

Classical Political Thought: Lectures

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Lecture 1: Problems of Politics

I. **Introduction:** aims of the lectures

II **What's political?**

1. **Terminology and translation:**

- 'Politeia', trans: civilis, 'The Republic'
- Polis: city, state, its citizens, its constitution
- Politikos (Plato) = 'statesman', ruler over free equals; trans (Moerbeke): politicum – comes to mean 'regime' rather than individual
- 'De re publica', trans: commonwealth
- vivere civile (Machiavelli): true republican regime

Political:

Rabelais (1483-1553) – Numa Pompilius est 'juste, politic et philosophe'

Shakespeare (Merry Wives of Windsor, 1599): Am I politic? Am I subtle? Am I a Machiavel?

2. **Politics and Greek life**

'Politics, like philosophy, was a Greek 'invention'. Never before, at least in the west, had there been a society in which ordinary men, lacking either inherited authority or divine sanction, openly debated and decided on such vital matters as war and peace, public finance, or crime and punishment. Political activity had become accepted not only as a legitimate activity but even as the highest form of social activity. And the defeat of the great Persian Empire proved that this new way of running society was effective and valuable. That it was a *new* way was recognised; so was the fact that even now there were among the Greeks powerful opponents of the city-state system, whereby free men organised their lives under the rule of law. An *inquiry* into the past (as distinct from a mere re-telling of the accepted tales) was thus stimulated, as a complement to the inquiries into ethics and philosophy.'

[Finley, Intro to Thucydides, Penguin, p.14; see also Finley 1985: 13-14]

[When men lived without cities, they had no civic art; so sought to get together and secure their lives by founding cities; but did wrong to each other for lack of civic art]; 'So Zeus, fearing that our race was in danger of utter destruction, sent Hermes to bring respect and right among men, to the end that there should be regulation of cities and friendly ties to draw them together. Then Hermes asked Zeus in what manner then was he to give men right and respect: 'Am I to deal them out as the other arts have been dealt? That dealing was done in such wise that one man possessing medical art is able to treat many ordinary men, and so with the other[s] ... 'To all' replied Zeus 'let all have their share; for cities cannot be formed if only a few have a share of these as of other arts. And make thereto a law of my ordaining, that he who cannot partake of respect and right shall die the death as a public pest.'

[Plato, Protagoras, 322C]

But so that you may be all the more eager, Africanus, to protect the commonwealth, know this: for all those who have saved, aided or increased the fatherland there is a specific place set aside in the sky where they may enjoy eternity in blessedness. There is nothing that can happen on earth that is more pleasing to that leading god who rules the whole world than those councils and assemblages of men associated through law which are called states; the guides and preservers of these have set out from here, and here they return.

[Cicero, De Re Publica, Book 6: The Dream of Scipio]

Some Dates:

492-449 Persian Wars

431-404 Peloponnesian War, Athens and Sparta,;

404 Athens defeated; imposition of 30 Tyrants;

403 restoration of democracy;

Socrates 469-399;

Plato 427-347;

399 death of Socrates;

Aristotle 384-322 ;

322 commencement of Macedonian and Roman domination of Athens.

III Athenian Ideals and Difficulties:

1. Pericles' Funeral Oration (431)

37 ... our system of government does not copy the institutions of our neighbours. It is more the case of our being a model to others, than of our imitating anyone else. Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people. When it is a question of settling private disputes everyone is equal before the law; when it is a question of putting one person before another in positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability which the man possesses. No one, so long as he has it in him to be of service to the state, is kept in political obscurity because of poverty. And, just as our political life is free and open, so is our day to day life in our relations with each other. We do not get into a state with our next door neighbour if he enjoys himself in his own way, nor do we give him the kind of black looks which, though they do no real harm, still do hurt people's feelings. We are free and tolerant in our private lives; but in public affairs we keep to the law. This is because it commands our deep respect.

We give our obedience to those whom we put in positions of authority, and we obey the laws themselves, especially those which are for the protection of the oppressed, and those unwritten laws which is is an acknowledged shame to break.

38 And here is another point. When our work is over, we are in a position to enjoy all kinds of recreation for our spirits. There are various kinds of contests and sacrifices regularly throughout the year; in our own homes we find a beauty and a good taste which delight us every day and which drive away our cares. Then the greatness of our city brings it about that all the good things from all over the world flow in to us, so that to us it seems just as natural to enjoy foreign goods as our own local products.

39 Then there is a great difference between us and our opponents, in our attitude towards military security. Here are some examples: Our city is open to the world, and we have no periodical deportations in order to prevent people observing or finding out secrets which might be on military advantage to the enemy. This is because we rely, not on secret weapons, but on our own real courage and loyalty. There is a difference too in our educational systems. The Spartans, from their early boyhood, are submitted to the most laborious training in courage; we pass our lives without all these restrictions, and yet are just as ready to face the same dangers as they are. ...

40. Our love of what is beautiful does not lead to extravagance; our love of the things of the mind does not make us soft. We regard wealth as something to be properly used, rather than as something to boast about. As for poverty, no one need be ashamed to admit it: the real shame is in not taking practical measures to escape from it. Here each individual is interested not only in his own affairs but in the affairs of the state as well: even those who are mostly occupied with their own business are extremely well-informed on general politics – this is a peculiarity of ours: we do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all. We Athenians, in our own persons, take our decisions on policy or submit them to proper discussions: for we do not think that there is an incompatibility between words and deeds; the worst thing is to rush into action before the consequences have been properly debated. And this is another point where we differ from other people. We are capable at the same time of taking risks and of estimating them beforehand. Others are brave out of ignorance; and, when they stop to think, they begin to fear. But the man who can most truly be accounted brave is he who best knows the meaning of what is sweet in life and of what is terrible, and then goes out undeterred to meet what is to come.

Again in question of general good feeling there is a great contrast between us and most other people. We make friends by doing good to others, not by receiving good from them. This makes our friendship all the more reliable, since we want to keep alive the gratitude of those who are in our debt by showing continued goodwill to them: whereas the feelings of one who owes us something lack the same enthusiasm, since he knows that, when he repays our kindness, it will be more like paying back a debt than giving something spontaneously. We are unique in this. When we do kindnesses to others, we do not do them out of any calculation of profit or loss: we do them without afterthought, relying on our free liberality.

This then is the kind of city for which these men, who could not bear the thought of losing her, nobly fought and nobly died. It is only natural that every one of us who survive them should be willing to undergo hardships in her service. And it was for this reason that I have spoken at such length about our city, because I wanted to make it clear that for us there is more at stake than there is for others who lack our advantages;

As for those of you here who are sons or brothers of the dead, I can see a hard struggle in front of you. Everyone always speaks well of the dead, and, even if you rise to the greatest heights of heroism, it will be a hard thing for you to get the reputation of having come near, let alone equalled, their standard. When one is alive, one is always liable to the jealousy of one's competitors, but when one is out of the way, the honour one receives is sincere and unchallenged.

Perhaps I should say a word or two on the duties of women to those among you who are now widowed. I can say all I have to say in a short word of advice. Your great glory is not to be inferior to what God has made you, and the greatest glory of a

woman is to be least talked about by men, whether they are praising you or criticising you. I have now, as the law demanded, said what I had to say ...

2. Plato: The Apology

21D: 'I am wiser than this man; for neither of us really knows anything fine and good, but this man thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas I, as I do not know anything, do not think I do either. I seem, then, in just this little thing to be wiser than this man at any rate, that what I do not know I do not think I know either.'

30E 'you will not easily find another, who, to use a rather absurd figure, attaches himself to the city as a gadfly to a horse, which, though large and well bred, is sluggish on account of his size and needs to be aroused by stinging.'

35C it is not right to implore the judge, or get acquitted by begging; ... For it is plain that if by persuasion and supplication I forced you to break your oaths I should teach you to disbelieve in the existence of the gods and in making my defence should accuse myself of not believing in them.

3. Plato: Crito

If, as I was on the point of running away... the laws and the commonwealth (poleis) should come to me and ask '... are you not intending by this thing you are trying to do, to destroy us, the laws and the entire state, so far as in you lies? Or do you think that state (polis) can exist and not be overturned, in which the decisions reached by the courts have no force but are made invalid and annulled by private persons' ...

... Is this the agreement you made with us, or did you agree to abide by the verdicts pronounced by the state? ... did we not bring you forth? Is it not through us that your father married your mother and begat you?... do you think right as between you and us rests on a basis of equality, so that whatever we undertake to do to you it is right for you to retaliate? There was no such equality of right between you and your father..... do you not see that your country is more precious and more to be revered and is holier and in higher esteem among the gods... you ought to show her more reverence and obedience and humility when she is angry ... and ought either to convince her by persuasion or to do whatever she commands, and to suffer, if she commands you to suffer, in silence...if she orders you to be scourged ... you must do whatever the state, your country, commands, and must show her by persuasion what is really right, but that it is impious to use violence against either your father or your mother ... any Athenian who wishes ... may take his goods and go away wherever he likes. And none of us stands in his way or forbids any of you to take his goods and go away wherever he pleases, if we and the state do not please him... But we say that whoever of you stays here, seeing how we administer justice and how we govern the state in other respects, has thereby entered into an agreement with us to do what we command; and we say that he who does not obey does threefold wrong, because he disobeys us who are his parents, ...' ... Socrates, we have strong evidence that we and the city pleased you; for you would never have stayed in it more than all other Athenians if you had not been better pleased with it than they; you never went out from the city to a festival... you begat children in the city, showing that it pleased you. And moreover even at your trial you might have offered exile as a penalty... but you then put on airs and said you were not disturbed if you must die, and you preferred, as you said, death to exile. And now you are not ashamed to think of those words and you do not respect us, the laws, since you are trying to bring us to naught; Are you then not breaking your compacts and agreements with us, though you were not led into them by compulsion or fraud, and were not forced to make up your mind in a short time, but had seventy years, in which you could have gone away, if we did not please you and if you thought the agreements were unfair. ...' [50A-54D]

Texts

Pericles 'Funeral Oration' (430) from Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian Wars*

Plato (423-347) *The Apology*; *Crito*

Cicero (106-43) *De Re Publica* (*On the Commonwealth*)

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