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Aristotle's Politics and Slavery in Ancient Athens

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Thea Klucznik

Ms. Keldorf

Western Civ

6 November 2017

EQ: What does Aristotle's *Politics* reveal most significantly about the institution of slavery in Ancient Athens?

Aristotle's *Politics* and Slavery in Ancient Athens

Praxagora: I want all to have a share of everything and all property to be in common; there will no longer be either rich or poor; no longer shall we see one man harvesting vast tracts of land, while another has not ground enough to be buried in, nor one man surround himself with a whole army of slaves, while another has not a single attendant; I intend that there shall only be one and the same condition of life for all. (Aristophanes)

This proposal, offered in Aristophanes' play, *Ecclesiazusae*, outlines a bucolic, almost socialist, utopia. The feasibility of such a system is quickly brought into question, however:

Blepyrus: It would be awful. But who will till the soil?

Praxagora: The slaves.

This exchange demonstrates quite succinctly the prevalence of slavery in Ancient Athens. It also shows that at least some of the playwrights and philosophers of the time were thinking critically about the institution itself. One of Aristophanes' compatriots in this subject matter is Aristotle, who concerned himself often with the concept of slavery. Perhaps his most well-known deliberation on the subject is contained within *Politics*, where he explains his theory of

natural slavery. While he makes a distinction between a legal slave and a natural slave, the discussion of natural slavery offered in Aristotle's *Politics* reflects most accurately the justification of the institution of slavery and the lack of social mobility afforded to those who were once slaves.

In Athenian democracy, there were strict limitations on citizenship. Among those disenfranchised were enslaved persons, former enslaved persons, people of foreign descent, foreigners, youth, and women (Osbourne 32). Foreigners living in Athens, for example, were known as *metics*, and had no paths to citizenship nor could their children become citizens, regardless of the status of the other parent (Ashley 9). By excluding both foreigners and freedmen (former slaves) from deliberations of the people's assembly, they were effectively excluded from political life (Garlen 80).

The citizen body of Athens (or *demos*) met in the Assembly (or *ekklesia*) (Hansen 125). Adult male citizens that were of age (eighteen or older), were allowed to attend the Assembly, while adult male citizens thirty and older were eligible for selection to the positions of magistrate (*arche*), legislator (*nomothetes*), and juror (*dikastes*). Legislators and jurors were selected by lot from a panel of 6000 citizens over thirty and served for a single day. Legislators passed laws, while jurors served on the People's court (Hansen 97).

Slavery in particular was widespread in Athens. This is demonstrated by the numerous words Athenians used to refer to slaves. In addition to the literal *doulos*, slaves were also referred to as *oiketes* ('household slave'), *pais* ('boy'), *therapon* ('servant'), and *andrapodon* ('manfoot') (Hansen 120). Slaves in Athens likely outnumbered adult male citizens (Sansone 101). Research has shown that Athenians of the hoplite class and above would regularly own

slaves (Osbourne 89). It was considered “a mark of penury if a man could not afford to own a single slave” (Brunt 344). The ownership of slaves has also been tied to participation in political life, as Athenian citizens that had enough time to appear in courts generally owned at least one slave (Osbourne 87). This connection highlights that slavery enabled Athenian citizens to have the free time to participate in public life (Osbourne 33).

As for the role slavery played in Athens, according to Robin Osbourne, a professor of Ancient History at the University of Cambridge:

It was not democracy as such which slavery enabled in Athens, but a particular conception of the citizen body as made up of an essentially homogeneous body of men, none of whom were subject to constraints imposed by other individuals. (Osbourne 101)

One way this was achieved was by not allowing slaves to testify in court, which enforced the inequality between slaves and members of the citizen body (Osbourne 239).

The traits that Aristotle prescribes to the natural slave are inherent and inheritable characteristics, and the laws regarding the children of slaves follow directly out of his claims. Specifically, Aristotle describe the natural slave as a being that lacks the capacity for virtue and reason. In his own words:

Accordingly, those who are as different from other men as the soul is from the body or man from beast – they are in this state if their work is the use of the body, and if this is the best that can come from them – are slaves by nature. For them it is better to be ruled in accordance with this sort of rule, if such is the case for the other things mentioned. For he is a slave by nature who is capable of

belonging to another – which is also why he belongs to another – and who participates in reason only to the extent of perceiving it, but does not have it.

(Aristotle 1254b17-24)

Here he offers a quite succinct justification for slavery – those who are natural slaves possess such an inherent mental deficit as to make enslavement actually beneficial for them. A natural slave therefore, “does not even reach the level of the normal human passions, in their potential for heeding reason (real moral virtue, in such a mentally deficient person, would be out of the question)” (Pangle 46). In a broader sense, the capacity for moral goodness in a slave is related wholly to their role as a provider for their master. A slave’s moral virtue is provided by the master, and is therefore limited to what is necessary for them to complete their assigned task (Garnsey 112).

According to Aristotle, a natural slave is marked by a lack of capacity for reason that makes them fundamentally different from others. In Athens, slavery was an inherited trait; the child of a slave, even if the child’s father was a free man, would be themselves a slave (Garlan 52). If a slave was considered naturally inferior in his or her mental capacities, as suggested by Aristotle, it follows logic that their children would be similarly unfit for citizenship, as was the case in Athens. This restriction remained even after a slave was freed by their master (a process known as manumission); the child of a freeman and a citizen was denied citizenship (Garlan 81). This once again falls in line with Aristotle’s claim, as what marked a slave as inferior was not absolved by manumission. Therefore, it makes sense that the child of a freeman would still be considered unfit to participate in political life. Like previously, reflections of Aristotle’s

assertions about the mental capacities of the natural slave can be found in how slaves, and more particularly their offspring, were treated.

The capacity of a slave for moral virtue and reason becomes important when examining a freeman's paths to citizenship, or, more accurately, the lack thereof. Aristotle makes a clear distinction between a slave and a citizen. He describes how:

Nature indeed wishes to make the bodies of free persons and slaves different as well as their souls – those of the latter strong with a view to necessary needs, those of the former straight and useless for such tasks, but useful with a view to a political way of life. (Aristotle 1254b28-31).

Here he makes an important distinction: a slave is not only a being of stunted mental capacity, but also a being that is inherently unsuited for engagement in political life. A citizen is similarly ill-suited to the life and work of a slave. While slaves are capable of "life," they are not capable of "the good life," which precludes them from being suitable of life in a polis (Garnsey 112).

Aristotle also claims that virtue is a necessary prerequisite for administration, saying "if these things are needed, so also, it is clear, are the virtue of justice and military virtue" (Aristotle 1283a19-20). In other words, "it was superiority in virtue alone that conferred a title to political power" (Brunt 353). In the words of Winston Ashley, the citizen "naturally seeks his own good and that of the city as a whole of which he is the part," but, as a slave is "dependent on the master for the virtue which guides not his work, or making, but his life, or doing," he is incapable of truly being a part of the citizen body (61). This is reflected in the reality of social stratification in Athens: even after manumission, a freeman was extremely unlikely to obtain citizenship (Garlan 83).

This was true in the reverse, as well: as a rule, a member of the civic body could not become a slave (Garlan 45). Prior to Solon's reforms, there was a great deal of class conflict in Athens due to the perceived inequality between socioeconomic classes. At this point in time, poorer Athenians had been driven to selling themselves into slavery (duBois 80). Solon, among other things, abolished enslavement for debt (Hansen 30). In Solon's own words:

I took away the mortgage stones stuck in her breast,
And she, who went a slave before, is now set free.
Into this sacred land, our Athens, I brought back
A throng of those who had been sold, some by due law,
Though others wrongly; some by hardship pressed to escape
The debts they owed; and some of those no longer spoke
Attic, since they had drifted wide around the world,
While those in the country had the shame of slavery
Upon them, and they served their masters' moods in fear.
These I set free; and I did this by strength of hand,
Welding right law with violence to a single whole. (duBois 80-81)

Solon not only passed reforms to protect the poor from enslavement, he also claimed to have repatriated those who had been sold into slavery abroad (Sansone 99).

In addition to the precedent set by Solon, there were important rites of passage for an Athenian male to become a citizen that further limited social mobility. Between the ages of three and four, a male citizen was entered in his father's phratry. When the boy came of age, he was entered into his father's deme. It was this inscription that ensured the boy's citizenship

(Hansen 96). Those who had not been entered into this record, such as infants who had been abandoned, or daughters who had committed adultery, were still at risk of enslavement (Garlan 45). As for a full Athenian citizen, he could only become a slave if, “he had been ransomed as a prisoner of war and had not reimbursed his ransom” (Hansen 99). Aristotle’s claims about a slave’s capability to participate in the political sphere are reflected in the ridged social stratification within Athenian society. A citizen was defined as someone who could not do the work of a slave, and a slave was defined as someone who could not do the work of a citizen, and, as follows, one could not easily find themselves in the shoes of the other.

Aristotle describes slaves as a possession beholden to his master before all else. In regards to whether or not a slave is a possession, he has this to say:

...since production and action differ in kind and both require instruments, these must of necessity reflect the same difference. Life is action, not production; the slave is therefore a subordinate in matters concerning action.

A possession is spoken of in the same way as a part. A part is not only part of something else, but belongs wholly to something else; similarly with a possession. Accordingly, while the master is only master of the slave and does not belong to him, the slave is not only slave to the master but belongs wholly to him.

What the nature of the slave is and what his capacity, then, is clear from these things. For one who does not belong to himself by nature but is another’s, though a human being, is a possession. (Aristotle 1254a5-17)

The meaning of this excerpt is fairly clear: a slave, while considered a human being, is first and foremost a possession of their master, with no autonomy of their own and no power of self-determination. Yvon Garlan, a professor of classical antiquity at Rennes-II University, put it as such: “The Athenian slave constituted first and foremost a possession and, as such, was transferable in the same way as other moveable chattel, regardless of his own wishes” (Garlan 40). According to Aristotle, a slave is a tool to be used in action (*praxis*), rather than for production (*poiesis*) (Pangle 43).

Aristotle accurately describes the source of slaves: wars against foreigners. On this matter, he is quite clear, saying “the art of war will also be in some sense a natural form of the acquisitive art, for one part of it is expertise in hunting” (Aristotle 1256b23-24). This passage is a very literal reflection of the contemporary practices. Athenian slaves were almost exclusively exported from outside the states, as “Greeks did feel a measure of repugnance at the sight of their own compatriots living in slavery” (Garlan 50). Generally speaking, slaves were barbarians, or those who couldn’t speak Greek (Hall 101), and obtained either through war or through capture via pirates (duBois 81). Research has shown that a slave market existed in the Agora and that, in the fifth century BCE, the tax on imported slaves provided a substantial amount of state revenue (Hansen 122). These slaves were primarily from the regions of Thrace, the Black Sea, and the interior of Asia Minor and Syria. There are fewer records of slaves being imported from the west; of note as sources of slaves are only Illyria and Sicily (Hansen 123). Aristotle also provides a reasoning for this, saying “it is because barbarians are more slavish in their characteristics than Greeks (those in Asia being more so than those in Europe) that they put up with a master’s rule without making any difficulties” (Aristotle 1285a20-23). In other words,

barbarians acquiesce to the rule of unfit kings because of their naturally servile character (Brunt 380). During the Peloponnesian War, records indicate that the greater part of the slave population of Athens was comprised of two ethnic groups, the Thracians and the Carians, neither of which is Greek (Garlan 46). Aristotle isn't the only writer from the time to speak to this. In his tragedy, *Iphigeneia in Aulis*, Euripides has the titular character exclaim "It is/ A right thing that Greeks rule barbarians/ Not barbarians Greeks" (duBois 59). Aristotle actually cites this in *Politics* (1252b8-9). Similarly, in his famous *Laws*, Plato expresses his wish that it be made illegal for Greeks to enslave their fellow Greeks (Brunt 350). In this case, the parallels are obvious: Aristotle describes war and, more generally, violence, as the primary method of obtaining slaves, and records indicate that this was generally how slaves were obtained in reality.

This status as a possession that belongs completely to someone else is reflected in the lack of self-determination afforded to slaves, particularly in the case of manumission. In almost all cases of freedom being granted to a slave, it was done on the authority of the slave's master or the state (Garlan 74); very rarely did a slave gain freedom of their own accord. Even after manumission, there were still strong legal binds tying a former slave to his former master. A freeman was required to have a patron. This patron was called a *prostates* and was generally automatically the slave's former master (Garlan 77). The freeman was also under a contract known as the *paramone*, which made him obligated to *paramenein* (stay or remain) with his former master (Garlan 78). As a slave was first and foremost a possession, it follows logic that their status is dependent on their master and that, even after obtaining freedom, much of a freeman's life remains under the control of their master. In this case, Aristotle's description of a

slave as a possession can provide an explanation and a reflection of the reality of slavery in Athens.

Aristotle also describes slavery as a necessary component of life for reasons that reflect the common views of the time. He first introduces the natural slave as an inherent part of the family. He does this by proving the reverse. He posits “that if shuttles should themselves and picks play the lyre, master craftsmen would no longer have a need for subordinates or masters for slaves” (Aristotle 1253b37-39). As this is obviously not the case in the Athens of Aristotle’s time, it is in this manner that he makes clear that slaves are necessary (Pangle 42). From the beginning of his section on natural slavery, “slaves are presented as indispensable to the constitution of the complete family” (Garlan 139). This section also suggests that it is only by the enslavement of others will citizens have the free time necessary to be fulltime citizens (Pangle 42). For Athenians “slavery was no superfluous luxury but simply the means for them to procure “necessary things” (*ta anagkaia*) and was therefore the condition of their own fulfillment” (Garlan 138). Aristotle’s view of slavery as necessary is shown to be representative of the views of the times.

The enslavement of others also played another role in the polis: it provided for the “fiction of Athenian equality” and reinforced the homogeneity of the citizen body by restricting the experiences members were exposed to (Osbourne 32). This apparent equality of citizens was a vital part of Athenian democracy (Osbourne 98). Aristotle even acknowledges this, claiming “Rule of the people arose as a result of those who are equal in any respect supposing they are equal simply, for because all alike are free persons, they consider themselves to be equal simply” (Aristotle 1301a29-31). He goes on to explain how this sense of equality:

...is the second defining principle of democracy. From it has come [the claim to merit] not being ruled by anyone, or failing this, [to rule and be ruled] in turn. It contributes in this way to the freedom that is based on equality. (Aristotle 1317b14-17)

Slaves helped contribute to this sense of equality, because the view of slaves as a single, homogenous group allowed citizens to “imagine their very citizen status as conferring on them a kind of equality with other citizens” (Sansone 100). The views of citizens of Athens at the time and the general widespread nature of the institution serve to reinforce and reflect Aristotle’s claim that it was a necessary part of society. This perspective, which was apparent throughout the Athenian citizenry, also played a vital role in how the institution was justified: even if it was evil, it was necessary.

The many parallels between the theory of natural slavery as presented in Aristotle’s *Politics* and the reality of slavery demonstrate the two resemble each other far more than some assume. A broader reading of *Politics*, not as something separate from the practical expression of slavery in Athens, but rather as a source of insight into, if not the reality of the institution itself, then how people thought about it at the time, allows for a greater understanding of how the enslavement of others was justified. Perhaps one of the most immediately repulsive of Aristotle’s claims (at least to a modern audience) is his assertion that for some people, to whom he has given the title of natural slave, are actually better off when enslaved. Taking such a stance, however, explains how slavery could have been such an integral part of and continued for so long in the birthplace of democracy. This idea, as well as the idea of the natural slave in general, provides a powerful force for the perpetuation of slavery. Every idea introduced in

Politics serves to reinforce the idea that slaves are outsiders, from their origin to the lack of shared experiences between citizens and slaves. The lack of empathy this engendered was the key to the entire institution. Yes, many modern readers can dismiss Aristotle's writing out of hand, but evidence indicates that for a contemporary audience, *Politics* made a lot of sense.

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