Theorizing Classical Democracy
A rhetorical interpretation of political community

Synopsis
of the PhD Dissertation
written by

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Part I
Theoretical focus

The thesis aims to explore a conceptual basis and a theoretical framework for interpreting democracy in a way, in which politics is a common realm of human beings; a sphere of freedom, where real, *agon*-driven plurality is crucial; and where debate stands in the center of politics; and where politics can be experienced as a way of life and a common enterprise as well.

For these theoretical purposes, I accept the idea that *agon* is formative in politics, and that the conflict-led “political” can be reconciled with democracy, but not in a totally closed harmonious unity. The latter points to a recurring problem in political theory: conflicts play a crucial role in democratic regimes, because democracies cannot exist without differences which make plurality possible. Besides this, the thesis builds upon the hermeneutical branch of political discourse theories as well. Yet, the main resources for theorizing the problems mentioned above, come from classical Greek political thought.

It is worth to emphasize two axiomatic points which serve as a normative foundation for this text. The first axiom derives mainly from a hermeneutical point of view and states that politics is a human made world, which is created by talking to the others. Political reality is therefore a common construction of human beings. The second axiom is that democracy has a value in itself, and especially classical Athenian political experience can help to interpret the relations of politics and democracy under contemporary circumstances.

This text belongs to primarily the Hungarian political discourse theory stemming from modern hermeneutics and German (or continental) philosophical tradition, but is also influenced by poststructuralist discourse theories. Yet, the most important argumentations are based on ancient Athenian political thought. It is presupposed that the problems posed above can be best treated with the permanent reinterpretation of classical Athenian political experience. This choice can be defended by referring to the historical role which rhetoric played in Periclean democracy, where the formation and defense of the political sphere for coming together for free discussions and debates, played a crucial role.

To sum it up, two important factors are philosophically relevant here: the role that rhetoric and common discourse played in classical Athens, and the characteristics of classical political experience, which can be reinterpreted as a way of life.
Part II
Theoretical background and interpretive method

The thesis shares the epistemological point of view of those political discourse theories which emphasize the capacity of discourses to create political reality. As being partially a political theory, and partially a political philosophy with normative assumptions, while treating politics as a discursive construction, it formulates its problematization and the directions of theoretical answers from this point of view.

The main methodological questions appear in relation to the classical texts, mainly because of the hermeneutical distance of the two interrelating political experience. Two aspects must be analyzed here directly. The first aspect sheds light on the causes of resource selection, while the other treats the relation between the modes of theorizing classical democracy and contemporary literature (including political theory).

Resource selection can be said atypical, because not just the canonized authors are treated as „classical”, e.g. Plato or Aristotle. They play sometime only partial role in the interpretive process, while others, especially the sophists, are given much more focus. Most of the theoretical re-descriptions of democracy and politics revolve around texts attributed to the sophists, or around authors who were related to them. I mention here Thucydides or the tragedians like Aeschylus (as a forerunner) as an example. I think it is necessary to emphasize the fact that most of the canonized ancient authors were not democrats. And not only according to our contemporary measures, but to their own political measures as well. Sometimes these authors had a clear position against democracy, its practices and ideas. Consequently, only reading these texts without a critical capacity is simply impossible, or at least not enough. If one accepts this caution, it leads to the two following consequences. On the one hand, contemporary literature (like classical history of thought or history of philosophy focusing on e.g. rhetoric) should be taken into consideration more seriously than in traditional modes of philosophizing (to put it simply, only reading Plato is not enough). On the other hand, the foci of classical authors and texts should be also shifted into a direction which is more relevant for the current purposes: theorizing politics in a manner in which discourse, coming together to talk, and the Arendtian Zwischenmenschlichkeit (interpersonal relations) as constituting political reality plays a decisive role.
These methodological standpoints could be a base for a work in the history of political thought as well. But this book has another kind of task. As a theoretical work, it has its foundations in these analyses, and uses their results, but does not intend to enter their discourse. The same can be said in relation to the history of philosophy and classical philology too. For my work were crucial to understand them, because of not only the visible differences of the two intellectual fields in history, but of the differences of vernacular languages (the languages through which we understand our world in everyday practices and in philosophy as well) and ancient Greek. But if the job done here seems to be acceptable or successful, it means also (for a sometimes really skeptical audience of political scientist in my country) that it is possible to theorize politics under contemporary circumstances in this way.

After all, the thesis builds up its structure of problematization from contemporary political experiences, and these are crystallized around questions concerning the interrelations of politics, democracy and discursivity. In fact, these are quite common questions: “what is politics?” and “what is democracy?”, especially as a way of life, or “what are the conditions of real plurality?” and so on. My standpoint is that these problems are clearly visible in classical political experience, but despite their ancient appearance, they are our own modern ones. Classical democracy is an idea and practice, through which we are more able to understand certain kinds of problems appearing on our intellectual horizon. And this means that the task here is not the reverse, not to understand and interpret classical democracy better or deeper.

Specifying the circle of authors, texts, theorists or philosophers, including secondary literature: first of all those texts and authors are analyzed who express and interpret the classical political experience, or they are democrats, or they understand the common political world as a discursive reality. I refer here briefly to the main authors from classical antiquity, as well as from contemporary literature. Among the classical authors are the sophists and their wider intellectual circle (Protagoras, Prodikos, Anonymus Iamblichi, the Dissoi Logoi, and Thucydides), and some Presocratic philosophers (particularly Heraclitus). Among the moderns, Hannah Arendt and some types of democratic agonistic theories (Chantal Mouffe’s agonism is used as an intellectual point of departure), among the historians Josiah Ober, Mogens Herman Hansen, and in relation to the sophists, G. B. Kerferd can be mentioned.

Finally it is worth also mentioning the intellectual circle in which this theoretical task is embedded. In Hungarian political discourse theory (which belongs to the continental – German – philosophical tradition, esp. hermeneutics, and whose founding father is Márton Szabó) the problem of political debate seems to be extremely relevant. Debate is crucial in
political world creation and democratic practices, and plays a constitutive role. Politics is not a practice that ends in consensus of opinion, but a place to come together to express differences or similarities, respectively. Political roles as friend and adversary are discursive constructions which are formed in public political debates. Sometimes in quite different ways, and often with relevant dissimilarities, hermeneutical discourse theory (in a Hungarian style) and democratic agonism theory express the idea, that politics is a place of “competing cooperation” (see references later). Competing or rivalry means that we should replace the role of enemy with adversary in the context of democratic politics, but debates and differences remains natural. Cooperation means that the opposing actors should take into consideration the permanent necessary of existence of the other. Therefore they should take part in the debate, maintain and enhance the political sphere: they should cooperate through debate and rivalry – or through ágon.
Part III
Theoretical results

1. The political as a precondition for democracy

Interpreting classical democracy helps us understanding political differences theoretically, and the idea of the polis can shed light on politics as a common world. The first part of the essay (with four subsections) deals with multiplicity and unity on a highly theoretical level. In doing so, it reinterprets the Schmittian concept of “the political” (das Politische) and the aforementioned democratic agonism, as well as some layers of Presocratic philosophy in order to prepare a conceptual base for further interpretations of democratic politics.

It is worth envisaging briefly the connection between politics and public discourse, focusing on the capacity of discourse to create political reality. The whole series of interpretation in this book is only possible, because public discourse plays an extremely relevant role in contemporary socio-political life, and I should emphasize that this relation was clear in Periclean Athens too.¹ This is true for the sophists also, which seems to be relevant from a politico-philosophical angle. In the political thought starting with them, there can be found a strong emphasis on the human created character of the world, and this idea is absolutely clear in Protagoras.² When later in the mid-twentieth century Hannah Arendt accepted the Greek experience as a base for reinterpreting the concept of politics, she understood this created character as one which basically happens among men talking to each other. The precondition of political existence for a human being is another human being, and politics occurs always among other humans. This realm opening up among humans is not a silent one, because people always create their common political world in an inherently plural talk, and in fact these talks occur almost always in public debates.³ But Arendt goes further, and interprets this classical situation of politics not just an agonistic discourse among humans, but emphasizes that debates make possible to see the same thing or problem from different angles. Or one may say, she talks about not truth (as a single indivisible unity), but about the birth of new perspectives, and the appearance of possibilities in the political sphere.

¹ On the Athenian democracy and public debates, Ober 1989. I would like to note here that this is a short summary of a cca. 220 pages long doctoral thesis (written in Hungarian), consequently here I refer only to the bibliographically most representative books and articles.
² Cf. Protagoras’ homo mensura statement.
³ Arendt 2002, esp. 114. (This is the Hungarian translation of the German original text ‘Was ist Politik’ from 1993, ed. by Ursula Ludz, which is perhaps one of Arendt’s most important texts on politics.)
This form of *Zwischenmenschlichkeit* reveals on the one hand that an open public space is always necessary for politics, and publicity has a value in understanding political life, and on the other hand that politics requires the acceptance of the Other’s existence. These two aspects are present in the rhetorical practice of classical democracy and this occurrence can be interpreted theoretically. The first theoretical consequence has mainly an ethical character, while the other one has an epistemic. The epistemic character of public sphere (formed by discourse) refers not only to our understanding of other’s world experiences, but to the experience of the actors as well.

First of all, men are those who creates their world themselves in which then they have the chance and capacity to think about relevant issues or hold debates over further actions and possibilities, and in which they can find their home. Political community is not only a public sphere for coming together to argue and making decisions. Political community, or in short, politics is a sphere which can collect human needs deriving from different experiences and desires, and a sphere from which these human experiences can be opened up. Politics, at least in the participative and direct form, offers the chance for human beings to come to the fore and be visible and accessible, shortly, it offers a chance for expression. Despite that not all have the equal capacity to take place in politics; these appearances always mean that the common human field of possibilities was widened. Differences among humans form the base of political plurality, which is an empirically existing fact of common life and therefore cannot be canceled without the dangerous consequence that the whole terrain of the political would be destroyed. But this axiom has further consequences, which we can find in some directions of contemporary democratic agonism theory (for a longer analysis, see Chapter I, “Conflict and political community”).

The point of departure of the interpretation what I follow is that politics has a conflict-led character by nature. This character is so strong that it never could be cancelled. Moreover, it would be wrong to attempt to cancel it, and perhaps the most important arguments for the value of conflicts is that political identities are always formed by differentiation and in political clashes. But it has another relevant consequence: conflicts are set of actions that make relevant differences visible in political sphere. This means that certain values and courses of actions appear in the common realm of discourse. Generally speaking, the existence of the alternatives in political life, which can be described as the capacity for humans to have a choice, must be always at disposal; and this goes not without conflicts.

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4 For this theory of agonism, see Mouffe 2005.
But a certain kind of problem arises here. Politics as conflict, and politics as a common participative universe are not in harmony; they shift away, or even collide. Theoretically it would be possible to prefer one in contrast to the other, but all the two idea has an explanatory value in politics, or even value in itself. For example, the existence of community, specifically democratic politics can be a value, but differences in life, therefore the alternative character of politics can be another value too. This is the dilemma that forms the base of my following argumentation (see Chapter II, “The constitution of political world”). My task is in this chapter to interpret Mouffe’s agonistic theory and the forms of the idea of “competing cooperation” in Hungarian discourse theory, respectively. But then I move into a wider philosophical horizon of multiplicity/unity, interpreting Schmitt’s theory of “das Politische” in line with Heraclitus and the early traces of egalitarian thoughts in Presocratic philosophy. I hope that the main result of the chapter is the making of this theoretical connection.

In order to make these problems more visible, I accept that politics has an inherently conflict-driven character. This is a radical interpretation in the sense that it tries to envisage what happens in a political realm, when one stands on its intellectual frontier. This kind of theoretical analysis is uncommon, but e.g. C. Schmitt uses it in theorizing politics. Frontiers (or margins) can envisage what happens in the center; (civil) war as the most intensive form of conflict, in its negativity, reveals how politics works under normal circumstances. But this radical interpretation has another kind of theoretical value. It sheds light on the role of intentions of actors, when they try to act. When human life is full of confrontations, the role of intention emphasizes that not only confrontation, but reconciliation is also a political act, but in this case intention must be directed towards taming intensive and radical forms of political conflicts.

Taking into consideration action and intention theoretically, the radically conflict-led, almost war-like view of politics can be further qualified. A radical theory, like Schmitt’s one, seems to be highly relevant in contemporary debates over the logic of politics. According to his idea, political character reveals when differences among humans become extremely intensive. Schmitt expresses the characteristic of the political with the formula of friend/enemy-distinction. But this idea does not seem to be unproblematic, as the contemporary explosion of interpretations shows. Almost every theoretician elaborated an opinion on Schmitt’s formula (and of Schmitt too), at least in Hungary (on Schmitt’s theory see Chapter III, “The concept of the political”). As Kari Palonen argues, Schmitt’s theory can

function in this way, because in fact his readers misunderstand him.⁶ But this misunderstanding has its own interpretive value: it makes possible focusing on conflicts when dealing with politics in a theoretical or philosophical way. The concept of the political reflects on this aspect of politics, but it is certainly not the whole picture. The Schmittian – not purely – formal distinction, in its most extreme form, means that humans are simply in war with each other. It is clear that politics cannot be described in this way. Hostility is not the bond that holds society together, and surely it is true not only for democracies, but for any kind of human political association as well. The concept of the political as being something extraordinary in politics, cannot describe normal (internal) political life in its entirety, but has a capacity to reveal conflicts or the political nature of human conflicts. A kind of theoretical delimitation of the political can be seen in reconciliation, and the theory of the political can show how this process occurs in a political way. Depoliticization is also a political act.

Conflict shows its theoretical face in a somewhat different manner in the Hungarian mode of theorizing political discourse. Agon plays a central role in modern politics, and it takes shape in public debates in contemporary democracies. Rivalry entails for centrifugal tendencies, but appearing in democracies, it must be cooperation too. This is what competing cooperation means.⁷ But in the interpretive line followed here, happens something different too. Dissolution plays more relevant role here than in the theory of competing cooperation, which means that civil war (or stasis) is seen as the theoretical boundary of political community, or the realm of democratic practices. This must be taking into consideration as an ever existing theoretical possibility, but naturally, dissolution, civil war or extreme rivalry is not the normal condition of politics.

In order to show this, I turn to the Presocratic philosophy and Greek pre-democratic political thought. Perhaps this sounds somewhat odd for the readers of politics, but makes possible to interpret the theoretical conundrum of multiplicity and unity in a consistent mode. I analyze first Heraclitus, then the early egalitarian political thought in the dissertation (Chapter IV, “The conditions of the political and democracy”). I read Heraclitus and Schmitt together, in order to make visible that Heraclitus can be a relevant author for contemporary theorizations of politics.

Heraclitus and Schmitt have a common motive in that they emphasize the interpretive and constitutive role of war, enmity and conflict in the epistemological terrains which are relevant for them (politics; the realm of the phusis). But interpreting Heraclitus’ fragments, we can

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understand the structuration of world through conflict as a process occurring inside the world, not outside of it. And, this process is always connected with the frames of existence of the universe. Coming to be through the process of war is the condition of existence for the universe. The highly abstract mode of this thought is relevant, because it conceptualizes the connection of multiplicity and unity. In doing so, it accepts that the mode in which the world exists is plurality, but it is simultaneously a world, that is, it is “one”. But the conceptual shift here from ‘unity’ to ‘one’ is not accidental. It is not necessarily to see the “one” as unity, or even uniformity. In the Heraclitean way of thought, the “one” can be seen as something that has the capacity to embrace plurality, and not only let itself change, but being change itself, because change is its form of existence. On the other hand, Heraclitean thought has another important consequence for the theory of politics. Confrontations among elements, e. g. between two colliding elements in the world, may not have a destructive character; therefore it is forbidden for an element to destroy the other one. This possibility is cancelled, because in an antithetical order like this, the existence and movement (that is, the confrontation) is what creates the frame in which every movement can occur. As a result, a world can exist only when there are confronting elements in it. In other words, as long as the other exists, and difference (the one who differs, or the Other) has a chance to appear in the world. The structure of the world is balanced by confrontations, which makes possible changes as well. It is perhaps among the most abstract conceptualization of the idea that agon is the base of the world and politics.

2. The frontiers of political community

The structure of the thesis follows rather a circular, than a linear theoretical logic. It starts with the borderlines of political community, and heads towards its center, that is, towards the idea of political community. Then it goes further to the absolute center of political imagination, the place of coming together and talking about common issues with each other. This centrality of sharing views with each other makes discourse and rhetoric extremely relevant, or even constitutive in political life. And this metaphorical map of political community helps to elaborate politics as a polis-type community with debate in its heart. I start the determination of political community through the theoretical elaboration of its absolute frontiers. First I deal with war, then civil war, finally with the relations between life and the polis.8

8 The theoretical apparatus I use here appears in contemporary texts too. I refer here only Márton Szabó’s book on political strangers, which follows a similar way (Szabó 2006).
It is clear now that violence and war is not the part of politics. These are not political phenomena, but belong to the frontier of politics (or political life), and they have a capacity in determining identities in general. War and civil war shed light on different types of political realms, and therefore on different kinds of political logics. War is in close connection with the pure “realistic” view of power; it is worth then to analyze them together (for the relation of war and power, see Chapter V, “The concepts of power”; for civil war and political community, see Chapter VI, “Civil war and the sphere of political community”). The concept of life prepares the analysis of common space interpreted as the negation of war (Chapter VII, “The concept of life”).

War has a double face. On the one hand, war can take place inside a political association, and then it is called civil war. Its characteristic feature is that it has the ability to destroy political community, as a result of its simple occurrence. On the other hand, war can be imagined outside of political communities as well. In this case, war does not have the ability to destroy political community by the simple set of actions of hostile violence. As a result, two different kinds of place can be defined here according to the measures of legitimacy, dynamics and power. Power in its original sense is per definitionem boundless, and in this context means dynamic growth. Such a power is imaginable in a space of war between poleis, and its dynamics can be at least partially accepted as legitimate. But boundless power is absolutely impossible inside of a polis. While outside the relationship among poleis is asymmetric, and the will of the stronger is decisive, then in an inner sphere justice is the rule, and this justice should be based on the equality of entities, or here, on the equality of human beings. The sophists, for example, talked about nature (phusis) and law or order (nomos) as two different sets of order in the human realm. Some of them clearly stated that in a polis only nomos can be the rule. (The result of these chapters is the analysis of power and later the concept of life.)

Classical power was analyzed in modernity as well. I try to describe two types of ideas here; both are sporadic, but have their roots in classical antiquity, and can be a relevant contribution to contemporary understandings of the relations between power and political community. The one type sees power boundless in the original sense; but the other one emphasizes the resources of power, and the plurality of them. The statement, that all power comes from men and derives from their relations, suggests that power is connected to the realm of human choices and to the freedom to act. But this presupposes that men had come

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together, but not in order to kill each other. And this reveals the double face of power again: there is a constant tendency to become destructive on the one hand, and the ability to become constructive and give things form, on the other hand.

The polis, which is the result of coming together of men, can be interpreted as the place embracing activities necessarily for life. This means that the polis stays in contrast with spaces of war; the polis is the space of peace in this sense. But perhaps this can not be understood in the way that it extinguishes all kind of differences (for this, see again Schmitt and democratic agonism). The concept of life (giving shelter to life) has an interpretive capacity in redescribing politics as polis. Life is not only a simple counter-concept, but a surplus of human activity, that is, the capacity to create. My dissertation emphasizes this difference, because the condition of democratic politics in this theoretical context is not peace as the counter-concept of war, but life. The idea of life can be further qualified – it is empty in this sense –, e.g. it can be understood as meaningful life, but it can be rethought in the dimension of growth and creation, as the idea of fully fledged life suggests.

Summing it up, power as phusis (or war-like power) based on inequality cannot describe the polis. Yet, as being a conceptual margin of politics, it offers concepts and ideas to interpret political community.

Civil war derives from internal conflicts. These conflicts divide political community, and in fact, it is the death of politics as common life. But later in the course of history, stasis, the word used for civil war, reappeared in the theory of rhetoric, in a pacified sphere, to reflect to the point which must be defined as the object of debate.\footnote{Cf. Carter 1988.} The concept of stasis is controversial, and embraces a whole scale of difference. The polis marks a limit for stasis by its own existence: polis lets stasis come in, but later transforms it. Differences reappear now discursively in the theory of rhetoric, and this transformation offers new insights in the interpretation of civil war and differences. (These chapters reveal and reconnect the layers of stasis.)

Debate and talk stays at the center of the polis. Plurality in the polis is only possible, because violence had been pushed back to the margins. In rhetorical theory this process ensures that collision of opinions and ideas can be interpreted with the help of stasis. The public, discursive and rhetorical sphere of polis is important, because it is capable of institutionalizing tensions deriving from human coexistence.

However, the common sphere for talk can be destroyed in extreme situations. Thucydides
describes a process like this, while his text reveals a relevant aspect of the relation between speech and violence. This central square of human coexistence can be demolished well before its physical disappearance. My analysis concerns with those aspects of Thucydides’ text which refer to the public sphere of speech (some of them seem to be having a Protagorean origin). Reading Thucydides sheds light on two relevant aspects which are the preconditions for free speech. First, creative and open public talks demand courage (“dare to talk”), in a wider sense it is a requirement of having general conditions of feeling free and safe among men in public spaces. Second, making political friends or forming an alliance requires transparent public sphere and trust. The Thucydidean description of stasis manifests in a negative way what politiké tekhné, or the art of constituting a polis, really means.

Politiké tekhné is one of the cornerstones of Protagoras’ political philosophy. He draws a distinction between prepolitical and political conditions, and the difference can be described in the form of destruction and construction. Human beings should posses the abilities necessary for polis life in order to survive. These abilities or skills include a sense of justice and mutual respect, and their implementation depends on personal faculties and collective capacities too. Another cornerstone of Protagoras’ theory is that all men can be equally good judge of common issues, and these are in fact the most important ethical and political dilemmas of a political community.

Protagoras’ political philosophy is the apology of (direct) democracy. It is based on the idea that social values are crucial in political life, and that there is a strong bond between the life of a singular human being and political community. Polis is value in itself, and is capable to taking the richness of life – or an active life – in. The polis is not only a sphere for pure life (understood in contrast to war), but also the chance of fully fledged life. On the one hand, politics gives the chance to live a politically active life, and on the other hand, polis can embrace the whole range of human activities. Besides the multiplicity of the polis, there is a general and legitimate demand for something “common”. This common world has an epistemic character, and Protagorean features too. The epistemic character of the common can be revealed through activities like teaching (paideia) or debate. These activities do not diminish the richness of the world, but enhance it. They can help to strengthen the self-affirmative structure of the common realm. But the common is Protagorean too, because this world cannot be maintained without mutual trust. The discursive political sphere makes possible the appearance and constant existence of the multiplicity and plurality of life, and it

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12 Thucydides, VIII. 66.
13 Plato, Protagoras 320c–322e.
is also the sphere that helps to make visible collective alternatives and choices – for the whole community.

3. The concept of political community

The focus in this section is on the concept of political community. I widely base on the results of contemporary researches on history of Greek political thought, in order to summarize some relevant aspects of polis as a political community. In fact, it is a preparation for the later theoretical task of interpreting politics from the point of view of rhetoric.

The polis was a historical entity, and the base of the later development of direct democratic forms. It is said that this was possible thanks to the small scale of ancient poleis. The small and good manageable size was one of the main causes that the direct form of democracy was canceled as a possibility worth to implement in modern times. On the other hand, the classical polis seems to be as an essentially united and homogenous political community for many even today. In sum, the value of classical poleis sometimes seems to be doubtful in contemporary theoretizations of politics. These critics are perhaps right in their own theoretical horizon; but it is also possible that they give up valuable ideas and concepts to theorize contemporary political experience, or reinforce democratic political imagination (even democratic desire) of today. For me, the humanism of ancient polis democracy and that living in a polis means a way of life, offers such theoretical and conceptual possibilities (these are the central themes of Chapter VIII, “Polis and humanity”).

The humanism of the polis is used here as a collective term, which refers to all kinds of thought that put human beings in its center of values. For two examples: one of Protagoras’ authentic fragments says that human beings are the measure of created things (or, man is the measure of what exist); and classical democratic thought also treated men as central and decisive component of its structure (as in the relationship between the concepts of polis and polités also can be seen). Classical democracy is based on the demos, in theory and in practice too. Perhaps we can better understand the institutional practices, when we analyze the political logic behind lot, which was the common procedure in choosing members for political or judicial offices. Behind lot stays the idea that all men is equal, which is not only a legal or political equality, but the recognition of the capacity of human mind (with the appreciation of collective ability for phronésis), and the equality of mind to make right(ous) political decisions. Classical democracy is a strong and egalitarian democracy, and this fact gives another accent to the concept of “humanity”; in fact, the centrality of humans means that participations is incorporated into politics, and they have the right and freedom to have a
The other aspect is that living in a direct democracy seems to be a way of life; to put it slightly differently, politics is a way of life. It is worth talking about this, because the historical example shows that being involved in politics (involvement in the most common form is simply just discussing political matters) can be a general, intensive and positive life experience. In Athens it was that, despite the fact that not all men could have participated in politics permanently. Yet, the idea of the demos is still relevant, because capacity to create alternatives, or new things in their materiality, ability to discuss political matters, and make decisions were connected to it. The concept of democracy emphasizes this capacity of the demos (and not that of the elite). It reflects to a polity which characteristic feature is that the demos has the chance and ability to do things; or, with other words, to make changes in the world in which they live in, and which is the realm of their own existence; a home, a political community. All these together change politics to an activity which is a value in itself; and finally this experience takes its form in Aristotle’s famous statement that human beings are political animals by nature.\footnote{Aristotle, \textit{Politics} 1253a, cf. Hansen 2008.}

The polis should be treated as a human realm, or rather, as a world of being among men, in order to reinterpret it in a rhetorical and discursive style (Chapter IX, “The world of being among men”). This Arendtian \textit{Zwischenmenschlichkeit} means that the world is formed by the relationships being among humans, and is created and maintained by permanent talk to each other.\footnote{Arendt 2002.} This idea can help to reveal some of those characteristics of ancient democracy which are relevant from a rhetorical angle. One characteristic is that politics is a realm, which is stood around and protected by humans, and this action also protects free speech in this circled space. Second characteristic is that politics is formed by discourses among men, but discourses spread in the city through and through, which means that they do not have a strict center. Third characteristic is that political actors do not belong to the elite or professionals, but they are in fact everyday people who use their quite common capacities and experiences in political debates.

The open, public character of the polis leads to further questions concerning with the appearance of the demos and singular human beings. These questions include the meaning of presence; can we interpret the political appearance of the demos, and therefore the political presence of singular individuals as self expression, could we understand these expressions as truth? Or, how can we understand the situation of standing and waiting on the margin, and the
appearance of differences deriving from way of lives, and their *agon* as well? The classical polis ensured political presence and expression through political discourse, and not only for the few, but for the many. Though, the polis can be interpreted not only a sphere in which one could appear and express ideas, ways of life and collective desires, but a frame that gives things and ideas shape. In the ancient political imagination the polis was the place that enabled any kind of form of creation.

The polis is therefore a good model when one tries to interpret these together. It was a polity in which speech and discourse has the accepted capacity to create reality. On the one hand, it was not possible without the conviction that every human being can make a good decision in political and ethical issues, and that political wisdom is related to the common realm. On the other hand, many believed, especially the sophists, that the truths of this realm are rooted in the human beings who inhabited their political world, and who were permanently talking about these common issues with each other. This chapter is a contribution to the interpretation of the polis, and its partial result lies in the reading of Protagoras’ political philosophy, and in the idea that the dynamics inherent in the political can be imagined between the boundaries of democracy.

Politics seems to be a way of life in classical democratic experience, and *agon* makes possible presence and expression (see Chapter X, “Politics and way of life”). Human beings not only enter the political sphere, but they appear for the others, and gain rivals too. But this poses further questions in relation to the limits of the political, including which are those discourses and ideas that the community let become the part of it. On the one hand, closing the borders may lead to a static condition of the polis, to the fading of the political, to the reduction of its inner movement. On the other hand, this reduces the chance of transmitting different way of lives and human experiences for the whole political community. It seems that the supporters of Periclean democracy were not interested in closing the doors completely. Perhaps politics itself was a way of life for them, and different kind of lives, desires and experiences could took their place in that common frame. A Periclean text reveals that the main enterprise for the political community was political community itself.  

4. Political community as presence

Polis is institutionalized around the public sphere, and this makes public speech and rhetorical theory extremely relevant in interpreting politics. Following Plato and Aristotle, rhetoric and

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16 Thucydides II.35. ff.
philosophy are usually understood as different kind of intellectual activities, staying in opposition to each other. Rhetoric is accused by that it cannot achieve truth, or is nothing more than adornment. But these statements should be put into brackets here: rhetoric is not deception or an ornament on speech, but a practice which enable the readers of politics to understand socio-political reality. Rhetoric is the theoretical reflection of politics as activity (see Chapter XI, “Democracy and rhetoric”). The result of this section is an interpretive frame in which (later) politics can be theorized on a rhetorical and sophistic ground.

One of the main consequences of classical rhetoric is that there is always an other (man) in the human realm, and the existence of the other is the general condition of political existence. The same things can show their different faces from different angles to the same group of people in the open political and discursive sphere (as Arendt also noted). Rhetoric as being the practice of talking to an audience, points out the fact that there are always many people, and therefore many point of views. The other aspect is contingency; that is, the unpredictability and open-endedness which are as permanent conditions in the human world, as plurality. Rhetoric deals with per definitionem contingency, and not with sure things, which are closed for future actions. Rhetoric is the realm of the possible, and people search for possibilities in rhetorical situations.

But the components like the plurality of point of views and contingency, pose further questions concerning truth. Although one can say that truths formed in rhetorical situation are unstable, or these are not truths at all, but in fact, they reveal the conditions of the common human realm.

Rhetorical situation is above all a situation of action, while rhetoric is a kind of thought oriented towards the future. The freedom of political community appears in it (Chapter XII, “The freedom of political community”). Although people debate about events, further actions, other actors and so on, but they always confront other human beings who see the problems from different angles. Contested things are therefore interpreted things, and people show different course of actions to the others. It is not persuasion that stays in the center of rhetoric, but new possibilities revealed in speech and debate. We can only talk about freedom when at least two alternatives are accessible. But in many cases the alternatives (rather life choices than policy matters) seem to be equally valid. Rhetoric not only shows these ethical dilemmas, but as a theory, makes clear that this contradiction is only valid when the two (or more) parts of it are connected. The frame which holds dilemmas together and makes them

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visible, is called democracy.

Personal presence in expression, and collective ideas on alternatives are not only personal values, and do not belong only to the realm of individual freedom; they also belong to the common freedom. This can be seen in the case of choices, but has a wider meaning as well. The main purpose of communities who live in debates can be their own existence; that is, the existence and reinforcement of the horizons, values and life choices which shape the community. In fact, the polis can only survive in institutionalized debates.

There are examples for theorizing the connection between politics and possibilities in contemporary political theory too, as Kari Palonen’s analyses on Weber and on the history of politics as action shows (Chapter XIII, “Existence of possibilities and politics”). Politics can be understood as action (or mainly as action), but for Palonen the actors are only professional politicians in the modern sense. They are in fact extraordinary actors, and this is not an unproblematic theoretical choice. Despite that Palonen wishes to analyze contemporary non-elite politics, which focuses on identity issues and thinks in terms of life choices and recognition, he still uses the Weberian differentiation between professional and occasional politicians, stating that politics in the life choice style requires professional occasional politicians. From a classical point of view, it seems to be extremely confused, because in ancient direct democracy all men were in some sense a professional politician; of course with different intensity of action. Despite the conceptual problems, it is a relevant conclusion that politics is the ability to deal with possibilities, and that a political actor not only chooses among possibilities, but she should create these possibilities. And this means that a politician (or an actor in politics) not only makes decision, or even creates new ones, but should step across the borders of the impossible, as Palonen states.

Politics understood from the politician’s point of view seems to be similar to how rhetorical theory depicts politics. Action and speech are closely tied together, and they shape each other. Consequently, this makes clear that even a singular actor speaks to the many, thinks in the context of the others, and wants to make the others join, and in this course of actions she always meets people who have different opinion than she. The actors also have different shares of power, they wills cross each other, but these always create open ended situations. Politics as an activity and struggle, which seems to be sometimes so superficial, is a really open realm of human possibilities.

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18 For the conceptual history of politics, see Palonen 2009.
5. The limits of the possible

Finally I return to the fact that every political community has members, and this is a world which should embrace different ways of lives and ideas about happiness. But one can pose a question concerning those people and discourses that do not have the chance to appear in politics. What does a political community do with these people, or what can be said about the borders of community, and thus, about the limits of the possible?

First, having accepted the idea of participative democracy, it is hard to criticize the intention that different ways of lives and desires to happiness should take place in a political community. Second, the answers of the polis to the dilemmas of human lives lead to the question of adaptive capacity of democracies.

This means that contemporary problems of life choices in politics were taken into consideration here, and this reveals again that the classical and the modern interpretive horizon stay not so far from each other. Finally, the main conclusion of this chapter is that every political community needs the chance to redescribe its own political world in order to enrich the realm of the possible. Democracy exists in the flow of time, and its possibilities are in close connection with the chance of appearance of human differences in the discursive political realm.


Part IV
List of publications

Relating articles


Conferences


Translation

Other publications and translations


