

THE USE OF *POLITEUMA* AND OTHER *POLIS*-RELATED TERMS
AS ‘CONCEPTUAL ICONOGRAPHY’ IN PLUTARCH’S
*AN SENI RESPUBLICA GERENDA SIT**

DELFIN F. LEÃO

Coimbra University. Centre for Classical and Humanistic Studies

Abstract

Taking as reference the rich semantic field of *polis*-related terms (Πολιεύς, πολιτικός, πολιτεία, πολίτης, πολιτεύω/πολιτεύομαι, πολιτεύμα) in the treatise *An seni respublica gerenda sit*, this study analyses the way Plutarch explores the wide range of meanings covered by those words and interweaves them, thus producing a coherent ‘conceptual iconography’ that depicts the portrait of how old men should engage in politics.

Key-Words: Plutarch, *An seni*, Conceptual iconography, *Politeuma*, *Polis*-related terms.

In a previous work presented at the meeting of the Spanish Section of the International Plutarch Society, in Cáceres¹, an analysis has been conducted to understand the use of the term *politeuma* in the whole Plutarchan *corpus*. The word occurs in fact 75 times throughout his work (with 63 occurrences in the *Lives* and 12 in the *Moralia*). In most cases, it is used only once or twice in a single biography or in a piece of the *Moralia*. There are, however, three exceptions to this global pattern: the *Lives* of Lycurgus and Numa (including the *Comparatio*), with 12 occurrences; those of Agis/Cleomenes and Tiberius/Gaius Gracchus (plus the *Comparatio*) with 13; finally, from the *Moralia*, the treatise *An seni respublica gerenda sit*, with 5

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¹ “Texto e contexto em Plutarco: o uso do termo *politeuma* nas *Vidas* e nos *Moralia*”, presented at the conference “La (inter)textualidad en Plutarco. XII Simposio Internacional de la Sociedad Española de Plutarquistas”, (Cáceres, Universidad de Extremadura), 8-10 October 2015 [= D. F. LEÃO, forthcoming].

passages. From the conclusions that could be drawn from that previous analysis, it became clear that the term *politeuma* (or the plural *politeumata*) is used in Plutarch, most of the time, in the sense of ‘political act’, even if a wide range of overtones can be detected in the way that public action is perceived². The word can be used to define a precise ‘political act’, restricted to a particular context, but more often it covers the implications of a certain deed in a broader timeline, i.e. the way those acts affect the people responsible for them, the future course of events or even the State. Finally, because almost all examples were taken from the *Lives*, the logical implication seems to be that the term *politeuma* understood as ‘political act’ is used mainly to describe a statesman in action, thereby in the making of his biography, and much less in theoretical meditations as could be expected from the *Moralia*.

Taking into account, as indicated above, that the use of the term *politeuma* is much more frequent in the *Lives* than it is in the *Moralia*, it becomes even more remarkable that a small work like the *An seni respublica gerenda sit* concentrates in itself 5 occurrences of this term. Another feature that should be mentioned already at this preliminary stage is that, in those passages, the interpretation of *politeuma* is close to the meaning ‘political activity(ies)’ in the sense that it implies a more embracing perspective than referring simply to a specific ‘political act’ of any kind³. This is in accord with the more theoretical tone of the *Moralia*, but is particularly pertinent in a piece of work that deals with the principle of engaging old men in politics. It is the aim of this paper to argue that this recurrent use of *politeuma* provides Plutarch with the opportunity to draw in this particular work what may be termed a ‘conceptual iconography’, as a way of representing a deep involvement in public affairs. Although the occurrences of the word *politeuma* are recalled more in detail in the last section of the analysis, they must be taken together with the abundant use of other *polis*-related terms, which contribute as well to draw this particularly vivid ‘conceptual iconography’⁴.

As is well known, the word *polis* is a very polysemic term that gave origin to a wide number of other words sharing the same etymological root and also a compa-

² Ranging from ‘law’, ‘political plan’, ‘political project’ to ‘behaviour’ or ‘conduct’. For the main questions dealing with the concept of *politeuma*, see W. RUPPEL, 1927; A. BISCARDI, 1984; C. ZUCKERMAN, 1985-1988; G. LÜDERITZ, 1994; M. H. HANSEN (1994); and more recently P. SÄNGER, 2013; 2016.

³ See *infra* comments on *An seni* 793B; 793C; 795B-C; 796B; the reference at 784D does not correspond so clearly to this pattern, because it is motivated by a specific ‘political act’: the victory of Caesar over Antony.

⁴ Expressions related to the idea of being engaged with the ‘common interest’ (*koinon*) contribute as well to this same concept: e.g. 784C (τοῦ τὰ κοινὰ πράττειν); 790A (τὰ κάλλιστα καὶ μέγιστα διαπράττεται τῶν κοινῶν); 791A (πρὸς τὰ κοινὰ); 791B (εἰς τὸ χρησίμιον συνῆκτο καὶ κοινωνικόν); 797F (κοινῇ δὲ τῇ πατρίδι). At any rate, only those words etymologically related to *polis* shall be considered more in detail.

rable aptitude for embracing a rich range of meanings. In the *An seni respublica gerenda sit*, there is a remarkable breadth in the use of this conceptual and etymological framework, starting with the very word πόλις, whose importance in the making of a citizen-character is underlined by the quotation of the celebrated verse of Simonides (784B: πόλις ἄνδρα διδάσκει⁵), expressing the way the State has the ability to mould the character of a citizen. Even Zeus Πολιεύς (‘guardian of the *polis*’) is evoked several times⁶. But terms that occur more often are precisely πολιτικός (as adjective and as a noun specifying the ‘politician’), πολιτεία, different verbal forms of πολιτεύω/πολιτεύομαι (especially in the middle voice, infinitive and in participles), and finally πολίτευμα. In what concerns πολίτης, it occurs much less often, although it can be detected, for instance, in connection with the love devoted to one’s homeland and fellow-citizens (791C-D: τὴν πατρίδα καὶ τοὺς πολίτας)⁷.

A short but impressive reference must be made also to the term πολιτευτέον, a verbal adjective deriving from the verb πολιτεύω, expressing the idea of necessity (‘one must take part in politics’). The *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* presents only 17 occurrences of the term, of which significantly 2 are used by Plutarch in this particular work: in one case, to express the need of having old men engaged in State affairs, if for no other motive, at least in order to educate and instruct the young⁸; in the other, as the very title of this piece of the *Moralia* (ΕΙ ΠΡΕΣΒΥΤΕΡΩΙ ΠΟΛΙΤΕΥΤΕΟΝ). Although the term is used very seldom in Greek literature, Plutarch cannot be credited with its creation, because it occurs already in the work (frg. 31.14 Wehrli) of Dicaearchus of Messana (fl. c. 320-300 B.C.), a former pupil of Aristotle. It is not implausible that Plutarch may have taken the suggestion for the use of this word from Dicaearchus, because he expressly cites him, when discussing the meaning of the verb περιπατεῖν in a philosophical context (796D)⁹.

Of the terms mentioned until now, the one that occurs most often is πολιτικός. Most of the time it is used as an adjective alluding to political contests (783B: πρὸς τοὺς πολιτικοὺς ἀγῶνας); to public life in general (783C: τὸν πολιτικὸν βίον); to public affairs (789A: πολιτικαῖς πράξεσι); to public offices (784A: ἐκ πολιτικῶν

⁵ ‘The State teaches a man’ (fr. 15 West). For other occurrences of the word *polis* in the *An seni*, in the traditional sense of ‘State(s)’ see 788C; 789F; 790D; 793D-F; 797E.

⁶ There is a particularly elucidative example of this at 789D: τοῦ Βουλαίου καὶ Ἀγοραίου καὶ Πολιέως Διὸς (‘[the servants] of Zeus, god of the Council, of the Agora and of the State’); see also 792F.

⁷ See also 795A, where the term *politai* implies as well the bulk of active citizens and the way they may call for the advice of an aged *polites*.

⁸ 790E: ἀλλ’ εἰ διὰ μηδὲν ἄλλο τῷ γέροντι παιδείας ἔνεκα τῶν νέων καὶ διδασκαλίας πολιτευτέον ἐστίν.

⁹ Stobaeus mentions the word in connection with the work of Plutarch (*Flor.* 4.13.43: Πλουτάρχου ἐκ τοῦ Εἰ πολιτευτέον πρεσβυτέρῳ).

ἀρχείων); to the excellence of public life (785D: τῆς πολιτικῆς ἀρετῆς); or even to political repute and power (787A: τῆς πολιτικῆς δόξης καὶ δυνάμεως). Quite often, it also denotes the statesman himself (e.g. 785C: πολιτικός ἀνὴρ, 790F and 793F: ὁ πολιτικός). In a very interesting passage, where Plutarch draws a parallel between the engagements of old men in the theatre and in politics, he even uses the impressive expression τὸ πολιτικὸν πρόσωπον (785C) to define the ‘political role’. This word may be combined with other terms particularly related to the idea of the common good, in order to underline a lifetime dedicated to the community and to the State (783F: τὸ κοινωνικὸν καὶ πολιτικὸν, cf. also 791C: πολιτικοῦ καὶ κοινωνικοῦ ζῶου). The adverbial form πολιτικῶς occurs as well combined with the obligation of devoting the entire lifetime¹⁰ to the public interest (791C: ὅσον χρόνιον πολιτικῶς καὶ φιλοκάλως καὶ φιλανθρώπως ζῆν). A final remark may be made to the use of the adverbial comparative form (795B: πολιτικώτερον), as a more expressive way of emphasizing what is esteemed to be ‘more statesmanlike’ in public activity¹¹.

Of comparable magnitude to that of πολιτικός is the use of the term πολιτεία throughout the *An seni respublica gerenda sit*, both in singular and in plural. When it occurs in plural, it is normally used to denote the ‘public life’ of a citizen in general or the ‘public activities’ (e.g. 787C: αἱ πολιτεῖαι, 788C: ταῖς πολιτεῖαις). It may also appear with the meaning of ‘State’ but close to the traditional connotation of a ‘form of government’, at times pervaded by a remote democratic flavour (784F: ἡμεῖς δ’ οἱ νῦν τρυφῶντες ἐν πολιτεῖαις, μὴ τυραννίδα μὴ πόλεμόν τινα μὴ πολιορκίαν ἐχούσαις ‘we, who now live softly in States, free from tyranny or from any kind of war or siege’). When the word πολιτεία is used in singular, too, most of the times it refers to the regular commitment of a citizen, thereby being equivalent to the global idea of engagement in public life or in politics¹², especially in old age (e.g. 783C: περὶ τῆς πρεσβυτικῆς πολιτείας ‘concerning the involvement of old men in public life’;

¹⁰ The concept of time is very important in this work of Plutarch, either as a defined period (χρόνος) of existence, whose pertinence is evident in dealing with activities suitable for old age and maturity, but also in the sense of appropriate (especially political) timing (καιρός), even on occasions when it is an unfavourable point in time (ἀκαίρως), as happened with Phocion when he had to lead the Athenians in war, at a difficult period, thereby being forced to convoke for battle all citizens up to sixty years (791E), or before him with Pericles, who had to take firm decisions in difficult circumstances (784E: οὐ κατὰ καιρὸν μάχεσθαι). On the way *tyche*, *kairos* and *chronos* are combined by Plutarch to operate in the *Life of Phocion*, see D. F. LEÃO, 2010.

¹¹ See *infra* (note 12) on 790D, with the expression “νοῦν δὲ πολιτικὸν οὐκ ἐχόντων” (‘[the young] who do not have a statesmanlike mind’).

¹² The term may occur also in the singular with the meaning of ‘State’ (790D): τὴν δὲ πολιτείαν αἰεὶ τοὺς γέροντας ἀποβάλλουσιν ἀναπίμπασθαι νέων ἀνάγκη διψόντων δόξης καὶ δυνάμεως, νοῦν δὲ πολιτικὸν οὐκ ἐχόντων (‘a State that always rejects old men must inevitably be occupied by young, thirsty for fame and power, who do not have a statesmanlike mind’).

786B: ἀλλ’ ἡ πολιτεία καλλίστας μὲν ἡδονὰς ἔχει καὶ μεγίστας ‘but public life possesses more beautiful and much superior pleasures’). This is in accord with the more generic approach to politics as developed by Plutarch in this work. Even so, a more technical connotation can also be found in some passages, as happens when the term is expressly linked with the political activity developed within the framework of a legal democratic government (783D: πολιτεία δὲ δημοκρατικὴ καὶ νόμιμος), implying those citizens who are used both to rule and instead to be ruled by others. Πολιτεία may also be used to define the ‘holding of public offices’ (e.g. 786E: ἐν ἀρχαῖς καὶ πολιτείαις), or in itself be the subject of a school exercise by a young who thinks that ‘he is capable of rightly administering the State (*polis*) and persuading the *demos* and the *boule*, just because he read a book or wrote an exercise about political science (*politeia*) in the Lyceum’¹³. As a closing remark to this section, it is particularly interesting to note that the term may refer to a political activity exercised during a long timeline, thereby being equivalent to the notion of a public career. It is worth to quote the passage in full (787F):

ἀλλ’ ὥσπερ τὰ παλαιὰ δένδρα τὴν μακρὰν πολιτείαν οὐ ῥάδιόν ἐστιν ἀνασπάσαι πολύρριζον οὕσαν καὶ πράγμασιν ἐμπεπλεγμένην, ἃ πλείονας παρέχει ταραχὰς καὶ σπαραγμοὺς ἀπερχομένοις ἢ μένουσιν.

But as happens with old trees, a long public career is not easy to pull up, because it bears many roots and is intertwined with affairs that bring more concerns and tearing to those who depart from them than to those who persist in them.

In what concerns the different verbal forms of πολιτεύω, they also occur quite often, always in the middle-passive voice (mostly in the infinitive and in participles). The usual meaning of the present participle form is ‘to be engaged in public life’ (e.g. 787D: οὐδεὶς ἀπελπίζει τῶν πολιτευομένων). In one case, it is particularly interesting that Plutarch compares the righteous *politeuomenos* with a ‘creator’ *demiourgos* (786D: οἶων δημιουργὸς ὁ πολιτευόμενος ὀρθῶς ἐστιν)¹⁴. The same basic meaning can be detected when the term occurs in the infinitive; it happens furthermore that a significant concentration of occurrences may be found in short passages, viz. at 791B-C (four times altogether: twice πολιτεύεσθαι, once πολιτεύσασθαι and πεπολιτεῦσθαι) and 796C-D (three times πολιτεύεσθαι), although in the third example from the last passage, τὸ πολιτεύεσθαι should be understood as a kind of ‘states-

¹³ 790D: πόλιν δὲ μεταχειρίσασθαι καὶ πείσαι δῆμον ἢ βουλὴν δύναται ἂν ὀρθῶς νέος ἀναγνοὺς βίβλον ἢ σχολὴν περὶ πολιτείας ἐν Λυκείῳ γραψάμενος.

¹⁴ In *Politics* (1273b32), Aristotle expresses himself in very similar terms (he uses πολιτευθέντες and νόμων ... δημιουργοὶ ... καὶ πολιτείας). But Plutarch makes it expressly clear that, in this context, he also has the Platonic *demiourgos* in mind (786D: ἀλλὰ τοῖς Πλατωνικοῖς ἐκείνοις καὶ οὐρανόις πτεροῖς ὅμοια). Cf. Plato, *Phdr.* 246B248E.

manship', as is made clear by the statement that 'being a statesman is comparable to being a philosopher' (796D: ὁμοιον δ' ἐστὶ τῷ φιλοσοφεῖν τὸ πολιτεύεσθαι)¹⁵.

It is now time to turn to the occurrences of the word *politeuma*. As mentioned already in the opening observations of this analysis, this term appears (in the singular or in the plural) 75 times in the whole *corpus* of Plutarch's works, but much more abundantly in the *Lives* than in the *Moralia*. Of the 12 times it occurs in the *Moralia*, 5 passages are from the *An seni*. Because of the weight they carry in shaping Plutarch's contribution to the use of the term, it is worth to evoke them in full at the final stage of the analysis:

784D: Καίσαρος δὲ τοῦ καταλύσαντος Ἀντώνιον οὐτι μικρῶ βασιλικώτερα καὶ δημοφελέστερα γενέσθαι πολιτεύματα πρὸς τῇ τελευτῇ πάντες ὁμολογοῦσιν.

All agree that after Caesar had defeated Antony his political activities (*politeumata*) became no less kingly and less beneficial to the people towards the end [of his life].

793B: οὕτως, ἐπεὶ τὸ πράττειν καὶ λέγειν μᾶλλον ἀνθρώποις ἢ κύκνοις τὸ ἄδειν ἄχρι τελευτῆς κατὰ φύσιν ἔστιν, οὐκ ἀφετέον τὴν πρᾶξιν ὡς περ τινὰ λύραν σύντονον, ἀλλ' ἀνετέον ἐπὶ τὰ κοῦφα καὶ μέτρια καὶ προσφδᾶ πρεσβύταις πολιτεύματα μεθαρμωτομένους.

Thereby, since it is more natural for humans to act and to speak than it is for swans to sing, right to the end of their lives, [old men] should not be dismissed from activity, like a lyre strained tight, but relax a bit, accommodating to those political activities (*politeumata*) that are light, moderated and fitting for old men.

793C: μήτε δὴ τελέως ἐκπαγένας ἑαυτοὺς καὶ καταψυχθέντας ἀπραξία περιδόμεν μήτ' αὖ ἄλιν πᾶσαν ἀρχὴν ἐπαιρόμενοι καὶ παντὸς ἐπιδραττόμενοι πολιτεύματος.

Consequently, let us not see ourselves becoming neither entirely chilled and frozen by inactivity, nor even, on the contrary, burdening us again with every office and every political activity (*politeuma*).

795B-C: Τούτου δὲ πολιτικώτερον, μὴ μόνον ἐμφανῶς μηδὲ δημοσίᾳ ὄνειδίζων ἄνευ δηγμοῦ σφόδρα κολούοντος καὶ ταπεινοῦντος, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον ἰδίᾳ τοῖς εὖ πεφυκόσι πρὸς πολιτείαν ὑποτιθέμενος καὶ συνεισηγούμενος εὐμενῶς λόγους τε χρηστοὺς καὶ πολιτεύματα.

And even more statesmanlike (*politikoteron*) than this is, when reproaching openly and in public, not only to avoid any sharpness [of speech] that vehemently debases and humiliates, but rather, in a good mood and in private, instil

¹⁵ S. XENOPHONTOS, 2012, 83, underlines that the connection between philosophy and politics expressed in this passage is a pivotal aspect of Plutarch's discussion of a proper public career.

in those who are naturally inclined for public affairs (*politeia*) helpful teachings directed to valuable words and to the political activities (*politeumata*).

796B: εαυτὸν ὀρθοῦντα καὶ χειραγωγοῦντα καὶ τρέφοντα μὴ μόνον ὑφηγήσεσι καὶ συμβουλίαις ἀγαθαῖς, ἀλλὰ καὶ παραχωρήσεσι πολιτευμάτων τιμὴν ἔχόντων καὶ δόξαν.

[The aged statesman] should himself raise up correctly [the young], lead and support them, not only with guidance and good counsels, but also by providing them access to those political activities (*politeumata*) that carry honour and esteem.

As stated in the opening assertions, a previous approach to the meaning of the term *politeuma/politeumata* in Plutarch has shown that the biographer used this concept in a wide range of meanings, such as (a) ‘political act’, ‘political measure’ or even ‘law’, (b) ‘citizenry’ or ‘active citizenry’, and (c) equivalent to ‘state’ and ‘constitution’¹⁶. Taken as a whole, this variety of meanings is very rich, and yet, although Plutarch also makes some new contribution to the concept (as happens with the use of *politeuma* as equivalent to the idea of ‘law’ or ‘ordinance’), the relevance of his use of the term for the history of the concept is, above all, that it shows the previous elaborations of the term, from Aristotle and the Attic orators onwards, in their full and mature implementation. By contrast, the 5 passages where it occurs in the *An seni* are quite stable in their meaning and could be interpreted in the more general semantic range of ‘political act’. However, this translation is more appropriate for the passages where the word occurs in the *Lives*, especially when it refers to a specific ‘act’ of a specific statesman. In the *An seni*, on the other hand, the approach is more theoretical and less connoted with the deeds of an individual person (with the exception of the effects of Caesar’s victory over Antony, at 784D). Therefore, a more comprehensive interpretation of the term as ‘political activity(ies)’ (or even ‘governmental activities’) would, in this case, be a more fitting and balanced interpretation of the term.

As a concluding statement, however, what is more striking in this small piece of the *Moralia* is the way Plutarch manages to explore the extremely rich semantic field of *polis*-related terms (Πολιεύς, πολιτικός, πολιτεία, πολίτης, πολιτεύω/πολιτεύομαι, πολίτευμα) and interweaves them so naturally that he makes emerge a coherent ‘conceptual iconography’ – an iconography that depicts the way old men should engage in politics, respecting the passage of time (*chronos*) and leaving the way for the young, but without failing to keep seizing the appropriate timing (*kairos*) for serving the State and the community¹⁷.

¹⁶ See especially P. SÄNGER, 2013; 2016; and D. F. LEÃO, forthcoming.

¹⁷ When discussing Plutarch’s compositional technique, taking as reference the theory of “clusters and parallel passages”, S. XENOPHONTOS, 2012, 87, argues that the proximity between certain passages from the *An seni* and the *Præcepta gerendae reipublicae* does not necessarily indicate the existence of a “cluster”, but may derive from “a mental rather than a written collection of thoughts”. This would be in accord with the idea that Plutarch depicts a ‘conceptual iconography’ in the *An seni*.

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