

Domestic Politics and International Relations: Lessons/Case Studies from Homer and Sophocles

Anastasia BAOU*

National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

Summary

Apart from their literary values, Homer and the Tragic Poets are deeply political. One of the several readings required to discover the several layers of comprehension, reveals forms of political organisation that are valid for an organised society to thrive and grow. The Iliad is wound around the devastating consequences of dispute of the leaders so that although it is about the war it ends up as a hymn to peace and prosperity. The army leaders just like Oedipus in the play of Sophocles must make the correct decisions otherwise the plot will not be resolved. The case studies throughout these works being inexhaustible, an attempt is made here to follow what appears to be a transformation of Oedipus into a tyrant during the play and restore him as an honest and brave political leader. Then we move on to the Iliad where in the first book in the open assembly there is a confrontation of two army leaders, which will judge the future of the whole army.

The virtues and leadership techniques revealed are valid for any age and any place. Especially in times of economic crises and until the proper state of mind is widely achieved by societies, political leadership remains a stronghold for the limits and constraints of state sovereignty and the endurance of democratic institutions. Correct domestic politics are a prerequisite for the function of international institutions and thriving cooperations both on regional and global level.

The political turmoil in the Greek City States after the Dark Ages in the eight century B.C. reflects the economic and subsequent social conditions of that time which was a transitional phase that lasted for two to three centuries and didn't evolve at the same pace everywhere.¹ The institution of monarchy suffered a long term fatigue and in its struggle to survive, it relied largely upon an aristocracy that got its power from land ownership and descend. The old kings are now in need of the nobles that surround them to provide counseling, resources and basically military support. Throughout several regions the king remains as a symbol mainly of religious power but the predominant form of governance was an aristocracy of the noble who had agreed to rule as a council of equal members. Small land owners who cultivated their

* **E-mail:** relibaou@gmail.com

¹ Selected bibliography on the history of that period: Bury, B. J., & Meiggs, R., *Ιστορία της Αρχαίας Ελλάδας μέχρι το θάνατο του Μεγάλου Αλεξάνδρου*, τ. Α', εκδ. Καρδαμίτσα, Αθήνα, 1979, Botsford & Robinson, *Αρχαία Ελληνική Ιστορία*, MIET, Αθήνα, 2008 and Schuller, W., *Ιστορία της Αρχαίας Ελλάδας*, MIET, Αθήνα, 2014.

own land as free citizens would have to borrow from the aristocracy in case of bad crops, mortgaging their land and finally their own selves. Thus heavily indebted farmers would finally become slaves to the aristocracy after a sequel of consecutive bad crops. The growing economic power of the aristocracy gained them political power alongside which, a growing class of merchants began to thrive stretching the social tensions further. Their growing prosperity made them demand a share in the political decisions monopolized by the aristocrats. With the increasing population and the scarcity of farmland, the ruling noble class encouraged and supported migration towards the Black Sea and south Italy. Relations with these regions had been well established in earlier times in seek of resources through maritime commercial routes and apart from case specific reasons for the colonization, the main motives remain economic and political. The colony was an enterprise under the auspices of the metropolis: there was financial support, religious bonds, rituals and customs were well preserved as well as continuous communication and cooperation. Should the colony wish to proceed and establish a new colony which was very often the case, it had to get the approval and support of the metropolis.

Although colonization gained the noble aristocracy political time and space, from 650 BC onwards, any remnants of political discontent that wasn't "drained" through the colonies were absorbed by the establishment of several types of tyrannies, a word which did not always equal the modern meaning of oppressive dictatorships.

One additional change of that time in the warfare conduct is critical and stressed for the transition of power and decline of the aristocracy. Any well -to- do citizen who could save money would buy himself a proper suit of armor to cover his upper body and head and also a shield. The spears accompanying it were shorter. This kind of soldier would march into the battle, closely attached to the rest of the unit forming one unique corps and this meant a radical change in the conduct of warfare: it gradually replaced to a large extent the chivalry of the noble who were fighting on horseback using long spears. It also reflected the notion that all men were equal on the field of battle, thus infusing democratic ways into the military power which was one of the strongholds of society in these days when cities would be in constant fight to prevail over the scarce land and resources.

In the case studies that follow, economic disaster is described as a plague sent by the gods. The attitude and political behavior of the leader / leaders in each case is key to the resolution or the continuation of the crisis. The consequences or benefits of the political decisions are equally important in times of peace and at wartime.

Domestic politics I: Oedipus Tyrant²

The myth of Oedipus is old, going back at least to the era of Homer : The king of Thebes Laios is given the oracle by Apollon at Delphi that the son we would have

² Text and selected commentary of Oedipus Tyrant: Dawe R.,D., Σοφοκλέους Οιδίπους Τύραννος, Ινστιτούτο του Βιβλίου-Α. Καρδαμίτσα, 2014, Μαρκαντωνάτος Γ., Σοφοκλέους Οιδίπους Τύραννος, Gutenberg, Αθήνα, 1986, Segal Ch., Οιδίπους Τύραννος. Τραγικός ηρωϊσμός και τα όρια της γνώσης, Ελληνική Ανθρωπιστική Εταιρεία, 2001

with his wife Iokasti was going to murder him. So, when the child is born he ties his feet together through holes in his ankles and gives him to one of his servants to abandon him on the mount Kithaironas to die. The servant pities the child and gives him to a shepherd from Korinth whom he meets there. This was the shepherd of the king of Korinth who in turn took the child to his king to be adopted. They named him Oedipus after his swollen and hurt feet and he was brought up by the king and the queen of Korinth. One day he discovers by accident that they are not his real parents and in his search for the truth he decides to go to the Delphi oracle where he was advised not to return to his parents because he would end up killing his father and marrying his own mother. Unable to return home he goes on wandering until he runs into a group of travelers and after a fight he kills them all but one, a servant who manages to escape. It turns out that these people had been the king of Thebes – the real father of Oedipus, Laios- and his escort. Further on the road, he comes up against the Sphinx, a fearful creature with the head of a human and the body of a lion who would pose a riddle on the passers - by and if they couldn't figure out the answer she would brutally kill them. Oedipus solved the riddle, the creature was destroyed and he got the award that had been proclaimed for the man who would save the city of Thebes from the monster. He became king, married the queen Iokasti, he had had four children by her and lived happily ever after as the beloved and popular savior and leader of the kingdom.

Suddenly a plague appears: women and animals would give birth to stillborn babies, the crops would dry out in the fields and the trees would be fruitless. Sophocles takes up the myth at this point, and starts his play by presenting King Oedipus receiving representatives of the people as suppliants who have come to beg their King to save their city. Oedipus the king exits the palace, he doesn't send a messenger as he himself stresses, proving this way how worried he feels about the problems of the state so that they open up to him more easily. He affectionately calls them what would be the modern equivalent of "my children" several times during the play although a part of the people are older than him. He is so self confident as their leader that he doesn't hesitate to open up to them first. He is not there to really find out what is happening in his kingdom as he is already aware of the situation and efficient as he is, he has already asked for an oracle from Delphi. The latter reads: the killer of the former King Laios must be sought out and banished. Oedipus immediately summons the people of Thebes in an open assembly where, having vowed to trace down the murderer, he appeals for any useful information towards that direction and as he also possesses the executive power, he pronounces the punishment for the guilty once he's been discovered. Open minded and democratic as he is, he takes the opinion and advice of his people to consult Teiresias, the blind prophet of Apollo in Thebes. Teiresias is reluctant to speak the truth, his wording is obscure and unclear and his reserved posture misleads Oedipus who is already under a confused state of mind into theories of conspiracy against him. Only when he leaves the scenery to get into the palace, Teiresias reveals that the murderer they are looking for is their own king. In the same way, Oedipus disputes with Creon who is the former

king of Thebes accusing him of an alleged conspiracy to usurp his throne. Everything takes place in the open, in front of the people of Thebes. All the heroes in the plays are exposed to the public of the tragedy represented by the Chorus, a fact that for a political leader as is Oedipus, automatically suggests transparency of procedures, which may be mistaken for transparency of thought also. The people of Thebes, watching their king dispute with the head of what would be today considered the church and then with their former king, draw the superficial and hasty conclusion that he shows signs of arrogance, implying that he is a tyrant. Overexposure to the public opinion may have such results: The average mind is not will not conceive the burden of responsibility and decision making of the leader. It cannot perceive that in order to get to the truth it is sometimes necessary to, temporarily doubt and question well established institutions and one fair ruler is entitled to do so. Not only he doesn't keep balances with the other poles of power (religious, former king) but through suffering and pain without losing one bit of his grandeur he doesn't hesitate to investigate deeply even when it is already obvious that he is the real cause of the catastrophe. That renders him an unparalleled role model not only as a political leader but also as a citizen and human being – no one should ask or expect the leaders to acquire supernatural powers. Eventually when all evidence is revealed and as he is the carrier of all powers including the executive one, he imposes on to himself the strictest of punishments: he doesn't sentence himself to death, one action that would cost his life but would instantly relieve himself from the torture and would also cause the sympathy of his people who would mourn for their king; instead he belittles his own existence by destroying his eyeballs, he hits them hard with his the metal pins he removed from the clothing of his dead wife – mother.

The whole play is about the struggle of Oedipus to discover the truth, the causes of the plagues that have fallen upon his people. The truth that everybody knows but himself. The tragedies were taught in the theatre not simply played. We don't have the music, the dancing etc to get in full the effect on the audience of that time. But we do have certain language techniques syntax and grammar forms and the vocabulary to compensate for these losses.

The Iliad – Homer³

The Iliad is the oldest text of European Literature. It was composed around the eighth century BC by one Homer or ... several (the scientific dispute is vivid) and was recorded in the years that Peisistratos reigned in Athens. It tells the story of the Trojan War, which started according to the poem when the Greeks attacked Troy, following the abduction of the Mycenaean queen by the prince of Troy. Mycenae, one of the six or seven kingdoms of the Bronze Age had had commercial relations with Troy for decades before the war broke out. The products imported from the land of Troy

³ Text and selected commentary of the Iliad: Όμηρος, Ιλιάδα, τόμοι Α' - Γ', "ΔΑΙΔΑΛΟΣ" - Ι. ΖΑΧΑΡΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ, Αθήνα, Kirk, S., G., The Iliad: a commentary, vol. I, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001 , Fowler R., ed The Cambridge Companion to Homer, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009

ranged from raw materials such as tin, copper and wool to food especially fish and live animals (horses). Further study of the archaeological findings shows that during the war, slaves (women with their children) were captured and transported to the Greek mainland mainly as workers. Historically, the war coincides with financial problems in the Mycenaean kingdom (approximately 13th century BC) related with overpopulation and lack of resources.

Whatever the motive, the poem 15,693 verses long, divided into 24 Books (Rhapsodies) provides amongst others, a brilliant model of how interior political problems will affect the course of events at wartime. During the ten-year long siege of Troy the allied army of the Achaioi (the Greeks) were living and sustained by plunder in places around Troy. The women from these places were kept or sold as slaves. One such slave is the cause of dispute during the tenth year of the war, between king Agamemnon who is head of the alliance and Achilles who is the leader of a part of the army from his homeplace. The Iliad starts by describing a terrible plague that has fallen upon the army as a punishment from Apollo because the daughter of his priest has been taken as slave by Agamemnon. Once the reason for the plague is revealed, Achilles takes the initiative to calmly convene an open meeting and he is totally poised as he addresses the people- during critical moments throughout the poem all the people even those who don't participate in the battle are summoned to an open assembly. He appeals to everybody's sense of duty and responsibility.

On the other hand, Agamemnon when he takes the floor a few verses later is described as angry ("his passion flooding from his dark insides), his eyes glittering like flames and he does not hesitate to attack the oracle Kalhas. His conduct and wording reflect his guilt and he uses several means to refute the accusations against him and disclaim his responsibility for the state of things.

Agamemnon's words reveal psychological fluctuations with ups and downs which can be read between the lines. These in turn cause equivalent fluctuations throughout the assembly: when he retreats there is a brief relief which is followed by new tension when he demands his share of the loot. On the other hand, Achilles starts his response calmly and his argumentation is objective (verses 125-127) Using the first plural (v. 125, 126, 127, 130) and taking the Greeks as one subject (v. 124, 130) he implies that the dispute is not personal among the two leaders but it concerns the whole army and that Agamemnon's greedy demands are pitted against the whole army. Agamemnon's reply turns the dispute on a personal level (verse 131) but there are elements in his speech which will not allow for the confrontation to climax yet: he recognizes the bravery of Achilles (v. 132) and stresses his divine nature (v. 147) and when he threatens to take his share of the loot as a compensation for his loss, he also mentions other heroes of war (verse 139) to sooth the personal attack on Achilles. The tension drops as he urges the assembly to take the woman back to her father. (v. 140- 147)

Achilles calls him names (dogface in v. 159) and also blames him for wanting to usurpe all the goods that belong to the whole army. Then he goes on to describe how impudence covers Agamemnon's body from head to toe like a cloth. The two leaders

remain tenacious on their arguments. Finally Achilles gives in as this the only way to end the dispute and accepts to give up his gifts and slave and hand them over to Agamemnon. Eventually he will realize his threat to withdraw his troops from the battlefield but he remains in the camp.

The scene of the open assembly is highly dramatic: the dialogues, quick in the transition from one speaker to the other, portray traits of their personalities and moral values, their physical appearance and gestures are supplemented by details by the narrator if necessary. Usually the poet is there to supply the least necessary for the description of internal or external action and generally will leave the drawing of conclusions and mind making to the audience.

The cause for the plague and consequent disaster of the army is the arrogance of Agamemnon and the punishment for it but the poet attributes it to the rage of Achilles who was not there to save them. Achilles incarnates the heroic role model as he prefers a short but glorious life to a longevity and tranquility, traits that render him a brave and courageous war machine that despises death. Apart from that he personifies virtues of honor and dignity valued by the respect of the rest of his comrades at battle. At the end of the dispute, he quietly withdraws from the battle without attempting to cause a breach or divide within the alliance of the military powers.

The destructive effect of this dispute is depicted eloquently throughout the poem, with scenes infiltrated with blood and horror described with violent and tough wording ("the souls of the heroes were pushed to Hades, while their dead corpses are devoured by dogs and vultures"). Human and material resources are wasted and the never ending siege of Troy is prolonged.

Domestic Politics and International Relations

It is believed that a quartet of cardinal values thought to have been established by Pythagoras can be detected in the work of Aeschylus and Pindar to be analysed by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle all the way to the Stoics: courage, temperance, justice and wisdom and they consist a measure against which every citizen should be judged.⁴

Keeping in mind the restraints set by the conceptual stretching in time and place, virtues of correct political leadership can be detected in both the afore mentioned works. While colonies and tyrannies in their historical framework consisted short term transitory means to the democracies, long term instruments to confront political problems that arose from the economic problems those days would be recorded legislation (on land reform, crimes etc). Divine command did have an important place in the illustration of events and enforcement of justice also in that time. *Mutatis mutandis*, modern societies build constitutions and courts of justice as modern states do with International Law and International Organizations.

Challenges and fragility cracks in modern states during the last decades which make sovereign states uneasy, finding their usual defensive mechanisms ineffective

⁴ Bowra, M.,C., *The Greek Experience*, H.N. Abrams, Inc., New York, p. 98

may be summarized as the emergence of new states, the migration of populations, the changing nature in the conduct of war not only in terms of the weapons used but also multiple confrontations on several levels without the traditional opposing two fronts, the almighty economic stagnation aggravated by regional economic crisis which have proven contagious.

Equally important to the creation of lasting institutions and the leadership of efficient political men, remain citizen qualities since democratic procedures require active participation and interaction of political beings, both governments and people. Otherwise democracies would be reduced to electoral rituals.

As regards ancient Greece, "the label electoral regime is completely wrong. There were elections and they had their element of ritual, their pretensions and conventions, their apathetic voters. But there were also assemblies with the (at least formal) power of final decision on issues. There was, in short, a measure of genuine popular participation."⁵

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Botsford & Robinson, Αρχαία Ελληνική Ιστορία, MIET, Αθήνα, 2008
- Bowra, M.,C., The Greek Experience, H.N. Abrams, Inc., New York,
- Bury, B., J., & Meiggs, R., Ιστορία της Αρχαίας Ελλάδας μέχρι το θάνατο του Μεγάλου Αλεξάνδρου, τ. Α', εκδ. Καρδαμίτσα, Αθήνα, 1979
- Dawe R.,D., Σοφοκλέους Οιδίπους Τύραννος, Ινστιτούτο του Βιβλίου-Α. Καρδαμίτσα, 2014
- Finley, I., M., Politics in the Ancient World, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000
- Fowler R., ed The Cambridge Companion to Homer, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009
- Kirk, S., G., The Iliad : a commentary, vol. I, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001
- Όμηρος, Ιλιάδα, τόμοι Α' - Γ', "ΔΑΙΔΑΛΟΣ" - Ι. ΖΑΧΑΡΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ, Αθήνα
- Segal Ch., Οιδίπους Τύραννος. Τραγικός ηρωϊσμός και τα όρια της γνώσης, Ελληνική Ανθρωπιστική Εταιρεία, 2001

⁵ Finley, I., M., Politics in the Ancient World, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 70