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Where does « Axial breakthrough » take place? In the past, or in present narratives of the past?

Violaine Sebillotte Cuchet¹

Abstract This article focuses on Vernant's thesis, masterfully developed in *Les origines de la pensée grecque* (1962) and translated into English in 1982. Vernant explained that between the 7th and the 2nd century BCE, one can note crucial modifications of the traditional and religious atmosphere, in civilizations as distant as China, India, Persia, Palestine and Greece. These turning points brought Confucianism, Buddhism, Zoroastrism, Prophetism, and, in Greece, Search for Truth. For historians, who claim their expertise on the past, methodological issues are at stake in this inquiry about an "axial age" or an "axial breakthrough". First, there is the epistemological question of historiography, a present narrative of the past that cannot, from a scientific point of view – that of the historians –, erase varieties of past narratives (poetics, technical treatises, epigraphic decrees, vase paintings, etc.). Then, there is the new understanding of the constant interaction of what we call the political sphere with what we call the religious sphere, insofar as the distinction between a strictly political sphere, separate from the religious sphere, is now fully challenged. Finally, the polis as we understand it nowadays includes women's acts, as feminist scholarship has demonstrated through the past 35 years. This new depiction makes the "citizens" different: they can no longer be thought of as all the same and interchangeable.

Keywords Vernant . ancient history. historiography . methodology . feminism

As a French specialist of Ancient Greece, the notion of Axial Age and Axial Breakthrough, mostly used in relation with the origin of Thought, carried me back to Jean-Pierre Vernant's masterly book, *Les origines de la pensée grecque* (1962), translated into English with the title *The Origins of Greek Thought* (1982). In this book, the thesis of Vernant, who was mainly a philosopher and a Hellenist, not a historian (nor a social historian), was to describe a kind of "Axial Age", the 6th century BCE in Greece. This period, actually extended to a wide range of years between the 8th and the 5th century, was characterized, according to Vernant, by the shift between Myth and Reason, between divine discourses and physical observations, arguments, and demonstrations:

Violaine Sebillotte Cuchet
violaine.sebillotte@univ-paris1.fr

¹ Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, UMR 8210 ANHIMA (CNRS, EHESS, EPHE, Paris1, Paris7), 2 rue Vivienne, 75002 Paris, France

If we wish to document the birth of this Greek rationality, to follow the path by which it managed to divest itself of a religious mentality, to indicate what it owed to myth and how far it went beyond it, we must compare and contrast with its Mycenaean background that turning point, from the eighth to the seventh century, where Greece made a new start and began to explore paths that were peculiarly its own: a period of decisive mutation that laid the foundations for the government of the *polis* at the very moment where the Orientalizing style was triumphant, and which ensured the advent of philosophy by secularizing political thought (Vernant 1982, p. 11).

One will note that this way of considering the past is quite similar to the one taken by Bruno Snell in his book published in 1946 and entitled *Die Entdeckung des Geistes*, translated into French in 1994 with the title *La découverte de l'esprit. La genèse de la pensée européenne chez les Grecs* (Snell 1946, Onians 1951). According to Vernant, the geographic context of the “decisive mutation” was mainly Ionia, the Greek East, in Asia Minor. The actors were Thales of Miletos, Anaximander, Anaximenes, and Solon of Athens, among others. The result was the conception of a new cosmos, organized in a political and rational order (by *nomos* - the Law - discussed by all). The result, and in fact, also the cause, was a new society where each one (in fact, Vernant was thinking of each male citizen) was in a relation of equality and reciprocity (democratic society and *isonomia*), and each decision could be discussed by each one (publicity of the written law):

The advent of the polis, the birth of philosophy – the two sequences of phenomena are so closely linked that the origin of rational thought must be seen as bound up with the social and mental structures peculiar to the Greek city (Vernant 1982, p. 130).

At one major point, Vernant put some distance between Snell and others: for him, like other scholars claiming the historicity of the “Greek spirit” (Momigliano 1994, p. 46), philosophy was not a pure Revelation. The birth of Reason was not a Miracle but an experience:

The Milesian school did not witness the birth of Reason; rather, it devised a kind of reasoning, an early form of rationality (...) Reason itself was in essence political (...). When philosophy arose at Miletus, it was rooted in the political thought whose fundamental preoccupations it expressed and from which it borrowed a part of its vocabulary (Vernant 1982, pp. 130-131).

In a way one can say that Reason was born thanks to the birth of political experience... As Andrew Ford wrote in 1989 in a critical review of Havelock's book, *The Muse learns to write*:

Vernant traces the advent of philosophy to the advent of the polis (Ford 1989, p. 366).

If it is not the birth of Philosophy or Reason, it is the birth of political thought, and thus of the *polis*, if I may suggest, that has to be understood as a kind of miracle. This view has been recently challenged by Richard Seaford in his book *Money and the Early Greek Mind*: even if the political explanation of the origin of Greek rational thought is still considered of great

importance, the use of money is, with Seaford's thesis, now to the fore (Seaford 2004, pp. 315-317).

More than fifty years after Jean-Pierre Vernant's masterly analysis of what one would call an « axial breakthrough », i.e. the coming of age of the *polis* and concomitantly of Reason (Logos/Mythos), I am not sure French scholars of the 21st century are still comfortable with this kind of approach. The aim of this short note will be to understand why looking for breakthroughs inside the ancient civilizations, or inside the past, seems nowadays to most of us so strange. I should add that when I speak of "us" I am referring to historians, those who claim their expertise on the past and have this question in mind: what really happened? I should also add that my aim is to express my discomfort with the notion, not to propose any authoritative method.

Jean-Pierre Vernant himself, in his Preface of 1987 (for the new French edition of his book), distanced himself from the thesis of 1962. He gave priority to the diversity of rationalities (philosophical discourses, medical treatises, historical narratives, technical treatises...). He also brought to the fore the inaccurate division between mythos and logos, one might say between irrationality and rationality. He took account of the fact that mythos and logos were actually quite synonymous before the 5th century when, in historical or philosophical treatises (and maybe only there), they became antagonistic notions.

Nevertheless, Vernant, in the new preface of 1987, underlined his debt to A. I. Zaitzev who was precisely following the path opened by Karl Jaspers. He explained that between the 7th and the 2nd century BCE, one can note crucial modifications of the traditional and religious atmosphere, in civilizations as distant as China, India, Persia, Palestine and Greece. These turning points brought Confucianism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Prophetism, and, in Greece, Search for Truth. Vernant added that the Greek specificity was that the movement was not displayed inside religion but beside (or outside) it. The search for truth did not use the religious medium but was developed by individual personalities, argumentation, and cumulative science.

Still, Vernant set the Greek *polis* as a specific social and intellectual context, the context of a city constituted by the participation of citizens in collective matters. Lloyd focused rather, as Seaford analyzed it, on the "unprecedented *freedom of public debate* characteristic of the polis" (Seaford 2004, p. 176, his emphasis). Seaford did not question this. He illuminated another factor, the "rapid monetisation of the Greek city-states of the sixth century BC" (Seaford 2004, p. 315).

As I suggested at the very beginning, different issues are at stake in this inquiry about an "axial age" or an "axial breakthrough". They are mainly methodological issues and my purpose is to open the discussion on these issues. I will discuss first the epistemological question of historiography, a contemporary narration about the past that cannot, from a scientific point of view – that of the historians –, erase varieties of past narratives. Then, I will demonstrate how far contemporary scholars are from Vernant's conception of the Greek polis and its political activity, mainly because of the constant interaction of what we call the political sphere with what we call the religious sphere. Then, I will draw a picture of the polis that is very different from that of Vernant and Seaford because the one we know nowadays is including women's acts, as feminist scholarship has demonstrated through the past 30 years.

The idea that history (time) is going on like a homogeneous flow.

Vernant was well aware of the difficulty in giving a present narrative of ancient societies and he called attention to the variety of rationalities in the past (as did Snell). Nowadays, nearly 30 years after the new preface of 1987, the way of considering historical narratives has changed a great deal and the balance between the necessity of producing a present narrative and the scruples of giving an exact depiction of the variety of ancient rationalities has shifted. Classicists and historians of modern periods are very cautious in writing their history and try not to make generalizations from the documents they use. I think that nobody would anymore write about Greek Thought, considered as a single entity **that would have inspired society, religion, and politics**, and that would have spread throughout the Greek world: every discursive genre, because of its pragmatic aspects, is thought of as producing a specific kind of reality. On this point, one can easily read a lot of very intelligent works, dealing with epistemological issues, particularly since the famous *Linguistic Turn* published by Richard Rorty in 1967 (Delacroix 2010, pp. 476-490), but we can also observe it very easily.

Take for example Xenophon's treatise titled *Oeconomicus* (Todd and Henderson 2013). It pictured a good citizen, living on his farm, with his spouse and some slaves. The treatise has been used as a good example for a vivid depiction of the everyday life of a quite rich Athenian woman: she was raised to get married in her teens and was only trained to work at the loom (spin and weave). She became, when married, the head of the house and planned the circulation of goods (grain, wool, oil, fruits) from the outside to the inside and then, if possible, to the marketplace. She controlled the exchanges and expenses. She also took care of everyone in the house: slaves must be in good health. Xenophon gave the name of the gentleman farmer and spouse of this woman, Ischomachos, not of his wife. Some scholars conclude, from that text and others (especially Attic discourses composed to be read in front of courts or assemblies), that in Athens (and Greece as a whole) women were at home, living inside like Penelope at the loom, and that their names should not be communicated in public, for it is a source of shame. Attic vases showing women at home, or among women, and doing housework, seem to confirm this fact, considered as the social norm: men were outside, in the public sphere, women were at home, silent and under control of the masculine members of their family.

Thus, if we take into account the various dedications, honorific or funerary steles, i.e., epigraphic documents, we would be stunned to read the names of many Athenian (or Greek) women, acting in the city, outside their houses, and having a prominent place in public areas: for example, an inscribed stone notes the name of the woman who acted as a witness in a sale in Olynthus, in the 4th century. The contract between Xenon and Euboulides recorded the two guarantors' names, Pytheas, son of Pythion and Philaina, daughter of Heron. Philaina did not need any kurios to be a guarantor (Game 2008, p. 62). The stone, from 350 BCE, was found in situ, in the ruins of a house located near the northeast corner of the agora of Olynthus. At the entrance of the house, one could read the name of Philaina (Game 2008, pp. 171-172). The stone was visible to anyone walking along the agora of Olynthus and this publicity about her (like the publicity for the men listed on the sale contract), was not a disgrace. Various lease agreements named women as renters for public lands. The agreements are inscribed on stone

and erected in public spaces for everyone to be informed. In Thespias during the third century, in Mylasa during the 4th, in Tenos during the 4th and, in that instance, for public sales of private lands, women are listed and described as acting in the same way as men (Pernin 2014).

A fragmentary inventory of the sanctuary of Artemis Brauronia in the Athenian Acropolis lists more than one hundred names of women who dedicated textiles to the divinity at the 4th century (Brøns 2014). One could also think of Lysimache's statue, described by Pausanias and erected on the Athenian acropolis, probably by her son, and celebrating the woman who has been Athena Polias' priestess during more than sixty years (Georgoudi 1993). Many epigraphic documents show women in action: at the end of the fourth century, Philia offered to Demeter and Kore a statue of her deceased daughter Philylla, named with her patronymic and demotic. Philia is named with her own name, without any tutor. She gave the commission to a man named Kephisodotos and acted as a man would (Kron 1996).

Everyone will easily conclude that one kind of narrative production (such as didactic treatises, one might say normative treatises) does not show the same picture of the past (life in Greek cities) as another (archeological documentation). When historians are analyzing documents, the question they have to ask is the one of their pragmatic use (what for? which audience? where?) instead of giving general explanation about their meanings. During the past decades, scholarship has demonstrated that some women could be free and active in public when others could live under the mastery of their fathers or husbands. Neither is there, from the past to the present, a single and homogeneous story for women, nor for the society as a whole. Past narratives, whether they are inscribed on stone or drawn on vases or written on papyri or transcribed on manuscripts, are always engaged in a social function: each tells its own truth. The contemporary narrative historians produce about the past could not ignore that. No one can ignore the competing past narratives, each one being a real and specific happening, mainly when there is no statistic about how people acted or thought, on average. In a way the social norm historians put to the fore is always only a social norm among others.

Religious sphere and political sphere

Vernant located the "breakthrough" (to employ the notion we are discussing, which is not his as he himself spoke of the "advent of the polis, the birth of philosophy") in the "decline of myth" when "the first sages brought human order under discussion and sought to define it, to render it in formulas accessible to the intelligence, and to apply to it the standard of measure and number". In this way "evolved a strictly political thought, separate from religion, with its own vocabulary, concepts, principles, and theoretical aims" (Vernant 1982, p. 131). Yet in 1990 a very influential article of Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood showed that there did exist, during the classical Age, a "polis religion" (Sourvinou-Inwood 1990). Julia Kindt recently criticized the notion but the notion of polis religion is still unchallenged. As Kindt resumed, the polis religion operated on three levels: first in providing "the major context for religious beliefs and practices", then in offering "a common set of ideologies and values, such as shared notions of purity and pollution, sacred and profane, human and divine" and finally in

constituting “the basic unit” through which “the panhellenic dimension of Greek religion (..) was accessed” (Kindt 2009).

In a sense, we can conclude that this now largely shared view, placing the political at the top, is not far from Vernant’s. But the major shift is that the political, in Sourvinou’s depiction, is no longer independent from religion. The political surpasses religion, including it. And, actually, it cannot be free of religion. How can we represent, nowadays, “political thought” (except by reducing it to political theory) separate from religion? New works underline the close connection between political groups, organized as tribes or phratries, and religious rituals and between political acts (on various levels) and religious beliefs. For example, the foundation of the Athenian Cleisthenic tribes was legitimated in the Delphi sanctuary; a war could not be undertaken without agreement of the gods, nor a political assembly. To illustrate this embeddedness of political and religious spheres, we can think, among other documents, of this lead tablet recording a consultation made by the Chaones (an ethnos living in North-West Greece) at the sanctuary of Zeus at Dodona (Epirus) before 330 BCE:

Good fortune. The city of the Chaones requests Zeus Naios and Dione to answer whether it is better and more expedient that they transfer the building of the temple of Athena the Citadel-Goddess (Davies 2002, p. 249).

The response – still to be discussed, **and in this perspective the final decision is a political one** – is given by priests.

Even philosophical schools could be located in, and identified with, a sacred grove (Ismard 2010, p. 188): in the Academy, in Athens, Plato was teaching in or beside the *Mousaion*, sanctuary of the Muses, in 387 BCE. Diogenes Laërtius indicated that Speusippos erected statues of the *Charites* (the Graces) in the sanctuary of the *Mousai* built by Plato in the Academy (the Athenian gymnasium honoring, among other heroes or divinities, the hero Academus and where civic education took place).

To conclude, it becomes more and more difficult to discuss and speak of “the polis” as a specific political agent. The historical agents are the assemblies and other institutions (such as courts of justice), the magistrates and other individuals. The “State” in itself needs to be defined with much more precision (Ismard 2014).

The conception of the city as a collection of citizens organized to share power and participate in collective matters is less a certainty than an issue, at least for feminist research.

Vernant wrote in 1962 that Reason, the result of the Axial breakthrough (to re-use the implicit notion), is “a creature of the city” (Vernant 1982, p. 132). And the city, according to Vernant, is the society of the citizens, free men exercising their political rights and their reason in assemblies. In 1987, he did not modify this picture. **Somehow, his question was less the Greek thought (which might be analyzed in philosophical treatises) than the political and social effects and realizations of “Greek Thought”.**

According to Vernant (Vernant 1963, p. 19), the political sphere was an exclusively male sphere. Vernant formulated here a very common idea of his generation, largely developed in France by Claude Mossé, Nicole Loraux and Pierre Vidal-Naquet (Loraux 1981; Vidal-Naquet 1981; Mossé 1983; Mossé 1993). The latter fathered the widespread formula describing the city as a “citizen club”. Actually, the “citizen club” was a way to express the feeling of sameness that was thought to be the firm cornerstone of equality and political thought. Because citizens were thought to be all the same (sharing manliness?), they were thought of as interchangeable. This thought explained the political abstraction of citizenship: one could be a ruler and then be governed by someone else. The point is that being equal and interchangeable, citizens accepted the rule (Aristotle, *Politics* III, 1275a 22-23 and 1275b17-21; Rackham 1977). In these years (the 60s and 70s) men and women were thought of as absolutely different (the Same and the Other) and gender was considered as the major criterion of social and symbolic division that should be explored and challenged, even by ancient societies themselves (Zeitlin 1996).

The scene has now completely changed even if many scholars do not take the results of feminist research into account as I do. A good example is the recent book of Andreas Fahrmeir, *Citizenship. The rise and fall of a modern concept*. According to Fahrmeir, the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* by the French National Assembly on August 26th of 1789, “was a defining moment for the history of a concept of social organization which has since become central to everyday life, political controversies, and academic research: citizenship” (Fahrmeir 2007, p. 1). According to him “as the invention of citizenship was a political project, it is not surprising that formal citizenship [legal rights to vote and be elected] was closely linked to political citizenship” (Fahrmeir 2007, p. 228). Before that time (the invention of formal citizenship), one can only speak of local experiments of inclusion and exclusion, one can only speak of social citizenship (membership). Thus, as we said before, various feminist scholars pointed out the women’s participation, as female citizens, in collective matters: rituals, public exhibitions of prestige, economic agency. They also put at some distance the social efficacy of the legal sphere (Hunter 1989; Foxhall 1996; Agut-Labordère and Veisse 2014) and the idea of a confinement of the freewomen inside the house (Nevett 1999; Nevett 2013). They underlined the polarity between free members of the city and slaves, and, doing so, moved the boundaries between the Same and the Other.

In 1987, an American scholar, Cynthia Patterson, demonstrated that Ancient Greek used the word citizen (*politai*) both for freemen and freewomen. The word indicates, in the plural form, the inhabitants of the city, the members of the community and the territory, since Homer (Patterson 1986). Used in the singular form, beside the word citizen in the masculine form (*polites*), the Greek language used a feminine form, *politis*, to refer to the feminine equivalent of *polites* even in a political context, for example, in speeches before the Athenian assemblies or in discourses engaged in defining what is the *polis* and what kind of individuals are the *politai* (Blok 2005; Sebillotte Cuchet 2016). It is therefore not so surprising to read two public decrees from Dodona in Epirus, inscribed on the same stele and dating from the 4th c. that gave the *politeia* to two women, Philista and Phinto (Davies 2002, pp. 234-258).

As women’s social participation has been widely shown by scholars, especially in rituals and in relation to gods and goddesses, the notion of separate spheres, religion on the one hand and

politics on the other, has been more and more challenged. Only freemen could belong to the legal sphere, the sphere of the publicly-made decision. That does not mean that all freemen felt concerned (many did not have the time and others did not care about politics, a notion Plato described for the first time as the art of governing). As a priestess, a woman could share the same prestige as a priest: she could also interfere in public assemblies (the *Boule* for certain, no evidence for the *ecclesia* yet) and manifest the power and the authority of the divine (Georgoudi 1993). She could be in a superior position to public magistrates (Herodotus 5.72: Waterfield and Dewald 1998). The participation in government, a major argument in the work of Aristotle to describe citizenship and political action, has been reduced in importance weakened. Political participation, in the Greek meaning of “*meteichein tes poleos*”, was not confined to what we used to call “political” assemblies. Ancient and modern citizenship are definitively not the same.

Philosophical works from Simone de Beauvoir (de Beauvoir 1949) to Judith Butler (Butler 1990), and including Monique Wittig (Wittig 1976) for example, showed that the notion of Alterity applied to women is a category of discourse pointing out one single element in the body, the male/female differentiated capacity for generation. Other scholars have demonstrated that in Ancient Greece, this kind of differentiation certainly operated, but only in limited types of discourses (medical treatises and stereotypical rhetoric – tragedy or comedy), whereas individuals were also thought of as human beings as opposed to beasts, gods and goddesses. I refer here to scholarship produced in Paris on women and gender history in Antiquity (Ernout and Sebillotte Cuchet 2007; Boehringer and Sebillotte Cuchet 2011; Sebillotte Cuchet 2012, pp. 573-603; Boehringer and V. Sebillotte Cuchet 2013, pp. 199-216). Mostly, freemen and freewomen were thought of as sharing the same status and ideology (controlling oneself – *sophrosune*) (Marchiandi 2011). Social distinctions, for example between the best among the citizen (*epitimoï*) and the worst among them (*atimoï*), included both men and women (Aischines, *Against Timarchus* 183: Adams 1968).

Even “Greece” could not be thought of as a whole. When Vernant was writing his book, it was usual to speak of Greece as a whole even when discussing very fragmentary pieces of evidence, mostly coming from a cultural tradition elaborated in Athens (the Pisistratids were very active in collecting documents of panhellenic value (Davison 1955, p. 1-21). Many works have demonstrated that political experiments were extremely diverse in Greece and rooted in intercultural exchanges with other Mediterranean cultures (Brock and Hodkinson 2002). According to Davies, the Aristotelian picture of “the city” (one single form for the whole Greek world) is nowadays challenged and cannot anymore be considered as a full picture of the Greek experience of the city (politics):

Conscious as he plainly was of the Greek lawgiver tradition, throughout the Politics he tends to regard a polity as something created by a political engineer and applied to a society in order to achieve certain objectives. He has little time for the alternative view of a governmental system as something which is secondary to, derives its shape from, and is gradual, organic, and unplanned outgrowth of, the essential components of the society which evolves it and is « administered » by it (Davies 2002, p. 238).

In the end, the *polis* does not look the same as Vernant's: the polis is an association of free people, men and women; the political decisions are not disconnected from the still strong religious background (there is no secularism). What he called "political thought", even if it did exist, might be a very narrow social experiment, held by a handful of people. We must still consider why such thought appears, but the reason is unlikely to be an Axial Breakthrough involving the entire society.

New documents (mostly epigraphic evidence), heterogeneity of thoughts (contentious perspectives), and empirical methodology have made it very difficult for any scholar to adopt an evolutionist point of view. Could any breakthrough be located in an Axial Age? That is the sense of the question: where does « Axial breakthrough » take place? Is it in the whole society – assuming we can speak for the whole- or in a few discursive practices? The question should be why one of these past narratives, the one focused on the advent of Reason, became so dominant in our present narration of the past? Why did it become so influential over time? Historiography, often underestimated, is a fundamental task for all historians.

From the point of view of the historian's practice, the breakthrough is mostly in the question asked, in the narrative each one constructs, not somewhere in the past. Nowadays, women are back in the city, society is back in the political sphere, and, with society, the rituals and beliefs in gods, heroes and divine forces are all back. "Axial breakthrough" is a concept quite at variance with our new methodology: it is a concept belonging to a specific historiographical narrative. **I guess its analysis cannot elude the historiographical narrative that constructs it.**

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