

Aristotle's Ridicule of Political Innovation

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The basic practical political question, constantly presented to every citizen in a republic, is whether to change or stay the same. The competing answers to the question may be said to constitute the essences of liberalism and conservatism, respectively. The constraints placed on the possibility of political change may be too great, as in tyranny, where nothing short of a revolution is sufficient; or too weak, as in extreme democracy, where every popular whim is effected. The need for the law to be reasonable and responsive must be balanced with the need for stability in the political order. We must ask ourselves whether we would put the particulars of our Constitution to a regular vote, or allow the wisest among us to replace it with what they deem better. That we balk at these suggestions demonstrates the commonsense Aristotelian understanding that law depends upon habit and tradition for its power and persuasiveness, and therefore that politics, contrary to the modern view, is not a science admitting of inflexible rules that can be applied according to precise formulae. When we treat it as such, we often make ourselves ridiculous by ignoring or downplaying the practical and particular realities of politics.

Aristotle addresses this question in his critique of Hippodamus in chapter 8 of book 2 of the *Politics*.¹ There are three things to know about Hippodamus. First, he was the inventor of city planning (1267b21, 1330b23). Because of its reliance on method, this activity has important parallels to modern political science. Second:

[He] was extraordinary in other aspects of his life through ambition, so that he seemed to some to live in a rather overdone manner, with long hair and expensive ornaments, and furthermore with cheap and warm clothing which he wore not only in winter but also in summer weather, and [he] wished to be learned with regard to nature as a whole—[he] was the first of those not engaged in politics to undertake to give an account of the best regime. (1267b22–29)

¹ Lord's translation is used throughout; all emphasis is added.

Aristotle thus seems to relate Hippodamus's "rather overdone manner" of life to his ambition in trying to "give an account of the best regime." Harry Jaffa called Hippodamus "the original political scientist," and it seems to have been both because of this "character sketch" and because of his political theorizing.² But how are the two related? What in his example, whether in terms of his city planning or his political theory, provokes what Leo Strauss calls Aristotle's "slightly malicious gossip"?³ Why should Hippodamus—or modern political science—be called out especially for ridicule?

The third thing to know about Hippodamus is that he proposed to grant public honors to anyone "who discover[s] something useful to the city" (1268a7–8). This seemingly innocuous law is the basis of Aristotle's more substantive criticism (1268b23–69a27). Hippodamus's naïve confidence in making this proposal betrays a defective understanding of politics that is shared by modern political innovators and system-builders, and this defective understanding is reflected in both his theoretical ambitions and manner of dress; accordingly, Aristotle proceeds in his critique from what is more manifestly ridiculous to what is less so, inviting us to make the comparison between the two.

I. CONTEXT

At the beginning of book 2, Aristotle makes a distinction between what is correct for regimes and what is useful for them (1260b27–33). Correctness is a difficult standard in the *Politics* because it depends not on the instituted principles of the regime, but rather on something like absolute standards of justice. The philosopher may distinguish between the proper, ideal ordering of the regime and what is less than ideal, but nonetheless beneficial, taking into account the present conditions of the people and the laws. What is correct may not be useful to a defective regime because it may not be possible or helpful to implement what is determined to be correct; it may even be harmful. This possibility comes to light in Aristotle's discussion of Hippodamus's plan for publicly honoring innovators. Also, what is useful may not be correct. Thales' art of monopoly is not properly a concern of natural philosophy (1259a18) or the main concern of politics, "for many cities need business and revenues of this sort" (1259a33) but not all of them. The aim of the city is self-sufficiency rather than profit (1252b27–53a1, 1258a14–19), so amassing money is not

² "Aristotle," 86. See also Strauss, *The City and Man*, 18. This paper, in addition to its larger theme, seeks to explore Jaffa's and Strauss's suggestion that Hippodamus is a pre-modern representative of modern political science.

³ *The City and Man*, 18.

fundamental to politics; but it is not completely outside the realm of the political either. The danger is that political leaders might take it to be the whole of politics, thereby obscuring all else. Similarly, attractive street layouts and neat divisions are interesting and useful, but secondary to the purpose of politics, whether this is the authoritative human good (1252a5) or defense (1330b24).

Having made this point, Aristotle makes “the natural beginning,” asking what things in the city should be in common and to what extent (1260b36–38). For “it is best for the city to be as far as possible entirely one,” but “as it becomes increasingly one it will no longer be a city” and will approach being a household or even an individual (1261a16–21). Aristotle emphasizes the importance of virtue and friendship for the possibility of sharing power and property (1263a29–30, 1329b40–30a1); hence, the degree of unity possible for a city depends on the character of its citizens. He criticizes Plato and Phaleas for failing to understand that what is theoretically optimal in this respect—complete unity or equality—is not actually practicable or desirable (1261a3–76b20). Hippodamus is criticized in a different but related way. He attempted a radical reorganization of his own life and manners, and that affectation and combination of diverse, sometimes contradictory elements in his own appearance—long natural hair in the Spartan style with expensive ornaments in the Athenian, for example—he attempted to reproduce in his political theory. Hippodamus, by attempting a combination that is possible in his own private life but impossible politically, mistakes the unity of the individual for the unity of the city. Because he sees that natural divisions such as that between winter and summer (1268b26–27) can be brought together through artifice, he imagines this can be done on a political scale.

If Hippodamus has failed to unify disparate elements in a sensible way even in his own person, how, considering that he fails to see what is required for politics—attention to virtue and the different forms of rule—could he possibly effect such unity in a city? Aristotle therefore engages in a personal criticism of Hippodamus, but not Plato or Phaleas, because Hippodamus’s personal attributes are relevant to his failure as a political philosopher. He is arrogant and hubristic, deciding what seems best in different times and places and then proposing to combine these without considering practical circumstances or possible objections, in the manner of modern political scientists. So the person of Hippodamus is instructive as an example of “an eccentric”⁴ who does not belong to a

⁴ Jaffa, “Aristotle,” 86.

particular place but rather travels from city to city practicing his art.⁵ In this light, that he “laid out Piraeus”—the port of Athens and therefore the place for foreign concepts and ideas—is illustrative (1267b21–22). It might also be relevant that while Hippodamus did his work in Piraeus, he is “of Miletus.” In failing to distinguish between the local and the foreign, Hippodamus universalizes beyond the limits of his material. The only constraint he recognizes is that “a single city occupies a single location” (1260b41–42). He makes no allowance for what else must be common among citizens to make his reforms effective. Thus, he shows no concern for virtue.

A third important point of context is that Aristotle begins the theoretical project of book 2 by setting himself apart from would-be sophists. He stresses that his search for the best regime is carried out not merely for personal aggrandizement but rather for an unselfish reason: because “those regimes now available are not in a fine condition” (1260b27–35). Thus, Aristotle suggests that criticizing or suggesting changes for existing regimes, could be a dangerous criminal act; the only excuse for doing so is that these regimes, though said to be the best, are not very well off. Conversely, Hippodamus does not bring forth his best regime with such considerations and apologies, nor does he, in suggesting public honors for innovators, recognize the danger to existing regimes of inviting reference to standards beyond those established by the regime; he would even honor those who criticize the regime as currently constituted. As Aristotle remarks, this proposal is “not safe, though it sounds appealing” (1268a7, b24). Presumably, Aristotle finds it appealing because his own activity is “to seek something apart from” current regimes. The difference between Aristotle and Hippodamus is that because of “ambition” the latter “seemed to some to live in a rather overdone manner.” As Strauss writes, in “attempt[ing] to speak about the best political order,” Hippodamus becomes in a way “the first political philosopher,” but while doing so he appears “rather ridiculous in the eyes of sensible freemen.”⁶ Aristotle, who does not act out of personal ambition, feels it necessary to justify his activity, whereas Hippodamus does not. Strauss interprets Aristotle to be saying that “philosophy had to be compelled to become concerned with political things,” a thought that is “somewhat mortifying to political scientists.”⁷ Accordingly, Aristotle had to extenuate his own reference to universal political standards and proposals of innovations.

5 Cf. Lord, *Politics*, 250n52. For Hippodamus’s work in other cities, see the historical study of Burns, “Hippodamus and the Planned City.”

6 *The City and Man*, 17–18.

7 *Ibid.*, 18.

The possible ridiculousness of political science or political philosophy must be distinguished from sophistry. Aristotle discusses the relation between politics and sophistry at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1180b29–81b24). There, he argues that the problem is two-fold: the sophists teach politics but do not practice it, while the politicians practice but do not teach it. It would be a great benefit for people who want to know about politics to have accounts based on “experience,” but these are rare. Instead, we have the sophists, “who do not even know at all what sort of thing it is or what sorts of things it is concerned with.” They think they can pick and choose the best laws as if doing so were “not a very great task.” The best this sort of endeavor can provide is “textbooks,” but these are useless for those lacking in knowledge, as medical reference books can be correctly used only by doctors. For Aristotle, people do not become statesmen or legislators from textbooks. His own endeavor is a “philosophic inquiry” that avoids this cataloging impulse. Accordingly, his *Politics* measures laws not independently but by reference to the context of the political regimes in which they exist. Aristotle does not attempt to emancipate himself from the necessarily determined aspect of law in political orders.

Aristotle disputes the sophists’ reduction of politics to rhetoric.⁸ Implicit in this reduction is the assumption that justice, even if it is more than just a word, is less important than persuasiveness. Hippodamus differs with the sophists in this respect; though he does not have any special regard for justice or the common good, he envisions politics as a technical art and not a form of rhetoric. He “wished to be learned with regard to nature as a whole” and to conceive of politics as part of that natural order (1267b27–29). Although, like the sophists, he fails to perceive what is peculiar about politics, he does understand it as admitting of rational inquiry.

Hippodamus, though, falls short of political philosophy. In book 3, chapter 12, Aristotle writes, “Equality in what sort of things and inequality in what sort of things—this should not be overlooked. For this involves a question, and political philosophy” (1282b21–23). Hippodamus is not aware of this question. He simply divides the city conveniently into three parts and assumes that each part will participate in choosing the rulers (1268a10–12). Aristotle must remind him that disputes will necessarily arise “in respect to those things that constitute a city” (1283a15), which is borne out in the confusion about the simple division of citizens (1268a15–b3). Because he ignores the very basic political problem of

⁸ *Ethics* 1181a17; see also *The City and Man*, 17.

faction, Hippodamus may be called a theorist, but not a political philosopher. Unlike Aristotle, he does not find in nature “many kinds both of ruling and ruled [things]” (1254a24). He fails to do so not, as with the sophists, by taking the forms of rule to be equally conventional and therefore secondary to rhetoric, but by uniformly applying a mathematical model consisting of division by three (1267b29–68a4). Political life with its rulers and citizens, disputes and resolutions, is glossed over and becomes secondary to design. Technocracy becomes the single form of rule.⁹ Hippodamus’s technocracy is easily distinguished from universal kingship, rule by the one who possesses the political virtue to a high degree and cares for a people who obey him willingly (1281b31–34). Hippodamus imagines he can have an ideal method *enacted in law*, adequately providing for future changes; but the universal king has no need for law. Why do all other regimes require it? Aristotle answers in book 3 that “those in political offices are accustomed to acting . . . with a view to spite or favor” (1287a37–38). Therefore, he says, “the argument from the example of the arts,” that the one who knows should rule and not be constrained by written rules, “may be held to be false” (1287a33). He reaches the same conclusion with regard to innovation in book 2: “the argument from the example of the arts is false” (1269a19); law, unlike the arts and sciences, requires habituation and obedience. The argument in book 3—against the king being the law for the city, as the father is the law for the household—establishes the necessity of law in the first place, whereas the argument in book 2 rejects the regular modification of preexisting legal systems. This distinction therefore demonstrates the speciousness of any connection between Hippodamus’s technocracy and universal kingship. His failure to say anything about natural or political rule leads Aristotle to ask, “[If] the laws are indeed to be changeable, are all to be, and in every regime? And by anyone, or by whom? For these things make a great difference” (1269a24–26).

Hippodamus, then, is not addressing politics. He wants to be a founder (1267b29–30), setting in motion a system with self-correcting mechanisms (1268a5–8). However, his proposal in book 2, chapter 8 only *appears* to be political since he has specified the size and organization of the city, divided the laws and the courts, and made provisions for offices and reform. But there is no overarching principle. Aristotle claims that “every partnership is constituted for the sake of some good” (1252a2), but the good for which Hippodamus’s city is constituted is unclear. Furthermore, there is great confusion about who is a citizen of this city

⁹ Nichols, “Aristotle’s Introduction to *Politics*,” 177; see also *The City and Man*, 19.

(1274b33–75a3). Aristotle defines the citizen as “whoever is entitled to participate in an office involving deliberation or decision” (1275b18). Hippodamus’s city supposedly gives citizenship to “artisans,” “farmers,” and “the military part” separately, but as Aristotle shows the consequences of the arrangement have not been thought out: the farmers and artisans will end up as slaves (1267b31, 68a16–20). One cannot simply divide cities according to distinctions satisfactory to oneself; distinction and separation must also account for the needs and desires of those whose persons and properties are divided. Lacking considerations of character and power, Hippodamus’s scheme is not politics but method, to be applied anywhere.

II. CRITICISMS

The problem of citizenship is the ground of the first criticism Aristotle levels against Hippodamus’s scheme (1268a14–b3). Hippodamus gives each type of citizen a part of the city but fails to consider how they relate to each other. The question at the beginning of book 2 concerns the unity of the city; at the beginning of book 3, its division. In dividing the tasks of citizens, Hippodamus implicitly recognizes that “the city belongs among composite things, and like other composite wholes is made up of many parts” (1274b38–39), but does not answer the necessary questions about who or what constitutes the regime. He takes for granted that all are citizens and participate equally.

Aristotle’s second criticism is that “the law concerning judging” is not “a fine one” (1267b36–68a6, b3). His point is that giving to jurors the power of arbitration confuses the nature of the office. He asks how one would count votes if they were not simple yeas and nays (1268b16). There would have to be reference to some greater authority, outside of the juror’s office. Perhaps this is the “single authoritative court, to which all cases that are held not to have been rightly judged should be appealed,” a court constituted out of “elected elders” (1267b39–41). Aristotle does not comment on it directly, but he does suggest that only the military part will serve in authoritative offices (1268a22). Therefore, the provision for jurors to make distinctions in their judgments is specious and ineffectual. It is the kind of thing that would be appealing only to a political scientist who imagines he is introducing intelligence and discernment into the political offices but does not take into account the way power and control work in human affairs. One might similarly question his “authoritative court.” Who is to decide which cases have not “been rightly judged,” and on what principles? Providing for this sort of prerogative, without

accounting for the possibility of corruption and abuse, is short-sighted and dangerous.

The third and most important criticism of Hippodamus concerns innovations (1268b23–69a25). Upon introducing Hippodamus's proposal to grant honors to those who propose something useful, Aristotle mentions something that Hippodamus himself found useful and proposed: a law that already existed. This comical jab echoes the personal criticism that started the chapter, raising again the questions of why Aristotle attacks Hippodamus's character and how this attack could be an attack on political science generally. Nothing about political science necessitates that it be unaware of what political practices are already in existence. However, because it attempts to reason from scientific principles instead of starting with what exists in practice, it is vulnerable to this mistake. Similarly, practicing politics as a science would not necessarily make one ridiculous, but this is a tendency brought about by universalizing beyond the limits of one's material. Hippodamus's cosmopolitanism means he is out of place, belonging to no single polis. His eclectic pretense is possible for individuals, but political orders are limited by what Aristotle calls their "equipment," that is, the virtue and habits of the people who live in them (1258a22–23, 81b15–21, 87b36–38, 88b41). By pointing to Hippodamus's uniqueness as an individual, Aristotle suggests that Hippodamus's best regime is suited not to real people but to eccentrics; it is as fantastical as the chimera. Thus, his ambition with regard to political theory is reflected in his own appearance.

Seen this way, Aristotle's criticism of Hippodamus's innovative manner of life is an analogue for a critique of innovation more generally. Perpetual re-constituting may be attractive on a personal level, but on the political it is "not safe" (1268b22–24). The dangerous implications of Hippodamus's proposal are clear: what if someone proposed to dissolve the regime or something tantamount to that (1268b28–30)? The regime must be authoritative; it cannot allow a principle of self-destruction within itself. Of course, some change might really be an improvement. Therefore, Aristotle must take up the question, but with extreme caution (1268b28–33). He alerts us, by way of contrast with Hippodamus, to the delicacy of the issue. He writes that "change *might seem* to be better" (1268b22), but every change, even if it is for the better as measured against correctness, must be weighed against the harm that is done to the strength of the law by undermining habit (12691a15–24). The example of Hippodamus's specious proposal serves as a foil for Aristotle's own conservatism in this respect.

If an innovation in law does not contradict the city's need for preservation, though, it can be as helpful as an innovation in the arts and sciences. People do not revere laws because they are old, but because they think they are good (1269a2–3). But they think they are good because they are old. Aristotle makes this point when he says, "law has no strength with respect to obedience apart from habit, and this is not created except over a period of time" (1269a20–22). This is not to say that law cannot be reasonable, or informed by reason, but that its effectiveness in practice depends on something irrational or sub-rational.¹⁰ For this reason, "laws based on [unwritten] customs are more authoritative, and deal with more authoritative matters" (1287b4–6). The presumption is that the citizen does not, and cannot, meditate on the reasonableness of each law but must act out of compulsion and habit. The criticism of Hippodamus does not rest on the question of whether the laws may be improved—Aristotle is clear that they can and should be (1268b39–69a14); rather, it is a matter of the extent to which the law itself can be knowable as rationally good to the citizens in the regime. Hippodamus's scheme of "easy alteration" presumes an abiding rationality in the law and amongst the partisans of the law that is highly dubious (1269a22). The deflating conclusion of the dialogue between the democrat and the oligarch in book 3 is that making the law instead of man authoritative does not introduce equity into their arguments and finally end their dispute (1281a34–38). The quality or justice of laws, for Aristotle, depends not on a presumptive rationality of the laws themselves, but rather on the authoritative founding principles that guide the regime in question (1282b8–9).

The fundamental defect of Hippodamus, then, is that he does not distinguish between founding and ruling. In a founding, there may be debts repudiated and a new conception of justice made authoritative (1276a6–16). But once this is done it belongs only to the philosopher to look past this beginning to what is true absolutely (1279b13–15). In providing public honors for innovators, Hippodamus makes the error of Kleinias in Plato's *Laws*—he thinks the laws can contain rational arguments for their own existence according to nature, and the lawgiver should show "that they are by nature" (890d). In this way, Hippodamus is like modern political philosophers who attempt to provide a rational basis for politics that is discoverable by all—a state of nature with a natural law that is accessible not only to philosophers and founders of regimes but also to citizens living within already constituted regimes. Aristotle reproves Hippodamus for the same reason Rousseau reproves

¹⁰ As Strauss argues, *The City and Man*, 22.

Hobbes and Locke—they make all people philosophers by nature and forget that most people cannot transcend the opinions and habits formed in them by the regime’s constitution, which makes it dangerous to encode and subject to criticism the rationale for the regime. Plato’s Athenian Stranger reproves Kleinias by asking, “Isn’t it difficult to follow arguments of this kind spoken before crowds?” (890a). If the law is intelligent, it will be because of private reasoning and not public knowledge (645b). But Kleinias, like Hippodamus, thinks the laws “provide for all time an opportunity for questioning” (891a). This may be said of the moderns as well.

But if the law is the enactment of private reasoning, its intelligence can only be manifest at the founding, and to the extent that change is necessary (as Aristotle acknowledges it will be [1269a8–9]) the regime will inevitably deviate from its founding principles. The question, then, is whether a regime can provide a “safeguard” within its own constitution (*Laws* 960d–e; 1286b32–33), something that understands the purpose of the laws because it can see beyond them to the intelligence informing their foundations. In the regime of Plato’s *Laws*, emissaries travel abroad seeking helpful innovations; they present their findings in secret to a council of elders and moderate philosophers, *not* in public with honors (961a–b). This scheme is an attempt to solve the problem of the necessity of innovation in a way radically different from Hippodamus and the moderns.

Aristotle likely would prefer Plato’s solution. One may reach this conclusion first and most obviously because of Aristotle’s previously demonstrated conservatism in his criticism of Hippodamus’s proposal to legislate public honors for “those who discover something advantageous for the city” (1268b22–24) and in his asking who should have the power to propose changing laws (1269a25). Although Aristotle criticizes the *Laws* at considerable length in the *Politics* (1264b26–66a30), he makes obvious errors in summarizing it, indicating that he is deliberately ignoring the larger themes of the work in order to equate it with the *Republic* (1264b28, 1265a9, 1264a3–4). Finally, Aristotle ends the chapter on Hippodamus by saying, “Let us . . . set aside this investigation for the present; it belongs to other occasions” (1269a26–27). If Aristotle had finished the *Politics*, possibly he would have returned to the investigation and said something like Plato’s Athenian Stranger. Another interpretation is possible: perhaps by “other occasions” Aristotle is referring to some private council much like the one specified in the *Laws*.

III. CONCLUSION

To the extent that modern political science supposes law to be purely a matter of reason, to be changed as quickly as the science develops, it admits of the same danger as Hippodamus's scheme. Modern natural rights theory shares the conceit that law is based in and accessible to reason, and therefore concludes that the traditional should give way to the reasonable,¹¹ but it does not go so far as the extraordinary modern conclusion that the good is the *opposite* of the traditional. Our optimistic view that progress in politics proceeds apace with progress in technology stands in contrast to the wariness of Plato and Aristotle, for whom change in the arts and sciences was always a threat to the political order.¹² We have concluded that politics *is* a science and that we must remove the pernicious constraints of custom in order to clear the way for rational organization.¹³ Hippodamus is in fact celebrated today as a founder of urban zoning and city planning,¹⁴ testaments of our ability to remake political orders according to scientific principles.¹⁵ In America, the Progressive era furnishes examples of those who traveled from city to city, speaking in one breath of wider streets and in another of a political order newly wrought on a scientific foundation.¹⁶

The American founders were not moderns in this sense, and they should not be indicted with the flippancy of Hippodamus and modern political scientists. It is true that Publius seems to dismiss the ancient problems of republicanism in writing that, "the science of politics . . . like most other sciences, has received great improvement."¹⁷ In fact, the formulation is very similar to "the argument from the example of the arts" that Aristotle dismisses (1269a19). However, Publius's comment here concerns founding; he later reveals his understanding of Aristotle's teaching that a re-founding, a subjection of the constitution to regular criticism and change, is dangerous and not at all desirable.¹⁸ When rejecting Jefferson's Hippodamean proposal to review the Constitution

11 See, e.g., Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 14; and Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, chap. 9, sec. 138.

12 See Strauss, *The City and Man*, 22.

13 See Bagehot, *Physics and Politics*, 219.

14 Burns, "Hippodamus and the Planned City."

15 See Hogan, "Hippodamus on Government Law." Hogan, in this mostly factual piece, argues that Hippodamus was concerned with the question of "how to turn an ideal state into a reality" but had no "immediate practical influence" because the Greek world was not ready for this project (773).

16 Howe, *Socialized Germany*: "Underlying all city plans is the proper arrangement of streets. This is the foundation of the city" (303).

17 Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, *Federalist* no. 9, 67.

18 *Ibid.* no. 49, 310-14.

at regular Conventions, he used an Aristotelian argument, that “law has no strength with respect to obedience apart from habit.”¹⁹

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¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 311.