
***Oikos* and Economy: The Greek Legacy in Economic Thought**

GREGORY CAMERON

In the study of the history of economic thought, there has been a tendency to take the meaning of the term “economics” for granted. As a consequence, when considering economic thought in ancient Greece, we turn to what the Greeks said about wealth, about money or about interest. This seems relatively straightforward. Problems emerge when we consider that the term “economics” had a different meaning in ancient Greece than it does today. As a rule, we project back onto history what we mean by “economics” and more or less ignore what it meant during the period in question. On one level, there is nothing wrong with this way of proceeding; after all we have no choice, ultimately, but to study the past with the concepts that are at our disposal. But the procedure can have certain drawbacks. The tendency of positive investigations is that they risk overlooking the kinds of transformations that give rise to our own concerns and even what is essential to our own thought and assumptions. The term “economics” has a long and varied history; the following is a brief attempt to turn things on their head and consider the history of economics not from the perspective of the modern notion of economics, but from the perspective of its ancient Greek ancestor and to begin to indicate the non-obvious ways in which the Greek legacy continues to inform even our most recent economies. As such, while brief mention is made of some modern economic historians, the primary focus is on the meaning of

the *oikos* in ancient Greece and the ways in which the transformation of the meaning of the *oikos* continues to inform the meaning of the economy today.

I. From *Oikos* to Economy

In his history of economic thought, Joseph Schumpeter begins his discussion of ancient Greece with the following remark: “So far as we can tell, rudimentary economic analysis is a minor element—a very minor one—in the inheritance that has been left to us by our cultural ancestors, the Ancient Greeks.” He goes on to indicate that for the Greeks, “*Oeconomicus* (from *oikos*, house, and *nomos*, law or rule) meant only practical wisdom of household management.” The reason for this is that “the Greek philosopher was essentially a political philosopher” (Schumpeter 53-54). While this claim has been contested by a number of more recent historians of economic thought,¹ it remains the case that the Greeks, despite the significance of what we would call economic activity, never to the best of our knowledge focused attention on economic activity for its own sake. And yet, Schumpeter’s claim remains rather peculiar given that ‘economics’ was a perfectly good Greek word. What are we to make of this claim that the Greeks, who wrote a good deal on the subject of economics, paid only lip service to the subject of economics?

At the beginning of his book on ancient economy, M.I. Finley brings the discussion closer to home and begins to clarify what will be at stake in the following essay:

In 1742 Francis Hutcheson, Professor of Philosophy in the University of Glasgow and teacher of Adam Smith, published in Latin his *Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy*, ... Book III, entitled “The Principles of Oeconomics and Politics,” opens with three chapters on marriage and divorce, the duties of parents and children, and masters and servants, respectively, but otherwise is entirely about politics. It is in Book II, entitled “Elements of the Law of Nature,” that we find an account of property, succession, contracts, the

value of goods and of coin, the laws of war. These were evidently not part of ‘oeconomics.’

Economics had a quite different meaning for Hutcheson than it does for us. But Finley is not saying that Hutcheson had no interest in economic matters. For Hutcheson, what we call economics falls under the heading “Elements of the Law of Nature.” As indicated by the reference to Adam Smith, Hutcheson stands at a crossroads between ancient economics and modern economic analysis. Thus Finley continues: “Hutcheson was neither careless nor perverse: he stood at the end of a tradition stretching back more than 2000 years. ... The book that became the model for the tradition still represented by Hutcheson was the *Oikonomikos* written by the Greek Xenophon before the middle of the fourth century B.C.” (Finley 14).

In the middle of the XVIIIth century, then, the term economics continued to bear the meaning it had in ancient Greece, but by the end of the century ‘political economy’ had come to refer to what we now associate with economics—the science of the wealth of nations. And, as Finley indicates, “there was no road from the ‘oeconomics’ of Francis Hutcheson to *The Wealth of Nations* of Adam Smith, published twenty-four years later” (Finley 20). What then happened to the notion of economics? How does one get from “household management” to “the science of the wealth of nations”? That there is, as Finley says, “no road” from the one to the other does not eliminate the fact of the transition.

On a certain level, it seems quite anachronistic that commentators on ancient economics look to ancient authors in order to catch sight of economic analysis and are disappointed with the results. Schumpeter, for example, points out that while Plato and Aristotle did at times touch on economic issues, much of what they wrote is little more than common sense, and rarely reaches the stage of analysis. Thus, he notes, referring to classical scholars and economists who rate

Greek economic achievements too highly, “that, in economics as elsewhere, most statements of fundamental facts acquire importance only by the superstructures they are made to bear and are commonplace in the absence of such superstructures” (Schumpeter 54). The tendency is for historians of economic thought to seek out that which corresponds to our understanding of economics. Neither Schumpeter nor his detractors consider the possibility that social relations in ancient Greece were not demarcated in such a way that would have made what we call economic analysis a relevant practice. Perhaps, in claiming that the Greeks did not engage in economic analysis, despite the importance of the economy, one is overlooking what was fundamental to the Greek world view and to our concept of economics. In saying this, however, it again becomes possible that even in terms of economic thought our inheritance from the Greeks is far greater than any simply positivist procedure could discover. This does not however mean that we should hope to discover what we call economics being practiced by the ancient Greeks.

The issue here, it should be stressed, is not merely semantic. The transformation of the term economics constitutes a fundamental event of the modern world. But this transformation leaves in its wake the very subject which for more than 2000 years was studied under the name ‘economics.’ The transformation is not a mere change of meaning; it is, rather, a drastic change in the way we demarcate human social space. However, this drastic change, on a conceptual level, is hardly modern. In fact, contra Schumpeter, this change can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle and even to the pre-Socratic philosophers.

II. The Economy of Metaphor

The second entry under the term “economics” in the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* suggests that economics is “the branch of knowledge that deals with the production and distribution of

wealth in theory and practice; the application of this discipline to a particular sphere; the condition of a state etc. as regards material prosperity; the financial considerations attaching to a particular activity, commodity, etc. L18” (782). This definition poses few problems for the economic historian. The historian would merely determine the mode of “the production and distribution of wealth” and the material prosperity of the society, region or period under consideration. The problems arise when one considers what would constitute “the production and distribution of wealth” in a given society. What would the terms “wealth,” “state,” “material prosperity,” “commodity,” mean in what used to be called primitive societies? The problem is not simply one of extricating a number of economic issues from the web of relations that constitute social life, the problem lies in the fact that in doing this one will have done such violence to the society under investigation that the information gathered will be of little or no descriptive value. How is one to extricate prosperity from questions of sacrifice, of relations with the gods, or of treaties of friendship with neighboring tribes? How is one to consider the question of wealth, when a great deal of what was considered wealth, would be to us merely symbolic?

It might seem that if we could determine how the transition from *oikonomikos* to economics came about, then we could begin studying non modern societies under the rubric of *oikonomikos*, with a clear understanding of how this would later become economics. This approach would have the advantage of allowing us to see a connection without radically undermining the nature of the society we were seeking to understand. In order to pursue this approach, we would first need to determine whether or not *oikonomikos* was itself applicable to all non modern societies. Unfortunately, there is little indication that *oikonomikos* is any more applicable to “primitive societies” than the term “economics.”

No doubt the classic text on primitive economics is Marcel Mauss' *The Gift*. In analyzing primitive societies, Mauss introduces a concept that should be added to the above dictionary definition of economics: the concept of exchange. For Mauss, exchange in archaic societies is not merely one issue amongst many; rather, relations of exchange are the very essence of these societies. As a consequence of their all-pervasiveness, relations of exchange cannot be considered merely economic. Economics implies, at the outset, some differentiation of social spheres, and it is Mauss' contention that in archaic societies exchange is a total phenomenon. Gift exchange is not one activity amongst many, rather the gift is that which weaves together the entire social fabric, incorporating every relation into relations of exchange. As E.E. Evans-Pritchard writes in his introduction to *The Gift*: "The exchanges of archaic societies which [Mauss] examines are total social movements or activities. They are at the same time economic, juridical, moral, aesthetic, religious, mythological and socio-morphological phenomena" (Mauss vii; cf. 76). This "total prestation" indicates that in archaic societies, social life was not divided up into unrelated spheres of social engagement. All social phenomena could be incorporated under the general rubric of exchange, granting an underlying coherence to social life.

It is not my contention that Mauss has had the last word or that the societies he describes have ever existed, but what is clear is that Mauss' analysis remains compelling and highly influential. And while there have been other attempts to come to grips with primitive social organization, Mauss' analysis invariably remains in the background. What is important for us in Mauss' analysis is his notion of the gift as total social fact. It is possible that there are societies in which economics, as a distinct field of social engagement, cannot be removed without completely misrepresenting social relations. As Karl Polanyi writes, clearly in the spirit of Mauss:

We must rid ourselves of the ingrained notion that the economy is a field of experience of which humans have always been conscious. To use a metaphor, the facts of the economy were originally embedded in situations that were not in themselves of an economic nature, neither the ends nor the means being primarily material. (quoted in Le Goff 20)

That Polanyi refers to this description as a metaphor is extremely ambiguous. It is not at all clear what the term metaphor refers to, unless it be the very use of the word “economy.” But then it is not entirely clear that the word ‘economy,’ when taken to mean that ‘either the ends or the means are primarily material,’² is not already a metaphoric use of the term. Polanyi, in other words, would be providing us with a further metaphoric use of the word ‘economics.’ What would this metaphoric use be?³

‘The facts of the economy’ which are not themselves economic, would seem to imply not a metaphoric use, but an improper use, which in the interest of economy we should avoid. However, since the proper use seems to be already metaphoric, it is not entirely clear that the material which is economics’ “primary concern” does not already lead us away from the realm of the real and into that of the purely figurative. Is there not a sense in which “the embeddedness of the economy in situations which are not themselves of an economic nature” indicates that from a metaphoric perspective there is a total economy of relations within a primitive society, that no relation escapes a certain economy? Indeed, might it not be the case that a certain totality would constitute any and all metaphoric uses of the term “economy”? That only an absence of an economy of relations could constitute an economy in the literal sense? But, if this were the case, there would immediately emerge the problem of rigidly demarcating this economy. How would one demarcate an economy that refused to embed itself in an economy of relations?

It might seem that similar considerations apply to the ancient Greeks. Writing of Plato and Aristotle, Schumpeter says: “They merged their pieces of economic reasoning with their

general philosophy of state and society and rarely dealt with an economic topic for its own sake” (Schumpeter 53). Was this merging a consequence of the fact that economic issues could not be divorced from a web of human relations, or was this really a matter of merging? We need to determine to what extent Plato and Aristotle did engage in an act of merging economics and politics and whether this prevented them from engaging in what we call economic analysis.

III. The Greek Economy

In his essay “Hestia—Hermes,” Jean-Pierre Vernant gives us a glimpse into the Greek *oikos* that is prevented by turning to the Greek philosophers. Vernant’s essay is motivated by the question of why Hermes and Hestia are paired at the base of the statue of Zeus at Olympia. Hermes and Hestia seem to break the mold of pairing that applies in the case of the other gods:

They are not husband and wife like Zeus-Hera, Poseidon-Amphitrite, Hephaestus-Charis; not brother and sister like Apollo-Artemis and Helios-Selene; nor mother and son like Aphrodite-Eros; nor even protector and protégé like Athena-Heracles. (Vernant 127)

Vernant proposes two immediate solutions to the problem of this pairing: on the one hand, unlike the other gods, both Hermes and Hestia dwell in the realm of the mortals. Hestia is the god of the hearth. As the hearth, Hestia occupies the centre of the *oikos* and symbolizes both stability and the navel which attaches the *oikos* to the earth. Hermes is the messenger god, and is generally identified as the wanderer, with no fixed abode. On the other hand, while both gods dwell in the realm of the mortals, their relations with mortals seem to indicate a polarity. Vernant writes: “To Hestia belongs the world of the interior, the enclosed, the stable, the retreat of the human group within itself; to Hermes, the outside world, opportunity, movement, interchange

with others.” Vernant suggests that Hermes and Hestia might be thought of as neighbors or as a representation of “the tension which is so marked in the archaic conception of space” (130).

However, immediately after providing these solutions to the problem, Vernant suggests that these solutions are simplistic and a distortion of the relations between the Greeks and their gods. He writes:

Obviously, by interpreting the Hermes-Hestia relationship in terms of these concepts, we distort them ... Religious thought obeys its own rules of classification. It defines and classifies phenomena by distinguishing between different types of agent, by comparing and contrasting various kinds of activity. In this system space and movement are not yet interpreted in the form of abstract ideas ... If Hestia is apparently capable of ‘centring’ space while Hermes can ‘mobilize’ it, it is because as divine powers they are the patrons of a series of activities undoubtably dealing with the organization of earth and space, and even constituting, in terms of praxis, the framework within which ... the experience of space took place—but which nevertheless covers a very much wider field than that implied when we talk of space and movement. (130-131)

The objective of the initial solutions was to reduce the gods to symbols of space and movement thought according to the abstraction by which these terms will later be determined. Vernant indicates that Ancient Greek thought proceeds in terms of material distinctions and different types of agents and not according to the logic of subsequent philosophy.

The relationship between Hestia and Hermes is not simply a relationship between two possible conceptions of space—inside and outside—or of a polarity between movement and stability. The tendency towards the construction of a simple polarity misses the ambiguous and contradictory nature of Hestia herself. It is this ambiguity that constitutes her relationship with Hermes. In a remarkably consistent conceptualization, Hermes is not reducible to a stable set of attributes; Hermes is the messenger, but also the trickster; protector of the threshold, but also the god of thieves; the god of divination by birds, but also of liars. As Vernant writes: “Nothing about him is settled, stable, permanent, restricted or definite” (Vernant 129). Hermes exceeds

stabilization, because he is the god of wanderers. This irreducibility of Hermes would still allow for the polarity of Hermes and Hestia if it were the case that Hestia not only symbolizes stability but is also conceptually stable. It is this conceptual stability that Vernant indicates is not the case. Hestia contains the very contradictions that allow her to be paired with Hermes. Hestia is herself “hermetic”—to coin a word which precisely does not mean “sealed.”

According to Vernant, Hestia is, at one and the same time, the principle of stability and the nodal point of all movement. Vernant exemplifies Hestia’s internal polarity by focusing on the role of women in the *oikos*: “The woman’s domain is the house. That is her place and as a rule she should not leave it” (133). Men, by contrast, are what Vernant calls the “centrifugal element.” However, there is an exception to this role of women: “In marriage, in contrast to all other social activities, it is the woman who is the mobile social element, whose movement creates the link among different family groups, whereas the man remains tied to his own hearth and home.” Hestia, Vernant continues, reconciles this contradiction by personifying “those aspects of feminine nature that are stable.” To exemplify this permanence, Hestia takes a vow of virginity, thus she remains “a stranger to the element of mobility.” Through this renunciation of movement, Hestia not only ensures stability in space, but also permanence in time. Naturally, however, permanence in time requires sexual relations and childbirth. As a consequence, Hestia introduces a contradiction into the life of the woman, which she at the same time resolves by taking on the role of the household’s womb, which in turn generates a new contradiction. Clearly, this system of representations is designed to ensure a purely paternal heredity. And yet at the same time, it is Hestia, the virgin mother, who symbolizes the stability of the *oikos* and the patrilineal line. The system of representations here seems to suggest that the woman plays no

role in childbirth at all, since the whole system suggests that Hestia herself, through a ritual rebirthing at the household's hearth, gives birth to children.

Vernant concludes his analysis of the relation between Hestia and Hermes by reiterating the ambiguous nature of Hestia:

Hestia as the principle of permanence, Hestia as the principle of impetus and movement—in this twofold and contradictory interpretation of the name of the hearth-goddess we recognize the very foundation that opposes and unites, in a single contrasted couple joined in unbreakable 'friendship', the goddess who immobilizes space around a fixed centre and the god who renders it completely and everlastingly mobile. (161)

In other words, what Vernant has revealed in his analysis is that Hestia contains the ambiguities that suggest her relationship with Hermes. The relation between Hestia and Hermes is not one of polarity, but is rather a relation of mutual implication and interpenetration. But how does this relationship relate to the question of economy?

Hestia, as goddess of the hearth, is the god of the *oikos*. This suggests that Hermes would be the god of the *polis*. But as Vernant has shown, this simple polarity does not get to the heart of the matter. Nonetheless, the hypothesis of a polarity between *oikos* and *polis* is not without its adherents. Perhaps the most influential account of this polarity is that provided by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*. Arendt distinguishes between *oikos* and *polis* by claiming that the latter is the realm of action, and the former the realm of the retreat from action. This account parallels Vernant's initial hypotheses of the relation between Hestia and Hermes. The *oikos* is the realm of stability, certainty, rootedness and security, whereas the *polis* is the realm of movement, uncertainty and conflict. However, there is more to the story than this simple opposition. The inside and the outside are both more and less strongly demarcated than Arendt would lead us to believe. On the one hand, the outside is demarcated by far more than political activity. Much of

what we call economics also occupies the sphere of the external world. Hermes is also the god of merchants and exchange in general. On the other hand, the inside also seems to embody the principle of movement: the movement of the woman in marriage, but also the welcoming of the guest, the incorporation of wives, adopted children, slaves, and even strangers, as a rite of hospitality, into the household. The *oikos* encapsulates, without reconciling, the tension between opening up and shutting out. This is not a simple dichotomy. The *oikos* centers the activity of the human community, drawing activity towards it as a site of rest and projecting that which is at rest out into the realm of action. The two cannot be separated or considered in isolation.

Hermes, and not Hestia, is the god of exchange. Neither exchange nor the acquisition of wealth belong to the realm of the *oikos*. Exchange and the acquisition of wealth belong to the “hermetic” realm. However, to Hestia and the *oikos* belong the accumulation, storage, and preservation of wealth. As Vernant writes: “From the point of view of economic activity, the woman personifies the act of storing and the man that of acquiring” (149). If we consider the Hestia-Hermes relation as representing or constituting the Greek conception of space, then these sets of oppositions reveal that what for us constitutes economic activity did not for the Greeks belong to a single spatial or social sphere. Most of what we would call economic activity does not belong to the realm of the *oikos* at all. The division between Hestia and Hermes allows us to see that an economic analysis of ancient Greece distorts the nature of Greek society. The Greek demarcation of space indicates why the Greeks did not develop what we call economics.

How, then, does the term *oikos* come to represent what was originally not part of the *oikos*? Vernant presents the key to this transition. The *oikos* that we have just been describing is not the *oikos* of classical Athens. This *oikos* continues to be referred to by Homer and the tragedians, but by the time of Plato and Aristotle the *oikos* has begun to move. Of course, to say

that it has moved in any absolute sense would be an overstatement: the *oikos* persists, but it is tending outwards. It remains where it was, but finds itself reflected outside itself—in the *agora*. The *agora* constitutes the common land at the heart of the city, and Hestia comes to represent not the hearth of the *oikos*, but the communal hearth. Hestia has “become the centre of the city and symbol of the unity of the citizens, just as previously she was the centre of the home and symbol of the unity of the family group” (Vernant 151). The persistence of the *oikos* despite Hestia’s emigration allows the spatial differentiation of inside and outside to persist without the Hermes-Hestia relation bearing its initial weight. The spaces demarcated by Hestia and Hermes have begun to overlap in a far more pronounced way than the previous ambiguities would have suggested. Some of these overlaps are prevented, however, by denying citizenship to those who engage in certain trades. Craftsmen, but also merchants are excluded from citizenship. It is as though both those who spend too much time indoors, and those who stray too far from home are denied citizenship irrespective of their place of birth. In other words, despite Hestia’s displacement from the hearth of the *oikos* to the communal hearth, the original spatial demarcation persists. This persistence of social space in practice is not consistently born out in theory. With the movement of Hestia from the *oikos* to the centre of the *polis*, we have entered the age of the philosophers. It is at this time that we can begin to witness a transition, the effects of which we are still experiencing today.

IV. Hestia On the Move

With the movement of Hestia out of the home and into the city, is it possible to see a return to the previous economy of relations? To see, as Schumpeter suggested, a merging of politics and economics? In his treatise *The Parts of Animals*, Aristotle tells the following story

about Heraclitus as a means of justifying the study of even those things that might seem distasteful:

and as Heraclitus, when the strangers who came to visit him found him warming himself at the furnace in the kitchen and hesitated to go in, is reported to have bidden them not to be afraid to enter, as even in that kitchen divinities were present. (Aristotle 1004)

Aristotle tells this story in order to drive home his point that we should study everything regardless of how it makes us feel, since even in the lowest of things there are wonders to be found. But is this all that this story tells us? Certainly this would depend on what we make of the fact that the strangers hesitated. Aristotle does not actually tell us why the strangers hesitated, but his use of the story suggests the possibility that there was something unseemly about Heraclitus' abode; that the strangers hesitated because there was something distasteful about the abode into which they were being invited. Martin Heidegger, in his *Letter on Humanism*, gives a slightly different interpretation. According to Heidegger, the strangers hesitate because they do not expect to witness such a commonplace as the philosopher warming himself at the hearth. The strangers hesitate because they expect something extraordinary from the philosopher, not the everyday scene of a man warming himself at the stove.

Both interpretations—we should perhaps say uses—seem to assume that the strangers hesitated because of the conditions in which they find the philosopher. And indeed, this would be the obvious recourse as soon as one thought to look for reasons: one would ask, “What was it that made them hesitate?” The question entices one to search where there might be nothing to find. After all, might it not be the case that the strangers hesitated at Heraclitus' threshold, because one simply does hesitate before entering another's house? Is it not the case that this hesitation, which we still experience today, is precisely the demarcation between inside and

outside, the threshold which has to be crossed, from one social space to another? To read the story according to this possibility immediately transforms its meaning. No longer is the story innocuous: suddenly it springs to life as the thought of another way of being. The hesitation itself is brought into question by the philosopher whose writings were always considered opaque. Is it not possible then to read in this story of Heraclitus a much more profound comment on the hesitation than is found in the readings of Aristotle and Heidegger?

Suppose, then, that the strangers just hesitated as any of us would hesitate when crossing another's threshold. How would the story now have to be read? The answer to this question lies in the presence of the gods. The gods are present "even" in that kitchen. Heraclitus comments on the strangers' hesitation by eradicating the threshold, by overturning in a single gesture the demarcation of space that distinguishes the inside from the outside. This eradication immediately homogenizes space. The gods are here just as they are there; the threshold does not constitute another space, but is the continuation of the same. The hesitation, Heraclitus is saying, is pure form, verging perhaps on superstition. With one gesture then, Heraclitus, the riddler, is not only eradicating spatial differentiation, he is also reconfiguring the entire pantheon of the gods. The distinction between Hestia and Hermes has vanished. The gods have ceased to be distinguished at all. One could read into this seemingly innocuous story a critique of the entire Greek tradition. But does it indicate a return? It does seem that Heraclitus is suggesting what I have called an economy of relations, but what is striking and indeed unique about Heraclitus' economy is that it is an economy of the outside, an economy dominated by Hermes. Heraclitus' economy seems to be an economy of the irreducible, of that which can only be spoken of in riddles, of that which exceeds totalization and enclosure. And yet, at the same time, Heraclitus' suggestion cannot but

be thought of as a reduction, a reduction of a bifurcated or pluralist conception of space into a unitary conception.

Nonetheless, Heraclitus is unique; dominance of place will not be given to Hermes by subsequent Greek philosophy. But subsequent philosophy will take up Heraclitus' elimination of the ambiguous and contradictory nature of the Hermes-Hestia relation. Indeed, it could be argued that the entirety of Greek philosophy was motivated by an attempt to eradicate this relation; to overcome, in other words, the contradiction at the heart of the city-state. Subsequent philosophy will eliminate the contradiction not by turning to Hermes, but rather by extending the role of Hestia. Of course, the issue is never stated in these terms, but that Greek philosophy, with the exception of Heraclitus and perhaps Thales, follows the movement of Hestia seems to me to be incontrovertible. The Greek philosophers, and Plato and Aristotle in particular, were engaged in a radical critique of existing social relations. More than simply identifying the movement of Hestia and working out its implications, Plato and Aristotle were in the process of completely undermining the social and spatial relations upon which the entire city-state operated. The issue here is not simply, as has been suggested, that Plato and Aristotle were emulating Sparta, nor is it simply the case that they were conservatives attempting to justify the role of the Athenian aristocracy. Plato and Aristotle were engaged in what we would call a de-mythologization of the Greek city-state. What they attempted was a rationalization of Greek social life—a rationalization in the name of Hestia.⁴

The elimination of Hermes from the *polis*, the economization of social space, transforms the *polis* into a site of non-contradiction. The ambiguous space of Hermes-Hestia becomes the unitary space of a re-conceptualized Hestia. Hestia is still thought in her relationship with Hermes, but their relation has become one of hostility and suspicion, rather than of

interpenetration and friendship. With the development of philosophy, Hestia takes on the characteristics attributed to her by Arendt. She loses her ambiguous relation with Hermes and becomes the symbol for the unitary, the stable, and the secure. Hestia becomes the symbol for the newly conceptualized understanding of truth or of God, the pure and immutable source of all that is. The philosophers engage in a reduction of the conception of space and in particular of the conception of Hestia. The philosophers' re-conceptualization of Hestia gives consistency to the emigration of Hestia towards the centre of the city already evident in the practices and thoughts of democratic Athens. The philosophers merely radicalize a tendency already at work to think of the polis as the site of unity, stability, and non-contradiction.

The drive, witnessed in both democratic Athens and in the thought of the philosophers, was towards an economy of social space, an elimination of the inherent contradictions and ambiguities of mythic thought. From the perspective of the imaginary, the elimination of contradiction and ambiguity tends invariably towards the creation of stability, and the realm of stability, as we have already seen, is the realm of Hestia—the *oikos*. Heraclitus' dismissal of Hestia is entirely consistent with his claim that everything is in flux, but flux here is an absolute, and thus is not itself in flux. It is flux that the *polis* as *oikos* overcomes. Politics is anti-thetical to philosophical thought precisely because it is politics that threatens the economy, whether this economy be an economy of the *oikos* or of the *polis*. Thus, Heraclitus is no less economical than Plato and Aristotle. Heraclitus eliminates the *oikos* in order to eliminate that which would lie outside the realm of flux, just as Plato and Aristotle eliminate politics in order to eliminate that which would lie outside the realm of stability. This, it seems to me, is the philosophical gesture par excellence. Philosophy, while not yet economics, is always already economical. And here it becomes clear that the multiple uses of the word "economy" are not simply metaphoric, rather

the multiple meanings circumscribe an economy of space and relations according to a systematics of totalization and incorporation. Nothing escapes the economy. And yet, it is clear that for Plato and Aristotle at least, despite their economizing, there remains an outside.

The outside that persists in the analysis of *polis* as *oikos* is the outside of the realm of Hermes—the realm of merchants, adventure seekers, those in search of wealth—who has now been shut out at the gates of the city as he was previously shut out at the threshold of the *oikos*. Hestia, now, has lost her relation with the outside. No longer are Hestia and Hermes to be joined together in friendship. Such friendships cannot persist under the dominance of the law of non-contradiction. The economy of the *polis* as *oikos* is an economy of separation from and elimination of that which is other, that which is outside, that which cannot be incorporated into the totality of the same. This excess, this remainder, constitutes what might be thought of as the particularity of Greek philosophical economy. Greek thought thinks itself as Greek, it never transgresses its boundaries in the name of universality. The barbarian is shut out and incomprehensible. There is no attempt to understand, nor incorporate the other. The gates of the *polis* as *oikos* are shut tight.

The philosophy of Plato and Aristotle are philosophies of separation, despite the fact that both philosophers seem to subsume this separation within a contemplation of the eternal, the Good, the unmoved mover, that would exceed the particularities of the *polis* as *oikos*. It is this philosophy of separation that will dominate subsequent Western thought, within an increasingly profound economy of relations. Indeed, it is possible to read the history of western thought as an attempt to incorporate into a single system the entirety of human relations; to read, in other words, the attempt to create a total economy with no remainder, with no other, with nothing that cannot be incorporated into the system. Such absolute economizing is nothing other than the

attempt to eradicate the wanderer, the stranger, the political, in the name of totality, stability, systematicity, identity, the incorporation of every relation of exchange.

There is, in other words, far more to the relation between the *oikos* and the economy than Schumpeter and Findley would have led us to believe. And there is no reason to assume that the representations of so-called primitive societies are not merely a reflection of this desire. Economic analysis continues the transposition of Hestia that began 2500 years ago; the globalization of the economy does not render reference to the home simply metaphoric, rather it indicates that today we are witnessing the absolute incorporation, by force if necessary, of every relation under the rubric of a single and stable set of analyzable relations.⁵

Hestia, however, has also been reduced. She no longer bears the relation to Hermes that she did for her worshippers. Hermes has been eliminated from the pantheon by the all-encompassing logic of economy: the logic of the enclosure, of the familiar and stable, of the term without opposition. No process, no activity, no set of possible relations, escapes this logic of economization. At the same time, however, this logic is dynamic. Hestia continues her movement away from the hearth of the home. The logic of this movement is a logic of incorporation. The process of incorporation continues even in the absence of a thought that would capture its logic. This process of embodying thus retains the significance of Hestia as navel. At the same time, however, this total economy eliminates the need for the hearth. The hearth, today, is everywhere and nowhere. Hestia inhabits all our activities and our thoughts, and the warmth of her fire is always just beyond our reach.

V. Conclusion: *Oikos* and Economy

Far from being a minor element in our inheritance from ancient Greece, economics is our inheritance. Attempts to overcome this legacy have invariably been incorporated back into its economy. The history of philosophy has always sought to curtail the movement of Hestia; to discover the realm of stability within a generalizable set of stable processes, methods, rules, or axioms. Economics seeks to discover the laws which govern fluctuation, or to discover the means by which fluctuations can be contained or controlled, but regardless the fluctuation itself already appears to incorporate everything it touches.

The movement of Hestia has been recognized, but Hestia is never overwhelmed by an outside that she could not welcome with open arms. To be sure, Hestia was always already on the move. But the Greeks sought to keep her to herself nonetheless. Hermes, that most ambiguous of gods, constitutes that which Hestia can never quite succeed in seducing to the warmth of the hearth. The subsequent history of philosophy, and economics, but not only economics, as a continuation of this history, has sought to put an end to this ambiguous predicament. The internal contradictions of the hermetic realm have been reconciled; space has been reconsidered and reorganized. Even the most radical critiques of a given economy today appear to remain within the confines of that economy. And yet, are there not indications that Hermes has already insinuated himself into the household? Can we be certain that beside the hearth there is not a stranger unwilling to be incorporated, offering us the promise or the threat of another way of being—of an outside which, while perhaps never present, offers us the glimpse of a potential opening? Is it possible that today we are again hearing the first tentative knocks of the stranger at the gates of the *oikos*? And if so, what does our hesitation mean?

Notes

¹ There have been a number of important reconsiderations of ancient Greek economic theory since the publication of Schumpeter's history. Perhaps most important is Polanyi's "Aristotle Discovers the Economy." In some respects this essay is an attempt to take up again Polanyi's argument. But the general claim against Schumpeter does not strictly interfere with the argument being made. The Greeks may have said more that is relevant to today's understanding of economics than Schumpeter assumed, but the Greeks did not understand what we understand by economic activity as constituting a unified sphere of investigation comparable to politics or physics.

² Polanyi is using the term "material" in the sense developed by Marx, and thus is related to the satisfaction of needs.

³ In *Economics and Evolution*, Geoffrey M. Hodgson devotes some attention to the question of the role of metaphor in economic theory. He does not, however, consider the fact that the term "economics" is itself a metaphor. His interest is in economics' adoption of metaphors from the natural and biological sciences. I would suggest that the metaphoric nature of the term "economics" already contains a good deal of his more extensive argument.

⁴ At the centre of the city described in *The Laws*, Plato establishes a shrine to Hestia; Hestia is clearly also the unmoved mover of Aristotelian metaphysics.

⁵ It should be clear here that I am not merely speaking about economics as the science of the wealth of nations. The economy of relations of which economics is merely a part is far more insidious than this simple equation would suggest, and is not limited to the realm of theory.

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