

## POLIS [πόλις], POLITEIA [πολιτεία] (GREEK)

ENGLISH city-state, state, society, nation  
FRENCH *cité, État, société, nation*

- STATE [DEMOS/ETHNOS/LAOS, STATE/GOVERNMENT, STATO], and CIVIL RIGHTS, CIVIL SOCIETY, ECONOMY, GOVERNMENT, ΟΙΚΕΙΩΣΙΣ, ΟΙΚΟΝΟΜΙΑ, PEOPLE, POLITICS

The word *polis* [πόλις] is considered untranslatable: city-state, state, society, or nation? But is it the word that is untranslatable in our languages, or the reality that it designates, which has no equivalent in our civilization? *Polis* designates the “political community” peculiar to a stage in Greek civilization. But the fact that today we still cannot designate anthropological reality in general without appealing to the word *polis* shows that it is not easy to distinguish between translating words and establishing correspondences between things or deciding between Greek particularity and human universality.

*Politeia* [πολιτεία] seems to pose different problems: the *politês* [πολίτης] being a member of the *polis* (hence the citizen), *politeia* designates either, distributively, the citizens’ participation in the city-state as a whole, and thus “citizenship,” or collectively, the organization of citizens into a whole, and thus “constitution” or “regime.” But there again, it is difficult to separate historical realities from the concepts philosophy bases on them since that is the title Plato gives to his main work on politics—the *Republic* (*Politeia*)—and the name that Aristotle gives to a particular *politeia* among all those that seem to him possible.

### I. *Polis* and Political Philosophy

The *polis* [πόλις] is first of all a political entity peculiar to archaic and classical Greek civilization between (at least) the eighth and the fourth centuries BCE, connecting a human community and a determinate territory. Whereas other peoples lived in empires having an “ethnic” identity (e.g., the Persians), the originality of the Greeks in the classical period was that they lived in small, free communities (the Athenians, the Lacedaemonians, the Corinthians, et al.) having no unity other than political. Thus every city-state enjoyed territorial sovereignty, made its own laws (according to its *politeia* [πολιτεία]), and was protected by its own gods. Three governmental institutions were common to all the city-states: a large Assembly that brought together all or part of the *polites* [πολίτες] (“citizens,” which was never synonymous with “residents,” because minors, foreigners, “metics,” women, and slaves were excluded); one or more smaller councils, generally entrusted with preparing and executing the decisions made by the Assembly; and a certain number of public offices (the *archai* [ἄρχαι], magistracies), exercised in alternation by certain people. The *politeia* specific to each *polis* defined the way these different bodies were recruited and their powers. Nonetheless, during the classical period, the *polites* were distinguished from each other by whether they had adopted a democratic or an oligarchic *politeia*. In the former case, as in Athens, the Assembly brought together all the citizens and decisions were made by majority vote after a debate in the course of which everyone had an equal right to speak; in addition, everyone had an equal opportunity to take part in the councils and in most of the tribunals and magistracies (except the military and financial ones) through

simple drawing of lots. In oligarchic city-states, only some of the members of the *polis* could take part in governmental organs and magistrates were chosen by election.

This singular historical reality constituted by the *polis* can be designated by the term “city-state” so long as the *polis* is not confused with the city (in Greek: *astu* [ἄστυ]), which was only a part of the city-state. But the problem is not only linguistic, it is philosophical from the outset because political philosophy was born in the *polis* as a “reflection” on the *polis* itself, both as the community of the Greeks and a way of life for men, and as a critical investigation into the *politeiai*, the different real or possible ways in which citizens could live together. It is from this interweaving of the singular and the universal, of the historical and the conceptual, of the real and the possible, that arise the difficulty of translating and the philosophical fertility of these notions of the *polis* and the *politeia*.

### II. *Polis*: State, Society, Nation?

The difficulty of translating *polis* is less a matter of language than of history. No modern political entity is identical with the ancient *polis*. We usually live in states, each of which has legal sovereignty over a community of individuals, families, and classes called “society,” and whose members feel themselves to be united by a similarity in language, culture, and history called “nation.” However, although the Greek *polis* appeals to the three elements of legal system, social interdependence, and historical identity, it is nonetheless distinguished from what we call a “state,” “society,” or “nation.”

Every Greek felt connected to his *polis* by an attachment so strong that he was often prepared to sacrifice his time for its administration and his life for its defense, and he feared the punishment of exile more than any other. Nonetheless, this feeling was not exactly national, if by “nation” we mean a community of language and culture (what the Greeks called *ethnos* [ἔθνος], and which they distinguished precisely from *polis*), not exactly patriotic, since it is less a relationship to a “native land,” to a territory, than what the Greeks called *chôra* [χώρα], an awareness of belonging to a human community bound together by a shared past and a future to be constructed in common.

Each community was welded together by institutions that had a sovereign power over the whole of its members and its constituent groups. This relates the *polis* to the modern state, if we understand thereby the authority that “successfully claims a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence” (Weber, *Politik als Beruf*). However, a *polis* is not exactly a “state,” the concept of which is correlative to that of the individual and “society.” The state appears as an omnipotent, anonymous, and distant legal institution against which individual liberties must—always and again and again—be defended: the state is “they” against “us”—and “we” are individuals, or society. The same was not true in the *polis*: the pressure exercised by the *polis* is still exercised by “us,” as such, by the community as a whole. To this extent, the freedom of the individual is gauged not by his independence with regard to the state but by the collectivity’s dependence with regard to him, that is, to his participation in the *polis*.

The *polis* is thus first of all a community with a transgenerational permanence and a transfamilial identity, whose members feel a solidarity transcending all ties of blood.

In this sense, it is related to a “society.” But it is not a “society” in the modern sense, for two complementary reasons. First of all, negatively, because for the Greeks, social and economic relations belonged to the sphere of the *oikos* [οἶκος] and not to that of the *polis*—that is, they were private, not public matters. Second, the *polis* is not a neutral context of exchange or of the circulation of goods, but rather the center of a historical experience, past and future, real or imaginary; in other words, the unity of this community did not arise from the interdependency of its members, but from action with a view to administering or defending it: it was a political unity.

The *polis* is thus neither a nation, nor a state, nor a society. It does not exist negatively, by inadequation, but positively, by definition. What constitutes the *polis* is the identity of the sphere of power (which for us concerns the “state”) and the sphere of community (which for us is organized into “society”), and it is to this unity that each individual feels affectively bound (and not to the “nation”). Thus we can understand why the first political thinkers were able to take it as both their object and their model: while being aware of the singularity of the *polis*, they saw in it the concept of a “political community” in general. Thus according to Plato, Protagoras thought that men have to live in *poleis* because they lack other animals’ biological qualities that fit them for the struggle for life, and thus have to unite by showing the virtues necessary for life in common (Plato, *Protagoras*, 320c–322d). Plato sees the *polis* as deriving from the necessity that humans cooperate and specialize (*Republic*, 2.369b–371e). Aristotle sees man as being by definition a “political animal” (*Politics*, 1.1253a 1–38), that is, “one who lives in a *polis*,” and by that we must understand not only a “social animal,” but also a being that can be happy only if he can freely decide, with his peers, what is right for their common life. It is as if the particularity of the *polis*, in which the sphere of the community merges with that of power, had made political thought as such possible. That is why the *polis* is neither the state nor society, but the “political community.”

### III. *Politeia*: Citizenship and Regime

This particularity also explains the dichotomy of the meanings of *politeia*. If the *politês* is a person who participates in the *polis*, the *politeia* may be either the subjective bond of the *politês* to the *polis*, that is, the way in which the *polis* as a community distributes among those whom it recognizes as its participants (the “citizenry”), or the objective organization of the functions of government and administration, that is, the way in which the power of the *polis* is collectively guaranteed (the “form of government” or the “constitution”). The first meaning is anterior and corresponds to the single use of the word in Herodotus (*Histories*, 9.34), who offers, moreover, without using the term *politeia*, the oldest classification of “forms of government” (3.80–83), depending on the number of those who govern: a single individual (“tyranny”), several (“oligarchy”), or all (“isonomy”). However, it is the second meaning that was to prevail in political thought, for example, with the *Poleitai of the Lacedaemonians* or the *Poleitai of Athens*, two texts transmitted in the corpus of Xenophon’s works, or the “Collection of *Poleitai*” assembled by Aristotle, and of which only that of Athens is extant. Given that all these cases involve a kind of a posteriori codification, the

term “constitution” seems to be the most appropriate translation of *poleitai*, on condition that it not be taken to imply any notion of a basic law written a priori. On the other hand, when Plato (*Republic*, 8) and then Aristotle (*Politics*, 3.6–7) classify and compare *poleitai*, they are concerned above all to discern in each case the fundamental principle on which the organization of power in the *polis* rests, and the term “form of government” seems more adequate.

However, neither of these translations is sufficient because one of Aristotle’s *poleitai*, the one in which power is assumed by all citizens with a view to the common good, is called precisely *politeia* (“republic”? “constitutional regime”?), as if it incarnated, as it were, the essence of any *politeia*, by combining the two senses of the word: according to this *politeia*, in fact, all those who belong to the citizenry, and thus to the *politeia*, have the right to participate in the administration of the *politeia*.

The words constitution (*politeia* [πολιτεία]) and government (*politeuma* [πολίτευμα]) have the same meaning, and the government, which is the supreme authority in states (*to kurion tōn poleōn* [τὸ κύριον τῶν πολέων]), must be in the hands of one, or of a few, or of the many (*ἓ hena ἔ oligous ἔ tous pollous* [ἢ ἓνα ἢ ὀλίγους ἢ τοὺς πολλούς]). The true forms of government (*politeias* [πολιτείας]), therefore, are those in which the one, or the few, or the many, govern with a view to the common interest; but governments which rule with a view to the private interest (*to idion* [τὸ ἴδιον]), whether of the one, or of the few, or of the many, are perversions. For the members of a state (*politai* [πολίτας]), if they are truly citizens (*tous metechontas* [τοὺς μετέχοντας]), ought to participate in its advantages (*koinōnein tous sumpherontas* [κοινωνεῖν τοὺς συμφέροντας]). Of forms of government in which one rules, we call that which regards the common interests, kingship or royalty; that in which more than one, but not many, rule, aristocracy; and it is so called, either because the rulers are the best men, or because they have at heart the best interests of the state (*polei* [πόλει]) and of the citizens (*tois koinōnousin autês* [τοῖς κοινωνοῦσιν αὐτῆς]). But when the citizens at large administer the state for the common interest, the government is called by the generic name—a constitution [ὅταν δὲ τὸ πλήθος πρὸς τὸ κοινὸν πολιτεύηται συμφέρον, καλεῖται τὸ κοινὸν ὄνομα πασῶν τῶν πολιτειῶν]. And there is a reason for this use of language.

(Aristotle, *Politics*, 3.7.1279a 25–39)

But where translations of *politeia* by “constitution” or “form of government” are clearly inadequate is when the titles of the political works of numerous Greek thinkers, first of all Plato, have to be translated. These “Republics” do not limit themselves to presenting the functioning of a form of government, but found an overall project of common life, including programs of education, the organization of labor and leisure, moral rules, etc.: another proof, if one be needed, that the *polis* is indeed the unity of the community and power, two agencies that are for us divided between the state and society.

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## POLITICS, POLICY

- CIVIL SOCIETY, DEMOS/ETHNOS/LAOS, ECONOMY, GEISTESWISSENSCHAFTEN, GOVERNMENT, POLIS, STATE, STATE/GOVERNMENT

In French, the noun *politique* refers to two orders of reality that English designates as two different words, "policy" and "politics." In one sense, which is that of policy, we speak in French of *la politique* to designate "an individual's, a group's, or a government's conception, program of action, or the action itself" (Aron, *Democracy and Totalitarianism*): it is in this sense that we speak of *politiques* of health or education or of Richelieu's or Bismarck's *politiques* in foreign affairs. In another sense, which translates as the English word "politics," *la politique* designates everything that concerns public debate, competition for access to power, and thus the "domain in which various *politiques* [in the sense of "policy"] compete or oppose each other" (ibid.). This slight difference between French and English does not generally pose insurmountable problems, because the context usually suffices to indicate which meaning of *politique* should be understood, but in certain cases it is nonetheless difficult to render in French all the nuances conveyed by the English term, or, on the contrary, to avoid contamination between the two notions that English distinguishes so clearly. On the basis of an examination of the uses of the two words in political literature in English, we will hypothesize that their respective semantic fields are not unrelated to the way in which scholarly theories (and academic institutions) conceive what French calls *la politique*.

### I. "Politics" and "Policy" in Philosophy

In contemporary academia, the domain of politics designates first of all an essential part of the field of "political science": the study of the forms of political competition, in accord with methods that arose from the analysis of pluralist regimes, but which can be transposed to the analysis of authoritarian regimes to shed light on conflicts among different opinion- or interest-groups that pursue opposed projects and distinct policies. Studies of electoral sociology (as well as analyses of other forms of political participation—demonstrations, petitions, activism, and so forth) belong to this domain, along with all kinds of studies on

political parties, the recruitment of governing elites, and, more generally, on the competitive and/or agonistic dimension of the regimes or political systems studied (see, for example, Campbell et al., *The American Voter*). But there also exist scientific approaches to policy that seek to bring out the conditions in which a particular policy can be implemented by a state, an administration, or, by extension, some kind of organization (a company may have a policy of investment, training, and so forth); significantly (insofar as it is a question of public organizations), this study of policy is generally called in French *analyse des politiques publiques*, in order to compensate for the indeterminacy of the word *politique* (for a general presentation, see Muller and Surel, *L'Analyse des politiques publiques*). As always in the social sciences, we find here a great diversity of approaches and theoretical oppositions to which we may give a political, even a partisan, meaning; but there is nonetheless a certain consensus in political science, at least in English-speaking countries, that has to do with the relations between scholarly discourse and common representations. The distinction between politics and policy is considered natural, even and especially when one inquires into the relations between them: the choice of a policy in a given sector obviously depends on politics, but that makes it only all the more useful to distinguish between the two notions. More deeply, most classical studies in political science have in common a combination of a certain confidence in the notions that have emerged from the common consciousness and an effort to critique and demystify the latter's most naïve or most widespread representations. With regard to the analysis of political life, sociology has constantly sought, with varying success, to shed light on the gap between classical democratic principles (popular sovereignty, the expression of the enlightened citizen) and the real functioning of representative regimes, which are in many respects oligarchical, and which very easily tolerate a certain political passivity; it could also be shown that many classical analyses, like that of "party identification" in *The American Voter*, draw their persuasive force from the fact that they tend to dissipate the democratic prejudices on which democratic regimes live. (If identification with a party is a crucial element in electoral choices, that is not because it increases political consciousness, but on the contrary because it makes political participation easier by relieving voters of having to form their own opinions on every question). The analysis of public policies, which has developed in the wake of decision studies, is primarily concerned with explaining the gaps between the intentions of decision-makers and the results of their actions, as well as the general opacity of decision-making processes themselves (Leca, in Grawitz and Leca, *Traité de science politique*, vol. 1). The dominant trends in political science are thus based on what might be called a non-Bachelardian epistemology that emphasizes the continuity between the common consciousness and scientific knowledge, and that probably reflects a more or less conscious adherence to the values of pluralistic democracy: that is no doubt what explains, *a contrario*, the reservations about this kind of political science expressed by French thinkers who reject this kind of naïveté and stress the discontinuity between science and common sense in order to bring out