

The Polis in the Hellenistic World



Ancient History

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Edited by
Henning Börm and Nino Luraghi

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FOREWORD: THE HELLENISTIC POLIS

Henning Börm and Nino Luraghi

After having been for decades the province of a relatively small group of scholars, typically specializing in Greek epigraphy and more often than not writing in French or German, the Hellenistic polis has finally become central to the research agenda of Greek historians more broadly. This development can be traced from the early nineties of the last century, and has picked up pace in a sustained fashion at the turn of the millennium. Debates such as the one on political participation, driven implicitly or explicitly by the need to claim for the Hellenistic polis equal status with its classical predecessor, are essentially behind us, at least in that form. More recent research has started approaching the polis of the centuries between Alexander and Cleopatra as a specific historical phenomenon, striving to define its most peculiar aspects from as many angles as possible, and to point to new avenues of interpretation that might contribute to recognizing its historical role in its Mediterranean and Near Eastern contexts.

In this general framework, the present volume attempts to explore new lines of thought, to question established ways of reading the evidence, and to take stock of recent developments. The authors do not subscribe to any particular shared approach or school of thought; on the contrary, their approaches and questions stem from many different scholarly traditions and methodologies. Rather than seeking to achieve a complete coverage, which would be extremely hard to do and might be less than desirable after all, the authors provide a selection of current research agendas, in many cases offering glimpses of ongoing research projects whose coming to fruition over the next years will be sure to have an impact on the field of Ancient Greek history. It is the editors' sincere hope that the reader will gain a sense of the vitality of this particular subfield within the broader study of the ancient cultures.

Most of the essays that comprise this book were previously delivered as conference papers – the majority at the conference *Rethinking the Polis in the Hellenistic Age*, organized by the editors and held at the *Kulturwissenschaftliches Kolleg* (KuKo) of

Konstanz University on June 2nd and 3rd, 2014. A second round of papers were delivered at a one-day workshop in the Department of Classics of Princeton University on February 6th, 2015. The financial support of the Center of Excellence *Cultural Foundations of Social Integration*, and of the *Program in the Ancient World* of Princeton University made these meetings possible; moreover, funds for editing the present volume have been generously provided by the Center of Excellence *Cultural Foundations of Social Integration* of Konstanz University.

The editors would like to express their special gratitude to Fred GIROD, Daniela GÖPFRICH and Christina THOMA (KuKo Konstanz), Isabel RAFF (Konstanz University) and Barbara LEAVY (PAW Princeton) for their selfless help and patience. At Franz Steiner Verlag, Katharina STÜDEMANN supported this project with the patience and good cheer that all those who know her have made experience of. Our gratitude for her goes well beyond the specific case of this book.

Konstanz and Princeton
January 2018

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE HELLENISTIC POLIS: COMPARATIVE AND MODERN PERSPECTIVES

Clifford Ando

1. Introduction

The topic of this chapter is contemporary collusion in the Greek solution to the democratic boundary problem. The term refers to the issue that any democracy (and indeed, any political society) functions in reference to a bounded community of persons, a citizen body, whose members are deemed capable of politics and bearers of rights and duties in direct relation to the sovereign.¹ The constitution of this community and the formation of its boundaries and agreement on its principles of inclusion and exclusion are acts logically prior to the actualization of democratic principles in its running.² No meaningful moral or political judgment can be rendered on the question of how democratic a society is without confronting this fact. Indeed, as I shall stress, the loud proclamation of adherence to democratic principles within a democratic oligarchy is the principal means by which Hellenistic poleis outside peninsular Greece asserted the legitimacy of their profoundly inegalitarian politics and essentially extractive domination of those they deemed non-political.

My interest in this subject derives from two sources: one is a broad interest in the history of government, and in particular in the conjoined histories of governmental and social power and the ideological and normative accounts by which societies describe, justify and constrain particular distributions of wealth and power. The second

¹ This language is intended to distinguish those directly interpellated by the sovereign from others, such as dependent members of households, who possess publicness only through the head of household.

² Whelan 1983.

is more strictly empirical: the contexts of ancient historical study are ones in which regional and macro-regional empires were ever-present, and in which social, political and economic life for the vast majority of human beings was *nevertheless* centered on villages and cities. Indeed, one might say – many ancient and medieval theorists did in fact say – that a principal contribution of empire was the sustaining of republican civic life. Put more bluntly, the ancient Mediterranean was simultaneously a world of monarchic empires and one of cities that described themselves as autonomous and democratic, not to say republican.³ In the past, my work has concentrated on a later stage of ancient history, when, as JONES and FINLEY clearly saw, the emergence of a unified legal and political structure radically altered the discursive structures and networks of social obligation that had theretofore sustained civic life.⁴ In this perspective, the great turning points in the history of the Greek city after Alexander came in 212 CE with the *Constitutio Antoniniana*, when cities were nominally required to extend civic citizenship to all residents of the *chôra*, their hinterlands composed of dependent, dominated villages,⁵ and in the later fourth century, when control over the incidence of taxation was taken out of the hands of local dynasts. But of course, a proper understanding of those emergent realities will depend ultimately on some portrait of the world it succeeded, and it is to that problem that I turn my attention in this chapter and its companion, a more strictly empirical study.⁶

The concerns of this paper are largely of a comparative and theoretical nature. My ambition is to reflect on democratic ideologies in light of the networks of social power in which they find meaning and which they work in turn to describe, shape and sustain: relations of slave and master, woman and man, metic and citizen, and non-elite and elite. To accomplish this, I draw upon a fairly eclectic body of theoretical and empirical work produced outside the fields of classical studies and ancient history, but I hope to have found language that makes its salience to the project of ancient history reasonably transparent. Let me offer first a brief outline of the topics on which I will touch:

- In what sense can and should democracies be understood as oligarchies? What power relations inhere in the functioning of ideologies of democratic equality? How do the acts of exclusion that inevitably attend definitions of democratic citizenship shape ideological and political constructions of difference *within* the democratic citizen body?

³ Ando 2016.

⁴ Cf. Jones 1940 and Finley 1985 (especially 177–207).

⁵ *Dig.* 50.1.30.

⁶ Ando 2016.

- Was the rise of plutocratic elites inevitable? What mechanisms would have had to exist to forestall this? Or would a contemporary view from political economics endorse, for an agrarian economy at least, the validity of MICHEL'S iron law of oligarchy?⁷
- Can and should we understand democratic politics as serving both to enable elite rule but also to constrain intra-elite competition?
- How might we address the questions of how democratic were Hellenistic democracies and, just as crucially, what sort of democratic politics did they conduct, with what sort of outcomes?

As regards the themes of this volume – in particular, the question of whether Greeks of the Hellenistic period imagined any alternative to democracy as the basis for communal government – let me offer one suggestion now and another at the close. On my reading, democracy allowed for the consolidation of elite power within a framework, and employing a language, of very high prestige.

2. Democracies are democracies over someone

Let me begin with the banal but still valuable observation that in premodern democracies in particular, the citizen body – the collective unit of those exercising a full panoply of rights and obligations – was always a minority and very often a very small minority of persons resident within the territory over which the *demos* claimed sovereignty and jurisdiction. As a related but essential matter, only that small minority *at most* will have fulfilled the normative understanding of political personhood that always, in circular fashion, worked to legitimate the structures that broadcast and enforced it *as* normative. In consequence, ideologies of citizenly equality within the citizen body are purchased at the expense of, or perhaps by means of, categorizing all others (which is to say, the majority of the population) as somehow defective, deficient or political persons merely *in statu nascendi*.

One aspect of my project might be clarified by entertaining the brilliant question posed by Paul KOSMIN at the close of the conference that gave birth to this volume: In what ways would the conference have been different, had its topic been the Hellenistic *city* and not the Hellenistic *polis*? What we call the *polis* is an analytic abstraction largely congruent with an ancient notion. It refers to a population and set of institutions, operative within a conurbation and asserting dominance over both a popula-

⁷ Wiemer 2013.

⁸ Michels 1911.

tion and a landscape. Membership in the so-called polis is strictly limited: it includes neither the total population of the city nor, emphatically, the total population of the political space over which the polis-population asserts its power. To put the matter in somewhat different terms, poleis outside of peninsular Greece in the Hellenistic and Roman periods were oligarchies that made claims of sovereignty over other human beings and their property.⁹ This is true whatever the formal quality of the distribution of power and authority within the oligarchic elite that called itself the *demos* of the polis.

In consequence, when we take the polis as analytic primary, we collaborate with an interested ancient representation, and hence efface the operation of (racialized and colonial) oligarchic power in systems of domination and wealth extraction. The contemporary vogue for celebrating the achievements of the Greek world in economic matters is nearly hopelessly implicated in analytic and moral error deriving from just this confusion. The refusal of poliadic oligarchies to give political and legal rights to persons over whom the city-states exercised sovereignty meant that benefits from economic activity were radically restricted. The so-called growth in the economy was largely accomplished by a vast increase in the aggregate means of production of the so-called Greek world, but of course the Greek world expanded almost entirely through imperialist enterprises, whether colonial ones or wars of conquest. The result was a steady increase in persons and lands available for exploitation and extraction, while poliadic law restricted rights of ownership of the means of production, particularly of land, to the few. That the polis economy “grew” as a result is not surprising. Owners of the means production in the ante-bellum South should on similar grounds be admired for their actualization of contemporary modes of capitalism. As an historical matter, I should like to emphasize one further point. The dominance of poliadic elites over the wider Mediterranean was not possible on the scale they achieved apart from the existence of superordinate political structures wielding macro-regional power. In short, without kingdoms and empires to backstop their claims to sovereignty, Hellenistic cities would have been vastly smaller and less wealthy. Empire was the foundation of the historical stability of the oligarchic form that we call the “Hellenistic polis”.

It will do no good to point to the mere fact of contestation or debate as an index of the robustness of democratic politics. As I have written elsewhere about Roman politics, “[n]otional competition, however narrow its terms, more easily hegemonizes debate than does mere harmony.”¹⁰ The questions are rather, who controlled what

9 On the language of religious, political and fiscal sovereignty see Ando 2017.

10 Ando 2011: 49. The passage continues: “At Rome, this competition so dominated public life that the narrow interests of the socio-economic elite, and above all the publicly-articulated values that guided competition within it, came to be civic values, to be exercised by the mere citizen only in derivative form, as soldier, say, rather than leader. On this understanding the function

came up for debate and what interests defined the boundaries of the political.¹¹ In the case of the Hellenistic polis, the space of politics was filled by this so-called contestation, and by sheer ostensive force, the limits of legitimate inquiry were defined. The performance of contestation thus operated to convey the impression that existing debate covered the full terrain of possibility, and thus to exclude voices and issues not allowed into the staged cacophony. Does anyone doubt but that had women been admitted to speak, issues might have been raised other than subventions for oil at the gymnasium or the placement of statues for men? Does anyone doubt that, had a slave been allowed to speak, very different issues would have come to the fore?¹² Or if indigenous villagers had been allowed the vote, the structures of taxation or placement of markets would have differed? But these were not political questions.

The effects of political language narrowly and representations of politics more generally in sustaining this system are scarcely in need of demonstration. To begin with, there is the intense circularity of Greek language, *polis*, *polites*, *politeusthai*, and so forth, being co-derived and co-dependent. Conduct by those excluded *a priori* from politics was by definition non-political.¹³ Similar conclusions can be derived from consideration of the metaphorical apparatus employed by Greeks to describe citizenly conduct: “having a share” in the *polis*; contributing to rites; participating in markets; serving in the army.¹⁴ To a point, these are understood as semi-autonomous social fields. As a result, their overlapping patterns of inclusion and exclusion, in no-

of Roman voters might be said to have been the granting of honor, power, and opportunity for further self-aggrandizement to successful competitors among the elite, who fought on terms set by themselves in their own self-interest, but which had been successfully universalized and naturalized over generations. The result was a fundamental incapacity of the Roman political imagination, or of Roman political language, to conceive and then to articulate meaningful reform. The differing crises of the late Republic – under the Gracchi, Saturninus, Marius, Sulla, Pompey and Caesar (and it is significant that we associate them with individuals; as Cicero remarked to Atticus, the dynasts contended not over policy, but “each for his own power, to the peril of the state” [ad Att. 126.4, SHACKLETON BAILEY]) – which we might diagnose as reflecting the inability of Roman civic institutions, still largely those of an ancient city-state, to contain the distortionate effects of magnitude and wealth – were thus addressed by the Romans through merely incremental reform: the reduplication of magistracies, the institution of momentary checks on career advancement, the institution and adaptation of courts as a further venue for competition, or the settlement of people on the land (but the land must come from somewhere). In other words, more (or less) of the same.”

11 For an influential statement of this approach to the study of politics see Bachratz and Baratz 1962.

12 Put differently, the non-existence of any advocacy for the abolition of slavery in antiquity is a function of who monopolized legitimate cultural production.

13 Ando 2017; cf. Ando 2012.

14 Filonik 2017.

tionally discrepant domains of sociability and social action, naturalized their rules (whether imminent or explicit) and mutually reinforced each other. Taken as a group, they undergird the totalizing force of what were in fact synecdoches: *demos* = population; and *polis* = city or city-state.

Such problems are not, of course, exclusive to ancient politics. For example, in contemporary liberal democracies, the principal unit of analysis is the atomized rights bearer. But for various reasons, even in modern liberal democracies, a very large portion of the population does not exercise a full range of human rights: children below some age a majority (and often there are multiple ages at which different rights are accessed), racial and religious minorities, often women, the elderly, the mentally ill, the handicapped, the temporarily disabled. The simple fact of the matter is that the majority of the population of most modern democracies does not remotely qualify as fully capable legal persons, and in eras before women's rights or countries that permitted slavery and *all* countries before the demographic revolution, this situation was dramatically worse.

Numerically, then, premodern democracies were de facto oligarchies, and in my view, their ideological operations – the meaning of their own self-representations – are best studied in light of this observation. Let me explore this issue quickly by reference to four literatures, each of which reflects on the kinds of work and effects of power entailed by democratic politics: on how a “we the people” is constructed, with what effects on those inside and outside the citizen body. In each case, the work I cite may be taken as emblematic of a larger literature.

(i) The democratic boundary problem is now the subject of a vast and sophisticated literature. It is of course a problem of very great moral salience, many of whose aspects may be without final solution: as Frederick WHELAN pointed out many years ago, it is simply not obvious how one can democratically settle the question of who constitutes the *demos*.¹⁵ Another classic in the field is Charles TAYLOR's seminal essay, “The Dynamics of Democratic Exclusion”. In that essay,¹⁶ TAYLOR poses the question of how modern liberal democracies can be at once more inclusive than any other form of political society and at the same time “push toward exclusion.” In his view, the dynamic is set in motion by the very fact of *democratic* inclusion: Exclusion is “a by-product of the need, in self-governing societies, of a high degree of cohesion. Democratic states need something like a common identity”.¹⁷

15 Whelan 1983. I here set aside the question of whether liberal-republican notions of citizenship are in fact the best means for advancing modern emancipatory politics. For a classic inquiry into this theme see Young 1989; further bibliography at Ando 2014a: 5.

16 Taylor 1998.

17 Taylor 1998: 143.

We can see why as soon as we ponder what is involved in self-government. To form a decision-making unit of the type demanded here, its members must not only decide together but deliberate together ... Thus, to function legitimately, a people must be so constituted that its members effectively listen to one another, or at least come close enough to that condition to ward off possible challenges to its democratic legitimacy from subgroups. In practice, even more is normally required. Our states aim to last, so we want an assurance that we shall continue to be able to listen to one another in the future. This demands a certain reciprocal commitment. In practice, a nation can only ensure the stability of its legitimacy if its members are strongly committed to one another by means of a common allegiance to the political community ... In other words, a modern democratic state demands a "people" with a strong collective identity.¹⁸

But, as TAYLOR points out, the need for a common identity can lead by various routes to practices of exclusion and even of self-exclusion: for example, communities that consider themselves culturally or ethnically homogeneous (or both) can be hostile to immigrants, and likewise hostile to forms of self-fashioning or conduct that cross some contingent ideological boundary into deviance. TAYLOR ultimately focuses on a very modern liberal democracy, namely Québec. But others have conducted similar inquiries into the ideological dynamics of societies with structural qualities of salience to scholars of the Hellenistic polis. Let me name two.

(ii) Eugene GENOVESE was one of the great historians of American slavery in the third quarter of the twentieth century, at one phase of his career a notable academic Marxist and later a passionate advocate of the so-called Southern Agrarians, a conservative movement that attempted to recuperate an anti-Enlightenment form of southern American Aristotelian republicanism. In two famous books, GENOVESE studied the culture of civility, chivalry, and gentility that characterized the slave-owning class of the American South.¹⁹ Unsurprisingly, Genovese identified this culture as an interested construct, a form of paternalism that operated to construct (elite) white males as an homogenous elite. The inner logic by which this unified ideology disenfranchised and subordinated white women and black slaves in quite different ways is an object lesson to students of other historical slaves societies. Likewise, the narrow but real elision of the juridical boundary between slaves and poor whites, both practitioners of banausic labor, fractured the ability of this ideology to efface distinctions of class within the white population. One question his work might provoke among historians of Hellenistic poleis is when, why and how the co-dependent ideologies of racial homogeneity, citizenly equality and gender are sundered, and to what effect.

¹⁸ Taylor 1998: 143 f.

¹⁹ Genovese 1971 and 1976.

(iii) Similar critiques of ideologies and practices that simultaneously include and exclude have been offered by feminists, notably analysts of male homosociality. The two most prominent are probably Jean LIPMAN-BLUMEN²⁰ and Eve KOSOFKY SEDGWICK.²¹ Homosociality refers to the tendency of men to be attracted to, stimulated by and interested in other men: being excluded from public occupations, powers, and resources, women were forced to compete and be evaluated within wholly different systems of social prestige. The conclusion to LIPMAN-BLUMEN's seminal essay sums up why a particular structure of gender relations turns out to be not merely exclusionary but also self-sustaining:

Men, recognizing the power their male peers have, find one another stimulating, exciting, productive, attractive and important, since they can contribute to virtually all aspects of one another's lives.

The contribution that women can make to men's lives, under the constraints of our present segregated society, are decidedly less important – and offer less scope. Women, whose resources are limited to sexuality, beauty, charm, service and parenthood, must focus upon this narrow range in order to distract men from the endless enticement of the male homosocial world. Women must emphasize what they feel men want most from them – sexuality, motherhood, service – in order to share their world at all . . .

Women's attempt to amass resources, according to this theory, is an unfeminine act in itself. And the vicious cycle is kept intact. The various institutions within society – the labor force, economic and legal institutions, the political forum, the military and the family – all act in analogous and integrated ways to perpetuate the homosocial world of men. The result is a self-sufficient, male homosocial world which need not deliberately conspire to keep women segregated. Merely by ignoring the existence of women outside the domestic, sexual and service realms, the male homosocial world relegates women to the sidelines of life.²²

This is, of course, painting with a very broad brush. It nonetheless has the ring of truth and has been enormously influential in sociological and literary scholarship and, indeed, in politics. My point, once again, is simply to encourage specific forms of suspicion in regard to the political, ideological and moral evaluation of democratic politics; and likewise to discourage as insufficient merely immanent reconstructions of their discourses, of courage or manliness or what have you. We show no respect for history through uncritical rehearsal of the categories by which oligarchies justified themselves, whatever the beauties (or idiocies) of their metaphysics.

²⁰ Lipman-Blumen 1976.

²¹ Kosofky Sedgwick 1985.

²² Lipman-Blumen 1976: 30 f.

(iv) This point might be made one last time by reference to a particular strand in contemporary empire studies, which has its origin, I think, in work by Geoffrey HOSKING, a notable historian of early modern Russia. HOSKING distinguished between states that *have*, and states that *are*, empires.²³ States that *have* empires distinguish radically between metropolitan and colonized populations. They also tend strongly to divide colonized populations, one from another, in order to prevent the realization of solidarity between them. Instead, each is them bound through purely bilateral relations to the metropole. This work was also performed through the juridical classification of persons and populations, who, whatever they were before (and remained), were now also classed and sorted in the superordinate schema of empire. A common entailment of empires so organized is the notional equality before the law of all persons holding metropolitan citizenship, such that those belonging to the center are equal amongst themselves in contradistinction to those over whom they as a collective rule.²⁴ Metropolitan citizens as a collective thus constitute a *demos*; their negotiations over matters of shared, public interest are the stuff of politics; subalterns whom they dominate, by contrast, are governed, and sometimes resist.

In states that *are* empires, there exists a single or unified logic of social differentiation, which extends uniformly through the population and establishes metropolitans and others in mutual relation in a single hierarchical scheme, nearly always in subordination to an absolutist sovereign.

To conclude this section, let me offer two observations. First, so long as democratically organized citizen bodies were in fact numerical minorities actively dominating others, self-interest would have strongly encouraged individual citizens to subscribe to whatever ideology of democratic equality obtained in their polity and so to ignore, insofar as possible, actual material inequalities within the citizen body, the better to sustain their position within a wider network of privilege and power.²⁵ Second, modern scholars who praise ancient democracy risk the endorsement of a narrow elitism in politics. No intelligent person in the 21st century can avoid knowing that ancient democracies were democracies of an elite over others. Whatever else it does, the praise of ancient democracy nearly always calques a desire to deliver power in contemporary society into the hands of a guardian class.

23 Hosking 1995; see also Maier 2006: 5f.

24 The long history of the emergence of Roman citizenship in its classical form adheres to some such story: juridical equality within the citizen body follows upon the decision to cease to incorporate the conquered as citizens and instead use citizenship to distinguish between metropolitans and subjects; see Ando 2015: 95, building on Millar 2002: 143–161.

25 For an application of this claim to Rome see Ando 2015: 87–96.

3. The source and stability of plutocratic power

What explains the emergence and stability of elites within democratically-organized classical city-states? My remarks here are inspired by a reading of Thomas PIKETTY's *Capital* and some related historical literatures (esp. by Angus MADDISON, Raymond GOLDSMITH and Robert LUCAS, Jr.), as well as by some reflection on FINLEY and his critics.²⁶ Theoretical reflection and comparative empirical work overwhelmingly suggest the following:

(i) In conditions of low population growth, low inflation and low productivity growth – and in the classical world generally all three conditions obtained, and not simply any one or two – the rate of growth in income from capital, which is to say, from just owning stuff, is basically always greater than the rate of growth of income from labor. In consequence, over time, inherited wealth will claim a greater and greater share of total income. In other words, an elite of wealth, once it emerges, will inevitably distance itself from non-elites and strengthen its position.

(ii) The greater ability of elites to store value across years, derived in part from their heightened participation in a monetary economy, will have accelerated this distancing between elites and non-elites. As was already clear to John LOCKE, non-agricultural capital accumulates; it is generally less subject to spoilage and other sources of risk.

(iii) Ownership of land beyond subsistence and its lease to tenant farmers further insulated elites from risk. After all, arrears in rent may eventually be paid off and so were accounted in Roman public and private law as assets. By contrast, the borrower or tenant farmer mortgages future income in times of bad harvests. In this way, the incidence of bad harvests upon the poor is vastly greater than on the rich.²⁷

(iv) In the later Hellenistic period, and certainly in the Roman era, the development of macro-regional and transregional trade allowed elites to escape the moral claims of local networks of social obligation and even the legal claims of poliadic jurisdiction. As an example, note how often elites are described as escaping local efforts at price controls and anti-hoarding measures by selling grain outside city limits during famines.²⁸

(v) Bracketing some exogenous intervention, conditions of low economic growth produce little sociological change, at least in the sphere of production, and little or no professional differentiation and technical specialization. There is therefore little

²⁶ Piketty 2014; Goldsmith 1984; Maddison 2007.

²⁷ This is so even if the legal system sought to respect the long-term interests of both landlords and tenant farmers in the stability of tenure and cultivation, on which see Kehoe 2007.

²⁸ See, e.g., Wiemer 1997.

chance for alternative regimes of social differentiation or new forms cultural capital to emerge.

Conversely, if per capita growth reaches a level even of 0.5%, let alone 1%, generational change is enormous: something between a quarter and a third of what is produced in one generation did not even exist a generation before. The result is also the creation of between a quarter and a third more jobs and often occupations. To quote PIKETTY, "Insofar as tastes and capabilities are only partially transmitted from generation to generation (or are transmitted much less automatically and mechanically than capital in land, real estate, [etc.]), growth can thus increase social mobility for individuals whose parents did not belong to the elite of the previous generation."²⁹

In light of these considerations, it might be appropriate to reflect on the contingencies that likely mitigated the incidence of these forces in fifth-century Athens: certainly the acquisition of an empire and the exploitation of the silver mines would have issued in a dramatic and, for a time at least, continuously increasing (if not linearly increasing) money supply.

4. Republican elites in Italian Aristotelian thought

Having suggested the nearly overwhelming likelihood of the emergence of an economic elite of increasing power in the material conditions of the late Hellenistic polis, let me now discuss the nature of politics in city states with similar demographic and economic regimes. To do so, I take up the work of two Florentine political theorists who lived through the Great Siege and wrote in its aftermath, Francesco GUICCIARDINI and Donato GIANNOTTI.³⁰ Both witnessed Florence's multiple transitions, from the expulsion of the Medici (which GIANNOTTI can have known only through report, having been two years old when it occurred), to the rule of Savonarola, to the foundation of the Florentine Republic with its Consiglio Grande, to the re-assertion of Medicean influence, the re-establishment of the Republic, and so forth. Both were avid readers of Aristotle; GIANNOTTI is the first writer of the Italian Renaissance to cite Polybius by name. Like many of their Florentine contemporaries, both were also fascinated by Venice. Why?

Above all, Venice was notoriously stable. Whereas Florence had suffered a half dozen changes in form of government in forty years, Venice had employed the same constitution since the foundation of its own Consiglio Grande in 1170, with only one significant change: in 1297, membership in the Council was made hereditary and new

²⁹ Piketty 2014: 85.

³⁰ Giannotti 1840; Guicciardini 1953.

citizens, new *gentiluomini*, were almost never created. (There's a bleeding between juridical and moral categories!) The question posed by reflection on Venice was therefore whether Aristotelian analysis could explain its success in a fashion that would allow its reduplication at Florence.

Beyond the question of form of government, however, two questions came insistently to the fore. These are, first, whether Venice remained a democracy, as the law of 1297 had the effect of gradually reducing the size and representativeness of the Council. In Italian terms, one would ask what importance to attach to its numerical transformation from a *governo largo* to a *governo stretto*. Second, as regards both Venice and Florence, what difference did the presence of a council or assembly make, given the fact of a plutocratic elite? What was the difference between an oligarchy comprised of plutocratic elites and government that was *de iure* democratic but *de facto* oligarchic?

As regards the first question, GUICCIARDINI and GIANNOTTI agree that the law of 1297 should be understood not as an effort to change the form of government but rather as an effort to define the Venetian citizen body. Venice therefore remained a *governo largo*, or democratic, in Aristotelian terms, because it extended membership in its assembly to all citizens and observed an appropriate [proportionate] equality among them. That democratic principles were observed only within what was, numerically, an oligarchic elite, was troubling, however, because it was possible to observe both the narrowing of that elite and the sharpening of class distinctions within it.³¹ (GIANNOTTI in particular remained troubled that no historical account of the transformation of 1297 survived, so that theories about the need to exclude merchants settled in the city – metics – in the interest of purity of blood must remain in the realm of conjecture.)

What about the further presence in all democratic assemblies of persons of greater and lesser wealth, prestige and power? On this topic GUICCIARDINI and GIANNOTTI largely agree once again. The value to the polity of sustaining a democracy in form and name despite the inevitable emergence and power of elites of wealth was as follows: the presence of an assembly, a Council, or what HABERMAS would call an *agora*, “render[ed] public and political the emergence” of that elite.³² In this way, the form of virtue, of aristocratic excellence adopted and performed by the elite, might be preserved untainted by private rivalries. This was so even at Venice, where they used a secret ballot: of this, the Florentines did not approve, but even this they understood to endow the selecting of one's ruling elite with impersonality in process and equality among electors.

31 Pocock 1975: 272–320.

32 Quotation from Pocock 1975: 287. “Agora”: Habermas 1989.

In other words, the politics of democratic councils of Renaissance Italy was not understood as constraining elites of wealth by means of some ideology of citizenly equality or communitarian values, nor as defanging wealth, so that it yields merely prestige for its owners and not social power. Rather, it offered the very powerful but very different advantage of defining and delimiting the nature of intra-elite competition. As John POCOCK puts it, in a reading of GUICCIARDINI: “For [aristocratic] virtue to be recognized purely for what it is, . . . for the elite to be truly free to develop it, recognition must be a public act performed by a public authority”.³³

In another context it might be useful to set out how anti-Machiavellian and anti-Roman the writings of these two men are: for Machiavelli, elites and non-elites existed in irresolvable structural tension, so that, for example, each had its own form of freedom. Elites wished to be free to exercise virtue, to be sure, but the principle expression of aristocratic virtue in politics was the domination of others; and non-elites wished merely to be free from domination.³⁴ GUICCIARDINI and GIANNOTTI offer a distinctly different view of plutocratic power in democratic politics: for them, elites play at democracy and so compete with each other according to known and public rules; and non-elites vote and grant them statues.

5. Assessing democratic politics

In contrast to the relatively foreshortened horizons of inquiry into Greek politics, a vast literature has developed to address questions such as how many kinds of democratic politics are there, how democratic are they, whose interests are represented in policy outcomes, and so forth.³⁵ I want to say a word about a recent and much celebrated development in this literature and the landscape that it surveys.

The development consists in the analysis conducted by Martin GILENS and Benjamin PAGE correlating survey data with legislative outcomes;³⁶ GILENS has also written a book about the project,³⁷ and one can find similar recent analyses in work by

³³ Pocock 1975: 253.

³⁴ Pocock 1975, 194–218; Pocock 2003, 203–235.

³⁵ Highlights include Arrow 1963, on the possibility of majoritarian consensus; Dahl 1961, an optimistic view of the voices represented in local legislative fora; cf. idem 1956, 1989 on contemporary democratic theory; Truman 1971 (1951) and Olson 1965, on challenges to majoritarian pluralists; and Winter/Page 2009 and Winters 2011, on the emergence of oligarchy within neo-liberal democracies.

³⁶ Gilens/Page 2014.

³⁷ Gilens 2014.

Larry BARTELS, among others.³⁸ They build upon decades of work that attempts to assess at an empirical level which parties or mechanisms determine the outcomes of legislative processes. Some of this work has been historical and attended to the documentary record of the passage of a single law; some has relied upon massive quantitative analysis of spending by lobbying groups; and so forth.

Another way to describe this work is that it has sought to address the question, “What sort of democracy is the United States?” Is it characterized by majoritarian pluralism, in which legislative outcomes track the policy preferences of the average voter? Is it better described as a form of elite domination, in which the preferences of wealthy elites dominate the majority? Is it a form of majoritarian pluralism, in which sub-groups within the population and political organizations fight one another, but (for various reasons) the resulting legislation largely tracks the preferences of the majority? Or is it a form of biased pluralism, in which political organizations so influence the outcome that legislation essentially reflects the interests of corporations?

GILENS has constructed a database and conducted a multivariate analysis that allows him to assess all these theories against each other *at the same time*. The database includes significant information for an astonishing 1,779 separate pieces of legislation, for which he has national polling data that includes differentiation according to wealth. The results are stark: “When the preferences of economic elites and the stands of organized interest groups are controlled for, the preferences of the average American voter have a minuscule, near-zero, statistically non-significant impact upon public policy.”³⁹ What is more, on those issues where their interests diverge, the net alignments of business groups and of economic elites correlates *negatively* with the professed wishes of the average voter, and still they win. America is best described as dominated by an economic elite and secondarily by biased pluralism. To paraphrase Abraham LINCOLN, if the long history of democracy teaches us anything, it is apparently that most democracies are governments of a democratic elite, by a democratic elite, for a socio-economic elite. Their form has not yet passed from this earth.

I should immediately issue the caveat that the literature cited in this section was produced by American political scientists, studying a two-party system and representative democracy. That said, at a formal level, it – and all other western democracies, and perhaps all other modern democracies – are formally far more inclusive than any ancient one. What is more, we do not have evidence for popular opinion that would allow us to assess the policies and legislative outcomes of democratic politics in Hellenistic poleis in the fashion designed by GILENS, though it must also be said that I know of no attempt to exploit the possibilities in this regard presented by

38 Bartels 2010.

39 Gilens/Page 2014: 575.

the aggregate data for Greek legislative action assembled by RHODES and LEWIS.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, before we speak of any ability of so-called communitarian ideology to compel elites to subscribe to notions of citizenly equality, we must find some means to assess whether the actual outcomes of political decision-making conformed in any meaningful way to the policy preferences of non-elites. Until we do, I remain skeptical about the status of Hellenistic poleis as “actual democracies”, or perhaps it would be far more accurate to say, the term “actual democracy” seems to me to have close to no analytical or evaluative meaning.

6. Conclusion

I have elsewhere written a few words on the absence from many ancient contexts of a robust notion of public goods *conjoined with* institutional mechanisms to fund them in a disinterested and depersonalized way.⁴¹ To my mind, thanking elites for spending private resources on public goods merely surrenders to them a moral authority that distracts from the extent to which their wealth and power rests upon the contingent, artificial and unnecessary operation of social institutions.⁴² What is more, it seems ever more clear that this wealth and power increased and consolidated over time.⁴³ That said, historical economics strongly suggests that only a wealth tax or very substantial estate tax might have addressed the structural processes governing wealth accumulation in agrarian societies, such as I described earlier. This is no special indictment of ancient polities; we are doing no better in solving these problems ourselves.

This essay has focused on what it means to talk about the actualization of democratic principles in the city-states of the Hellenistic world, in two senses: first, how well did they wrestle with the democratic boundary problem, and how shall we adjust our inquiries in light of the solutions that they crafted; and second, what meaning shall we attach to the ideologies of citizenly equality and democratic politics that they claimed to support, in light of their imbricated functions to distinguish citizens from others and to efface distinctions of wealth and power within the citizen body. In my view, historical questions concerning the distribution of power in democratic polities cannot be answered by attending to *their* language alone, nor by purely formal analysis using Aristotelian or neo-Aristotelian categories, as GUICCIARDINI and GIANNOTTI

40 Rhodes/Lewis 1997.

41 Ando 2012: 115–116; Ando 2014b.

42 Cf. Ando 2014b.

43 Cf. Meier 2011; Chaniotis 2013; Ellis-Evans 2013.

already saw. Democracies are complex structures, deserving complex analysis. Scholarly work in other contexts offers ancient history a model and a call to arms.

Indeed, consideration of historical study in other fields provokes somber reflection on the state of affairs in Greek history. In no other field known to me do scholars assert the normative salience of lessons derived from their object of study as is commonly practiced in ancient history: historians of the Andes do not offer the silver mines at Potosí as exemplars of scaled resource extraction; scholars of the ante-bellum South do not affirm the beauties of plantation gentility, like Hellenistic *paideia* a site of resistance to both the sordidness of the world and the crudities of Northern/Roman power; no one holds out the treaty of Nanking or convention of Peking as advancing the causes of free trade and unrestricted capital flows. But Greek democracy and the Greek economy are imagined as distinct from the regimes of slavery, sexual predation, patriarchy and imperialism that were their essential and inextricable context. To an extent, this must represent a legacy of Enlightenment and Romantic attachments to Hellenism. It must likewise derive, in part, from an anxiety on the part of Greek historians that the on-going relevance of their field to contemporary culture depends not on its intrinsic interest (and hence, not on its alterity or comparative interests, as scholars in the age of Vernant or Connor might put it), but rather upon its historical prestige, before which they continue – at best, unknowingly – to genuflect.

I close with two suggestions. First, as emphasized above, in respect to jurisdiction, legislative autonomy, and control over the incidence of taxation, the history of the Greek polis after Alexander has two major turning points: 212 and c. 400 CE. Whether we should posit any broad change in public law as relevant to the history of membership in the elite (e. g., whether membership in local councils became hereditary at any point) is of course an important but also a very difficult question whose answer, I have suggested, may tell us little about the material fact of elite power. Second, I return to the question posed by Paul KOSMIN paraphrased at the start of this essay: Paul asked, what difference it would make to organize a conference around the Hellenistic *city* rather than the Hellenistic *polis*. My response is this: polis-talk was the principal means employed by Hellenistic democratic elites to rule the Hellenistic city.

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