
The Greek Discovery of Politics, is a 1990 translation of Christian Meier's 1980 book, Die Entstehung des Politischen bei den Griechen (note the original title's use of "the political" rather than "politics"). The individual chapters were written on different occasions during the 1970s, and were admittedly animated by events in 1968. The book has now been reviewed many times, in German and in English, largely (but not exclusively) by ancient historians and classicists. Recurring criticisms of Meier's book refer to its conceptual vagueness, lack of apposite concrete illustrations, and eclectic nature. Praise runs along the lines of appreciation for some of the insights in the long chapter on Aeschylus's Eumenides, occasional flashes of brilliance throughout the work, and the breadth and catholicity of the scholarship (the endnotes are decidedly in the Teutonic tradition), especially in analyzing the historical evolution of ideas such as isonomia, isegoria, demokratia, and so on.

I propose to look at Meier's work from the standpoint of political theory, ignoring the murkier and more tangential of the themes (e.g., the ancient equivalent to the modern idea of progress), fastening instead upon those directly germane to Meier's thesis about the emergence of "the political" and its connections with democracy in fifth century Attica and Athens. In my view, what is sound in Meier's argument corresponds with the logical implications of Aristotle's account of the middling or generic political regime in the Politics, and what is lacking in Meier's account derives from his failure (and that of many contemporary classicists and historians) to comprehend the real Platonic and Aristotelian critique of advanced democracy. This is an important point of departure, given Meier's
apparent hostility to at least ancient political theorists (he appears partial to the notorious, twentieth century German theorist, Carl Schmitt, the most oft-cited author in the entire book):

According to Plato, rich and poor might often live side by side like two cities within one city wall. This was exaggeration (which shows that even in his day political thinking, with its high political pretensions, tended to proceed from the exception and could not easily do justice to the rule). (p. 22)

Athens was exceptional. This was still true in the fourth century, despite all the criticisms that were made of it and despite that fact that the grandiose pretensions of political theory led some to find fault with democratic practice. (p. 153)

Let me begin the analysis with that part of Meier's argument which strikes me as sound, and which corresponds to the logical implication of Aristotle's giving the generic name polity to the form of popular regime directed toward the common advantage, i.e., that this was the political regime in the purest sense. The heart of Meier's oft-repeated (sometimes to its detriment) thesis appears to be the following. From about 800 B.C. to the fifth century B.C., there occurred in Attica events which may be compactly denoted and made coherent by the term "politicization," "understood as a change toward the comprehension of a social world that was constituted by the citizens acting in their capacity as citizens and, to this extent, political." (p. 165) This historical movement from the implicit to the explicit began as the articulation of limited political rights against feuding factions of nobility, and peaked in good democracy, a condition in which the order of the polis was detached from direct cosmic considerations and became subject to the now largely autonomous activity of politics (p. 124); in which the identity of the polis and civic community was assumed in the word politeia (p. 172); and in which the idea of a just order was embodied in practices of alternating rule, majority vote, and conciliatory speech, among those who were free and equal and for the good of the whole (p. 148). Now, in my view, this thesis is quite sound, quite unoriginal, and is implicitly set forth in Aristotle's