From Greek antiquity up to our own century, one of the most pressing problems of Western politics—in theory as well as in practice—has been the identification of the appropriate criteria for full membership in the community, encapsulated by the term “citizenship.” Greek and Roman philosophers as well as politicians debated a wide range of principles for political inclusion and exclusion; the theme was taken up in regard to both church and state in early European Christendom. Of course, in the modern world, the demand for civic rights has been a rallying cry for wars and revolutions, and also formed a central object of theoretical reflection.\(^1\) Even at the beginning of the twenty-first century, political exclusion remains on the agenda of the most economically and socially complex liberal-democratic regimes—whether in connection with illegal immigrants, “guest workers,” racial minorities, or other marginalized groups. In the United States, for instance, the policy of numerous states, especially in the South, to deny the franchise and other civil rights to convicted felons (an overwhelming majority of whom are black) may have tipped the outcome of the 2000 presidential election. The politics of citizenship has not disappeared from supposedly inclusive liberal democracies.\(^2\)

Among the many attempts to define the standards of citizenship in the Western tradition, one of the most influential was proposed in the writings of Aristotle, in particular, his *Politics*. Aristotle famously questioned whether a share in citizenship could be accorded to women, children, slaves, foreigners, perhaps even the elderly—and “mechanics” (*mechanicus*, the Latin translation of the Greek *banausos*, literally, one who earns a livelihood by working with his hands). In Aristotle’s own day, and well

\(^1\) For a wide-ranging survey of the topic, see Peter Riesenberg, *Citizenship in the Western Tradition: Plato to Rousseau*, Chapel Hill, 1992.

into modern times, the refusal to permit people in the first four categories to possess full membership in the civic community remained relatively uncontroversial. Indeed, although the abolition of forms of legal unfreedom and the extension of gender equality have erased most of Aristotle’s group exclusions, liberal-democracies today still do not generally confer a complete range of political rights on minors and resident aliens.

By contrast, the civil status of “mechanics” remained a disputed topic from ancient Greece onwards. As Aristotle fully realized (and bemoaned), Greek democracies such as Athens admitted freeborn adult males to citizenship regardless of property qualifications or occupation: farmers, artisans, traders, and skilled craftsmen were indeed the backbone of the democratic poleis in war and peace. Republican Rome likewise eventually accorded basic civic identity to freemen without reference to economic position, although the social distinction between patrician and plebian lingered powerfully. And throughout later European history, the claims of legally free but civilly excluded men to a share of political standing were asserted (albeit often unsuccessfully) time and again. Aristotle and other philosophers such as Plato, who insisted that citizenship properly understood was incompatible with physical labor, thus advocated a position that by no means enjoyed universal approval either in their own day or thereafter.

Yet Aristotle’s political philosophy exercised widespread and profound influence in later times, particularly during the Latin Middle Ages, when The Philosopher enjoyed an almost peerless status among European theorists. Of course, the traditional view among historians of political thought that the translation and transmission of Aristotle’s moral and political writings in the mid-thirteenth century caused an “intellectual revolution” has now been generally discredited. Still, Aristotelian texts were among the prime source materials for political reflection among the learned elites of the medieval West, and their authority contributed crucially to the support for the philosophical teachings in university classrooms and scholastic texts. Hence, if ever Aristotle’s views about the qualifications for citizenship might enjoy an enthusiastic audience prepared to embrace them wholeheartedly, late medieval scholasticism would seem to provide ideally fertile ground.

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