

# POLI 341: ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL POLITICAL THOUGHT

## Session 2 – GREEK POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CLASSES

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# Session Overview

Welcome to session 2 of this course: **Greek Political and Social Classes**. Under this session, we want to discuss the Ancient Greek concept of the city-state. The Greeks considered the state as the single most important political organisation and therefore believed that life of the Greek revolved around the state. The session will also explain the key features of the state as conceived by the Greeks, identify the major advantages and draw backs. We are happy to notify you that the ancient Greeks had certain social classes which defined their roles in the state. Note that one's status on the social ladder determined how one was perceived and had access to some of the social and political rights in the city-state. It is important for you to know the political philosophy and the political institutions through which the ancient Greeks conducted political business. The session also explores why the Greek political and social institutions managed to survive for a very long time. We entreat you to take your time and with diligence, go through this session.

# Session outline

This session covers the following topics:

- Ancient Greek Concept of the State
- Social Classes in Ancient Greek City-States
- Ancient Greek Political Philosophy and Institutions
- Political Ideals of Athenians

TOPIC ONE

# Ancient Greek Concept of the State

# The Greek Conception of the State

- The Greeks thought that both the state and the individuals were similar in their moral purpose and ethical activity.
- They believed that the individual and the state were one.
- **Citizens within the state were expected to have civic consciousness to participate in the activities of the state.**
- The attainment of the well-being of the citizen was the primary duty of the state.
- Accumulation of wealth was never the real objective of the state.
- **The Greeks thought that a state worth its sort must give honour, power and authority only to persons who possessed virtue (behaviour or attitude that show high moral standards), and wisdom.**
- They maintained that even though they fall short of virtue and wisdom which are indispensable for a true state.

# The Greek Conception of the State

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- To the Greeks, the state was a moral association.
- Any deviation from morality and ethics on the part of the state would be disastrous.
- It is the duty of the state to help the citizens to pursue moral and ethical behaviour.
- The Greeks also drew no distinction between the state and society and also between different economic classes even though they recognised the importance of society.
- Free play of democratic values and institutions, to a considerable extent, ensured the freedom and autonomy of society.
- As the spirit of democracy was active, and as must always be the case when that spirit is active, free social opinion and social groups could easily influence the life of the state.

# Features of the Ancient Greek State

The ancient Greek polis was the central figure of the entire political system. However, the state had certain specific features. These included the following:

- Firstly, in ancient Greece, the state meant city-state and the political life of Greece revolved around this city-state.
  - To the Greek civic life was the normal life. The city-state was regarded as the home of *urda* *Yity* *a* *Yd* *Di* *lity*.
  - The Greek state was a mixture of rural and urban atmosphere and this made it unique in many respect.
- Secondly the city-state also had many facets. It was the seat of government.
  - The people used the city-states as a centre or club where they met regularly and had free, frank and open discussions which ultimately created a healthy atmosphere of good relations and cordiality among the people.

# Features of the Ancient Greek State

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- Thirdly, the city-state was that geography played a very important role in determining the physical boundary of the city-state.
- Finally, the city state also had several paradoxes.
  - The city-state was not always a city.
  - The city-state did not possess all the characteristics of city.
  - The city of ancient Greece did not mean that it was the home of leisure.
  - There was the prevalence of slavery and other many representative institutions.



# Major advantages of the City-States

- The tradition of free discussion, good relation among the inhabitants, urges for unity and finally loves for democracy allure us.
- In the Greek city-state, there were several classes, but there was no class antagonism.
- Today's states are | ery d'ig aŷd populous aŷd there no place for open assembly.
- The Greeks loved democracy and worked for its success .

# Major Drawbacks of the city-states

- Among the most intractable problems of the polis was the difficulty of reconciling the antagonistic striving of self-assertive men with the universally recognised need for moderation if they were to live comfortably together.
- Also the calls for moderation from all sources of moral authority including the Delphic Oracle, testify to the existence of selfish men.
- Again, the Greeks were brought up in a tradition that invites us to see virtue in poverty, modesty and simplicity of soul.
- Finally, the use of exile as a punishment meant sending a political opponent to another city where his political opinions would mean no trouble for the leader and less trouble for him.

TOPIC TWO

# **Social Classes in ancient Greek City-States**

# Citizens

The population of Greece was divided into three main classes that were political and legally distinct.

- **Citizens**
- The most important group were the **citizens** of the city who were legally entitled to take part in the politics of the city.
- This was a privilege attained by birth, for a Greek remained a citizen of the city to which parents belonged.
- Moreover, what citizenship entitled a man to was membership, that is, some minimum share of political activity or participation in public business.
- This minimum might be no more than the privilege of attending town meetings.
- Thus Aristotle, obviously thinking of Athenian practice considered that eligibility to jury-duty is the best criterion of citizenship.

# Citizenry ; Don't

- The Greek society was divided into demes.
- Everybody belonged to a *deme* of his/her father. It was only when you cross your *deme* that you were referred to as a *metic*.
- It is from your deme that you derive your citizenship and therefore your political rights.
- Franchise (the right to vote and be voted for) was a priceless right. It was considered inalienable and inviolable.
- Citizenship always meant some sort of participation in the affairs of the city-state.
- The idea of citizenship was therefore much more intimate and much less legal than the modern idea of citizenship.
- Citizenship was thought of not as a possession but as something shared, much like membership of a family.
- **Women** had no rights in the Greek society. They were considered as properties of the state and their husbands.

# Metics (Resident Foreigners)

- The Greek society was also made up of *metics* (resident foreigners).
- In a commercial city-state like Athens, the number of such persons was large and many of them were not transient.
- Since there were no naturalization laws, *metics* extending several generations still lived outside the citizen-body.
- Like slaves, *metics* had no part to play in the political life of the city, though he was a free man and was not to be socially discriminated against.

# Slaves

- At the bottom of the social scale were **slaves**.
- Slavery was a universal institution in the ancient world and at least about a third of the inhabitants of Athens were slaves.
- Slavery was as characteristic of the city-state economy as wage-earning is of the modern.
- The slave did not count politically in the city-state.
- The existence of slaves in the city-state was taken for granted by the Greeks.
- All descendants of slaves were also considered slaves.
- There were no naturalization laws and as such a person remained a slave as long as he remained in an area outside his *deme*.
- Aristotle was even of the view that all manual work must be reserved for slaves so that citizens could be freed to effectively participate in politics.

TOPIC THREE

# **The Ancient Greek Political Philosophy and Institutions**



# Ancient Greek political philosophy

- The Greek people were rational.
- Although the Greeks were highly religious, they were very practical and never hesitated to judge everything in the light of reason and experience.
- They analysed, explained and observed political events in the light of their personal experiences and this they did in a very rational manner.
- The Greeks gave us vocabulary of politics and were the first to make self-conscious reflections on politics. For instance, Plato used myths and knew their power, but he also analysed, speculated on, philosophized about politics.
- The existence of the city-states (polis) created very fertile grounds for constant political experiments and out these experiments emerged political thought.
- There were frequent rise and fall of monarchy, aristocracy, tyranny and democracy.
- These changes encouraged political thought in two ways.
  - **First**, the changes supplied data for political enquiry and **secondly**, since there were many city-states, there was close contact among them.

# The Greek Political Institutions ;cont'd

- The citizen-body of the Greek society transacted political business through political institutions. The political institutions, to all intents and purposes laid the foundation of direct democracy. These political institutions included the following:
- **The Assembly (Ecclesia)**
- This was the first political institution of the ancient Greeks.
- All citizens of the city-state above twenty years were entitled to attend the open meeting of the Assembly.
- This Assembly was also called the *ecclesia*.
- The Assembly was expected to meet ten times in a year and its sessions were very regular.
- Provision was also made for extraordinary sessions, even though it was the Council which had the power to convene the extraordinary sessions of the assembly.
- The assembly had the responsibility of deliberating over the affairs of the polis.

# The Greek Political Institutions

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- **The Council of 500**
- The decision-making and implementation functions were entrusted to a small body of persons called the Council.
- There were five hundred (500) members in the council hence the name the council of 500.
- The purpose of making the council so big was to make it more representative.
- Each of the ten tribes into which the Athenians were divided furnished fifty of the members and the fifty members from a single tribe were active for one-tenth of the yearly term of office.
- The committee of 50, augmented by one councilman from each of the nine tribes not in office, was in actual control and transacted business in the name of the entire Council.
- A president was chosen by lot from the fifty for a single day and no Athenian could hold this honour more than one day in his entire life.
- Theoretically, the fate of the Council was to be decided by the Assembly, in practice, however, the former was more powerful than the latter.

# The Greek Political Institutions

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- **The Ten Generals**
- There was also the Ten Generals who were chosen by direct election and were eligible for re-election.
- They retained a large measure of independence that the other institutions.
- The Generals were purely military officers but during imperial days, they actually exercised foreign relations functions and had some influence over the decisions of the Council and the Assembly at home.
- It was a general that Pericles acted year after year as the leader of Athenian policy.

# The Greek Political Institutions

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- **The Court**

- It was through the court, that popular control, both of the magistrates (public officials) and of the law was consummated.
- The Athenian courts were the main bedrock of the whole democratic system. The main duty of the Court was to render judicial decisions in particular cases, civil or criminal.
- In addition to this judicial function, the Court had the powers which were considered executive and legislative in nature.
- The Greek legal system had no room for appeal.
- First, the Courts had the power to judge the qualification of a person.
- Second, the Courts had the power to judge the performance of the magistrates. This was done at the end of a person's tenure.
- Finally, the Courts had the authority to look into the accounts of magistrates.
- Everyone, including slaves, had access to the law and that everyone was accessible by law. Nobody was immune from prosecution.
- There was no public prosecution. All prosecutions were brought by individuals against individuals.
- Citizens were expected to oversee the conduct of their fellow citizens and have enough civic virtue to go to law about it if it became overweening and unlawful.

TOPIC FOUR

# **Political Ideals of the Athenians**

# Political Ideals of the Greeks

- The popularly chosen Council and its responsibility to the Assembly, and the independent and popularly chosen juries, were the characteristic institutions of Athenian democracy.
- It is important for one to know that such ideals are less easy to discover and less tangible to describe, but they are no less important than the institutions themselves for understanding political philosophy.
- The political ideals of the Athenians were captured in a funeral oration delivered by Pericles in honour of the soldiers who had fallen in the first year of the Great War with Sparta.
- The purpose of the funeral oration was its patriotic appeal.
- Brief reference to some aspects of the funeral oration by Pericles will suffice here.
- *— I would have you do all things with a view to the greatness of Athens, until you become filled with the love of her; and when you are impressed by the spectacle of her glory, reflect that this empire has been acquired by men who knew their duty and had the courage to do it, who in the hour of conflict had the fear of dishonour always present to them, and who, if ever they failed in an enterprise, would not allow their virtues to be lost to their country, but freely gave their lives to her as the fairest offering which they could present at her feasts.*

# Political Ideals of the Greeks ;cont'd

- **Citizenship**
- Citizenship was considered the highest glory of the Athenians.
- Citizenship was treasured because it guaranteed other political rights.
- **Life in the city-state**
- The Greek political life had the intimacy which it is very difficult for the modern man to associate with politics.
- Modern states as you are aware, are relatively so large, so remote, so impersonal, that they cannot fill the place in modern life that the city filled in the life of the Greek.
- The Athenian's interest in politics as less divided, fell less sharply into compartments unconnected with one another.
- His religion, in so far as it was not a family matter, was the religion of the city, and his religious festivals were civic celebrations.



# Political Ideals of the Greeks ;cont'd

- **Representation and Participation**

- One other important ideal of the Greeks was effective representation and participation in governance.
- The administration of the city-state was in the hands of the many and not of the few. Public discussion, either formal or informal was the main delights and interests of the Athenian life.
- The Athenian citizens therefore combined the care of their private affairs with a share of public life.
- This particular ideal is captured vividly in the following statement by Pericles.

*—“Aÿ Atheÿiaÿ Ètizeÿ does ÿot ÿegleDt the state dèDause he takes Èare of his o|| ÿ household; and even those of us who are engaged in business have a very fair idea of politics. We alone regard a man who takes no interest in public affairs, not as a harmless, but as a useless character; and if few of us are originators, we are all souÿd judges of poliÈLJ*

- It was argued that when a citizen is in any way distinguished, he is preferred to the public service, not as a matter of privilege, but as the reward of merit. Pericles agued in his oration that:
- *—“We relLJÿot upoÿ waÿageÿeÿt or triÈkerLJ d’ut upoÿ our o|| ÿ hearts aÿd haÿds. Aÿd iÿ matter of education, whereas they (the Spartans) from early youth are always undergoing laborious exercises which are to make them brave, we live at ease, and yet are equally ready to faÈe the perils || h iÈh theLJfaÈe.*

# Political Ideals of the Greeks ;cont'd

- **Respect for law**
- Another important political ideal of the Greeks was respect for law.
- The Greeks had the faith that government rests in the last resort upon conviction and not on force, and that its institutions exist to convince and not to coerce.
- Greek political thinkers argued that tyranny is the worst of all governments.
- Tyranny, to them, means the application of unlawful force, even though it is beneficent in its aims and results, it is still bad because it destroys self-government.
- The Athenian political ideal might be summed up in a single phrase as the pursuit of free citizenship in a free state.