

Introduction

“Our Ancestors the Greeks”

Studying ancient Greek political philosophy goes to the very root of our relations with the Greeks, that is to say, to the root of a peculiar and fertile mystification. It is said that the fantasized tie that the West today maintains with ancient Greece, that has taken five centuries, maybe eight, to construct, has become remarkably distorted in the last several decades. The retreat of classical studies should be in fact both the cause and a result of this weakening, but after all the number of people knowing Greek was never that great. This distancing involves so to speak every domain. Our new approach to the history of knowledge probably played an important, perhaps fundamental, role, in the divorce between the Greeks and us. For a long time, in fact, historians of science have accepted the illusion of a direct descent from ancient speculations to modern disciplines. The fact that our sciences use, even for their names, many Greek terms has contributed to that illusion. In fact, it is tempting to think that there, as almost everywhere else, the same words refer to the same realities and that, therefore, modern physics directly follows ancient *physikē*. This is a matter of a historical problem of first importance, opposing a continuist vision of the progress of the human spirit, which thinks that all scientists over the centuries have been dedicated to the same tasks, posing to themselves the same questions, and that science would then be the structure that they have built together, to which each has contributed his or her stones, and the discontinuist conception developed by the French school of the history of science, founded by Gaston Bachelard, which simultaneously refuses to consider the progress of science as a simple addition of discoveries and insists on the new and irreducible character of the sciences in relation to

previous intellectual constructions. Thus, it is necessary to recognize that there is hardly more than a relationship of homonymy between ancient physics and that of Galileo and Newton, and in any case these two do not belong to the same history.

Greek, and more generally Greco-Roman, antiquity provides first-class material for thinking about the complex relationships between historical continuity and discontinuity, one of the subjects of the magnificent and somewhat forgotten 1969 work of Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.¹ It's exceptional material because the Greeks and Romans have left us an impressive number of texts that have been continuously edited, translated, analyzed, imitated, and invoked. Our relationship to classical antiquity has also long been privileged because the West, like its cultural ancestors before them, the Byzantines and Islamics, has thought of Greek and Roman thinkers as direct participants in their theoretical debates. An exceptional fate, because despite attempts to revive "the spirit of medieval philosophy" by Christians trying to slow the irreversible decline of Christianity, the Medieval Latin world, for example, has not had that sort of survival—it has for a long time been relegated to the category of obsolete intellectual universes.

What would be the basis of a continuity between us and the Greeks, when important elements of their cultural constructions and ours do not belong to the same history? Foucault has been especially sensitive to these discontinuities that are like the material of historical continuity: "In short, the history of thought, of knowledge, of philosophy, of literature seems to be seeking, and discovering, more and more discontinuities, whereas history itself appears to be abandoning the irruption of events in favour of stable structures."² We will return to Foucault in our conclusion. Michel Foucault and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* form the frame of this study.

Nevertheless, even staying within the history of the sciences this Bachelardian position needs to be modified on several points; I will mention the three most important. First, the Greeks have left us theoretical constructions that we cannot simply delete from the history of science. Obviously, in mathematics no one would dream of expelling the Hellenic

1. In French, Michel Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), English translation, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Routledge, 2002).

2. Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir*, 13, trans. Sheridan Smith, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 6.

and Hellenistic contributions from the discipline, but the same goes for speculations based upon mathematics, the hydrostatics of Archimedes as well as astronomy, even though geocentric, based on the hypothesis of orbits composed of circular movements: the hypotheses of Eudoxus and Calippus, as well as those of Ptolemy, based on a system of homocentric spheres, as false as they are, are still part of the same history of science. Next, there are other fields involved that we have sometimes thrown too hastily into the bitter abyss of pre-science. That is true of Aristotle's biology, something that I have studied for a very long time. From the start I was sensitive to its aspect that is radically strange from the point of view of modern science, notably as it takes positions dictated by metaphysical or ideological prejudices. How should we understand, for example that Aristotle has "observed" that women have fewer sutures in their skulls than men? Today I would be much more inclined to consider Aristotle as a "true" biologist. We must recognize that the Bachelardian schema functions much less well in biology than in physics.³ Finally, if we consider only the most impressive physics of antiquity, that of Aristotle, we must surely recognize that it has posed problems that subsequently required a scientific treatment. Thus the "law" of falling bodies posited by Aristotle that establishes a relationship between the weight of the body and the speed of its fall, or more generally large sections of Aristotelian kinematics fall under a physical theory that happens to be false rather than under an alleged physical theory. That was also the case with the homocentric spheres mentioned above.

Also, the various "human sciences," even if they don't belong to the same history as their Greek equivalents, even when they bear the same name, nevertheless have all or nearly all a Greek, even Aristotelian, prehistory or "archaeology." That's one of the bases of the extraordinary resurgence of interest in Aristotle since the 1960s: when we excavate to ensure the foundations of our disciplines, we hit Aristotelian strata. And there is, "last but not least," the case of philosophy that, at least in its university practice, pretends to continue our relationship with the Greeks.

But the domain in which our relationship to the Greeks seems to us somehow direct, and that which concerns us directly here, is that of politics, in the largest sense of the word. In that domain many of us feel directly illuminated by the Greek sun. The opinion that the Greeks invented

3. I have tried to give some reasons for that fact in the introduction to my translation of the *Parts of Animals*, *Aristote, Les Parties des animaux* (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 2011).

politics, and especially democracy, and by the same token the very idea of citizenship, is all the more rooted in our common consciousness that it is far from being completely false. That position became even more legitimate in the middle of the twentieth century with a decisive turning point for our approach to Greek matters.

That turning point was brought about by Jean-Pierre Vernant and his colleagues and students taking up ancient studies in the years 1960–1980. They not only reinforced for us the idea that in political matters the Greeks have spoken to us *directly*, but they have made us see in the political organization of Greek society an ultimate explanation of the special characteristics of the Hellenic cultural era. We must recognize from the start that Vernant and his colleagues are real historians who are, as such, aware of the differences between antiquity and the modern world, open to a relativistic approach to cultural facts and receptive to the irreducible element of exoticism that ancient Greece has for us. Thus, if any charges are to be brought against Vernant, they would not include schematism. To be sure, Vernant uses some unfortunate phrases. Thus, when he begins the last chapter of his famous *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs*⁴ with this statement: “Rational thought has, as it were, its personal credentials in order: its date and place of birth are known. It was in the sixth century BC, in the Greek cities of Asia Minor.” That’s a remarkable example of an expression that goes beyond the thought of its author, as Vernant himself recognized, since he did not intend in any way to deny rational thought to the non-Greek people of antiquity.

It may be useful, as a foretaste of what will follow, to remember very schematically what Vernant has taught us. His central thesis asserts that what seems to distinguish the Greeks from their neighbors is the birth of an original form of social organization, the city (*polis*). The corollary to this thesis, hardly expressed by Vernant and his colleagues but always present, is that all the ideas and practices that the Greeks have constructed from this *political* break, like those that concern the exercise of power, citizenship, public space, relation to the law, are those that still shape our democratic values. That is why we do not feel ourselves tied as directly to the “others,” the apolitical barbarians.

4. Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs* (Paris: Maspéro, 1962), trans. J. Lloyd and J. Fort, *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks* (New York: Routledge, 1983), 343. This work, justly celebrated, is a collection of articles that appeared in 1962 from François Maspéro, a “progressive” publisher from whom Hellenists hardly ever appear.

This thesis rests on the historical fact that at a certain moment power stopped being founded on a relationship between divine entities handed down through princes and priests in relation to or anointed by them, but started to depend on the ability of some to persuade those who had become their *fellow citizens* by rational arguments. This new organization of power is symbolized above all by the assembly of citizens in the *agora*, where many aspects of collective life had passed through the sieve of contradictory rational discussion. Thus one is witness at the birth of political institution, which, in competition with other institutions (religious, family, professional, etc.), ultimately dominated them.

Vernant writes,

The human group [that of the Greek cities and even of the proto-cities found in Homer] makes itself in this image: beside individual private homes there is a center where public affairs are debated, and this center represents all that is “common,” the collectivity as such. In this center each one feels equal to everyone else; no one is subject to another. In this free debate that is instituted in the center of the *agora*, all citizens are defined as *isoî*, equals, *homoioi*, similar. We see the birth of a society where the relation between man and man is thought under the form of a relation of identity, symmetry, reversibility.⁵

Vernant discerns a “contamination” of every level of Greek society by this new political structure. Thus the crucial idea of *isonomia*, which in the political domain designates the equality of rights of all citizens, is applied in medicine in the famous passage of Alcmaeon of Croton, who says that health, and thus life itself, presupposes an isonomic equilibrium of the powers that compose the body, while illness is the *monarchy* of one of the powers (hot, cold, dry, moist, sweet, bitter, etc.).⁶ *Isonomia* is applied even to the whole universe, since in Anaximander’s cosmology, for example, Earth is immobile in the center of the universe because it

5. Vernant, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs*, 154 (trans. note: A. Preus translation; in the translation published by Zone Books New York in 2006 you find the passage on p. 371).

6. Cf. Pseudo-Plutarch, *Placita Philosophorum (Opinions of the Philosophers)*, ed. G. N. Bernardakis (Leipzig: Teubner, 1893), 911A, and Stobaeus, *The Greek Anthology*, ed. W. R. Paton (Cambridge, MA: Loeb, 1857–1921), 4.36.

“is not dominated by anything” (ὕπὸ μηδενὸς κρατουμένη).⁷ In an article both brilliant and dense, Charles Mugler shows that *isonomia* is the basic principle of atomism and that it was posited in a manner more general and in a way more “pure” by Democritus than it would be by Epicurus. This superiority of Democritean atomism over Epicurean atomism has been asserted several times by Mugler.⁸ We should note that he expresses the indeterminate and undecidable nature of the universe of the Atomists in terms of justice and law: “justice is thus rendered by this homogeneous distribution to everything that exists” (232); Democritus “grants the same right of existence to everything that is possible” (236).

The political space thus created is that of men, not of women, outside the home, not within, of written laws, not of customs, of civic deities and not of chthonic and/or mystical cults, of reason and not of dank psychic enthusiasms. Science and philosophy would have arisen directly from this process of politicizing Greek space, because they put into operation compelling demonstrations valid for any human mind, and in ethics, for example, imperatives would be based on reason and not on certainties transmitted by what one may call the collective consciousness of a particular population. Vernant meant to show us, among other things, that it was only in a city that Socrates could have sought universal definitions of various virtues.

The forms of knowledge too become both rational and public, with the primary consequence that they can be understood as accessible to everyone and teachable, often for a fee. The example of medicine is remarkable. One can get an idea of the transformation we are talking about by looking at the greatest figure of ancient medicine, Hippocrates. The medical school that he founded on the island of Cos brought together old and new. The old is that medicine, an activity closely tied to religion by way of the cult of Asclepius, rests on a traditional form of teaching, that is, that it is not propounded in a reasoned oral presentation but is *transmitted* from predecessors to their successors, generally carried out within a lineage. Thus, physicians tried to insert themselves into one of the lineages descending from the god Asclepius himself, by one of his

7. Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, trans. J. M. MacMahon, 1.6.3, available online at NewAdvent.org.

8. Charles Mugler, “L’isonomie des atomistes,” *Revue de Philologie* 30 (1956): 231–250, see also his “Sur quelques particularités de l’atomisme ancien,” *Revue de Philologie* (1953): 141–174.

two sons, Podalirius or Machaon. The family of Hippocrates, for example, pretended to descend from Podalirius, and Hippocrates was initiated into medicine by his father and grandfather, who is supposed to have written medical works. His sons and his son-in-law were members of his school. The new aspect is that Hippocrates proposed a theory of medicine that everyone could examine and thus also criticize, even if none of the texts that have come down to us under his name can be attributed to him with certainty. He is also the person who, it is said, was the first to teach medicine for a fee.⁹

The *school*, which replaced the lineage brotherhood and was no longer located in a temple, is the new form of association within which knowledge is transmitted. The physicians doubtless preceded the philosophers in the “schoolization” of knowledge in Greece, since the school of Hippocrates was founded about 420 BCE, the Platonic Academy around 387, and the Presocratic schools earlier than Hippocrates were not institutions presupposing a life entirely or mainly common among its members, as were the medical and philosophical schools in classical, Hellenistic, and Roman antiquity.¹⁰ Nevertheless we must note that it is not certain that the school of Hippocrates (and this applies equally to the Academy during the lifetime of Plato) imposed on its students any doctrinal orthodoxy at all, because it was not until the third century BCE that Herophilus of Chalcedon brought from philosophy to medicine a *school* practice that would make its students not only live with their teacher but be held to defend his teachings against those of rival schools. Among the philosophers doubtless the first “school” in the full sense of the word, producing an orthodoxy, was Aristotle’s Lyceum. However, the teachings of the master were discussed and developed by his disciples and successors; this was the case in the Lyceum, the Stoa, and, to a lesser degree, the Epicurean school.

Of course the victory of political rationality was never complete. There were perverse usages, like those of the Sophists, at least in the picture of them that the philosophers like Plato and Aristotle have given us, and there

9. Several years ago, I tried to give a *political* reading of the difference, long noticed by specialists, between Cnidian medicine, with its empirical reputation, and Coan medicine (that of Hippocrates), with a rational reputation. Cf. Pierre Pellegrin, “Médecine hippocratique et philosophie,” in D. Gourevitch, M. Grmek, P. Pellegrin, *Hippocrate. De l’Art médical* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1994), 14–40.

10. The Pythagoreans formed an association that was closer to a religious sect than to a school.

still existed large areas of social life that continued to follow prepolitical logics, for example within familial cults or initiatory religious associations like that of the Mysteries of Eleusis, that surely often got the upper hand over the political process in certain decisions that citizens were led to take concerning their individual or collective life. It's really only in Plato's *Republic* that the family, the most important prepolitical institution, was dissolved into the city. That is a crucial *political* problem and is treated as such by Aristotle; we will come back to that. Nevertheless it remains, conformably with the position of Vernant, that the texts of the philosophers, orators, historians, even the dramatists, show that the Greeks had a clear awareness of the difference between them and those they called "barbarians"; the fact that they lived in cities was, in their eyes, an important part of that specialness. As for Aristotle, he lived at the end of a historical movement that began with the founding of cities, and no one was more conscious than he of the break that that foundation represented.

But that which interests us above all is the application of this rational approach that would thus be fundamentally a political one, to politics itself. Doubtless the Greeks, according to the written works that have come down to us, mainly agreed in considering city life as founded on relationships between rational beings, even if no one could imagine a city bereft of all religious practices. But the relations between the religious and the rational were not, in ancient Greece, the same as those that have been constructed in the case of "true" religions, revealed religions, and in any case the political sphere did not have to worry about any threats from various religious institutions. This is true to the point that when in mythical thought human unhappiness was often seen as caused by human ignorance of divine commandments or agreements, with the rise of the city, social evil was subsequently understood as coming from a lack of rationality. Thus, political theoreticians, who were immediately presented as reformers in charge of a refoundation of the city according to rational criteria, are as ancient as politics itself.

We will never be grateful enough to Vernant for having liberated us from a false and pernicious approach to Greece. Presenting himself as the one who, following his teacher Louis Gernet and according to the title of Gernet's most famous work (*An Anthropology of Ancient Greece*),¹¹ contrib-

11. Louis Gernet, *Anthropologie de la Grèce antique* (Paris: Maspéro, 1968), a posthumous collection of articles by J.-P. Vernant in 1968 published by François Maspéro. Louis Gernet died in January 1962.

uted to put ancient Greek society under the theoretical yoke of historical anthropology, Vernant took up opposition to the previous approach, that of the “Greek Miracle.” In detaching the ancient Greeks from ordinary historical causality and pretending that their genius was something miraculous (“because it was they”), the theory of the “Greek Miracle” served above all to give us made-to-measure ancestors who helped us feel ourselves to be what we pretend to be. Tremendous historical, anthropological, and sociological research has apparently not completely destroyed this idea, since it is periodically reborn from its ashes.¹²

Today, however, it seems to me that the break that Vernant established should be relativized. Not, obviously, that Vernant falls back into the reactionary ethnocentrism of our old teachers, since he has thoroughly applied the methods of critical history and historical anthropology to ancient societies. But to bring everything together to the birth of the city (a kind of Marxist schema, but based on politics more than on economics), isn’t that in a way a kind of reintroduction of the Greek Miracle? Because it is a fact that the city appeared in the Greek cultural era and not elsewhere. Why? Vernant has the wisdom to avoid identifying one or several causes of this appearance. In a sense, the analyses of Vernant and his friends recover the *ideological* role of the theory of the Greek Miracle, even if in a subtle and altered manner. Because the image of Greek politics and democracy that they give us would be that which we would expect to make the Greeks the ancestors of modern politics and democracy as we would wish they would be, and unhappily, that they are not.

Doubtless we should soften Vernant’s description, in the first place because the Greeks surely were rather strongly aware of the particularity of Hellenic politics according to the regime under which they themselves lived. But Vernant fell into the same Athens-centric illusion as the majority of his colleagues. Because not only were most cities not democratically governed, but the democracies of the Greek world from the sixth to the fourth centuries BCE, other than the mother of all democracies, Athens, were often regimes imposed by force on cities that fell to Athenian impe-

12. See, for example, the book by Sylvain Gouguenheim, *Aristote au Mont Saint-Michel* (Paris: Seuil, 2008), which (re)constructs a mythical Western rationality that goes from the Greeks to the Medieval Latins, via the Romans, but carefully avoiding the Arabs. I have said (almost) everything bad that I have to say about this book in Pierre Pellegrin, “Aristote arabe, Aristote latin. Aristote de droite, Aristote de gauche,” *Revue philosophique de la France et de l’Étranger* (Janvier–Mars 2009): 79–89.

rialism. Here is an example taken from Thucydides (1.115.2). Samos and Miletus went to war, and Miletus having been worsted, appealed to Athens:

In this they were joined by certain private persons from Samos itself, who wished to revolutionize the government. Accordingly, the Athenians sailed to Samos with forty ships and set up a democracy; took hostages from the Samians, fifty boys and as many men, lodged them in Lemnos, and after leaving a garrison in the island returned home.

Thus democracy was established at Samos. We will see that for Aristotle cities are in a way more or less political according to the regime under which they live.

Besides, historians have noted that Athenian democracy conformed very little to that which we expect from a democracy. The great majority of the population (women, slaves, foreigners) was excluded from political life. In 317 BCE Demetrius of Phaleron, who had been put in charge of Athens under the control of Macedonia, carried out a census that counted twenty-one thousand citizens, ten thousand metics, and four hundred thousand slaves. Doubtless among the slaves were counted the women, less certainly among the metics, but it is almost certain that that was not the case for citizens, which means that there were over twenty thousand wives and daughters of citizens being excluded from citizenship. Some modern historians have contested these numbers because it seems difficult that Athens at that time had nearly five hundred thousand inhabitants, but at least it gives an order of magnitude. In oligarchical cities it was worse, and the body of citizens was often unbelievably restricted, not to mention tyrannies and other monarchies. Although Plato, both in the *Republic* and in the *Laws*, did not seem to be excessively concerned about this sort of demographic lack of equilibrium, Aristotle sometimes reveals that he is conscious of the danger. We must also recognize on this point that Vernant, more than many others, was conscious of the limits and corrections that we need to bring to our spontaneous image of Greek democracy.¹³

Another historical remark, to notice a point, truly gigantic, that casts a singular shadow over Vernant's account, which we must recognize as somewhat idyllic. This point has in any case been well seen by Aristotle.

13. On this matter, there is a book that is still worth reading, Moses Finley, *Démocratie antique et démocratie moderne* (Paris: Payot, 1976), with a long essay by Pierre Vidal-Naquet, "Tradition de la démocratie grecque."

As we have said, the Athenians, who serve as a model for Vernant, were always, to the end, fierce partisans of birthright (*jus sanguinis*). Claude Vatin, as well as Claude Mossé,¹⁴ who is far from giving up her Athens-centrism, have shown clearly that “the maximum enlargement of the political body is not incompatible with the closing of the civic body.”¹⁵ That is, Athenian democracy developed in two directions: on the one side, lift as much as possible the census restrictions that prevented many Athenians from participating in political life because they had too small an inheritance, and, on the other, to avoid any contamination of the civic body by the two great dangers that threatened it, slaves and foreigners, two groups largely overlapping, since there was the very strong tendency of all slave systems to look for their slaves among foreign populations. And in that paragon of Athens-centrism, Pericles’s famous funeral oration presented in 431 BCE for the Athenian soldiers who had died in combat, according to Thucydides, who reported the speech, he praised the

Ancestors, for it is both just and proper that they should have the honor of the first mention on an occasion like the present. They dwelt in the country without break in succession from generation to generation, and handed it down free to the present time by their valor.

For the Athenians there was, *prior to the establishment of political relations* (and “prior” here should be understood as much in a logical as chronological sense), a dream of ethnic purity that dazes us. When we read Aristotle’s *Politics*, we get the impression that the crucial problem for any city is that of determining by law the *political* criteria for citizenship. Thus, Aristotle thinks that a well-governed city should not give civic rights to artisans. But even before legislating to decide who is legitimately a citizen, Athens formed a human group, established on genetic and not political criteria, of people who could be citizens. This practice is demonstrated by the formation of “civic lists” where potential citizens are inscribed as members of a deme. One of the major events of the political history of Athens was the periodic revision of these civic lists. Thus, according to the *Constitution of Athens* ascribed to Aristotle (26.4), because the number

14. Claude Vatin, *Citoyens et non-citoyens dans le monde grec* (Paris: SEDES, 1984); Claude Mossé, *Politique et société en Grèce ancienne. Le ‘modèle’ athénien* (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 1995).

15. Vatin, *Citoyens et non-citoyens dans le monde grec*, 70.

of citizens had become too great, Pericles decided to limit citizenship to men descended from Athenians on both sides, maternal and paternal. In Athens, citizenship, in the sense of the prerogatives that attached to the status of citizen, was extremely difficult to obtain. Athenians were more than willing to share the *duties* of citizenship with noncitizens: thus, metics paid a special tax and were liable for military service. But even the orator Lysias, who assisted the return of the democracy in 404 BCE, did not acquire citizenship. This obsession with purity of blood was so entrenched among the Athenians that they went so far as to refuse to apply the common idea that people settled in a location are formed by migration. Nicole Loraux has clearly shown that, right to the level of myth, Athenians wanted to remain *purely*, in every sense of that word, with each other; we remember that according to their main origin myth they pretended to be born from their land (autochthonous).¹⁶

Historically, we see that legislation had a tendency to resist marriages with foreigners, and worse yet, with slaves, on the one hand firmly rejecting from citizenship children born of such unions, and punishing fraud on this point in a pitiless way on the other. It's also because of this obsession with purity of blood that Athens had a very strong prohibition against adultery. Claude Vatin remarks correctly that women, whom all cities excluded from full citizenship, were nevertheless closer than foreign men—they were called *πολίτις*, the feminine form of *πολίτης*, or “citizeness.” Ethnically pure material, although not a sufficient condition for the existence of a citizen, was a necessary condition. So in Athens citizenship was in the first place a matter of birth, that is, of family. That is a crucial point that causes some difficulty for Vernant's schema.¹⁷

Before offering a specifically political critique at the beginning of *Politics* 3, in one of the rare passages in his works that is straightforwardly

16. Cf. Nicole Loraux, *Né de la terre. Mythe et politique à Athènes* (Paris: Seuil, 1996). In a remarkable little book William K. C. Guthrie finds in many Greek populations this pretention to autochthony but remarks that “above all other Greeks the Athenians boasted of this distinction.” William K. C. Guthrie, *In the Beginning: Some Greek Views on the Origin of Life and the Early State of Man* (London: Methuen & Co., 1957), 23.

17. We ought to note here that modern democracies have sometimes shared these characteristics with ancient democracies. In the apartheid era, South Africa was certainly a democracy with great attention to the rights of its citizens, except that the great majority of the population was excluded from this civic contract. Until recently, Germany maintained a citizenship rule, based on a birthright, so strict that Turks who had lived for several generations in Germany, without having any remaining relationship at all with the country of origin of their ancestors, were refused German citizenship,

ironic, Aristotle begins by showing the absurdity of the Athenian position—he does not attribute it specifically to Athens, since he talks about Larissa—on the ground that it leads to an infinite regress. In order to be an Athenian citizen, one had to have parents who were Athenians, whose parents in turn had to have been Athenians, and so on. In fact Aristotle does not challenge the attribution of citizenship in a city transmitted by way of birth, but he is much too aware of the vagaries, twists, and turns of history to be able to believe that this way of acquiring citizenship could be definitive and unchangeable, and he notes that the principle is challenged when there are historical upheavals: we will return several times to the occasional necessity of opening up the body of citizens following a “lack of men” caused by a war. For the most part, the Greeks did not accept, even hypothetically, the idea that people could become fellow citizens simply by sharing the common ethical and political values, as the American and French revolutions affirmed. Doubtless that idea has, unfortunately, lost some force in our societies. Philosophers like Plato and Aristotle are doubtless closer than others when they claim that citizenship in the excellent city is for men who share a certain number of virtues. But for Aristotle the demand for virtue is for fellow citizens and, for him as for all the Greeks, the idea of “foreigner” remains full of implications.

One may say simultaneously that a more careful reading of Aristotle would have enabled Vernant to bring necessary amendments to his sketch, but also that in general Aristotle conforms to the essence of Vernant’s position in that, as we will see, politics, although not definitory of human nature, is no less an important property that colors every level of society in which it appears.

The Greeks, That Is to Say, Aristotle

It is all the more regrettable that Vernant did not read Aristotle more carefully, because he is the only really political thinker in antiquity, and perhaps in the entire history of philosophy. There would be many ways

while the descendants of seventeenth-century German immigrants to the Caucasus, no longer speaking German, gained German citizenship easily. Germany has recently modified its legislation, yielding to pressure from the EU, but powerful movements in favor of birthright are currently appearing in Europe along with the increase of power of populist movements. In any case, in a country like France, the right of residency is rarely invoked to acquire French nationality; that is mainly conferred by the fact of being the issue of parents themselves already citizens.

of showing that the place of Aristotle in *our* approach to the Greek political reality is more significant than that of other philosophers, historians, and ancient thinkers of the social reality of antiquity. Let us be satisfied, even before any precise analysis, with the following fact. When we read the surviving ancient Greek texts, two characteristics inevitably strike us, we could say two invading *presences*. The one, which is far from being distinctive to the Hellenic world, but is clearly a nearly absolute rule in all societies of the same period, is that of slavery; the other, proper to the Greeks, is the city (*polis*). These two realities are not, properly speaking, part of the unconscious of the Greeks, because none of them were ignorant of their presence, but they were so close and so pervasive that they didn't have the idea of trying to think about them explicitly and precisely.

Thus for slavery. Slaves were *so much there*, everywhere and always, that they became invisible. Pierre Vidal-Naquet has remarked that even utopia did not succeed in erasing the reality of slavery, even of reducing its massiveness. Those who, like Aristophanes, imagined an extreme social subversion, that rule by women would represent, simply did not conceive that such a subversion could abolish slavery, since the city of women continues to have slaves.¹⁸ Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism, wrote a *Republic* in the Cynical vein that was part of his thought. He described a society of sages (composed solely of sages, or mixing sages and non-sages—interpreters are not in agreement about that) in which all social usages would be overturned. All institutions would be suppressed—no courts, no temples, no money; not only is the institution of marriage abolished, but there is a regime of absolute sexual freedom and, last but not least, the very marks of sexual difference are abolished, since men and women wear the same clothing.¹⁹ But apparently not a word about slavery, although that institution is at least as invasive as that of marriage. The same for the revolutionary (pro)positions of the Cynics, who counted among natural practices both incest and cannibalism: in the name of its founding conventions culture seems to go against our sexual impulses in forbidding us certain partners and also against our need of food by forbidding us to eat the bodies of our dead relatives. On the other hand, slavery did not seem to them to

18. See Pierre Vidal-Naquet, "Slavery and the Rule of Women in Tradition, Myth and Utopia," in *Myth, Religion and Society*, ed. R. L. Gordon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

19. See Harold Caparne Baldry, "Zeno's Ideal State," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* (1959): 3–15.

be an unnatural institution. To be sure, Diogenes of Sinope finally did without his slave, but only when his slave had run away, which proves that he had one, and we know his name—Manes. In fact, the actions and words of Diogenes reported by Diogenes Laertius tend to show that the cynical philosopher thought, like most people of his era, that the state of slavery was naturally appropriate for people who had mental and/or ethical qualities inferior to those of “normal” people. Diogenes Laertius tells us twice that Diogenes declared himself winner in athletic competitions “in the category of men,” and that the official winners ought to be included “in the category of slaves” (6.33 and 43). When someone asked Diogenes why we call slaves *andropoda* (“man-footed”), he answered, “because they have the feet of men, and a soul like yours, you who ask me that question” (6.67). For the Cynics too, “slave” is an insult.

If we remember the place and functions that Plato grants to women in his *Republic* and blame him for the silent presence of slaves in the Platonic dialogues, it reinforces in us the impression that gender difference was for ancient thinkers a *question*, and slavery was not. Aristotle was the only ancient philosopher who put forward a theoretical analysis of the phenomenon of slavery; we will have to clarify the content and goals of that analysis. But Aristotle was also the only ancient philosopher to try to think through that peculiarly Greek reality, the city, which amounts to saying, as we have already pointed out, that he was the only political thinker. We will, in what follows, take the terms “political,” “politician,” “politically,” in their proper sense as that which relates to the *polis*, or city. Oddly enough, among the orators, poets, and even philosophers, who are constantly referring to the city, none asks himself or herself “what is a city?” We will return to these social objects common to the Greeks and theoretically absolutely proper to Aristotle. The Aristotelian theory of slavery will be examined in the appropriate place when it is a matter of the place to which Aristotle assigns it, within the family. As for the city, it will be absent from none, so to speak, of the pages that follow.

When one writes a work on a subject it is because one believes that the subject has not been satisfactorily treated heretofore. The interpretation of Aristotle’s political philosophy has been, for the last several decades, the object of a great deal of attention, many publications, and automatically, one may say, remarkable progress. Some of the theses presented in this book nevertheless propose a reorientation of the reading of whole sections of the political philosophy of the man from Stagira. But, of course, “new” does not always mean “true.”

This work was originally imagined as a collection of articles dedicated to Aristotelian political philosophy. In view of how much my own positions have evolved, I had at the beginning the intention of revising these articles before publishing them until I realized that I had to write a book, for at least two reasons. First, because it would be the most economical solution, to the extent that revision is sometimes harder work than writing in the first place. One of the principal results of that decision is that I have often engaged in self-plagiarism in reusing the theses and even many of the expressions used in the articles in question. The second reason is entirely different: in gathering my articles, I realized that, on the one hand, on almost all the important subjects that were discussed in them, Aristotle came to positions that separated him, sometimes to a significant degree, from those of other ancient thinkers, and on the other hand, that these positions gave him a decidedly “modern” appearance. Without wanting to make Aristotle an immediate participant in today’s debates—a procedure that I have just condemned in this introduction—I think that it does not lack interest to note the degree to which Aristotle’s political philosophy finds an echo in ways of thinking that are radically foreign to him. But it is more striking to consider these original positions together than to study them one by one.