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Polis and Oikos: The Art of Politics in the Greek City-State

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Abstract

The Greek city-state has traditionally been viewed as an entity that was divided into two distinct spheres (*oikos* and *polis*) and governed by two distinct arts (*oikonomia* and *politikê technê*). The aim of this article is to show that this image of the Greek city-state is not very accurate. The relationship between the *oikos* and the *polis* was not exclusive in classical *poleis*. Particularly in Athens during the democratic period, the *polis* was depicted as a family writ large, and to the extent that *oikos* was seen as an entity of its own, it was a part of the *polis*, not excluded from or opposed to it. My aim is to show that the art of the household and the art of politics were not distinct arts as has been claimed in modern political theory. Furthermore, although the collapse of the classical city-state during the Hellenistic era entailed a privatization of the household, it was not until modern times, from the late eighteenth century onwards—when the concept of the natural right to life and property became firmly established in juridical and political discourses—that the private sphere attained genuine autonomy.

Keywords: *Polis, oikos, oikonomia*, Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben

Notes on Contributor

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Introduction

In political theory, it has become almost commonplace to refer to ancient Greek society as an entity divided into two distinct spheres (*oikos* and *polis*) and governed by two distinct arts or techniques (*oikonomia* and *politikê technê*). The aim of this article is to show that such an image of the Greek city-state is not quite accurate. The relationship between the *oikos* and the *polis* was not exclusive in classical *poleis*. In democratic Athens in particular, the *polis* was depicted as a family writ large—and to the extent that *oikos* was seen as an entity of its own, it was a part of the *polis*, not an entity excluded from or opposed to it. Further, life of the Greek *oikos* was not a pre-political space immune to political interventions but, on the contrary, it was controlled and regulated by magistrates with a number of laws and ordinances. In classical political theory, this regulatory tendency is even more obvious: in Plato's and Aristotle's works on politics, even the tiniest details of everyday life are controlled and regulated by legislators and magistrates. Accordingly, it is contestable whether the art of the household (*oikonomia*) and the art of politics (*politikê technê*) were as different as has been claimed in modern political theory. Even Aristotle—perhaps the first to propose a clear-cut distinction between the authority of the statesman (*politikon*) and that of the head of an estate (*oikonomikon*)—makes extensive use of words from the *oikos* vocabulary in his reflections on the government of the *polis*.

Political Theory and the Divided City-State

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt provided an influential interpretation of the structure of the Greek city-state as divided into two antithetical spheres, the *oikos* and the *polis*:

According to Greek thought, the human capacity for political organization is not only different from but stands in direct opposition to that natural association whose center is the home (*oikia*) and the family.¹

In Arendt's view, the politics of the *polis* did not concern the things necessary to the sustenance of life related to bodily needs. These things pertaining to what she calls life processes were restricted to the sphere of the *oikos*: things such as birth, death, procreation, health, sickness, longevity, even economy, were strictly excluded from politics. These were excluded from politics because being tied to the necessities of life and bodily needs they contradicted the political way of life (*bios politikos*)—the realm of the *polis*, the realm of freedom of great words and deeds: “The distinction between private and public coincides with the opposition of necessity and freedom” (73). Yet at stake was not merely the structure and function of the existing Greek city-state as the binary structure of society was a standard in ancient political thought as well. As Arendt argues, the sharp division between the public and the private realms as well as between activities related to the common world of politics and those related to the maintenance of life (*oikonomia*) was “self-evident and axiomatic” (28). Although Arendt admits that in Plato and Aristotle the borderline between household and *polis* is occasionally blurred, she nevertheless believes that the “true character” of the city-state—divided into two distinct spheres—is “still quite manifest” in their works on politics and government (37). In fact, she goes so far as to assert that the distinction between the two spheres was never even doubted in Plato and Aristotle.² It is only in modernity that the borderline between private and political becomes blurred primarily because the matters pertaining to the private sphere of the family have become a collective concern (33). In ancient Greece, the private sphere, the realm of necessity, was free from political interventions not because it was considered sacred but because such interventions would have

corrupted the political freedom of the public sphere. In modernity, Arendt argues, such interventions became a rule—but they were no longer considered interventions as the very distinction between the spheres was blurred and political action was replaced by the administration of a nation-wide household called “society”:

In our understanding, the dividing line [between the spheres] is entirely blurred, because we see the body of peoples and political communities in the image of a family whose everyday affairs have to be taken care of by a gigantic, nation-wide administration of housekeeping. (28)

This binary image of the Greek city-state is repeated in a number of subsequent reflections on the classical *polis* in political theory: “In the Greek city-state the sphere of the polis,” Jürgen Habermas writes in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, “was strictly separated from the sphere of the *oikos*.” He also reiterates Arendt’s assumption that the private sphere of *oikos* was a sphere of pre-political necessity in which the reproduction of life took place, in contrast to which stood the public sphere as the sphere of freedom. In his description of the *polis*, there are no references to Arendt, but immediately following it he criticizes Arendt for idealizing the model of the classical city-state and endowing it with “normative power.”³ It is hence quite obvious that the very model Habermas depicts owes everything to Arendt’s interpretation of the *polis*. In other words, although Habermas criticizes Arendt, he does so owing to her tendency to idealize the classical city-state and not because her description is flawed. On the contrary, her description is absolutely correct, and only the normative conclusion she draws from it is incorrect.

More recently, perhaps the most notable advocate of the Arendtian *polis* has been Giorgio Agamben. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, the aim of which is

to correct Michel Foucault's thesis of biopower, Agamben's point of departure is clearly Arendtian: in the classical city-state, the *oikos* and the *polis* were two radically separate spheres, and this separation entailed the exclusion of simple natural life—Arendt's life process—from the sphere of the *polis*. As mere reproductive life, Agamben continues, natural life remained confined to the sphere of the *oikos*. Contrary to Arendt, however, Agamben does not hold that natural life had *no* political significance in the city-state: its exclusion from political life constitutes the very foundation of the political mode of life of the *polis*. As he puts it: natural life (*zoê*) was included in the political form of life (*bios*) in the mode of exclusion. Nevertheless, also Agamben subscribes to Arendt's binary image of the *polis* and argues—as Arendt does in *The Human Condition*—that the entry of natural life into the public sphere “constitutes the decisive event of modernity and signals a radical transformation of the political-philosophical categories of classical thought.”⁴ Hence, although in Agamben's estimation natural life was not pre-political in the Arendtian sense inasmuch as its exclusion from the public sphere was itself a political gesture, it was not until modernity that natural life became directly politicized.⁵

Plato and Aristotle on the Relationship of *Oikos* and *Polis*

Now, even though these descriptions of the *polis* contain a seed of truth as the Greeks certainly recognized the difference between what is one's own (*idios*) and what is common (*koinos*), it is contestable that the semantic field of these words corresponds to the modern meaning of the “private” and the “public.” Moreover, even if we interpret *idios* as “private” and *koinos* as “public,” they were not separated from or opposed to each other in the way depicted in modern political theory from Arendt to Agamben. At most, they were two intertwined *aspects* of everyday life in the *polis*.⁶

Let us consider Plato and Aristotle first. In Plato's *Republic*, as we very well know, the inseparability of *polis* and *oikos* is absolute, at least among the guardian class as they have nothing of their own—not even their children belong to them. As Plato affirms in the *Laws* (5.739c), referring to the best possible state represented in the *Republic*: in Kallipolis everything that is called one's own (*idios*) should be rooted out of life. In the second best city of Magnesia, there are things that can be called one's own, but everything is nonetheless under strict control of the political authorities. In Magnesia, "nothing, so far as possible, shall be left unguarded" (6.760a). This is the main principle of the city:

The main principle is this—that nobody, male or female, should ever be left without control [*anarchon*], nor should anyone, whether at work or in play, grow habituated in mind to acting alone and on his own initiative, but he should live always, both in war and peace, with his eyes fixed constantly on his commander and following his lead; and he should be guided by him even in the smallest detail of his actions. (*Laws* 12.942a–b)

This control and regulation encompassed everything from sexual behavior to the number of children and from one's occupation to one's emotions: "At every stage the lawgiver must supervise his people" (1.631e), "observe their pains, pleasures and desires, and watch their passions in all their intensity" (1.632a). And even though children are not taken away from their parents as they are in Kallipolis, they nevertheless "belong to the state first and their parents second" (7.804d). In the *Statesman* (259c), moreover, Plato explicitly denies that there would be a difference between "political" and "economic" administration, asserting that the arts of the statesman (*politikos*), king (*basileus*), master (*despotês*), and householder (*oikonomos*) are basically the same.

On the other hand, it is equally well known that at the beginning of his *Politics* (1.1252a 5–20) Aristotle rejects Plato’s equation of the arts of the statesman and those of householder, asserting that the art of the statesman (*politikon*) and that of the head of an estate (*oikonomikon*) are qualitatively different. However, it is quite likely that this distinction was not commonplace in Greece but was introduced by Aristotle. Moreover, it did *not* entail a separation between the *oikos* and the *polis*. In the *Politics*, on the contrary, Aristotle stresses that the *oikos* and the *polis* are not separate domains but “in a sense, constitute a unit” (2.1263b30–31) and more precisely, they constitute a unit in which the *polis* is the determining entity, as households and citizens belong to the *polis* and not vice versa: “We ought not to think that any of the citizens belongs to himself, but that all belong to the city-state” (8.1337a27–28). Although Aristotle admits, as the Greeks did in general, that some things are one’s own (*idia*) and some are held in common (*koina*), this does not entail that in his view there was an autonomous private sphere in the *polis* in whose matters the magistrates would have had no authority to intervene. In point of fact, even the most private aspects of what is supposed to belong to the impenetrable sphere of the *oikos* come under the control of the political authorities in Aristotle’s *Politics*, including sexual behavior, marriage, the number and nature of children, child rearing, education, and property.

In Arendt’s view, as presented in *The Human Condition*, which is shared by Habermas and Agamben, no activity that only served the purpose of sustaining the life process was permitted to enter the political realm in Greek *poleis* (37). Yet even a superficial look at Aristotle’s *Politics*, often read as an account of the sociopolitical reality of the Greek city-state, reveals that the life process is one of the most fundamental issues of political reflection. First of all, says Aristotle, the lawgiver must settle “when and in what condition a couple should practice matrimonial intercourse” (7.1334b31–32), and he must also decide how long it is suitable for a couple to produce children (7.1335b28–32) as well as to fix the

maximum number of offspring (7.1335b23). These two rules—the age limit of reproduction and the number of children—must be implemented by the threat of abortion: “If any people have a child as a result of intercourse in contravention of these regulations, abortion must be practiced on it” (7.1335b23–24), and there must also be a rule that “no deformed child shall be reared” (7.1335b19–20). Further, the lawgiver must supervise the diet and the bodily exercise of both pregnant women and children (7.1334b–7.1336a)—for even the children’s bodily frames must be suited “to the wish of the lawgiver” (7.1335a5–6). The legislator should also prescribe what kind of games and fairytales are appropriate for children (7.1336a34–35). Finally, the education of children and young people is to be under the control of political authorities: “The superintendence of education must be a common affair [*koinos*] and not one’s own [*idios*]” (8.1337a22–23).

These directives are not addressed to the head of a household, but to the political authorities, the legislators and magistrates. Hence, it seems obvious that in Aristotle’s view these allegedly private matters are not private at all but essentially political. The same holds true for the economy. In Arendt’s estimation, economic activities were excluded from the public realm in the classical *poleis*, but when we read Aristotle’s *Politics*, it is hard to miss the fact that these activities were one of the main, if not noblest, concerns of the political authorities, for, as Aristotle explains, actions aiming at “honors and wealth [*euporia*] are the noblest actions absolutely” (7.1332a16–17). In this regard, the legislator should first determine the proper level of the overall wealth of the city-state. On the one hand, his duty is to contrive measures that “may bring about lasting prosperity [*euporia khronios*]” (6.1320a35)—for example by creating favorable conditions for the production of goods and trade (7.1328a20–1331b25). On the other hand, excessive wealth is not desirable, for it will be coveted by stronger neighboring states (2.1267a20–25). The optimal limit of wealth is one which does not tempt a stronger foreign state to wage war solely because of the wealth of

one's own country (2.1267a28–32). Second, the legislator must decide on the division of property between the city-state and its households. Here Aristotle holds that for the main part property should be given to the households (2.1263a25–30), though in some cases, private property can be used in common (2.1263a38), by which he means public funds (2.1271b10–11) collected from the rich by donations (*leitourgiai*). In addition to the common use of private property, Aristotle recommends that the city-state should possess lands and slaves working on those lands (7.1330a2–3). Third, the legislator should fix the maximum amount of property a household can possess (2.1266b10–11), and though he does not specify the amount of property for each household, he strongly recommends that the magistrates see to it that nobody becomes excessively rich (5.1308b15–20). Finally, the legislator must decide on the distribution of property among the households. In this regard, Aristotle first admits that absolute equality might be a good solution (2.1266b25–30). With regard to the overall aim of the state, however, such equality is not necessary (2.1267a38–39) and not even desirable: the erasure of the difference between rich and poor is a threat to the very existence of the city-state (5.1310a1) since without rich people it would be unable to supply the magistrates, military, common tables, and religious rituals, necessary for good government.

Hence, not only Plato but also Aristotle argues that the so-called private affairs, ranging from sexuality and childrearing to economic affairs in and of the city-state, should be under the control of the political authorities. Although Aristotle does not agree with Plato that “one's own” should be rooted out of life, he opines that nothing is naturally “one's own” but depends on the political decision of the magistrates. Yet this does not indicate that Agamben's thesis would be correct. Even though Aristotle leaves the decision on the relationship between what is common and what is one's own to the discretion of political authorities, it does not entail that in his view of “natural life” from sexuality to economy should be confined to the sphere of the *oikos* as Agamben maintains. As we have seen,

Aristotle strongly recommends that the lawgivers and magistrates should control and regulate the smallest details of natural life, including even when and in what condition a couple should practice matrimonial intercourse (7.1334b31–32).

The Relationship between *Oikos* and *Polis*

It may be argued that the political philosophies of Plato and Aristotle do not reflect the historical experience of the Greeks in which a clear-cut distinction between *oikos* and *polis* was self-evident and the political concern for the *oikos* uncommon and reprehensible. However, if political interest in the “private” sphere had been an uncommon and perhaps a delicate issue in classical Greece, Aristotle would have arguably needed to legitimize it somehow. Yet we cannot find even a hint of any such legitimacy problem in the *Politics* for the simple reason that Aristotle’s attitude seems to reflect the general Greek pattern of thought and practice, at least if we are to believe the recent and more detailed studies of Greek society and political thought. These studies have shown that the distinction between the private and the public spheres was much less clear-cut than Arendt depicts them. In his meticulous analysis of Aristotle and political participation, Richard Mulgan for example writes:

Although Aristotle and other Greeks accepted a distinction between collective and personal life, their notion of personal life did not carry a presumption that it was the individual’s own business and therefore of no concern to the community.⁷

Brendan Nagle goes so far as to assert that the interpenetration of economic, political, social, moral, and religious aspects of life—of public and private realms—was “much more intense

and complete in a *polis* than in any other form of state, ancient or modern.”⁸ As to the alleged impenetrability of the *oikos*, Stefano Ferrucci points out that the Greek *poleis* showed great interest in regulating its most important moments by means of legal provisions.⁹ In his study of the Athenian public administration, Frances Pownall likewise asserts that the overall effect of its wide array of offices “reveals the remarkable determination of the Athenians to govern every aspect of polis life and hence to expose the polis to the governance of the entire demos.”¹⁰ Similarly, J. Roy argues that when the political authorities felt it necessary, they passed legislation which interfered in a major way with the *oikos*.¹¹ In her history of the Greek family, Cynthia B. Patterson in turn argues that the Platonic image of the city as a family writ large was not a Platonic innovation but reflected the Greek experience of the democratic city-state:

Rather than separating the social, religious, and familial life of households from the sphere of politics proper, Plato and democratic Athenian ideology brought all together within a polis which was itself imagined as a single metaphorical family.¹²

This is reinforced by Roger Brock’s study of Greek political imagery from Homer onwards which brings plenty of evidence for Patterson’s thesis: the city as a household was a conventional trope in classical Greece, particularly in democratic Athens.¹³ Barry Strauss puts it as follows: “The Athenian state used the metaphor of the *oikos* as one of its fundamental structuring principles.”¹⁴ David Cohen agrees but argues that those who endorsed it were not the supporters of democracy but rather its enemies. While the aristocratic critics of democracy, who disliked the radical ethos of personal freedom, supported state intervention in the private sphere (sexuality, family, education),¹⁵ the radical

democrats conceived the notion of a protected private sphere as one of the constitutive characteristics of a democratic society: “For radical democrats, arguing for the right of the state to interfere in this area involved attacking the notion of democracy itself.”¹⁶ In other words, Cohen paints a picture of Athens in which two “parties”—democrats and aristocrats—opposed to each other as to what extent it was legitimate for the political authorities to interfere in the private life of the citizens. While democrats, so Cohen’s argument goes, preferred maximum non-interference, aristocrats such as Plato, Isocrates, and Aristotle, insisted that in a well-governed state, magistrates must inspect the citizen’s private life. Yet also Cohen admits that the private sphere as represented by the family and house, though a significant barrier, was far from impenetrable.¹⁷ Further, he deduces the alleged democratic freedom of the private sphere from its critics. For example, he takes Plato’s criticism of democracy’s excessive liberties almost at face value, though we could argue that his representation of democracy in the *Republic* is probably a distorted caricature of Athenian democracy.¹⁸

Finally, as Patterson’s meticulous analysis of the family in Greek history shows, it was only *after* Solon and subsequent democratic reforms of Cleisthenes to Pericles and the demagogues who followed them, that the Athenians started to envision the *polis* as a communal household and family—as “the true object of familial loyalty and love.”¹⁹ Brock’s study on the Greek political imagery confirms Patterson’s view: “It is not until the second half of the fifth century that we see evidence that the image [of the state as a household] was firmly established.”²⁰

When we turn to look at the Athenian legislation in the classical era, we see that many private matters—from economic transactions to sexual behavior and even certain eating habits—were regulated by the city-state. Even the most famous measure by Solon, the cancellation of debts, concerns citizen’s private economic affairs, but it was not the only law

that entailed the politicization of private life. Solon's laws also forbade the exportation of other products than oil, prohibited dowries, criminalized idleness (he ordered the council of the Areopagus to "examine into every man's means of livelihood, and chastise those who had no occupation"), changed the rules of succession, and intervened in the traditional family relationships in many ways.²¹ Furthermore, in subsequent reformations of the Athenian legislation, more regulations pertaining to the private sphere of the *oikos* were introduced, including new rules of marriage and taxation. Since Pericles's rule, for example, marriages between Athenians and non-Athenians were strictly forbidden: an alien who joined the *oikos* of a citizen as husband or wife could be prosecuted and, if found guilty, was sold as a slave, while the citizen who thus received an alien woman into his *oikos* as his wife was fined 1,000 drachmas. A *kurios* of the house who had given an alien woman to a citizen for marriage could also be prosecuted and, if found guilty, disfranchised and his property confiscated.²² In the fifth and fourth century, we also witness an expansion of the tax base, naturally a significant way of the public sphere intruding into the private. In the fifth century, there was no income tax in Athens, but there were other sources of revenue. One of the main sources of such revenue was the voluntary contributions (*leitourgiai*) of the rich—which in the fourth century, or probably even earlier, were no longer voluntary but regularly and legally enforced. There were also other forms of revenue, including harbor and market dues, taxes on sales and auctions as well as on imports and exports, customs and excise payments. In addition, there were court fines, sales of confiscated property, rents from public and sacred lands, and royalties from silver mining concessions. Finally, during the fourth century, the Athenians introduced a permanent property tax (*eisphora*) imposed on the wealthy citizens and metics, which previously was collected only in times of war.²³

As to the various expenditures, the most costly was military expenditure which usually took more than 50% of the total state expenditure. In addition, the revenue was spent

on the construction and maintenance of the fleet, temples, citadel, roads, wells, and harbors, as well as on the salaries of the full-time state officials, but much of it was also directly redistributed to citizens, particularly to those participating in the city administration.²⁴ The number of these officials and those participating part-time in the city administration was not small. In the *Athenian Constitution*, pseudo-Aristotle reports that tributes and taxes supported more than 20,000 men: 6,000 jurors, 1,600 archers, 1,200 cavalrymen, 500 councilmen, 500 guards of the dockyards, 50 guards of the Acropolis, and about 700 domestic and 700 overseas officials—including officials in charge of the economic affairs of the state such as market (*agoranomoi*) and grain trade (*sitophulakes*) magistrates as well as measure and weight magistrates (*metronomoi*). The members of the *prytaneion* (the seat of the government), orphans, and prison guards were all publicly financed as well; and there was even a law directing that all who have less than three minas of revenue and are disabled from maintaining any occupation are allowed two obols a day from the public funds.²⁵ During the fifth and fourth centuries, Athens had thus established a comprehensive system of political management of the economy not only in order to control the fairness of commercial activities and to maintain and improve the infrastructure of the city-state but also in order to redistribute wealth.

Given the number of public tasks and offices funded by the state, it is not surprising that in her analysis of the circulation and allocation of products and services in classical Greece, Astrid Möller concludes that “from some perspective there was no clear distinction between public and private matters.”²⁶ Möller does not specify the perspective she has in mind, but it is obvious that it must be a modern liberal one. It is from the modern liberal perspective in which the distinction between the public and the private has become commonplace that the distinction between the *polis* and the *oikos* in the Greek city-state appears indefinable, and it appears so because it *was* indefinable and to a certain extent even

nonexistent. At least it was more obscure than it is today, for the city-state was not a modern liberal space constituted by different autonomous spheres such as the private, cultural, economic, or religious sphere that would lie beyond the reach of political intervention. The Greek city-state was one of the most politicized societies in the history of the West—a society in which political authorities intervened, if they so wished, in all spheres of human existence.²⁷

Political *Oikonomia*

In Arendt's view, the term "political economy" would have been a "contradiction in terms" in ancient Greece: "Whatever was 'economic,' related to the life of the individual and the survival of the species, was a non-political, household affair by definition."²⁸ And yet, as we have already seen, there were a lot of economic affairs that were also political in the Greek city-state. Further, the term "political economy" (*oikonomia politikê*) was not a contradiction in terms as it was employed in ancient literature, as for example in the pseudo-Aristotelian *Economics*. Indeed, perhaps even less clear-cut than the difference between the *oikos* and the *polis* was the difference between household management (*oikonomia*) and government of the city-state. It is well known that for Xenophon, among others, the distinction between the affairs of the *oikos* and those of the *polis* was artificial, as there was no difference of nature but merely of degree between them:

Do not look down on household managers [*tôn oikonomikôn andrôn*],
Nicomachides, for the management of one's own affairs [*tôn idion*] differs only
in point of number from that of common affairs [*tôn koinon*]. ... For those who
take charge of common affairs [*tôn koinôn epimelomenoi*] employ just the same
men when they attend to their own [*ta idia oikonomountes*]; and those who

understand how to employ them are successful directors of one's own [*ta idia*] and common [*ta koina*] concerns, and those who do not, fail in both. (*Mem.* 3.4.12)

Less well known is the fact that in the *Politics*, Aristotle likewise asserts that the city-state is governed by *oikonomia*: “Every *politeia*” must be governed both “by its *nomoi* and by *oikonomia*” (5.1308b31–33). In a monarchy, the art of government as the art of *oikonomia* is self-evident: “Kingship [*basileia*] is *oikonomia* over a city-state or over one or several peoples” (3.1285b31–33). In a tyranny, governing by *oikonomia* is desirable, at least if the tyrant wants to prevent revolts and preserve his rule: “It is necessary,” for a tyrant, “to appear to the subjects to be not a tyrannical ruler but an *oikonomos* and a royal governor” (5.1315b1–2). However, as we read in pseudo-Aristotle's *Economics* (2.1345b1–15), *oikonomia* can be practiced in every form of government, though unlike in the *Politics*, here *oikonomia* refers exclusively to the management of purely economic affairs of the city-state. Here Aristotle—or rather some of his followers, as it is generally established that the *Economics* was not written by Aristotle himself—first defines the conditions of proper *oikonomia*, stating that it demands familiarity with the sphere of one's actions, good natural endowments, and finally an upright and industrious way of life. He then asserts that there are four main types of *oikonomia*: that of a king (*oikonomia basilikê*), of a governor (*oikonomia satrapikê*), of a free state (*oikonomia politikê*), and of a private citizen (*oikonomia idiôtikê*)—and that they, for the most part, “of necessity cover the same ground” (*Econ.* 2.1345b1–15).

Furthermore, *oikeô* and *dioikeô* as well as their noun derivatives *oikesis* and *dioikesis*, which were usually employed in the context of household management before *oikonomia* became a common concept (which appears for the first time in Plato's *Apology*), the absence of a significant difference between household management and the government

of the *polis* perhaps becomes even more obvious.²⁹ In Homer and Hesiod, *oikeô* means “to inhabit” and “to dwell” but from the fifth century onwards its meaning extends to organizing, managing, directing, administering and governing things, including the household *and* the city-state. The first attested use of the verb *oikeô* in the sense of governing the city-state seems to be in Euripides’s *Electra*, when Orestes proclaims that virtuous men manage well both city-states and houses (*poleis oikousin eu kai dômath’*) (386). We find a similar use in *Hippolytus* in which Phaedra asserts that eloquent words without truth is what “destroys the well-governed cities and houses [*eu poleis oikoumenas domous t’*] of mortal men” (486–487). In his *History*, Thucydides employs the expression in this sense several times, including in his reconstruction of Pericles’s funeral speech (2.37): “It is true that we are called a democracy, for the administration is in the hands of the many and not of the few” (*kai onoma men dia to mê es oligous all’ es pleionas oikein dêmokratia keklêtai*).

The verb *oikeô* was frequently used during the fourth century as well. In Plato’s works, particularly in those deemed as non-Socratic, there are plenty of passages in which *oikeô* is employed in the meaning of the government, administration, and management of the city-state. In the *Republic*, he uses the verb *oikeô* fourteen times in this specific sense,³⁰ while in the *Laws* we can detect eight occurrences.³¹ Elsewhere in Plato, the verb is not that frequently used but neither is it absent altogether. Plato uses it with this meaning for example in *Charmides* (161e), *Hippias Major* (284d), and *Alcibiades I*, where he, or some of his followers (as *Alcibiades* is considered spurious), writes:

And states, therefore, are not well-governed [*oud eu oikountai*] in so far as each person does his own business? How can you say that? Without the presence of friendship, which we say must be there if states are well-governed [*eu oikeisthaitas poleis*], as otherwise they are not? (1.127b)

In *Anabasis*, Xenophon employs the expression *polin oikeisthai* (“to govern the city-state”) no less than five times in a single chapter (1.2).³² In his speech *Against Timarchus* (1.21–22), Aeschines uses the same verb as follows: “A city-state will be best governed [*tautên arista tèn polin oikêsomenên*] in which orderly conduct is most common.” Furthermore, there is Isocrates, who not only uses the verb *oikeô* in connection with the government, management and administration of the city-state several times in his speeches,³³ but in his oration addressed to Nicocles (18) also exhorts the king to manage the city as he would manage his house (*oikei tèn polin homoiôs hôsper ton patrôn oikon*). In his speech *Against Theocrines*, Demosthenes uses the expression as follows:

For no man surely will persuade you that there will be any lack of politicians like the defendant, or that the state will be less well-governed because of that [*oud' hôs dia touto kheiron hê polis oikêsetai*]. (58.62)³⁴

Similarly, Aristotle employs the verb eight times in the *Politics* in reference to the government and administration of the city-state. Referring to the doctrine of common property in Plato’s *Republic*, for example, he asks whether it is better for “a city that is to be well-governed” (*oikêsesthai polin kalôs*) to have community in everything which can possibly be made common property (2.1261a1–4)—and that it is better to have some things in common and others not, for in the existing “well-governed” (*kalôs oikoumenais*) Greek city-states the property is at least partially common (*Pol.* 2.1263a30–33). In the same way, a famous passage (3.1283a17–25) on the possibility of a city-state consisting of the poor and slaves alone, Aristotle argues that without justice and civic virtue “the city-state is not governed [*oikeisthai polin*] at all.” A little later he ponders whether a well-governed (*kalôs*

oikêsesthai) city should be ruled by a king, adding that the value of different *politeiai* does not depend on the number of rulers but rather on whether the *politeia* is well-governed (*kalôs oikêsesthai*) (3.1284b35–40).³⁵

The term *dioikeô* is less frequently used than *oikeô* but its semantic field is more restricted. While *oikeô* also signifies “to dwell” and “to inhabit,” the meaning of *dioikeô* pertains almost solely to organizing activities: to administer, manage, govern, control, settle, direct, and organize. Although these activities may take place in various domains from business to warfare, *dioikeô* also designates the government of the city-state in the same sense as *oikeô*—and it is difficult and even impossible to tell the semantic difference between these terms in administrative contexts.

Already in the first surviving document employing the verb *dioikeô*, it refers to the government of the city-state. This is Thucydides’s *History* in which the narrator recounts a successful popular revolt against the upper classes in Samos, after which “the rest [commons] governed the city” (*ta loipa diôkoun tèn polin*) (8.21). We find a similar usage of in Aristophanes’s *Ecclesiazusae* in which the chorus laments the income the citizens currently get by taking care of public duties, comparing this practice to the time under the archonship of Myronides when “none would have dared to let himself be paid for the trouble he spent governing the city [*ta tês poleôs dioikein*]” (305). In *Against Nicomachus*, Lysias uses the expression as follows: “For thus everything connected with public affairs will be administered in accordance with the laws [*houtôs gar ennomôs dioikêthêsetai ta kata tèn politeian panta*]” (35).³⁶

In the fourth century, the verb *dioikeô* and the noun *dioikêsis* in the sense of city government and administration remain common. In Plato, we find more than thirty cases in which *dioikeô* is used in the sense of administering, managing, or governing the city. Unlike

the verb *oikeô*, there are also plenty of passages in the so-called Socratic dialogues in which *dioikeô* is employed in this sense.³⁷ The following example is from *Meno*:

Were you not saying that a man's virtue is to manage a city-state well [*polin eu dioikein*], and a woman's a house? And is it possible to manage a city-state well [*eu dioikein ê polin*], or a house, or anything at all, if you do not manage it temperately and justly [*mê sôphronôs kai dikaiôs dioikounta*]? (73a)

After these presumably Socratic texts, *dioikeô* is used in this political sense in *Critias* (112e), in *Minos* (317c), in *Alcibiades I* (126b), as well as in the *Lovers* (138b).³⁸ It is also employed in the *Republic*, although not as frequently as *oikeô*.³⁹ In *Republic* 5.449a, for example, Socrates speaks of four forms of badness in the governance of the city-state (*peri te poleôn dioikêseis*) and the individual soul. In the *Laws*, on the other hand, *dioikeô* is used more often than *oikeô*, with nine occurrences in which it is employed approximately in the same sense as above.⁴⁰

Furthermore, both Xenophon and Aeschines use the verb *dioikeô* in this sense.⁴¹ In *Timarchus*, Aeschines writes that “autocracies and oligarchies are governed according to the tempers of those set over them [*dioikountai d'hai men turannides kai oligarchiai tois tropois tôn ephestêkontôn*], but democratic states according to established laws” (1.4). In Isocrates's corpus, the verb *dioikeô* and the noun *dioikêsis* are also used in the same sense several times, most frequently in *Panathenaicus* in which it appears eighteen times.⁴² In a paradigmatic phrase from *Panathenaicus*, Isocrates writes: “He [Theseus] had accomplished many excellent things both in war and in the administration of the city-state [*peri dioikêsin tês poleôs*]” (128). The expression is also frequently present in Demosthenes's speeches.⁴³ In *Timocrates*, for example, Demosthenes states: “Our city, gentlemen of the jury, is governed

by laws and by votes of the people [*hê gar polis hêmôn, ô andres dikastai, nomois kai psêphismasin dioikeitai*]” (152).

Finally, in Aristotle’s *Politics*, there are twelve occurrences of this specific usage of *dioikeô*.⁴⁴ In the Book 3, he employs the verb while pondering whether a small number of virtuous men are able to govern the city-state (*dioikein tèn polin*) (3.1283b10–13). In the Book 4, on the other hand, he explicitly refutes what Demosthenes suggests in *Timocrates* 152. The city-state cannot even be called a *politeia* if it is governed by resolutions of the assembly:

It is manifest that an organization of this kind, in which all things are governed by resolutions of the assembly [*en hêi psêphismasi panta dioikeitai*], is not even a democracy in the proper sense, for it is impossible for a voted resolution to be a universal rule. (*Pol.* 4.1292a),

Evidently, *oikeô* and *dioikeiô* were not the only terms the Greeks used in referring to the government of the city, as they also employed verbs such as *politeuein* (“to govern,” but also “take part in government,” “participate in the affairs of the city”), and *archein* (“to rule,” “to govern,” “to command,” but also “to begin”). Yet the point is that the *polis* is also governed by *oikonomia* and by *oikesis* and that—and this is most essential here—there is no significant difference between the semantic fields of the “politic” and “oikic” terms when they are used to denote the activity of government or the administration of the city-state.⁴⁵ In other words, although the Greeks were well aware of the difference between the household and the city-state as well as of the economic and the non-economic affairs of the city, the “oikic” vocabulary was not restricted either to the affairs of the household or to the financial affairs

of the city-state: it was used extensively in contexts that we would nowadays identify with the activity of political government and administration of the entire state.⁴⁶

According to Agamben, it was only in the Hellenistic age that the “political” and “economic” vocabularies entered into “a relation of mutual contamination,”⁴⁷ but the examples above show that the process of this contamination had started much earlier. In fact, the very idea of contamination is somewhat flawed inasmuch as it was only at the threshold of the Hellenistic age that these vocabularies started to *diverge*, as indicated also by the pseudo-Aristotelian *Economics* in which the term *oikonomia* is restricted to purely economic issues. It is from this perspective that we should understand Josiah Ober’s account of Aristotle’s *Politics* in which the clear-cut distinction between the statesman (*politikon*) and the head of an estate (*oikonomikon*) was introduced: the *Politics* not only reflects the structure of the classical *polis* but also anticipates the Hellenistic future of the Greek society, that is, the divorce of the social from the overtly political and, at the same time, the end of the classical *polis*.⁴⁸

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to show that the Greek city-state was not divided into two distinct spheres (*oikos* and *polis*) but a totally politicized society—a political unit in which it was difficult and even impossible to make a distinction between the political and the non-political, between the public and the non-public. In the classical *polis*, virtually everything was political: “Even the most intimate family relationships were subject to public scrutiny.”⁴⁹ Yet this politicization of the family did not mean that a distinctly political vocabulary would have replaced that of the family in public discourse. On the contrary, the politicization of the family also entailed the familiarization of politics, particularly in democratic Athens.⁵⁰ Accordingly, the political and the economic vocabularies were not separated from each other

in the classical city-states: *oikos*-related verbs such as *oikeô* and *dioikeô* were used in the administration of the city-state as persistently as in household management. This is not to say that the Greeks did not recognize the difference between what is one's own (*idios*) and what is held in common (*koinos*) or between the management of the household and the management of the city-state, but that the difference between the two spheres and techniques was much less clear-cut in ancient Greece than in modern times.

Already the collapse of the classical city-state and thereby the depoliticization of Greek society during the Hellenistic era entailed the privatization of the household, but it was not until modernity when the concept of the natural right to life and property became firmly established in juridical and political discourse that the private sphere attained genuine autonomy. In other words, it was not at the threshold of modernity that the difference between the private and the public spheres became blurred, as Arendt and her followers maintain, but on the contrary, it was only in modern times that the very difference was established for the first time in the West—exemplified also by the fate of family as the image of political community. In medieval and early modern times, the commonwealth was still regularly depicted as a family writ large (the king as the father of the nation)—and although to some extent this image has persisted, it has been radically problematized in modernity. So, while economic activities continue to be of major public concern, we are today witnessing the unparalleled depoliticization and deregulation of the economy—a process with which the richest one percent have become the owners of more than half of the world's wealth.

If this interpretation is correct, it is also quite obvious that any analysis based on the assumption that the crisis of modernity originated in the emergence of the nation as a family or the blurring of the private and the public spheres is necessarily biased. The contemporary predicament of global capitalism is not a consequence of the politicization of the private sphere, let alone of the political management of the economy (“collective

housekeeping”). Rather, it is a consequence of the privatization of the economy to a degree unimaginable before modernity. Today any politician who proposed similar measures to Solon’s would be considered a daydreamer. On the other hand, in modern totalitarian states, as Arendt and her followers have emphasized, the idea of a divided society was called into question and every aspect of life was totally politicized. Yet the idea of a society divided into two spheres was not a Greek idea, but rather the modern liberal idea that was contested by totalitarian ideologues—who found support for their views also in Greek thought: “For that which we today call ‘the total state’ there is no more perfect figuration than Plato’s *Politeia*,” as Kurt Hildebrandt, a National Socialist philosopher, wrote in 1933.⁵¹

Notes

¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 24; hereafter page references are cited in the text.

² *Ibid.*, 37.

³ Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 3, 4.

⁴ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 9, 11–12, 10. For an alternative interpretation of the history of biopolitics, see Ojakangas, *On the Greek Origins of Biopolitics*.

⁵ Even such a prominent Hellenist as Christian Meier subscribes to the Arendtian thesis: “There was a strict separation between the polis, the area in which they [the Greek citizens] acted jointly as citizens, and the house, between politics and the ‘realm of necessity’ (*anakaia*).” Meier, *The Greek Discovery*, 165–66.

⁶ As Strauss puts it: “Polis and oikos were less antithetical institutions than mutual and interdependent ones.” Strauss, *Fathers and Sons in Athens*, 11. On the different senses of the word *oikos*, see MacDowell, “Oikos in Athenian Law,” 10–21.

⁷ Mulgan, “Aristotle,” 198.

⁸ Nagle, *The Household*, 245.

⁹ Ferrucci, “L’oikos nelle leggi della polis,” 135–54.

¹⁰ Pownall, “Public Administration,” 290–91.

¹¹ Roy, “‘Polis’ and ‘Oikos,’” 4.

¹² Patterson, *Family in Greek History*, 185.

¹³ Brock, *Greek Political Imagery*, 25–42.

¹⁴ Strauss, *Fathers and Sons in Athens*, 214.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 231–36.

¹⁶ Cohen, *Law, Sexuality, and Society*, 220.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 84

¹⁸ Furthermore, in Athenian drama, particularly in Aristophanes' comedies criticizing extreme democracy, it is precisely in democracies in which the distinction between the *polis* and the household is blurred and the management of the household is associated with the management of the *polis*. See for example Aristophanes, *Plutus*, *Ekklesiazusae*, and *The Knights*.

¹⁹ Patterson, *Family in Greek History*, 179.

²⁰ Brock, *Greek Political Imagery*, 25. To be sure, contemporary scholars are far from unanimous on this issue. In his well-documented study of the Athenian democracy, Hansen maintains that in classical Athens the *polis* and the society as a whole were clearly distinguished, unlike in modern society in which the state prevails over everything. Hansen, *Athenian Democracy*, 64.

²¹ Plutarch, *Solon*, 20–24. See Delfim and Rhodes, *Laws of Solon* for additional sources.

²² MacDowell, *Law in Classical Athens*, 87.

²³ Kyriazis, "Financing the Athenian State," 109–27; Lyttkens, "Institutions, Taxation, and Market Relationships," 505–27; Bresson, *Making of Ancient Greek Economy*, 286–305.

²⁴ Möller, "Classical Greece: Distribution," 362–84.

²⁵ Pseudo-Aristotle, *Athenian Constitution*, 24, 49. **Hereafter all references to Aristotle's works are from *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*.**

²⁶ Möller, "Classical Greece: Distribution," 375.

²⁷ This does not mean that political authorities actually intervened in all spheres of human existence during the democratic period of Athens. Yet the point here is not to estimate the degree of negative freedom in democratic Athens but rather to emphasize that there was nothing that would have naturally remained outside political decision-making.

²⁸ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 29.

²⁹ To my knowledge, the following analysis of *oikeô* and *dioikeô* is the first attempt to disclose exhaustively the political use of the terms in Greek literature.

³⁰ See Plato, the *Republic* 2.371c; 4.420b; 4.421a; 4.423a; 5.464b; 5.472e; 5.473a; 5.473b; 7.520c; 7.520d; 7.521a; 7.521b; 8.543a; 10.599d. Hereafter all references to Plato's works are from *Plato in Twelve Volumes*.

³¹ See Plato, the *Laws* 1.626c, 3.680b; 3.702a, 4.712e; 4.713b; 5.739a; 6.779c; 9.853b.

³² See also Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.1.7, 1.2.64, 4.1.2. Hereafter all references to Xenophon's works are from *Xenophon in Seven Volumes*.

³³ See Isocrates, *Areopagiticus* 21, 22, 40, 41, 53, and 78, and *Panathenaicus* 132, 133, 136, and 162. Hereafter all references to Isocrates's works are from *Isocrates with an English Translation in Three Volumes*.

³⁴ See also Demosthenes, *Against Midias* 21.150, *Against Aristogiton I* 25.26, *Against Aristogiton II* 26.26, and *Against Theocrines* 58.62. Hereafter all references to Demosthenes's works are from *Demosthenes, with an English Translation*.

³⁵ See also Aristotle, the *Politics* 6.1321b5–10; 7.1325a; 7.1327b30–35.

³⁶ See also Lysias, *Against Nicomachus*, 22.

³⁷ It appears in Plato, *Crito* 51e, and *Gorgias* 520e, two times in *Protagoras* 318e, 319a, once in *Laches* 179c, and six times in *Meno* 73a, 73b, 91a.

³⁸ In the *Lovers* 138b, Plato uses the verb as follows: “Again, when one man governs a city rightly [*ti de hotan eis anêr orthôs polin dioikê*], is he not called a despot and king? I agree. And he governs by a kingly and despotic art [*basilikê te kai turannikê technê dioikei*]?”

³⁹ In Plato's *Republic*, it occurs seven times in this political sense. See *Rep.* 5.449a, 5.455b, 5.455d, 5.462c, 8.564e, 10.599c, and 10.600d.

⁴⁰ See Plato, the *Laws* 2.667a, 3.698a, 4.709e, 4.713c [to rule people], 4.714a, 6.768d, 7.790b, 7.809c, and 12.957a. In section 6.768d, in which the verb is transformed into a noun, the passage may be translated as follows: “But it is impossible to give a full and precise account of the city-state and the political system as a whole [*pantôn tôn kata polin kai*

politikên pasan dioikêseôn] until our review has embraced every section of its subject, from the first to the very last, in proper order.”

⁴¹ See Xenophon, *Hellenica* 6.1.2–3, and *Ways and Means* 4; as well as Aeschines, *Against Ctesiphon* 3.2; 3.6; 3.25, and *Against Timarchus* 1.4 and 1.153. Hereafter all references to Aeschines’s works are from *Aeschines with an English Translation*.

⁴² See Isocrates, *Panathenaicus* 44, 48, 119–120, 124, 128–130, 140, 161, 164, 169, 177, 189, 198, 226, and 239. See also Isocrates, *Helen* 31, 37, *Plataicus* 39, *To Nicocles* 2, 13, and *Nicocles or the Cyprians* 20.

⁴³ See Demosthenes, *Against Timocrates* 27, 152, *Against Aristocrates* 209, *Against Aristogiton I* 15, *Against Theocrines* 15, 30, *On the Crown* 320, *On the False Embassy* 2, and *Erotic Essay* 46. In his speech *Against Aristogiton I* (15), Demosthenes interestingly adds nature to the list of governing authorities: “The whole life of men, Athenians, whether they dwell in a large state or a small one, is governed by nature and by the laws [*phusei kai nomois dioikeitai*]” (15). Hereafter all reference

⁴⁴ See Aristotle, *Politics* 2.1269b, 3.1283b, 4.1292a, 4.1298b, 4.1292a, 5.1313a, 5.1314b, 6.1321b, and 7.1331b.

⁴⁵ It should be emphasized that this lack of difference only concerns those contexts in which these words are used to denote the government or the administration of the city-state and its affairs. On the use of *politeuô* in this sense in Aristotle’s *Politics*, see 2.1266a33–35, 1267a18–19, 1269a34–35, 3.1279a36–38, 4.1292b10–30, and 4.1295b25–40. In addition to Aristotle, Isocrates and Demosthenes use the verb quite frequently but it is relatively rarely used by other classical authors. In Plato’s *Republic*, for example, it occurs only eight times. Unlike *oikein*, *politeuein* does not denote the management of household and unlike *politeuein*, neither *oikein* nor *dioikein* has a connotation of political participation. Like *archein*, on the other hand, these “oikic” terms are sometimes used in the sense “to rule.”

⁴⁶ It should be noted that the Greek meaning of the “political” was quite different from its modern meaning. For the Greeks, as Meier correctly points out, “‘political’ meant the same as ‘common’ (*koinos, xynos*) and referred to what concerned everybody.” Meier, *Greek Discovery of Politics*, 13.

⁴⁷ Agamben, *Kingdom and the Glory*, 24.

⁴⁸ Ober, “Aristotle’s Political Sociology,” 133.

⁴⁹ Patterson, *Family in Greek History*, 132.

⁵⁰ See also Barry, *Fathers and Sons in Athens*, 12.

⁵¹ Lane, “The Platonic Politics,” 133. The book Lane quotes is *Platon: Der Kampf des Geistes um die Macht* published in 1933. The term “total state” was coined by Carl Schmitt, a German scholar of constitutional law and a member of Nazi party (since 1933). For Schmitt, a total state is the opposite of the liberal “depoliticized” state. In contrast to the liberal, non-interventionist state, there is no sphere in the total state “which should be considered as absolutely neutral in the sense of non-intervention by the state.” Schmitt, *Der Hüter der Verfassung*, 79. In Schmitt’s view, a total state may be a democracy or a dictatorship but it cannot be liberal. On Plato’s “totalitarianism,” see also Popper, *Open Society and Its Enemies*.

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