

I

# ANCIENT AND MODERN HOUSEHOLDS

## 1. DEFINITIONS

The *polis* households analyzed by Aristotle in his *Politics* and *Ethics* had little in common with the households of contemporary developed states. For Aristotle as for most Greeks, modern households would not have been households at all. Just as citizenship in the modern state is a weak shadow of *polis* citizenship, modern households are weak reflections of the powerful, independent institutions that were the *oikoi* of *poleis*.<sup>1</sup>

The differences were profound and manifold. In the eyes of Greeks, most modern households would have been seen as deficient, incomplete economic entities failing in the all-important aspect of being, at least minimally, self-sustaining. In this regard, modern households are the reverse of *polis* households in that they are, by and large, dependent for their subsistence on income originating from outside the household. Without jobs provided by the disembedded, non-household economy, modern households could not exist. Households of this type are merely consumer and reproductive units.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, the Greek *oikos* was expected to be a self-sustaining joint enterprise, almost

<sup>1</sup> The term *polis* is usually translated as “city-state,” or, less commonly, as “citizen state.” Translating *polis* as “city-state,” however, leads to confusion because the designation refers only to the self-conscious understanding of Greeks of their political and social institutions. The term “city-state” is a modern construct, capable of being applied to any and all city-state phenomena, whether Hellenic or not. For this reason, I use the term *polis* to designate only the Greek version of the city-state.

<sup>2</sup> Or merely consumer units. The decline of the role of reproduction in modern households would have puzzled ancient Greeks as much as their weak economic aspects.

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invariably agricultural, undertaken by husband and wife for the specific goal of the perpetuation of the *oikos* and the passing on of its resources to the next generation.<sup>3</sup>

However, it was much more than a business enterprise. The driving force of the *oikos* economy was not profit in the modern sense of the term.<sup>4</sup> The *oikos* was a moral and religious entity in its own right whose purpose was not just the generation of legally recognizable citizens, but the proper formation of morally acceptable members of the particular *polis* community where it was located, and the passing on of the household's religious cults to future generations. Material resources were intended primarily to sustain this enterprise; they were to be held in trust for the next generation. In that sense, even the property of the *oikos* was not purely private.<sup>5</sup>

It might be objected that *polis* households of this type did not differ all that much from the kinds of households found in other pre-modern societies. A recent authoritative social-anthropological survey of households identifies five elements as characteristic of households generally: production, distribution, transmission, reproduction, and co-residence.<sup>6</sup> The domestic group or household in this perspective should not be thought of as a single entity, but as a combination of several. The "familial" dimensions of the household are defined by the "origin of links between its members, links that have their source in

<sup>3</sup> The *oikos* was a joint enterprise, Foxhall 1989. Husbands and wives each contributed material resources to the setting up of the household. It was their joint management that made it functional. Despite the existence of non-subsistence households of the sub-hoplite or thetic class in most *poleis*, the generalization made here regarding autarky reflects both the ideology and the reality of Greek *oikoi*.

<sup>4</sup> Raw profit-making militated against Greek communitarianism. Households had social obligations to neighbors and kinsmen that constituted a kind of banking of reciprocal obligations, a way of building up help among others against the day the household in question needed to draw on its stored obligations (Millet 1991). In the absence of the kinds of social safety nets provided by modern administrative states, the only way for *oikoi* to provide for the old age or disability of their members was to rely on kin and neighborhood ties.

<sup>5</sup> Lacey 1968:125–137. That is not to say that the desire for more – *pleonexia* – was lacking among Greek farmers. Given an opportunity to improve or increase their holdings, they seized it with as much energy as farmers elsewhere. They were not, however, profit maximizers. Most *poleis* remained outside the market economy, minimal as it was by modern standards. For more on the ancient economy, see Chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>6</sup> Netting 1984: Introduction and Part I.

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culturally defined relations of birth, adoption and marriage.” On the other hand the “household” dimensions are defined “by shared tasks of production and/or consumption, regardless of whether its members are linked by kinship or marriage or are co-resident.”<sup>7</sup> The distinction between the kin and consumption or production aspects of the domestic group are particularly relevant to the study of premodern household (and among them, although not mentioned in Netting’s survey, *polis*) households. The following is a definition offered by one of the contributors:

In general a household is a collection of persons who work together to provide mutual care, including the provision of food, shelter, clothing and health care as well as socialization. But though households everywhere may be defined as task-oriented social units, the precise pattern of allocation is variable. In protoindustrial economies . . . as well as in agrarian communities, households generally function both as units of production and as units of consumption, while in industrial economies households tend to lose their role as productive units.<sup>8</sup>

Another contributor distinguishes between the conjugal family unit (the “family”) and the household. The conjugal family unit consists of the married couple and their offspring. This is sometimes called the simple, elementary family. This unit “may be thought of as the set of cultural expectations of what domestic groups and domestic relations should be like.” It establishes normative rules such as those of recruitment and devolution. The “household,” on the other hand, “is a dynamic empirical unity . . . in which reproduction and other important tasks, commonly including production, transmission, pooling and distribution take place.”<sup>9</sup> Aristotle and Greeks generally would have had no difficulty in understanding these distinctions, although they would have been puzzled by comments regarding industrial economies where “households tend to lose their role as productive units.” For Greeks, households without productive capacities would have been anomalies, not true, functional households.

<sup>7</sup> Netting 1984:45.

<sup>8</sup> Netting 1984:52.

<sup>9</sup> Arnould, in Netting 1984:138.

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Thomas Gallant, in his groundbreaking work, *Risk and Survival in Ancient Greece: Reconstructing the Rural Domestic Economy*, accepts the descriptions offered by the contributors to Netting's volume and defines the Greek household as a "collectivity of individuals who were usually, but not necessarily, related to one another and who formed the central unit of production/consumption and reproduction."<sup>10</sup> Still, for Gallant, such a definition is inadequate given the dynamic nature of the household and its morphology as an entity that was constantly in a state of flux, changing over time to the rhythm of its life cycle as new members were introduced and others left.<sup>11</sup>

*Inadequacies of Modern Definitions of the Household*

Neither Netting's definition nor Gallant's adaptation of it is an adequate basis for fully grasping Greek understanding of the household and, in turn, Aristotle's analysis of it. In their introduction, Netting et al. note that they do not discuss "household activities that fall outside [the] five spheres – such as defense or political action – although these can be of overriding importance in some cases."<sup>12</sup> This brief statement speaks volumes about modern assumptions regarding the household. For Netting and his contributors, politics and defense are not central to "households" but peripheral, whereas their five other characteristics – production, distribution, transmission, reproduction and co-residence – are definitional. This is intelligible enough in terms of their perspective, which focused on societies, where it can be taken for granted that "politics and defense" belong in another realm

<sup>10</sup> Gallant 1991a:153; cf. also 12–13.

<sup>11</sup> Gallant 1991a:14 cites Stone approvingly, "family size and composition are not fixed over time, but oscillate throughout the family life cycle." For antiquity, observing the life cycle in operation is difficult to impossible because of the absence of the kinds of long runs of serial data and detailed biographies of individual members. Cf. Pomeroy 1997:23: "The *oikos* is permanent, but its members are not. The family is a dynamic entity that reconfigures itself over time. The residential composition of the household changes over the life cycle of the family."

<sup>12</sup> Netting 1984:20. Netting does not indicate in what kinds of households or states defense or politics would be of "overriding importance." Although the editors included one article on the medieval household, they have nothing from any earlier period. The *polis* household would have offered an enlightening – and contradictory – contrast to the "universal" household type developed in the study.

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independent of and disconnected from the household. In short, the household in Netting's cross-cultural perspective falls into the category of the private realm. In none of the contemporary or historical societies reviewed by the contributors was there an immediate connection between the household and the political, judicial, and military realms. Yet it was precisely its involvement in the areas of defense, law, and politics that distinguished the *polis* and other city-state households from households in other societies, and provided them with their unique character.

*Unique Households in Unique States*

From earliest times to the beginning of the modern era, peasant households formed the basis of all complex societies around the Mediterranean basin and in western Asia. In all cases, with the exceptions noted, the principles laid down by Netting's scholars would have been valid. Peasant households from Morocco to Iran exhibited, in one form or another, the five characteristics claimed by Netting to be found in households universally. This, however, would not have been true of city-state institutions, whether Greek or non-Greek, which expected, or at least allowed, some measure of formal participation in civil, cultural, and military life by their constituent households.

The city-state was not a uniquely Greek institution, nor did Greeks invent it. Not all genuine city-states were Greek, though more than others, Greek city-states tended to exhibit what Hansen calls the characteristic of "city-state culture."<sup>13</sup> What Greeks did do was develop the form of the city-state more thoroughly, completely, and in greater variety over a longer period, and over a more widespread geographical landscape, than other city-state peoples. According to one scholar, what distinguished Greek *poleis* from other city-states was "the form of political rationality that the Greeks chose to substitute for other forms of communal tie, whether social, religious, military, or economic."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Hansen 2000:145. In his comprehensive survey of historical and contemporary city-states, Hansen suggests that the term "city-state culture" be used for clusters of city-states, or dispersed city-states that exhibit the same cultural characteristics.

<sup>14</sup> Murray 2000: 242; 1990:1–25; Hansen 2000; Gawantka 1985. Wood 1996 offers insights into the differences between *polis* and US concepts of citizenship, paying particular

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Making military and political affairs part of, and indeed central to, the agenda of the household understandably produced a radical restructuring of its internal relationships and its functional relationship to the larger *polis* community. Greek *oikoi* were expected to internalize and reproduce in their own micro-environments the ideology that characterized the constitution or *politeia* of their individual cities. The *oikos* of a particular city was supposed to embody the values of its *politeia*, and its corresponding characteristic *bios*, or life-style. Greek constitutions were not so much legal documents as comprehensive behavioral blueprints for daily life, politics, religion, social, economic, and cultural interactions. The impact of the intrusion into the household of what is usually thought to be proper to the public realm was not restricted to those who participated directly in military and political affairs, namely, the males of the household, but permeated all aspects of its relationships. Mothers in *polis* households were understood to be not merely responsible for the education of future farmers and their wives – as was true of all peasant households – but of property-owning, arms-bearing citizen-farmers *and* their wives.

The burden of education fell heaviest on the mothers of young children and other females of the household before fathers began to take over the socialization of their sons at some time around six or seven years of age. Their supervisory roles never ceased. Daughters had to be socialized into the *bios* of the community so that they, in their turn, could fulfill their responsibilities for the raising of citizen children. In the village-like community that was the average *polis*, the matrons were the primary guardians of behavior. In this, of course, they lacked the assistance of a formal “public” school system or any other aspect of the bureaucratic, custodial apparatus characteristic of modern states. Instead, kin networks, local, village-level supervision, the festivals, and the institutional structures of supra-household associations such as the

attention to our differing concepts regarding freedom. American citizenship, she says citing Ostwald, is a matter of individual rights and entitlements, whereas for Greeks, it was a matter of participation in a political community. It is easy to lose sight of this distinction and to introduce anachronistically modern versions of “rights” into considerations of Greek culture.

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deme, phratry, *genos*, tribe, and religious associations in which the *polis* was rich, provided a general structure for the education of children above and beyond what the *oikos* itself was capable of providing. The education of Greek children was incidental, not formal.

The opening up of the public realm of political, judicial, and military life to citizens of the *polis*, directly to its male population but indirectly to its female population, represented an enormous expansion of human experience for all members of the household. The customary comments regarding the political disabilities of female members of the *polis* need to be offset by considerations of their high social standing vis-à-vis other members of the community, such as male and female metics. While the internal hierarchy of the household was at least formally clear to all, it was equally clear that a citizen *oikos* outranked all other households. Another frequently underestimated aspect of female participation in the life of the political and not just the social community of the *polis* was the public role of women in religion.<sup>15</sup> As one scholar has put it, the religious realm was the equivalent of the political realm for males.<sup>16</sup>

*Politics and Defense*

For Greek *polis* dwellers, Netting's spheres of "politics and defense" were not peripheral but central to all aspects of their lives, from ideological self-understanding to the ways they structured their economic existence.<sup>17</sup> Depending on the individual constitution or *politeia*,

<sup>15</sup> Until recently, Anglophone scholars tended to give less emphasis to religion than did their Francophone colleagues, such as Gernet and de Polignac (Humphreys 1978a: 76–106; Sourvinou-Inwood 1988 and 1990). For Greek women and religion, we now have a thorough survey by Dillon 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Cohen 1991:225. Cf. Parker 1996: 80: "It is commonplace that Greek women enjoyed a kind of 'cultic citizenship,' which granted them at a different level the recognition they were denied in the political sphere."

<sup>17</sup> There was, of course, no "Greece," a national, territorial state like Assyria or Egypt or, later, Rome, with a capital, a ruling elite, army, and bureaucracy. Instead, approximately 1500 *poleis* formed a *Kulturnation* spread from the western Mediterranean to the eastern coasts of the Black Sea. "The Greeks saw themselves as part of one religious group; the fact that they had common sanctuaries and sacrifices – as well as the same language and blood, a perceived common ancestry, and the same way of life – was one of the defining characteristics of Greekness (Herodotus 8.144.2)," Sourvinou-Inwood 1990:300.

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military and political activities were integrated in varying degrees of depth with the economic, social, and cultural aspects of *polis* life. These military and political activities were central to the value system of the *polis*, not distractions from the main purpose of life.<sup>18</sup> They were not periodic interruptions of a life otherwise devoted to some other kind of activity, such as the pursuit of a profession, or the running of a business, or holding down a job. It was the way the public spheres of life – the military, the judicial, and the political – interacted with the constituent households of the community that made the *polis* household a distinct institution. Military and political affairs pervaded every aspect of life. Households in *poleis* and non-*poleis* differed precisely because the states in which they were embedded were different. To approach this from another angle, it was the *absence* of shared ruling and participation in security matters, or participation in these affairs at a very low level, that defined for Greeks (including Aristotle) the character of non-*polis* households and states.<sup>19</sup> For Aristotle, the fullest development of human nature occurred only in a *polis* context. Human flourishing, happiness, *eudaimonia* could not be readily achieved in any other environment. Correspondingly, the proper functioning of a household occurred only within a *polis* environment. Naturally, the best household was to be found in the best state, but even in a deficient *polis*, the household remained different from households in non-*polis* states.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> A distinction needs to be made between large (exceptional) *poleis* and the more average small *polis*. In the case of the former, there was a good chance the citizen-farmer lived in a village or, more exceptionally, in a detached farmhouse on his land at some distance from the metropolitan center. For some of these citizens, distance would have been a deterrence to attending assemblies and courts, although it may just as easily have had the opposite effect on those anxious to escape for a while to the big city. Cf. Carter 1986; Hansen 1977, 1983. For more on the size of *poleis*, see n. 29 and Chapter 3.

<sup>19</sup> The distinction between *polis* and non-*polis* states applies to Greeks as well as non-Greeks. Considerable numbers of Greeks, especially those living in continental Greece, remained in pre-*polis* conditions for centuries after their maritime neighbors urbanized or polisized. The term *ethnos* tends to be used of these Greeks, although the precise meaning of this term is not always clear. For a recent summary, see Morgan 2003:4–18; Beck 1997; Gehrke 1986; 2000. Polisization, or at least the formation of complex forms of government such as leagues, was a phenomenon that continued throughout the classical period. *Pari passu*, non-Greek states like Carthage were fully recognized as true, self-governing *poleis*.

<sup>20</sup> This might be regarded as judgmental ethnocentrism. There is no doubt that Aristotle, with full knowledge of other forms of polity besides the *polis*, made the conscious and



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*An Expanded Definition of the Household*

I return now to the definition of the *polis* household in the light of Netting's and Gallant's analysis. The definition of the Greek *polis* household needs to be expanded beyond the five categories proposed by Netting to include formally those political and military dimensions that gave the household of these states its special character, its specific function and capacity, its *ergon* and *dunamis*.<sup>21</sup> However, more than a single type of *polis* and household existed. The moral character of each individual *polis* was expressed in its constitution, its *politeia* and its specifically tailored educational system, its *paideia*, which existed to sustain this special character. There were as many constitutions as there were *poleis*. Correspondingly, the state's constituent *oikoi* and their quality varied with the state. Households were expected to enshrine and inculcate the values of their individual *polis*. Good households reflected the character of, and were productive of, the character of the *polis*. Reflecting this common understanding, Aristotle, in his discussion of the ideal state comments that:

[Education (*paideia*)] ought to be adapted to the particular form of constitution (*politeia*), since the particular character (*ēthos*) belonging to each constitution both guards the constitution generally and originally establishes it – for instance the democratic *ēthos* promotes democracy and the oligarchic oligarchy; and a better *ēthos* always produces a better constitution (8.1337a14–17).<sup>22</sup>

This may seem to be a commonplace since it could be said that all polities aim at self-replication through their households. Although this

explicit value judgment that the *polis* was the best institution for human flourishing. Only in a *polis* could there be full development of the cardinal virtues and their subsets of virtues that constituted the good and happy life of human beings. This is a separate question from whether he also thought that *only* the Greek *polis* fulfilled the definition of a *polis*. That not all members of the *polis* community would have the opportunity to practice virtue at the level necessary for happiness is a weakness of Aristotle's theory and the subject for another chapter.

<sup>21</sup> "All things are defined by their function (*ergon*) and their capacity (*dunamis*)" (1253a23). By identifying the proper *ergon* and *dunamis* of the household, we should, presumably, be able to establish its definition. And, having established its definition, we will thereby know what is its essential nature and highest good: "To discover the essential nature or definition of an object is the same as to discover its highest good" (Johnson 1990:48).

<sup>22</sup> Translations throughout this work are either from or based on Rackham.

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is true to some extent, no other political entity possessed the degree of integration of public and private realms that were to be found in the *polis*, which in turn placed such a heavy burden, educational and otherwise, on the household.<sup>23</sup> The interpenetration of economic, political, social, moral, and religious aspects of life – of public and private realms – was much more intense and complete in a *polis* than in any other form of state, ancient or modern.<sup>24</sup> In turn, it was this unusual melding of public and private that gave the *polis* household its special character and imposed on it heavy responsibilities.

*Public and Private*

In emphasizing the integration of private and public sectors, of household and *polis*, I do not wish to return to an older view of the *polis* that saw the household's privacy minimized and subordinated to the intrusive authority of the state.<sup>25</sup> The private realm of the household

<sup>23</sup> Contrast this with the assumed incompetence of contemporary households. According to the President Hoover's 1930 White House Conference on Child Health and Protection, it was "beyond the capacity of the individual parent to train her child to fit into the intricate, interwoven and interdependent social and economic system" of the modern state. According to the pioneering child expert G. Stanley Hall in 1925, "[t]he family, like a good administrator, farms out more and more of its functions to school, church and other organizations. . . . The specialists who enter the child's life to care for the different sides of his nature are far more efficient in their several fields than any one parent can be." Both citations are from Hulbert 2003:101, 116.

<sup>24</sup> This understanding reverses the public-private dichotomy advocated by Hannah Arendt and her followers. Large implications result from this reversal, especially as it concerns gender relations. I agree strongly, though not always for the same reasons, with the sentiments of Patterson 1998 that "[t]he engagement of the long separated 'private and public spheres' enlarges the historical stage and increases our appreciation of the historical drama. . . . If . . . the family – its interests, structures and relationships – can be seen as an important participant in the historical development of Greek society, so also will women enter the historical realm. And they will enter not solely as objects of male gaze but as participants in social institutions. . . . The family is not the passive relic of political development, but the active fashioner of relationships and identities from which and with which its members engage the larger world" (Patterson 1998:226–229).

<sup>25</sup> Plato's recognition of the power of the household led to his notorious abolition of it for the elite in his dialogue, the *Republic*. Plato's and Aristotle's insistence on the dominance of the state over the individual components of the state is a reflection in part of the reality of the *polis*, but also a product of their reforming ideological aims. The relationship of the public and private realms in Athens is dealt with at length by Cohen 1991:70–97; Swanson 1992. Cf. also Patterson 1998; Cox 1998; Saxonhouse 1992; Strauss 1993; Pomeroy 1997.