

Zoran Dimić, *Političke životinje i zveri. O Aristotelovom zasnivanju filozofije politike (Political Animals and Beasts. On Aristotle's foundation of the philosophy of politic)*, Novi Sad: Akademska knjiga, 2022, \$31, 167 pp., ISBN: 9788662633958

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Traditionally, students of Aristotle's philosophy of politics focus on the taxonomy of right and wrong forms of government and his famous definitions of a man as *animal sociale* and *animal rationale*. In the recently published monograph *Political Animals and Beasts: On Aristotle's foundation of the philosophy of politics*, Zoran Dimić offers an innovative interpretation of Aristotle's *Politics*. On the one hand, he draws on anthropology, biology, history, and sociology to contextualize Aristotle's writings and the objects of his research. On the other hand, he pays careful attention to the original Greek, relying on the principle that the most literal translation is the most accurate. Studying man in *pre-polis* communities and the reasons and practices whereby the *polis* is founded, Dimić gives a whole new meaning to the definitions of man as *animal rationale* and *animal sociale*. In this way, he opens a space to discuss Aristotle's philosophy of politics beyond the narrow realm of the history of Greek or ancient philosophy.

This text arrives nine years after Dimić's first book, *The Birth of the Idea of the University*, a seminal study of both the sources and the neglected aspects of European university heritage. The same guiding principle informs both works. Dimić studies a canonical text alongside a subject that is too often taken for granted and through a detailed analysis of the text he uncovers hidden and overlooked motifs, leading to a new and innovative understanding.

Innovative methodology

The book consists of an introduction and four chapters: “1. Domestication and household,” “2. Household and economy,” “3. Genesis and the development of the political nature of man,” and “4. Aristotle’s establishment of a philosophy of politics.” Dimić’s use of secondary literature goes beyond the limits of philosophy and its subdisciplines. He breaks free from disciplinary boundaries and achieves this not only by incorporating general conclusions from other fields, but also by basing his investigations on empirical material. In the best sense, he exemplifies Hegel’s maxim that philosophy is its own time apprehended in thoughts. His method is also close to the French *Annales* historians and theorists, like Fernando Braudel, or even Marxists like Henri Lefebvre, in recognizing the importance of everyday life. Dimić links the subject of his philosophical study to the practices of life contained in it.

Although Dimić is not at all a Marxist, he nevertheless confirms Marx’s maxim that there is “only a single science, the science of history.”³ Dimić grounds Aristotle’s philosophy of politics in its historical context. In this study, Dimić does not do what is usually expected from a philosopher. He does not take one or several concepts, or conceptual assemblies, and then examine them etymologically, phraseologically, or otherwise. On the contrary, Dimić starts his investigation by stepping out of philosophy and into biological anthropology. He says that the key to understanding Aristotle’s *Politics* is Paleolithic stress and the Neolithic revolution that abolished it. Why does that matter? Only in sedentary communities, like the ones that emerged after the Neolithic revolution, did politics develop as one of the aspects of human praxis. However, it did not develop immediately but only after evolving from more primitive and smaller human communities, such as households and villages.

Dimić’s reconstruction of Aristotle’s text

In his work, Dimić patiently follows Aristotle line by line and introduces material from other philosophical works as well as from anthropology, biology, history and sociology. He does so to reconstruct, step by step,

³ Marx, K & Engels, F, *Collected Works of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Vol. 5: Marx and Engels 1845-1847* (London: Lawrence and Wishart Ltd 1976), 28.

how pre-political forms of sedentary human life developed according to certain principles, functions and purposes. In doing so, he fundamentally and patiently takes apart traditional ideas that we take for granted. One of these is the Judeo-Christian view of man as created in the image of God. However, Dimić reminds us that humans were once wild animals who lived a day-to-day existence, gathering fruit and hunting other animals. Before we learned to grow crops and domesticate animals, we experienced constant uncertainty about our food supply and lacked any existential security. Simply by domesticating ourselves, we domesticated other living things.

It is in the last chapter that Dimić reveals the key to understanding his study. He does so by methodologically opposing Plato's and Aristotle's philosophies of politics. Where Plato seeks to found the ideal *polity*, a one-size-fits-all solution based on the idea of the Good, which would transform any given political community into the best one possible, Aristotle analyzes the formation of particular political communities, examining also their creators and their purposes. Following Aristotle's method, Dimić uncovers human political practice layer by layer, in this way reconstructing the meaning and implications of Aristotle's famous statements.

To arrive at Aristotle's policy considerations, Dimić starts with the Neolithic revolution, which led to the establishment of permanent settlements. The transition from a hunter-gatherer to a more sedentary mode of living, one involving cultivation and stockpiling, changed the rhythm of life. To survive, people had to perform repetitive, tedious, and unpleasant tasks. The first community to emerge was the household (*oikos*), which formed around the joint execution of these tasks. The mission of the household was the reproduction and continuation of the species, secured by providing shelter, food, and progeny. However, contrary to popular belief, a household is not a community of people but a community of domesticated animals, humans and non-humans alike, living under the same roof. A functional division of labor develops within the household, and its members are divided into roles such as husband and wife, parents and children, or master and slave. The success of the household in meeting its purpose or nature, or *physis* as Aristotle would say, depends on the effectiveness of this division of labor. On the basis of the presence or absence of an effective division of labor, Aristotle divided households into Greek and barbarian.

Aristotle argues that only one person manages the household and it is their nature to rule the household, not because they were born to rule, but because they have acquired the necessary skills. This skill is known as *oikonomia*, which is not to be confused with *ktetike*, the skill of gaining wealth. The purpose or nature of the village is similar to that of the household, although on a bigger scale, but Dimić does not explore this at length. As in the household, a functional division of labor is present, along with vertical management. Dimić argues that households and villages are formed because of the human tendency to associate, whose purpose is the reproduction of the species. This tendency is rooted in the prominent role of the Paleolithic period in the development of the human species. However, the nature of the *polis* does not include this. Unlike households and villages, which are based on a consensus around a functional hierarchy, the foundation of the *polis* is dissensus. At a level higher than households and villages, people can live in communities that are organized around relatively constant functional hierarchies.

From this, Dimić proceeds to offer a novel interpretation of Aristotle. Humans are not simply political beings or social animals, but, through his reconstruction of Aristotle's understanding, Dimić's view is that man is both *zoon* and *politikon*. A man is both a domesticated animal that associates with others to ensure his reproduction and a being that lives in a political community. As a *zoon*, a human functionally differentiates: husband or wife, parent or child, master or slave. While as *politikon*, this individual transcends their function in the reproductive process and becomes a part of the *polis*. In other words, people only become human through political practice.

Thus, in Dimić's interpretation, Aristotle is not the Aristotle of traditional academic expositions. Dimić's work reveals an eminently modernist Aristotle – an author whose thought goes beyond the limits of the time in which he lived and can inspire political discussions of contemporary matters. In contrast to Plato's idealism with its fixed and eternal ideal forms, Dimić emphasizes Aristotle's evidence-based approach as essential to his conclusions.

Aristotle – a modern philosopher

The modern aspect of Aristotle's *Politics* lies in a conclusion that Dimić does not explicitly draw in his study: what Aristotle calls *polis* we know under the liberal or socialist name of democracy. In Aristotle's text, Dimić

discovers the principle of limited government, a feature recognized as a prominent aspect of John Locke's political philosophy. He also observes that Aristotle acknowledges the conflict of interests within a political community, in a way that recalls Hegel's definition of society in his *Philosophy of Right*. Moreover, Aristotle perceives a fundamental conflict between politics and economics, which we can say is the starting point of Marx's philosophy of politics, if we can speak of his having one.

Finally, Dimić's interpretation of Aristotle emphasizes the radical instability of politics. If the function of politics is to determine what is good and just for a particular political community, it cannot provide eternal solutions. Instead, it has to continuously question what is good and what is just, and this accords with changing authority holders and the necessity for the political community to resolve conflicts of interest. The *polis* recognizes and respects these disputes; it doesn't suppress them. On the contrary, the community constantly engages in disputation, allowing individuals to employ and demonstrate their rationality, evoking Aristotle's definition of man as *zoon logon ehon*: a rational animal.

In his conclusion, Dimić abandons his strict interpretation of Aristotle's text and shows instead that his theses, findings and methods can still be relevant today. He does this by criticizing the depoliticization of the community in which he lives, explaining that great powers produce stability and consensus in peripheral capitalist countries such as Serbia. This is just one of the possible lines of discussion opened by this remarkable study. It is my hope that it will not remain the only one, because Dimić's interpretation of Aristotle's *Politics* deserves a broad and lively reception.