Aristotle on the Demise and Stability of Political Systems

La discusión aristotélica acerca de la destrucción y estabilidad de los sistemas políticos

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Recibido: 11-07-2021
Aceptado: 01-01-2022

Abstract

This article examines Aristotle's theory of 'factional conflict' (*stasis*) in Book 5 of the *Politics* and claims that it is mainly directed against the a-historical account of constitutional change Plato develops in the *Republic*. Aristotle's investigation of the causes of stasis is oriented towards the normative political goal of stabilizing political orders and preventing their 'change' (*metabolê*) into different ones. This article argues that the constitution Aristotle calls 'polity' (*politeia*) constitutes his solution to the challenge of stabilizing democracies and oligarchies. The paper also aims at elucidating Aristotle's conception of an empirical political science, his political realism, and the method he applies in conjunction with it in the 'empirical' Books of the *Politics* (Book 4 through 6).

Keywords: political injustice, factional conflict (*stasis*), polity (*politeia*), political science, political realism, empirical method, Plato.

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Resumen

Este artículo analiza la teoría aristotélica del 'conflicto entre facciones' (*stasis*) en el libro 5 de la *Política* de Aristóteles y afirma que esta misma teoría ataca el relato a-histórico del cambio constitucional que Platón desarrolla en la *República*. La investigación aristotélica sobre las causas de la *stasis* tiene como objetivo normativo práctico la estabilización de los regímenes políticos y la prevención contra su 'cambio' (*metabolê*). Este artículo sostiene que la constitución que Aristóteles llama politeia constituye su solución al desafío sobre cómo dar estabilidad a las democracias y las oligarquías. Esta contribución se centra también en presentar la idea aristotélica de una ciencia política empírica, el realismo político de Aristóteles y el método que el filósofo usa en unión con él en los libros 'empíricos' de la *Política* (libros 4-6).

Palabras-clave: injusticia política, conflicto entre facciones (*stasis*), *politeia*, ciencia política, realismo político, método empírico, Platón.

1. Aristotle and political realism

As a political philosopher, Aristotle is primarily known for his normative political thought connected to his virtue ethics and theory of 'human flourishing' (*eudaimonia*). According to it, the 'goal' (*telos*) of the *polis* is the good and happy life of its citizens, which requires the active and perfect actualization of the virtues of the character and the intellect. Aristotle's political analyses in the 'empirical' Books of the *Politics* (*Pol.* Book 4 through 6) show, however, that he was also among the first political realists. The realist tradition goes back to Thucydides and some of the Greek sophists[2]. One characteristic of this tradition, to which also Niccolò Machiavelli and Max Weber belong, is a sober and realistic view of political reality, the human being, and its moral defects[3]. While most political realists reject 'ideal theory' and consider only pure factuality, in Books 7 and 8 of the *Pol.*, Aristotle also lays out his conception of an 'ideal' political order. According to political realism, *power* is the central category both in politics and for an understanding of the 'political'[4]. While power is an important topic of Aristotle's political thought, he is equally concerned with normative questions such as political justice and citizen's good and happy life.

It is primarily the realistic aspect of Aristotle's political thought, which

[2] In the volume Frankel 1996, which is devoted to different aspects of realism in international politics, three articles focus on Thucydides and one on the sophists.

[3] According to Berg-Schlosser-Stammen 1995: 25-26, a contemporary political science textbook, Machiavelli and Weber are the main representatives of a realist conception of politics.

[4] Cf. Berg-Schlosser-Stammen: 25-26.

influenced Machiavelli's political theory. According to Machiavelli's political realism, it appears "more fitting to go directly to the effectual truth of the thing (*verità effettuale della cosa*) than to the imagination of it"[5]. Despite his political realism, Machiavelli, like Aristotle, has a strong normative interest in the preservation and stability of existing political orders[6]. Machiavelli's political theory depends in particular on Book 5 of the *Pol.*; as has been noted more than once, in *Il Principe* Machiavelli includes several of the advices Aristotle suggests to the tyrant[7]. Even more important, Machiavelli takes up both Aristotle's conception of political science as a practical science and his empirical, inductive, and comparative method[8].

This article aims at elucidating Aristotle's conception of an empirical political science, his political realism, and the method he applies in conjunction with it in the 'empirical' Books of the *Pol*. In Book 5, Aristotle carries out one of the four different tasks he assigns to constitutional theory at the beginning of Book 4. It requires studying "any given regime […] with a view to determining both how it might arise initially and in what manner it might be preserved for the longest time once in existence" (*Pol.* 4.1, 1288b 28-30, trans. Lord; cf. *NE* 10, 1181b 18-19). In Book 5, Aristotle presents his theory of 'upheaval', 'sedition', 'faction', 'factional conflict', 'rebellion' or 'revolution' (*stasis*[9]). His investigation of the causes of *stasis* is oriented towards the normative political goal of stabilizing political orders and preventing their 'change' (*metabolê*) into different ones. This article argues that the constitution Aristotle calls 'polity' (*politeia*) constitutes his solution to the challenge of stabilizing democracies and oligarchies. It examines Aristotle's theory of *stasis* and claims that it is mainly directed against the a-historical account of constitutional change Plato develops in Books 8 and 9 of the *Republic*.

In Book 5 of the *Pol.*, Aristotle consistently advocates the preservation of political orders and never their overthrow. One reason for this might be his audience: "the *Politics* is addressed to those in power, not to those seeking power"[10]. Another reason might be that Aristotle is a conservative in the truest

[5] Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, XV, trans. H. Mansfield, Italian words inserted by M.K.

[6] This normative interest is expressed in phrases such as "mantenere lo stato" and "conservare lo stato", which Machiavelli holds to be political goals of prime rank; see e.g. Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, XVIII and XIX.

[7] Mehmel 1948; Sternberger 1984: 172ff., confronts several passages from Aristotle's *Politics* and Machiavelli's *Il Principe*. Ottmann 2004: 149, summarizes some of Aristotle's advices, assuming that Machiavelli used Bruni's translation of the *Pol*. For more literature on Aristotle's influence on Machiavelli, see Zanzi 1981: 131.

[8] Knoll 2010.

[9] In her part of the introduction to a recent commentary on Books 5 and 6, De Luna-Zizza-Curnis 2016: 7, Maria Elena De Luna explains that a perfect translation of the term *stasis* is impossible due to its "densità semantica"; for the terms *stasis* and *metabolê*, see also Hatzistavrou 2013: 276-277 and Keyt 1999: 64-66. In this article, the translation mostly used for *stasis* is "factional conflict".

[10] See Keyt 1999: xiv-xv, who suggests two other possible reasons why Aristotle consistently advocates the preservation of political systems.

sense of the word, which reveals itself in Book 2.1-5 in which he adamantly criticizes the social-revolutionary innovations Plato introduces for his best city. A third reason is that in Greek history the overthrow of a constitution usually went along with distress and bloodshed. Thucydides' account of the several horrible civil wars that happened during the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE) is among the main historical sources from which Aristotle draws in Book 5. Its main topic is the demise and stability of 'political systems' (*politeiai*).

2. Aristotle's conception of a 'political system' (*politeia*) and political justice

While the different 'virtues' (*aretai*) are the main topic of Aristotle's writings on ethics, the various *politeiai* are the central subject of his *Pol*. The common translation of πολιτεία (*politeia*) is 'constitution'. This translation is problematic because Aristotle's political thought is rooted in the ancient world of the *polis* and his understanding of a *politeia* is quite different from the modern comprehension of a 'constitution'. In contrast to ancient *politeiai*, modern Western constitutions usually are written documents, which constitute the legal basis of *democratic* political systems, comprise a catalogue of fundamental rights, and stipulate which parts of the constitution can be altered and which majorities are necessary to do this. Aristotle's first core definition of a *politeia* in Book 3 delineates it as an 'order' (*taxis*) that determines *who* rules in the political community. For example, democracy is the rule of the 'people' (*demos*), oligarchy the rule of the 'few' (*oligoi*) (*Pol.* 3.6, 1278b 8-13). Aristotle's narrow definition, which focuses on the *various* common allocations of political power, further illustrates why the modern and broad term 'constitution' is a problematic translation of *politeia*. A more appropriate rendering, which is in line with the terminology of contemporary political science, would be 'system of government', or, defined more broadly, 'political system'[11].

In Book 4, Aristotle presents a second and extended definition, "A *politeia* is the order of a *polis* in respect to its various offices and the questions of how they are distributed, what the supreme power of the *polis* is, and what the end of every community is" (*Pol.* 4.1, 1289a 15-18, my trans.). This definition includes two new determinations of a *politeia*, which Aristotle discussed both in the chapters of Book 3 that follow his first definition. First, different political systems and their respective ruling groups focus on diverse ends or goals. The three correct political systems aim at the common good, their three deviations at the particular or personal benefit of the rulers. Kingship and aristocracy focus primarily on a good life of its citizens based on 'virtue' (*aretê*), oligarchy mainly aims at safeguarding

[11] For partly different criticisms of the translation of *politieia* as 'constitution', see Strauss 1953: 135-37, who translates *politeia* with 'regime'.

and increasing the fortune of the wealthy, and democracy mostly at the freedom of the poor majority of citizens who want to live as they want[12].

In contrast to the final or dominant ends of political systems, the second new determination of Aristotle's extended definition plays an essential role in Aristotle's theory of the demise and stability of political systems. It concerns the just distribution of political offices and thus of political power. This is not only a disputed political but also a controversial ethical question because the champions of different systems of government justify their specific distribution of power through a corresponding conception of distributive justice. Aristotle usually distinguishes between four conceptions of distributive justice and four groups of citizens; each of those defends one of these four conceptions with reasons and arguments: the democratic, the oligarchic, and the aristocratic conception, and an undesignated fourth conception (cf. *NE* 5.6, 1131a 25-29). In Book 3 of the *Pol.*, Aristotle gives the most detailed account of the respective arguments of all four political groups and advocates his own view. Briefly summarized, the supporters of an oligarchic conception, who Aristotle equates with the rich, argue that because of their unequal contribution to the public they deserve an unequal share in political power. Therefore, they claim that an oligarchy, in which the offices are distributed in proportion to 'wealth' (*ploutos*), is the appropriate system of government (*Pol.* 3.9, 1280a 25-31; *Pol.* 3.13, 1283a 31-33). The adherents of a democratic conception argue that all male citizens are equal because they are all born as free men. Because of their equal 'freedom' (*eleutheria*) they hold it to be just if both the poor and the rich get an equal share in political power; hence, they maintain that a democracy is the apposite system of government (*Pol.* 3.9, 1280a 23-25; *Pol.* 3.12, 1283a 16-17). Contrary to supporters of both the democratic and the oligarchic conception of distributive justice, the members of the good families refer to their 'noble birth' (*eugeneia*). The better-born argue that because of their qualities and the virtue of their families it is justified that they get a bigger share in political power than the low-born (*Pol.* 3.13, 1283a 33-37).

This brief reconstruction of the arguments of the oligarchs, democrats, and well-born shows that each conception of distributive justice is connected with a corresponding system of government. Aristotle conceives of the different political systems – with the exception of tyranny – as embodiments of different conceptions of distributive justice[13]. In Book 3, he presents several arguments for his preference for the aristocratic conception that holds 'political virtue' (*politikê aretê*) to be the appropriate measure of merit and the most justified claim for political power. Aristotle's main reason for this political preference is that political virtue contributes substantially to reaching the good life or 'human flourishing'

[12] Aristotle's view of the final or dominant ends of political systems corresponds to Plato's; cf. *Resp.* 4, 420b-4, 445d; 8, 555b-c, 557b, 562b-d; 9, 580bff. In Book 5, Aristotle refers back to the goal of oligarchy (*Pol.* 5.10, 1311a 9-10). In Book 6, he refers back to the goal of democracy (*Pol.* 6.2, 1317a 40-b17).

[13] Cf. Keyt 1991: 238; Miller 1995: 79; Mulgan 1991: 310.

(*eudaimonia*), the true goal of the *polis*. Several scholars argue that Aristotle was a supporter of aristocracy and that his best political system is a true aristocracy in which the morally and intellectually best men rule[14].

That Aristotle presents a second and extended definition of a *politeia* in Book 4 clearly suggests the interpretation that he does this to include the results he gained in Book 3. This is a strong argument for the unity of the *Pol.*[15]. First, it shows that there is no rupture between Books 3 and 4, as the supporters of the genetic-analytic interpretation of the *Pol.* suggest. Second, it indicates that its subjects and arguments are not only coherent and consistent, but build on each other in such a way that later parts implicitly or explicitly refer back to earlier parts, which they presuppose, continue, distinguish, or supplement. This is also true for Book 5, in which Aristotle bases his theory of *stasis* to a considerable extent on the theory of political justice he had developed in Book 3[16].

3. Political injustice as general cause of factional conflict

The dispute about a just distribution of political power and the appropriate political system is highly significant for Aristotle's theory of the demise and stability of political systems. Because if a group of citizens judges its particular share in political power to be unjust, it is prone to 'factional conflict' (*stasis*). Aristotle discusses this general cause or motive for 'faction' (*stasis*), which has been adequately denominated as "injustice-induced faction"[17], in the crucial first chapter of Book 5 of the *Pol*. In the chapter, he focuses on democracy and oligarchy, which he recognizes as the prevailing political systems of his time (*Pol.* 5.1, 1301b 39-40; cf. *Pol.* 3.15, 1286b 20-22). Already Thucydides informs us of how unstable both of these constitutional types were. During the Peloponnesian War, Athens, the champion of democracy, aimed at constitutional change by supporting democratic parties in oligarchic political systems. While Athens triggered revolutions in order to make Greece 'safe for democracy', its rival Sparta destabilized the democratic allies of Athens in order to introduce oligarchic political systems[18].

[14] For reconstructions of Aristotle's arguments for the conception of distributive justice he favors see Keyt 1991: 247-259, and Knoll 2017a: 95-100; cf. Bertelli 2011 and Miller 1995: 127. For Aristotle's best political system as a true aristocracy see Bates 2003: 97; Bertelli 2011: 76; Chuska 2000: 322-23; Giorgini 2019: 138; Keyt 1991: 260-270; Keyt 1999: vx; Knoll 2017a: 100-104; Kraut 2002: 232; Langmeier 2018: 317-368; Miller 1995: 192.

[15] For more arguments, see Knoll 2011a and Knoll 2011b.

[16] For the relation of justice and stability of constitutions, see Langmeier 2018: 261-272.

[17] Hatzistavrou 2013: 276, 278, 290.

[18] Thuc. 3.82; *Pol.* 5.7, 1307b 19-24; Bleicken 1994: 58-59. Also after the Peloponnesian War, in the 4th century BCE, several bloody revolutions happened, e.g., in Thebes and Thessalia; cf. Gehrke 1985.

Aristotle attributes the origin of democracy and oligarchy to the opposing conceptions of justice of their supporters. While the democrats advocate arithmetic or numerical equality and justice, the oligarchs defend geometric or proportional equality and justice[19]. Due to their equal freedom, the democrats consider equal political participation, and therefore a democratic system of government, to be just. In contrast, based on their unequal wealth and unequal contribution to the *polis*, the rich hold an unequal share in the government and an oligarchic political system to be appropriate (*Pol.* 5.1, 1301a 25-39).

Despite the fact that Aristotle concedes both conceptions of justice a limited right, he ultimately assesses them to be mistaken. As origins and causes of their corresponding systems of government, they are both mistaken because they are the reason that democracies and oligarchies are instable and cannot be steadily preserved (*Pol.* 5.1, 1301a 35-36; 1302a 4-7). The rich citizens strive to overthrow democracies because they retain a distribution of political power, in which every citizen has an equal claim, to be unjust. In contrast, in oligarchies uprisings happen because the poor citizens are excluded from political life, which causes their indignation. As a result, and in line with their conception of justice, they request to participate in government equally (*Pol.* 5.2, 1302a 22ff.; *Pol.* 5.3, 1303b 3-7; *Pol.* 5.12, 1316a 39-b 5). While the rich strive for a form of political participation that is *equal in proportion to* their wealth and contribution, the poor aspire to partake in the political life *equally in a numerical sense*[20]. This is why Aristotle arrives at the overall conclusion that "in general it is equality they seek when they engage in factional conflict"; or, "factional conflict is everywhere the result of inequality" (*Pol.* 5.1, 1301b 26-29, trans. Lord). However, uprisings each time originate from the citizens, or group of citizens, who are not in power or do not have the amount of power they feel entitled to: "The inferior always seek equality and justice; those who dominate them take no thought for it" (*Pol.* 6.3, 1318b 4-5, trans. Lord).

Aristotle claims that political inequalities only cause factional conflicts if they are not in proportion to citizen's inequalities. This is, e.g., the case if a "lifelong monarchy […] exists among equal persons"; in this circumstance the king does not stand out among the citizens through extraordinary moral and intellectual virtue and therefore does not deserve to rule (*Pol.* 5.1, 1301b 27-28, trans. Lord; cf. *Pol.* 3.13, 1284a 3-11, b 32-34; *Pol.* 4.2, 1289a 41-

[19] Cf. Bertelli 2011; Keyt 1991; Knoll 2017a.

[20] In contrast to *NE* and in line with Plato in the *Laws*, in the *Pol.*, Aristotle opposes 'numeric' or 'arithmetic' (*arithmô*) equality to equality 'according to merit' (*kat' axian*) (*Pol.* 5.1, 1301b 29-30; 6.2, 1317b 4; cf. *Leg.* 751d, 757a-758a). This opposition corresponds to the fundamental antagonism between arithmetic equality and justice, on the one hand, and geometric or proportional equality and justice, on the other. Unlike in *NE*, in the *Pol.*, democratic justice is no longer presented as one interpretation of justice according to merit, but as an application of 'numeric' or 'arithmetic' equality (*Pol.* 6.2, 1317b 4: *kata arithmon alla mê kat' axian*; cf. *NE* 5.6, 1131a 25-29; *Pol.* 6.2/3, 1318a 3ff.).

b1)[21]. Aristotle examines the decay and preservation of monarchies (both kingships and tyrannies) in Chapters 10 and 11 of Book 5. He holds kingship and aristocracy to be kindred constitutions because their genuine versions are both based on the moral and intellectual virtues of the rulers (*Pol.* 4.2, 1289a 30-33). In line with his aristocratic political leanings, Aristotle declares that the best and most virtuous citizens are arguably truly unequal (*Pol.* 5.1, 1301a 40-b 1). Nevertheless, when they are not in government, they hardly strive to seize political power: "Those who are outstanding in virtue would engage in factional conflict most justifiably, yet they do it the least of all" (*Pol.* 5.1, 1301a 39-40). Aristotle does not explain whether he holds this to be a good or a bad attitude, but as he nowhere advocates the overthrow of political systems, likely he approves.

According to the central argument of Chapter 1 of Book 5, the perception of political injustice is the "general cause" of factional conflict. As repeatedly acknowledged in the literature, this is one of the most important results of Aristotle's theory of *stasis*[22]. The importance he attributes to this result is easily recognized by how often he comes back to it in Book 5 (*Pol.* 5.2, 1302a 22ff.; *Pol.* 5.3, 1303b 3-7; *Pol.* 5.12, 1316a 39-b 5). The perception of political injustice concerns the psychic constitution or mental state of the citizens who engage in factional conflict. Such perceptions cause indignation and anger which in turn can cause an uprising (cf. Aristot. *Rhet.* 2.2 and 2.9). Their anthropological or psychic fundament is the human sense of justice, which is the bedrock of the opposing and irreconcilable conceptions of political justice. In the context of his famous definition of man as the only living being that possesses *logos*, speech and reason, Aristotle explains "that he alone has a perception of good and bad and just and unjust and the other things of this sort" (*Pol.* 1.2, 1253 a 14-18, trans. Lord). The human sense of justice plays an essential role in generating the indignation and moral outrage that motivates faction and rebellion. Aristotle is not only among the pioneers of a theory of moral and political disagreement, but also among the founders of a political psychology of motivation[23].

4. The general and particular causes of factional conflict and Aristotle's empirical, inductive, and comparative method

According to Aristotle's understanding of science, to scientifically explain

[21] If one interprets the existing citizens of a *polis* as its matter and its political system as its form, matter and form have to correspond to prevent factional conflict; cf. Polansky 1991: 326, 335.

[22] De Luna-Zizza-Curnis 2016: 7; Gehrke 2001: 143; Hatzistavrou 2013: 278-79, 287-295; Ottmann 2001: 208; Polansky 1991: 327-328, 335; for more literature, see Saxonhouse 2015: 186.

[23] For Aristotle's psychology of faction, see Hatzistavrou 2013: 281-287.

something means to acquire knowledge of its 'origins' (*archai*) and 'causes' (*aitiai*) (cf. *Metaph.* 1.1). Therefore, the question of the different causes of constitutional 'change' (*metabolê*) is at the heart of his theory of the demise and stability of political systems. Aristotle distinguishes between two forms of constitutional change. In the first form, an existing political system is changed into another one, for instance, a democracy is transformed into an oligarchy or vice versa. In the second form, an existing political system remains the same, but a citizen or group of citizens attempts to seize power in it, or to partially change it, e.g., by making an oligarchy more or less oligarchical by reducing or increasing the number of rulers (*Pol.* 5.1, 1301b 6-25)[24]. Aristotle's investigation of the causes of factional conflict is inextricably linked with his normative interest in preventing it. As he explains in a key phrase of his theory, "it is evident that if we know why political systems are destroyed, we also know how they are preserved" (*Pol.* 5.8, 1307b 27-29, my trans.)[25]. Therefore, after examining the general causes of constitutional change and the particular causes that lead to uprisings in different systems of government, Aristotle addresses the question of which measures preserve them. The stability and duration of political systems is the normative and practical purpose for which the analysis of the general and particular causes of factional conflict is undertaken.

The previous section examined the perception of political injustice as "general cause" of factional conflict. This cause concerns the mental state or psychic motivation of the citizens, which leads them to start an uprising. From this cause, Aristotle distinguishes two further forms of causes of factional conflict (*Pol.* 5.2, 1302a 16ff.). The second form concerns its final cause. If we know the 'goal' (*telos*) of an uprising, we are able to explain why it happens[26]. Aristotle holds the two general goals of factional conflict to be profit and 'honor' (*timê*). Those who start an uprising either seek profit and honor, or try to avoid losing these goods "either for themselves or for their friends" (*Pol.* 5.2, 1302a 31-34)[27]. The striving of the citizens for honor equals their striving for political power and offices because one achieves honor or recognition by executing political offices[28]. Like the striving for honor, Aristotle conceives of the striving for profit as a basic human drive. In democracies, this striving motivates the popular leaders to set on the multitude against the wealthy citizens in order to get rich on their fortunes, which in turn leads the rich to overthrow

[24] Cf. the four forms of 'change' (*metabolê*, *kinesis*) Aristoteles distinguishes in *Ph.* 3, 201a 11-15.

[25] In the following phrase, Aristotle justifies this statement: "for opposites produce opposites, and destruction is the opposite of preservation (*sôteria*)" (*Pol.* 5.8, 1307b 29-30, my trans.).

[26] For Aristotle's account of a final cause, as one of four causes, see *Ph.* 2, 194b 32-195a 3; 194b 16-32.

[27] For profit and honor as origins or efficient causes of uprisings, see *Pol.* 5.2, 1302a 34-35, 38-1302b 2.

[28] Aristotle even identifies political offices with honor or recognition, "For we say that offices are honors" (*Pol.* 3.10, 1281a 31, trans. Lord).

the political system (*Pol.* 5.5, 1304b 20-1305a 1)[29]. Concerning the relation of the striving for material gain and for honor, Aristotle explains that "the many strive more for profit than for honor" (*Pol.* 6.4, 1318b 16-17, trans. Lord). This quote expresses Aristotle's realistic understanding of the human animal and its appetites and passions[30]. According to his realist image of humanity, it is not simply the striving for profit and honor, which is an essential feature of human nature. The same is true for an extreme striving for these goals called greed and ambition. Similarly to Thucydides and Plato, Aristotle conceptualizes such a striving with the term *pleonexia* (Thuc. 3.82; *Phd.* 66c; *Resp.* 2, 373d-374a)[31]. For Aristotle, *pleonexia* is a morally reprehensible drive to get more than one deserves with particular regard to external goods such as political power, honor and gain. This drive, which leads to "greed-induced faction", is primarily a characteristic of the rich and well-off citizens (*Pol.* 5.7, 1307a 17-20, 29-31)[32]. Aristotle holds *pleonexia* to be a vice so prevalent and significant that he identifies it with particular injustice, which he opposes to "justice as a part of virtue" (*NE* 5.2, 1129b 1-10; 5.3-4, 1130a 15-b 4)[33].

A third form of causes of factual conflicts on which Aristotle focuses attention are the efficient causes that constitute their initial impulse or trigger[34]. Among them is once more the striving for honor and for profit. However, this time Aristotle does not conceive of honor and profit as final causes and goals that citizens want to obtain. Rather, it is the perception that others, whether justly or unjustly, achieve honor and profit in excess that leads to moral outrage and triggers uprisings (*Pol.* 5.2, 1302a 34-b 2). Among the other efficient causes that stir up factional conflicts are, e.g., contempt, the 'arrogance' (*hybris*) of the governing, predominance of one citizen, fear of wrongdoers to get punished and fear of citizens who want to forestall suffering injustice (*Pol.* 5.2, 1302b 2ff.).

Starting with Chapter 5 of Book 5, Aristotle analyzes all the particular causes that lead to uprisings in different political systems and suggests measures to preserve them. To illustrate the method of his analyses, and how he derives conservation measures, a few examples may suffice. It is important to notice that Aristotle gains these particular causes and conservation measures in an empirical and inductive way through the comparison of similar cases recorded in history. As early as at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*), Aristotle announces his research plan for Book 5 of the *Pol.*: "Then, in the light of the

[29] Cf. De Luna 2013.

[30] For Aristotle's view that the human being is related to the other animals, see, e.g., *Pol.* 1.2,1253a 7-37 and *HA*, 1.1, 487b 33-488a 14.

[31] Cf. Balot 2001.

[32] The appropriate term "greed-induced faction" was coined by Hatzistavrou 2013: 276, 279.

[33] Cf. Knoll 2009: 65-68.

[34] For Aristotle's account of an efficient cause, as one of four causes, see *Ph.* 2, 194b 29-32; 194b 16-195a 3.

political systems we have collected, let us try to consider what sorts of things preserve and destroy cities and each type of political system" (*NE* 10.10, 1181b 17-19, trans. Crisp). This refers to the collection of 158 constitutions compiled by Aristotle himself, or, in all likelihood, under his direction[35]. As undertaken at a later time by Machiavelli, Aristotle resorts to the historical experiences of the last centuries and gains, based on particular events of constitutional history, general rules about how political systems originate and why they are stable or instable[36]. Based on this approach, Aristotle explains that "a tyrant is set up from among the people and the multitude to oppose the notables, in order that the people may suffer no injustice from them. And this is manifest from the facts of history. For almost the greatest number of tyrants have risen, it may be said, from being demagogues, having won the people's confidence by slandering the notables" (*Pol.* 5.10, 1310b 12-16, trans. Rackham). As historical instances of how tyrannies originate from demagogues, Aristotle mentions Panaetius at Leontini, Cypselus at Corinth, Pisistratus at Athens, and Dionysius at Syracuse (*Pol.* 5.10, 1310b 29-30). Chapters 10 and 11 of Book 5 contain a detailed investigation of why monarchies (both kingships and tyrannies) decay and which measures are apt to preserve them. While Aristotle advises, e.g., the kings not to rule in a tyrannical way, he recommends to tyrants to rule "more kingly" and to "give a fine performance of the part of the kingly ruler" (*Pol.* 5.11, 1314a 33-40, trans. Lord).

About the loss of stability of democracies, Aristotle states the *general rule* that it originates from the "insolence of the demagogues" who, e.g., confiscate the fortune of the rich citizens, which leads them to overthrow democratic political systems. The demagogues "cause the owners of property to band together, partly by malicious prosecutions of individuals among them (for common fear brings together even the greatest enemies), and partly by setting on the common people against them as a class. And one may see this taking place in this manner in many instances" (*Pol.* 5.5, 1304b 20-25, trans. Rackham). As historical examples, from which he derives this rule, Aristotle mentions the fall of democracy in Cos, Rhodes, Heraclea, Megara, and in Cyme. All these revolutions originated from the combined wealthy citizens who were mistreated. From knowledge of the causes of the overthrow of a political system, one can derive advices for its stabilization. Thus, in the chapter on the preservation of democracies, Aristotle recommends: "And in democracies it is necessary to be sparing of the wealthy not only by not causing properties to be divided up, but not incomes either (which under some constitutions takes place unnoticed)" (*Pol.* 5.8, 1309a 14-17, trans. Rackham). The instances

[35] Of this collection, only fragments of 68 or 69 constitutions and most of Aristotle's *Athenaion Politeia* are preserved; for the fragments, see the edition of Rose 1886.

[36] Cf. Knoll 2010.

adduced elucidate that in Book 5 Aristotle applies an empirical, inductive, and comparative method in order to understand how political systems originate and perish and through which measures they can be preserved and stabilized. As a practical science, political science does not aim at knowledge for its own sake but at applying it to political reality in a useful and beneficial way.

5. Plato's a-historical account of constitutional change as Aristotle's main target

In order to achieve a better understanding of a philosophical position, it is usually helpful to find out against which of its precursors it is directed. While Plato primarily struggles with Protagoras, Aristotle usually attacks Plato. Concerning the question of the demise and stability of political systems, Aristotle's main target is easy to identify[37]. It is Plato's rigid and schematic account of the gradual demise of Kallipolis, the best city, in Books 8 and 9 of the *Republic*. This decay proceeds through timocracy and oligarchy to democracy and tyranny and corresponds in each step to a constitution of the 'soul' (*psychê*). At the end of Book 5 of the *Pol.*, Aristotle makes clear in a key chapter that his preceding discussion of constitutional change and factional conflict was directed against this non-empirical account (*Resp.* 8 and 9, 543a-576e). He ends Book 5 with several explicit arguments against Plato's account of constitutional change, which he introduces by stating that Socrates discussed this in the *Politeia*, "however, not in an appropriate way" (*ou mentoi legetai kalôs*) (*Pol.* 5.12, 1316a 1-3, my trans.). Aristotle's criticism at the end of Book 5 complements his critique of Plato's *Politeia* in Book 2, 1-5, and in his writings on ethics[38].

Aristotle's arguments against Plato's account of constitutional change primarily criticize that it is historically incorrect because it ignores the many different ways in which constitutional changes actually take place and their many different causes (cf. *Pol.* 5.7, 1307a 20-25). This criticism entails that Plato does not engage with the multiplicity and complexity of political reality, which our historical experience reveals, but searches for uniform and abridged explanations[39]. For good reasons, Plato was characterized as 'Einheitsdenker',

[37] This was noticed in the literature several times; see e.g. De Luna-Zizza-Curnis 2016: 15; Ottmann 2001: 63; Polansky 1991: 343-344; Saxonhouse 2015: 184ff.

[38] For this criticism, see Knoll 2016.

[39] Barker 1958: 250, defends Plato's account against Aristotle's attack arguing, "It should be noticed that Plato's general treatment of constitutional change was meant to give an account of its inner logic rather than of its historical chronology". Ottmann 2001: 63, supposes that the inner logic of Plato's account might be the regularity "that extremes change into their opposites", but denies that it was Plato's intention to find such a regularity (my trans.). Ottmann 2001: 57, 63, asserts that with his account of constitutional change Plato wanted to show both the deficits of the unjust constitutions in an exemplary way and – in terms of an argumentum *e contrario* – the superiority of Kallipolis. Whatever Plato's intention exactly was, both Barker and Ottmann persuasively argue that Aristotle's criticism misses this intention. Nevertheless, this does not

as thinker of unity, while Aristotle was called a 'Vielheitsdenker', a thinker of plurality[40]. Aristotle's first explicit criticism is that Plato only offers general causes for constitutional change and that such causes are not able to explain why specifically Kallipolis decays. As such general causes, Plato mentions, e.g., that "for everything that has come into being there is a decay", that the rulers "will at some point beget children when they should not", and that those unworthy children will make fatal mistakes when their time to rule has come (*Resp.* 8, 546a-b, trans. Bloom). Although Aristotle agrees with Plato's causal analysis in principle, he criticizes: "But why should this be a sort of revolution peculiar to the regime he calls the best, rather than belonging to all the others and to all persons coming into existence?" (*Pol.* 5.12, 1316a 11-14, trans. Lord). In line with this critique, Aristotle further reproaches the Athenian for remaining short on mentioning a specific cause why Kallipolis, an aristocracy, turns into "timocracy"[41]. Such a cause would be in particular required because aristocracy and timocracy are cognate constitutions and all political systems "more often change into the opposite form than into the one near them" (*Pol.* 5.12, 1316a 18-20, trans. Rackham).

Aristotle's next argument explicitly criticizes Plato's account of constitutional change as not being in line with how political systems actually change. According to Plato, timocracy changes into oligarchy, oligarchy into democracy, and democracy into tyranny (*Resp.* 8, 550c, 555b, 562a). Against this account, Aristotle argues that "the very reverse also happens: democracy can change into oligarchy, and more often so than from democracy into monarchy" (*Pol.* 5.12, 1316a 23-24; cf. *Pol.* 5.12, 1316b 11-12; for historical examples, see *Pol.* 5.5, 1304b 20-1305a 1). Although historical experience shows that democracy can indeed transform in the direction of monarchy or tyranny, more common revolutions are the changes from oligarchy to democracy and vice versa.

Aristotle's observation that democracy and oligarchy often transform into each other is a strong argument against interpretations that misconstrue his scheme of the six constitutions (*Pol.* 3.6 and 3.7) as *anakyklosis*, as a 'cycle of the constitutions'. For Aristotle, the three correct political systems are kingship, aristocracy, and 'polity' (*politeia*). In *NE*, Aristotle calls the three mistaken political systems – tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy – as 'deviations' or 'perversions' (*parekbaseis*) of them and as, so to speak, their 'corruptions'

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entail that "Aristotle's historical criticism" is "hardly relevant" as Barker 1958: 250, claims. The different variations of constitutional change, which we can observe in history, do not *all* follow *one* universal "inner logic" or regularity. Therefore, the most useful or beneficial way to examine them is empirically by looking for different clusters, patterns, and causes of change.

[40] Ottmann 2001, 114, 119. Like usually, in Book 5, Aristotle attempts "to pluralize Plato's teaching and to move it closer to empirical evidence"; Ottmann 2001, 63 (my trans.).

[41] While Aristotle designates Plato's second-best political system as "Laconian", Plato calls it both "Laconian" and a "timocracy" (*Resp.* 8, 544c, 545a-b); for Plato's characterization of the second-best political system, which resembles the Spartan regime, see *Resp.* 8, 547c-550c.

(*phthorai*) (*NE* 8.12, 1160a 31-32; cf. *Pol.* 4.2, 1289a 26-30). In the following paragraph, Aristotle claims that constitutional change takes place mainly in three forms: a) from true kingship to tyranny, which he understands as a change from the best to the worst political system; b) from aristocracy to oligarchy "through the vice of the rulers"; and c) from *timocracy or polity*[42] to democracy, which are adjacent regimes. In *NE*, Aristotle holds that these are the most frequent constitutional changes, "since the transitions involved are the smallest and easiest" (*NE* 8.12, 1160b 10-22, trans. Crisp). The mistaken interpretations, which impute a cycle of the constitutions to Aristotle, add to these three forms of constitutional change three further transitions; from tyranny to aristocracy, from oligarchy to timocracy or polity, and, in order to close the cycle, from democracy to kingship. Nowhere in his writings does Aristotle defend such a 'cycle of the constitutions' (*anakyklosis*). However, he criticizes Plato for not addressing questions such as whether tyranny is the final constitution, whether any further transformation could occur, or whether a return to the best and first political system and thus a cycle would be possible (*Pol.* 5.12, 1316a 25-29). It is remarkable that Aristotle adduces several historical example to demonstrate that a tyranny could change in the direction of many other political systems (*Pol.* 5.12, 1316a 29-34). This could indicate that he – mistakenly – reads a constitutional cycle into Plato's theory of constitutional change[43]. The cycle of the constitutions, however, with little variations, is advocated only much later in the history of political thought by Polybius (*Histories*, Book 6, 4.7-9.14) and Machiavelli (*Discorsi*, Book 1.2).

Like Plato's account of the gradual demise of Kallipolis, the cycle of the constitutions represents a rather schematic and non-empirical account of constitutional change. In *NE*, Aristotle claims that the transformation of the three correct political systems into their respective deviations are the most frequent constitutional changes. However, he does not back up his *early* view of constitutional change by concrete examples. In contrast, his *later* theory of the demise and stability of political systems, contained in Book 5 of the *Pol.*, rests on his collection of 158 constitutions[44]. In Book 5, he mainly examines why democracies and oligarchies change into each other. Such revolutions are more frequent and in line with historical experience than the changes on which Aristotle focuses in *NE*.

The last Chapter of Book 5 contains a few more arguments against Plato's account of constitutional change. Aristotle criticizes Plato's view that timocracy

[42] In the *Pol.*, for the correct rule of the many Aristotle uses only the term 'polity' (*politeia*) (*Pol.* 3.7, 1279a 39, 1280b 6). In *NE*, he prefers the term 'timocracy' (*timokratia*); "though most people usually call it a polity (*politeia*)" (*NE* 8.10, 1160a 32-35, b17-18, trans. Crisp).

[43] Cf. Ottmann 2001: 57; Aristotle also adduces several examples for changes from oligarchy to tyranny (*Pol.* 5.12, 1316a 34-39).

[44] Aristotle mentions that he will use his collection of past constitutions in a future political treatise at the end of *NE* (10.10, 1181b 12-23). In all likelihood, this refers to the eight Books of the *Pol.* (cf. Knoll 2011a: 128-130). That *NE* was written before the *Pol.* is also indicated by the back references to Book 5 of *NE* (which corresponds to Book 4 of the *EE*); *Pol.* 3.9, 1280a 18; *Pol.* 3.12, 1282b 19-20.

changes into oligarchy because of the greed of the rich citizens. Rather, the real reason is the conception of distributive justice of the rich, which induces them to feel entitled to an unequal share in political power (cf. *Pol.* 5.1). Aristotle further criticizes Plato's understanding of oligarchy as a *polis* that is not one "but of necessity two, the city of the poor and the city of the rich" (*Resp.* 8, 551d, trans. Bloom, cf. *Resp.* 4, 421d-423a; *Pol.* 5.12, 1316b 6-7). For Plato, the change from oligarchy to democracy happens because the poor defeat the rich by force of arms or because their fear drives the rich away (*Resp.* 8, 557a)[45]. Aristotle objects to Plato's view by arguing that almost all cities contain rich and poor citizens and that constitutional change does not depend on changes of poverty and wealth. Rather, oligarchies transform into democracies when the poor become the majority and democracies into oligarchies when the wealthy have more power than the multitude and when the latter neglects political vigilance (*Pol.* 5.12, 1316b 8-14). In this context, Aristotle repeats his main argument against Plato's account of constitutional change: it occurs for many different causes and takes place in lots of different ways (*Pol.* 5.12, 1316b 15-25). Finally, Aristotle criticizes that Plato is not aware that there are many forms of democracy and oligarchy (*Pol.* 5.12, 1317b 25-27). In Books 3, 4, and 6 of the *Pol.*, Aristotle distinguishes between three and five subspecies of kingship, aristocracy, oligarchy, and democracy. These distinctions are directed both against Plato's account of constitutional change and against his theory of political systems, which unduly reduces the complexity of the empirical political world.

6. The 'polity' (*politeia*) as the most stable political system

In Books 4 and 6 of the *Pol.*, Aristotle lays out his theory of the different forms of democracy and oligarchy and his conception of a political system which he calls 'polity' (*politeia*). The polity is a mixture of democracy and oligarchy based on average citizens who possess military virtue (*Pol.* 3.7, 1279a 39-b 4; *Pol.* 4.11, 1295a 25-31; *Pol.* 4.13, 1297b 1-2; cf. *Pol.* 4.8-9, 11-12)[46]. Books 4 and 6 are thematically connected to Book 5. For good reasons, researchers refer to these three Books as the 'empirical' Books. Aristotle defines democracy as

[45] Aristotle claims that the cause of the change from oligarchy to democracy is the financial ruin of the ruling group of citizens, referring in all likelihood to *Resp.* 8, 555b-556a (*Pol.* 5.12, 1316b 14-20). According to Plato's text, however, this is not the main cause. Rather, the greed of the rulers and the licentiousness of the youth lead to more and more poor people, which promotes their victory over the rich. Even more important, as the dominant goal of oligarchy is wealth, Aristotle explains about the decay of this political system that "the greediness for wealth and the neglect of the *rest* for the sake of money-making destroyed it"; '*rest*' refers mainly to virtue and physical training (*Resp.* 8, 562b, trans. Bloom). The perception of these flaws of the ruling class facilitates uprisings by the poor (cf. *Resp.* 8, 556a-e).

[46] Cf. Schütrumpf 1980: 139.

the rule of the poor for their own advantage and oligarchy as the government of the rich for their personal benefit (*Pol.* 3.7-8, 1279b 4-19). As examined in the previous sections, these two political systems were not only the prevailing political systems of Aristotle's time, but were very unstable and prone to factional conflict. A main reason for this is the antagonism between the poor and the rich citizens, which Aristotle identifies as the two main social classes that usually live together in all cities[47]. To curb the dangers connected to this "class antagonism", Aristotle introduces his conception of a 'polity' (*politeia*), a mixed constitution that aims at mediating between the extremes of the poor and the rich. Aristotle develops this conception because of his normative interest in promoting political stability and because his conviction that political science should be useful for political practice. Aristotle was not the first to recognize the political dangers of extreme poverty and wealth and the benefits of a mixed constitution[48].

The 'polity' (*politeia*) is the main topic of the second half of Book 4. It is a mixed political system composed out of elements of democracy and oligarchy and their respective goals, freedom and wealth (*Pol.* 4.8-9, 1294a 15-b 41). *The* polity does not exist, only different mixtures depending on given groups of citizens and features of existing individual democracies and oligarchies. The polity aims at mediating between the claims of the poor and the rich by letting them both participate in political power and by creating a strong middle class. This political system represents Aristotle's solution to the challenge of improving and re-*forming* existing democracies and oligarchies and of making them more stable. The conclusion of the crucial Chapter 1 of Book 5 supports this thesis. There Aristotle argues that democratic (or arithmetic) and oligarchic (or proportional) equality and justice have to be mixed. Such a mixture creates a polity, "the most stable of regimes" (*Pol.* 5.1, 1302a 15, trans. Lord)[49]. Despite being a mixture of elements of democracy and oligarchy, the polity is closer to the former than to latter; in general, "democracy is more stable and freer from factional conflicts than oligarchy" (*Pol.* 5.1, 1302a 8-9, trans. Lord). Later in Book 5, Aristotle recommends that one should "endeavour either to mingle together the multitude of the poor and that of the wealthy or to increase the middle class (for this dissolves party factions due to inequality)" (*Pol.* 5.8, 1308b 28-31, trans. Rackham)[50].

[47] De Ste. Croix 1997, suggests a Marxist interpretation of the dispute between the rich and the poor citizens.

[48] In Plato's *Laws*, the Athenian outlines a mixed constitution and gives a law that forbids extreme wealth and poverty because both leads to civil war (*Leg.* 5, 744; cf. *Resp.* 4, 421d-423a and Knoll 2017b). Thucydides praises the new order of the 5000, which was created after the deposition of the 400 in Athens in 411 BCE, as a "moderate blending (*metria*) of the few and the many" (Thuc. 8.97, trans. Smith).

[49] Cf. Knoll 2009: 111-115, 181-190.

[50] For good reasons, Sternberger 1984: 127, 147, distinguishes between the 'middle constitution' ("der '*Mittleren Verfassung*'") and the 'mixed constitution' ("der '*Gemischten Verfassung*'"). He is aware that Aristotle does not use the latter term.

As previously mentioned, with his theory of political stability Aristotle carries out one of the four different tasks he assigns to constitutional theory. It is closely linked to a different task which requires a political theorist to "ascertain the political system most suited to all cities" (*Pol.* 4.1, 1288b 33-35, my trans.). The polity is most suited to all cities because at Aristotle's time most 'city-states' (*poleis*) were either democracies or oligarchies and the polity is a stable mix of elements of these two unstable political systems. These two tasks constitute the core of Aristotle's political realism. The polity is not his 'ideal' political order as some interpreters hold[51]. Aristotle conceives of the task to study "the best constitution" as a separate undertaking (*Pol.* 4.1, 1288 b 21-24; *Pol.* 4.11, 1295a 25-29). Aristotle's best political system is a 'true aristocracy", which he examines in Books 7 and 8[52].

7. Conclusion

As a political realist, Aristotle develops a conception of political science that applies an empirical, inductive, and comparative method. Such a method is only rudimentarily observable in Plato's dialogues. In Book 3 of the *Laws*, Plato analyzes the reasons why of the original three kingships Argos, Messene, and Sparta only the political order of the latter remained stable (*Leg.* 3, 685a). As causes of the corruption of the political systems and laws of Argos and Messene, he mentions the greed, the arrogance, the discord, and the ignorance of the kings (*Leg.* 3, 690d-691a). As reason of Sparta's stability and longevity, he recognizes its mixed political system, which limits and moderates the kingly power. The mixed constitution that Plato drafts for the *polis* he outlines in the *Laws* embodies several insights that he achieved from analyzing Sparta's political system[53]. According to the most important of these insights, to preserve a political system and to keep it stable, political power has to be divided, and thus limited (*Leg.* 3, 691d-692c). There are no indications that the empirical, inductive, and comparative method, which Aristotle uses to analyse political reality, was applied before by the sophists or other political thinkers. Therefore, Aristotle needs to be acknowledged not only as the founder of a realistic theory of factional conflict and political stability, but of empirical political science.

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[51] Bien 1980: 315ff.; Nussbaum 1990; Ottmann 2001: 210; Sternberger 1984: 119, 127, 156. For criticisms of the interpretations that hold the polity to be Aristotle's ideal city, see Knoll 2009: 100-111, 187-210; Knoll 2017a, Langmeier 2018: 376-382, and Schütrumpf 1980: 159.

[52] Cf. footnote 14 of this article.

[53] Cf. Knoll 2017b.

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