

Towards the conception of post-modern politics: the Aristotelian *polis* vs. the modern nation-state

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The paper addresses an alternative Aristotelian conception of politics vis-à-vis the prevalent modern conception of the nation-state. It argues that the liberal multicultural nation-state cannot be reconciled with the classical Aristotelian conception of the state. The latter was based on and embodied a substantive conception of human good as well as required a shared notion of common good. This is not the case with the dominant modern conception of the state which, ever since Thomas Hobbes was seen in terms of the minimal conception of political community. The contemporary post-modern society is essentially a multicultural society, thus a single substantive conception of common good is in principle impossible within modern society. The paper concludes that the only possibility to realize an Aristotelian conception of politics is by locating it within the social setting of local communities.

Key words: liberal nation-state, Aristotle, Alasdair MacIntyre, post-modern politics, common good

INTRODUCTION

The main concern of this paper will be not so much to present a critique of the liberal democratic politics of the nation state but to sketch an alternative understanding of the politics of common good. In the first part of the paper, I shall briefly present Aristotle's understanding of politics, stressing how much this Aristotelian conception of the political community is different from that founded in the contemporary large-scale democracies. This will be discussed within the context of Alasdair MacIntyre's moral and political philosophy. MacIntyre is one of the rare contemporary political thinkers who extend the philosophical critique of the Enlightenment not only to the sphere of political theory but also to contemporary politics, and thereby reject contemporary liberalism and the liberal democracy of the modern nation-state. MacIntyre is certainly one of them – he sees them as the embodiment and logical continuation of the project of modernity. To articulate this position and then to ask where we can find the locus of such alternative Aristotelian understanding of politics will be the main concern of this paper.

ARISTOTELIAN CONCEPTION OF THE STATE

I shall start from a blunt statement of what, for MacIntyre, the activity of politics should be about. MacIntyre claims that politics should be seen as the public activity whereby the realisation of common good is possible. From this point of view, politics is the public rational deliberation about the common good. What this means is that each individual within a well

constituted community not merely sees his / her individual good as part of common good, but understands that one's own good is possible only through learning what the common good is. Thus, politics is this rational activity where a strong interconnection between individual goods and communal good is learned and realised. It is only this link between communal and individual goods that can justify political authority: people would willingly obey a government that embodied people's shared understanding of common good. Now, what MacIntyre suggests is that today such communal learning where a close bond between communal and individual goods is realised can be found neither within the contemporary social institution of the family nor within the modern nation-state. Thus, the locus of politics, according to MacIntyre, cannot be either family or the modern nation state as the former is too small, whereas the latter is too big. The structures of political community and hence politics should be seen only within small-scale local communities. It is only in this sense that MacIntyre rejects the institution of the modern state, however, claiming that the modern nation-state is "an ineliminable feature of the contemporary landscape" (MacIntyre 1999: 133). Thus, his position does not have any affinity to anarchism on the one hand and cannot be accused of any tendency to totalitarianism on the other.

To understand the conceptual significance of these claims, we need to turn to Aristotle. What is it that makes Aristotle's understanding of politics so different from the politics of liberal democracies of the nation-state? A simple answer would be that the contemporary liberal democracies are based on the conception of a minimal / neutral state. The state or political community, according to John Locke for instance, is the outcome of the contract of individuals who give up their natural rights of sovereignty to the civil government. Thus, sovereignty of the state is only a function of what it is given by individuals. Hence the conception of limited government: its primary function is the preservation of "life, liberty and estate"; thus, any attempt to deprive free and equal individuals from their rights is doomed to be unconstitutional activity. Now, what is significant in our context is the paradigmatically modern conception according to which political society is artificial and secondary to that of free and equal individuals. Ontologically, individuals are free, equal and self-determining beings; thus, political community is only the means for securing each individual's right to pursue his / her good.

It is exactly such a conception of the minimal / neutral state, the state which from John Locke to John Rawls is the means to the individuals' goods and never an end/good in itself, which is so different from the Aristotelian understanding of political community and politics. In *Politics*, Aristotle argues that it is only due to political life and only in political community that the self-sufficiency of human life can be achieved. Aristotle also claims that "the state came about as a means of securing life itself, it continues in being to secure the *good life*" (Aristotle 1981: 1252b). Thus, his conception of human life presupposes a perfectionist conception of political community and politics. Aristotle's argument is the following: despite the fact that political community grows out of the household and then out of the village, the state¹ is *essentially* primary to the individual, the household and the village. The primacy of the political community is an ontological one. That is to say the state or political community in Aristotle's view exists by nature. The way Aristotle understands nature is different from the way nature has been understood by modern political theorists and philosophers. From

¹ Aristotle uses "the state" and "political community" interchangeably. On the relationship between these two concepts, see Bielskis 2006.

Thomas Hobbes, John Locke to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant, nature, including human nature, has been understood as static and as something that demotes the state of being as it is. This is not the case with Aristotle who saw nature in terms of his conception of teleology. In *Politics* and elsewhere, Aristotle states that nature itself is an end: “for whatever is the end-product of the coming into existence of any object, that is what we call its nature” (*ibid*). Following Aristotle’s teleology, to claim that nature is an end means also to claim that fully to actualize one’s nature is to achieve one’s highest good. Accordingly, the state as well as a well functioning political community is an end of human existence and thus its highest good: “the end is perfection; and self-sufficiency is both end and perfection” (*ibid*). Thus, the three collective organisations – the household, the village and the state – are ordered hierarchically according to their importance and goodness in Aristotle’s *Politics*. The ontological function of the household is reproduction and the satisfaction of our *daily needs*. Although Aristotle does not explicitly claim this, the function of the village can be seen in terms of the satisfaction of our social needs which are qualitatively different from and higher than our daily needs in the household. Finally, the good of political community is higher than the goods of the household and the village: the highest good can be achieved only in a well functioning political community and is driven not by the *necessity* of daily needs but by *freedom*. Only members of political community can fully exercise their human faculties and in so doing achieve happiness. Aristotle’s definition of the *polis* illustrates this argument well:

A state is an association of similar persons whose aim is the best life possible. What is best is happiness, and to be happy is an active exercise of virtue and a complete employment of it (*ibid*: 1328a).

Aristotle’s claim that human beings are essentially political animals is closely related to the conceptual setting outlined above. This claim is not only political and ethical, it is also ontological. To claim that human beings are by nature political is to argue that humans can live flourishing lives only within a community of free and virtuous individuals. According to Aristotle, this is so because it is only within a well structured community that humans can fully exercise their moral and intellectual faculties and in so doing achieve happiness. The ethical aspect of this claim is linked to Aristotle’s conception of happiness (*eudaimonia*) which he conceptualized in *Nicomachean Ethics* as the highest end of ethical life. And yet this claim is also ontological as Aristotle makes it clear that without being part of political community humans will cease to be humans:

He is like a war-mad man condemned by Homer’s words as ‘having no family, no law, no home’; for he who is such by nature is mad on war: he is a non-cooperator like any isolated peace in a game of draughts (*ibid*: 1253a).

It is important to stress the aspect of proximity which we find in Aristotle’s conception of political community. All of us need the particular others and the organic networks of giving and receiving in order to sustain our lives. Furthermore, a good human life is the one when people can share their lives with one another. Following Aristotle, MacIntyre calls the virtues necessary for sustaining the communal life the virtues of acknowledged dependence.

Thus, for Aristotle the *polis* is impossible without freedom which should be understood in terms of positive rather than negative freedom (to use Isaiah Berlin’s terms). Freedom for Aristotle meant citizens’ ability to exercise their virtues in ruling each other as well as in exercising their intellectual and moral endowments. A well functioning political community is impossible without its members being able to exercise the fundamental virtues of wisdom, justice, courage and temperance. Thus understood political life and the political community

are the surplus of the ordinary life of necessities. The end of such existence is flourishing (or the best) life. This is the reason why politics for Aristotle was closely linked to and required leisure. He also urged politicians to make sure that citizens were properly educated. Part of such education should be philosophy enabling citizens to develop the ability of sound judgement and other important intellectual virtues (Bielskis 2005: 148–150).

A possible objection to such conception of politics can be to point that it is rather elitist. Very often it is, and this is the reason why MacIntyre, being himself Aristotelian, sharply criticises Aristotle (in particular the issue of slaves and inequality between men and women (MacIntyre 1999: xi). However, that politics as a free rational deliberation about individual and common good is linked to philosophy is clear in both Aristotle's and MacIntyre's thought. To put it briefly, politics is linked to philosophy, at least to practical philosophy, i. e. ethics, in that both politics and philosophy, from an Aristotelian point of view, are based on the public enquiry into human good. Philosophy is essentially a *value*-driven reasoning which asks and is able to answer what is good and bad, whether that particular action and way of life is correct or wrong, what is just and unjust. Such philosophical politics thus constitutes a public enquiry about what is good for both individuals and community in this particular situation and what the further / ultimate good is. Furthermore, from this point of view, politics is essentially a critical enterprise which is able to question its own premises – what is the good of the goods of particular practices and how are they to be ordered within this particular community?

WHY THE MODERN NATION-STATE CANNOT BE AN ARISTOTELIAN POLITICAL COMMUNITY

Now, what I want to argue is that such an understanding of politics, politics as a free public deliberation about communal good which requires strong or “thick” moral judgements, needs a certain intellectual tradition or a “grand narrative” which would furnish a local community with a frame within which fundamental agreements about a common good can be established. Shared agreement concerning fundamental principles is needed since, according to MacIntyre, the political debate / rhetoric can be rational only if it logically moves from shared premises to a desirable or further conclusion. Accordingly, there cannot be practical rationality if there is no possibility of arriving at a common ground: without sharing certain premises there is either an incommensurable disagreement or certain conclusions are reached through irrational manipulation.

An important question which arises is how, then, we are to understand MacIntyre's conception of tradition, bearing in mind that today there is no single meta-tradition. The time of a single grand and all encompassing meta-narrative is over, and this is the sign, to use Lyotard's terms, of the post-modern condition. This is evident within contemporary politics as well. One of the characteristics of the post- Cold-War politics across the Western democracies has been exactly the decline of ideologies: the sharp ideological divide between the right and the left has almost ceased to exist. Marxism, as a powerful alternative to free-market-oriented liberalism, has slowly and quietly died in contemporary parliamentary politics (this is not to say about theoretical debates). The grand narratives such as positivism, Christianity and Marxism are the remains of sometime powerful meta-narratives. This, however, would not mean that such narratives are impossible. Rather what I want to suggest is that post-modernity should be seen as a cultural condition which willingly acknowledges that there is no single all-encompassing narrative, a narrative with exceptional rights, but a variety of localised rival intellectual and moral traditions. Just because the existence and credibility of these former grand meta-narratives are not straightforwardly evident, the allegiance to them

becomes the matter of an active hermeneutical actualisation of these traditions. On the other hand, once the belonging to a certain moral and intellectual tradition is realised through the critical self-scrutiny, its adherent could still properly believe that the claims of that particular tradition are claims for truth.

If we agree with what has been said, namely that the Aristotelian understanding of politics as dialectical activity requires a moral tradition and that such Aristotelian politics should be “located” within a localised meta-narrative, a narrative that would both acknowledge that there are different rival traditions and at the same time would believe that its claims are the claims for truth, then we have to ask: where can we find such a *polis* and which tradition it should be?

Liberal democracy as it is embodied in the contemporary nation state definitely cannot be this *polis*. One of the reasons is that it is too big: it is impossible to have shared common beliefs within large-scale politics today because there is no, and cannot be, any single meta-narrative or a single system of beliefs which could serve the modern nation-state with the shared premises for contemporary public debate. An attempt to unite the whole society of the modern nation-state through such a single meta-narrative or ideology would lead to some form of totalitarianism. But since today the predominant public debate cannot afford an agreement on fundamental premises of what the *good* communal life might be, the public debate, looking at it from the Aristotelian point of view, is not rational. The irrationality rests exactly in its purely instrumental character and its inability to discuss the shared common ends other than in terms of effectiveness or cost / benefit calculations. Accordingly, the fundamental questions about the values and goods of certain ways of life, such questions as what it is to live a *good* life and how it can be politically achieved, are never posed let alone answered: the contemporary political debate within the level of decision making has completely excluded questioning about first principles and final ends (MacIntyre 1998). And this is so because within the sphere of contemporary politics there is a multiplicity of different conceptions of goods (i. e. modern society is essentially a multicultural society) and thus politics appears as the activity that mediates between them without a substantial enquiry about these goods themselves.

On the other hand, large-scale liberal democracies often fail on their own terms as well. For the classical theories of social contract, democracy should be based on informed consent. The tendency of the last decade has been that the ideological differences among political parties have become smaller and the political debates of their leaders have become less substantially different. This implies that people do not see that their choice to vote for one or another party is significant. Thus, it is not surprising that less than half of, for example, America’s electorate vote (Taylor 1991: 62). This tendency of a low turnout, political indifference and apathy in general is apparent in Europe as well². Such political apathy makes the legitimisation crisis deeper. On the other hand, the contemporary political debate comes to occupy more and more a common “middle ground” and is dominated by the media where the public deliberation becomes increasingly supplied by the techno-visual manipulation:

„The [political] candidate has become to some degree a fictional construction, a figure constructed by public relations experts, speech-writers, manipulators of opinion and cosmetic artists, very much as a film star is“ (MacIntyre 1998: 249).

² The 2001 parliamentary election in Britain is a good example of the increasing political apathy in Europe. The turnout (58 percent of the electorate) was the lowest since 1918, i. e. in the history of democratic Britain. Accordingly, Labour won the election with the support of only a quarter of its whole electorate.

It is not surprising then that the gap between the political elite, who not only have the power of decision-making but also have control over the agenda of decision-making on the one hand and the general electorate on the other, has grown increasingly wide.

Where, then, can we locate such an Aristotelian understanding of politics? One example is a very concrete – both actual and hermeneutic – body, the Christian *Ecclēsia*. What that means in more concrete terms is the following: it would be to develop the conception of politics whose locus would be a local Christian community – church or parish – but whose mode of political deliberation would be that of a secular and open enquiry into the common, and through this to individual, good.

CONCLUSION

As this argument has been already made, here I would like to stress only the most important points of the argument (Bielskis 2005). If we accept such Aristotelian understanding of politics, politics as the activity of communal learning about both communal and individual goods, an activity which requires to exercise strong moral judgements and to cultivate such Aristotelian virtues as courage, justice, self-control and wisdom, then we have to accept the fact that such politics is impossible within the level of the liberal democratic nation-state. And this is so not only because the nation-state is too big, but also because such Aristotelian politics requires a moral-intellectual tradition which would furnish a particular local community with certain fundamental premises and agreements of what a good communal life might be. It is more than plausible, then, following MacIntyre, to suggest that Christianity or, to be more precise, progressive Thomism, on the one hand and a local parish on the other can be such a moral and intellectual tradition within which the politics of common good can be advanced. The further development of such conception of politics would be truly an attempt to develop the post-modern politics not only because it would be post-secular politics, but also because it would be based on the multicultural assumption that this moral tradition is one among many others.

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Postmodernios politikos koncepcijos link: aristoteliškas *polis* vs. moderni nacionalinė valstybė

Santrauka

Straipsnyje siekiama aptarti alternatyvią aristotelišką politikos sampratą modernios nacionalinės valstybės politikos kontekste. Teigiama, kad liberalioje nacionalinėje valstybėje, kuri yra grindžiama šiuolaikinio liberalizmo principais, aristoteliška politika nėra įmanoma. Aristotelio klasikinė politikos samprata buvo grįsta substanciška bendrojo gėrio idėja, tuo tarpu moderni politikos samprata nuo pat klasikinio liberalizmo buvo ir tebėra grindžiama minimalia pilietinės bendruomenės samprata. Šiuolaikinė postmoderni visuomenė yra daugiakultūrinė, todėl viena bendrojo gėrio koncepcija iš principo yra neįmanoma. Straipsnyje teigiama, kad vienintelė galimybė realizuoti aristotelišką politikos sampratą postmodernioje visuomenėje yra galima tik mažose vietinėse bendruomenėse.

Raktažodžiai: liberali nacionalinė valstybė, Aristotelis, Alasdair MacIntyre, postmoderni politika, bendrasis gėris