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# Polis and Polis

by *Barry Castro*



If we have been fortunate as academics, and I would guess that most of us have been, we were initiated into the polis of academic life by mentors who understood the joys, privileges, and responsibilities that they were inviting us to subscribe to.<sup>1</sup> Our acceptance of their invitation made us the colleagues of all those who had accepted similar invitations in the past. It made us the colleagues of those of our contemporaries whose initiations were parallel to our own. It obliged us to invite others in when we could and it gave us access to the profound pleasure all of that made possible. It is wonderful to feel part of something as empowering, affirmative, and civilized as the legacy of the Athenian Golden Age — quite a gift to have received, to share, and to be able to pass on.

I am a member of the Management Department of a School of Business, trained to some degree in economics and the social sciences, but not at all in classics. I have read the tragedies, some Aristophanes, some Plato, less Aristotle, Thucydides, and a little contemporary commentary on the Athenian fifth century. The limited classical material I have read has all been in translation. Nonetheless, it has struck a powerful chord for me.

The idea of the polis — which I very much connect to the idea of collegiality — is central to both my reading and the profound pleasures of academic life. Members of a polis, I want to suggest, are colleagues brought together by shared commitments to reason together, by commitments to an evolving moral imagination, and by an openness to each other's aesthetic sensibility. I think all three are necessary. It is clear that the polis does not simply refer to people who happen to live in a particular place and who share some common culture.

I think the pleasure I take in all of this is what I am about as an academic person, celebrating my colleagues and our collegiality, doing what I can to spread the joy, and fighting to keep the uniniti-

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from a talk presented April 14, 1997, at the Grand Valley Classical Forum.

ated from gumming up the works by redefining our enterprise in bureaucratic or careerist or populist terms. The good stuff can take many forms. I remember the spirit of the seminars that the butchers at the Berkeley Coop offered on the ways meat might be cut up, packaged, and labeled thirty-five years ago. I don't remember anything about the substance but the process was a celebration of being alive and awake and together. That process is difficult to forget. Those seminars were part of a polis in a way that my undergraduate philosophy class was not.

Like you, I expect, I can name the teachers who were part of the polis I am describing — one in grade school, one in Sunday school, two in high school, a few in college, and three or four in graduate school. I can name colleagues qua mentors too, one at the Equitable Life Assurance Society where I worked immediately after leaving college, many people with whom I taught everywhere I taught, some people, doing many different kinds of work, who loved new ideas and loved the process of thinking things through again and again. Like you, I can name people I have read whose voices stayed with me. Being able to invoke those voices through our lives — to be able to go out and have a cup of coffee with any one of them whenever we choose — makes us members of an awfully rich community — and one that is almost indestructible. Primo Levi's moment of rebirth as he remembered some lines from Dante and smilingly spoke them to himself in the heart of darkness at Auschwitz comes to mind. I find that my pleasure at these connections leads me to care a great deal about keeping faith with the visions of human potential that they worked toward. That faith is a celebration of life very much in the spirit of the Athenian Golden Age.

That is one thing I mean by polis. A second — geographic — sense of polis as physical community has been important to some recent work I have been doing and I want to share some thoughts about that too. It is a more pedestrian day-to-day kind of context but important to me in much the way that people who had never heard of Dante could be tremendously important to Primo Levi at Auschwitz. Living somewhere is different from living anywhere. Living somewhere involves one in a conversation which continues to evolve. We learn about our potential from each other. We learn about our responsibilities from each other. We learn that we can assume some things about reciprocal obligations that enable us to be less defensive and more fully realized. In the absence of such learning

things fall apart.

What I want to do is to present you with some conclusions of a study I am involved with of Grand Rapids and thirty-two other North American cities of comparable size. Doing that requires that I write in a different voice — one more like that of a business school faculty member. Let me italicize that voice to emphasize the disjuncture and also remind you that I believe the two voices come together in the end. Nonetheless, they seem to me to constitute an inquiry into why some places are more like a polis than others and why.

*I looked at U.S. Department of Census data to get at the 33 cities in the United States with populations between 150,000 and 250,000 that were not part of the metropolitan area of a larger city. The cities that had most rapidly lost manufacturing jobs between 1963 and 1990 had rates of violent crime more than twice as high as the cities that had most rapidly gained such jobs. This difference in the rate of violent crime — 19.67 per thousand as compared to 8.23 per thousand — was of recent origin. In 1975, when manufacturing job losses were substantial but with much deeper losses yet to come, the former group had a rate of violent crime a little more than half again as high as the latter (8.228 per thousand as compared to 5.088 per thousand). In 1950 and 1960 the cities which were to lose particularly large numbers of manufacturing jobs in the next thirty years had lower rates of violent crime than the cities to which I compared them (1.081 per thousand as compared to 1.745 in 1960 and 1.019 as compared to 1.308 in 1950).*

*Single parent families were also a good deal more prevalent in the cities that had lost manufacturing jobs (63% of the two parent families in the cities in the bottom quartile in manufacturing job retention as compared to 36.1% of the two parent families in those cities that had done best in increasing the availability of manufacturing jobs). Again the difference between the two groups of cities seemed to be increasing over time. In 1980, the proportion of single parent families in the cities that had lost manufacturing jobs was 33.3% as compared to 23.2% in the cities that had not. Unfortunately, census data on the local incidence of single parent families are not available earlier.*

*High school drop-out rates in 1990, the most recent year available, were 12% higher in the cities that had lost manufacturing jobs, another instance of social breakdown associated with long-term losses in manufacturing jobs. Estimates of the incidence of homelessness, still another index of social breakdown, were that it was 14.3% greater in the cities*

*that had lost manufacturing jobs in the most recent year available, 1989.*

*Race is often associated with both the incidence of single parent families and the incidence of violent crime, but the proportion of blacks in the cities that had lost manufacturing jobs and suffered the associated social breakdown was only 21.3%. The proportion of blacks in the cities that had best retained manufacturing jobs was 26.4%. Whatever else this may mean, and I think that is well worth inquiring into, it is clear that the findings I am reporting here are not confounded by race.*

*Local ownership matters. The cities in my sample with the highest indices of local ownership had more than a 50% higher rate of foundation giving than the cities with the lowest indices of local ownership. Their per capita United Way contributions were more than a third higher. They had a per capita response to Goodwill Industries almost twice as high as the low local ownership cities and a response to Second Harvest, in terms of pounds of food distributed per person in poverty, that was over 40% higher than the response of the low local ownership cities. Habitat for Humanity affiliates built almost three times the number of homes in the high local ownership cities than were built in the low local ownership cities (353 as compared to 130).*

*The cities high in local ownership did not maintain manufacturing employment any more than the cities low in local ownership. Nonetheless, they had more than 30% lower rates of violent crime and 11.6% fewer families without husbands present. There is, in short, a good deal of reason to believe that both retention of manufacturing jobs and high degrees of local ownership independently mitigate social breakdown, the former significantly more strongly than the latter.*

*It should, of course, also be clear that the indices I have relied on reflect a great deal of general social breakdown since 1960 — breakdown quite independent of changes in manufacturing employment or local ownership. My purpose here is to suggest that within the context of that general breakdown, strong relative differences exist, and that these seem to be based on the differential retention of manufacturing jobs and the differential extent of local ownership, and not on race.*

What would happen to our polis if we began losing our jobs and pretty much all of us had either lost them or were worrying about losing them? What would happen if there were no possibility of a comparable job to which we could reasonably look forward? What would happen if the people responsible for managing our enterprise

were no longer in Zumberge but were somewhere else (maybe Lansing — maybe Singapore) far enough away so that they considered us only as undifferentiated factors of production and we considered them as undifferentiated power brokers? What would happen if there were only private interests and the interconnectedness from which collective commitments might at least evolve did not exist? We lead privileged lives but the difficulty in extending that privilege to those around us is hard to ignore. Studying that difficulty cannot do much to resolve it but it gives my life a kind of cohesion it would not otherwise have. I think that must in one way or another be true for many of you. I hope so. ♣