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The Politics (Book Review)

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The Politics, Aristotle; Carnes Lord, tr.
University of Chicago Press, 1984, 284 pp. \$35; \$9.95. 0-226-02667-1

This is a readable translation of *The Politics*. So far as one can do so with a densely written Aristotelian text marked by several apparent lacunae, Lord has succeeded in making Aristotle clear and straightforward in contemporary English. At the same time he has provided about thirty pages of notes on the text that elucidate references, cross-references and that comment (sparely but informatively) on difficult passages. Two elementary maps and a brief outline of the argument of the book are also included. A glossary of key English terms, along with the transliterated Greek will be useful both for the Greekless novice and for the reader who wants to check Lord's usage against that of other translations. So if the reader is slightly put off by "regime," used often today in a slightly pejorative sense, he or she can quickly discover that it translates *politeia* and has the following inclusive senses: "the organization of offices in a city, particularly the most authoritative; the effective government or governing body of a city; the way of life of a city as reflected in the end pursued by the city as a whole and by those constituting its governing body." The entry goes on to say that the usual translation of "constitution" is misleading because constitutions are typically written. Ernest Barker and others do use "constitution"; but then the British speak of an unwritten constitution. Lord's translation, then, seems keyed to American English; given the problems of political hermeneutics apparent from the consideration of *politeia*, this should be a good thing for American audiences. In other cases Lord employs terms that may puzzle the American undergraduate; for example "popular," (*demotikos*) which the student may take to mean widely liked or admired, has for Lord the older sense of pertaining to the *demos*, the common or poorer people. Clearly the student new to Aristotle or the Greeks is going to need some guidance, given our own generally laudatory use of "democratic." Here he will get some assistance from the glossary, and very little from the introduction; the intervention of an instructor or at least of a secondary source will be required.

Such problems, however, are not of Lord's making but have to do with the immense difference between the modern conception of politics and Aristotle's. Lord's translation differs significantly from Ernest Barker's which is perhaps the most widely used one in print. Published in 1946, Barker's edition has extensive prefatory essays, notes, and appendices. Barker was particularly interested in Aristotle's alternative to Platonic political philosophy and that theme emerges quite strongly in his text. But he gives the reader too much guidance, perhaps, so that he or she may not be able to see so clearly the many themes of *The Politics* that escape the Plato-Aristotle confrontation. In recent years there has been a revival of Aristotelian political philosophy associated with such otherwise diverse thinkers as Hannah Arendt, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Leo Strauss. If one were to teach a course on the viability of Aristotelian political philosophy that juxtaposed Aristotle, his more recent admirers, and critics of neo-Aristotelianism such as Jürgen Habermas, one would be better off with Lord's somewhat ascetic but accurate text than with Barker's overfull one.

Looking at the translation of specific terms, as opposed to the format and scholarly apparatus, one begins to wonder whether it is in principle possible to get a translation of Aristotle just right. Aristotle himself was a notorious neologizer and a transformer of the accepted sense of words (although this is less true in the ethical and political writings than in the metaphysical ones); so perhaps a translator would be justified in introducing a novel vocabulary to mark Aristotle's

distinctive meanings. In any case, I am left with a few doubts about some of Lord's choices that slightly qualify my admiration for most of them. Should *phronesis* be consistently translated as "prudence" for example? This leads Aristotle to say that "the excellent ruler is good and prudent, while the [excellent] citizen is not necessarily prudent" (91, Bk. 111, ch. 4). The more usual translation is "practical wisdom"; the phrase can be found in Lord's glossary entry under "prudence." But "prudent" might suggest the quality of a careful investment manager or financial counselor rather than that of the statesman. Similarly, what should one do with the beginning of Aristotle's lapidary declaration that "Since we see that every city is some sort of partnership (*koinonian*) ..." (35, Bk. I, ch. I)? Here a gremlin seems to have done his work on the glossary. There is no entry for "partnership" but if one looks carefully one finds one for "common" (*koinos*) that articulates its connections with public and community and directs us to the non-existent entry on "partnership," a direction also encountered under "participate" (*koinonein*). Jowett translates "community" and Olof Gigon, in a recent and authoritative German translation, uses the even stronger "*Gemeinschaft*." Barker settles for "association" which is general enough to range over the concept of community and the possibly more contractual and minimal notion of partnership. Clearly the actual states that Aristotle discusses, torn as they were by conflict between rich and poor and factionalized in other ways, were hardly species of an idealized *Gemeinschaft*. But neither were they minimal associations for specific purposes (*Gesellschaft*). As the body of *The Politics* makes clear, Aristotle supposes that the moral tone or character of a city does indeed involve, generally speaking, a commitment to the good of the city as such. And he says this in the conclusion of his opening lapidary formulation; but perhaps that could be made even clearer by the use of "community."

One of the major strengths of Lord's translation has to do with its clarity concerning the topics of education, culture, and music. Lord argues in a recent book that can serve as a companion to this translation that the account of education and music in Books VII and VIII of *The Politics* is a crucial part of Aristotle's argument, and not merely an addendum as some commentators have suggested (*Education and Culture in the Political Thought of Aristotle*, Cornell University Press, 1982). So Barker's title for the apparently incomplete Book VIII, "The Education of Youth" suggests an unnecessarily restricted approach to Aristotle's painstaking inquiry into the content of the good, leisured life in the city (of course there are no titles for any parts in the Greek). Lord's translation, notes, and his other book (in effect a commentary on Books VII and VIII) make it clear that Aristotle went some way in developing a highly articulated account of the culture of a good city. As Lord points out, such an approach is distinctly classical, differing both from an individualistic liberalism that would consign aesthetic questions to the private sphere, and from those forms of political activism which see the aesthetic as a more or less direct vehicle of political propaganda and agitation. I would disagree, however, with Lord's claim that Aristotle's emphasis on the artistic and cultural aspect of the political life is totally foreign to modern concerns. Outside of the liberal tradition, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Habermas and Derrida are among the most original and influential thinkers concerning the nature of the political. All of them are deeply concerned in one way or another with both the aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics. This last reflection suggests another possible way of incorporating Aristotle into courses dealing with more contemporary materials. The topics of cultural and artistic modernism and postmodernism are of great current interest. An attempt to come to terms with these changing cultures and *epistemes* (to use Foucault's term) could very

usefully examine their classical alternatives and predecessors; Lord has helped to throw into relief Aristotle's version of that alternative.

In a relatively brief (24 pages) introduction, Lord provides some suggestions about how to read and place the text. These will be of interest to the advanced student and scholar but not to the freshman or sophomore. He argues correctly, I think, against Jaeger's tendency to take the Aristotelian works apart into more and less Platonistic parts written at different times. In a more speculative vein he attempts to show that Aristotle was closely in touch with a variety of political developments of the fourth century. he presents both a philosopher who gave us a *Politics* that is relatively unified in texture and purpose and a man who was himself experienced and practically wise in political matters. He suggests that Aristotle was *not* (contrary to the usual assertions) mesmerized by the Greek world, since he respects Carthage and "maintains a resolute silence" about many aspects of the Greek *polis*. One might argue that such things do not constitute a very large departure from the world of the *polis*; in any case, the question of whether Aristotle's political thought is basically limited to his own time or has wider implications is one to be further pursued.

What sort of course might be taught with such a text of *The Politics* that asked a question something like "Aristotle's *Politics* today?" I follow the sequence of the text, modifying some of Lord's terms in his "Analysis of the Argument" in suggesting some topics and readings:

Aristotle's Politics

the city and man, Book I; the household, man and woman, Book I; mastery, slavery and labor, Book I; the best regime, Book II; justice, Book III, types or regime and political institutions, Books IV, V, VI; the best life: philosophy music, poetry, Books VII, VIII;

Other Readings

selections from Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*; selections from Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*; Hegel "Lordship and Bondage" from *Phenomenology Marx, 1844 Manuscripts* Leo Strauss, "Aristotle's *Politics*" in *The City and Man*; selections from John Rawls, *Theory of Justice*; selections from *The Federalist Papers*; *Nichomachean Ethics*, *Poetics*; Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*; Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art* Jürgen Habermas, *Lectures on Postmodernism*

This seems to me to be the best English version of the *Politics* for classroom use and it will clearly be indispensable for the student of Aristotle.

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