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# More than Justice: The Structural and Systemic Organization of Aristotle's *Polis*.

## *Más que justicia: la organización estructural y sistemática de la* polis *de Aristóteles.*

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***Resumen:*** *Este artículo pretende reconstruir la concepción de la* polis *encarnada en la teoría política de Aristóteles. Para ello, se examina analíticamente aquellos argumentos significativos y textuales de la* Política *empleados por su autor a efectos de desplegar una aproximación estructural y sistemática a la justicia en la comunidad política. Finalmente, en la conclusión se ofrece una caracterización integrada y definicional de la* polis *de Aristóteles como medio de captar el concepto clave de constitución.*

***Palabras clave:*** Polis, *justicia, constitución, Aristóteles.*

***Abstract:*** *This paper intends to reconstruct the conception of the* polis *that embodies Aristotle's political theory. For that purpose, it analytically examines those significant and textual arguments of the* Politics *employed by its author to display a structural and systemic approach to justice in the political community. Finally, in the conclusion, it is offered an integrated and definitional characterization of Aristotle's* polis *as a way of grasping the key concept of constitution.*

***Keywords:*** Polis, *Justice, Constitution, Aristotle.*

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At the end of the second chapter of the Book I of the *Politics*, Aristotle places justice between the highest goods that the city provides. Justice promotes human perfection (*Pol.* 1253a31-32)[1] and sustains the reproduction and preservation of happiness and the elements of political community (*EN* 1129b17-19). Deprived from law and justice, man employs its forces for unjust ends, degrading its condition and reaching the lowest levels of barbarism and inhumanity (*Pol.* 1253a33-37); justice, on the contrary, is "the bond of men"[2] in organized political and communitarian life (37-38).

It is clear that the polis is founded on justice. However, to put it that way is not enough, because, besides its ethical foundation, which are the bases of political community? what determines its specific and original nature? To that question, and thanks to Aristotle, we can answer: polis is said in many ways (1276a23-24). On theoretical grounds, it could be characterized in accordance with four reconstructed senses: (1) the polis is a political form; (2) the polis is a social and historical system; (3) the polis is an order based on justice; (4) the polis is a composed community which aims at a political and ethical end. This paper reconstructs and analyses the textual and argumentative aspects of the first three particular meanings and concludes with the integrated last sense that, as I argue, summarizes and gives relevance to the concept of constitution in Aristotle's political theory.

## 1. The polis is a form

> For, since the state is a partnership, and is a partnership of citizens in a constitution (*koinonía politón politeías*), when the form of the government changes (*gignoménes hetéras tōi eíde*), and becomes different, then it may be supposed that the state is no longer the same, just as a tragic differs from a comic chorus, although the

[1] Justice is the key concept of Aristotle's *Politics* in Miller's interpretation: *cf.* Miller (2001). Miller defines Aristotle's perfectionist principle as follows: "a thing is better to the extent that it promotes human natural ends" (Miller, 2001: 57).
[2] B. Jowett's translation in J. Barnes' edition, *The Complete Works of Aristotle. The revised Oxford translation*, one volume, digital edition, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995 (sixth printing, with corrections).


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> members of both may be identical. And in this manner we speak of every union or composition of elements as different when the form (*eíde*) of their composition alters... (*Pol.* III, 3, 1276b1-b8; *v.* 9-13.)

Born from archaic proto-communities, the polis was generated and gradually developed its complete form. This progressive formation of the political community, posterior in time and anterior with respect to the priority of the species in definition, was in a latent mood in the natural institutions of family and village and led, by nature, to the not less gradual determination of a common space. That is why Aristotle considers the determination of a common space, a *koinonía*, a histo-biological fact and a precept for social research (1260b36-41): "We will begin by the natural beginning (*arkhé*) of the subject. The members of a state must either have all things or nothing in common, or some things in common and some not. That they should have nothing in common is clearly impossible, for the constitution is a community, and must at any rate have a common place-one city will be in one place, and the citizens are those who share in that one city." So the city is an aggregate of pre-existing communities and of associated human beings who have things in common (*koinón*), that is, things that are shared by the participants (those who take part in: *koinoneín*) in a cooperative and reciprocal scheme[3].

## 2. The polis is a system

*EN* IX, 8, 1168b31-34: "... and just as a city or any other systematic whole (*sýstema*) is most properly identified with the most authoritative element in it, so is a man..." The conceptualization of the polis as a system is strongly emphasized in this passage of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which shows a conceptual connection that, in a certain

[3] That is the "natural principle" that Aristotle uses when he confronts Plato in *Pol.* II: *v.* esp. 1260b41 ff.; *Rep.* V, esp. 457b-469e; and see also 416d-417b, 423c, 462a-b, 421d-423b, 462a-e, 427d ff. To sum up, the polis is a substantial, multiple and unitary form socially stratified and cooperatively composed: *cf.* Canto-Sperber (1993), Stallei (1991); on self-respect as an additional motive for comparison between Plato and Aristotle concerning political unity, see Nussbaum (1980).


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way, can be found in the genetic explanation of *Pol.* I, 2. In the latter it is affirmed the natural existence of the polis (given its complete formation and end) and the political nature of man (as a political animal); lastly, in a sort of conclusion of the naturalistic argument, it is also postulated the priority of political community by linking the city's development, first by nature to the house and each of us, to the notion of an organic totality that defines *per se* the proper name and function of each part[4].

The beginning of *Pol.* I, 7, despite the salient opposition to Plato's political vision, is not an easy task to grasp:

> ... the rule of a master (*despoteía*) is not a constitutional rule (*politiké*), and [...] all the different kinds of rule are not, as some affirm, the same as each other. For there is one rule exercised over subjects who are by nature free, another over subjects who are by nature slaves. The rule of a household is a monarchy, for every house is under one head: whereas constitutional rule is a government of freemen and equals (*eleuthéron kaí íson*).

In contrast, a careful and retrospective examination of the analytical chapter 3 can positively confirm that the first sub-system of the political community is the original community identified with the household (*oikía*), and that the domestic administration or household management (*oikonomía*), the first of its components, is, by definition, focused on the use of domestic goods (1256a10-12). At the same time, the household consist of free men and slaves and, according to the method of analysis chosen by Aristotle (cf. 1253b4-5 and ff.)[5], its minor elements, the first and minimal parts that order it, are the three kinds of domestic relations: the relation between master and slave, the relation between husband and wife, and the relation between father and

[4] On civic priority thesis and for some different reconstructions and interpretations of Aristotle's political naturalism and genetic propositions, *v.* Kraut (2002: ch. 7); Miller (2001: ch. 2), Keyt (1991). It might be drawn a parallel between Aristotle's conceptualization of the polis in terms of a *sýstema* and Niklas Luhmann's own conception of a social system: *v.* Luhmann (1998: esp. p. 220).
[5] On Aristotle's method in Book I, *v.* Wolff (1999: 48-49).


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children. Furthermore, and closely linked to the economic administration, there is a second component, the so-called chrematistics, or the art or technique of acquiring useful goods.

Not only does domestic administration serve property, but also chrematistics, which depends on the first one, has an important function in the same sphere. In fact, the latter is a part of the household, "for no man can live well (*eú zén*), or indeed live at all (*zén*), unless he is provided with necessaries" (24-25). And as in the arts with respect to lifeless instruments, so it is for a subordinate in the execution of its function. Therefore, as property in general (*ktésis*) is a number of instruments, and goods and possessions (*ktéma*) are instruments for life, so the slave (*doúlos*) is a living possession which operates as a previous instrument to the remaining instruments. The distinction proceeds consequently until reaching its essential base: production (*poíesis*) and action (*práxis*) differ specifically; the instruments from which it is obtained more than their mere use are called means of production (v.g. a shuttle), whereas the practical instrument is considered a possession, like a dress or a bed, because it is used in the interest of an ulterior action. Such is the slave's condition, "a subordinate for action"[6] who submits, by nature, that is, structurally, to master's will. An interposed paragraph in the central argument announces the future role of technique and exhibits the talent of Aristotle for thinking slave's function from the perspective of a general and organized plan (*cf.* 33-1254a1). Enslavement was, in this view, the systemic presupposition of city's political life[7].

[6] (Translation is my own.)

[7] It exists a simple science of the master applied to the use of slaves; consequently, those who don't need to attend to the household will be free to act politically or to philosophize: *cf.* 1255b20 ff. The structural dimension of Aristotle's theory of slavery has diverse interpreters and commentators: see Gigon (1965) and García and Jiménez (1994); for general considerations on recent tendencies of interpretation and new proposals of internal, conceptual and textual readings, see Wolff (1999: esp. pp. 96-102). I think all of them have a certain deficiency in trying to analyze Aristotle's theory of slavery without taking into account the general and structural plan of the polis that rigorously coincides with the internal organization of the *Politics*.
Needless to say, ancient societies were based on enslavement: on the subject beyond the *Politics* and as it was discussed by ancient historiography, *v.* esp. Austin and Vidal-Naquet (1986: esp. part I); Finley (2003); Ste. Croix (1988: esp. pp. 15-323 [First Part]).


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Maybe everything would look different if critics had concentrated on the internal and conceptual structure of Book I, that is to say, on the polis' structural plan that the same book draws. In line with that sequential arrangement, the analysis of the slave as a systemic element of property is followed by the study of *oíkos* as a complete sub-system (1256a, *ab initio*): "Let us now inquire into property generally, and into the art of getting wealth [chrematistics], in accordance with our usual method, for a slave has been shown to be a part of property." It is discussed whether chrematistics is a part of economics or something different, but the fact is, as it was affirmed early (I, 3, *v. supra*), that chrematistics differs from the administrative science of *oíkos* because the former refers to the various ways of getting useful goods (*khrémata*) and the property (*ktésis*) that, like wealth, embraces a lot of parts[8]. After another classification now concerning the different ways of life established on the basis of the supply and acquisition of goods and of the alimentary habits of animals and men, Aristotle attributes to nature the reason for which animals have a certain acquisitive capacity and, as nature does nothing incomplete and nothing in vain (b20-21), the *scala nature* dictates that the very existence of plants and animals has to serve human life, since men need food and make use of them. The subject could be separated into two fundamental types: there is a species of acquisitive and sporadic art that by nature is part of domestic administration, for it cares for those indispensable resources for life and useful resources for the civic community and the household. It amounts to true wealth (*ploútos*), an enough sum of economic and political instruments (*orgánon plethós*) acquired by means of a natural art that, as any other instrument and art, is limited in quantity and magnitude. Besides that art, there is another species of acquisitive art, also called chrematistics, which arises from commercial practice and technique, is unnatural and has no limit applied to wealth

[8] In Meikle's opinion, the full discussion cannot be dissociated from Athenian social and historical formation: "Athens had significantly developed the production and circulation of commodities by the fourth century BC and we shall see that Aristotle has a body of thought directed specifically at analyzing that development." The theoretical formulation of Aristotle tends, therefore, to understand the fabrication and trading of merchandises in his own time with reference to "... the historical social form acquired by the product of labour in a society whose social relations are those of private labour and private exchange" (Meikle, 1991: 156-157). Aristotle is justly recognized as a pioneer of economic science: see, e. g., Polanyi (1957).


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and property. At this point it is untangled the double valence of a good, a principle for its study as a merchandise and as a strict possession intended to use (*cf.* 1257a6-13). Aristotle observed that the use-value of a thing is due to its intrinsic qualities, while its exchange-value is not; the problem was then to explain how things that are naturally incommensurable reveal their artificial comparability in a posterior interchange.

The process of development of social forms runs parallel to the process of evolution of exchange's modes (13 ff.): in the household community, where all things are possessed in common, exchange is not necessary; but, when the community starts to growth, the necessities of those who were spread generate the appearance of barter (*metabletiké*), the first form of reciprocal change in which useful objects are changed for other useful objects. This first form was neither unnatural nor part of chrematistics, for it was only practiced to complete self-sufficiency. However, as a result of inevitable foreign contacts, because of the importation of lacking goods and the exportation of what is produced to excess, an incipient monetary and commercial economy originates. Then, following the dissemination of current money (*nómisma*) and its legal coinage, appeared the second form of exchange and, consequently, of chrematistics: retail trade (*kapeliké*), the activity through which different sorts of goods are equalized by means of a unified measure of value, that in a first instance it was operated in a simple way, but later redirected to obtain a gain (*kérdos*) in the market[9].

[9] The unlimited accumulation (*aúxesis*, 1257b38) of wealth subverts the economic activity of domestic management as a sub-system. Extensively, the polis' economic activities are regulated, in Aristotle's social philosophy, by an additional notion: reciprocity (*antipeponthós*, *cf. EN* V, 5). In this manner the economic theory of chrematistics reaches a high level of abstraction at explaining the passage from household's economy to city's economy (Meikle, 1995). This process, seen by Susemihl and Hicks as one corresponding to a "necessary development" (*The Politics of Aristotle*, London, 1894 [repr. 1976], p. 29, *apud* Meikle, 1991: 164, n. 10), could be interpreted as a complete formulation of just exchange supported by a material and objective theory of value: *cf.* Meikle (1991); Marx (1990: 72). Despite the ambivalences presented in his analysis of value and the social relations that embodied it, Aristotle was capable of identifying the last and most advanced form of polis' social and economical evolution: "... usury, which makes a gain out of money, and not from the natural object of it. For money was intended to be used in exchange, but not to increase at interest. And this term interest, which means the birth of money from money, is applied to the breeding of money because the offspring resembles the parent. That is why of all modes of getting wealth this is the most unnatural" (*Pol*. 1258b2-8).


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The so many times criticized Aristotle's justificatory realism might instead be taken as a conscious assumption of what had come to be an inexorable process of commercial exploitation ("mercantilization") of ancient city's social relations. For the same reason, neither could his mentality be associated with an archaic and traditional spirit that, once he became the authorized voice of fourth-century social thought, was definitely distant from him. Aristotle prevented his contemporaries not against the transformation of chrematistics into a mere transactional scheme, but against the invasion and menace that the logic of unbridled acquisition represented to justice in the political community[10]. In other words, the logic of accumulative acquisition put at risk the conception of the polis as an auto-regulated system of reciprocal cooperation that required, in virtue of its constitutive matter, a constitutional and stable form[11].

It would have been an illusion to pretend that the transformation of the historical forms of exchange did not have any effect on the natural substance of the polis. A conscience of its impact survives in the repetition of chrematistics' axiology that closes the discussion (1258a38-b1): "There are two sorts of wealth-getting [...]; one is part of the household management; the other is retail trade: the former is necessary and honorable, while that which consists in exchange is justly censured; for it is unnatural, and a mode by which men gain from one another." Like a tragic irony, the historical development dictated its proper course, and Aristotle was doomed to dive into the crisis and to rethink the material foundations of communitarian order and political struggle[12].

[10] There is always a mixed component, ethical and political, conveyed in the notable examination that has a preponderantly economic nature and coordinates both lines of argumentation exposed in *Pol.* I, 8-10 and *EN* V, 5. Others interpreters, less inclined to think of Aristotle as an analyst of economy and more like a moralist who tried to oppose the current trends of his time, see his economic contribution otherwise: *cf.* Finley (1978).

[11] The art of getting wealth pervades the autonomous function of domestic economy and, because of the ethical implications of the activity that aims to the supply of pleasures, affects the right use of human faculties, hence transmuting the essential end of all human activities (*cf.* 1257b38 ff.)

[12] It seems evident now that the deep significance of Book III and especially of the so-called empirical part of the *Politics* (Books IV, V and VI) does reside in the historical realities and conditions that they allow to emerge from the textual and conceptual reconstruction of Aristotle's political theory (Tierno, 2008).


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## 3. The polis is an order of justice

*Pol.* I, 2, *in fine*: "... justice is the bond of men in states (*he dé dikaiosýne politikón*); for the administration of justice (*díke*), which is the determination of what is just (*toú dikaíou krísis*), is the principle of order (*táxis*) in political society." Justice is political, for the institutionalized administration of justice expresses the organization of community and its legal practice is implemented by the trials through which are judged the public acts of citizens.

The coupling of the city *qua* a self-sufficient system and of the city *qua* a just order becomes evident further, when in *Pol.* VII, 8 Aristotle distinguishes between the parts of the city and the necessary elements ascribed to it[13]. If any doubt exists about the substantial character of the city, it should be noticed what is said at the initial paragraph of the above reference: "As in other natural compounds the conditions of a composite whole are not necessary organic parts of it, so in a state or in any other combination forming a unity not everything is a part which is a necessary condition." Those who live in a community must have something in common, even if they take part in it equally or unequally; for instance, food, land or other similar things. And as the craftsman manipulates its instrument producing the work in the material he has received, so the property and its parts (its animated and unanimated constituents) are necessary for the end (collectively) aimed. This subtle adaptation of teleology to the polis, which makes possible the separation of the final cause from the efficient and material causes, creates the conditions for eliciting the material elements responsible for the activities without which the city might not exist: food, arts, the various means to guarantee social order and coercion, divine worship and, in the last place "and most

[13] "Unlike some philosophers he [Aristotle] does not identify essential properties with necessary properties. For him some necessary properties are 'intrinsic concomitants' (*kath' hauta sumbebēkota*) that belong to something necessarily, because of its essence, but are not themselves part of the essence (*Met.* 1025a30-34)" (Irwin, 1980: 38; see also *Met.* Z, 10-11, *De an.* 402b16-18). Furthermore, "'part' is used in several senses" (*Met.* 1034b32; and see Δ, 25). Aristotle, as Guthrie comments, "was impatient of fixed terminology"; he proceeded "to retain the popular sense of a world even after laying himself under the necessity of adapting it to his own technical requirements." (Precisely, that was the case in the use of the world *eídos*: *cf.* Guthrie, 1981: 105, n. 1.) It is important to say that such a typical attitude did not prevented him from recovering the fundamental senses of a world and, as he and his disciples did in Book Δ of the *Metaphysics*, enumerating them.


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necessarily of all, there must be a power of deciding what is for the public interest, and what is just in men's dealing with one another" (1328b14-15). This set of functions, makers and executors fosters the formal principle that activates the multiple and teleological development of the compound, and provides the necessary resources for life and the autarchic community (*cf.* 15-23).

Being an outcome of a dynamic interaction made of inclusions and exclusions, social plurality originates the different forms of government in connection with the different forms of life that every city bears (a35-b2):

> ... for a state is a community of equals, aiming at the best life possible. Now, whereas happiness is the highest good, being a realization and perfect practice of excellence, which some can attain, while others have little or none of it, the various qualities of men are clearly the reason why there are various kinds (*eíde*) of states (*póleos*) and many forms of government (*politeías*), for different men seek after happiness in different ways and by different means, and so make for themselves different modes of life and forms of government.

The last excerpt conveys the idea that the administration of justice is related to a specific mode of ordering or organizing politically the life of the polis (order or organization, i. e., *táxis*) and, as it is stated in *Pol.* III, 3, polis and *politeía* must be equated. Previously, in *Pol.* I, 2, it was asserted that justice equates with law (*nómos*, 1253a32-33). So the political constitution could be denoted in the same way as legal justice, that is, as a *táxis*, a system of government by which it is set the precise goal of the community (1289a15-18; *cf.* also 1278b8-15; 1290a7-13): "A constitution (*politeía*) is the organization (*táxis*) of offices in a state, and determines what is to be the governing body (*kýrion*), and what is the end (*télos*) of each community."[14] The

[14] The next lines add the principle of authority that yields the normative content of legality:


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constitution presupposes an order; the order, means for government and for attaining an end; both, a code of justice; and justice, the political function of judgment or the capacity of discerning what is just and what is not.

## 4. The Aristotelian polis' organization

The polis is a plural community of citizens determined by a formal principle of order (justice) which organizes the different social groups in a specific system of government (a constitution) and directs it to the end that that particular human compound collectively wants to achieve. The principle of determination by form permits to apprehend the political principle of organization by the constitution. Politics, then, is the order imposed by the authoritative part of the city to the communitarian whole. For the political community is a social formation growingly differentiated into families, associations, and stratified classes which results from historical evolution and cultural and technical progress. So the introductory Book I of the *Politics* is a definitely textual proof of the manner in which Aristotle's political theory approaches to the analytical principles of polis' natural genesis and development in order to reveal its systemic and formal structure[15].

After a careful analysis of certain relevant aspects of Aristotle's political theory, the historical meaning of the key concept of constitution (*politeía*) comes out. From the beginning, justice was the bedrock of the community and of the remaining ethical virtues manifested in the *éthos* socially sanctioned and built. The character of

> But laws are not to be confounded with the principles of the constitution; they are the rules according to which the magistrates should administer the state, and proceed against offenders. So that we must know the varieties, and the number of varieties, of each form of government, if only with a view to making laws. For the same laws cannot be equally suited to all oligarchies and to all democracies, since there is certainly more than one form both of democracy and of oligarchy. (1289a18-25.)

Hence, in a derived sense, law (*nómos*) is an order (*táxis*), and good government (*eunomían*), good order (*eutaxían*, 1326a29-31; *cf.* 1287a18).

[15] For a nearby structural and materialist interpretation, *v.* Heller (1998: 176 ff.)


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each community's member[16] reflects the cohesive reciprocity and the cooperative friendship fostered by familiar, associative and civic bonds. Political justice, the polis' organization and its institutions, embodies the common law that governs the constitution. In the city—in the political community, in the state—, the citizen's action is coordinated and processed by its pertinence to the distinct groups and parties that intervene in the democratic deliberations of the popular assembly. This expanded and final characterization almost sums up the core of Aristotle's political, ethical and economic thought. The city—the political community, the State—has a moral end, namely, the good life of the functional parts of the organized whole. On account of this systemic and structural interpretation of the *Politics*, a condensed sense of polis has thus emerged: the political constitution forms and orders the material and real conditions of existence that pervade the entire collective dimensions of every human life.

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[16] Citizens and no citizens members, political and no political Aristotelian parts of the community, are being considered here, as the preceding context indicates.


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