



SOPHIA
AND
PRAXIS

THE BOUNDARIES
OF POLITICS

J.M. PORTER

*Sophia
and
Praxis*

The Boundaries of Politics

Edited by J. M. Porter

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Sophia and Praxis: The Boundaries of Politics

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Introduction

J. M. PORTER

In order to understand and resuscitate the political dimension of human existence, it is necessary to perceive the relation between *sophia* (wisdom) and *praxis* (action). The common project of these essays is to demonstrate in various ways that *sophia* and *praxis* are related in a true politics. Since politics had its origins in a specific period and cultural context, it is necessary to devote some attention to the philosophic history of the pertinent terms. But since symbols and meanings are subtly changed and even transformed through history, philosophical analysis of contemporary terms and uses is also necessary. Thus, through a blend of conceptual history and analysis, these essays present a philosophic defense of a politics conceived as a public and reasoned collective action.

Reflection on the nature of politics originated in the classical Greek experience of the polis. It is Jürgen Gebhardt's thesis that this original political experience, prior to Plato and Aristotle, contained the fundamental ingredients that would lead to Greek philosophy. The centrality of the political realm can be seen in the original "political" use of such terms as *sophia* and *theoria*. Through an examination of these and other terms, Gebhardt inquires into how politics was discovered, and how with this discovery there grew the "differentiating experiences that retrospectively would become the symbolic form of philosophy."

With a careful examination of the original texts, Gebhardt traces the emerging Hellenic self-understanding of the experience of politics. The tragedies, as one example, clearly represent the politics of the citizen and the emergence of a new perception of the forces in the human soul. With the disintegration of the polis, tragedy as a representation of man's nature and

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Preface

Founded in 1979, the International Seminar for Philosophy and Political Theory is an independent academic association. It conducts programs of common research linking philosophy to the problems of politics. Representing no particular school of thought, it seeks collaboration with theorists and scholars whose interests, in our critical contemporary situation, go beyond narrow methodological, textual, or ideological consideration to consider the larger perennial questions concerning man, society, and history. The Seminar's sole commitment is to the pursuit of truth wherever it may be found. Toward this end it is devoted to the historical and philosophical study of man's search for his humanity and its order in history and society.

The purpose of the Seminar is to promote research in two primary areas:

1. The analysis of modern thought and experience through the philosophical investigation of the underlying symbolic forms of existence and their social ramifications.
2. The development of a coherent philosophy of culture and history which can provide an empirically based, theoretically sound analysis of sociopolitical order and disorder.

With assistance from the Rockefeller and Earhart Foundations, the Seminar held its preparatory session at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Study and Conference Center at Lake Como, Italy, in March 1980. Papers were read on the theme "Modern Images of Order and Disorder," and a multiyear program of research on "Politics and Its Boundaries" was discussed and established. With assistance from the Kemper Educational and Charitable Fund, the Earhart Foundation, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the first

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groundwork session was held in Montreal in May 1981. This session was devoted to the topic "*Sophia and Praxis*." The 1982 meeting, held in Germany, examined the topic "Rhetoric, Persuasion, and Political Action." The publication of future volumes is envisaged.

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condition was replaced by philosophy. There was in the early mystic philosophers, Gebhardt contends, an incipient universalism that transcended and survived the death of the polis. The initial experience and discovery of politics had led to the philosophy of politics. Thus, *sophia* was not viewed by the Greeks as the opposite of *praxis*. *Sophia*, historically, grew out of the needs and experiences of the polis. There was no polarity between inactive, abstract, scientific, and theoretical knowledge versus active, particular, and practical application. Gebhardt's essay suggests one possible perspective for understanding politics and the relation of *sophia* and *praxis*.

Even though we live in historical continuity with the past and even though the explication of the original meanings and context enables us to distinguish more clearly modern mutations, just as Gebhardt argues, we cannot simply transplant those meanings and context on to modern soil. Yet, the integration of *sophia* and *praxis* is a precondition for a politics understood as reasoned political action, that is, a politics of principles and beliefs. It is crucial, accordingly, to examine in contemporary terms the reason-action relationship or nexus, and this is the topic of Frederick Barnard's essay. Unless one can establish that there is in some sense a causal relationship between reasons and action, the idea of political action is not conceivable. Barnard presents the case that reasons can account for human action and for its subspecies political action because reasons—not rationalizations—are constitutive of action.

Through examining the concepts of rationality and causality, Barnard shows that reasons are contained in action, and thus human actions are made intelligible as meaningful conduct and are not reducible to mechanical or natural processes. Because political action has the same anatomy as individual action, it becomes at least conceivable to view politics as a reasoned activity of which an account or explanation can be given. Just as a citing of socioeconomic or psychophysical "causes" could not make intelligible what a person does for reasons, political action cannot be reduced to such mechanical or natural origins. Joint beliefs and principles or a political ideology, Barnard argues, can disclose the meaning of a political act in the

same manner that a reason can account for an individual act. Political discourse, he concludes, is actually a form of rational discourse used to rally “support by providing persuasive grounds for concerted actions.” The nature of political discourse becomes the theme for the next essay.

Bertrand de Jouvenel has said that the “elementary political process is the action of mind upon mind through speech.” George Graham and William Havard discuss the relation between political knowledge and action in contemporary political speech and find, in agreement with Barnard, that the relation between *sophia* and *praxis* has been radically altered with the predominance of various types of “scientistic” theories of knowledge. They demonstrate that such modern epistemological considerations as an instrumental conception of reason, the separation of object and subject, and the absolute distinction between the factual and the evaluative have rendered nugatory, in their words, the relation between *sophia* and *praxis* in the practical areas of ethics and politics. Modern political discourse and rhetoric, as a consequence, atrophy.

Rhetoric is needed for political discourse and for translating political and ethical knowledge into *praxis*. After exploring the Aristotelian connections among philosophic knowledge, deliberation, education, action, and rhetoric, Graham and Havard probe the question whether contemporary politicians can be statesmen. The possibility—illustrated by brief treatments of Franklin Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Ronald Reagan—is dependent, they reason, not only on the statesman’s rhetoric, which must be grounded on knowledge and deliberation, but on a people who have a “developed common sense (*phronesis*)” sufficient to respond to the deliberative arguments of the statesman. In this manner, *sophia* and *praxis* can be related through the statesman’s art of rhetoric, and politics becomes possible.

In modernity the *sophia-praxis* relationship has been liable to two particular derailments. One is the constant attempt to separate and oppose one to the other. In the course of unfolding the arguments for their own topics, Gebhardt, Barnard, and Graham and Havard have all noted and criticized such efforts,

and they have shown some of the detrimental consequences for politics. The second is the attempt, particularly common among Marxists, to conflate *praxis* and subsume *sophia*. Thomas Flanagan's essay is devoted to the first derailment, and Athanasios Moulakis dissects the second.

For this reason, the contribution by Flanagan shifts the emphasis from the philosophic origins and nature of the relationship between *sophia* and *praxis* to a direct examination and critique of a modern and perhaps prevailing conception of that relationship. Nobel laureate Friedrich Hayek has been, arguably, the most popular and famous thinker of the contemporary period who has criticized the view that a scheme of certain knowledge (a parody of *sophia*) could be applied to social reality in order to remake and construct a new society (a parody of *praxis*). There are various schemes of this sort, but all share a common philosophic structure, which Hayek calls "constructivism." Flanagan explicates Hayek's critique of constructivism and provides some needed philosophic support by relating Hayek's position to the *sophia* and *praxis* nexus.

Constructivism can be seen in the propensity to conceive of social reality as an organization amenable to the created and imposed rules of an administration. In contrast, Hayek suggests that society is a spontaneous order with rules that have evolved and are superior to any that could be devised and imposed. Language, the common law, and the market are classic illustrations of such orders. While describing Hayek, Flanagan also amends, but he does hold that Hayek's concept of constructivism is an excellent diagnosis of the tendency in modern political ideologies to have society remade through the use of state power and according to some plan or blueprint, which is in turn based upon an hubristic claim of knowledge.

In Flanagan's helpful phrase, "politics is the field in which men encounter each other in action," and the field is obliterated when *sophia* becomes certain knowledge and *praxis* becomes making or producing. Thus, he argues and concludes that Hayek's critique of constructivism provides a necessary diagnosis of a modern disposition and is a "step toward the emergence of politics from ideological eclipse."

Moulakis is concerned with the second derailment of the *sophia-praxis* relationship, that is, the modern view that *praxis* is devoid of any connection with *sophia*. This is a conception of *praxis* derived from the primordial level of activity: labor and work. There is in modern culture, Moulakis asserts, a pervasive glorification of work, at least in the sense that work purportedly supplies the essential meaning to human life. The emergence of this modern conception of *praxis* as work-activity is traced, starting with the classical view of *praxis* as found in Aristotle. Here *praxis* is understood as "a manner of life qualified and informed by philosophy." Through the Stoics, St. Benedict, Descartes, Hegel, and Marx, Moulakis delineates the threads that are finally woven into the motif that work-activity is the highest mode of *praxis* and the essential activity of man. *Praxis* understood as the glorification of work, Moulakis makes evident, is ethically incoherent as a way of life. *Sophia* is required.

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JURGEN GEBHARDT

*The Origins of Politics
in Ancient Hellas:
Old Interpretations
and New Perspectives*

1

We begin our reflection on politics appropriately with reference to (thereby evincing our reverence for) Aristotle: "It is clear that the *polis* is the most perfectly actualized partnership and that man in its utmost actualization is a *zoon politikon*."¹ While these words were written at the end of the lethal crisis of the classical or citizen-polis, they were honed by necessity from the fundamental experience of the Athenian order perceived as an autonomously acting unit of citizens. They contain the paradigm of man's humanity and its order. The *eu zen* (good life) in polis-existence does not refer simply to the brute fact of man's partnership through necessity with other men, as many moderns seem to think; rather, the citizen-polis provides the social framework for that *public* interaction—the political friendship of no-etic (rational) selves—which enables man to grow into a *spoudaios* (mature person) and into the above mentioned "utmost actualization" of man's humanity. It will be argued here, in fact, that the classical reflections on politics were founded on the prior paradigmatic historical existence of the polis.² Therefore, reflection on the origins of politics must trace the classical experience of politics to its roots, carefully abstaining from the methodological fallacy of interpreting the origins of politics by means of the later language of politics. Moreover, these reflections are essential for historical understanding of the human condition today.³ This classical comprehension is the necessary corrective for current common opinion that tends to reduce politics to an opaque flux of power relations in the public domain.⁴

Only by attention to the classical emergence of political reflection from the prior paradigm of the polis can we understand that we still live in the structural continuity of the historic experience of differentiated reality. "By explicating the political," as Christian Meier explains, "the Greeks formed the eye of the needle world history had to go through in order to reach modern Europe." The discovery of a realm of being that coincides with the realm of human interaction and culminates in a common or public dimension of activity was the historical event that exposes the very constituent of man's humanity as it partakes of a more comprehensive structured reality. This event made paramount to men the differentiated realm of being and defined politics in terms of the structure of human existence newly perceived as the tension between order and disorder, fullness and want, mortality and immortality, and time and eternity. Under the aegis of *ta anthropina* man became increasingly able to act out the whole range of his existential potential, from libidinous drives to ordering reason. This new experiential mode of the differentiated reality of God, nature, man, and society opened up to man's activities a realm of being (i.e., politics), which enabled Western man to start the enterprise of modern civilization. Naturally, the realm of politics is neither purely secular nor purely sacred. It is the area of "in between" that comprises the two poles of existential experience, time and eternity. However, because the innerworldly pole of earthly existence is more successfully managed, there is tangible public proof of its reality. The other dimension of politics is in contemporary thought constantly denied; it is present only in the various modes of more or less desperate searches for the measure that would guide and structure human activities within a more and more chaotic political realm, but these modes are devoid of the very substance of humanity that had once unfolded in the public realm of society and history.

In this respect, the discovery of politics in the Hellenic polis seems to be of considerable interest. To a certain degree, the reflective remembering of the origins of politics may strengthen our awareness of what politics is all about. Certainly the science of politics of Plato and Aristotle is intrinsically intertwined with

the unfolding of the political realm in Hellas, but the two are not the same phenomenon. The science of politics did not come into existence coevally with the realm of politics. It was coeval with the crisis of the Hellenic political culture, which occurred at the time when the political realm was still embedded in the undifferentiated cosmological world and was about to disintegrate under the impact of losing its spiritual dimension in the course of a civilizational growth pursued with imperialist ruthlessness, last but not least by Athens. The differentiating event of politics, discovered in the rather limited spatio-temporal area of the Hellenic poleis, had already touched off, on the one hand, a considerable bulk of institutional, behavioral, and symbolic explications of the immanent structure of the realm of politics. On the other hand, politics had inspired a continuously moving process of differentiating experiences that retrospectively would become the symbolic form of philosophy ranging from Xenophanes, Parmenides, and Heraclitus to Plato and Aristotle. To put my argument most pointedly: Mankind explicates its humanity in the course of history, and thus this permanent step in the symbolic self-explication of mankind's humanity, philosophy, originated in politics. The Sophists as well as Plato and Aristotle participated in this movement of consciousness toward the differentiation of reality, unfolding the experiences of this movement in a paradigmatic symbolism of representative humanity. They created political philosophy—the discursive presentation of rational (noetic) acts, acts of thought concerning the order of man in society and history. This achievement raised the first historical experience of the realm of politics to a level of importance that transcended the original spatio-temporal social order of its origins. Although the polis-civilization was historically all but wiped out, its experience continued the process of Western civilization.

To support this thesis I will begin with an analysis of the central philosophical terms, *sophia* and *theoria*. Herodotus's use of these terms is instructive: "There came to Sardis all the Sophists from Hellas who then lived in this or that manner, and among them came Solon the Athenian man (*aner Athenaios*), he having made the laws for the Athenians at their re-

quest, left his home for ten years setting out on a voyage, as he said, for the sake of *theoria*,” to see the world. After having led Solon around among his treasures, Croisos addressed him: “Our Athenian guest, we have heard much of you by reason of your *sophia* and your wanderings, how you have wandered around the whole world for the sake of *theoria* as somebody who philosophizes (*philosophēon*).”⁵ *Theoria*, *sophia*, and *philosophēon*, in this context, are not technical terms in any respect; they are words of the common parlance among educated people. Yet, there is a meaning implied that points to the specific quality of the emerging self-understanding of the Hellenic culture and that relates, through the reference to Solon as the Athenian lawgiver, philosophizing to the ordering experience of the beginning of the sixth century.

This ordering experience evolved from the crisis of the aristocratic archaic polis and brought forth, in the long run, the very *nomos* of the Hellenic polis, “which has the fairest of all names, *isonomia*.” The management of public affairs was made common, and power was given to the people because “there is the whole in the majority.”⁶ Herodotus has Demaratus, the exiled king of Sparta, describe the *politikon* of the Greeks to Xerxes, who wanted some information about the military quality of his enemy: “By use of *arete* (excellence),” Demaratus says, “Hellas defends herself from poverty and despotism,” and “*arete* comes of their own seeking, the fruit of *sophia* and strong *nomos*.”⁷ The *nomos* of the polis is set against the *nomos* of the Persian despots who rule their subjects by means of the whip while the free Greeks are only afraid of one *despotes*, the law (*nomos*).⁸ Thus, Herodotus traces the great struggle between the Hellenes and the Barbarians, in the last analysis, to their antagonistic ways of life, the Hellenic one being the life of the polis, to *politikon*.⁹

When Pericles, at the height of Athenian greatness, claims in his eulogy “that our polis as a whole is the school of Hellas,” he extols the general involvement in *ta politika*. “You will find united in the same persons an interest at once in private matters (*oikeia*) as well as in politics (*ta politika*), and in others of us who give attention chiefly to business, there is no lack