

Historical Representations in Aristotle's Political Theory

Las representaciones históricas en la teoría política de Aristóteles

Gerald Mara¹

Georgetown University (USA)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3328-9683>

Recibido: 16-07-2021

Aceptado: 28-12-2021

Abstract

Excepting the first half of *Athēnaiōn Politeia*, whose authorship remains controversial, there are no works of historical inquiry in the Aristotelian corpus. This contributes to the impression that Aristotle's political theory abstracts from history. This judgment is reinforced by statements in the *Poetics* that diminish history and the historians in favor of poetry and the poets. I offer a more nuanced interpretation, relying principally on an intertextual reading of the *Athēnaiōn Politeia* and Book 5 of the *Politics*. Both texts direct the reader's attention to history, though in dramatically different ways. I argue that Aristotle's uses of history are essential to his conversational engagements with the narratives that his various audiences construct in order to make sense of their experiences and to clarify options for choice. Read in a dialogic spirit, these texts underscore the possibilities and hazards of civic agency and preserve the importance of history, as well as poetry, for Aristotle's political theory.

Keywords: history, poetry, social science, political theory.

¹ Gerald Mara (marag@georgetown.edu) is Affiliate Professor of Government and Dean Emeritus of the Graduate School, Georgetown University. He has written *Between Specters of War and Visions of Peace* (2019), *The Civic Conversations of Thucydides and Plato* (2008), *Socrates' Discursive Democracy* (1997) and numerous journal articles and book chapters. He offers many thanks to Jill Frank for comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

Resumen

Exceptuada la primera mitad de la *Athēnaiōn Politeia*, cuya autoría sigue siendo discutida, no hay obras de investigación histórica en el corpus aristotélico. Esto fortalece la impresión de que la teoría política aristotélica se abstrae de la historia. Esta opinión es reforzada por las afirmaciones contenidas en la *Poética*, que atenúan la importancia de la historia y los historiadores en favor de la poesía y los poetas. Esta contribución ofrece una interpretación más matizada, que se apoya sobre todo en una lectura intertextual de la *Athēnaiōn Politeia* y el libro 5 de la *Política*. Ambos textos dirigen la atención del lector hacia la historia, pero en una manera completamente diferente. En este artículo argumento que los usos que hace Aristóteles de la historia son fundamentales para sus intercambios dialógicos con las narraciones que los seres humanos construyen para dar sentido a sus experiencias y aclarar sus opciones a la hora de elegir. Si se leen en este espíritu dialógico, estos textos resaltan las posibilidades y los riesgos de la acción política y salvaguardan la importancia tanto de la historia como de la poesía para la teoría política aristotélica.

Palabras-clave: *historia*, poesía, ciencias sociales, teoría política.

1. *Historia*, history

In one sense, all of Aristotle's works are *historiai* as understood in classical Greek. Translating *historia* as "inquiry", Aristotle is surely a diligent and sustained inquirer. He is also pluralistic. In *Metaphysics*, Nu 6 he rejects proposals to reduce first philosophy to mathematics: "But if it is necessary for all things to partake of number, it must follow that many things are the same, and that the same number belongs to this thing and to that other. [...] There are seven vowels, a musical scale has seven strings, the Pleiades are seven, at seven the teeth fall out (for some animals, but some not), and there were seven against Thebes. Is it, then, because the number is of a certain sort by nature, that for this reason the attackers turned out to be seven or the Pleiades to consist of seven stars? Or were the former seven on account of the gates or for some other reason, while the latter we count that way, as we count twelve stars on the Bear, while others count more" (1093a 14-20; trans. Sachs). This may sound like a casual joke designed to make intellectual opponents look silly, but the serious point is that the mathematization of first philosophy would marginalize important ways of understanding the world. Because the world is varied, *historiai* must be too (cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094b 12-14).

Yet this pluralism leaves the place of what the Western tradition calls 'history' uncertain. This form of inquiry aspires to offer, in Paul Ricoeur's language, a truthful representation of a past that no longer is, but which once was². While we shouldn't anachronistically interpret ancient texts according to modern disciplinary categories, there is a family resemblance between Ricoeur's characterization of history and (for example) Thucydides' commitment to replace fanciful (*muthōdes*) representations of the Peloponnesian war with more accurate accounts of its events (*erga*) (1.22). Mark Munn³ thus traces what he calls the emergence of historical writing to the books of Herodotus and Thucydides⁴. When Aristotle was writing, 'history' as we understand it was certainly 'around'.

But is this history around in Aristotle? Looking to the perspective shared by Ricoeur and Thucydides, we don't find any such inquiry in works that are unambiguously Aristotelian. The closest is the first half of the *Athēnaiōn Politeia*, whose authorship is controversial and whose historical accuracy has been sharply criticized⁵. While Aristotle frequently provides historical examples in his *NE*, *Politics* and *Rhetoric* (hereafter *Pol.* and *Rhet.*), these are embedded within other theoretical or pedagogical projects. Ernest Barker therefore distinguishes Aristotle's uses of "historical details" from his structured political theory⁶.

Moreover, Aristotle offers his own tepid judgment on historical writing when he compares history with poetry in the *Poetics*. History's seeming inferiority is traceable, first, to its concern for what has happened rather than for the kinds of things that might (1451b 1-5). This seems an odd complaint, since it criticizes history for what many see as its unique strength, its truthful factuality (*Rhet.* 1393a 15). But Aristotle explains: in considering what may happen or what might have been, poetry is concerned with generalities (*ta katholou*) not simply with particulars (*ta kath' hekaston*). The meanings of these terms are fluid across Aristotle's writings, depending heavily on intellectual context. Here, they imply that poetry's signifying possibilities are more capacious and less bounded than history's. Within epic and tragic poetry, Achilles and Agamemnon, Oedipus and Antigone, are human beings of "such and such" a character. Their errors and sufferings tell audiences something important about the human condition, insights rooted in but not confined to the named characters' identities (1451b 9). By contrast, history allegedly deals exclusively with particulars; Aristotle's example is a recounting of certain things that Alcibiades did (*epraxen*) or experienced (or felt) (*epathen*) (1451b

² Ricoeur 2004: 228.

³ Munn 2017: 3-4.

⁴ Cf. Foster 2018: 105.

⁵ Harris 2019: 394-395, 398, 402-403; Ober 1998: 352, 358; Rhodes 1984: 19-20.

⁶ Barker 1962: 242.

10). A second drawback to historical narratives is that they are held together more by chronology than by theme (1459a 20-24). While events control history, poetry controls events (1451b 27-29), principally through its construction of a plot (*mythos*), the soul of tragedy (1450a 39-40). Consequently, poetry is more philosophical (*philosophōteron*) and more serious (*spoudaioteron*) than history (1451b 5).

Not all commentators are convinced. Elisabetta Poddighe reads Aristotle's political theory as decisively influenced by Athenian historical experiences. He does not simply browse history to illustrate a systematic political theory (*à la* Barker) but instead takes historical agency as constitutive of politics⁷, allowing him to become the first classical theorist of political change⁸. Offering a different interpretation of the *Poet.*, Jill Frank and Sara Monoson read *AP* as a "poetic history" inviting Athenian citizens to embrace a politics of lawful moderation not actualized as yet, but possible in the future, narrating particular political events while illuminating their more general human significance⁹. For these readers, inquiries into historical practices and possibilities are not dispensable references to detail but essential elements within Aristotle's political theorizations.

This prospect begins my inquiry into the relation between history and political theory in Aristotle's practical works. I argue that diminishing history as it is characterized in the *Poet.* would also diminish the importance of politics as it is understood by Aristotle. This renewed appreciation of politics requires, in turn, that we reconsider Aristotle's understanding of history and poetry, seeing both as essential resources for his political theory. I begin with a provisional understanding of the style of Aristotle's practical philosophy in such texts as *NE*, *Pol.*, *Rhet.*, *AP* and *Poet.* itself.

2. Practicing practical philosophy

Some commentators interpret these texts as early philosophical treatises¹⁰ whose analytic structures need to be made more explicit and precise if their arguments are to receive both fair hearing and fair criticism¹¹. This approach rightly insists that Aristotle's arguments be subjected to rigorous scrutiny and critique, but it shouldn't exclude other genre possibilities. While Aristotle (unlike Plato) often speaks in his own voice, his works are also multivocal,

⁷ Poddighe 2014: 14.

⁸ *Ibid.* 110-114.

⁹ Frank-Monoson 2009: 247, 262, 267.

¹⁰ Lord 2013: xviii.

¹¹ Deslauriers-Destrée 2013.

perhaps even implicitly dialogic¹². We cannot presume that every position represented is his own. Is it Aristotle or the committed legalist who says that law rules as intellect without appetite (*Pol.* 1287a 34)? Sometimes he carries arguments to their logical conclusions to make their difficulties more apparent. If the supremely just rule of the one person standing out for the highest virtue “resembles household management” (*Pol.* 1285b 30), does it destroy the political character of that partnership? At times, the rhetorical context of their utterance affects how his claims are to be read; for example, the arguments about political justice in *Pol.* 3.9-11 are expressed in vehemently partisan language.

This conversational style is consistent with Aristotle's pragmatic education of his audience (*NE* 1180a 29-34). This education is less didactic than protreptic, more attuned to individual differences than to collective similarities (*NE* 1180b 15-17¹³). While the audience is political¹⁴, we shouldn't interpret that politics too narrowly. In *NE* 6.8, political intelligence includes both a legislative knowledge or lawgiving (*nomothetikē*) consistent with seeing politics as master science (*NE* 1.2) and a more distributed but less definite capability for action and deliberation, Frank's¹⁵ work of citizenship. Yet who the citizens are is disputable (*Pol.* 3.1); it is not even clear that Aristotle isolates male from female citizens (*Pol.* 1.15¹⁶). Consequently, it seems limiting to interpret Aristotle's political education as targeting potential leaders for special instruction¹⁷ or as addressing philosophic and non-philosophic listeners differently¹⁸. Instead, we might see his audience as more indefinite, perhaps becoming more so over time¹⁹. How might the education of such an audience employ truthful representations of the past? Bearing in mind that the *Poet.* itself is such a conversational text, perhaps its critique of history should be reassessed.

3. Reconsidering *Poetics*' 'history'

Some note that the *Poetics*' critique covers only 'usual' or customary history²⁰. What might 'usual' history include? Numerous poets are referenced in the text but only one historian. He is named within a denial that poets can be identified simply by their use of metre; even if Herodotus had written

¹² Burger 2008; Frank 2005; Mara 1995 and 1998; Salkever 2009.

¹³ Cf. Frank 2015: 17.

¹⁴ Lord 2013: xix; Salkever 2009: 210.

¹⁵ Frank 2005: 179-180.

¹⁶ Pangle 2013: 68.

¹⁷ Lord 2013: xxx.

¹⁸ Tessitore 1996: 20.

¹⁹ Frank 2015: 10-11, 23.

²⁰ Frank-Monoson 2009: 246-247.

in metre, he wouldn't be a poet (1451b 1-4). This comment is followed immediately by the downgrading of historical writing because of its exclusive concern with particulars. Later, Herodotus (unnamed) provides the example of history's alleged deference to chronology. That the Athenian victory at Salamis took place on the same day as the (Syracusan) victory over Carthage (Hdt. 7.166) is coincidental, not connected by any plot or end (*ouden pros to auto sunteinousai telos*) (*Poet.* 1459a 23-28). Herodotus thus becomes the poster figure for history's limitations. Yet he is far from 'usual'. Implications? Perhaps if Aristotle's criticisms apply to one of the finest historians, they apply to all. On the other hand, by offering these assessments of Herodotus (named) and (I believe) Thucydides (unnamed, but who, other than Plato, pays so much attention to Alcibiades?), perhaps Aristotle is cuing questions about how accurate these criticisms are or about the deeper significance of what they mean. We should presume that Aristotle is familiar with notable historical narratives even when his references to them are not explicit²¹ and that he presumes a similar, though uneven, familiarity on the part of his audiences. This familiarity is an indispensable cultural resource for the rhetorical practice of the enthymeme (*Rhet.* 1416b 25²²), but it also gives the texts Aristotle is criticizing a presence that can qualify or complicate his own arguments or encourage reading them in more provocative ways. Historians become dialogic partners, not just targets for criticism.

For *Poet.*, poetry's statements are of general significance because they reveal what such and such a person would necessarily or probably say or do (1451b 7-8), connecting speaking or acting with a character revealed in a particular situation, communicating something more generally true about human beings, even while employing proper names. Intriguingly, this project parallels Thucydides' intention in representing the speeches (*logoi*) of his characters (1.22). While "recalling precisely what was said was difficult [...] [I offered] what seemed to me each would have said [as] especially required (*ta deonta malist eipein*) on the occasion, yet maintaining as much closeness as possible to the general sense (*gnōmēs*) of what was actually said" (trans. Lattimore, adjusted). Not just factual reporting, these representations allow the speeches and characters of those involved, be they individuals or regimes²³, to be mutually illuminating. The speaker or figure who dominates the second half of Thucydides' book is the compelling Alcibiades (e.g., 5.43.1-2; 6.15.2-4; 6.61.1-6; 6.89.1-6; 8.47.1-2). In narrating what this man did or felt, the historian (never called such) potentially connects external behavior with internal experience or action with character. Perhaps what we learn about

²¹ Poddighe 2014: 128-129.

²² Cf. Frank 2015: 16-19.

²³ Mara 2008: 25.

Alcibiades shows why he might celebrate being distinctively *kath' hekaston* (6.16.1). Because Thucydides' writing communicates "those things that will always come to be as long as human beings have the same nature" (3.82.2), he, too, gives past events enduring significance, even though he (like the poets) uses proper names.

It is also hard to accept at face value Aristotle's judgment that the best historians are controlled by chronology. Aren't even the most deliberately chronological historians (such as the Atthidographers) guided by implicit organizing principles or theoretical structures? Such framings become more interesting in the best hands. In Thucydides, there are multiple, both overlapping and competing, time horizons, disordering the goal of recording the war's events by summers and winters (5.26.1) and problematizing what seems to be an abrupt and accidental ending²⁴. *Poetics*' dismissal of Herodotus' same-day Athenian and Syracusan victories as pedestrian chronology is singularly puzzling. Within Herodotus' *Historia* (7.166) this reference itself violates any strict chronological pattern; the victory at Salamis is not fully narrated within its own temporal sequence until the next book. Its long story is introduced (7.139) with the intention of proving that Athens' victory saved Greece, giving the Salamis story a plot and a *telos*. It is the Sicilians who say that these battles took place on the same day. Is this an example of the failure to appreciate Salamis' meaning? Does the following narrative correct misimpressions that temporal coincidence means equal significance? Paradoxically, the author who deprives Herodotus' narrative of a *telos*, connecting its events only chronologically, is Aristotle.

Such a blatant misstep may be intentional. By offering critiques of history that are on their own problematic, perhaps Aristotle implies that he is only targeting histories (mistakenly) understood as nothing more than chronologies of particulars, not just history as written by the most amateurish but history as read by the most careless, paralleling the mistakes of those who identify poetry simply by its metre. Do both the concerns proper to history and the character of historical writing need further examination? Not surprisingly, Aristotle's own uses of histories in his practical works are more respectful of their philosophical importance and seriousness.

4. History's particulars and universals

In different ways, these inquiries challenge history's allegedly exclusive concern with particularity. Does historical writing engage only *ta kath' hekaston*? Even if it does, is that engagement less serious and less

²⁴ Mara 2009: 122-123.

philosophical than poetry's representations of *ta katholou*? Can these foci really be separated? Far from dismissing particularity, the inquiry into practical wisdom in the *NE*, for example, makes its perception central to deliberation and action. What distinguishes prudence (*phronēsis*) is its capacity to perceive the ultimate particular (*NE* 1142a 27-28) in each circumstance. Thus, while *Poet.* (1459a 23) seems to marginalize particulars in ways paralleling natural science's sidelining of accidents (*sumbebēkoi*) (*Metaph.* 1025a 24-26²⁵), the examination of equity (*epieikeia*) in *NE* 5.10 makes the recognition of accidents (*sumbē*) crucial in determining when a general law (*ho nomos katholou*) errs (*hēmarten*) (1137b 21-23), replacing it, not with a better law, but with an insight about what equity demands in a particular case, even if it runs against legal generalities (*para to katholou*), themselves particular historical practices (*Pol.* 1269a 15-19). In the *Rhet.* (1393a 15-17), the particular is more useful for the deliberating citizen.

Yet can particulars be identified without essential reference to generalities? Within natural science, the designation of an event as accidental requires recognition of those occurring necessarily or probably (*Metaph.* 1025a 14-16). Especially within practical philosophy (but not only there, *Metaph.* Zeta, 13), it seems more accurate to say that the relation between generalities and particulars, not just as terms of designation, but as modes of practice, is an ongoing puzzle.

Commentators have identified different arrangements of this relation in Aristotelian political texts. I note two statements that will eventually return. Antony Hatzistavrou²⁶ interprets Aristotle's project in *Politics*, Book 5 as the construction of a typology of political change. Historical examples supply data that Aristotle, as synoptic social scientist, uses to construct general theory. Focusing more on local knowledge, Josiah Ober²⁷ sees the ambiguous author of the *AP* (Ps.-Aristotle) engaged in teleological reconstruction, identifying phases in Athens' political development leading to the *dēmos*' full authority (*kurios*), indeed mastery (*kratōs*), over the city's institutions (41.2²⁸).

Aristotle appears to adopt each of these templates within different inquiries. Passages in *Pol.* (1295b 35-1296a 36; 1318b 10-17) and *Rhet.* (1357b 25; 1379a 5; 1389a 5ff.) trace political structures and behaviors to social conditions in empirically generalizing ways²⁹. *AP*'s local history has a comprehensive parallel in *Pol.* 3.15, where a schematic historical narrative traces the growth of civic populations until every city must (now) be significantly democratic. This

²⁵ Cf. Davis 1996: 91.

²⁶ Hatzistavrou 2013: 276-277, 295.

²⁷ Ober 1998: 352-353.

²⁸ Cf. Cammack 2020: 41-42.

²⁹ Salkever 2009: 231.

general perspective implies a kind of social evolution, anticipated in *Pol.* 1.2's theorization of the origins and character of the city, the complete partnership. In spite of the differences between these approaches, each seems to reinforce the *Poetics*' explicit verdict by shaping historical practices within more conclusive or hegemonic intellectual framings.

However, Aristotle's uses of such generalizations or developments treat their relationship with particulars differently, more consistent with his conversational *historiai*. Ricoeur associates both history and memory with discursive representation³⁰, suggesting that the construction of memory is a sociolinguistic practice cohering historical particulars within more general narratives (*Rhet.* 1357b 5). Though Aristotle does not regard the self simply as socially constructed (the *anthrōpos* remains the frame of reference³¹), by noting the crucial role of habituation in forming the virtues (*NE* 2.1) and by focusing on the *politeia* as key to the city's identity (*Pol* 3.3³²), he makes regime narratives central to human individuation. In the *Poetics*' terms, human beings construct plots (*mythoi*) to make sense of the fluid events running through their experiences and do so interactively. Within this practice, historical events are neither data points to be subsumed under general laws nor stages within the development of a completed social condition. They are, rather, constitutive parts of a cultural *mythos* that both enables and emerges from human actions and choices. Because such *mythoi* are culturally embedded, there is notable variation, even sharp disagreement among them. Consequently, Aristotle's practical conversations proceed by engaging the *mythoi* constructed by his various audiences, what Stephen Salkever, Jill Frank³³ and others have read as the interrogation of securely held and self-consciously argued cultural opinions, *endoxa*.

Two related notations. First, within this engagement, the *endoxa* themselves are interactively reconstructed as Aristotle appeals to a community of decent readers with opinions that his texts try to create or develop (*Rhet.* 1355a 15; 1381a 20). Second, the 'history' engaged within this practice is not a set of experiences or archives somehow there already. Like the Platonic dialogues³⁴ Aristotle's practical works are less recognitions of and responses to external historical influences than internal inscriptions of historical narratives within their texts.

³⁰ Ricoeur 2004: 162-163.

³¹ Salkever 2009: 218.

³² Poddighe 2014: 39-40.

³³ Salkever 2009: 214; Frank 2015: 25.

³⁴ Mara 2019: 180-181.

5. Dialogues of history, poetry and theory in the *AP* and *Pol. 5*

I try to develop this argument through an interpretive experiment, reading *AP* in juxtaposition with Book 5 of the *Politics*. In spite of obvious differences between them, including the question of *AP*'s authorship, this pairing is not arbitrary. Anticipating the structure of the *Pol.* as he concludes the *NE*, Aristotle proposes to move from "the regimes collected together" to "theorizing (*theōresai*) what sorts of things preserve or destroy cities [and] what sorts of things do so for each of the regimes" (1181b 18-21; trans. Bartlett/Collins, slightly altered). Among the large number of constitutions involved (158 is the accepted figure), the sole modern survivor is the narrative of Athens, arguably the most interesting and most important³⁵. The causes of regime preservation/destruction are the explicit concern of *Pol. 5*. Whatever the textual ambiguities, there is a direct intellectual connection between the two works. Because they treat history differently, the texts turn its relation to political theory into a problem, one enhanced, I will suggest, by implicit but significant engagements with Thucydides.

According to the *Poetics*' categories, the two works seem divergent, with *AP* lingering on one particular regime and *Pol. 5* thematizing generalities. I hope to revise these impressions, neither sequestering the two within separate interpretive frames³⁶ nor subsuming them under a systematic theorization that resolves all tensions. Instead, I treat them as participants in an interactive dialogue, noting both mutual reinforcement and reciprocal challenge. Reading *AP* in light of *Pol. 5* prompts us to rethink Ober's judgment that *AP* narrates a completed political development. *Pol. 5* implies that Athens' political changes were matters of contingency with uncertain issue; any sense of an ending is premature. Possibilities for a healthier politics that Frank and Monoson detect within *AP*'s poetic history are likewise complicated as *Pol. 5* reveals a more threatening potentials, condensed in the image of violent factional conflict (*stasis*) and underscoring politics' inherent dangers. Yet *Pol. 5*'s seemingly distant analysis is challenged when *AP* invites readers to adopt the agentic perspective of citizens needing to make political choices.

Interpreting this exchange relies on the resources of both poetry and history but revises *Poetics*' judgments about both, noting Hannah Arendt's emphasis on their common concern with practice³⁷. Within this intertextual dialogue, history is more than the chronological linking of particulars. And poetry is not simply the representation of a completed *mythos* (*Poet.* 1450b 23-33). By eliding but not eliminating the difference between what has been (historically) and what might be (poetically), this dialogue recognizes a pragmatic space that is, in Arendt's phrase, between past and future (cf. *Rhet.* 1368b 30; 1392a 5).

³⁵ Mara 2002: 310-311.

³⁶ Rhodes 1984: 11.

³⁷ Arendt 1968: 44-45.

Consequently, this interactive reading itself resembles politics, though its goal is an improvement of our political *theōria* (*NE* 1181b 21)³⁸.

Like *NE* 6, both *AP* and *Pol.* 5 problematize *Poetics*' sharp separation of historical particulars from more encompassing human generalities. In *AP*, Athens becomes particularly interesting as a democracy once readers understand why its political behavior was distinctive. After recovering the city from the violent oligarchy (called 'the Thirty') that took power after the city's defeat in the Peloponnesian war (404 BCE; *AP* 35.1-4), Athens' victorious *dēmos* responded with an amnesty that was nobler and more political than what would normally be expected; in similar circumstances, triumphant democracies despoil the wealthy (40.3-4). *AP* does not marshal evidence supporting the latter claim but the perspective of *Pol.* 5 reinforces it by emphasizing the violent character of political *stasis*, generally. While *NE* 10.9 promised examination of the causes of regime preservation and destruction, *Pol.* 5 places destruction (*phthora*) first (1301a 22). By tracing such violence to desires for profit and honor (1302a 33; 1312a 24), *Pol.* 5's analysis parallels Thucydides' political autopsy on Corcyra (3.82.8), even as it, too, generalizes its claims across historical time and cultural space. Historically literate members of *AP*'s audience will be reminded not only that Athens' *dēmos* stood out but also that competitions to control regimes ultimately threaten to disintegrate them.

Emphasizing the *dēmos*' generosity is not simply a respect for truthfulness. It coheres with *AP*'s broader project of encouraging civic mildness (*praotēs*, 22.4), a characteristic opposing the aggressive boldness (*tharros*, 22.3; 24.1; 27.1) marking much of Athens' political history. This narrative intersects with Thucydides' in varying ways. While Thucydides focuses on Greece's (and therefore humanity's, 1.1.2) greatest war or motion, *AP* emphasizes the internal development of Athens' *politeia*, reflected in the institutional stability analyzed in the work's second half. The rule of the sea (41.2), seen by Pericles as Athens' singular achievement (Thuc. 2.62.2-3) and by Thucydides as one of the two underlying causes of the (greatest) war (1.23.6) is called an error (*hamartia*, 41.2). Going even beyond Thucydides³⁹, *AP*'s war narrative focuses nearly exclusively on Athenian defeats⁴⁰. The only noted victory is Arginusae, catastrophic in its costs (34.1). And while Pericles is portrayed by Thucydides as a singular, though flawed, political leader⁴¹ (2.65) whose role in the Athenian empire's construction was architectonic (1.144; 2.65), *AP* marginalizes his contributions, focusing instead on his strengthening the domestic power of the *dēmos*, furthering his own ambitions (27.4-5⁴²).

³⁸ Mara 2008 and 2019.

³⁹ Foster 2018.

⁴⁰ Mara 2002: 321.

⁴¹ Mara 2019: 193.

⁴² Cf. Keaney 1992: 58.

Reading this work with Frank and Monoson as a kind of poetry, we ask if it is tragic. In *Poet.*, tragic poetry imitates life, especially the happiness (*eudaimonia*) or unhappiness (*kakodaimonia*) (1450a 15) achieved through action. The best tragedies represent changes (*metabaseis*) involving reversals (*peripeteias*), recognitions (*agnōriseis*) and suffering (*pathos*) (1452b 5-10). When *kakodaimonia* overwhelms, it follows from the *hamartia* of an individual “not preeminent in virtue or justice” but who nonetheless has “great reputation and good luck” (1453a 5-15), reminders that reputation is not virtue and that being lucky is different from being just. The work (*ergon*) of tragic imitation is to elicit pity and fear, opposing both anger (softened by pity) and arrogance (chastened by fear). These personal emotional experiences have political expressions; anger and arrogance drive aggression; pity and fear may, in different ways, support moderation (*Rhet.* 1380a 35-b 10).

At one level, *AP* represents the rule of the *dēmos* as a success story, narrating the defeat of the Thirty’s oligarchy and the establishment of democratic control throughout the city’s offices. Tragic elements (the *hamartia* of rule of the sea) seem redeemed or overcome by the city’s achievements, culminating in the generosity of the amnesty. On first view, this narrative is confidently teleological⁴³. Responding, Frank and Monoson unsettle any finality⁴⁴, arguing that the text implies other, better, possibilities, what might be but isn’t yet.

Pol. 5 both connects with and intrudes upon these readings, beginning with its own contribution to the generalities/particulars puzzle as it emphasizes contingency. Even within this text’s general treatment of political change (1302a 15-20), most of its causal analysis is granular; patterns constantly fluctuate (1301b 1-20; 1307b 4-5). While such changes can be significant in their outcomes, they are often triggered by petty things (1303b 18-20). For example, Thucydides’ Mytilenian envoys tell the Peloponnesians that they have justifiably rebelled against Athens because the shifting power dynamics driving relations between ruling and ruled cities have turned threatening (3.11.1-6). By contrast, Aristotle’s explicit reference to the culmination of this event (“when Paches took [Mytilene]”) represents a perceived insult over marriages (1304a 4-11) as origin. The generalities of *Pol.* 5 seem to emerge from contingent particulars and would seem vacuous or formulaic without them. Yet these same particulars often complicate or undercut the generalities they communicate. When challenging “Socrates’” narrative of regime change (offered in *Republic*, Books 8 and 9 and rejected in *Pol.* 5.12), Aristotle not only disputes statements about individual transformations but also questions whether directions of political revolution are predictable in principle (1316a 26-27). Whatever the past was, it offers no future guarantees.

⁴³ Ober 1998: 352; Loraux 2019: 252, 263.

⁴⁴ Frank-Monoson 2009: 261.

6. Alternative histories

That the Athenian response to the defeated oligarchs was distinctive (40.2) implies that its victorious *dēmos* could have behaved very differently. While *AP*'s historical narrative of regime change (41.2) ends with the amnesty, *Pol. 5* warns of persistent fragility, perhaps, in the language of tragedy, even violent reversal. After analyzing how oligarchies, aristocracies, democracies and polities shift between one another, Aristotle moves (in 5.10) to the destruction and preservation of monarchy (kingship or tyranny). Initially, this sequence puzzles. Hasn't kingship been historically overtaken by the democratizing effects of population growth (1305a 18-22; 1313a 4-8)⁴⁵? The progression is less strange when it's noted, at the beginning of 5.10, that tyranny has the evils of both democracy and oligarchy, the two most common existing regimes (1301b 40-1302a 1; 1310b 3-4). Later, the opposition between *dēmos* and tyrant is imaged as Hesiod's "potter against potter" (1312b 5). Are they such deadly enemies because they're so alike (*Eudemian Ethics* 1235a 16-18)? From this perspective, the people's being *kratos* of everything seems perilously close to its being tyrannical (1313b 40-41)⁴⁶. From this perspective, we might interpret *AP*'s historical sequences differently, imagined by a tragic poetry whose tropes of recognition are replaced by tropes of failures to recognize, signaling the ignorance that accompanies and underlies political turbulence. I offer two examples.

On the surface, *AP* praises Solon's leadership⁴⁷. Against those who assail him for making the city excessively democratic, Aristotle responds that he simply made it more political, ending the enslavement of the many by preventing debtors from securing loans with their personal freedom (6.1-2). This judgment is consistent with the assessment of Solon offered in *Pol. 2.12*. Yet readers informed by the indeterminacies of *Pol. 5* may see instability, perhaps even error. Solon's reforms were followed by the recurrence of *stasis*, eventually leading to the tyranny of Peisistratos. This reversal followed Solon's departure from Athens, leaving instructions that his laws function unchanged (7.2-3; 11.1-2). Did this vision of a stable future overlook the political turbulence that *Pol. 5* underscores? Solon's poetry may have encouraged civic rationality by explaining his political decisions to his fellow citizens⁴⁸, but as poet did he also miss differences between poetry and politics? Did he believe – or hope – that Athens' politics would have a completed plot? Should the same questions be asked of the seemingly final narrative of the city's constitutional development that ends *AP*'s first half?

⁴⁵ Cammack 2020: 17-18.

⁴⁶ Cammack 2020: 7-8; Loraux 2019: 20, 55, 66-67, 253.

⁴⁷ Loraux 2019: 102.

⁴⁸ Mara 2002: 324.

Failures to recognize permeate *AP*'s engagements with the diverse *mythoi* surrounding the Peisistratid tyranny. Its violent end is seen by many as democratic Athens' founding moment, sacralized by the periodic sacrifices to the martyred tyrannicides Harmodios and Aristogeiton (58.1-2). Athenian memory on Peisistratos himself is more conflicted. Though he held power as a tyrant, he is also said to have ruled more politically and to have been distinctive in his personal generosity and humanity (16.2). Indeed, "one might hear many say that the tyranny of Peisistratos was the [golden] age of Cronos" (16.7). It was only under his sons that the tyranny became harsh, triggering the tyrannicides' heroic sacrifice.

In *AP*, however, such encomia can be read as failures to recognize. Peisistratos' success continually depended on false impressions he deliberately fostered. As a partisan within the post-Solonic *stasis*, he was thought to be the most democratic of the principals (13.4-5; 14.1). But after wounding himself, he was allowed a body of guards, eventually used to seize the acropolis from the *dēmos* (15.3-4). Solon opposed creating this force, recognizing Peisistratos' intent while others didn't (14.2-3; *Rhet.* 1357b 30). In spite of ruling moderately, Peisistratos was exiled from Athens twice. He successfully reacquired the tyranny, each time relying on deceit (14.4; 15.4). His first return supposedly enlisted a pseudo-Athena as his accomplice, prompting amazement among the residents of the city (14.4). While this story may be fabricated, it reinforces the significance of the Athenians' failure to recognize who Peisistratos really was.

Peisistratos was succeeded by his eldest son Hippias; initially, his rule followed his father's example. Abuses followed, however, at the hand of his brother Thettalos, bold and hubristic (18.2). An erotic quarrel between him and Harmodios provoked a conspiracy that went disastrously wrong. Another brother, Hipparchos ("playful, erotic and a lover of music" and here, unlike in Thucydides, 6.55-7, seemingly an innocent victim), was killed instead, turning Hippias suspicious and violent. Harsh tyranny was more result than cause of the tyrannicides' plot (19.1). Like the mythos of Peisistratos, the *mythos* of the tyrannicides both signals and contributes to the Athenians' ignorance of their own polity.

The starker analytics of *Pol. 5* go even further, dispensing altogether with cultural encomia; to this extent, the text seems counter-mythical. Peisistratid rule is bracketed by violence at both beginning (1305a 25-26) and end (1311a 37-40). Peisistratos was not exceptional and his regime is described through categories applicable to other tyrannies (1305a 20-25; 1310b 24-30; 1313b 3-5). The tyrant family is identified collectively, with no distinctions between father and sons or among brothers (1311a 36). The Peisistratids themselves constructed the image of their rule as a golden age (1313b 24)⁴⁹. The violence

⁴⁹ Zatta 2010: 21-62.

of Hippias' tyranny is not traced to the accidental killing of Hipparchos; it is a consequence of the arrogance endemic to tyranny itself (1311a 34-40). Yet *Pol. 5* is equally unforgiving to the tyrannicides, who acted out of personal attachments not public spirit, violating, like the Peisistratids, boundaries between private and public.

Because recognition is a change from ignorance (*agnoia*) to knowing (*gnōsis*; *Poet.* 1452a 29-30), repeated failures to recognize imply the persistence of ignorance in politics as indeterminacies proliferate. Alternative *mythoi* likewise multiply (contrasting *Poet.* 1459a 15-20) as political agents attempt to cope with and to correct that ignorance. Thus cued, we may envisage other readings of *AP*'s apparently more settled history. Frank and Monoson appropriately focus on the figure of Theramenes⁵⁰ whose political history is controversial⁵¹. *AP* counters slanders that he was "destroying of all regimes" (*pasas tas politeias kataleuin*), a menacing image that condenses *Pol. 5*'s wreckages. Instead, this text praises him for opposing anything unlawful (*paranomon*), regardless of regime configuration, and therefore for exemplifying the work of the good citizen (*agathou politou ergon*; 28.5). Yet by referencing narratives he will challenge, *AP*'s author acknowledges their existence and, here too, gives them an implicit presence in the text. By noting the Thirty's crimes (35.4), the author potentially implicates Theramenes, however remotely. This may parallel the treatment of Solon, not simply in correcting cultural judgments about each man⁵², but also in representing the practical and moral liabilities that political indeterminacies and unintended consequences impose upon those attempting to be good citizens.

However, the perspective of the citizen seems muted throughout most of *Pol. 5*, apparently replaced by that of the diagnostic social scientist. While aggrieved parties often blame *staseis* on alleged injustices, their real causes are the drives for gain and honor (1302a 33) that recall Thucydides on Corcyra. Whether ambitions for preeminence or resentments against ill treatment are justly or unjustly felt (1302a 29-30), their conflictual dynamics are identical. Those claiming to deserve the highest offices on the basis of true virtue have the best case for taking power. They rarely try to do so (1301b 5), but perhaps only because they are always outnumbered (1304b 4-6). Consequently, whenever perceived injustice is identified as triggering *stasis* (1304b 33-34; 1305a 38-39; 1307a 5-9; 1308a 13-14; 1316b 1-5), the narrative backdrop requires deeper digging, often with disturbing outcomes. Attacks on monarchies may be prompted by the ruler's abuses; yet the monarch's riches and honors are so great that all desire them (1311a 30-32). Perhaps the differences between

⁵⁰ Frank-Monoson 2009: 260.

⁵¹ Frank-Monoson 2009: 249-250; Mara 2002: 329.

⁵² Mara 2002: 331.

Hatzistavrou's "injustice-induced faction" and "greed-induced faction" are not always clear⁵³. In 5.10, Aristotle says in his own name what Thucydides ascribes to his Athenians on Melos (5.89, 105); all do what they wish whenever they can (1312b 3-5). The means through which regimes change are grouped collectively as force (*bia*) or deception (*apatē*). Persuasion morphs into deception, with the lies of the oligarchic four hundred in 411 BCE a notable example (1304b 13-16; cf. Thuc. 8.66.1). The claim of Thucydides' Diodotus, that the *ergon* of the good citizen is the persuasion of equals (3.42.5)⁵⁴, would be discounted or seen through. Theramenes' principled death in opposition to policies that were *paranomon* is replaced by *thumos* raging at the cost of life (1315a 30-31), recalling the *alogiston tolma* driving Thucydides' tyrannicides (6.59.1).

Nicole Loraux's critical assessment of *AP* interprets its representation of the amnesty as a fiction that both suppresses and exposes the conflict inevitably present within a city always divided⁵⁵. If this judgment resonates, *Pol. 5* can be read as an Aristotelian correction of that fiction, underscoring politics' violent turbulence and reinforcing Michael Davis's claim that this text theorizes politics as ceaseless motion (1302b 15-17, 36-38; 1307a 21-22)⁵⁶. Modern social scientists have attempted to explain and predict these dynamics by discovering lawlike generalizations⁵⁷, but Davis⁵⁸ sees *Pol. 5* also tempering these ambitions. Individual and collective contingencies are not random but they are explicable only retrospectively and granularly (*Physics* 196a 3-8). As significant as it was, Paches' capture of Mytilene might have originated in quarrels over marriages. For Davis, this epistemic caution has a pragmatic parallel. Political agents aiming to control political change through aggressive structural or cultural reforms (Thucydides' Alcibiades? that hubristic such and such?; Thuc 6.18.4-7) are warned that such ambitions are illusory and dangerous⁵⁹. Yet in countering intellectual and pragmatic *hubris* with sober science, does *Pol. 5* diminish the pragmatic concerns of citizens needing to choose well?

Not altogether. *Pol. 5* does not simply correct *AP*'s fictions; it also clarifies and defends its project, even as it implies its limitations. This contribution is offered in what might seem to be an outlier within *Pol. 5*'s scientific framework, Chapter 9's examination of the qualities needed for holding the highest offices, a discussion that immediately precedes 5.10's warning that democratic *kratos* can also be tyrannical. Aristotle identifies three such qualities: affection for

⁵³ Hatzistavrou 2013: 276.

⁵⁴ Mara 2015.

⁵⁵ Loraux 2019: 154-155, 210-211, 252-253, 256, 260-263.

⁵⁶ Davis 1996: 91.

⁵⁷ Gurr 1971: 86.

⁵⁸ Davis 1996: 92.

⁵⁹ Davis 1996: 96.

the established regime, the capacity for performing the office effectively, and virtue and justice (1309a 33-39). While all are needed in principle, there are puzzles (*aporiai*) in application when they don't cohere, when a good strategist is a traitor (Alcibiades?) or when a dedicated loyalist is incompetent (Nicias?). Such occasions require attention to how persons and responsibilities match or don't, demanding that those assigning the offices make the right choices (1309a 39-b 1). This implies a democratic context for selecting office holders and represents the good citizen as the one able to choose well for the city, someone implicitly possessing all of the qualities needed for ruling and judging well. While some mistakenly believe that loyalty with skill is enough, they overlook the need for self-control when desire threatens to undercut intelligence and good intentions (1309b 12-15). The virtue and justice needed for good citizens depend, in turn, on an education appropriate to the needs of the particular regime (*pros tēn politeian*) (1310a 13-14)⁶⁰.

In emphasizing the importance of choice, *Pol.* 5 qualifies what might be seen as its own strictly scientific theorizing of political dynamics, justifying *AP*'s attention to civic agency. Confronting Athens' ongoing conflicts, Solon could have made himself tyrant by siding with either the many or the oligarchs. Yet he did otherwise because he thought that rule of law was best for the city (11.2). The first half of *AP* narrates a series of choices (well or badly made) by the Athenians. In so doing the text may aspire to correct the failures to recognize that accompany political ignorance through an Athenian education *pros tēn politeian*. While Loraux sees *AP*'s amnesty narrative as forgetting politics as such⁶¹, *AP*'s civic perspective may offer, as Frank and Monoson suggest, an opportunity to rethink it.

7. Poetry and possibility, history and truth

AP's perspective cannot simply be decisive, however. While the text challenges simple distinctions between particulars and generalities and though its audience extends beyond one city, its rhetoric encourages Athenians to reflect upon their own political history and institutions and to become better citizens within their polity. If *AP* resembles poetry in being guided by a *mythos*, the text is, also like poetry, a *mythos* within *mythoi*, emplotting some cultural themes while obscuring others, always in conversation with those sharing its community of memory and discourse. By acknowledging alternative *mythoi*, this cultural sharing invites cultural questioning, potentially offering an immanent critique within the *politeia* that is Athens.

⁶⁰ Frank-Monoson 2009: 264; Mara 2002: 311.

⁶¹ Loraux 2019: 18, 38, 40.

Pol. 5's synoptic view is a reminder of the epistemic and pragmatic limits of both particularity and immanent critique. Regime-specific frames of reference are epistemically partial when they mistake particulars for generalities, seeing the valorized practices of the Greeks (or the Athenians) as reflecting the highest possibilities of the species. They are pragmatically limiting when they conflate one's own with what's good, construing what seems just in one's own case as justice, simply (1301a 36-37). By employing a perspective beyond that of any particular regime, *Pol. 5* implies that, while awareness of particularity and contingency is necessary for sound political judgment, it is not sufficient. "Recognizing (*gnōnai*) an arising evil from its beginning is not the work of any chance person but of the political man (*politikou andros*)" (1308a 35; trans. Lord altered). This recognition detects the general in the particular, thus allowing a clearer perception of the particular itself (Peisistratos was a tyrant, from the beginning), a practical and intellectual capability that is the mark of education (*Rhet.* 1395b 30; *Poet.* 1448b 6-7).

This synoptic perspective is, therefore, neither a scientific taxonomy of regime change, as for Hatzistavrou, nor a stark revelation of the harshness of politics, as for Loraux. Extending the civic perspective of *AP*, *Pol. 5*'s generalities are embedded in the work's educational practice (the *mythos* of the *Pol.*⁶²), respecting while going beyond *AP*'s immanent critique. If *AP* encourages good citizenship by redeeming Theramenes' reputation, the *Pol.* prompts the audience to ask whether the good citizen Theramenes was also a good man and a good human being (*Pol.* 3.4, 7.3; *NE* 1130b 26-29). *AP* comments that the dominance of the *dēmos* seems correct and just because its alternative was/is worse. It leaves open the possibility that what seems correct (*orthōs*) may be local orthodoxy and what seems circumstantially just may fall short of what's just simply.

This interpretive experiment, represents the byplay between generalities and particularities as an ongoing problem within Aristotle's political theory. Within this reading, political theory relies on both poetry and history, each adjusted according to the needs of the *historia*. In calling the rule of the sea a *hamartia*, *AP* shares the pragmatics of the finest tragedies, encouraging the audience to recognize error and to avoid civic unhappiness, perhaps moving toward Frank's and Monoson's healthier political future. Yet this poetry might also imagine, as *Pol. 5* often does, the worst that might happen (1314a 2-29). In this respect, *AP* and *Pol. 5* envisage alternative political poetics, representing the possibilities and the dangers of political agency.

Aristotelian political theory also requires a partnership with history, not by assuming the impossible accessibility of *erga* without *logoi* or by courting the dangerous ambition to contort history in the name of theory, but by respecting

⁶² Salkever 2009: 236.

the need for narrative truthfulness. We note that the *NE* singles out *phronēsis* for its ability to see the truth (*hē alētheia*) in particular practical and moral situations (1140b 6-8). This practical truth is not a timelessly valid set of general propositions or laws invariably applied to human actions and choices, but particular perceptions (*Pol.* 1253a 14; *NE* 1142a 28) of practical/moral realities, always within historical circumstances. Intelligent lawgivers and citizens must work through the partiality of self-interested justice claims to determine the most just solution under the circumstances (*Pol.* 1309a 37-39) and must consider different regime possibilities (*Rhet.* 1360a 20-35) to identify the best *politeia* that conditions permit (*NE* 1135a 4-6)⁶³. Though variances are acknowledged and alternative perceptions, therefore alternative *mythoi*, are always possible, there is a justice to be perceived in every (particular) circumstance and a regime that's best in every (particular) case. This commitment parallels Thucydides' acceptance of the same challenges, both in narrating what happened and in judging what was best (1.22.1-4; 8.97.2-3).

Consequently, Aristotle does not disregard Ricoeur's warning against conflating history with fiction (cf. *Poet.* 1460b 12-14, 31-34)⁶⁴. Dialogues with *endoxa* often elide differences between poetry and history. As cultural images, Priam (*NE* 1100a 6-10) and Achilles (*Rhet.* 1359a 1-5) resonate as much as Pericles (*NE* 1140b 8) and Brasidas (*NE* 1134b 23-24). Does it matter whether the seven Theban gates were poetically or historically true? What Ricoeur fears, however, along with Arendt and Loraux, is not the intellectual error of discerning contestable human truths in the poetry of Homer or Aeschylus, but the political menace posed by the distortion of factual reality, the abusive manipulation of memory⁶⁵ that disregards political truth completely, rendering any change from *agnoia* to *gnōsis* impossible. In a way that is, I think, responsive to the concerns of these thinkers, Aristotle insists that the presumption of practical truths, accessible within even the most controversial contexts, resists the error of taking the epistemic or pragmatic templates of any historical particularity as last words. Those judging their own cases are suspect (*Pol.* 1280a 14-15). Because there are truths to be discovered about Solon, the Peisistratids, the tyrannicides, Pericles, and Theramenes, not just what they did but who they were and why that matters, cultural opinions about them should always be subject to critical scrutiny. Truthfulness less finds or regulates than prods. This same standard applies to Aristotle's own narratives, requiring readers to ask serious questions not simply about the historical accuracy of his claims but about the relation between such factual truths and the more complex truths that he intends to communicate about the

⁶³ Salkever 2009: 230.

⁶⁴ Ricoeur 2004: 261-262; 274-280.

⁶⁵ Ricoeur 2004: 82; Arendt 1968: 238, 242; Loraux 2019: 266, 268.

Athenian regime and about politics itself. Our friends are dear but the truth more so (*NE* 1096a 17-18). To be practiced well, political theory requires the virtues of both the finest poetry, open to possibility, and the finest history, respectful of truthfulness.

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