ROBBIE SHILLIAM

DECOLONIZING POLITICS

AN INTRODUCTION

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Ali Meghji, *Decolonizing Sociology*

Decolonizing Politics

An Introduction

Robbie Shilliam

polity

Copyright Page

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Dedication

For Kōkiri and Reremoana. And to all the children who must find ways over, under, around, and through wicked Babylon.

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Introduction

Let’s start with a figure who is conventionally known as the “father” of political science – Aristotle. You might think this strange for a book that seeks to decolonize the study of politics: isn’t Aristotle a very Eurocentric departure point? Not if you asked Aristotle. He categorized Europeans as barbarians. Paul Cartledge (1993, 5), an eminent historian of the classical world, describes the ancient Greeks as “desperately foreign” to our Western sensibilities. Or how about Derek Walcott, famous Saint Lucian poet and Nobel Prize winner, who compares the Aegean and Caribbean seas and finds much in common:

> If we looked at them now, we would say that the Greeks had Puerto Rican tastes. Right? Because the stones were painted brightly. They were not these bleached stones. Time went by, and they sort of whitened and weathered, the classics began to be thought of as something bleached-out and rain-spotted, distant. (Brown and Johnson 1996, 183).

Perhaps Aristotle is not so much a strange departure point as an uncanny one. Investigating the place of aboriginal ideas of the sacred in mainstream Australian society, Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs (1995, 171) define the uncanny as “the combination of the familiar and the unfamiliar – the way the one seems always to *inhabit* the other.” Aristotle is familiar: we are used to conceiving of him as the progenitor of a European science of politics. Yet he is also unfamiliar: in fact, Aristotle was *not* European, so what does that make of the purportedly European tradition of studying politics?

Facing the uncanny unsettles our assumptions in an intimate fashion. Intimacy is important. There's an easy option to decolonizing the study of politics. You can simply search for the most exotic forms of politics around the world and revel in their alien-ness. But in doing so, you'd keep the "familiar" familiar and the "unfamiliar" unfamiliar. There would be no intimate engagement there between "them" and "us." No question raised as to what counts as "exotic' to whom and why. No stakes at play.

Put another way, if you moved your focus to a study of the "margins" only, then that would leave the "center" intact. Your movement would thereby avoid difficult but compelling questions such as: Who made their lives central and other peoples' lives marginal? And, by what logics are the margins divided from the center? There are many different kinds of centers and margins. In this book we are going to focus on imperial centers and colonial margins. We will be decolonizing the study of politics by rethinking both these centers and margins; but to do that we will have to take marginalized perspectives seriously.

Empirically, imperialism pertains to the expansion of a polity's influence or dominion through usually militaristic but also economic and diplomatic means. Imperial administration is a hierarchical affair, with a center that is served by a diverse set of peripheries. Imperialism is mostly a violent affair in so far as it forces the center of some peoples' worlds to become the margins of another people's world. Colonialism is principally about governing those marginal populations. Such governance can take many forms. I will draw attention to two here. Firstly, there is an indirect kind of colonial rule whereby a small coterie of foreign administrators (usually from the imperial center) appoint indigenous "chiefs" to rule over "tribes" on their behalf. Think of Ghana. The second version is where populations from the imperial center colonize and settle

lands and govern themselves while also ruling over indigenous peoples. In this instance, settlers often become the majority due to land dispossession and other techniques of genocide. Think of New Zealand.

You might say that empires and colonies no longer exist. A few colonies still do, but let me grant the point. However, the claim I will make in this book is that political science remains indebted to approaches, debates and categories that emerged to make sense of the challenges that imperial centers faced in ruling over the colonial margins that they had created. In this respect, empire and colonialism are formative phenomena in the study of politics. Case in point: our uncanny Aristotle, who was born into a colonial world.

Aristotle’s World

Aristotle was born in Stagiera, a typical Greek colony-city. Before the wars with Persia (499–450 bce), it was commonplace for Greek cities to send out settlers to found new cities. The hundreds of small autonomous cities produced in this colonizing movement provided the lattice of Greek politics. For instance, Aristotle’s mother came from Chalcis. Chalcis and another city, Andros, together sponsored the settlement of Stagiera almost 300 years before Aristotle’s birth in 384 bce. You’ve no doubt heard of Aristotle’s ideal model for a political community. Well, his description of the “polis” – its shape, size and substance – was remarkably similar to the colony-city of his birth.

Let’s be under no illusion: Greek colonization – like all colonization – was a conflictual and often bloody process. Nonetheless, in the “archaic” period (the hundreds of years before the Persian Wars) Greeks colonized in a manner similar to most groups of people who inhabited the shores of the Mediterranean. Greeks were all too aware that they shared these ancient shores with empires to the Asian east

and African south – empires that were often older, wealthier, and more powerful than them. Therefore, although colonizers themselves, Greeks did not necessarily consider themselves to be superior beings. Their settlers did not even feel the compulsion to eradicate the foreign gods of the lands that they colonized. Such gods were mapped onto figures that already comprised the Greek pantheon; either that, or their pantheon received new members.

One of the ways by which Greeks oriented themselves to this world of colonies and empires was by contrasting themselves to “barbarians.” You’re probably thinking about the derogatory nature of this term. Actually, in the archaic era “barbarian” straightforwardly referred to a non-Greek speaker. How about xenophobia? You’ll be aware of the hatred of foreigners usually implied by that term. But in the archaic era, “xenoi” referred to a “guest-friend” (see Malkin 2004). Evidently, the Greeks did not think themselves as fundamentally superior to the multicultural empires with which they shared the Mediterranean.

All this changed during the Persian Wars. Athens rose to become the hegemon of the Delian league, a collection of Greek cities that faced the imperial armies and navies of the Persian empire. As these autonomous cities came increasingly under Athenian rule, so were their distinctive identities sidelined by a new cultural identity of imperial belonging: Hellenism. At the same time, “barbarian” came to be associated primarily with Persians, who were described as a sensual and effeminate race of men. “Hellenic” thus came to reference a superior masculine civilization to the lesser barbarians that threatened it.

But the consolidation of imperial power by Athens invited challenge beyond the Persians. Macedonians, who lived north of Mount Olympus, spoke a Greek dialect and

worshiped gods from the Greek pantheon. They were, though, considered by Greeks to be barbarians. Regardless, by the time Aristotle was born, the imperial designs of Macedonia also began to threaten Athens and its leadership of the Delian league. As it happens, Aristotle's father served as a court physician to the Macedonian king Amyntas II during his short reign. Aristotle himself most likely spent some of his early childhood in the Macedonian palace at Pella. These connections would cause persistent trouble for him in later life.

So, Aristotle was born into a colonial world increasingly shaped by inter-imperial competition. On his mother's side he inherited the Greek settler project of founding independent colony-cities. On his father's side he inherited a connection to the court of an expansionary imperial power.

That said, much of Aristotle's own life would be spent in Athens as an immigrant, or what we would nowadays call a "permanent alien" or "permanent resident." James Watson (2010) helpfully points out that the Greek term for immigrant – metic – originally referred to a person who changed his dwelling from one land to another. In the archaic period, before Athenian hegemony and when distinctions between Greeks and non-Greeks were less fraught, metic women could marry Athenian men and their children would become Athenian citizens. Even during the war with Persia thousands of people arrived in Athens fleeing military invasion and most subsequently gained citizenship. But all this changed when Athens won the war under the leadership of Pericles.

In 451 bce Pericles introduced a law that limited the conferring of citizenship only to children of two Athenian parents. Effectively, the law ruled out the granting of citizenship to immigrants. With this, the status of metic was

drastically redefined. True, unlike slaves – and most households had them in Athens – metics were at least free. Nevertheless, metics could not own land, vote in the assembly, serve as a magistrate, or represent themselves in court without a sponsor. Unlike citizens, metics had to pay a poll tax and failure to do so could lead to enslavement. Despite this inequity, metics had the same obligations as citizens to serve in the army and navy. After the end of the Persian war, approximately one third to one half of the free population in Athens were metics.

At the age of seventeen, Aristotle moved to Athens and there attended Plato's academy for nineteen years. Aristotle's experiences in Athens were defined by his metic status. For instance, when setting up his own school in the Lyceum area of Athens, Aristotle could not buy land but had to rent the property. He even confided to a friend that "the same things are not proper for a foreigner as they are for a citizen: it is difficult to stay in Athens" (Anagnostopoulos 2009, 9). Tellingly, in his writings Aristotle often referred to Athenians as "they" rather than as "us" (Dietz 2012, 284).

In fact, Aristotle was cast more than once as an anti-Athenian self-hating Greek sympathizer of Macedonia. Anti-Macedonian sentiment intensified when, under Philip II's command, the Macedonian army began expanding into the territories of the Delian league, which were under Athenian leadership. Soon after Plato's death, Aristotle left Athens under some duress. It seems as if some Athenians resented his familial connections to Macedonia. Return to Stagiera was not wise; Aristotle's birthplace had recently been destroyed by Philip II and its residents sent into exile or sold into slavery. Instead, Aristotle was welcomed to Atarnesu, a settler-city on the coast of Asia Minor (in present-day Turkey), by an old student of Plato. Having

married his wife Pythias there, Aristotle moved the family to the island of Lesbos.

In 342, Philip II invited Aristotle to tutor his son, the future Alexander the Great. Aristotle returned to the palace at Pella for two years, introducing the young Alexander to the study of politics and writing for him two works on the subjects of monarchy and colonies. Thereafter, Aristotle journeyed home to Stagiera in time to witness the conquering of Athens by Philip II and the formation of a new federation of Greek cities – the League of Corinth – under Philip's influence.

After Philip's assassination and the ascent of his son Alexander, Aristotle returned to Athens for a second stay, during which he wrote his most influential treatise on the study of politics. He did, though, keep his Macedonian associations, including a friendship with Antipater, Alexander's viceroy, who held supreme command over the League of Corinth. After Alexander's untimely death, and with anti-Macedonian sentiment again sweeping through Athens, Aristotle left Athens for the last time. He retired to Chalcis, the colony-city where his mother's family held estates, and died there soon after.

Is not the political world of Aristotle uncanny to us? It is surely familiar in many ways: most present-day nations have colonial pasts; states across the world enact laws that make immigrants second class in comparison to first-class citizens; xenophobia easily sways political debate; and people flee wars to become asylum seekers and refugees. But it is also an unfamiliar world: we do not imagine colonial politics to play out in Greece, and Greece is supposed to be the ancient root of the European Union, not the center of non-European inter-imperial politics.

Above all, this uncanniness leads us to suspect that empire is an unexceptional political phenomenon. We might have

to face the possibility that our foundational understandings of the political world are filtered through colonialism far more than we might imagine to be the case. Consider this. When he wrote his treatise on *Politics*, Aristotle had already moved from his original colony-city to become a permanent alien. He then effectively became an asylum seeker and subsequently moved between two imperial powers. Even if he was relatively privileged, Aristotle’s life was also that of a sojourner, escapee, resident alien – not that of a settled, rights-holding, “native” citizen. Acknowledging this uncanniness allows us to re-orient toward Aristotle and his analysis of politics.

Many of the textbooks you might come across will introduce Aristotle as the first teacher of political science. Through his writings, you will be told, Aristotle proposed that man was a “political animal,” that the nature of this animal was to seek out the “good life,” that this life required systems of justice, and that the polis was the exemplary organization by which such normative aspirations could be met. Textbooks will also tell you that Aristotle described a wide array of political orders as well as the best methods by which to investigate and evaluate the actions of politicians and regimes.

Aristotle did cover this ground; no one is lying to you. But perhaps the problem lies in the ways in which textbooks condense Aristotle’s study of politics to a framework centered upon the citizen of the polis. It goes something like this: the lawmaker crafts legislation, especially a constitution that preserves order over the various inhabitants of the polis; politicians govern through the laws, customs and educational institutions that uphold the constitution; and, in pursuit of the good life, citizens hold a right to participate in political deliberation.

To be fair, textbooks will often mention along the way the inadequacies of Athenian justice when it came to women, slaves, and barbarians. Sometimes a note of caution might be struck over Aristotle's apparent disdain for barbarians, his claim that some people are "natural slaves," and that women are inferior to men. But textbooks will still tend to separate Aristotle's "ideal" model from its "real" politics.

By the "ideal" I mean a framework that focuses on the citizen in relation to the polis, such that the logic of this relationship is self-sufficient and exclusive of imperial entanglements. By the "real," I mean the wider imperial and colonial contexts in and through which the very practice of citizenship gained meaning for Aristotle. Does this separation of the "ideal" and the "real" quell that unsettled feeling? Does it make Aristotle comfortably familiar again? I hope not.

Because in light of the contextualization we just undertook it seems conceptually inadequate to separate the polis from empire, and the non-citizen from citizen. The logic that Aristotle used to bind the citizen to the polis is not self-sufficient and exclusive of imperial entanglements. What if we started from the premises that Aristotle's polis was intractably modeled on the small settler-colony of his birth, and that his focus on democratic deliberation was at root an attempt to redress the harms of imperial expansion? (see Dietz 2012).

Don't get me wrong. I'm not claiming that Aristotle was what we nowadays call a "decolonizer" of political science. He wasn't even a revolutionary. He was conservative in the literal sense. That is, Aristotle wished to conserve the possibility of living in a just polis, but one that for him was modelled on the small settler-colony of his birth. Crucially, Aristotle believed that imperial expansion and the wars that served such expansion had radically curtailed that

possibility. This was not only the case when it came to evaluating the barbarians of the Persian empire but also with regard to the trajectory of the Greek city leagues under the ambitions of both Athens and Macedonia (see, in general, Tuplin 1985). For Aristotle, empires by and large produced despots; and even citizens had to slavishly serve despots.

Aristotle’s position could not have been a comfortable one from which to write a treatise on politics: he sought to dialogue with Athenian citizens, living among them, but not as one of them. Aristotle’s philosophical provocation to them was something like this: “here is what you believe and practice; here is the logic to it; knowing this, do you think you should reappraise your beliefs and practices?” Indeed, his conception of politics itself was designed to address precisely such an intimately unsettling question.

Let’s start with Aristotle’s most famous statement: “a human is by nature a political animal” (Aristotle 2017, 4). But what does he mean by nature? As Jill Frank (2004) explains, nature for Aristotle signals “what happens usually and for the most part.” The nature of humans can neither be accidental – which would make that nature inexplicable – nor defined in terms of necessities – which would make that nature unchangeable. Rather, nature is stable enough to be studied, but variable enough such that any study will be imperfect.

Naturally (usually and for the most part) we humans care for each other, whether that be through friendships or families (Salkever 2014, 71). What’s more, says Aristotle, like most animals we are endowed with voluntary action, that is, we can choose to act. However, our capability to choose is a unique one. Unlike animals we can make choices by first using reason to evaluate all the possible courses of action (Aristotle 2014, 38–40).

If we put these concerns for sociability, agency, and reason together, then human nature can be explained in Aristotelian terms as a collective deliberation toward choosing the best course of action by which to attain the good life. Of course, such deliberation involves judgment. And for this reason, judgment is more of an art than a science, requiring practical wisdom, that is, insight applied to particular situations. For Aristotle (2014, 105–106), then, the study of politics cannot be simply the scientific analysis of universal laws but must always be a deliberative discussion about what might be best for the polity in any given time and place.

Still, deliberation requires leisure time and therein lies the rub. Those who plant the fields, raise children, clean households, and manufacture goods do not have any spare time. Therefore, politics can only be undertaken by virtue of a hierarchical division of labor that enfranchises some men as active citizens over and against other people in their household such as women, workers, slaves etc. Here we return to face Aristotle's conservatism, but in a different light: he wishes to preserve the hierarchical order of settler-colonies that makes politics, and thus the good life, possible.

Recall, though, Aristotle's understanding of nature as a condition that usually and in the main attains, and is neither random nor necessary. This understanding affects how he conceives of hierarchy. There is a subtle but important distinction between arguing that (a) hierarchy is *usual* and claiming that (b) certain peoples *by necessity and essence* occupy certain places in that hierarchy.

And think of all the paths that Aristotle has traveled in his life by the time he writes his *Politics*. He has moved from a citizen of a colony-city to a resident alien of another city, to a barbarian-sympathizer, to an asylum seeker, to an

academic in the court of empire, and back to a resident alien again. All his life he has moved into and through different hierarchies. Given this lived experience of politics, it is reasonable to suppose that Aristotle is trying to sensitize Athenian citizens to the fact that the hierarchical world they live in is changeable. Citizens, too, might not be essentially superior to anyone else. The great can also degenerate.

Take, for instance, one of Aristotle's most infamous discussions concerning the "natural slave." As scholars such as Michael Heath (2008) have argued, what distinguishes the citizen from the slave for Aristotle is a very distinct and exacting condition: the practical inability to take part in deliberating on predetermined ends. Aristotle does not mean to imply that the slave is incapable of deliberation, which for him would be the case with a child. Rather, for most of the time and in most cases the slave cannot practically enter into deliberation with others in an independent manner.

Basically, the definition of a natural slave is what the citizen categorically is not. This is no surprise, given the fact that Aristotle's ideal for the household is a division between citizens and slaves. So long as that division enables citizens to take part actively in politics, that is, deliberation toward the good life, then slavery is ultimately a good thing. The peace and prosperity enjoyed by the master even trickles down to benefit his slave.

We'll return to these assumptions shortly. But why might Aristotle be making such an argument in his own context? If we refuted the assumption that certain people are essentially born slaves, then anyone might become a slave if the political system they inhabit practically forbids deliberation for the sake of the good life. And Aristotle defines slavery, you'll recall, as the opposite of citizenship.

Consequently, imperial ambition, whether homegrown in Athens or imposed by Macedonia or Persia, might corrupt the polity, foreclose independent deliberation, and produce slavish citizens who must serve despots.

We can also think about the distinction between citizen and barbarian in like manner. Aristotle is influenced by earlier work that attributed the diversity of human capabilities to the effect upon semen production caused by climactic conditions. Yes, it is that graphic. In this model, as Julie Ward (2002) shows, the mild climate in Asia produces gentle, timid folk, while the cold climate in Europe produces wild, belligerent folk. As luck would have it, the Greek climate falls in between the two (Aristotle did not conceive of the Greeks as European) and so produces a balanced disposition of rationality and courage.

Are some people fated by climate to be barbarians? Perhaps, if only that Aristotle considers Greek peoples to display the same range of dispositions internally – European, Asiatic and Greek. So there has to be something additional to geographical location that makes a people barbaric. Actually, Aristotle rarely uses the term "barbarian" except descriptively. He is far more interested in examining the analytical difference between "ethnos," which he characterizes as a group existing without a common purpose, and the "polis," a group who share a conception of the good life (Ward 2002). Aristotle defines the Persians as an ethnos: he does not believe that the despotic structure of empire allows for a deliberative, shared conception of the good.

Therefore, in Aristotle's conception, the difference between peoples is principally, albeit not solely, decided by their political regime. By this logic, there is nothing in nature that prevents Greeks from losing their civilization and