

THE PURSUIT OF EQUALITY IN THE WEST

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EQUALITY
IN THE WEST

ALDO SCHIAVONE

Translated by

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PREFACE

This is not a political book, nor is it an ideological manifesto.

It is a work of historical interpretation and conceptual proposition that, while holding together different perspectives, seeks to contribute to defining the terms of a crucial issue of the present age.

I believe it is important to say straightaway that readers will not find here a history of equality in the West—a project far removed from my goals—but just a path within it. An itinerary aimed at identifying some key loci, from which an alternative and as-yet-unexplored paradigm can be constructed.

The idea of equality is a constitutive feature of our tradition. But for some time now, since before the new century even started, the value and perhaps the very meaning of this presence have been lost. Events of great consequence, sometimes very distant from each other, have led to its eclipse. We therefore run the risk of mislaying something essential, which, it seems to me, we need more than ever before.

To elude this danger, new thinking is required, capable of grasping the challenge that is being laid down for us. Historic research is always in some way preparation for the future. The story presented here aims to be so in an even more visible way than is normally the case. The past,

if we know how to speak to it, is a living laboratory, not a storeroom of discarded objects.

The theme has preoccupied me for many years, at least since the concluding chapter of *Ius: L'invenzione del diritto in Occidente* (2005; 2nd ed., 2017), published in English as *The Invention of Law in the West* (2012). I devoted a series of lectures to it at the Collège de France in 2008, and the Jerome Lectures in 2014, at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, and at the American Academy of Rome. The idea for the book arose from these initial approaches to the topic, and was discussed and appraised with Sharmila Sen, whom I wish to thank most warmly for having wanted from the outset to make it a book for Harvard.

Fara Nasti read the whole Italian manuscript and made many very helpful suggestions. The work would have been unimaginable without her contribution.

Finally, a warm thank you to Jeremy Carden, who translated my complex Italian with care and sensitivity, and my gratitude to everyone at HUP—a constant and irreplaceable presence in my studies over the years.

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PROLOGUE

The Most Beautiful of Lives

On the final page of the third and last book of his *Essays*, Montaigne writes:

It is an accomplishment, absolute and as it were God-like, to know how to enjoy our being as we ought. We seek other attributes because we do not understand the use of our own; and, having no knowledge of what is within, we sally forth outside ourselves. A fine thing to get up on stilts: for even on stilts we must ever walk with our legs! And upon the highest throne in the world, we are seated, still, upon our arses.

The most beautiful of lives to my liking are those which conform to the common and human model, with order but without miracles and without extravagance.¹

These words were not dashed off by their author. The examples of the stilts and the throne, and the reference, in the final section, to the human and to order, were added after the first print version, as we learn from the manuscript notes in the margin to the copy of the *Essays* on which Montaigne worked until the end of his days.²

Indeed, they touch on a point that troubled him perhaps more than any other: “I am expounding a lowly, lacklustre existence. You can attach the whole of moral philosophy to a commonplace private life just as well as to one of richer stuff. Every man bears the whole Form of the human condition,” we read at the beginning of the second essay of Book 3.³ It was necessary to describe and to emphasize that part of us which, though not identifying with the particular experiences of each person, includes them all, and constitutes the common ground we have long called (as Montaigne already did) the “human condition.”⁴

We are in the years between 1588 and 1592, one of the darkest periods in the history of France and of Europe. The country had been racked for decades by an almost uninterrupted succession of religious wars: implacable hatreds between faiths brandished like arms, and a reciprocal desire to annihilate the other. But though his eyes were filled with the havoc of such lacerations—or perhaps precisely because he saw nothing around him except that unspeakable horror—Montaigne was able to reverse the perspective, and to place in the center not the rupture but the rediscovery of the bond; not the emptiness of divisive destruction but the fullness of identification and contact.

“The whole form of the human condition,” in the second essay; “the common and human model,” in the final one. The later addition of the words “and human” to the “common model” present in the text of 1588 condenses all of Montaigne’s concern: the fear, which evidently still troubled him, of not having been sufficiently clear on a vital theme.⁵ What is really “common,” what makes all lives comparable—from the most obscure to the brightest—is exactly what makes them unmistakably “human.”

The “human,” then, was nothing other than the “common,” the shared. But the only way to fully grasp this unifying thread, to render evident the substance and force of the connection, was, according to Montaigne, to take the apparently opposite path of an endless journey within the irreducible singularity of one’s existence, in search of the most secret and hidden attitudes as they revealed themselves—day after day, event after event, thought after thought, reading after reading—to his dissecting gaze. The maximum determinateness, as a way of achieving the maximum inclusion, the cancellation of every particularism, of every closure:

to enable the discovery of the universal human—"the whole form"—as it unfolded in all its fresh and objective nudity.

We will search in vain in Montaigne's beloved classics—Seneca, Plutarch, Horace, Lucretius, the Sceptics, and the ancient Stoics—for something more than a preliminary intuition of this itinerary that began from the singularity of his own inner landscape, but whose sole objective was to go beyond, in order to reach, in the remotest layer of the self, a universally shared imprint. This was no longer the ancient world, even though Roman humanist motifs (perhaps not all of which were familiar to Montaigne) can still clearly be discerned, from Terence to the intellectuals of Hadrian's court—Gellius, Favorinus, the great jurists of the imperial council—bent however to describe another matter, integrated into another substance.⁶

Montaigne was not announcing the dawn of the bourgeois world either. What we have here is the outline of a less well-known modernity, another way out from antiquity, completely different from the one that would soon delineate the extraordinary path of modern individualism in its successful blend of economics and philosophy, law, politics, and literature. Montaigne is not Defoe, or Locke, or Descartes: there is no continuity or progression between them. And the figure that speaks in the first person in the *Essays* has very little in common with the one who says "I" in the *Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (less than seventy years later in the—slightly backdated—fiction of the novel).⁷ Here too we are witnessing the lighting up of a feature through unexplored paths, and we can detect the presence of traits that had never previously appeared on the stage of history. This time, though, the protagonist recognized himself only in doing; he was defined entirely and exclusively by the actions he performed. In short, he was nothing other than his labor—incessantly transforming, producing, and accumulating—and he entered into a reflective relationship with his mind only through the trace left on the things surrounding him.

We tend to forget it, but the early phases of modernity were not marked by the linear course of just one renewed construction of the self, the intellectually compact formation of a single new form of subjectivity. In that crucial age, we glimpse instead the outline of separate roads, just one of which would become dominant—and it was not the one indicated

in the *Essays*. The horizon they offer a view of appears all the more precious, then, because it has the flavor of an alternative, and of an occasion that has not, thus far at least, been developed.



Montaigne was entirely caught up by his discovery: by having found that the ultimate substance of our “being”—we are accustomed to say, of our individuality—carries, inscribed within it, a feature describable through what he called a “common model,” which is reproduced identically in each of us.⁸ On it the circumstances of the existence of single persons, the infinite variety of accidents and opportunities, construct sometimes enormous differences, without predefined limits: stilts and thrones as opposed to “lowly, lacklustre” lives.⁹ But, he thought, it was necessary to look beyond the false absoluteness of singularities, to trace the element to which all lives must relate in order to be truly understood. Montaigne resorted to a striking image to express the power of this return, which was not a reduction but a revealing. It evoked the ineludible physicality of the bodies to which we are bound, the hardness of their anatomical structure, which is the same for everyone: “our legs,” “our arse” (the word is not coarse, but arresting; there was this too in sixteenth-century Europe, before the consolidation of the Counter-Reformation or of “good manners” in the salons of Paris, London, and Vienna: think of Rabelais, or, in Italy, of Aretino and of certain letters by Machiavelli).¹⁰

“The most beautiful of lives . . . are those which conform to the common and human model,” said Montaigne. The aesthetic judgment (“the most beautiful of lives”) masked the moral evaluation. The idea of “conforming” introduced the unexpected one of the rule, the norm: of a parameter that is reproduced, intact, in each person. Subjectivities are not extinguished by complying with this yardstick but perfected through recognition of it: “with order but without miracles and without extravagance.” It is in this way that it is possible for each person to perceive “the whole form of the human condition”: the “human norm”—as E. M. Forster, perhaps the most important English writer of the twentieth century and certainly the last to have an idea of what the British

Empire had been like, would write centuries later in a page of *A Passage to India* that appears to be a late counterpoint to Montaigne—as the only path toward “harmony” and “beauty.”¹¹

As in the *Essays*, so too in Forster the aesthetic judgment hid the moral appraisal. French humanism tempered by the ravages of civil war, and an already post-Victorian and postimperial English classicism came together on the cusp of the same idea, which Forster also called “Mediterranean”: the universality of measure as the discovery of equality in the human.¹²



Montaigne was writing on the threshold of a great change.¹³ Just a few decades earlier the New World had begun to invade the imagination, intellects, and even the everyday life of Europe with the previously unknown produce of its lands; with its riches, its spaces, its marvels; and ships bristling with sails and cannons had not long since begun to regularly ply the Atlantic, suddenly no longer a boundary but a channel.

His relationship with antiquity was still deeply felt, even if it was a past seen as an inexorably fading universe, already immersed in the deceptive, albeit golden, light of the Italian Renaissance.

In his eyes, though, modernity had not yet acquired the features that would soon become familiar and indelible: it was, as it were, merely announced more than truly realized (unlike what would be seen by Defoe—we have just mentioned his *Robinson Crusoe*—who was writing when the die of capitalist development was almost cast), and Europe had not definitively embarked on the path of bourgeois transformation that we all know. The profile of the modern world was barely sketched and open to various solutions. In many ways, Montaigne behaved like a frontiersman, suspended between two ages. And it is for this too that his thought is so compelling—because it does not flow within schemes that would only later become the acquired forms of a whole epoch.

But in his own time there was already a new and different atmosphere in French, English, and Dutch—but also German, Portuguese, Spanish, and Danish—cities. A sudden and disconcerting expansion of the borders within which it had until then been permitted to live, and a new

abundance of goods, capital, labor, and ideas was thrusting Europe into a totally unknown dimension. At the same time there was a spreading perception of a changed—and previously inconceivable—relationship between land and sea, rootedness and mobility, geography and history, that rendered even the unthinkable realistic.

The breaking of old barriers was already all there in Montaigne. His point of view could not have formed if he had not interiorized the definitive breach of a historic boundary, of a cage of restrictions—material and cultural—that until not long before had given a shape and a countenance to the course of the Old World: a basis of facts and interpretations on which the image, first elaborated by Italian humanists, of ancient antiquity as completeness and as the satisfaction of the finished had just been constructed. Perfection, but in closed forms.

This network of limits had already begun to dissolve centuries earlier—commencing with the thought and social practices of Italian cities at the end of the thirteenth century, Dante and Florence above all—but it was not long since that it had really disintegrated. Montaigne enjoyed the freedom of a gaze that could venture for the first time beyond the barriers of the past; but which, at the same time, did not yet know the outcome of what was starting to come into being, nor where and how the new equilibria of the epoch that was being ushered in would be reached. He was thus able to move with a fluidity and lack of prejudice that he seized as an unexpected gift.

From such a privileged position—the last point of contact between the old and the new, the ancient and the modern—Montaigne said he was unable to conceive the “human”—the “condition” and the “model” of a human that historically was already completely outside antiquity and its echoes, but not yet completely molded by the new age—without at the same time conceiving equalness, and without going beyond, in order to do so, the excluding shell of the “I.”



We will find it very hard to fully position Montaigne in Western thinking about equality, which he only touched from a tangential position—a

reflection at the boundaries between ethics, history, and philosophical anthropology.

His point of view did, however, reflect an exceptional historic time—the dawning of the modern: a state of suspension in which everything was still possible. Past and future—what had definitively ceased to be lasting but had not yet completely slipped away, and what had already begun, but was not yet fixed in a stable grid of characteristics, either social, economic, or cultural—blurred together in the same oscillating indeterminacy: a fluidity enabling the achievement of vertiginous depths.

The order of thoughts entrusted to the *Essays* did not have—nor did it wish to have—strictly philosophical, and far less political, implications. Instead it stuck to the representation of a morphology of the interiority of the human—of all the human—that projected it onto a backdrop with as-yet-unknown and nebulous traits, in which one feature, albeit only barely outlined, was emerging: the force of the entanglement between the idea of the universal, the consciousness of self, and the intuition of equality—of a particular and barely glimpsed equality: the impersonalized and common measure of each life—as the true destiny of a civilization. It is for this reason that we have begun our story with him.

At the time when Montaigne was writing, the modern developments of that idea were not even imaginable, though a long history had already accrued around some of its elements. It is these paths that we must now tread, following the traces of lost threads that we shall use in an attempt to extend our gaze and look forward.

THE GREEK ALTERNATIVE

Nature or Politics?

Anatomies

The beginning of our journey takes us far back in time. The setting is the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, in the decades between the sixth and fifth century BC, when the outline began to form of what would later be called, in a way as suggestive as it was overstated, the “Greek miracle”: an age of great innovations, when features took shape that would leave their mark on the whole of the ancient West.

As far as is known, reflection on equality first began to crystallize in relation to one of the most significant events of this period: the birth of the *polis*; that is, of the city as a politically organized body that we would call sovereign—though the ancients themselves had no such concept.

In the new communities, whose independent existence often stemmed from the crumbling of vaster territorial entities, in Greece and along the coasts of Ionia colonized by the Greeks, the experience of complete political autonomy led the inhabitants to form very close ties among themselves. Reciprocal and equal, these bonds were not just between the old

aristocracies, but also included people of humbler stock—peasants, artisans, shopkeepers, traders, seafarers—and prompted a distribution of government tasks that involved the whole community, rather than just being concentrated in tight-knit oligarchies or in the hands of a monarch.

The *poleis* regenerated from this new sociality quickly became the context for a peculiar management of power, which was soon called “democracy”—a word that Aeschylus, in *The Suppliants*, written in Athens probably around 460 BC, already showed that he knew, working deftly around the terms forming it: *demos* and *kratos*—people and power, combined in a previously unimaginable short circuit.¹

In the newly refashioned cities there was plenty of discussion (and writing too): more complex modes of social organization and of the division of labor freed up, albeit for just a few, time and resources to devote to activities that we would describe as intellectual. People began to publicly ask questions about themselves, the value of their choices, the characteristics of the societies that were developing, the mysterious regularity of nature, and the hidden meaning of life and of the world. They debated the exact significance of the peculiar symmetry between citizens induced by democratic politics, and what the limits were of this condition.

Parity within the bounds of one’s own circle had already long been common among various aristocratic groups at the time—as is clearly shown, for example, in Homer’s poetry. But something different was emerging now: the democracy taking root in centers along the coasts of the Aegean was at once the presupposition and the result of a leveling not limited to a narrow circle of important families but extending to the whole social fabric of the city. It is in this framework that we come across an announcement that has reached us mutilated and decontextualized but which, due to the essentiality of its content, has been part of European and Western history ever since: in a certain sense, the point of origin of the path we are trying to reconstruct.

Expressed in it, probably in highly assertive and polemical terms—whether for the first time exactly we do not know, but undoubtedly in an already very definite and complete way—was a radical idea, that of equality as a “natural” feature of the human; and some decisive implications of this discovery were clearly set forth:

We know them and we respect them [perhaps: “our customs, our laws”: the integrations to render this incipit are conjectural and controversial]; but those of people who live far away we neither know nor do we respect them. Thus in this regard we have become barbarians towards each other, since, in nature at least, we are all fitted similarly by nature in all regards to be both barbarians and Greeks. It is possible to observe what is necessary by nature for all human beings and what they possess in relation to their needs in conformity with <the same> needs, and in all this none of us can be defined as either b<arbaria>n or Greek. For we all breathe into the air through our mouth and nose; <we laugh when we are happy in our mind> or we weep when we are grieved; we take in sounds by our hearing, and we see by means of light with our eyes; we do work with our hands and we walk with our feet.²

It is possible, as has been suggested, that these words were paradoxical or even provocative, and that their author was not exactly a friend of democracy, whose limitations and incompleteness he wished to denounce.³ But no attempt to piece together a background can extinguish the objective force of this thought, presented with the impact of a drastic pronouncement open to all “human beings.”⁴ The boundaries of citizenship in the new *poleis* were breached in a single blow; the declaration went further even than the whole sum of their inhabitants, to include nothing less than the entire human species.



Writing in this fashion, around 430 BC, in a work consisting of various books and probably entitled *On Truth*, was a man devoted to “philosophizing,” as Pericles, the great Athenian politician, put it in those same years. His name was Antiphon, and his words have survived in a fragment known to us through two of the Oxyrhynchus Papyri.

Antiphon lived in Athens—at the height of the democratic experience—and his master had probably been Anaxagoras, who came from Clazomenae on the coast of Asia Minor: a man of learning versed in the

doctrines of the Ionic physics that had accompanied the establishment of popular governments on the Asian side of the Mediterranean.

An Ionic inspiration—the intellectual environment between Miletus and Abdera—shines through in Antiphon's text: the naturalism supported by the empirical observation of reality typical of early Greek science, which had yielded the conceptions of Thales, Anaximander, and Leucippus, and would run through to Democritus. A universe that is now almost lost to us (something can be intuited through Lucretius), due to the drastic selection made in late antiquity when saving classical texts—a choice dominated by the Christian canon, which, by no longer transcribing works deemed incompatible with the new religion, effectively consigned them to oblivion—like those of the early Ionic scholars, too imbued with materialism. Their analytic force can be almost only detected in an indirect way, through the screen of Platonic and Aristotelean writings that would intercept and readapt their memory. But unfortunately, here too we are conditioned by a thick filter erected by the two philosophers, who forced the richness and originality of that tradition into the categories of the metaphysical and spiritualistic turn that distinguished Greek thought from Plato onward (we shall see an example shortly).

To push his reasoning to its most extreme consequences, Antiphon evoked an alterity well known to fifth-century Athenian culture, constitutive of the Greek certitude of their own superiority: we, the Greeks, on the one hand, and the barbarians on the other. A contrast based on a primary negation, a path of self-recognition determined above all by exclusion, in opposition to the other: not slaves, not women, not peoples unable to speak a Greek dialect.

Instead, Antiphon stripped those differences of meaning, erasing them completely, and in so doing reached the horizon of an absolute inclusion: the space of the universally equal (the philosopher did not mention women, but he probably included slaves in his formulation, though whether here or in another text we cannot say, as we shall see more clearly further on—they must also have fallen within the scope of the equality he imagined). Every identification obtained solely through opposition was superseded at a stroke, to the point of including within the same field also what appeared at first sight to be completely extraneous to it: the barbarian, or the slave, recognized as being perfectly equal.

Any distinction constructed on the basis of social conventions, however deep rooted, was cancelled out by the evidence of a more important uniformity, founded on objective recognition of fundamental characteristics shared by all human beings, distinguished by the same anatomy and the same functioning of the body. Such uniformity had to come first, because—and this was the real heart of Antiphon's reasoning, implicit but crystal clear—everything belonging to the world that we would call social-historical should be related—and to a certain extent subordinated—to the natural-biological datum. The corporeality of bare existence was elevated in this way to the measure of every human relation. Not just the common functions of survival (breathing), but also those enabling sociality and community life (seeing, moving, working, laughing, crying), performed by means of the same anatomical base (the mouth, nostrils, feet, eyes, hands), make humans entirely similar; and from this Antiphon derived consequences that could connect nature and society, observation of reality and the correct formation of the rules that should guide all dealings between human beings.

The affirmation, as formulated, had the effect of bringing life—grasped in its barest essentiality—directly into politics (the declaration inevitably had political implications), projecting the materiality and functionality of bodies not only onto the social profile of the *polis*, but even onto relations between different peoples commonly perceived as opposites. And life was brought in not as an inert object over which to exercise an omnipotent command—the unquestionable authority of the law, of *nomos*—but rather as the unbreakable foundation of collective action: an intent that, with time, would become the genetic feature of all democratic radicalism.



In Antiphon's interpretation, the experience of politics—whatever the philosopher's actual position within it—was evoked and, as it were, placed between parentheses, while it was the discovery of the natural character of equality that was placed in the foreground. As if, to truly comprehend its import, it was necessary to give that idea a completely external grounding with respect to the constitution of the *polis*. To

conceive it as evidence of a nature pushed beyond itself and interpreted as norm and as destiny—an attitude also known to Greek thought irrespective of this particular vision. And it was the conquest of a pre-political horizon that made it possible to arrive at that otherwise precluded universality which, once achieved, had a socially and culturally explosive significance.

The boundaries of nature, in fact, did not coincide with those of the *polis*. The discovery of equality held true also and indeed above all outside the city; it could go beyond the specifically political sphere to include the whole species, precisely because the affirmation was not the outcome of an achievement within a particular community, but reflected a natural input, a kind of primary self-recognition of the human as such.

What weight and value Antiphon really gave to the proclamation of this boundless unity is not known. It is likely that he himself thought it wise not to exaggerate its significance, sterilizing its practical and political meaning, reduced to a declaration of principle, perhaps even with paradoxical overtones, and without any immediate consequences for the established order of an entire civilization.

The fact remains, however, that it is impossible to erase the effect of destabilizing relativity that the affirmation—whatever its intention—ended up radiating. A whole system of persuasions was called into question and oscillated dangerously, observed with the estranged gaze of someone judging it in the light of another truth.

Cities of Equals

In the Greece of the second half of the fifth century BC, Antiphon's pronouncement was an isolated, though, as we shall see, not forgotten case. From what can be reconstructed, it would appear that no one developed his strand of thinking directly, though someone must have picked up on it.

Equality was discussed, though above all in relation to a different and less radical version—narrower, but more widely shared. A paradigm directly linked this time to politics and to the democratic turn being experienced by the Greek world. It too was destined to have a very long history.

A trace of it can be found in a well-known passage from Herodotus, written in the second half of the fifth century and drawing probably on a source that should once again be linked to Ionic thought. The historian expounded, in the shape of a dialogue, a kind of elementary theory of forms of government, setting them against each other in the search for the best one. His classification would prove very influential and long-lived, from Plato to Aristotle to Polybius and all the way through to the founders of modern political science—Machiavelli, Hobbes, and others.⁵

In the tale the comparison was developed enigmatically by three Persian men of learning.⁶ Each one defended a different type (Herodotus was perfectly aware of the strangeness of attributing to Easterners what must have seemed to his readers to be authentic Greek thinking, and though the reason for his choice is not revealed, the anomaly was evident to him):⁷ one of the three, Darius, speaks up for the monarchic form; another, Megabyzus, for the oligarchic one; while Otanes, who speaks first, prefers the institutional setup based on the power of the people: “The rule of the many . . . has, in the first place, the most beautiful of names, to wit, isonomy”—literally, “equality of law.”⁸

Herodotus did not use the word “democracy,” already fairly widespread in his time, but referred instead to a notion connected to an essential aspect of the democratic constitution: that of the equality of the law with respect to all citizens: *isonomia*. Antiphon’s *omoios*, which perhaps had more of a morphological and naturalistic semantic field, was replaced by Herodotus with *isonomos*, more loaded with political and, we would say, specifically constitutional allusions. For him, equality with respect to the law was the soul of democracy, because this is what made it possible to place the power to govern the *polis* in the hands of the people.

There was, however, something further hidden in Herodotus’s tripartite division (monarchy, oligarchy, isonomy), which made the role of *isonomia* even more central. In the sequence, democracy only figured as one of the possible forms of politics in the city: alongside it, and on the same level, were the other two, oligarchy and monarchy. But that was not how things actually stood. This position, whereby democracy (and the equality that made it possible) was just a part within a broader whole (the three forms of politics together), was nothing more than a retrospective fiction, formulated to create an effective systematic construction.

From a historic point of view, the experience of politics—and, let’s say, its birth as a specific way of organizing and managing power in the *polis*—had not preceded democracy (*isonomia*), but had accompanied and, if anything, followed it as its consequence. Politics, in its entirety, coincided genetically with democracy and was not simply an antecedent.



To better understand the identity of what we are talking about, and its implications for our theme, we must move on to Aristotle, who, around a century later, in the third book of the *Politics*, drew on Herodotus’s classification (already used and modified by Plato), and in turn listed the three forms of government indicated in the *Histories*, though with some changes to the nomenclature: government of one, of a few, of many.⁹ For the government of many—what Herodotus had defined as *isonomia*—Aristotle used the word *politeia*, the same one he employed to denote, generically and neutrally, the political setup of every city, what we would call its constitution.¹⁰ The same term thus came to designate, in his writings, both the political constitution in general and a particular form of it—the democratic one; and the philosopher himself did not fail to emphasize the surprising superimposition (without offering an explanation), for which there were no alternatives. Evidently, the “government of many” was not just one of the types of *politeia*, whose name it stole. Its existence was the indispensable condition for being able to think of the *polis* as a “political” order (that is, for being able to use, to describe it, the word *politeia*).

The lexical overlap revealed the historic connection that had produced it: the government of the people, and that alone, had opened, in the West, the age of politics—of any politics, of *politeia* itself as constitutional order—and had enabled the *polis* to become what we know.

But in turn—and this is the aspect of greatest interest here—politics brought equality onto the scene: Aristotle defined the *polis*—any *polis*, not just the democratic kind (another revelatory clue)—as a “community of equals” (*koinonia ton omoion*), once again using the word we found in Antiphon.¹¹ For Aristotle, there was no *polis*—no genuine

city—if there was no equality among citizens. And on the same occasion, shortly before the text mentioned at the beginning, Aristotle referred to the political order in general—to any order that could be called “political”—as a system based on the equality of citizens.¹²

In his eyes, then, politics, democracy, and equality were woven together in an inseparable web, which appeared to be the result of a specific historic process, mirrored by philosophical reflection. Without equality there could be no democracy, and without democracy no politics—that is, the possibility of a constitutional order of any kind. There could only exist an unspeakable and immense power, like in the despotisms which, in the view of the Greeks, had always characterized the Eastern empires.

Subsequent history, far beyond antiquity, would contribute to dissipating the force of this original connection, obscuring its significance and value: and the loss would have important consequences. It would be forgotten that the generative core of politics in the West only succeeded in taking shape through the inclusion of citizens in the government of the community, and their active adherence to a framework of rules and shared institutions. It had been this participation that formed, in each person, a new self-consciousness that included a precise, albeit limited, idea of equality. It is entirely correct, then, to see, as the Italian historian Santo Mazzarino has, the birth of politics as being bound up with the discovery of its indissoluble connection with the development of moral life.¹³



One further word should be said about Aristotle. We have seen that the philosopher, in his definition of *polis*, returned to the term *omoios* previously used by Antiphon—and it is possible that this is the oldest word in the Greek lexicon of equality. But in the fifth book of the *Politics*, it is *isos* that dominates, in its meaning of quantitative, measurable, and divisible equalization.

Isos and its compounds had in fact marked, already from the middle of the fifth century—and so roughly around the time of Herodotus—the season of the democratic wave that was sweeping across the whole of the central and eastern Mediterranean, from Ionia to Sicily, pushing all

the way to the banks of the Tiber, where republican Rome was taking its first difficult steps. And *isonomia* above all had occupied a privileged place in this spread: equality with respect to *nomos*, to the law as a now exclusively political and secular command within the *polis*.¹⁴ In the composition of the word, the presence of *isos* was not the only novel element. In the middle of the fifth century, *nomos* also appeared with a transformed meaning.¹⁵ Any religious allusion (that it might originally have had) had been lost, and it had begun to unambiguously denote the written law dictated by the new politics on which democratic equality was founded.

It is possible that, at first, *isonomia* also denoted, still in a limited manner, merely aristocratic forms of parity. But when Herodotus described it as “the most beautiful of names,” more than fifty years after the Athenian reforms of Cleisthenes, it already related unequivocally to the new democratic regimes. For Herodotus the “beauty” of the word evidently lay in its connection with the flourishing and development of a world of political ideas and behaviors that expressed—or at least had the potential to do so—a form of community that had not previously seen the light of day.

The opening up of unexpected areas of opportunity—from increasingly intense trade to the colonization of extensive territories beyond the sea, and to the exploration of the inner self (“I have investigated myself,” we read in a fragment of Heraclitus), all of which were well known to Herodotus—was breaking down the former hierarchies and old structures of power, from Greece to Asia Minor.¹⁶ The new equilibria were judged not only to be wiser, but also more “beautiful”: the two terms—wisdom and beauty—coexisted in the democratic culture of the late fifth century, and the beauty of the object was projected into the beauty of the name that denoted it.¹⁷

Democracy

Herodotus expressed opinions that were fairly widespread in Greece in the second half of the fifth century. Other thinkers, not many years apart, were reflecting even more fully on the relationship between equality (a particular type of equality) and democratic regime. Pericles’s

oration for those who had fallen in the first year of the Peloponnesian War, reported by Thucydides, can be regarded as the first manifesto of democratic thought on democracy in the history of the West: and equality—but not Antiphon’s version—occupied a prominent position.

Pericles was speaking in the winter of 431–430 BC, when events still seemed to be going Athens’s way. Thucydides, who was relating it, was writing around twenty years later.

We use a constitution which does not seek to emulate the laws of our neighbours, we being more of a model [*paradeigma*] for others than their imitators. And its name is democracy [*demokratia*], because on the one hand it rests not on the few [*es oligous*], but on the many [*es pleionas*]; and on the other, while before the law [*kata . . . tous nomous*] all men are equal [*pasi to ison*] for the settlement of their private disputes, if however, according to the evaluation received, each man has a good reputation in something, he is not chosen to hold public office on the basis of his wealth more than for his merits; nor, due to poverty, if someone can do something good for the city, is he prevented from doing so by obscurity of rank.¹⁸

The combined use of “democracy” and “isonomy”—though obscured by a not entirely limpid style that has caused great difficulties of interpretation—outlined what we would call a kind of sovereignty, of popular sovereignty, which for Pericles (as we know him through Thucydides) acquired exemplary value for the whole of Greece. In it, the idea of equality was determined by the actuality of politics and achieved efficacy solely in the ambit of the latter, and of its boundaries, commencing with the distinction between the private sphere (“private disputes”) and public life (access to “public office”).

Antiphon’s naturalistic and universalistic perspective was entirely absent. His path seemed to have led nowhere. Now equality figured as a direct consequence of the political constitution; the government of the people was the sole condition for its maintenance and development. It was an equality *in politicis*, as has rightly been observed: effective in this field alone.¹⁹ And not just in the sense that it was limited to what we

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