

ARISTOTLE'S 'UNMIXED' MIDDLE POLITEIA AND ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY

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Summary: Aristotle's 'middle *politeia*' is proposed in *Politics* 4.11 as the answer to the question 'what is the best *politeia* and what is the best mode of life for most cities and most people, if we do not judge by a standard of excellence that is above the level of ordinary people'. But it is not often treated by scholars as so important for tackling issues of practical politics as his conception of a 'mixed' constitution, particularly as encapsulated in the notion he calls *politeia* (*Pol.* 4.9), in the more specific form of 'polity', the word employed in many translations as a term of art designating its distinctive compromise between oligarchy and democracy. There has been a tendency to suppose that the 'middle *politeia*' and 'polity' are versions of the same idea. The first section of this essay argues that they are conceptualised in quite different ways, and play quite different roles in Aristotle's argument in Book 4 of the treatise. 'Middle *politeia*' is an ideal of a community visualised in socioeconomic terms carrying ethical associations, and with a membership accordingly predominantly characterised by ethical attributes key for the best conduct of its political life. It is not the structure of organs and offices of state represented in the 'well-mixed' constitutional settlement of a 'polity', requiring discussion of rules for eligibility and mode of appointment. The second section of the essay considers the ideology of 'middle' *politeia*, and Aristotle's interest in finding the best approximation to this ideal in the contemporary Greek city. Despite his hostility to the form of democracy he sees as prevalent in his own time, he appears to accept that large democracies with substantial numbers of citizens equipped with 'middling and sufficient' resources present the best realistic chance of achieving something close to that ideal. Athens is the most obvious candidate, given recent work by historians on evidence for its socioeconomic composition, whereas on the scale of closeness to a 'well-mixed' constitution Aristotle deems it to score lowest.

'Polity' and middle *politeia*

In *Polis*, his recent historical blockbuster, John Ma writes at one point:¹

1 Ma 2024: 217–18.

Aristotle's *Politics* constitute an invaluable witness situated at the start of the great convergence in the second half of the fourth century BCE. ... In the end, and for all his hesitations, Aristotle seems to favor a form of constitution that he cannot quite bring himself to call *dēmokratia*, describing it as *politeia*, an inherence to the possibilities of the citizen-state and a corrective to the aberration that his elite-centered and philosophical frameworks force him to see in democracy (we could translate it by “republic,” which has the same mealy-mouthed effect). *Politeia* is close to rule by the masses, as Aristotle admits; and is the result of compromise and negotiation – a concept that may prove useful for the interpretation of the great convergence.

By ‘the great convergence’, as I understand him, Ma refers to the outcome of processes whereby citizen-states of the Hellenistic era came to exhibit patterns of governance much more uniform than in previous periods of Greek history. What he has in mind especially is first the general prevalence and vigour of local autonomy, thanks particularly to the demise of hegemonic control earlier exercised by some such states over others (by Athens and Sparta above all); and secondly, the increasing failure of any system other than some form or other of democracy to prove sustainable. In the extract just quoted, Ma is invoking Aristotle in the *Politics* as witness – in his opinion reluctant witness – specifically to the second of these developments.

Many readers of Books 4 to 6 of the *Politics* will probably resemble Ma in taking Aristotle's treatment there of *politeia*, as particular form of constitution often rendered as ‘polity’ in English, to indicate his preferred option for best practicable citizen-state system of rule. He usually there sees ‘polity’ as a form of mixed constitution closer to democracy and rule by the *plēthos* (I think captured better by Ober's singular ‘mass’) than it is to oligarchy or aristocracy.² The employment of the word *politeia*, the general term used by Aristotle to connote ‘constitution’ or ‘citizen-state system’, for a specific form of constitution also, was apparently not his invention. His designation ‘the so-called *politeia*’ is the most obvious indication of that (*Pol.* 4.3.1290a17–18, 4.7.1293b9, 20, 4.11.1295a33–34). We might compare also its first mention in Book 3 (*Pol.* 3.8.1279a37–b4; cf.

2 Ober 1989.

also 2.6.1265b26-9, 5.7.1307a15-16). That Book 3 passage suggests among other things that in this use the term was originally designed to assert rule by *politai*, citizens generally (as opposed to elite control), in what modern scholars used to call the limited 'hoplite democracy' of the seventh and sixth centuries BCE that they posited.³

What Aristotle hoped for of such a *politeia* or 'polity' in his own day was a 'well-mixed' system whose intrinsic stability would derive (as he puts it at one point) from the fact, not that those who wanted it were in a majority, but that there should be no constituency within the city which would even want another system (*Pol.* 4.9.1294b36-40). Not, presumably, what any faction or interest group would go for if unconstrained. But in difficult and otherwise unpropitious circumstances, something not too unlike the outcome of the Good Friday Agreement on the status of Northern Ireland: giving every party to the concordat what it considers vital to secure, when apprised of what some other party might successfully attempt to take from it or inflict upon it, should it aim for more than that. Something, in short, worth settling for by 'compromise and negotiation' as best option available. It was aptly termed *politeia*, 'citizen-state system', presumably as catering in some measure for the aims and interests of all citizen groupings. As Aristotle himself puts it, more crisply (*Pol.* 4.9.1294b34-36): 'In the admirably mixed *politeia*, it should seem that both and neither [the democratic and the oligarchic] are salient.'

Such a mixture he often counts as a *politeia* or 'polity' when democratic features predominate, in line with what he says is usual linguistic practice – again presumably because there is then general citizen participation in the system (*Pol.* 4.8.1293b34-38; cf. 5.7.1307a15-20).⁴ But if no such qualifications are in play, it is presented as just a mixture of oligarchy and democracy (*Pol.* 4.8.1293b33-34, 1294a22-23). And in the chapter of Book 4 (*Pol.* 4.9) devoted to its analysis, Aristotle focuses on principles and methods of mixture generally. He evinces an approval especially of

3 A historical concept now mostly abandoned: as discussed briefly for example by Raaflaub 1997, who notes an element of Aristotelian provenience in its profile (*ibid.* 26 and n. 5).

4 But he can speak of a 'so-called *politeia*' that tilts more towards oligarchy: an instance is *Pol.* 4.7.1293b20-21, as further discussed below (p. 141).

the stability such mixture tends to bring. Such endorsement of appropriate mixture is paralleled by the favouring of balance and moderation in constitutional arrangements of whatever types which is apparent throughout these books (as for example at *Pol.* 5.1.1301b26-1302a8; in Book 6 likewise, especially chapters 4 and 5).

Is polity Aristotle's 'favoured' form of constitution, however, as Ma supposes? That does not seem to be a claim he makes, neither in *Politics* 4.3-10, where he is surveying and discussing the main types of constitution and their individual varieties ('polity' included, as just observed), nor elsewhere in the treatise. The lion's share of the survey is devoted to democracy and oligarchy, the regimes most prevalent in his own day. Treatment in that order of what are ordinarily called aristocracies, 'polity', and tyranny is given much briefer consideration in its final pages: hardly the most promising context, one might think, for identifying and endorsing a candidate for 'favoured' constitution. To grasp how he does in fact tackle that issue, we need to consider the way that the whole body of material constituting Books 4 and 5 of the *Politics* is constructed.

We might begin by noting that the final section of the still introductory chapter *Politics* 4.2 (1289b12-26) sets out an ordered programme that political theory should implement, if it is to deal properly with the more empirically oriented tasks that fall within its scope (as prescribed in the opening chapter *Politics* 4.1). As the first task to be undertaken, the programme indeed envisages constitutional survey, focused mainly on democracy and oligarchy and their differing varieties. But thereafter a sequence of problems to be worked at is articulated – some more theoretical, some more practical – that legislators who are confronted with those more empirically oriented tasks will be best advised to digest, in the light of the results of the survey. Implementation of this programme, in that same order, occupies the whole of the rest of Books 4 and 5.

It is only in the next chapter following completion of the survey in *Politics* 4.3-10, *Pol.* 4.11, that Aristotle takes up the second and most fundamental topic proposed for consideration in the programme for Books 4 and 5 which is prescribed in *Pol.* 4.2.1289b12-26. That is the question:

'which form [of *politeia*] is the most capable of being shared in (*koinotatē*)⁵ and which most desirable after the best *politeia*; and if there should have been in existence some other that is aristocratic and admirably constituted, what it is' (Pol. 4.2.1289b14-17). Here is how Chapter 11 of Book 4 begins, clearly meaning to address just those questions (Pol. 4.11.1295a25-31):

But what is the best *politeia* and what is the best mode of life for most cities and most people, if we do not judge by a standard of excellence that is above the level of ordinary people, or of an education that needs natural gifts and means that depend on luck, nor by the standard of a *politeia* such as one might pray for (*kat' euchēn*),⁶ but by that of a mode of life able to be shared by most people, and of a *politeia* possible for most cities to attain?⁷

We may note that in embarking on the topic, Aristotle now talks of the *politeia* that, though second best, is nonetheless itself best, presumably relative to other possibilities.

Aristotle's talk here is talk of *politeia* (in a general sense). But Pol. 4.11 does not read at all like the sort of attempt at constitutional design to which many of the other chapters of Book 4 are devoted. They are typi-

5 Published translations of this term as used here vary considerably. But its meaning is clear in the light of the introductory passage to Pol. 4.11 (now quoted) at 1295a30: *tois pleistois koinōnēsai dunaton*.

6 The expression *kat' euchēn* recalls the Platonic Socrates' concern in the central books of the *Republic* that his proposals for a good city should not be considered merely a 'prayer', an unrealisable wish (Resp. 5.450d, 7.540d-541b). For Aristotle, on the contrary, considering the *politeia* one might pray for is the prime object of the enterprise undertaken in the *Politics*: 'Our purpose is to consider what form of political community is best of all for those who are able to live so far as possible as they might pray to do (*kat' euchēn*)' (Pol. 2.1.1260b29: perhaps 'as they would ideally wish'). That ambition is reiterated at the start of Book 4 (Pol. 4.1.1288b23-24), and then again at the beginning of Chapter 4 of Book 7 (Pol. 7.4.1325b36), where such an ideal is one construed as realisable provided that a range of favourable preconditions are met.

7 In the next sentence, he takes up the issue, projected in the programme sketched in Pol. 4.2 (1289b15-17), of whether a form of aristocracy might supply a good answer. See below p. 140-41 for discussion.

cally preoccupied with the governmental structure of a city, with its offices and key executive bodies (*archai*), with entitlements to occupy or belong to them and to choose by one method or another those who do, and with like matters. That is entirely in accord with what Aristotle's initial definition of a *politeia*, understood as 'constitution' in a normal governmental sense of the word, would lead us to expect. Back at the beginning of Chapter 6 of Book 3, he had offered the succinct formulation (*Pol.* 3.6.1278b8-10; repeated in an abbreviated version at *Pol.* 4.3.1290a7-8): 'organisation of a city's *archai*, especially the supreme authority'.

As the Oxford scholar Richard Robinson observed in his 1962 Clarendon translation with comments, Chapter 11 of Book 4, by contrast, seems more akin to an exercise in political sociology reinforced (he thought unsuccessfully reinforced) with philosophical ethics.⁸ Aristotle here envisages a *politeia* dominated in political weight and influence by a sufficiently large body of citizens of middling economic resources. They are described as neither 'exceedingly well-off' (*sphodra euporoi*) nor 'exceedingly short of resources' (*sphodra aporoi*) (*Pol.* 4.11.1295b1-3). But even more important for him is that such persons are those in the city who are most likely to have virtuous characters. They will hit the midpoint between over-reaching and over-submissive behaviour, as explained in the theory of the mean developed in the *Ethics*. To his mind, like Cicero's subsequently in *De re publica*, it is primarily the quality of the citizens (Cicero's *viri*) and their *mores* that matter most for a political community (*Rep.* 5.1). This focus more resembles that of the account of the best city of our prayers sketched in Book 7 of the *Politics* itself, or of Books 8 and 9 of the *Republic*, Plato's brilliant narrative of the forces which propel degeneration of the entire ethos of the life of such a community – of a *politeia* in the sense of 'social and political system', rather than 'constitution' – until it saddles itself eventually with a demagogue, a *prostatēs* who turns into a lawless tyrant.

In *Politics* 4.11 Aristotle discourses at some length on the moral vices that are apt to be fostered by great wealth and great poverty. The ideal

8 Robinson 1962: 100 (cf. 103). That *Pol.* 4.11 is mostly political sociology seems to be generally accepted in scholarship on the *Politics*, as for example recently in Samaras 2015: 132.

for a city is, he proposes (*Pol.* 4.11.1295b25-27), 'to consist so far as possible of persons who are equal and peers; and this desideratum is realised particularly among the middling people.' It is among them that friendship, and associated with that, political community, may be expected to flourish, not one in which one class is envious, the other contemptuous of the other, like masters and slaves, not free persons (*Pol.* 4.11.1295b21-24). Aristotle concludes (*Pol.* 4.11.1295b27-28): 'That city will necessarily, therefore, best conduct its political life when constituted of the sorts of person of which we are saying the city is by nature composed.'

Proper political community and the virtues of individual citizens, in short, are interdependent. And crucial for both is an economically based socio-political structure. Much of the rest of *Pol.* 4.11 expatiates on the need for a sufficiently large and influential middle class if the likelihood of domination of cities by overbearing oligarchic or democratic regimes is to be minimised, and on the regrettable preponderance in its absence of cities ruled by assertive democracies and oligarchies in Aristotle's contemporary Greek world. There is not a word, however, about a constitutional framework enabling the political weight of 'middling people' to be exercised.

Now to a question about how Aristotle regards a middle *politeia* of this kind (*Pol.* 4.11.1296a37-38), one 'that is through the middling people', brought into being or sustained – I take it he means – by the community-minded citizens they are (*Pol.* 4.11.1295b35). Does he take it to be identical with a polity or mixed constitution, as specified in the later part of the constitutional survey, at *Politics* 4.8 and 9? In other words, does he equate middle *politeia* with the *politeia* [= 'polity'] that Ma takes to be Aristotle's favoured form of constitution when it assumes a democratic bias? Robinson devoted a good deal of space in his comments on the chapter to discussing the matter. He recorded his impression that previous interpreters in general had asserted the identity.⁹ Such a consensus appears mostly to have continued, as evidenced for example by Hansen,¹⁰ in a chapter of his *Reflections on Aristotle's Politics* originally published in

9 Robinson 1962: 100-1. One instance was Newman 1902, as quoted below for example (p. 139).

10 Hansen 2013: 8.

1993, and in more recent treatments by Balot and Samaras.¹¹ At the same time, interpreters standardly note, sometimes with puzzlement, that such an identity is not anything Aristotle himself asserts.

Politics 4.11 contains just one explicit reference to the ‘so-called *politeia* [or ‘polity’]’. In the programme of *Pol.* 4.2, Aristotle had envisaged some discussion, under the topic of ‘the form of *politeia* most capable of being shared in and most desirable after the best *politeia*’, of the additional question of ‘some other that is aristocratic and admirably constituted, but will fit most cities’ (1289b15-17). He picks up this issue briefly at the end of his initial statement in *Pol.* 4.11 of the sort of *politeia* he will be hoping to explore in the chapter, in these words (1295a31-34):

For some of the so-called aristocracies that we have just been speaking of fall outside the reach of most cities, while some of them are close neighbours of the ‘so-called polity’ (so we should talk of the two of them as a single *politeia*).

His purpose here is plainly one simply of delivering brisk rejection of the possibility mooted in *Pol.* 4.2 that there might be an aristocratic constitution that would ‘fit most cities’.

To elaborate on the issue to which Aristotle now returns: Would a form of aristocracy perhaps satisfy that requirement, stipulated as something demanded of ‘the best *politeia* and the best mode of life’ for cities in general that he has just proposed as the immediate subject of enquiry (1295a25-26)? His verdict is negative. An aristocratic *politeia* would not ‘fit most cities’, if the first forms of ‘so-called aristocracy’ articulated in

11 Balot 2015: 109-11, Samaras 2015: 132-34. But the consensus is not universal: see for example Johnson 1988: 197-203, arguing for non-identity, who makes some well-taken, some questionable points (offices in a middle *politeia* are said to be distributed to the ‘middle class’, for example, despite no mention of offices in *Pol.* 4.11); and Kraut 2002: 427-33, who does however suppose – ‘although Aristotle does not say so explicitly’ – that the middle *politeia* of *Pol.* 4.11 equates to *politeia* (‘polity’) as first introduced in *Pol.* 3.7.1279a37-b4. There ‘polity’ is presented not as a mixed constitution, but as a system in which ‘the mass conduct political activity for the common advantage’.

Book 4's chapter on aristocracy (Pol. 4.7.1293b7-19) are considered. Carthage and Sparta respectively are instanced.¹² As to cases (not illustrated) of the third form mentioned in that chapter, Aristotle there takes them to be just versions of 'polity' that tilt towards oligarchy (1293b20-21). So, although conceivably within reach of most cities, they will presumably be appropriately described not as 'aristocracy' at all, but rather as examples of 'polity'. Here in Pol. 4.11 he is less forthright. But the comparability of these 'close neighbours' to polities of some kind still leaves him implying that they are so close that it is better not to use different terminology in speaking of them. 'Polity' would on Aristotelian premises appear to be a less misleadingly neutral name than 'aristocracy', given that there is nothing ethically admirable in the prizing of wealth that he takes to be key to oligarchy, tending to arrogance and greed as it is liable to do (Pol. 5.7.1307a19-20). He suggests that people call it 'aristocracy' only because 'culture and noble breeding are apt to attach more to the more well-to-do' (Pol. 4.8.1293b37-38).

At this point one might be inclined to ask (in some sympathy with Ma's parallel comments on polity and democracy): would it not be more straightforward to designate forms of so-called aristocracy close to polity as actually just 'oligarchy', of the most moderate, 'best mixed' kind, as identified at Pol. 6.6.1320b18-29? There Aristotle himself observes of that system, in so many words, that it is 'close to so-called *politeia* ('polity')' (1320b22).¹³ And at various other points he comments on overlap between the constitutional types he specifies, perhaps most programmatically at the beginning of Book 6 (Pol. 6.1.1316b36-1317a10). Yet, as for example Balot points out, it is precisely the ambiguity of mixture that seems to be what attracts him to 'polity' as a distinctive form of constitution, neither obviously altogether democratic nor obviously altogether oligarchic.¹⁴

12 For obvious reasons, he does not mention here 'genuine and primary' aristocracy (Pol. 4.8.1294a24-5), as understood in Book 3: a *politeia* made up of those who have achieved excellence without qualification – in which the same person is both good man and good citizen without qualification (Pol. 4.7.1293b1-7).

13 For some discussion of the passage, see Keyt 1999: 221-22.

14 Balot 2015: 109.

There is no hint in *Pol.* 4.11.1295a33-44, however, that *politeia*, as ‘polity’ or mixed constitution of some kind, is indeed the best *politeia* offering the best mode of life that Aristotle undertakes to try to identify. A key contrast between the two conceptions needs to be borne in mind. In the chapter that he devotes to analysis of ‘polity’ (*Pol.* 4.9), he presents it as something that would need to be a construct of constitutional engineering or ‘mixture’. The *politeia* that is to be investigated in *Pol.* 4.11, by contrast, is never spoken of in terms of ‘mixture’. It is an ethical ideal given socioeconomic underpinning. As Aristotle explains at the end of the chapter, it is to serve as a yardstick for judging political systems. That concluding passage runs as follows (*Pol.* 4.11.1296b3-9):

Now that the best has been defined, it is not difficult to see, among the other forms of *politeia* (for we say that there are various forms of democracy and various oligarchies), what kind is to be placed first, what second, and what next in this order, through one being better and another worse. For at each stage the form nearest to the best one must necessarily be superior, and the form that is more remote from the middle must be inferior.

Ober captured Aristotle’s intent nicely in the Aristotle chapter of his 1998 book *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens*:¹⁵

This regime, based on the dominance of “middling” persons (*hoi mesoi*), seems less an actual regime type than a model by which oligarchies and democracies may be judged and (it is hoped) made more moderate.

It is time to draw the threads together. The middle *politeia* has a conceptual profile and plays a role quite different from ‘polity’ or mixed constitution within the overall argument of Books 4 and 5 of the *Politics*. It supplies no more than the one key component – ethically sound, community-minded ‘middling’ people, with ‘middling and sufficient’ resources – of what would be an achievable socioeconomic best structure for a citizen-state, and a criterion for judging better and worse when the best is

15 Ober 1998: 335 n. 78.

not achieved. If it were to become a reality, it would be 'through the middling people' (*Pol.* 4.11.1295b35; cf. 1296a8): I suppose he means, by the speech and action in the public sphere to be expected of citizens committed to partnership, not faction, as those 'in the middle' are taken to be.

'Polity', on the other hand, encapsulates a package of possible permutations of institutions (*Pol.* 4.9). The permutations briefly sketched there in barest outline are designed to engineer a constitutional compromise – a mean – between oligarchic and democratic systems principally of franchise and political office-holding and participation.¹⁶ Aristotle relaxes and gets more eloquent when in the second part of the chapter he explores the Spartan constitution. He considers it now, not as a form of aristocracy, but as a 'well-mixed' example of 'polity', and interestingly combines comments on both social system and constitutional provisions for office holding and selection (*Pol.* 4.9.1294b13–34). Yet that chapter is still only half the length of the chapter he will go on shortly to devote to the middle *politeia* (*Pol.* 4.11), perhaps giving some impression that its notion of mixture 'does not seem so important' to him as his hopes of a middling citizenry.¹⁷

As Andrew Lintott went on to note, 'the mixed constitution had already become an important part of Greek political thought' by the time Aristotle was writing the *Politics*.¹⁸ By contrast, the idea of a middle *politeia*, dominated by citizens of middling resources who will exemplify virtues of moderation, seems to have been his own invention. In much of the detailed discussion of constitutions in Books 4 and 5 considerations of balance, compromise, and mixture are those to which he mostly has recourse, however. There he makes little mention of the role 'middling' people might play in politics. It is as though he had not yet got far in thinking that through.

16 No mention is made in *Pol.* 4.9 of 'middling people'. The second of the three mechanisms listed involves middling property assessment as a qualification for eligibility for political functions, with membership of popular assemblies the example (*Pol.* 4.9.1294b2–6). But it is accorded no prominence among the three.

17 Lintott 2000: 165.

18 Lintott 2000: 165.

In conclusion: Middle *politeia* is an achievable socioeconomic ideal of virtuous citizenry. ‘Polity’ is a constitutional structure produced by a formula for ‘mixture’. In both, Aristotle emphasises the importance of a mean between extremes (as for example at *Pol.* 4.9.1294b16–18, 4.11.1295a34–40, 1296b22–27). But that does not licence us to treat the systems they envisage as identical or as versions of a single form of *politeia*. Middling people figure only once in a context where Aristotle talks of mixture. There, defusing the possibility of civil strife by increasing the strength of the middle element in the city is suggested as an *alternative* to a constitutional mixing of the needy and the well-off, not as an ingredient in a mixture (*Pol.* 5.8.1308b28–31). Nor is Aristotle’s middle *politeia* itself presented as any kind of mixture.

Middling citizens and Athenian democracy

In much of the *Politics* ‘middling’ people make no appearance. For Aristotle, the now dominant political systems are oligarchy and democracy. And these, he argues, are properly characterised as regimes controlled not literally by the few and the many, but by the well-off (*euporoi*) and the needy (*aporoi*), usually treated in his pages as an exclusive disjunction. A middling category does not seem to be prominent in other fourth century authors writing in Athens either, if present at all. Not (so far as I have found) in the orators, Isocrates, or Plato or Xenophon, nor yet in Herodotus or Thucydides before them – except significantly in the very final sentence of the latter’s account of the *stasis* at Corcyra (427 BCE). There he comments that the ‘middling’ element among the citizens was targeted for annihilation by partisans on both sides (3.82.8). The orators do now and again speak approvingly of a lifestyle that is *metrios*, measured or moderate, often in contrast with the arrogant and insulting behaviour of the wealthy. But the ideology of citizen equality had presumably by this time become so ingrained that it might have seemed undemocratic in a public forum to attribute such a lifestyle to a group of persons positioned between the wealthy and the *dēmos*. On one occasion, indeed, Demosthenes couples *metrios* with *dēmotikos*, ‘a real man of the *dēmos*’ (Dem. 21.183); and – to return to Aristotle – his great-souled man will

be *metrios* in his bearing towards the 'middling' people (*Eth. Nic.* 4.3.1124b19-20).

So how did the 'middling' people come to force their way into Aristotle's frame of reference? One clue is supplied by some words of the sixth century poet Phocylides that he himself quotes. He is rounding off the main argument in *Pol.* 4.11 he has been making for his ideal of a political culture shaped by equals and peers committed to communal values. The poet declares (*Pol.* 4.11.1295b33-34 [= Fr.12 West]):

Many things go best for those in the middle: I want to be middle in the city.

Here Aristotle is tapping into a political ideology that can be documented in several poets of the archaic and early classical periods, as Ian Morris argued in a paper published thirty years ago.¹⁹ Morris saw that ideology as an anti-aristocratic creation, originating (so far as our evidence goes) in the time of Hesiod and associated with the beginnings of a *polis* culture. Its middling status emerges particularly clearly in the poems of Solon, who describes himself *inter alia* as a 'boundary stone at the midpoint between them [i.e. the greater and more powerful and the people]' ([Arist.] *Ath.Pol.* 12.5 [= fr. 37.9-10 West]). And indeed, towards the end of the chapter Aristotle adds as an argument for the middle *politeia* the claim that 'the best legislators have come from the middling citizens'. He instances at the head of his list Solon, already appropriated for their own varying political agendas by other writers in mid-fourth century Athens, and appeals to the evidence of Solon's poetry (*Pol.* 4.11.1296a18-21).

The closest and fullest surviving parallel to his own conception of middling citizens, however, comes in a striking passage of Euripides' play *Suppliants* (staged in 423 BCE), as noted by Collard ad loc.²⁰ Theseus king of the Athenians, represented as a thoroughly democratised monarch, makes a long speech lambasting the king of the Argives *inter alia* for his political ineptitude. He includes for his edification the following morsel of socioeconomic analysis (*Eur. Supp.* 238-45):

19 Morris 1997.

20 Collard 1975.

There are three classes of citizens. One lot are rich and useless and always craving for more. Others, 'have-nots' and destitute, fearful folk, investing too much in envy, shoot out grievous stings against the 'haves', beguiled by the eloquence of vicious leaders. But of the three classes, the one in the middle preserves cities, observing the order that the city ordains.

A complication is that those very Solonian verses were probably interpolated later into the text of Euripides.²¹ So if they were what shaped and fuelled further Aristotle's own elaboration of the earlier 'middling' ideology, particularly the tripartite division of the citizen body in *Pol.* 4.11, in place of his standard exclusive categories of just *euporoi* and *aporoi*, interpolation would have to have occurred early, or he had perhaps recalled them from their original home in some other tragedy.²²

The middle *politeia* of *Pol.* 4.11 is, to be sure, an ideal. But there can be no doubt that, by the time he wrote this chapter and the next, Aristotle had come to see the middling citizenry which he makes its central component as a present social reality. Here he is in the next chapter offering advice to the legislator (*Pol.* 4.12.1296b34-40):²³

The lawgiver must always in his constitution take in the middling people. If he is making the laws oligarchic, he must do so with the middling people his target. If democratic, he must attach them to the laws. And where the number of the middling people exceeds both the extreme classes together, or even one of them only, here it is possible for a constitution to achieve durability.

That line of thought in fact recapitulates a reflective observation that he had offered already in *Pol.* 4.11, immediately following his main argument for a middle *politeia* as 'best *politeia* ... for most cities and most people' (1295b35-40):

21 See the Loeb edition of Kovacs 1998 and Diggle's revised OCT (2025); and for discussion, especially Mueller-Goldingen 1987.

22 My thanks to Jonathan Barnes and James Diggle for some discussion of this matter.

23 The middling people play an important part in the argument of *Pol.* 4.12. But thereafter they figure significantly only at the end of *Pol.* 4.13 and again of *Pol.* 5.1, almost as afterthoughts when the main discussions of those chapters are over.

It is possible for politics to be well conducted in those cities that are of the kind in which the middle element is numerous, and preferably stronger than both the other two, or at all events than one of them, for by throwing in its weight it sways the balance and prevents the opposite extremes from coming into existence. Hence it is the greatest good fortune if those engaged in politics possess middling and sufficient resources.

As this passage indicates, Aristotle is from the outset concerned with implementation of his ideal, or at least with approximation to it.

He associates the rise of a substantial middle class with an inexorable contemporary tendency for cities to increase in size. He usually relates growth in their populations to what he sees as the inevitability of democracy's becoming the dominant form of constitution, as towards the end of Chapter 15 of Book 3 (1286b20-22):

Since cities have become still larger, we may perhaps say that it is not easy any longer for any other constitution except democracy to come into being.

But the emergence of a significant middle class he treats as an ingredient in that process of growth also, as at the end of Chapter 13 of Book 4 (1297b25-28):

It is not surprising that the old constitutions should have been oligarchical and monarchical. With their small populations, cities were without much of a middle element, so being both small in numbers and poor in organisation, they put up with subjection to rule.

In *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece* (2015), Josiah Ober makes some observations which seem to confirm Aristotle's belief that it is important to recognise the existence of such a middle class, at any rate in the larger cities of his time. Ober associates what he calls the 'ancient Greek efflorescence' in the classical and early Hellenistic period with 'an extensive middle class', and with its ability 'to consume goods and services at a

level well above mere existence'. In the light of a complex matrix developed by economic and demographic modelling applied to different data that he assembles about Athens, he argues.²⁴

In sum, it appears likely that a substantial number of residents of fourth century Athens lived far enough above subsistence to enable them to live decent lives. The surplus consumption capacity of a comparatively large middling population would have been a major driver of the Athenian economy.

Ober is at pains to emphasise that for him 'middle class' is a demographic category, not meant 'to imply anything substantive about self-identification, class consciousness, or place in the mode of production'. This 'middling population' of Ober's sounds very like that envisaged by Aristotle, who says of his own middling people that they have 'middle and sufficient resources' (*Pol.* 4.11.1295b40). Aristotle, too, volunteers nothing explicitly about how they self-identify, even if we may assume that they see each other as equals and peers, nor about any economic activity which they may perform.

At a later point in his chapter on 'the best *politeia* and the best mode of life for most cities and most of mankind', he writes as follows (*Pol.* 4.11.1296a7-16):

That the mean condition of cities is best is evident. It alone is free from civil strife, since where there is much influence from the middle element (*to dia mesou*), outbreaks of civil strife and divisive factions among the citizens least occur. And the large cities are freer from civil strife for the same reason, because the middle element is numerous. Whereas in the small cities it is easy to divide everybody into two factions, leaving nothing in the middle, and almost everybody is needy or well-off. And democracies are more secure and more permanent than oligarchies, because they have a middle class which is more numerous and has a greater share in honours.²⁵

24 Ober 2015: 97 (and see also Ober 2019).

25 'Honours' seems usually to equate to *archai*, 'offices', 'positions of rule'.

No fourth-century city was larger than the democratic Athens in which Aristotle lived for much of his life. And it was an Athens that enjoyed remarkable political stability through all those years. No doubt Aristotle was thinking of other cities as well as Athens when he composed that passage. We should not forget that encyclopaedic collection of no less than 158 already existing political constitutions that he appears to have commissioned (Diog. Laert. 5.27). But it seems likely enough that, viewing the phenomenon he describes through Solonian spectacles, he concluded that the existence in Athens by the later years of that century of a substantial middle element – well over half of the entire body of male citizens according to one study cited by Ober – is key to understanding such stability.

Yet now we run into a problem raised by Aristotle's remark: 'in the small cities it is easy to divide everybody into two factions, leaving nothing in the middle, and almost everybody is needy or well-off'. It is a puzzle that was voiced long ago by W.L. Newman, the great late-Victorian commentator on the *Politics*. Newman wrote:

If οἱ μέσοι (the middling people) were so few in number in small Greek States, the polity²⁶ can hardly have been suitable to them. Yet were not most Greek States small? If so, can the polity have been suitable to most Greek States? Aristotle says himself in 1296a23 sqq. [i.e. a few lines further on] that the midway class was often a small one in Greek States. The difficulty just pointed out does not seem, however, to have occurred to him.²⁷

How might we respond on Aristotle's behalf?

Newman's supposition, hardly controversial, that most ancient Greek cities were relatively small, has only been reinforced by the major *polis* research project led by Mogens Hansen in the 1990s and early years of the present millennium. On his estimation, in the period from the eighth to the final years of the fourth century BCE, about 8 in 10 cities occupied territories of less than 200 km², some very much less.²⁸ Hansen continued

26 I.e. the middle *politeia*: Newman thought it the same as 'polity'.

27 Newman 1902: 218.

28 Hansen 2006: 77–84.

to revisit the assumptions underlying his calculations and their methodological bases, but that global estimate seems not to have varied.²⁹ However, Aristotle might not have been too disconcerted by such a figure. According to Hansen's calculations, a big majority of ancient Greeks were urban dwellers living in middling to large cities ('large' here meaning more than 500 km²). That majority was no doubt the more palpable because much less scattered than was the minority inhabiting the many more numerous smaller settlements.

Perhaps that circumstance might suggest an explanation of what was meant by suitability for 'most cities and most people'. The claim which the incorrigibly Hellenocentric Aristotle wanted to make, and indeed assumed he was making, we might conjecture, might have been more precisely formulated as the following proposition. For most Greeks, Aristotle will have meant, and for most of the cities in which most of those Greeks lived, a middle *politeia* was a practicable ideal. In middling to large cities, there would have been enough of a middling class of male citizens for introduction of a middle *politeia* to have been in principle a realistic and relatively (if only relatively) easy project. But he concedes that most Greek cities were in fact ruled either democratically or oligarchically, whether because they were too small to have a middle class sufficient to sustain a middle *politeia*, or for other reasons, such as hegemonic control by dominant regional powers. Consequently, the middle *politeia* as such in fact either never comes into being or rarely and among few people (*Pol.* 4.11.1296a22-38).

It is worth our pausing at this point over Aristotle's remarks about stability and democracy in making his claim that 'the mean condition of cities is best', and indeed 'evidently' best. 'It alone is free from civil strife' was the rationale he offers for that judgement (*Pol.* 4.11.1296a7). He had added that 'large cities are freer from civil strife for the same reason, because the middle element is numerous' (1296a9-10). Then after his remark about 'small cities' (1296a10-13), he had continued as we saw above (1296a13-16): 'And democracies are more secure and more permanent than oligarchies, because they have a middle class which is more numerous and has a greater share in honours [offices (*archai*) are usually those he most often seems to have in mind].' As with so many Greek political

29 Hansen 2008.

thinkers, the bane of *stasis* is here the key focus, and its successful avoidance taken to be the principal basis for judging the merit of a *politeia*, at any rate one suitable for 'most cities and most people' (1295a25-26).

By that measure, the Athenian fourth century democracy presumably scores highly. It had remained 'free from civil strife' for decades by the time Aristotle was probably composing Books 4 to 6 of the *Politics* (generally taken to be during his final years in Athens from 335 BCE on). It was a 'giant amongst the city-states',³⁰ and on Ober's assessment had a demographically dominant middle class, possessing 'middling and sufficient resources', in Aristotle's phrase (1295b40). At the end of the opening chapter of Book 5, a book wholly devoted to the issue of 'what things destroy or preserve the constitutions' (the final item projected in the programme for Books 4 and 5 as set out at *Pol.* 4.2.1289b12-26), he remarks that 'the *politeia* which is based on the middle class more nearly approximates to democracy than to oligarchy' (*Pol.* 5.1.1302a14). By that reasoning, it would seem to follow that a democracy such as that of fourth-century Athens might be not too far removed from Aristotle's ideal of a 'middle' *politeia*, and indeed a candidate for the superior form of *politeia* 'nearest to the best', in the formulation used in the closing summary to the middle *politeia* chapter (*Pol.* 4.11.1296b8).

Aristotle notoriously has much less to say in the *Politics* about Athens specifically than about Sparta – although it may well be that many of his discussions of democracy in general consciously reflect particularly Athenian institutions or practices as he understands them.³¹ His account of Solon's reforms and subsequent constitutional developments (*Pol.* 2.12.1273b35-1274a21; cf. also 6.4.1319b19-22) leaves little doubt, however, that he took contemporary Athens to exemplify what he regards as

30 Hansen 2006: 91.

31 Lintott 1992 constitutes a maximalist version of this approach, in its most egregious form when he states (ibid. 115): 'However, he himself [Aristotle] does not draw any distinction between fifth- and fourth-century democracy here, and in a later passage (1298b28ff. [1298a28ff. appears to be intended]) he specifically states that his most extreme form of democracy is the one currently in use in Athens.' No mention of Athens in the text, even if that is what Aristotle is thinking of. A more cautious formulation: 'Once again, the influence of Athenian history is patent' (ibid. 120). For recent reservations about such an Athens-oriented line of interpretation: Cammack 2019: 64-65.

the final and most extreme form of populous democracy, furthest away from a ‘well-mixed’ system. In such a democracy, he says, ‘the mass of the needy becomes the authority over the *politeia*, not the laws’ (*Pol.* 4.6.1292b41-1293a10). The Aristotelian author of the *Constitution of the Athenians* (preserved in papyrus form) certainly thought that to be the condition of fourth century Athens (*Ath. Pol.* 41.2): ‘The *dēmos* has made itself the authority over everything, and manages everything by decrees and through the courts.’

The contrast in the way Aristotle thinks of large contemporary democracies in his discussion of middle *politeia*, Athens doubtless included, and in much of the rest of his treatment of them in Book 4 and elsewhere, Athens explicitly in the Solon chapter of Book 2, is stark – even if there are signs of a more nuanced and qualified assessment of democracies in Book 6, notably in such passages as *Pol.* 6.5.1320a17-b17. It perhaps tends to reinforce the suspicion that the ideas he offered in *Pol.* 4.11 for ‘the best *politeia* and what is the best mode of life for most cities and most people’ were developed relatively late in his thinking, and were never integrated with most of the rest of the *Politics*. Had he not really taken stock earlier, one might wonder, of how most Athenians of his own day were able to afford a relatively satisfactory ‘middling and sufficient’ livelihood – if, indeed, Ober is right about that? It would not, perhaps, be surprising (as Ober comments to me)³² if it took a while for the realities of the changing post-350 BCE era, now freshly explored in John Ma’s book, to impress themselves fully on contemporary Greeks (an informed and reflective observer such as Aristotle included), long accustomed to thinking about the *polis* mostly in binary terms of a dichotomy of rich and poor.³³

32 Personal communication.

33 This essay has been long in the making. Earlier attempts to get to grips with Aristotle’s ‘middle *politeia*’ were presented to colloquia in Bordeaux and Stanford, then after the pandemic to meetings in Cambridge and Athens, and most recently as the 2024 Runciman Lecture at King’s College London. My thanks go to the organisers of all these events for the stimulus they gave me, and those who offered me comments and suggestions on those occasions. The essay’s themes are close to some of Mogens Hansen’s major preoccupations. He kindly sent me upon publication his *Reflections on Aristotle’s Politics*, inviting comments from me that I fear I never mustered. It is

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therefore a special honour and pleasure, as well as a sadness, to have the opportunity of contributing to this memorial.

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