

AUTARKEIA AND ARISTOTLE'S POLITICS:  
THE QUESTION OF THE ANCIENT SOCIAL FORMATION

by

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I hereby certify that the work embodied in  
this thesis is the result of original  
research and has not been submitted for a  
higher degree to any other institution.

(Signed).....

*Neil Math*

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Sonnet LIX

If there be nothing new, but that which is  
Hath been before, how are our brains beguiled,  
Which, labouring for invention, bear amiss  
The second burthen of a former child!  
O, that record could with a backward look,  
Even of five hundred courses of the sun,  
Show me your image in some antique book,  
Since mind at first in character was done.  
That I might see what the old world could say  
To this composed wonder of your frame;  
Whether we are mended, or whether better they,  
Or whether revolution be the same.  
O, sure I am, the wits of former days  
To subjects worse have given admiring praise.

William Shakespeare

## INTRODUCTION

Every historical book worthy of the name ought to include a chapter, or if one prefers, a series of paragraphs inserted at turning points in the development, which might almost be entitled: "How can I know what I am about to say?" I am persuaded that even the lay reader would experience an actual intellectual pleasure in examining these "confessions".

Marc Bloch, The Historian's Craft, p.71

Aristotle was a pre-eminent cartographer of Greek culture and ideology. One way in which we can arrive at an appreciation of Aristotle's careful examination of the workings of a polis world, is to explore both Aristotle's conceptual universe and elements of his cultural world upon which he drew for comparative and illustrative purposes. Additionally, we shall reach across Greek historical experience for further comparative evidence which helped characterise the physical, intellectual and symbolic universe in which Greeks lived, thought and died. Aristotle cannot be comprehended in isolation. The environments in which Hesiod, Herodotos and Thucydides wrote, whilst clearly preceding Aristotle's, shared with Aristotle's world thematic elements which revealed the workings of a broad, if turbulent, historical continuity. To this extent, particular aspects of, events or encounters in Greek, Athenian and Spartan historical and cultural experience, at home and abroad, will serve, in terms of time, place and space, as concrete experiential and referential points in this history of a polis paradigm. Similarly, the later world of Dio of Prusa can contribute equally to an unravelling of the elements of this continuity.

What were these thematic elements? First, there was the agrarian household orbit of social relations within a polis. Here, citizen men, women and their households at once defined and outlined the working patterns, the social relations and symbolic forms of their human habitat. The oikos and its popular agrarian lore, along with Aristotle's formal analysis of generic household practice and its paradigmatic form, was a potent gathering ground for practical, theoretical and symbolic forms of household life within polis experience. Second, there were the unavoidably material and ideological presences and symbolic

representations of the world of slavery. Slaves did not quantitatively dominate the polis world. This statement should not be taken as, in any way, excluding the diverse and particular experiences of any single polis during the course of Greek history. The relations, the class relations of slave master and owner to slave, that is, the master-slave relationship, formed one hemisphere of polis activity. The other hemisphere that revealed itself as apart from the immediate world of master-slave but not outside or removed from its cultural and ideological presence, was concentrated around the gamut of socio-political and military relations between poleis which were often portrayed by the ideological language of 'free' and 'slave'. The qualitative experiences of slavery formed essential reference points for Greek culture's historical experiences and forms.

I recapitulate the argument concerned with slaves' importance to a polis world. Slaves need not outnumber the free members of a polis for them to have exerted a critical role in the material renewal of a polis. Their roles were concerned directly with exploitative social relations whose aims were the extraction of a surplus. These social relations were an integral part of the agrarian (dry farming, local market trading, fishing, small scale husbandry, craft production and direct household service) polis world. The presence of slavery went well beyond these elemental, fundamental roles and assumed, as well as signalled, ideological values and symbolic forms. Slavery's manifest presence, and this is not solely or simply a moral point, percolated throughout polis thought and action. In an otherwise admirable article, "Freedom, Slavery and the Female Psyche", Just makes the following observation:

But Aristotle was still a philosopher, and by distinguishing two types of slavery, that deriving from nature and that caused by society, he was most probably engaged in a form of analytical nicety not practised by the majority of his contemporaries.<sup>1\*</sup>

Yet, what matters is not whether or not Aristotle's contemporaries were practiced in such "analytical nicety"; rather slavery's pervasive presence in Aristotle's world was (and remains) central.

\* Notes to Introduction on p.vi.

In order to reconstruct the meanings and the layering of meaning, particularly contained within Aristotle's language, and to account for its politically centred yet moral process of presentation, one must present a fresh outline of Aristotle's reasoning which will focus particularly upon Politics, Books I and II, and Nicomachean Ethics 1129a-1134a. By a fresh outline, we must appreciate that what is intended is an uncovering of Aristotle's extension of taxonomic reasoning processes to the central anthropocentric focus of his studies - citizens and poleis. Here, we are presented with a particular junction of history and culture, and to understand their intertwined workings one must approach ideas as cultural artifacts. For such an approach to be both useful and successful, one needs a comparative evidentiary eye to locate and examine cultural values within an intensive ideas-in-history perspective which, while focussed upon Aristotle's paradigmatic polis, has extensive historical links with 'archaic', 'classical' and later Greek polis cultural ideals and perspectives.

To realise such a goal, one needs an historical sketch of ancient social theory<sup>2</sup> and its relationship to an autarkic polis form. Such a sketch requires an historian to carry out research on Greek concepts which directly and indirectly (purposefully, culturally and incidentally) examined or cast light upon those ideals and practices which constituted a polis habitat. In turn, these concepts served as foci for reflections upon a model polis formation or stood, by virtue of historical practice and events, as stark reminders that contradictory practical, moral and theoretical forces confronted Greek (particularly Aristotle's most clearly elaborated model of autarkeia) autarkic paradigms. The antithetical 'worlds' of khrēmatistikē represented this conflict of theory and practice, this clash of ideas, ideals and actions.

If one intends to provide a clearer, more comprehensive historical account of Aristotle's model of khrēmatistikē, and its antithesis, an exploration of Aristotle's reasoning must include an investigation of the workings of his cultural universe. To help achieve this, one must also, in the words of C. Wright Mills:

Make any trans-historical constructions you think your work requires; also delve into sub-historical minutiae. Make up quite formal theory and build models as well as you can. Examine in detail little facts and their relations, and big unique events as well.<sup>3</sup>

Whilst such an approach may appear adventurous it is not. Rather, an inquiry based upon such a model is a painstaking venture. It recognises the primacy of particular historical experiences and does not assume or presume an automatic cultural affinity or a ready comprehension of a peculiar world's history.

An historical inquiry such as the present work has only been possible within the supporting framework of a social-science methodology. The tools for a complex comparative inquiry into the reasoning processes behind Aristotle's moral universe are not located exclusively within the historian's preserve. A comparative historical methodology has the advantage of being able to stretch itself across time to examine the cultural and historical world within which Aristotle thought and wrote. This methodology can take Greek writers separated by historical time rather than culture and draw their disparate (in the sense of unequal) observations and reflections into a fresh perspective. By deploying such an approach, Aristotle's Politics, Books I and II, and Nicomachean Ethics 1129a-1134a, can be opened to a more meaningful historical appreciation. These works will serve as the primary focus of this investigation and additionally, for the purposes of this inquiry, as a representative sample of Aristotle's comprehension of a polis universe.

Aristotle's formidable intellectual prowess can be traced in his ability not only to construct theories (not always completed or satisfactory) around the general and immediate world of polis experience but also to delve into, reveal and theorize upon the "minutiae" of that particular historical formation. Aristotle grasped with equal vigour the broader socio-cultural environment in which Greek poleis lived and worked. First, he recognised the alternating presences of war and peace.<sup>4</sup> For a



polis this was a given reality. Second, Aristotle recognised that agrarian practices formed the dominant and predominant experiential world of humanity.<sup>5</sup> It is not at all unreasonable to argue that Aristotle's preceding arguments were relative statements based upon his apprehension of Mediterranean, and particularly, poleis' historical experiences. From such a general intellectual vantage point Aristotle went on to apprehend his immediate world through the course of its household, social and exchange relations.

Yet, as we examine a polis world, principally, though far from exclusively, through Aristotle's eyes, and seek to reveal a little further its preferential cultural boundaries and forms (its self interpretations and understandings) we must appreciate after Rostovtzeff that:

The cities have told us their story, the country always remained silent and reserved. What we know of the country we know mostly through the men of the cities,...The voice of the country population itself is rarely heard. After Hesiod wrote his poem, the country remained silent for many centuries, breaking the silence from time to time with complaints about the hardships of its life...<sup>6</sup>

Notions of country and country experiences remained shadowy presences in written literary, philosophical and historical material. Yet, if their fleeting presences can be detected, they must be grasped and examined as discrete experiences which can add intellectual integrity and peculiar insights to our perceptions of the social relations and cultural values which formed the subject and object of Aristotle's paradigmatic exploration of a polis formation.

Aristotle's 'world' was not the 'classical' world or 'epoch', it was a Greek world defined within its own self perceptions of geographical space, historical time, philosophical understanding and cultural form. One world's, 'our world's', characterisation of another world's characteristic human form or forms is only valuable to the extent that any historical sketch contributes to a further, fuller or deeper understanding of that world. Aristotle's 'world' invites inquiry.

NOTES: INTRODUCTION

1. Roger Just, "Freedom, Slavery and the Female Psyche", Crux: Essays Presented to G.E.M. de Ste. Croix on his 75th Birthday, History of Political Thought, vol.VI, Issues 1-2 (1985), p.176 and generally pp.169-188.
2. Raymond Firth, "The Sceptical Anthropologist? Social Anthropology and Marxist Views on Society", Inaugural Radcliffe-Brown Lecture in Social Anthropology, Proceedings of the British Academy, vol.LVIII (1972), pp.3-39 carefully surveys the roles a theory, sketch or model of society can play in formulating a dynamic view of human society and its anthropological and historical processes, particularly see pp.11-21ff. Also note, for a revealing approach and a sure grasp of theory's roles in history and its cross disciplinary 'nature' E.P. Thompson, Folklore, Anthropology and Social History, A Studies in Labour History pamphlet, (1979), first appeared in the Indian Historical Review, vol.III, no.2 (January 1978), pp.247-266 and Keith Thomas, "History and Anthropology", Past and Present, no.24 (1963), pp.3-24.
3. C. Wright Mills, The Sociological Imagination (Great Britain, 1970; 1st pub., O.U.P., 1959), p.246. In addition, see the broad-ranging, yet succinct and clear, observations in "Uses of History", pp.159-182 and "On Intellectual Craftsmanship", pp.215-248.
4. Arist. Pol., 1254b30-32.
5. Arist. Pol., 1256a38-40.
6. M. Rostovtzeff, The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire, vol.I, revised by P.M. Fraser (O.U.P., 2nd edition, 1957; 1st pub., 1926), p.192. For an overview of Rostovtzeff's place in an historiography of modern and contemporary writers on Greco-Roman antiquity see Meyer Reinhold, "Historian of the Classical World: A Critique of Rostovtzeff", Science and Society, vol.X, no.4 (1946), pp.361-391.