

# *Politeia* and the historical account of the *polis* in Aristotle

## *Politeia* y el relato histórico de la *polis* en Aristóteles

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### Abstract

Aristotle's conception of the *politeia* (regime, constitution) as a distinctive feature of the historical experience of the *polis* is a key aspect in his treatment of politics<sup>2</sup>. Part of this discussion deals with Aristotle's attempt to locate and define the qualities of the *politeia* as the most valid criteria for a historical account of the *polis*. These are the qualities I intend to address in this chapter. In section 1 I consider the role of the *politeia* in Aristotle's account of the history of the *polis* after it deviates from the monarchic model of government. In section 2 I tackle the problem of the *politeia's* intelligibility inside the *polis* understood as a "community of interpretation"<sup>3</sup>. Finally, in section 3 I address the *politeia* as an expression of the unity of the *polis* and discuss its quality to unify actions (*praxeis*) aimed at a common goal. Here I argue that it is the *politeia's* "unifying quality" that highlights the causal connections underlying actions that regard the *polis*. The *politeia* helps to unmask historical causation between the actions. Within the context of the *politeia*, the historical account of the *polis* connects actions which outside the framework of the *politeia* do not appear to be so closely related.

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<sup>2</sup> On the role that the concept of the *politeia* plays in Aristotle's *Politics* see more recently Bates 2016; Bertelli 2017. On the place of the *politeia* in Aristotle's historical research see Poddighe 2014; 2019a.

<sup>3</sup> Ober 1993: 130.

**Keywords:** *politeia's* intelligibility, *polis'* history, political justice, Aristotle on the unity of the *polis*, Cleisthenes' reform, Aristotle on history and poetry.

## Resumen

La idea aristotélica de la *politeia* (régimen, constitución) como característica distintiva de la experiencia histórica de la *polis* constituye un aspecto clave de su estudio de la política. Parte de esta discusión tiene que ver con el intento de Aristóteles de establecer y definir las calidades de la *politeia* como el criterio más válido para elaborar un relato histórico de la ciudad. En la sección 1 tomo en consideración el papel de la *politeia* dentro del relato de la historia de la *polis* desde que esta última se aleja de la forma monárquica. En la sección 2 me ocupo del problema de la inteligibilidad de la *politeia* en el contexto de la ciudad entendida como “comunidad de interpretación”. Por último, en la sección 3 analizo la *politeia* como expresión de la unidad de la ciudad y discuto su condición de elemento unificador de las acciones (*praxeis*) que miran a un objetivo común. Aquí argumento la “calidad unificadora” de la *politeia* que destaca las conexiones causales que subyacen a las acciones vinculadas con la *polis*. Dentro del contexto de la *politeia* el relato histórico de la *polis* pone en relación acciones que fuera del marco de la *politeia* no aparecen tan vinculadas entre sí.

**Palabras-clave:** inteligibilidad de la *politeia*, historia de la *polis*, justicia política, Aristóteles acerca de la unidad de la ciudad, reforma de Clístenes, Aristóteles acerca de la historia y la poesía.

First let me provide a brief introduction to the Greek term *politeia* and its understanding as regime, constitution. The word *politeia* includes everything that concerns the ‘way of life of a city’, in other words, everything that concerns values, practices, customs and, not least, the particular form of government of a political community. As a particular form of government of a political community, the *politeia* establishes the principle upon which the laws are laid down and the offices and magistratures are distributed, including the sovereign office responsible for governing. A *politeia* arranges the citizens of a *polis* (*Pol.* 3.1, 1274b 38-41) by organizing the political offices that they fill (*Pol.* 3.6, 1278b 8-11). Such an arrangement sets out the distributive principles for full citizenship, the eligibility conditions for each office, and the end (*telos*) or goal of the *polis* itself, (4.1, 1289a 15-18), which is its very function or *ergon* (7.4, 1326a 13; Keyt 2017, 183)<sup>4</sup>. It is to this concept of *politeia* that I shall mainly

<sup>4</sup> On *telos* as the result of the just deliberation: Natali 1989: 103-142; Leszl 1991: 76-77. See § 3.

refer in this essay, beginning with Aristotle's discussion in *Politics* on the first appearance of a *politeia* as an order incompatible with the acceptance of the monarchy.

## 1. The first establishment of a *politeia*

In *Pol.* 3 Aristotle states that the establishment of a *politeia* dates back to a time when the members of a community first chose what should be common among them, i.e. when they first decided on a certain idea of equality that became incompatible with accepting the power of a single individual. Here is what Aristotle states: “when it happened that many arose who were similar with respect to virtue, they no longer tolerated kingship but sought something common and established a *politeia*” (1286b 11-13). The term *politeia* seems here to have the generic meaning of a polycratic civic regime<sup>5</sup>, as opposed to the first kings who – Aristotle had already commented – had their powers taken away from them in the course of time (1285b 15)<sup>6</sup>. The context in which this statement is found is *Pol.* 3 where Aristotle traces the succession of *politeiai* in history. According to that historical succession, the first *politeia* was founded on the idea of the equality of citizens measured according to virtue: when citizens who were similar with respect to virtue began to equate virtue with honor, they established a *politeia*<sup>7</sup>. This idea of equality/similarity is manifest – according to Aristotle – in the collective decision that kingship is no longer tolerable. It is the emergence of such a notion that qualifies the *polis* as a specific type of political society. This type of political society comes into being through a discontinuous act: its deviation from kingship. In a later passage Aristotle also states that “among similar and equal persons it is neither advantageous not just for one person to have authority over all matters” (1288a 1-3)<sup>8</sup>. The power of the individual is judged incompatible with the *polis*, which has passed the stage in which “cities were under kings” (1252b 19-20) and has already given itself a coherent order with a standard of worth validated by the *polis* itself.

Clearly, the deviation from the monarchic model of governance is peculiar to the *polis* which has already arisen out of more primitive communities which, according to Aristotle, are constituted by nature. Aristotle, however, does not

<sup>5</sup> When to rule is an aristocratic multitude (*Pol.* 1288a 10). Preus 2012: 27; Accattino 2013: 226; Oliveira 2019: 33.

<sup>6</sup> Preus 2012: 27.

<sup>7</sup> See also *Pol.* 4.10, 1297b 16 (Preus 2012: 27).

<sup>8</sup> Oliveira 2019: 55, notes that “however, in communities where such equality does not exist or where the equality is no more a political fact, kingship and even despotic government appear as legitimate forms of rule”. On Aristotle's theoretical discussion of the total king, or *pambasileus*, which offers a solution to the paradox of kingship within the egalitarian structure of the *polis* see Atask 2015.

explain this historical transition on the basis of natural factors. The natural character of the *polis*, whose existence is due to the natural disposition of man to associate himself politically (1252b 30-1253a 30)<sup>9</sup>, is, in fact, never evoked as the reason why the *polis* developed historically nor why there was the succession of *politeiai* over time<sup>10</sup>. This although Aristotle argues in *Pol.* 3 that political communities are ideally governed according to different regimes depending on the nature of the multitudes which arise “in accordance with their nature” to support kingship, or aristocracy or a different regime (1288a 6-19)<sup>11</sup>. Aristotle’s political naturalism is essentially a theoretical perspective rather than a historical one<sup>12</sup>. It theoretically explains the existence of the *polis*<sup>13</sup>, it is evoked to envisage the ideal combination of political regimes and populations, but it does not account for the history of the *poleis* nor the historical succession of *politeiai*. The history of the *poleis* and the historical succession of *politeiai* is explained in *Pol.* 3 on the basis “of the sort of justice that is alleged by those who established the political regimes” (cf. 1288a 20-22). That “sort of justice” is the one that matters<sup>14</sup>, because it is the one that “remains” and can be interpreted by the historian (see § 2), unlike the notion of a natural justice which plays no role in the history of constitutional systems<sup>15</sup>.

But let us turn to the history of the *poleis* in *Pol.* 3. Aristotle briefly refers to the historical process by which the *polis* achieves the status of a community founded on political justice – one, therefore, organized according to a *politeia* – and he simply states that “people were under kingships originally” (*Pol.* 1286b 8-12; see also 1252b 19-20). Aristotle believed, as Greeks generally did, that in the Homeric age the predominant form of government in the Greek states was kingship<sup>16</sup>. This is similar to a remark we find in the *Athenaion Politeia* (hereafter *AP*) for early Athens when at the time of Ion “the people appointed the Tribal Kings” (41.2)<sup>17</sup>. The *polis* ruled by kings was not a community

<sup>9</sup> On this central claim of Aristotle’s political anthropology see Lord 1991 and now Knoll 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Accattino 1978: 183-185; Lord 1991: 55-56; Miller 1991: 296; Gastaldi 2012: 131-134.

<sup>11</sup> Accattino 2013: 236-237; Oliveira 2019: 54-55.

<sup>12</sup> On Aristotle’s political naturalism see Keyt 1987: 54-79; Id. 2017: 111-138, 168-172, 195; Id. forthcoming; Kullmann 1991: 96-103; Lord 1991; Simpson 1998: 20-26; Miller 2003; Id. 2005; Salkever 2005; Besso-Curnis 2011: 201-220; Vegetti 2011; Gastaldi 2012; Reeve 2013: 513-520; Knoll 2017; Duke 2020. Aristotle’s political naturalism does affect his theoretical reasoning on the natural standard of justice in the ideal *polis* since “nature and justice are connected” and there is “a positive principle linking the just and the natural, and a negative principle linking the unjust and the unnatural” (Keyt 2017: 168-172, 186-187).

<sup>13</sup> Vegetti 2011; Keyt 2017: 111-138; Id. forthcoming (29ff.) who rightly affirms that “Aristotle’s larger appeal to nature” is in *Pol.* 7 (chapters 8-10) “through his description of the ‘*polis* of our prayers’ and the ‘proper parts of the ideal *polis*’”.

<sup>14</sup> Accattino 2013: 238.

<sup>15</sup> Bertelli 2011: 67. On the role it plays in the ideal *polis* see Keyt 2017: 168-172, 186-187; Id. forthcoming: 27.

<sup>16</sup> Preus 2012: 27-28; Atack 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *infra* pp. 291-294.

regulated by a *politeia*, had not elaborated a shared notion of political justice<sup>18</sup> and therefore, according to Aristotle, it is not possible to give a precise account of its history (see § 2). In order for the history of the *polis* to be intelligible it must be a community regulated by a *politeia*<sup>19</sup>. In *Pol.* 3 the intelligibility of the history of the *polis* is in fact subordinate to the condition of it being a community regulated by a *politeia* which can be considered an attribute only if the *polis* is already an organism founded on a shared notion of political justice validated by the *polis* itself. Only insofar as it is the expression of a given conception of political justice is the *politeia* intelligible<sup>20</sup>.

Aristotle's reasoning in *Pol.* 3 is consistent with what he says in the Book 5 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter *NE*) about what is politically just<sup>21</sup>. Aristotle develops two points in this regard. First, he notes that political justice exists if there is a determination (*krisis*) of what is right and what is wrong (1134a 24-32). Then he limits this first condition in the following way: political justice exists if this determination is manifest as plural, that is, within a community that has already defined an idea of commonality and equality and that shares an idea of legality (1134a 32). Overall, Aristotle states that what is politically just “exists among men who share their life for the sake of self-sufficiency and who are free and equal, whether proportionately or numerically” and that what is politically just “belongs to those who come under the law” (1134a 26-31).

Aristotle believes that only when the idea of justice also addresses justice for others<sup>22</sup>, that is, when the community shares an idea of legality, does the order of the *polis* become intelligible<sup>23</sup>. This order becomes more visible as communities grow larger and the pattern of rationality that governs their organization becomes clearer<sup>24</sup>. Although the city-state arises out of more primitive communities which are natural aggregations, Aristotle affirms that this is a necessary, not sufficient, condition for the justice of the city-state. For political justice is peculiar to a community of “free” and “equal” human beings aiming at the good life whose mutual relations are already governed by laws and conventions, even if they are unwritten<sup>25</sup>. The transition to the form of a community politically organized according to a *politeia* thus entails the emergence of a notion of political justice as commonality (the idea that kingship is no longer tolerable) which becomes intelligible to the historian through the *politeia*.

<sup>18</sup> Lord 1991: 62. See *Pol.* 1288a 1-3; *NE* 1161b 11-15, 1134a 25-31.

<sup>19</sup> Lord 1991: 62; Mayhew 1997: 334-339.

<sup>20</sup> Poddighe 2014: 49ff.; Poddighe 2016: 91-96.

<sup>21</sup> Bertelli 2011. Discussion of studies in Poddighe 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Bertelli 2011: 66-67. Cf. *NE* 1160a 9ff.; *Pol.* 1282b 16-17. Viano 2008: 28.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Rosen 1975: 233ff.; Weinrib 1987: 134-135.

<sup>24</sup> When the citizens being equal have so many things in common. Cf. Rosen 1975: 233.

<sup>25</sup> *Supra* n. 18.

Now, Aristotle applies the same principles to trace the historical evolution that follows the appearance of that first idea of commonality – where the unifying criterion is virtue. The oligarchic *politeiai* that have succeeded each other in history are the result of political choices made by the citizens to legitimize wealth and, therefore, to define a new shared notion of political justice: the idea that wealth is a thing of honor.

Aristotle states in *Pol.* 3 that the transition to oligarchy occurred when the rulers equated wealth with a new idea of justice (1286b 14-16). The expression he uses is instructive “for they made wealth a thing of honor” (ἐντιμον γὰρ ἐποίησαν τὸν πλοῦτον): by making wealth a motive for honor, the transition to oligarchy was legitimized and justified<sup>26</sup>.

Even when in *Pol.* 5 Aristotle’s attention turns to the universal laws that theoretically explain the constitutional upheaval leading to oligarchy, his interpretative model remains the same<sup>27</sup>. Here in fact Aristotle states that the transition to oligarchy is explained by the fact that “those who are very preeminent by the fact of their property” legitimize their superior right to hold office by supposing that “it is not just for those possessing nothing to have a share in the city equal to that of the possessors” (1316a 39-b 6). Thus, it is the legitimization of a new idea of justice as equality, in this case measured on the basis of wealth, that legitimizes constitutional upheaval towards oligarchy.

The history of the early Athenian *politeia* as recounted in Aristotle’s *AP* is consistent with these theoretical premises. Modern scholars have often questioned the authorship of the last work (the only one surviving from a corpus of 158 constitutions) and believe it to be a product of the Aristotelian ‘school’, but probably not written by Aristotle himself<sup>28</sup>. Here the consensus assumption we are relying on is that the work is ‘Aristotelian’ insofar as it was “born around Aristotle” and “supervised” by him, and is therefore the result of interaction with Aristotle’s own views on the Athenian case in the *Pol.* (views that in the *AP* are generally a reflection of his later thinking)<sup>29</sup>.

In the *AP* the account of the origins of the *politeia* draws on theoretical models defined in *Pol.* and *NE* for the history of the *poleis* when “people were under kingships”<sup>30</sup>. The most instructive chapter is 41, which closes the historical section of the treatise. Here Aristotle does not use the term *politeia* when describing the history of Athens at the time of Ion “when the people were first divided in the four Tribes and appointed the Tribal Kings” (41.2). It is the

<sup>26</sup> Lord 2013: 191. On this passage see also Contogiorgis 1978: 86, 147 n. 3; Poddighe 2018a; Cairns-Canevaro-Mantzourani 2020: 555.

<sup>27</sup> Saxonhouse 2015; Poddighe 2018a.

<sup>28</sup> Poddighe 2014: 18-22. Here we defend the position of those who believe that Aristotle himself drafted the section describing historical evolution (chapters I-XLI) and most probably the entire work (Keaney 1992: 12-14, 39-40; Mara 2002: 310-311).

<sup>29</sup> Poddighe 2014: 116-127.

<sup>30</sup> On the parallel between *Pol.* 3 and *AP*’s local history see Mara in this volume.

stage common to the history of other *poleis*, as stated in *Pol.* 3 (1286b 8-12), in which “people were under kingships”.

Only “in the time of Theseus” (41.2) does the *polis* provide itself with a “form of *politeia*” (πολιτείας τάξις). This was the transition from monarchy to aristocracy. Then for the first time there “took place a slight divergence from the kingship” (41.2). Fragments 2-4 of the *AP* are consistent with this reconstruction. They state that “Theseus relinquished monarchical government” and that he “instituted an assembly of the whole people”<sup>31</sup>. Of this *politeia* Aristotle defines the criteria for access to the magistracies as “in all respects oligarchical” (2.2). These are in fact criteria such as wealth and nobility of birth (3.1, 3.6). Although Aristotle does not refer to written laws, the notion of political justice (the *dikaion*) is recognizable. Aristotle traces the emergence of the first *politeia* to the definition of a criterion shared by a group of equals, led by Theseus. This group defined the principle of their commonality by the fact that they possessed wealth. A commonality from which the “many” (*polloi*) are excluded, of whom Aristotle states that because they were excluded from offices “they were discontented for they found themselves virtually without a share in anything” (2.3).

The reference to the theoretical models defined in *Pol.* and *NE* is also evident with regard to the subsequent *metabole* of the Athenian constitution. The distinguishing mark of the “second” *politeia* is that a code of laws was first published (41.2). The status of that *politeia* is recognized starting with the definition of rules governing access to offices (4.2-3) and the definition of the sovereign body which, for the first time, coincides with “those who provided themselves with arms” (4.2). The criterion that defines the group of equals has changed: whereas before equality was measured by wealth and nobility of birth, now the equality of those who could provide for their own armament and could therefore be included in the rank of the hoplites is legitimized. It is evident that natural factors do not play any role in the historical development of the Athenian *politeia*, nor in the historical succession of *politeiai* traced in *Pol.* 3<sup>32</sup>. It is clearly no natural inclination in the Athenians, the Argives or the Spartans towards certain political orders that led Athens, Argos or Sparta to experiment in the mid 7th century with a form of political organization that recognized political sovereignty and the equality of all those who could provide for their own armament<sup>33</sup>. On the contrary, when Aristotle detects historical evidence of a widespread aspiration for equality in the Greek *poleis* he ascribes this both to

<sup>31</sup> More generally, on the relationship between the Athenians and Theseus in Athenian texts see Atack 2014: 340-355; 2019: Theseus, although a commanding individual, is here represented “as a king who also cares about the shared life of the city, to *koinon*”.

<sup>32</sup> Murray 1993: 201. See Accattino 1978; Polansky 1991: 329; Moggi 2012; Poddighe 2014: 21 n. 16, 61-66. *Supra* n. 15.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. von Leyden 1985: 18-25; Lintott 1992: 118.

historical factors such as the change in the military structure of the *poleis* which have grown larger and to the “sort of justice” (cf. 1288a 20-22; *supra* p. 290) that arose in those contexts, since they needed to recognize the equality of all those who could provide for their own armament (*Pol.* 1297b 16-28).

In this context, Aristotle’s assertion that the first *politeia* originated at a time “when men sought for some form of commonwealth” is to be understood in the sense that the *polis* as a community of citizens united by a *politeia* evolved historically because of political choices made by its members based on their idea of political justice as equality.

For Aristotle, the *polis*’ history is essentially the history of its *politeiai* as are its conceptions of political justice, it is not a natural history of the *polis*<sup>34</sup>. Whenever possible, Aristotle traces the history of a *politeia* from what the laws and social practices in force reveal about a certain view of political justice. Only if there are laws – even unwritten ones – that reflect a certain view of political justice is it possible to recognize the *politeia* (*Pol.* 1292a 32; cf. *NE* 1180a 34-b 2) and this follows from the fact that these laws do not stem from nature but from choices (*NE* 1134b 18-1135a 6; 1103a 19-21). The construct of *politeia* allows us to identify the *polis*’ historical development (but only after it has deviated from kingship) making its foundational political choices intelligible. And the *nomoi*, which are the product of these choices, become a “unit of measurement” through which it is possible to reconstruct the history of the *poleis*<sup>35</sup>.

## 2. The *politeia*’s intelligibility in the *polis* as a “community of interpretation”

When the idea of justice also envisages justice for others, that is, when the community “shares” an idea of legality, the order (*taxis*) of the *polis* (i.e. the *politeia*) becomes intelligible.

Of the many definitions of *politeia* as the order of the city, the most comprehensive is the one Aristotle formulates in *Pol.* 4 where *politeia* is defined as “an arrangement in cities connected with the offices, establishing the manner in which they have been distributed, what the authoritative element of the regime is, and what the end of the community is in each case” (1289a 15-18).

Here Aristotle explicitly relates the definition of the *politeia* to the problem of its intelligibility and states that the manner in which the *polis* distributes the offices, the authoritative element of the regime and the end (*telos*) of the *polis* in each case are “things that are revealing of the *politeia*”. The verb δηλόω

<sup>34</sup> Poddighe 2014: 21 n. 16, 61-66; Poddighe 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Lisi 2000: 37-53.



expresses the action of revealing. Among the “things that are revealing of the regime” Aristotle lists a group of laws “those in accordance with which the rulers must rule and guard against those transgressing them” (1289a 18-21). This passage is generally understood in the sense that those laws “are distinct” from the things that are revealing of the *politeia*<sup>36</sup>. But regarding the interpretation of this statement by Aristotle Carnes Lord is correct in pointing out that here “the general argument is concerned to establish the *connection* between laws and the regime; and Aristotle seems to be thinking specifically here of ‘constitutional’ laws regulating the tenure of officials and protecting against legislative subversion of the regime”<sup>37</sup>. Those laws are therefore among the things that are revealing of the *politeia*.

According to Aristotle, it is possible to determine the status of a constitution by identifying the criteria governing access to the sovereign body and offices, the purpose of the actions (*praxeis*) decided in the city, and finally the ‘constitutional’ laws. Aristotle applies this morphological scheme in the *AP*. As I have tried to show elsewhere, the descriptive pattern found in the *AP* appears to be based on the rules of access to the civic body and offices, on the purpose (*telos*) of the political action of the sovereign body (or its leaders) and above all on what Lord calls the “constitutional laws”<sup>38</sup>.

It would be wrong, on the other hand, to assume that Aristotle’s is a pragmatic constitutionalism<sup>39</sup>. It is in fact quite clear that the *politeia* for Aristotle is not just a set of institutional rules (or laws). Aristotle’s interest is in *politeia* as a living constitution and embodiment of community values<sup>40</sup>. At the core of his enquiry is the *politeia* as a “total social fact”, as a “product of citizens’ acquiescence and reason”<sup>41</sup> which is therefore capable of accounting for the *polis* as a “community of interpretation”<sup>42</sup>.

In approaching the *politeia* as a synthesis of social, economic and institutional relations, Aristotle draws on the tradition that preceded him. This tradition focused on the value of the *politeia* as the spirit that informs associated life<sup>43</sup>: it is what brings citizens together and identifies the values “that citizens have most in common”<sup>44</sup>; it is what defines the “particular way of life” of each *polis*<sup>45</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> See Poddighe 2014: 331-332, for a *status quaestionis*.

<sup>37</sup> Lord 2013: 98 n. 4.

<sup>38</sup> Poddighe 2014: 16-24, 106-154.

<sup>39</sup> See on this point Frank 2007: 45-50; Polito 2017: 36-57.

<sup>40</sup> Sundahl, 2009: 467ff. On Aristotle’s constitutionalism see Frank 2007: 45ff.; Lisi 2008; Ventura 2009: 105ff.; Bodéüs 2010: 145ff.; Lewis 2011: 25-49.

<sup>41</sup> Keyt 1987; Frank 2005: 40.

<sup>42</sup> Ober 1993: 130.

<sup>43</sup> Munn 2000: 136.

<sup>44</sup> Cfr. Antiph. dk, 87 B44. Fouchard 1997: 370-371.

<sup>45</sup> *Pol.* 1295b 1; Ober 1993: 131; Kraut 2002: 15. On the role of *philia* as a deliberate “sharing of a common way of life” see Lucchetta 2011: 21-22, and Irrera in this volume.

However, in Aristotle's theoretical considerations this value of the *politeia* which he 'finds' in tradition acquires yet another meaning. Aristotle makes the *politeia* the main interpretative category through which to reconstruct and narrate the history of the *polis*. This is a new development in Aristotle's approach. It is the idea that the study of the *politeia* is the best way to discover and describe the historical form of a political community. In other words, it is the belief that the *politeia* represents the most heuristically fecund category for the purpose of investigating the history of the *polis*. It is more fecund because it is more intelligible. Aristotle first of all recognizes the quality of intelligibility of political choices, which he contrasts with the unintelligibility of non-historical factors such as nature, chance and necessity. How to define the condition of intelligibility? For Aristotle, it is the condition proper to political deliberations and actions that can be investigated historically and theoretically because they are decipherable. It is the condition proper to things that are within our reach. Aristotle examines the deliberations and actions carried out by the *polis* with respect to its own end (*telos*), which is the common good. The selection of actions that are "revealing of the *politeia*" follows a single criterion: they are complete actions, i.e. they have achieved the end (*telos*) they have set for themselves in accordance with a certain political justice. They concern "issues that are open to deliberation and then to change"<sup>46</sup>.

In *NE* 3.5 Aristotle lists the matters on which man can choose by deliberation, but starts from the matters on which he does not deliberate<sup>47</sup>.

Here is what Aristotle says:

Now no one deliberates (a) about eternal things, e.g., about the universe or the fact that the diagonal of a square is incommensurable with the side, or (b) about moving things which occur always in the same way, whether necessarily or by nature or through some other cause, e.g., about the solstices and the daily sunrise, or (c) about things which [fairly regularly] occur now in one way and now in another, e.g., about droughts and rains, or (d) about things occurring by luck, e.g., about the finding of a treasure. Nor do we deliberate about all human affairs, e.g., no Spartan deliberates about how the Scythians would best govern themselves, for things such as this cannot occur through us (*NE* 1112a 22-31).

Here I agree with Bobzien's comments on the meaning of this passage: "Since deliberation is aimed at action that leads toward one of the agent's ends, hence deliberation is about things that are within our reach and that allow us to obtain our ends. Deliberating about any other things would be pointless. Aristotle argues this point repeatedly (*NE* iii 3.1112a21-b16, vi 2.1139b5-11; *EE* ii 10.1226a21-32), listing all the things that are not within

<sup>46</sup> Cammack 2013: 247. See also Price 2016: 442-443.

<sup>47</sup> Cammack 2013; Bobzien 2014; Poddighe 2014: 63-66; Price 2016.

our reach, in order to arrive by elimination at those that are<sup>748</sup>. Here is what Aristotle affirms:

We deliberate, then, about things which can be done by us, and these are the things which are left; for [moving] causes are thought to be nature, necessity, luck, and also intellect and every other cause through man. Now each man deliberates about the things which he can do by himself (*NE* 1112a 32-36).

The point of this second Aristotelian statement is that we deliberate on everything not included in the list of non-deliberable things, i.e., on things which remain off that list. But what “remains” is also that which is open to investigation by the historian, that which leaves a trace of itself<sup>49</sup>. The “things which are left” are the actions by means of which deliberations achieve a given end. They concern issues well defined by Cammack as those that “are open to deliberation and then to change”, that are “not at the hands of individual agents” and that “are questions for entire communities to decide”<sup>50</sup>.

Now, it is precisely those actions that by revealing the order (*taxis*) of the *polis* are also revealing of the *politeia*. For Aristotle, discovering and describing the *politeia* means knowing how to single out and connect those actions motivated by the common *telos* which “according to Aristotle, belongs to a complete thing”<sup>51</sup>.

How to define this function of the *politeia* of grouping together the actions? We could call this the ‘unifying quality’ of the *politeia* which makes it possible to connect actions that are linked together by the purpose they are meant to achieve through appropriate measures. These are the actions performed in order to attain a chosen end (*synteinein*) which is the proper end for that *politeia*<sup>52</sup>. It is precisely their *synteinein* that makes it possible to understand their meaning, that is, to understand how, starting from a new conception of political justice, the achievement of that chosen end changed the city and its *politeia*. When Aristotle investigates the history of a *politeia*, what he is most concerned with is both the ‘discovery’ of the means in relation to the end, and the ‘discovery’ of the end itself<sup>53</sup>. The actions converging towards the achievement of a given end, if rightly identified and explained, define the *politeia*, and this is what, according to Aristotle, gives unity to the city.

<sup>48</sup> Bobzien 2014: 90.

<sup>49</sup> Poddighe 2014: 64-66.

<sup>50</sup> Cammack 2013: 247.

<sup>51</sup> Cammack 2013: 242.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. *NE* 1144a 25; *Pol.* 1325a 15-16; *EE* 1226b 11.

<sup>53</sup> Natali 1989: 103-142; Leszl 1991: 76-77; Price 2016: 448.

### 3. *Politeia* and the unity of the *polis*

A fundamental theorem in *Pol.* 3 says that “it is looking at the *politeia* above all that the *polis* must be said to be the same” (1276b 10-11). Here Aristotle affirms that the city manifests its unity, i.e., reveals itself to be the same through its *politeia*. Aristotle’s assumption is that the unity of the *polis* cannot be sought in its natural or material components (territory, population). In *Pol.* 2 Aristotle already stated that “the city is not naturally one as some argue” (1261b 6-7)<sup>54</sup>. But it is in *Pol.* 3 that he proves his theorem with respect to its fundamental postulate, namely that what gives unity to the city is its *politeia*<sup>55</sup>.

The corollary that follows (I will come back to this) is the idea that the *politeia* has that ‘unifying quality’ that connects and reveals the causal links behind the actions concerning the city. But we must first consider the postulate that underlies this theorem: this is the assumption that what confers unity to the *polis* is neither the territory nor the population, but the *politeia*.

Let us consider *Pol.* 3 where Aristotle discusses the different interpretations of the problem of the unity of the city. Here he rejects the thesis that the unity of the city is to be sought in its spatial configuration or in its population (understood as the lineage of those who are citizens) or in the form of its civic body.

Aristotle identifies the limitations inherent in definitions that refer to the territory of the *polis* and its population. In *Pol.* 3.3. Aristotle makes this very clear and observes that “the most superficial way of examining this question” – i.e., the sense in which the *polis* ought to be considered one and the same – “concerns the location and the human beings constituting it; for the location and the human beings can be disjoined with some inhabiting one location and others another, and it will be still a city” (1276a 19-23). The inhabitants of a city could live scattered while retaining membership of the city. On the other hand, Aristotle goes on to say that it is not enough for several people to live in the same place to constitute a city “And similarly in the case of human beings inhabiting the same location, if one asks when the city should be considered one. For it is surely not by the fact of its walls – it would be possible to build a single wall around the Peloponnese” (1276a 25-28)<sup>56</sup>.

While Aristotle recognized the limitations to defining the *polis*’ unity based on territory and lineage, this does not mean that he considered territory or lineage as irrelevant to the problem of divisions within the *polis*. Indeed, Aristotle acknowledges that both can contribute to the generation of *stasis*. For instance, in *Pol.* 5 Aristotle states that “Cities sometimes fall into factional conflict on account of location, when the territory is not naturally apt for there

<sup>54</sup> Lord 1991: 56; Roochnik 2010: 275-278. See also Bertelli 2017: 88.

<sup>55</sup> See now Oliveira 2019: 42ff. and Duke 2020: 64-73, on the point that the *politeia* provides the *polis*’ political unity.

<sup>56</sup> Lucchetta 2011: 22ff.

being a single city” (1303b 8-9). There are territorial features that favor the development of distinct parts of the city<sup>57</sup>. With regard to lineage, in *Pol. 5* Aristotle observes that “Dissimilarity of stock is also conducive to factional conflict, until a cooperative spirit develops” (1303a 25-26). In neither passage does Aristotle claim that territory or descent are decisive elements or catalysts of *stasis* (in fact, for Aristotle they are accidental rather than essential properties of the *polis*), while he points out that there are other decisive aspects, namely, ethical and socio-economic conditions that determine the divisions between citizens<sup>58</sup>. For Aristotle, neither territory nor lineage can be used to define the unity of the *polis*.

In keeping with this position is Aristotle’s idea that the unity of the *polis* does not depend substantially on internal differentiations in the relationship between the city and its surrounding territory. Ugo Fantasia has observed, in this regard, that according to Aristotle the unity of the *polis* as a political organism is not threatened by any divisions of its territory and that therefore any contrasts between the central core and periphery are not discussed as factors that seriously jeopardize its unity<sup>59</sup>. Thus, Fantasia continues, the legislator’s tasks do not include integrating the centre and periphery of the *polis*, the city and the countryside (ἄστυ and χώρα) into a territorial unit, nor do the tensions that animate the relationship between the two constituent elements of the *polis*, when they exist, seem to enter its institutional framework<sup>60</sup>. Aristotle illustrates this position in *Pol. 7* where he considers as reasonable the following law: when the assembly deliberates on matters entailing the possibility of a conflict such as a war with a neighboring city, the inhabitants of the frontier zone are excluded from the vote; for they could not vote without their particular interests overwhelming their motives, while the decision must be made on general grounds only (1330a 20). In short, it is those who vote in the common interest who identify the city. Unity is political before it is physical, it is in the choices of the city more than in its physical form. Therefore, the “size of the city should not be overlooked by the political ruler” according to Aristotle (1276a 32-33).

<sup>57</sup> Ibidem 9-12: “At Clazomenae, for example, those in Chytus engaged in factional conflict against those on the island. So also the Colophonians and Notians. At Athens too there is dissimilarity: those living in the Peiraeus are more of the popular sort than those living in town”. For a historical commentary on the mentioned disputes see De Luna-Zizza-Curnis 2016, 315-322, and Lintott (2018: 104ff.) who properly observes that “Topography is probably not the primary cause of *stasis* in these two examples, but serves to reinforce conflicts arising from different economic interests or political sympathies”. See also Contogiorgis 1978: 187. Regarding, in particular, the dispute between Colophonians and Notians, I do not think it can be assumed, as Rogan (2018: 107ff.) does, that Aristotle, in order to demonstrate the centrality of the territory for the unity of the *polis*, dismisses the historical reasons for the dispute and emphasizes the natural ones. In my opinion, Aristotle’s reconstruction is consistent with the basic idea that the physical configuration of the *polis* may favour *stasis*, but is not its primary cause.

<sup>58</sup> *Pol. 5*, 1303b 15-17.

<sup>59</sup> Fantasia 1975.

<sup>60</sup> Fantasia 1975: 1255.

In *Pol.* 3, Aristotle also confutes the thesis that the unity of the city is to be sought in its population (understood as the lineage of those who are citizens) or in the form of its civic body. Against the unity of lineage Aristotle argues that, in addition to the possibility that there might be a city consisting of different lineages, even a city with only one lineage would be materially changeable due to the turnover of its inhabitants through births and deaths. Aristotle doubts whether it is correct to say that “the city is the same as long as the stock of inhabitants remains the same, even though some are always passing away and some being born” (1276a 34-36). It is therefore a mistake to base the city’s unity on the sameness of its members<sup>61</sup>. Moreover, belonging to a single lineage also does not seem to be an adequate criterion for legitimizing the condition of citizenship. Aristotle, again in *Pol.* 3, points out the inevitable theoretical difficulties attendant on recognizing citizenship based on the status of parents and ancestors. Indeed, the requirement that one’s forbears be citizens would lead to a receding series of historical references, the first of which could not be defined in the same way as those that follow, and would be entirely inapplicable in the case of new cities and colonies. Therefore, although

“as a matter of usage, a citizen is defined as a person from parents who are both citizens [...] and some go even further back, seeking two or three or more generations of citizens’ forebears”, this definition raises a great question that is “how that third or fourth generation ancestor will have been a citizen [...]”; for, at any rate, it is impossible that the definition from citizen father or mother should fit in the case of the first inhabitants or founders” (1275b 22-33).

Nor does Aristotle believe that the unity of the city is given by the shape and size of its civic body. On the contrary, it is a mistake to represent the unity of the city with the image of an unchanging civic body as some citizens may be expelled or new ones included. This is demonstrated by the fact that Aristotle considers exclusions and exiles functional to the unity of the *polis*, rather than dangerous alterations to an original form. This is a point worth exploring. It is often through exile that the unity of the *polis* is realized. For example, Aristotle’s defense of the *poleis*’ practice of ostracizing exceptional individuals, in order to maintain a form of well-balanced civic order, analogous to artistic beauty or musical harmony is based on a notion of political justice. Aristotle in *Pol.* 3 explains the widespread practice of exiling citizens who want to be ‘preeminent men’ in order to stabilize the *politeia* (i.e., to provide unity to the city), observing “this is something that is advantageous not only to tyrants, nor are the tyrants the only ones who do it, but the matter stands similarly with respect both to oligarchies and to democracies; for ostracism has the same power in a certain way as pulling down and exiling the preeminent” (1284a 34-

<sup>61</sup> Coby 1988.

38)<sup>62</sup>. The use of the body metaphor to describe the harmony produced by the expulsion of elements dangerous to the union of the city is revealing. Expelling elements that are not respectful of the *politeia* in force means eliminating its disharmonious elements as a painter does when he portrays a human face or body and depicts proportionate limbs instead of oversized ones: “For a painter would not allow himself to paint an animal with a foot that exceeded proportion, not even if it were outstandingly beautiful” (1284b 9-10). The only exception that Aristotle admits for avoiding exile is that any ‘preeminent men’ should be “in consonance with their cities” and “beneficial to their cities”, thus in consonance with a certain political justice (1284b 15-17). Otherwise, exile is preferable and provides for the unity of the *polis* as it guarantees the stability of the *politeia* (cf. 1284a 17-22; 1302b 15-21).

As Benjamin Gray makes clear, Aristotle is aware why some *poleis* chose to practice exile: the aim is to “assign priority to the elimination of difference” because “inevitable differences concerning the interpretation of necessarily ambiguous and polyvalent political and cultural values lead the political community to implode”<sup>63</sup>. The political unity of the city therefore depends on “the removal of dissenters and outsiders, including all those who advanced, supported, acted on, or symbolized other specific interpretations of indeterminate shared ideals”<sup>64</sup>.

Similarly, Aristotle justifies the practice of including new citizens, as long as they are intended to stabilize the *politeia* (if it is a democratic *politeia*) and thus provide unity to the city. This is the case with the reforms adopted by Cleisthenes and referred to in *Pol.* 6. In describing the measures that can be adopted to strengthen a democratic *politeia*, Aristotle discusses the question of naturalization, stating that “with a view to establishing this sort of democracy, those at the head of affairs customarily make the people stronger by adding as many persons as possible, admitting as citizens not only those who are legitimate but even bastards and those descended from a citizen either way” (1319b 6-12). In *Pol.* 3 Aristotle mentions that Cleisthenes had recourse to such measures recalling “the citizens created in Athens by Cleisthenes after the expulsion of the tyrants; for he enrolled in the tribes many foreigners and alien slaves” (1275b 35-37). Cleisthenes’ purpose for these naturalizations is the same as that of extending citizenship to the “bastards and those descended from a citizen either way”, their common goal being to strengthen the democratic *politeia*. In keeping with this principle, Aristotle in *Pol.* 6 also recalls Cleisthenes’ decision

<sup>62</sup> See Oliveira 2019: 51-52, on Aristotle and the practice of exile and ostracism as relatively justifiable methods to deal with the problem of a citizen who for some reason other than virtue becomes politically outstanding. Gray 2015: 120, concludes “Admittedly, Aristotle himself adds that lawgivers should organize *poleis* such that this remedy is unnecessary”.

<sup>63</sup> Gray 2015: 289.

<sup>64</sup> Gray 2015: 239.

to increase the number of territorial tribes and observes that “also useful with a view to a democracy of this sort are the sort of institutions that Cleisthenes used at Athens when he wanted to enhance the democracy”, i.e., that other and more tribes are to be created (1319b 19-24). To create new tribes clearly has the end of accommodating the new citizens<sup>65</sup>.

Now, what is it that emerges from Aristotle’s theoretical consideration of population and territory in relation to the unity of the *polis*?

Two data are clear: (1) the territory or the population (the *polis*’ natural constituents) cannot provide its political unity; (2) the deliberations taken in the historical *poleis* regarding these two components – whether with regard to exile or naturalization, or to increasing or decreasing the territorial tribes – are not in themselves capable of accounting for the history of those *poleis*, unless they are interpreted within the unitary framework provided by the *politeia* of those particular *poleis*.

If, in fact, these same deliberations taken in the historical *poleis* with regard to territory and population, are interpreted within the framework of the *politeia*, then the links between the actions (*praxeis*) united by “the chosen end” towards which they converge (*synteinein*) become evident and can be described causally. The *politeia* helps to unmask historical causation between the actions.

This brings us back to the corollary already mentioned, which states that, if we interpret the actions taken in the historical *poleis* within the framework of the *politeia*, these actions acquire historical meaning.

In historical research it therefore becomes essential for Aristotle to identify the purpose of actions and to detect the actions leading to the achievement of that purpose (above p. 297 and n. 53). As a historian of the *politeiai* Aristotle must be in the position to discover (and explain) the aim (*telos*) of the actions taken by the good legislator whose task consists “in correct positing of the aim and end of actions” and in “discovering the actions that bear on the end” (*Pol.* 1331b 27-29). This search can be complicated because it may well involve discovering “not just a single means to the goal but a sequence of means and ends, through a series of steps where each means becomes in turn itself a goal”<sup>66</sup>. How then to find the unity of the *praxeis*?

Cleisthenes’ reform as fully described in the *AP* is a clear example of how the unity of the *praxeis*, their *synteinein*, only manifests itself if these *praxeis* are interpreted within the framework of the *politeia*. Aristotle states that Cleisthenes’ reform was intended to mix the citizens and that therefore Cleisthenes “first divided the whole body into ten tribes instead of the existing four, wishing to mix them up” (21.2). The territorial division had the same

<sup>65</sup> See Poddighe 2014: 210-222.

<sup>66</sup> Price 2016: 448.



purpose: Cleisthenes “also portioned out the land among the demes into thirty parts” in order to make “all the inhabitants in each of the demes fellow-demesmen of one another” (21.4). This direct relationship with the demes would have obscured the origin of the new citizens, so that the Athenians “might not call attention to the newly enfranchised citizens by addressing people by their fathers’ names, but designates people officially by their demes” (21.4; cf. *Pol.* 1275b 35-37). According to Aristotle’s reconstruction, this measure would even have discouraged such investigation for “those who want to inquire into people’s clans” (21.2)<sup>67</sup>.

In Aristotle’s view, the chosen end towards which the actions of Cleisthenes (supported by the Athenian demos) converged was to ensure that the tribal registration of citizens (particularly naturalized citizens) could not be questioned on the grounds of origin. Cleisthenes wanted to mix new and old citizens in such a way that the former could not be distinguished from the latter (*AP* 21.4). A ‘mixing’ between the members of the new and enlarged community was achieved through the creation of alternative ties to those of blood and based on territorial affiliation (*AP* 21.2; cf. *Pol.* 1319b 6-32).

What distinguishes Aristotle’s reconstruction is the fact that he unifies it by including information that is revelatory of the new democratic ‘state’ but which was not recorded by other authors<sup>68</sup>. An example of this is his explanation of the provision requiring the identification of citizens according to their deme. Aristotle has his own information on this measure, since he is the only author to report on it and this could not have been deduced from the laws in force at the time of his writing<sup>69</sup>. This is also the case for the rule whose effect was to discourage people from investigating the origins of citizens’ (*me phylokrinein*), not to be understood as a written law, but as the manifest expression of a new democratic *ethos*. The demotic system, by making the demos the “place of origin” of all citizens, meant that family origins no longer had to be enquired into (*AP* 21.2) and thus allowed the citizens of the new and enlarged community to represent themselves as equals.

The chosen end of Cleisthenes’ reform only becomes clear once the actions converging and achieved for that purpose are interpreted within the framework of the *politeia*. Within the framework of the *politeia* Aristotle is able to discern a new sentiment, a new *ethos* with respect to the question of family origins. In short, through the telling of the story of a *politeia* Aristotle connects and unites facts that would otherwise be disjointed (as in *Pol.* 3 and 6). By composing a unified view of Cleisthenes’ actions within the framework of the *politeia* Aristotle can rearrange pieces of information (and fill in the gaps) from

<sup>67</sup> Discussion in Poddighe 2014: 220.

<sup>68</sup> Poddighe 2014: 217-222.

<sup>69</sup> Poddighe 2014: 216-222.

Herodotus, who was his main source<sup>70</sup>. What does he take away from Herodotus (5.66-73)? It is the collective character of Cleisthenes' action and the support of the demos for Cleisthenes<sup>71</sup>. Aristotle's reconstruction, however, recomposes the scant information found in Herodotus in a more meaningful way. Aristotle orders and explains the individual measures mentioned by Herodotus, i.e., the increase in the number of tribes and the distribution of the demes among the tribes; Aristotle places those actions together within the framework of the *politeia* and emphasizes the aim of reforming of the demos, which reveals the 'chosen end' of the whole effort. Aristotle in fact believed, as Huxley showed in his seminal 1972 article, that facts have intrinsic interest and value, but they "are even more significant when, having been shifted and ordered, they enable us to find explanations by looking for cause"<sup>72</sup>. This is what Aristotle does when he places the data collected on Cleisthenes' reform into the frame of the *politeia* and arranges them in order to look for cause.

Huxley defined Aristotle's method as "a more philosophical" approach to history<sup>73</sup>, and for that reason, I would like to conclude by comparing the unifying feature of the *politeia* with those philosophical qualities which, according to Aristotle in the *Poetics*, are missing in the traditional historical narrative.

In famous chapter 9 of the *Poetics* (1451a 20-b 6), Aristotle judges history to be less philosophical than poetry – that is to say, less theoretically significant because it narrates facts as such, without removing them from the dimension of dispersion and chance, without searching for the most significant (and sometimes least apparent) causal links, confining itself to a linear scansion of time instead of conferring meaning and value<sup>74</sup>. Aristotle addresses a second problem with historical narrative in chapter 23 (1459a 18-36): this is the fact that historical narrative is dominated by temporal unity rather than by the unity of action. The problem is that the only unifying operator available to historical narrative is the temporal frame, the *chronos*, within which its *genomena* are arranged. Aristotle's point here, as Lockwood understood, is that "history takes chronologically unity as an organizing principle of its account, a principle that lacks a *telos* or aim that necessarily or logically connects events"<sup>75</sup>. For, as Aristotle states, "it makes a great deal of difference whether something happens because of another or after another" (1452a 20-21) and "often one thing happens after another, without any end in view" (1459a 27-29)<sup>76</sup>.

<sup>70</sup> Poddighe 2010; 2014: 217-222.

<sup>71</sup> Hdt. 5.66-73. For a systematic comparison between Herodotus' and Aristotle's reconstructions see Poddighe 2010; 2014: 216-222.

<sup>72</sup> Huxley 1972: 158-163 (159). See also Armstrong 1998: 448ff.; Carli 2011: 325ff.

<sup>73</sup> Huxley 1972: 160. See also Carli 2011.

<sup>74</sup> Carli 2011: 325ff.; Vegetti 2011: 100-101; Poddighe 2014: 67-68.

<sup>75</sup> Lockwood 2017: 321 (see also 323-324 for Aristotle's contrast between chronological and practical unity).

<sup>76</sup> On the importance of recognizing the chosen end (*telos*) see Carli 2011: 339-340.

For a long time, scholarly interpretations of these famous passages in the *Poetics* differed, but today the dominant view is that Aristotle's contrast between poetry and history "opens the possibility of a different kind of history, one oriented to not only particulars but universals"<sup>77</sup> and of a historical account with an epistemological value similar to (or only slightly inferior to) poetry<sup>78</sup>. Themes like the *politeia* can be the subject of a more theoretically satisfying historical narrative, insofar as it is possible to identify the shared *telos*, the origin and development of the *politeia*, within an overarching perspective. Identifying the *politeia* as the most suitable category for a historical account of the *polis* clearly responds to Aristotle's need to add the epistemological qualities described in chapters 9 and 23 of the *Poetics* to an account of the *polis*' history: an account which, through the narration of actions converging towards a chosen end (τὸ αὐτὸ συντείνουσαι τέλος), places the description of the events within a synoptic vision (συνοραῶσθαι) capable of bringing out the most significant causal links or the universals (τὰ καθόλου)<sup>79</sup>. Within the framework of the *politeia*, the historian assembles the meaningful facts. Through the history of the *politeia*, the historian recounts the history of the *polis* according to an overall, diachronic view that does not rely (only) on temporal unity.

<sup>77</sup> Frank-Monoson 2009: 245.

<sup>78</sup> *Status quaestionis* in Frank-Monoson 2009; Carli 2011: 321 n. 6; Lockwood 2017; Poddighe 2019b, 102-106. See Mara in this volume.

<sup>79</sup> On the role of the "synoptic vision" in Aristotle's thought see Poddighe 2019b: 117-120; 2020: 17-50. Useful considerations in Polito 2017: 31-32, 34.

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