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# TOWARDS A GENEALOGY OF THE GENDER SPACE OF POLITICS

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this article is to trace a logical, binary outline of the classical period of western civilisation, from which the gender division of political space has emerged. This gender division has been deepened by an excluding tension which divides the *polis* and the *oikos* into two distinct spheres; these are marked by a structural asymmetry between the citizenry and female subordination. In closing, two other points will be briefly made, which are recalled by the bodily figures of Penelope and Antigone.

## **Keywords**

Polis, oikos, kratos, gendered body.

## **Resumen**

El artículo pretende trazar, en la edad clásica de nuestra civilización occidental, el esquema lógico binario del que sobresale la división de género del espacio político. Esta se fundamenta en la tensión excluyente que encierra la polis y el oikos en dos distintas dimensiones, caracterizadas por una discordancia constitutiva de la ciudadanía y de la

subordinación femenina. Finalmente se evocan brevemente dos líneas de fuga representadas por las figuras corpóreas de Penélope y de Antígona.

### **Palabras clave**

Polis, oikos, kratos, el género.

Departing from the consideration that politics is contextualised in a public space, I will attempt to locate the codification of its antithetical, mirror image relationship, and ask as to how the contextualisation of politics supports – by definition – differences of gender and the definability of a public *versus* a private space. As has been described for centuries in the west, the scenario of such a codification is Greek. This scenario establishes well-defined boundaries via the legitimisation of pairs of concepts, which reinforce the binary nature of traditional logic.

The relationship of equivalence binding public-private binomials – body-mind, man-woman – enucleates a theoretical space from which we can attempt to articulate a genealogy of gender difference. Indeed, the very first terms of these pairings indicate the unity of a public space which is socially shared, dwelt in by men as equals, assigned to exercising the notion of *nous*. *Nous* is understood not only as a speculative activity but as a portal to acting ethically and, therefore, politically.

If the aspiration of Greek man is fulfilled within the *agorà*, it is because it borders the perimeter of a shared space in which man is free only because he is amongst equals. The manner of articulation of this sharing is mirrored in the concept of a folded *constitution* when the necessity to educate the citizen-man in exercising virtue becomes pressing. “Excellence itself, *arête*, [...] has always been assigned to the public realm where one could excel, could distinguish oneself from all others. [...] For excellence, by definition, the presence of other is always required, and this presence needs the formality of the public, constituted by ones’ peers, it cannot be the casual, familiar presence of one’s equals or inferiors”<sup>1</sup>.

Thus, the spatial-temporal situated emergence of an individual (5<sup>th</sup> century BC in Athens) renders as urgent a more cogent definition of the type of training involved in practising *aretè*. This individual has the right of speech and a public existence, and both are bound by his capability to practise virtue. “Therefore the great educational movement, [...] which is the origin of the European idea of culture, necessarily started from and in the city-state of the 5<sup>th</sup>-century”<sup>2</sup>.

The proposal of the Sophists should be seen from this point of view, one which simultaneously reveals its democratic and elitist nature. Such a characteristic shapes the entire constitution of man who is already (in that, he is educable) a free citizen, to whom access to knowledge is consented. Political *Paideia* is one construction of such

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1. H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1988, pp. 48-49. On Plato’s study by Arendt, cfr. S. Forti, *Hannah Arendt tra filosofia e politica*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano, 2006.

2. W. Jaeger, *Paideia*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, vol. 1, 1946, p. 288.

knowledge, whose formation occurs simultaneously as an ideal form of the *polis* takes shape. Such an event occurred from the VI century BC when Cleisthenes conceived of Athens as a city governed by *isonomia*. The latter can be defined as the unity of the intellectual environment, the symmetry between physical and civic space, the solidarity of philosophy and public life<sup>3</sup>. The *agorà* was the centre of such a space, the very same spatialization of *isonomia*. It involved all citizens – differentiated by family, residency, wealth – who acquired the status of *isoì* and *homoioi*, being equal and similar to each other. On the one hand opposing all the civic space at the centre and, on the other hand, ordering this space around itself, with each particular position being determined by its own starting point and being related to it<sup>4</sup>. Thus, when equality of rights is possible, locating the space of the *agorà* isolates the social sphere of each individual in this private existence; for the Greeks, this is a political act.

The postulate, according to which an individual is born with an imprint of the good, turns the constitutive axis to the practice of virtue, with the notion of good ever present<sup>5</sup>. Whilst being legitimized by diverging opinions, the Sophist and Socratic methodologies share the same objectives, that is, to teach *aretè*. This makes possible the moulding of man who, in the private sphere, has a dominating/dominated relationship; contemporaneously *aretè* can forge a citizen, who is capable of participating in the public sphere as *isos* and *homoios*. The thread uniting these two poles is supported by the concept of *enkrateia*. Sharing the same root with *kratos*, *enkrateia* implies a capability of self-dominance, an essential condition of being virtuous.

Indeed, *enkrateia* – as a “form of effort and control that the individual must apply to himself in order to become moderate (*sophron*)”<sup>6</sup> – establishes *sophrosune*. This can be defined as the capability to control one’s desires and pleasures, according to reason. Therefore, even if rationally *sophrosune* may function correctly, it is insufficient to know good; it is necessary to manage and control one’s impulses and passions. This makes being virtuous not a “state of integrity”, but “a relationship of domination, a relation of mastery”<sup>7</sup>.

3. J.-P. Vernant, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs. Etudes de psychologie historique*, Librairie Françoise Maspero s.a., Paris 1965. See C. Meier, *Die Entstehung des Politischen bei den Griechen*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1980, especially cap. IV; L. Canfora, *Il mondo di Atene*, Laterza, Bari, 2011.

4. J.-P. Vernant, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs*.

5. See G. Duso, “Platone e la filosofia politica”, in G. M. Chiodi, R. Gatti (eds), *La filosofia politica di Platone*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2008, pp. 9-23.

6. M. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, Vintage Books, New York, 1990, p. 65.

7. Ibidem, p. 70.

The *polemos* animating such a relationship justifies intervention which pursues the forming of good via the *askesis* to virtue. In the context of the *polis*, the virtue of *enkrateia* occupies a privileged position in that it serves as a point of equilibrium between the asymmetry of a private relationship and the symmetry of a public relationship. “Governing oneself, managing one’s estate, and participating in the administration of the city were three practices of the same type”. And thus it is for this reason that “the master of himself and the master of others received the same training”<sup>8</sup>.

Constituting master of oneself permits the individual to modulate and extend the applicability of *kratos*. In a city which has still not separated the political from the social, *kratos* is placed as the centre of equidistance, symmetry and reciprocity between individuals by unifying both into the public sphere. Placing power at the centre means removing the privileges of supremacy of each single individual so that no-one may dominate anyone. Fixed at the centre, *kratos* becomes common to all members of the collective. For citizens of a city, placing *kratos* at the centre is the same as asserting one’s freedom from any yoke<sup>9</sup>.

The *agorà* is, therefore, that space in which power cancels one’s own authoritarian value, projecting an isonomic dimension onto the participants and thereby guaranteeing freedom to those who have a right to enter the *polis*. The *agorà* simultaneously asserts differences in social functions, which are ascribed to an individual, and the equality of political prerogatives. Both permit each individual to be free – *auto-nomos* – that is, participate, together with others, in the institutions of law<sup>10</sup>.

The ‘neutralisation’ of *kratos* defines the *politeia*, it expresses the very same essence of each social life; whomsoever is outwith the *politeia* is, in a certain way, out of society<sup>11</sup>. However, *kratos* contains, in its most ancestral roots, the same idea of force without exhausting its semantic extent. The latter is limited to controlling one’s own passions, given the prospect of being virtuous. It is not sufficient to deny one’s own desires; it is necessary to assert power, to displace the idea of domination towards others. The latter do not live in the space of the *polis* because they are not citizens. The denial of the right of speech to those unequal and not free may, therefore, constitute the construction of a separate space. Having divested the citizen of his spoils, it is here that the individual can and must exercise power.

8. Ibidem, p. 76 e p. 77.

9. J.-P. Vernant, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs*.

10. See C. Castoriadis, *La démocratie comme procédure et comme régime*, in *Les carrefours du labyrinthe*, IV, *La montée de l’insignifiance*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1996, pp. 221-241.

11. J.-P. Vernant, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs*.

Such a condition is not meant as a torment to the individual but as a development of the way of thinking and performing *kratos*. Originally, *kratos* was conceived of as power, the force of coercion, which was attributed in the highest degree to the gods, to whom men devotedly submitted themselves. Similarly, it is this idea of *kratos* which men practise before the constitution of *politeia*, but above all it is this idea of *kratos* which justifies the neutralisation of *kratos en mesoi* (at the centre). Such a weakened power thus becomes equidistant between all citizens, thereby protecting its symmetry and reciprocity. It is this foundation which governs the ethics of *sophrosune*, as a result of the practising of *enkrateia*: a moral idea [which] is oriented towards social reality, tending to shape it<sup>12</sup>. Thus, the dual nature of Greek ethics reveals itself as a human discipline, which is autonomous and demanding of an solid foundation; the work of Socrates monumentally summarises this discipline.

The twofold nature of *kratos*, “to command and obey” – cohabiting harmoniously within the same individual – [indeed] “ceases to appear as antithetical; it forms the boundaries of the same reversible relationship. The same men obey and command, according to the ordering of time, which is numerically regulated. This is because *kratos* revolves around a common centre, the seat of the power to command. An abstract ordering of the egalitarian distribution of tasks substitutes the brutal force of domination”<sup>13</sup> (*isonomia*). Possessing – as an objective – a constitution of reciprocally-equal citizens is indicative of the end of *isonomia*. The latter may be sought by means of an other-directed relationship in which the master manages a specific relationship, envisaged by him and according to terms which must be obeyed. Thus, the formative context of the manner in which the educator/educated relationship is expressed faithfully represents the twofold nature of *kratos*.

Where can the citizen of the *polis* exercise his command? Within the space of inequality, the space of *oikos*, in which inequality is legitimate, due to its mirror image to the *polis*. Hannah Arendt has underlined this: “the polis was distinguished from the household in that it knew only “equals” whereas the household was the center of the strictest inequality”<sup>14</sup>. It is only within this framework that the space of the *oikos* is habitable. How is the space of the *oikos* defined? Precisely by its constitution *oikos* reveals its mirror image with the space of the *polis*. Also *oikos* is a territory conceived of and articulated around the notion of a centre, around, that is, the notion of being fixed. And

12. J.-P. Vernant, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs*.

13. *Ibidem*.

14. H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, cit., p. 32.

this is the starting point for measuring the movements of the surrounding space. This is the play between Hestia and Hermes. Hestia, inner, closed, fixed, the folding in on itself of a human group; Hermes, outside, opening, mobility, contact with others who are different. It can be said that the Hermes-Hestia coupling expresses in its polarity the tension existing within the archaic representation of space. Space requires a centre, a fixed point, a privileged, valued position; departing from this point, guidance, varying in nature, can be oriented and given. However, space is present contemporaneously as a place of movement and this implies the possibility of transition and the passage from any point to another<sup>15</sup>.

In the stillness of the domestic hearth, presided over by Hestia, divinity of the house, one can reflect on the stability of *Hestia koinè*; its symbolic, religious meaning fading away to be transformed into political meaning: at the centre of the city, *hestia koinè* keeps the memory of the family hearth alive. “The domestic alter, secured to the ground, fixes the human home to a determined point on the earth; this distinguishes it from every other type of *oikos* whilst conferring a special, religious quality [...]. Having become commonplace, *hestia koinè* is built on a public space and open to the *agorà*, no longer within a private dwelling [...], by now the hearth expresses the centre, in that it is the common denominator of all the houses which comprise the *polis*”<sup>16</sup>.

The polarity between Hestia and Hermes surrounds the typology of the relationships of man and woman; and thus is it with the complementarity between the closed and unmovable space of the hearth, and open space of the social relationships of the *agorà*. How is it possible to collocate woman presiding over the hearth, and at the same time, locate the locus of male control within the *oikos*? The *oikos* constitutes the only territory where man can exercise his power; the fact of not being amongst equals justifies the subjection of beings inferior to himself: slaves, children, women. However, woman occupies a privileged position within the home in that she preserves the private space of man.

Such a contradiction is revealed to be fictitious but it deepens the relationship between woman and man. On marrying, the position of woman shifts, or better, is transformed, from the fixed space of her father’s house to the equally static house of the

15. J.-P. Vernant, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs*.

16. *Ibidem*.

husband. The only movement made by a woman makes is connoted by the fact that the future bride is equated to a commodity: her first function in the marriage is to sanction the stipulation of a contract between two families. Thus man admits an element of trade to his house; she also becomes the mainstay of the hearth because she must fulfil another fundamental function: the guaranteed production of offspring. Woman, whom we have seen assimilated, as an element of her relationship, to the shifting wealth of the herd, is now identified in her procreative function with that of field of the herd. The paradox is that this does not previously embody her land but that of her husband. It is necessary for her to embody the land of her husband otherwise sons born of a furrow thus ploughed would have no religious title with which to occupy the paternal sphere and bear the fruit of the soil<sup>17</sup>. In terms of nature, the civic role of women was to produce citizens, that is, male heirs of householders who comprised the city; culturally, women acted as a pawn in a transaction between father-in-law and son-in-law<sup>18</sup>.

Placing woman at the centre of the house does not, therefore, permit a woman to live autonomously in the domestic space as she cannot own it: she supervises it for he who has put her there to perform a role. This role characterises her and defines her as ‘another’, bound by a twofold tie to that man – and only that man – who has the power to confer a sense of her existence. This depends on fulfilling a social role and contributing to generations of citizens but this does not guarantee her political status. Woman is banished from the *polis*, with its radical foreignness of political life; in the same instant, it precludes her from being virtuous, the possibility, that is, to be shaped by the exercising of virtue, which would render her as *isos* and *homoios*. On the contrary, she cannot participate in *isonomia*, precisely because this alienates the idea of *sophrosune*. Thus woman remains totally excluded from any type of public relationship.

However, it is well to remember that to woman is conceded a certain type

of the moral virtues: all must partake of them, but not in the same way, but in such measure as is proper to each in relation to his own function. Hence the ruler must possess intellectual virtue in completeness [...], while each of the other parties must have that share of this virtue which is appropriate to them. Hence [...] the temperance of a woman and that of a man are not the same, nor their courage and justice, [...] but the one is the courage of command, and the other that of subordination, and the case is similar with the other virtues.

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17. Ibidem.

18. J. Redfield, “L’uomo e la vita domestica”, in J.-P. Vernant (ed.), *L’uomo greco*, Laterza, Bari, 1997, p. 157.

“This point therefore requires general consideration in relation to natural ruler and subject: is virtue the same for ruler and ruled, or different? [...], we cannot say that the difference is to be one of degree, for ruling and being ruled differ in kind, and difference of degree is not a difference in kind at all”<sup>19</sup>. On the basis of such specific differences, woman is confined to the *oikos*, whose perimeter encompasses her condition of submission. This begs the question as to whether it is possible to focus on a line of flight in order to modify one’s separate but equal being to that of man.

The ancient Greeks have provided us with two figures representative of this yearning for conceptual autonomy, and they have been sought via the awareness of their own embodiment. This awareness leads to a converging of being a woman with the practising of bodily experience, which is specifically female.

The characteristics of one figure are found in Homer’s *Odyssey*: Penelope, who, suspended and waiting for the return of her husband, forever separated in her role of wife, attempts to create a niche to take refuge and build her own existence. Penelope’s action is as subversive as it is belongs to the space-time in which she is obliged to live but to which she does not belong. Her daily weaving records her perfectly in the order of mother and faithful wife. She must free herself, so she dims the light of the sun, that is, the *nous*, which is traditionally ‘masculine’, and she closes in on herself in a space-time of her own construction. The night-time is when she unpicks part of the shroud, prolonging indefinitely the waiting of her suitors. She makes a gesture which locates her beyond and against her role: the space of the loom is the space where she, hiding, is revealed as Penelope, a totally unique being. Whilst defying agreed canons, the gesture of Penelope’s freeing herself, however, maintains intact the equilibrium of the *oikos*. It is Telemachus – the man of the house – who imposes *kratos* on the orphan dwelling of Ulysses, silencing his mother and relegating her to ‘her’ rooms: “Nay, go to thy chamber, and busy thyself with thine own tasks, the loom and the distaff, and bid thy handmaids ply their tasks; but speech shall be for men, for all, but most of all for me; since mine is the authority [*kratos*] in the house ([*oikos*])”<sup>20</sup>.

The irreconcilability of the tension which animates *oikos* and *polis* violently bursts onto the stage in Sophocles’ *Antigone*. The resolute will to safeguard in a dignified manner the body of the deceased brother moves Antigone towards the *polis*; the latter has determined by law the right of burial of Polynices. The legal impossibility of recognising

19. Aristotle, *Politics*, I, 1260a, 13, 15-20; 1259b, 30-35.

20. Homer, *Odyssey*, I, 355, 360. On woman’s aphasia, see L. Irigaray, *Speculum de l’autre femme*, Paris, Ed. de Minuit, 1974. See notably A. Cavarero, *Nonostante Platone*, Editori Riuniti, Roma, 1990, pp. 13-32.

such a right is the essence of the tragedy. The play collocates Antigone on the boundary between *polis* and *oikos*. The tie of blood which subdues her to the divine law of the *oikos* at the same time compels her to strike against the *polis*. The inevitability of this clash is proportional to its necessity: no woman has the right to enter the *polis* but, precisely because she has no knowledge of ‘male’ laws, Antigone cannot obey, therefore, she cannot free herself but she ‘contradicts’ these laws. Her saying ‘against’ is tantamount to saying ‘outside’. Her words and those of Creon are written in two complementary records: the a-political of the *oikos*, indeed the pre-politics of the *polis*, which are kept parallel to each other. “[Antigone] does not aim to substitute the order of Creon with another. Her Nomos is totally *a-polis*; she does not resist but opposes. An extraordinary and amazing fact is that such a stark contrast takes place in the theatre of the *polis* – which here the totally separated elements are destined – despite themselves – to contradict themselves”<sup>21</sup>.

Evading the law of the *polis* by enduring from within, Penelope’s escape obtains her a micro-space within the macro-space of the *oikos*. The challenge of Antigone seems to be tragically more extreme: the same force which introduces her as a foreigner to the *polis* marks her definitive condemnation to death. “Creon knows that, where unlawful conduct is not sanctioned, all order in the *polis* would collapse”<sup>22</sup>. He is entrenched within the law of the *polis*, deciding not the death of the woman but to bury her alive, suspending her between life and death so as to admit her to enter the *polis* but denying her the political space. “Woman has a place in politics if she stays in the home [...], that is, precisely when it includes her by excluding her (on an institutional level of politics, in the *polis*, the non-politics of the female is her political character). However, when she refutes her own circumstance, that is, the four walls of the house – no longer being an impossible, public dimension but an indefinable public space – politics no longer controls her”<sup>23</sup>. Antigone can only remain in the border of the *polis*, when she who crosses therein lives no more.

The inside/outside polarity which supports the complementarity between *polis* and *oikos* defines the space of acting publically. It delineates the margins of this *polis/oikos* space, confining the constitution of the self only to man, who is permitted to *trans-form himself* into a citizen. The institution of the political *paideia* in exercising virtue as a unique political experience splits its own aim: the idea of shaping an

21. M. Cacciari, *L'arcipelago*, Adelphi, Milano, 1997, p. 44.

22. *Ibidem*, p. 43.

23. P. Amato, *Antigone e Platone*, Mimesis, Milano, 2006, p. 64. See also A. Cavarero, *Corpo in figure*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1995, pp. 17-62 whose analysis would deserve more attention.

individual relating between equals in the *polis* is mirrored in the legitimisation of authority of the same equals regarding those who live outside politics. Therefore, *oikos* is shaped as a space of domination where it must, out of necessity, impose itself on those who do not have the right to be subjects. This is because they are excluded from any type of public life. In this sense, woman becomes a subject who cannot be educated, in that access to public relations is prohibited to her. However, as a subject necessitating private relationships, that is, exercising power, she is a necessary pole and, for this reason, her moulded being coincides with her *con-forming* to such a role.

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