

ARISTOTLE'S DISRESPECT OF THE LACEDAEMONIAN CONSTITUTION

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Aristotle is one of the foundational Greek philosophers, and he has had a huge influence on modern, Western philosophy. A student of Plato, Aristotle's observations included a wide variety of topics, including arts, sciences, politics, and ethics. In this paper, I will analyze Aristotle's observations on the Lacedaemonian (i.e. Spartan) constitution, which he was critical of. I will do this by examining the question: *Why does Aristotle suggest that the Spartan or Lacedaemonian constitution shouldn't be respected?* By looking at Aristotle's analysis of the Lacedaemonian constitution, it becomes clear that many of his criticisms are subjective in nature. This is significant, as it points towards the societal differences between ancient Greek poleis; Aristotle criticizes the way Spartan social structures work within their constitution, less so the constitution itself.

Aristotle's commentary on the Lacedaemonian constitution was written circa 340 BCE. This is significant, as it was written shortly after Athens surrendered to Sparta in the Peloponnesian War. Sparta and Athens had both become powerful, and after uniting many poleis to defeat an invading Persian empire, Sparta stripped Athens, which had become increasingly powerful, of its empire.¹

Many of Aristotle's criticisms of the Lacedaemonian constitution have to do with the political structures put in place. He specifically criticizes Spartan's policies on property laws and land distribution. The criticism of Spartan property laws focuses on citizenship; he accuses the polis of giving out citizenship to many people, instead of equalizing property.² In terms of land distribution, he points out that the legislator allows people to give up or sell inheritance,³ and

¹ Wiesner, Merry E., Patricia Buckley Ebrey, Roger B. Beck, Jerry Dávila, Clare Haru Crowston, and John P. McKay. *A History of World Societies* (Bedford/St. Martins, 2018), 106.

² Aristotle. *The Politics of Aristotle* (New York: Colonial Press, 1900).

³ Aristotle

asserts that “nearly two-fifths of the whole country are held by women”,⁴ due to large dowries being given out, and there being many heiresses.

That women are part of the issue in the makeup of the Lacedaemonian constitution is present throughout much of Aristotle’s analysis; he claims that the licence of women “defeats the intention of the Spartan constitution”.⁵ In terms of Aristotle’s contentions about the role women play in Spartan society, Robert Mayhew points out that “Aristotle criticizes [the] communism of women and children”,⁶ and Mayhew does not think “Aristotle is concerned with the promotion of inherently proper civic behavior”.⁷ Aristotle focuses more on the social structures present in Sparta and how they undermine the systems put in place than on the systems themselves. One of Aristotle’s criticisms is that poor people can be chosen for the Ephoralty (the highest authority); and therefore, they are susceptible to bribes.⁸ Furthermore, he points out that the legislator wants the Council of Elders (who, in Aristotle’s opinion are also too old) to be ambitious, and that ambition “[is] the motiv[e] of crime”.⁹ In fact, John P. McCormick asserts that it is reasonable to say that Spartans are led “by the most experienced and wisest among the citizenry”,¹⁰ not random people who are either too old, too poor, or susceptible to bribes and criminality. Furthermore, the Spartan legislator “established economic equality by distributing land equally among all citizens, by banning foreign trade, and by imposing strict sumptuary laws”.¹¹ Aristotle is clearly

⁴ Aristotle

⁵ Aristotle

⁶ Robert Mayhew. “Impiety and Political Unity: Aristotle, Politics 1262a25-32,” in *Classical Philology* (1996), 54

⁷ Mayhew, 58.

⁸ Aristotle

⁹ Aristotle

¹⁰ John P. McCormick. “Keep the Public Rich, but the Citizens Poor’: Economic and Political Inequality in Constitutions, Ancient and Modern,” in *Cardozo Law Review* (2013), 881.

¹¹ McCormick, 881.

concerned with many aspects of Spartan society. Instead of analyzing cultural differences, however, he criticizes the Lacedaemonian constitution on a political basis.

Aristotle spent most of his life in Athens, which was both a cultural and political rival of Sparta. Not surprisingly, Aristotle shared his thoughts on the Spartan constitution shortly after Sparta had stripped Athens of its empire.¹² It is plausible that through his criticism of the constitution, Aristotle is echoing the “Athenian elites longstanding resentment toward the democracy that severely curtailed their political power”.¹³ Aristotle, being loyal to Athenian culture, would likely have looked less kindly on Spartan society, and this may have prevented him from logical reasoning.

Why does Aristotle suggest that the Spartan or Lacedaemonian constitution shouldn't be respected? Further continuation of research for this paper would include information about the constitution's supposed writer (Lycurgus); Sparta's relationship with Crete; and an analysis of economic equality and political hierarchy in Sparta. In his analysis of the Lacedaemonian constitution, Aristotle argues it is faulty. However, Aristotle does little more than criticize Spartan social structures through the eyes of a rival Athenian.

¹² Wiesner, 106.

¹³ McCormick, 883.

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