

BOOK REVIEW

Aristotle's Politics: A Critical Guide. Edited by THORNTON LOCKWOOD and THANASSIS SAMARAS. Cambridge Critical Guides. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. 259. Hardcover, \$99.99. ISBN 978-1-107-05270-3.

The subtitle 'A Critical Guide' is misleading for this collection of essays by various authors, as it does not present a systematic guide to the interpretation of key issues in Aristotle's *Politics*. 'A Critical Sampler' would be more appropriate, as the editors themselves describe the volume as "a showcase of the state of scholarly reflection on Aristotle's *Politics* from several disciplines" (2). They also note that the contributors do not share a "homogeneity of opinion about Aristotle's *Politics*" (2).

Given the patchwork nature of this collection, the definitions of crucial but slippery terms should have been established. The lack of such definition often leads to a false portrait of Aristotle as sympathetic to democracy. For example, the term 'free' (*eleutheros*) is used without explanation to simply mean 'non-slave,' ignoring its "peculiar sense" in the *Politics*: "the gentleman, the man who is fully free from all constraining toil"¹ (cf. *Politics* VII.1328b-29a). Failure to appreciate that *all* workers—farmers, craftsmen, merchants, as well as manual laborers—do not qualify as 'free,' and therefore should not qualify as 'citizen,' lends a falsely democratic tinge to such statements as "the ideal of an equal share of power between all citizens" is "central to Aristotle's conception of polity and the ideal city" (Destrée, 222). Pierre Destrée does note that citizens must not be workers in Aristotle's ideal city (223), but does not pursue the full ramifications. Josiah Ober also admits that merchants, agricultural workers, rowers and craftsmen are excluded from citizenship in the ideal city, but still declares it to be "a (very specific) kind of democracy" (237). This democracy is so specific as to be unrecognizable to the ancient Athenians, whose democracy was maintained by the fleet in defiance of the oligarchic coup of 411 BCE, and whose postwar Assembly was dominated by craftsmen.²

¹ G. de Sainte Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World From the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests* (Cornell University Press, 1988), 116-17.

² As claimed by M. Balme, "Attitudes to Work and Leisure in Ancient Greece," *Greece and Rome* (1984) 147; cf. B. Strauss, *Athens After the Peloponnesian War* (Croom Helm, 1986) 47, M. Markle,

Further contributing to a false pro-democracy picture is the omission of the *Politics*' Hesiodic decline of democracy, a 'deviant' constitution to begin with, through several progressively more deviant versions (*Politics* VI.1318b-19b). For example, Ober refers to democracy, without qualification, as "the best of the three common and corrupted regimes" (225). Ryan Balot acknowledges that "the first type of democracy" is "governed by a large, middling class of farmers with little leisure to engage in civic activity," but goes astray in characterizing them as "allow[ing] the law to rule rather than majority decree" (113). Aristotle states that "being poor, [the farmers] have no leisure, and therefore do not often attend the assembly," so "the right persons rule:" the best democracy is really an aristocracy in disguise. The more participatory a democracy is, the more it deviates; the "far inferior" democracies are dominated by craftsmen, traders, and laborers, since as city-dwellers they can "readily come to the assembly," as in the postwar Athenian democracy of Aristotle's youth.

Thanassis Samaras (chapter 7) does depart from the usual picture (140: "Aristotle's understanding of polity does not indicate sympathy for or partial acceptance of democracy"), but his sensible conclusions are marred by a failure to define until late in the essay his frequent term "banausics" (134: "free citizens who engage in a trade or art for their living"), where at the beginning it seemed equivalent to "potential citizens" (123). Similarly, Bobonich's otherwise fine examination of Aristotle's analogies for describing the judgments of the many is marred by a failure to define "the middle class" (e.g. 145). While it may be a literal rendering of Aristotle's *hoi mesoi*, a clear definition is required to rid the phrase of its post-Industrial Revolution connotations.

There are other sins of omission, such as the occasional failure to distinguish between 'the best' existing constitution(s) and Aristotle's ideal city (from which all existing constitutions deviate: *Politics* IV.1293b), as by Lockwood (chapter 4), Mulhern (chapter 5) and Arlene Saxonhouse (chapter 10). Pellegrin in considering politics as a natural science (chapter 2), also fails to consider Lloyd's important distinction between the normative and descriptive uses of nature (*physis*) in the *Politics*.³

With these serious caveats in mind, there is still much useful information to be gleaned. J.J. Mulhern's examination of the meanings of *politeia* in the *Politics*

"Jury Pay and Assembly Pay at Athens," in *Crux: Essays in Greek History Presented to G.E.M. de Ste. Croix* (Duckworth, 1985) 275.

³ G. Lloyd, "The Idea of Nature in the *Politics*," in *Aristotelian Explorations* (Cambridge 1996) 184–204.

makes one acutely aware of the inadequacy of most translations (e.g. “constitution,” used here). Deslauriers carefully considers Aristotle’s characterization of rule over women as both ‘aristocratic’ and ‘political.’ Lockwood breaks from the usual focus on Athenian democracy with a look at the regimes of Crete and Carthage in Book II, and their significance for the larger question of change in regimes. Shütrumpf (chapter 9) and Saxonhouse raise important questions about the meanings of ‘justice’ in the *Politics*; Balot examines the character of the ‘mixed regime’; Destrée considers Aristotle’s practical advice on improving existing constitutions, even tyrannies; and Ober argues for a continuity between the *Politics*’ descriptions of the ‘natural’ evolution of human society, the historical evolution of actual regimes, and the ideal city.

Given the character of this collection, I would recommend it to scholars familiar with the *Politics* and Greek political history/philosophy, not to a novice reader looking for a *vade mecum*.

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