boredom.

83 Ibid.