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Intellectuals in Politics in the Greek World

**From Early Times to the
Hellenistic Age**

Frank Leslie Vatai



Intellectuals in Politics in the Greek World

Intellectuals in Politics in the Greek World, first published in 1984, was the first comprehensive study of this recurrent theme in political sociology with specific reference to antiquity, and led to significant revaluation of the role of intellectuals in everyday political life.

The term 'intellectual' is carefully defined, and figures as diverse as Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle; Isocrates, Heracleides of Ponteiuss and Clearchus of Soli are discussed. The author examines the difference between the success of an intellectual politician, like Solon, and the failure of those such as Plato who attempted to mould society to abstract ideals.

It is concluded that, ultimately, most philosophers were conspicuously unsuccessful when they intervened in politics: citizens regarded them as propagandists for their rulers, while rulers treated them as intellectual ornaments. The result was that many thinkers retreated to inter-scholastic disputation where the political objects of discussion increasingly became far removed from contemporary reality.

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FROM EARLY TIMES TO THE HELLENISTIC AGE

FRANK LESLIE VATAI



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To my mother and father,
Irene and Laszlo

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The 'philosopher', on the other hand, is the *reaction*: he desires the *old* virtue. He sees the grounds of decay in the decay of institutions, he desires *old* institutions; — he sees the decay in the decay of authority: he seeks new authorities (travels abroad, into foreign literatures, into exotic religions —); he desires the ideal *polis* after the concept 'polis' has had its day (approximately as the Jews held firm as a 'people' after they had fallen into slavery). They are interested in all tyrants: they want to restore virtue by *force majeure*.

F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*
No. 427 (Kaufmann)

1 INTRODUCTION

The Issue

This book is an exploration of the role of intellectuals in the politics of the classical and Hellenistic periods. Political theory is not discussed except to illuminate the similarities and the differences between what philosophers said about politics and how they behaved in the political arena. The difference between these two attitudes can be broadly termed the difference between theory and practice. The question as to whether intellectuals ever assumed so important a position in society that their very utterances could be considered as political events can, in general terms, be answered in the negative. Kings and tyrants established themselves in powerful positions where they were likened to gods and their word was law; intellectuals, with the possible exception of Pythagoras, were never allowed such a dominant status, save in the eyes of their followers. For some, like Plato, this was a bitter disappointment; others, such as Aristotle, may have felt that the Athenians paid too much attention to resident intellectuals such as himself. The *demos* had its reasons, however, for Aristotle and his followers maintained close Macedonian links.

The word 'intellectual' cannot be defined with any precision.¹ In general, sociologists provide working definitions that are valid for whatever point they are trying to make. Naturally, resemblances exist between the various definitions and sociologists and historians are usually gracious about quoting other definitions, especially if these fill out an area in which the scholar's own definition is weak. Historical and cultural differences also make any single blanket definition virtually an impossibility.² To add to the difficulties, there is the particularly eclectic nature of the term 'intellectual'. Ray Nichols, in his recent study of Julien Benda, notes the ambiguous nature of what an intellectual is and what counts as an intellectual action:

The discourse is *reflexive*: in strange mirrors we see (and make) our faces, and experience sudden shocks of recognition. Nowhere is this more true than with the intellectual . . . Perplexity over diverse practices, social and conceptual, and their relations – the problem of the intellectual lies here. Efforts to grapple with it in turn reveal

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themselves as contributions to it or re-presentations of it, and they become part of their own subject matter, part of their own problem – social expressions as well as social analyses.³

Efforts to turn the mirror into a window are tenuous at best. Of the many discussions and definitions of intellectuals, those of Max Weber and Edward Shils provide the best vantage point from which to commence our survey of Greek intellectuals.

Weber tells us that by ‘intellectuals’ he understands ‘a group of men who by virtue of their peculiarities have special access to certain achievements considered to be “culture” values, and who, therefore, usurp the leadership of a culture community’.⁴ This definition should be augmented by Shils’s observation that

there is in society a minority of persons who, more than the ordinary run of their fellow men, are inquiring, and desirous of being in frequent communion with symbols which are more general than the immediate concrete situation of everyday life and remote in their reference in both time and space. In this minority, there is a need to externalize this quest in oral and written discourse . . . This interior need to penetrate beyond the screen of immediate concrete experience marks the existence of the intellectuals in every society.⁵

This minority quite naturally view themselves as an elite. They are almost as naturally drawn towards each other. In any society, it is given to few individuals that their personal visions remain private truths, for a prophet requires an audience. If the masses serve no other function, they can at least be used as a yardstick to measure the difference between the chosen few and the unenlightened many. Among the Greeks, this self-image of a privileged elite was further strengthened by the fact that many philosophers and their epigoni came from the aristocracy. This is especially true with the Pythagoreans and members of the Academy. It is also the case that members of this aristocracy turned to the philosophical schools when their own positions within society were threatened by the ‘new education’ or the accelerated commercialism of the late sixth, fifth and fourth centuries. In the philosophical schools, the politically declining aristocracy found a new cohesiveness; bound together by their feelings of natural and acquired superiority they could again turn outwards towards society and attempt to reclaim their ‘rightful place’. Florian Znaniecki notes that ‘in order to be qualified as a scientist [intellectual] whom his circle needs, a

person must be regarded as a “self” endowed with certain desirable characteristics and lacking certain undesirable characteristics’.⁶ These desirable characteristics for the Greeks included good breeding, a sense of loss over what they regarded as their true role in society and a romantic sense of themselves as that segment of society *engagé* with a rapidly deteriorating world. Unlike the modern world where knowledge gives social status, the opposite was the case for much of the period under discussion. For most Greek intellectuals social status was the prerequisite to true knowledge and goodness.⁷ In the words of Aristotle,

a man’s own goodness is nearer to him than that of a grandfather, so that it would be the good man who is well-born. Some [writers] have indeed said this, fancying that they refute the claims of noble birth by means of this argument. As Euripides says, good birth is not an attribute of those whose ancestors were good long ago but of whoever is simply good in himself. But that is not so. Those who give pre-eminence to ancient goodness make the correct analysis. The reason for this is that good birth is excellence of stock, and excellence is to be found in good men. And a good stock is one which has produced many good men. Such a thing occurs when the stock has had a good origin, for an origin has the power to produce many offspring like itself.⁸

Goodness is biologically determined. M.T.W. Arnheim points out that ‘this naturalistic argument is Aristotle’s way of reconciling the traditional aristocratic outlook with the more fashionable views that each individual should be judged on his own merits’.⁹ Arnheim goes on to remind us that not even Euripides could bring himself to accept the latter view.

Karl Mannheim speaks of the perennial attempts of intellectuals to lift the conflict of interests to a spiritual plane.¹⁰ He sees in the intellectuals a coherent group able to rise above the petty egoism of the conflicting parties, simultaneously penetrating the ranks of society and compelling it to accept their demands. Such altruism is today possible, he thinks, due to ‘participation in a common educational heritage’ that acts to dispel differences of birth, status, wealth and so on.¹¹ His idea of an unattached intelligentsia must be viewed sceptically, however, and, for the Greeks, the idea must be rejected altogether. Greek intellectuals were united through the educational programmes of a Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, or Zeno, but it was a union of ‘members of a leisure class who reflected the views of a defunct aristocracy and

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disdained labor and commerce'.¹² Such individuals were very much part of the conflicting factions of the time. There is a sense in which Mannheim is correct, if we define the conflict of interests to include the social and political interests of the intellectuals: many aristocrats, faced with a decline in their political and military fortunes, decide to wage their battle for power with the rest of society on a new plane, a spiritual one. Their new weapons become the cultural symbols. They monopolise the interpretation of such symbols and newly rearmed re-enter the political fray.

The relationship between values and interests works both ways. Alvin W. Gouldner writes:

The New Class believes its high culture represents the greatest achievements of the human race, the deepest ancient wisdom and the most advanced modern scientific knowledge. It believes that these contribute to the welfare and wealth of the race, and that they should receive correspondingly greater rewards. The New Class believes that the world should be governed by those possessing superior competence, wisdom and science — that is themselves. The Platonic Complex, the dream of the philosopher king with which Western philosophy begins, is the deepest wish-fulfilling fantasy of the New Class.¹³

The New Class to which he refers encompasses both the technical intelligentsia and the intellectuals. The quotation describes the situation of that section of the New Class called the 'humanistic intellectuals'. Gouldner's words describe the contemporary situation in 1979, but they are equally valid for any period in history when intellectuals feel that their power is not commensurate with their self-image as they judge it. Since intellectuals have always had a very high opinion of their value, the tensions that exist between this status group and the rest of society exist today as they existed in the fourth century when Plato wrote, 'that the ills of the human race would never end until either those who are sincerely and truly lovers of wisdom come into political power, or the rulers of our cities, by the grace of God, learn true philosophy'.¹⁴

In so far as tension between intellectuals and power is a perennial problem, it is of interest to examine the character of Greek intellectuals and their relations with society, their role as social beings.¹⁵ In general, the Greeks treated their philosophical elites with a mixture of indifference and humour.¹⁶ Finding such an attitude unacceptable, Greek

intellectuals attempted to position themselves within society in such a way that they could no longer be ignored or scoffed at. This jockeying for political influence took the two forms that Plato had mentioned: intellectuals attempted direct political rule; or working through an existing ruler, the philosophers tried to rule the state by controlling him. The first method does not presume any single political system and so philosophically minded activists were both tyrannicides and tyrants, setting up or supporting governments ruled by the one, the few or the many. In the majority of cases, however, direct intervention was not possible or advisable and philosophers followed Aristotle's advice and became advisers to rulers.¹⁷ Since it was judged easier to gain ascendancy over one individual than over a group, philosophers came to be a regular fixture at the courts of tyrants or kings. A modern example is Henry Kissinger, who managed to sidestep both Congress and Richard Nixon's executive staff in order to maximise his influence with the President. The *amour propre* of this man has been well summed up by Michael Howard:

Kissinger's memoirs make it clear that he knew very well what he was doing there. He was the Merlin at this Round Table; the wise man drawing on deep wells of ancient magic to help this naive, rumbustious good-hearted people among whom his lot had been cast; rescuing them from the disasters into which their good intentions had already led them, setting them on a path that would avoid future catastrophe, and teaching them the skills by which their noble endeavors could be turned to good effect.¹⁸

Few Greek intellectuals achieved Kissinger's success or shared his survivor instincts. Their failure was due in part to the fierce rivalry among competing intellectual groups, particularly in the fourth century. It is always necessary to be aware of interpersonal relations among intellectuals. There was fierce competition for a favoured place in the retinue of the mighty. Rival blue-prints for a new society or rival arguments for the justification of the old order were common occurrences. Further, Greeks of all political persuasion loved a contest and found it natural to pit rival schools and philosophers against each other; the energies that might have gone outward into society were thereby deflected into inter-scholastic squabbles. This, however, is not a state of affairs limited to Greeks.

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An Emerging Pattern

While discussing problems in psychic research, William James notes that

the peculiarity of the case is just that there are so many sources of possible deception in most of the observations that the whole lot of them *may* be worthless . . . I am also constantly baffled as to what to think of this or that particular story, for the sources of error in any one observation are seldom fully knowable.¹⁹

On an equally melancholy note, E.N. Tigerstedt concludes an admirable summary of the problem of writing a life of Plato: 'Many, if not most, of the ancient writers had no interest in telling the truth, if ever they knew it.'²⁰ Tigerstedt succinctly analyses the difficulties facing the historian of antiquity. The historian

cannot simply disregard the sources, yet he can still less trust them unreservedly. Even a statement that looks probable may simply be due to a plausible invention. Nor are the earliest sources necessarily the more reliable, as the example of Aristoxenus proves. On the other hand, the tendentious character of a source does not in itself make it absolutely unreliable. Much of what Aristoxenus told about Plato might have been true, though he interpreted it to Plato's disadvantage.²¹

The situation holds true not only for a life of Plato, but for all the philosophers with which this thesis concerns itself: the sources are often late, ill-informed, and with various personal and academic axes to grind. Tigerstedt's solution to the problem has been to concentrate his attention on the image of Sparta in antiquity or on the various ancient and modern interpretations of Plato. This is a valid approach in itself and is equally useful for trying to arrive at some conclusions about what actually did take place. For behind the image lies some reality, and even if the historian cannot penetrate the image, at least the image contains elements of truth in the same way as comedy contains elements of the reality that it caricatures. An attempt at reconstructing the roles that philosophers played or aspired to in politics can be made, both because the importance of the subject requires such an attempt, and because the sources, though bad, are not completely chaotic. However tentative, a reconstruction is possible through disciplining the historical imagination.

In discussing the manner in which he has constructed a historical model out of the Homeric poems, M.I. Finley emphasises an important methodological rule: 'No argument may legitimately be drawn from a single line or passage or usage. Only the patterns, the persistent statements have any standing.'²² This rule has served Finley well, and the controversial thesis of *The World of Odysseus* has stood the test of time. Since he was working from the Homeric poems and, to a lesser extent, myths and oral traditions, the lack of hard, documentary evidence dictated his methodological rule. This principle of patterns can be applied to my own reconstruction where hard, documentary evidence is often lacking or sometimes buried under a welter of hagiography, polemic and fiction.

By itself, a pattern is not enough. In separate articles D.R. Stuart and Janet Fairweather have pointed out that Greek biographers were prone to make persistent errors in such matters as the derivation of biographical material from an author's writings.²³ When the works in question include dialogues or poetry, scepticism is called for. Other examples, such as *topoi* concerning witticism, the circumstances of a philosopher's death, and so on, require that the pattern principle be reinforced by additional controls.

Finley suggests comparative analysis: 'A behaviour pattern which can be shown, by comparative study, to have existed in one or another society outside the one under consideration.'²⁴ Reaching beyond the sources, there is a presumption that given a similar set of circumstances, men with similar attitudes and value systems will act in a more or less similar manner. Thus, how intellectuals in one period of time behave throws light on the behaviour patterns of intellectuals from a different period of time or from a different culture. Weber has argued similarly:

The general psychological orientation of the intellectuals in China, India, and Hellas is, in the first place, in no way fundamentally different. As mysticism flowered in ancient China so Pythagorean esoterics and Orphism did in Hellas. The devaluation of the world as a place of suffering and transitoriness is familiar to Hellenic pessimism . . . These are representations appropriate to any cultivated intellectual strata. The differences of development were located in interests . . . established by political circumstances.²⁵

The historian works from the known to the less known. Periods better documented than the classical or the Hellenistic can be used to arrive at informed estimates of how Greek intellectuals behaved.

Working from the less known to the even less known, W.K.C. Guthrie likens Pythagoras to Confucius and minimises the Greek's personal ambition while emphasising his personal zeal for reforming society according to his moral ideas.²⁶ Bertrand Russell's description of Pythagoras as a cross between Einstein and Mary Baker Eddy is well known.²⁷ The Pythagoreans have always been liable to such comparison. Analogies have been made with the Calvinists at Geneva, the Freemasons of the eighteenth century, Chinese thought reformers and Catholic monks.²⁸ George Thomson and Kurt von Fritz demonstrate the dangers of using comparative methods to justify conclusions already reached. Thomson attempts to locate the Pythagoreans according to Marx's conception of the historical dialectic; he considers them to be a commercial theocracy of the type and in the same line of development as the Calvinist elders of Geneva.²⁹ Von Fritz wished to minimise the role of the Pythagoreans as a group in politics and finds a natural parallel with the Freemasons of the eighteenth century who, though influenced by Masonic theory, 'certainly did not govern, compose, or write poetry in their quality as Masons, much less because they were Masons'.³⁰

Weber's thesis that the general psychological orientation of intellectuals differs in no fundamental way from period to period can be illustrated by comparing Isocrates to Comte. Isocrates wrote letters to Dionysius, Jason and other rulers: his behaviour, and his faith in what he had to say, can be compared with the activities of Auguste Comte who sent covering letters with his book, *System of Positive Polity*, to Tsar Nicholas of Russia and the Turkish sultan.³¹ A comparison of Isocrates' declamations with Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation* is enlightening from the point of view of underlining the evangelical fervour of both individuals. A comparison of Isocrates' Panhellenic ideal with the crusading ideals of the Hildebrandine Papacy is rewarding for understanding the attitudes and public stance of Isocrates and his followers.

What applies to individuals works with elite groups as well. One of the most important of the nineteenth century elites was the Saint-Simonians. As Frank Manuel points out, this group

accentuated the final phase of the tradition of their master and elevated to pre-eminence the *artists* — their generic name for what he had called the Platonic capacity — a category that extends far beyond painters, poets, and musicians and embraces all moral teachers, whatever may be their instruments of instruction ...

The man of moral capacity set goals and inspired his brethren with the desire to achieve them.³²

The premises of the Saint-Simonians were at variance with those of the Academy or the Pythagoreans. The self-image of the various groups, however, bears comparison, as does the manner in which they set about trying to achieve their goals.³³ It is useful to note the position of Saint Simon within the movement and the way in which the movement altered following the master's death. Such a self-righteous group, convinced of the probity of its motives and the truth of its goals, easily falls into eccentricity and becomes prey for satirists. What would an Epicrates or an Antiphanes have made of the followers of Enfantin who wore their vests buttoned in the back to enforce dependence on one's fellow man?³⁴

Although many Saint-Simonians came from the upper classes, Saint Simon's own falling out with Napoleon and the Saint-Simonians' obsessions with technology and progress blunted the aristocratic element in their thinking. The elites proposed by English intellectuals of the nineteenth century were frankly aristocratic in nature. Ben Knights has pointed out that Matthew Arnold 'like Coleridge . . . proposes an ideal cultural system, and then performs a dialectical conjuring trick by which the ideal is found to be latent in the *status quo* . . . We are dealing with reactions to what were seen as mechanistic accounts of the human spirit, the most prevalent of which was liberal nationalism.'³⁵ Coleridge, who formulated the notion of an intellectual elite or clerisy, openly acknowledged his debt to Pythagoras and Plato. In a conversation towards the end of his life, Coleridge ruminated as follows:

All harmony is founded on a relation to rest — a relative rest. Take a metallic plate and strew sand on it; sound an harmonic chord over the sand, and the grains will whirl about in circles and other geometrical figures, all, as it were, depending on some point of sand relatively at rest. Sound a discord, and every grain will wisk about without any order at all, in no figures, and with no points of rest.

The clerisy of a nation, that is, its learned men, whether poets, or philosophers, or scholars, are these points of relative rest. There could be no order, no harmony of the whole without them.³⁶

To go back to Weber's assertion, intellectuals do behave in a consistent enough manner that analogies between a better and a less