

## Spooked by the Demos: Aristotle's Conception of the Good Citizenry Against the Mob

*Colleen Bell*

This article addresses two aspects of Aristotle's *The Politics*.<sup>1</sup> The first concerns his conception of the good citizenry and the second concerns the character that he attributes to a politically active *demos*. At times, Aristotle refers to this latter category as the 'mob' which serves as the citizenry's disruptive counterpart.<sup>2</sup> I explore how the ideas of rationality, virtue and excellence are used to characterize the good citizenry, while the mob, driven by passion, moral depravity and irrationality, is represented as its alterity. The relationship between the good citizenry and the mob, I argue, is critical to the image that Aristotle casts of the best possible constitution; one designed to be largely invulnerable to revolution and to the formation of an active, democratic polity. His awareness of the potential for the *demos* to transform into a form of 'mob rule' leads him to compromise the ideal constitution, composed of a wholly 'rational' and 'virtuous' citizenry, by extending citizenship rights to a limited and select portion of the *demos* in order to minimize the likelihood of mob driven revolution.

Aristotle provides the classical account of the citizen as one who has both the knowledge, and the ability to rule and be ruled.<sup>3</sup> Key is the idea that while 'man' is distinguished by reason, not all 'men' possess sufficient reason to warrant citizenship.<sup>4</sup> In holding that not all of humanity has the capacity to rule, essential to his conception of the good citizen is the willful exclusion of women, slaves, immigrants, and children from both political subjectivity and participation. With the exception of immigrants, these groups, though women to a lesser degree than children and slaves, lack the reason to rule themselves and must therefore remain subject to the absolute or even despotic rule of men. Aristotle also proposes to exclude a portion of the lower class from membership in the citizenry so that they do not outnumber the middle and upper classes.

The exclusion of the larger portion of the population hinges upon Aristotle's conception of the relationship between the good man and the good citizen. A citizen is good to the extent that he adheres and contributes to the constitution that governs his city. A man, on the other hand, is good to the extent that he possesses both practical and theoretical virtue. Thus, a good man may be a 'bad' citizen if he, out of adherence to intellectual virtue, disobeys bad laws, while a good citizen is one who follows the laws irrespective of whether they are 'good' or 'bad.' The ideal end of politics, for Aristotle, is to bring into unity, to the extent possible, the good man and the good citizen. Indeed, his conception of who is to rule and be ruled is dependent on a notion of rationality which

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. J.A. Sinclair (Baltimore: Penguin Books Inc., 1962).

<sup>2</sup> While it is the case that Aristotle focused not so much on the citizenry, as how to cultivate the good individual citizen, it is nonetheless the case that his fear of the mob served as the expressed collective alterity to that of the citizenry.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>4</sup> Consequent to Aristotle's categorical exclusion of women from citizenship because he considers them to have an inadequate (though not entirely non-existent) rationality and because they are confined to the 'private' realm of the household, reference to citizens and men denotes the male gender exclusively.

relates directly to the possession of virtue and the practical expression of the virtuous man as a citizen. While Aristotle acknowledges that rationality is not a condition for the exercise of liberty, his attempt to merge the good man and the good citizen is a move towards a form of governance in which the highest development of rationality and virtue corresponds to one's liberty. Rationality, a key component of virtue, is what gives some men the moral 'right' to rule over other, 'irrational,' men, legitimating multiple forms of unequal social relations. Those who are excluded from political participation lack the necessary virtue to be citizens, or are likely to be easily swayed by immoral views. The involvement of either, in his view, would undermine the production of a moral citizenry required for the creation of a just constitution.

To be a good citizen for Aristotle one must demonstrate a virtuous, yet calibrated and acquiescent notion of citizenship. The natural qualities of the citizen include the uniting of the qualities of head and heart – the combining of courage and passion with brainpower and skill.<sup>5</sup> These qualities, he contends, produce “the kind of person who can easily be moulded by a lawgiver and brought to a high degree of excellence.”<sup>6</sup> Education plays a key role in the formation of a good citizenry in order to both tame the passions of men, as well as to educate citizens in conformity with the constitution of their city. As “[m]en start revolutionary changes for reasons connected with their personal lives,” he argues for the constitution of an authority “to exercise supervision over those whose activities are not in keeping with the interests of the community.”<sup>7</sup> Education is deployed as a key mechanism to encourage stability and guard against revolution:

It is useless to have the most beneficial rules of society fully agreed upon by all who are members of the *politeia*, if individuals are not going to be trained and have their habits formed for that *politeia*, that is to live democratically if the laws of society are democratic, oligarchically if they are oligarchic; for as one individual may get out of hand for want of training, so may a whole city.<sup>8</sup>

Through education it becomes possible to tame the passions of the demos and shape conduct in conformity with the constitution while also guarding against revolutionary change. The point for Aristotle is to ensure that the polis is composed of good citizens who will be largely satisfied with the political status quo. Citizenship is therefore comprised of orderly, non-disruptive forms of political participation – it is the space of both being 'free' to articulate one's will, insofar as what is expressed is consistent with both the physical qualities (ie. male property owner) and character traits (ie. virtue, courage) of the rational citizen. These qualities render the ideal citizenship an expression of the highest *telos* of humanity, while paradoxically barring entire categories of people and situating them as forms of unfulfilled or deficient humanness by comparison.<sup>9</sup> The production of the good citizen is thus the outcome of identifying not only who is fit to

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>9</sup> It may be worth noting that, for Aristotle, different groups (women, slaves etc.) possess their own specific *telos*. The defective rationality of 'lesser' beings prevents them from fully acquiring complete virtue, though they may acquire the highest possible goodness that their lesser *telos* allows.

rule and be ruled, but also entails the task of nurturing the desirable traits of such persons in order to maximize the fulfillment of their potential.

Aristotle's concern with the mob is not directly taken up with comparable consideration to the rational citizenry. Rather, the image of the mob emerges from his deliberation over stable and desirable forms of state, and their less stable and less desirable counterparts. To illustrate, in "Book V" of *The Politics* Aristotle considers what leads to the preservation and dissolution of the constitution. One scenario he identifies which can bring about revolutionary change is the holding of excessive power in which "one or more men exercise power out of all proportion to the state or to the power of the citizen-body."<sup>10</sup> The character of Aristotle's good citizenry puts him at odds with a democratic polity, which can subvert the proper cultivation of the citizenry under the lawgiver and lead to its moral corruption. As politics is to be concerned primarily with 'soulcraft' and character formation for Aristotle, democracy falls short of realizing this task because it holds liberty, rather than virtue, as the best human good. Forms of 'extreme' democracy results in an ethos that is entirely void of virtue; the characters of men in a democracy are deformed and their souls are rendered vile. Thus democracy, he contends, seeks to invest liberty in men whose reason, he suggests, may be largely defective.<sup>11</sup> Lack of attentiveness to the careful formation of a good citizenry, he insists, can lead to instability and revolution if it is overrun by the character deficiencies of the *demos*.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the wielding of excessive, morally depraved, power can occur in a system of full democracy because it succumbs to arbitrary rule, as opposed to observing the rule of law. Rule by the *demos*, Aristotle concludes, allows for the rule of passions over intellect.<sup>13</sup> Here is where the mob emerges: through the unregulated and universalized power of the *demos*.

Since Aristotle views the *demos* as lacking the necessary requirement of full rationality, he expresses no doubt that, if left to the management of its own affairs, it will naturally succumb to the rule of passions. Festering passions make the problem of democracy the same as the problem of tyranny: neither of which conform to the rule of law, but rather have a tendency to exercise power arbitrarily.<sup>14</sup> The power exercised by the *demos*, he continues, is unpredictable, susceptible to radical change and can be easily swept up by demagogues. As the good of the individual is tied with the good of the community and the state, democracy gives political power to those who lack goodness (or virtue) resulting in a diminished character of the polis as a whole. Thus, because the *demos* tends to lack rationality and excellence, writes Aristotle, "[i]n democracies the most potent cause of revolution is the unprincipled character of popular leaders" who may "bring malicious prosecutions against the property-owners" or "openly egg on the multitude against them."<sup>15</sup> Democracy, therefore, is presented as the breeding ground for the tyrant and the impetus for the emergence of the mob. The popular leader in a democracy writes Aristotle, "is the flatterer of the mob."<sup>16</sup> As he explains, "[t]he tyrant

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 236-237.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 192. Aristotle discusses 'numerical' and 'proportionate' equality as significant factors that require careful formulation to stabilize the constitution.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 217-218, 241, 244.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 226.

springs from the people, from the mob, and directs his efforts against the upper classes, to the end that the people may not be oppressed by them...tyrants have mostly begun as popular leaders, being trusted by the people because they disliked the upper class.”<sup>17</sup> Extreme forms of both democracy and oligarchy,<sup>18</sup> concludes the philosopher, “are really multiple or distributed tyrannies.”<sup>19</sup>

It is therefore the rule of tyrannical passions that exemplifies the mob for Aristotle. The mob is composed of men who “grovel” before the tyrant, men who lack independence and free spirit and are illiberal-minded.<sup>20</sup> The high virtues of discipline, civic comportment and the development of rationality are rendered corrupt in its wake. As the philosopher writes, the subjects desired by the tyrant “have no minds of their own...no trust in each other...no means of carrying out anything.”<sup>21</sup> Such men of “puny minds” signify a tragic lack of individual rationality and moral courage which threatens violence or disruption of the political order. Thus, Aristotle advocates for a carefully governed collectivity that guides rational citizens towards orderly conduct, while minimizing the influence of those who may be swayed by the instigators of political change.

Further, concern over the possibility of revolutionary change invoked by the mob leads Aristotle to consider ways to ensure stability and preservation of the constitution. To this end, he proposes a model of democratic oligarchy (or oligarchic democracy) that is meant to resolve the tendency of democracy towards the rule of the *demos*.<sup>22</sup> This involves a model of citizenship that, as noted above, is not only exclusive of women, children and slaves, but also restricts the number of ‘free’ male citizens from the lower class. As he writes, “[t]he addition of new citizens ought only to continue until the people just outnumber the upper and middle classes...To go beyond this point makes for disorganization in the constitution and irritates the notables...A small mixture of the lower classes is not noticed, but a large is all too obvious.”<sup>23</sup> The preservation of the constitution is only ensured by the presence of a limited, specified citizenry for enfranchisement. A model of carefully limited franchise comes to signify the best state for Aristotle, not least because it is only with the emergence of a good state where the distinction between the good man and the good citizen may be reduced or dissolved.<sup>24</sup>

The extension of citizenship to a portion of the lower class additionally relies upon a particularly limited *practice* of citizenship. The limited portion of the *demos* that Aristotle wishes to include in the franchise is intimately connected to his interest in an agrarian model of democratic oligarchy. The agrarian model proposed sets out not only qualifications for property ownership, but is desirable especially because the agrarian

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>18</sup> Beginning in “Book V” Aristotle provides a discussion of the problems of extreme forms of oligarchy, which he contends can lead to political instability. This is what leads him to propose a mixed constitution that includes qualities of both democracy and oligarchy (“Book VI”).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 226-227.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 243.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 107. This is not to suggest that Aristotle’s conception of the good man is dependent on the good citizen, but rather that as the dissolving of the distinction between the two signifies a good state, this creates the conditions for goodness among the population generally.

class consists of a large portion of the population that will “rarely attend the Assembly.”<sup>25</sup> Because a rural population is thinly and widely dispersed, Aristotle suggests that designated agrarian citizens will be unlikely and predisposed to *not* appear at public meetings<sup>26</sup> presumably due to prohibitive travel distance and political isolation. This model has the advantage of producing a large citizenry wherein “*all* the citizens elect to offices, call to scrutiny, and sit in court, but that persons to fill the most important offices be selected from among those possessing a certain amount of property, the greater the office, the higher the property qualification; or alternately to use not property but ability as the criterion for holding office.”<sup>27</sup> This form of government, he argues, will ensure that “men of culture and distinction...will not find themselves ruled by their inferiors, and their own government will be just, because others will have the right to call them to account.”<sup>28</sup> Conversely, the most inferior model of democracy according to Aristotle is one composed of labourers and hirelings who are “the most ordinary specimens of humanity.”<sup>29</sup> Because such subjects usually live in urban areas, he argues, they are all too likely to attend the Assembly and act as a “city mob” that may take political control of the Assembly.<sup>30</sup>

The model of the good citizenry advanced by Aristotle is constructed upon an awareness of the lurking possibility of the mob. As his model of democratic oligarchy extends citizenship to a portion of the *demos* or lower class, the mob is kept at bay by dividing the *demos*, disenfranchising one portion and conditioning the participation of other, so as to render it politically inactive and largely acquiescent. While the mob signifies disruptive and unpredictable collective activity, the rational citizenry is taken to embody its opposite – regulated, rule-oriented, passivity. Yet, and this comes as a strange result, precisely because Aristotle’s proposal to extend citizenship in the interests of producing a stable constitution seems to be at the expense of maintaining the good citizenry, characterized, as he purports, by the qualities of head and heart – brainpower, skill, courage and passion. The citizen, as one who both rules and is ruled, appears in practice to emphasize the latter characteristic over the former. The spectre of the mob in Aristotle’s formulation of the best and most stable constitution therefore compromises the coherence of the rational citizenry as an authentic expression, in his own terms, of virtue and goodness.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 242.