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**INTERWEAVING THE POLITICAL FORM AND THE SOCIAL
FORM IN LIGHT OF THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL AND
SOCIAL THOUGHT** <https://doi.org/10.2478/ppsr-2026-0001>

► Received: 01 January 2025 ► Accepted: 6 November 2025

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This paper explores the dynamic interplay between political and social forms, arguing that modern political science's emphasis on the state and society neglects the foundational distinction between community and society. Drawing from classical and modern thought, it examines how ancient political structures, such as the polis, fostered communal bonds and civic virtues, contrasting this with the transactional and individualistic orientation of modern market-society frameworks. By conflating community with society, contemporary thought undermines the ability to address crises in leadership and social cohesion. Through an analysis of key political thinkers, the paper underscores the necessity of distinguishing between the organizational principles of the Political Form, which governs power and authority, and the Social Form, which shapes interpersonal interactions and collective identity. Revisiting the classical notion of the polis as the perfected community provides insights into fostering governance that prioritizes human flourishing, social cohesion, and the common good. The paper advocates for reclaiming the nuanced distinctions between community and society to develop a holistic understanding of governance that addresses modern challenges in political life and leadership.

Keywords

political form, social form, community, society, polis, state

Introduction

The distinction between political form and social form has often been blurred in modern political science, largely because the state became the discipline's standard unit of analysis. This conflation—rooted in the early modern social contract theories of Hobbes and Locke—collapses the difference between community and society, obscuring the ontological and normative character of genuine communal life.

In classical thought, from Aristotle's conception of the polis as a *koinonia teleios* to the Roman *civitas*, political life was seen as the fulfilment of communal association, oriented

toward *eudaimonia*, the full flourishing of human beings. The polis was not merely an institution but the culmination of overlapping forms of communal life—family, village, and beyond—where individuals could cultivate relationships, participate in common affairs, and pursue the common good together. Political authority was constitutive of communal existence, shaping the bonds through which humans thrive.

Modern political theory redefined political order as an artificial construct regulating interactions among atomized individuals. Hobbes' *Leviathan* and Locke's *Two Treatises* exemplify this view, conceiving the state as a mechanism to secure the interests of self-interested actors rather than to nurture communal life. The replacement of *koinonia* with *societas* was not a trivial semantic shift but a profound reordering of political grammar: authority became derivative of social relations and transactional interests rather than an expression of communal being. Sociological thought reinforced this shift—Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, along with Durkheim and Nisbet—by reducing political rule to a mode of power and obscuring the interplay of political and social forms.

Recovering the distinction between political and social forms is essential for understanding both human association and political order. Revisiting the classical idea of the polis illuminates the conditions of genuine community and human flourishing, highlighting dimensions of political life neglected by modern society. The emphasis on individualism, economic exchange, and market relations overlooks the deeper bonds of history, culture, and shared commitment that sustain meaningful life. Recognizing this neglect is crucial for confronting contemporary crises of leadership, legitimacy, and cohesion, which often arise from the disconnect between individuals and the larger social body. Reclaiming the classical distinction between community and society is thus no antiquarian exercise; it is a corrective to the homogenization of political experience under the state-society paradigm and a framework for imagining governance oriented to human flourishing.

Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that modern political science is built on the concept of the state, which means it focuses almost exclusively on society. State and society are twin creations of modernity (see Arendt, 1951, 1958). If community is truly distinct from society, then we have lost sight of a fundamental phenomenon. By following this reduction, political science undermines the very means by which we understand community, leaving the longing for it to reappear in distorted forms (see Tocqueville, 2001; Nisbet, 1956).

The mutual shaping of political and social forms underscores the need to grasp their dynamic interplay. In modern thought, however, conflating community and society homogenizes the varieties of rule—reducing all political organization to power relations. This leads simultaneously to the over-politicisation and under-politicisation of life, trends abundantly visible today (see Manent, 2006). Clarifying the variations of social form (society vs. community) and their connection to political form is not a pedantic task. These linguistic elisions shape the very way we think and act. To avoid confusion, it is necessary to define precisely what is meant by “political form” and “social form.”

The concept of political form has a deep lineage in political theory. Rousseau, in *The Social Contract*, distinguished monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy as institutional forms of political life. Hegel, in the *Philosophy of Right*, understood the state itself as an ethical-political form mediating freedom. Marx and Engels gave the concept a materialist grounding: Marx described the state as the “political form” corresponding to the bourgeois mode of production, while Engels identified democracy as a political form of class

rule. Weber, at the turn of the twentieth century, theorized types of domination—legal-rational, traditional, and charismatic—that became foundational for understanding political authority as form. Carl Schmitt radicalized the concept in the 1920s and 1930s, treating democracy, dictatorship, and the state as distinct political forms tied to the essence of sovereignty. Later, Claude Lefort redefined political form as the way a society organizes power and authority while preserving the distinction between rulers and ruled (1986). Following Lefort, Pierre Manent emphasized political form as the structure through which a society organizes sovereignty and collective life, shaping its civic and public existence (2009, 2013). This genealogy traces a movement from classical concerns with government, through Marxist and Weberian analyses of social order, to Schmittian and Lefortian reflections that continue to shape contemporary uses of the term.

The political form denotes the structural framework through which a political community is constituted. It encompasses institutions, norms, and practices that organize authority, structure power, and sustain collective identity. Distinct entities—city-states, nations, empires, even religious bodies—embody distinct political forms, each expressing a particular way of organizing rule and representing community (Manent, 2009, 2013).

In essence, political form defines the configuration of political and governmental structures that determine a community's functioning and character: how power is distributed, how decisions are made, and how institutions maintain order and coherence. Examining political form reveals how different political organizations shape governance and the relation between governors and governed (Schmitt, 2007; Lefort, 1986; Manent, 2009, 2013). Put simply, the political form is the embodied framework of a people's collective existence, the institutional shape through which their political life takes form.

Clarifying this meaning of political form is especially important for distinguishing it from social form: whereas the latter concerns the patterns of association, exchange, and interaction that bind people together, the former refers to the organizational framework that gives political unity, direction, and authority to communal life.

In contrast, the social form encompasses the broader patterns and structures that govern interpersonal interactions, relationships, and norms within a community.¹ It includes institutions such as family, education, and religion, as well as the social hierarchies, cultural practices, and shared values that shape behaviour and collective identity (Elias, 2000, pp. 445–7, 466–8; Giddens, 1996, pp. 1–33, 165–178; Bruhn, 2011, pp. 29–46). These elements weave a distinctive social fabric through which individuals relate to one another, sustaining cohesion and belonging.

The idea of social form also has a genealogy. Classical thought emphasized the natural foundations of association: Aristotle described the household and village as prior forms culminating in the polis, while Roman writers analysed the family and kinship as the bedrock of civic order. Early modern theorists, from Hobbes to Locke, reframed society as a collection of atomized individuals whose interactions were mediated by contract. This shift prepared the way for the sociological turn of the late nineteenth century. Ferdinand

1 Here, some might argue that one should point to the communitarian-liberalism debate that took place in political theory circles in the 1980s through the early 2000s. The problem with that debate was it tended to present the problem as an either/or, whereas what I am suggesting the problem was far more complex than those engaging in that communitarian-liberalist debate framed the point of contention. I would argue that those scholars failed to distinguish the political form from the social form and thus make the issue to be seen as a contest between different political orders.

Tönnies, in *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, distinguished between organic community and contractual society; Émile Durkheim, in *The Rules of Sociological Method*, emphasized the constraining force of collective structures on individual action (Tönnies, 2001 and Durkheim, 1982).

The explicit category of “social form” (*soziale Form*) was introduced by Georg Simmel in *Soziologie* (2009), where he distinguished formal patterns of interaction—conflict, cooperation, exchange—from their substantive contents. In the 1920s, Leopold von Wiese developed a typology of forms in his “formal sociology,” and Alfred Vierkandt applied the category to systematic analyses of interaction. Karl Mannheim extended the idea by speaking of “social forms of thought,” embedding it within debates on ideology, knowledge, and culture. More recent theorists, from Norbert Elias to Robert Nisbet, have stressed how evolving networks, institutions, and traditions shape collective life, further refining the sociological understanding of social form.

Taken together, this trajectory shows how the concept of social form developed from classical concerns with natural association, through early modern contractarianism, to the formal sociology of Simmel and his successors, and finally into contemporary accounts of social cohesion and identity.

The relationship between political and social form illustrates the intricate interplay between state and community in modern thought. The political form embodies the structural framework of governance—institutions, rules, and mechanisms through which authority is exercised and decisions are made. The social form, by contrast, shapes the norms, values, and networks that sustain community life. Each influences the other: social structures condition the responsiveness and priorities of political institutions (Nisbet, 1956; Elias, 2000, pp. 466–8), while political decisions and institutional frameworks reshape social hierarchies, cultural practices, and relationships. Legislation, for example, can alter established norms or generate new ones, demonstrating how governance and social life continually transform one another.

Bringing in the Distinctions Between the Ancient and the Moderns

The distinction between Ancient and Modern political thought, as framed by political theorists such as Eric Voegelin, Hannah Arendt, or Leo Strauss (just to mention a few who do this), provides a critical lens through which to examine the relationship between social form and Political Form. In ancient societies, the political landscape was primarily characterized by the polis, where the concepts of community and governance were deeply intertwined. The Social Form in this context was not merely a backdrop to political activities but was integral to the functioning of political life. Citizens engaged in public discourse and collective decision-making, reinforcing a political identity rooted in shared values, traditions, and social relationships.² The political form reflected this communal life, embodying the norms and practices that facilitated civic engagement and public participation.

2 Some might object that it would be necessary to note the historical fact that the category of “citizen” in ancient Athens and elsewhere in the ancient Greek world contained only a small number and minority of the total population. Different regimes tended to define who was a citizen differently, especially since the Ancient concept of citizenship held that the citizen exercised direct rule over the given political community (see Meier, 1990).

The nature of early Modern political thought tended to blur the separation between the political and social forms—treating the state and society as something interchangeable. For both Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, the social contract is a fundamental combination of society (the frame of the social) with the state (the frame of the political) into a unified conceptual framework. This is to say, for Hobbes, and for Locke, there is no real separation of the creation of the state and the society in either Hobbes or Locke's teaching on the social contract. For example, Hobbes, in *Leviathan*, argues that the state arises directly from the condition of people in the natural state, where life is marked by perpetual conflict and insecurity. To escape this “war of all against all,” individuals collectively agree to transfer their natural rights to a sovereign power, thus forging a political entity that is inextricably tied to the social realities of human fear and self-preservation. This merging ensures that the political authority is both a product of and a solution to the social conditions from which it arises, highlighting how society and the state are inseparable in Hobbesian theory.

Similarly, Locke's conception of the social contract intertwines society and the state by grounding political authority in the natural law that governs social relations. For Locke, the state of nature is characterized by rationality and cooperation, but conflicts over property and rights necessitate the creation of a political structure. Through the social contract, individuals consent to form a government that reflects and institutionalizes the cooperative and moral principles already present in society. The political frame, therefore, is not imposed upon society but evolves from its foundational characteristics. In each case, Hobbes and Locke demonstrate that the social and political are not distinct realms; rather, they are interdependent and mutually constitutive, with the social contract serving as the mechanism that unites them.

In contrast, later Modern political thought tends to conceptualize society and the state as separate entities, leading to a division that diminishes the significance of community in the governance process (see Montesquieu, 1989, and Tocqueville, 2001; also take note of Constant 1988, regarding the critique of the Ancient vs the Modern political forms). Add to that the trajectory taken by political science in the 20th century, with its behaviouralist, positivistic, and rational choice approaches, which tended to focus on the state as the primary unit of analysis, and the social form became relegated to a secondary status perceived primarily through the lens of social relations and individual interests which were no longer treated as either mere inputs or background information that were to be fed into models (see Almond, 1996; Bevir, 2022, and Farr, 1988). This shift results in a homogenization of political dynamics, where varied forms of rule are reduced to mere power struggles.

This separation is particularly problematic as it neglects how social structures inform political behaviour and decision-making. The social form is instrumental in shaping the priorities of political institutions, yet when viewed in isolation from the political form, its influence becomes muted. By failing to recognize the interdependence of these forms, we risk oversimplifying the political landscape and ignoring the rich tapestry of human relationships that underpin political life.

Thus, addressing the differences between Ancient and Modern political thought is essential for re-establishing a holistic understanding of the relationship between social form and political form—something that this paper seeks to help accomplish. Recognizing that the embodiment of social form is inherently tied to the political form by being co-con-

stitutive and mutually reinforcing, thereby encourages a more nuanced exploration of governance that appreciates political identity's historical and cultural dimensions. By reclaiming the importance of community within the discourse of modern political science, we can better understand the dynamics of power, authority, and collective identity that continue to shape political entities today. Yet, how should we understand the relationships between the different varieties of the political form (e.g., the polis/*civitas*/city or the state) and the varieties of the social form (understood as either community [expressed in Greek as *koinonia* and in Latin as *communitas*] or society)? Should we understand it that a given political form (the polis/*civitas*/city or the state) can only manifest itself through a specific variety of social form, one that best fits its nature? Is this interconnection something fundamentally historical, developmental, or accidental? To get a fuller understanding to answer these questions, we perhaps need to look at these various forms and how they relate to each other and the meaning of that relation to the nature of how we understand the differences between these forms.

The *koinonia*

The Greek term "*koinonia*," which derives from "*koinos*," meaning "common", encompasses a wide and flexible range of meanings that extend beyond contemporary understandings of community. This term captures the essence of shared experiences and connections among individuals and embodies the idea of a collective identity rooted in mutuality and commonality. Unlike the more rigid and narrowly defined terms in modern languages, which often categorize social interactions into distinct types, "*koinonia*" allows for a spectrum of connectedness that includes personal relationships, shared practices, and even a collective belonging to a particular genus or group. This inherent flexibility makes it a rich and complex concept in ancient Greek thought, particularly in the context of political philosophy.

What is the nature of the *koinonia*, and what is its completeness, which Aristotle and others argued is found in the polis (city)? The variations of *koinonia* range from the husband/wife pairing, the parent/child pairing, the family relation, the formation of the household (with its mixture of husband/wife, parent/child, as well as that of master/servant[slave]), to that of the extended kin relationship that forms a village and then extends to a tribe or a nation.³ Thus, the scope of what can be *koinonia* goes from the two fundamental relations of husband/wife and parent/child to its aggregations from family, clan, village, tribe, nation, and race. This range, from husband/wife to being a human being, offers a range of shared commonality from the most intense and intimate bond to the most distant. Thus, the bond is strongest at the most intimate levels, such as between husband and wife or parent and child, exerting less influence as one moves up to broader forms of association, like tribes, peoples, nations, races, or humanity as a whole.

3 Some might object to using the term nation here. But the Greek term *ethnoi* embraces the concept of a people or nation. Any review of Aristotle's *Politics* and his *Nicomachean Ethics* regarding the use of the term *koinonia* will see the wide range of how it is used, from the husband-wife bond found in the household to the household itself to the polis (city), to the *ethnoi* (tribe, or nation), the *genos* (race), and even humanity itself. The polis is only the ideal point of *koinonia*. Here, human flourishing is said to be best famed (see *Politics* 1.2.1253a20-40; also, Yack, 1993).

In Aristotle's framework, "*koinonia*" is foundational in understanding the political community (*Politics* 1.1.12521a1-2, 1.21252a24-b40). The concept of *koinonia* suggests that what we might label as society—derived from the Latin "*societas*"—operates at a sub-political level or trans-political level. This is because the Latin term "*societas*" referred to bonds of contract between either individuals (i.e., forming a business) or between communities (like an agreement or treaty). It is also interesting that the Ancient Greek lacks a term that fits what the Latin call "*societas*", the closest word in Greek is *symmachía*, the term for alliance.

For Aristotle, pursuing *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing, cannot be anchored solely in societal structures (see Yack, 1993 and Nagel, 2006). Instead, true fulfilment arises from active participation in the political community, where individuals engage with one another in a shared life that fosters virtues and civic responsibility. This notion emphasizes the importance of political engagement as a means to achieve a collective good, demonstrating that the health of the political body is intricately linked to the strength of its social fabric.

The modern political landscape, however, has seen a significant shift in focus toward the state (with its associated concept of society) as the primary unit of analysis, often at the expense of the political community (see Locke, 1967, in contrast to Montesquieu, 1989, and Tocqueville, 2001). This trend has oversimplified social dynamics, where interactions are framed in terms of individual interests and utilitarian outcomes. As contemporary political thought emphasizes the state as the constant phenomenon in governance, the rich tapestry of "*koinonia*" is often overlooked or dismissed as primitive and thereby repressive (see Hayek, 2013, pp. 63, 112–113; Popper, 2011). This neglect diminishes the understanding of how communal bonds and shared experiences can shape political life, ultimately leading to a crisis in leadership and a disconnect between the governed and those who govern (see Goodwin, 2023 and Goodhart, 2017).

Furthermore, the conceptual evolution of terms like "community" and "society" has contributed to this conceptual confusion. In modern English, the distinctions between these terms have blurred, leading to a more utilitarian and consensual understanding of social relations—conflating the more rational and utilitarian understanding of society with the more organic concepts of community (see Tönnies, 2001). This shift makes finding an equivalent for "*koinonia*" challenging to accurately reflect its depth in the political sphere. While "society" may imply a collective of individuals, it lacks the nuanced understanding of connectedness that "*koinonia*" encapsulates (see Tönnies, 2001; Durkheim, 2013). The difficulty lies in the vocabulary and the underlying conceptual frameworks that shape our understanding of human relationships.

In this modern context, the focus tends to be on specific shared activities or interactions rather than the broader experiences of connectivity that "*koinonia*" represents. This narrow perspective can lead to a fragmented view of human relationships, which undermines the richness of communal life and the role of shared values in fostering a cohesive society (Newman & De Zoya, 1997 and Keller, 2003).⁴ The Greek concept of "*koinonia*" invites

4 Some may suggest that greater engagement with the broader communitarian literature is needed. Yet I would argue that the communitarian-liberal debate is built on a mistaken premise of competing political systems. The deeper issue is understanding the distinction between community and society itself, rather than the nature of political form. This paper does not aim to intervene in the communitarian-liberal debate; instead, it seeks to move beyond it by examining the different forms and the distinctive relation-

a more holistic understanding of connectedness, encompassing a range of experiences, from the intimate and personal to the shared identity within a broader community. Such an understanding is essential for cultivating the civic virtues necessary for a flourishing political life (Yack, 1993; Nagel, 2006; Strauss, 1959, and Manent, 2013).

Ultimately, recognizing the significance of “*koinonia*” in ancient times help us to re-think what modern political thought teaches us about the innate pairing of state and society. And by doing this, we will help to enrich our understanding of community and governance. The distinction between ancient and modern interpretations highlights a fundamental divergence in how humans relate to one another. While modern terminology often categorizes experiences into distinct types, the Greek concept emphasizes a continuous spectrum of connectivity. This deeper appreciation for “*koinonia*” underscores the importance of shared values and mutual engagement in fostering a vibrant political community, reminding us that the essence of political life is rooted in the collective experiences that bind individuals together (see Nagel, 2006; Manent, 2013).

The Polis/Community Interconnection

The polis is said to be the perfection of community (*koinonia*). For Aristotle, the polis or the civic body is the *koinonia teleios*, that is, a variation of *koinonia* that is the end (*telos*) that satisfies the ability of human beings to actualize *eudaimonia*. What is meant by actualizing *eudaimonia* is the ability of the human being to actualize their full potential as a human being and, in doing so, be able to not only live/survive but also live well (*Politics* 1.2.1252b27-30). Thus, the *polis*, which we most commonly translated into English as the city (and in Latin as *civitas*), is known as the political community and thus ties together the perfected community to the city (see Schmidt, 1986 and Schütrumpf, 2014). Here, we need to understand the ancient city not as an urban unit but as a political entity, as one would speak of the country or motherland today (see Hansen, 1999).

One of the biggest problems of contemporary thinking in the English language is that we treat “community” and “society” as synonymous terms (something that Early Modern Thinkers such as Hobbes and Locke also commonly do).⁵ Others have highlighted this problem, but none have connected it to the problem of ruling (see Yack, 2012). By first returning to the origins of each term, we know that they are anything but interchangeable, and while tracing the genesis of a concept does not exhaust its meaning, doing so does highlight how much each points to two very different types of human relations. For example, the terms were distinct in Latin, as *communitas* and *societas* whereby the latter signified the relationship between many of the former, as we shall discuss (see Tönnies 2001). However, the everyday practice of treating these two terms as synonymous not only obscures the differences but also creates further problems in understanding the political behaviour of human beings. To recover this distinction, we must discuss the origins of community and society.

ships between the political and the social.

⁵ See Delanty, 2003, where he argues that the modern discourse of “community” is often shorthand for “society,” noting the enduring conceptual conflation in sociology. For examples of scholars who actively conflate community and society, see Bauman, 2001, Giddens, 1991, Putnam, 2000, and especially Nancy, 1991, who erases the border between community and society.

Further discussion of the polis is necessary to expand on the nature of the human community. As understood by the Classical Studies, the polis embodies the political in a given form of human community. Ancient authors viewed the highest and most authoritative form of community as one that controls and gives authority to all other communities and associations. The polis was thus seen as the condition or status in which the specific type of political animal, namely the human being, inhabits and exercises its political nature. The logic of the polis follows from the claim that a human is by nature a political animal and that he is the type of animal that naturally lives together with his fellow humans not only due to necessity for the sake of mutual (or individual) survival but because human political animals get natural pleasure from sharing a life together.

An explicit additional reason that Aristotle gives in *Politics* 1 is that a human being, by themselves, is not capable of being self-sufficient (*autarkeia*). Aristotle's point about self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*) is important in Aristotle's later arguments about why the polis is not just a larger version of village/tribe, etc., but also is rather important in having the ability to seek justice and the good life (Yack, 1993). The human animal is gregarious and, therefore, not only likes or enjoys, but is made better by, living together with his fellow humans. Thus, the polis as a *community* is the natural habitat of human beings that allows for the fulfilment of their political nature. Through the founding and subsequent reflection on the polis, the Greek world articulated—if not altogether invented—an alternative mode of collective life, distinct from the more prevalent forms embodied in the tribe and the empire, each of which was characterized by paternalism, domination, or the interplay of both (Meier, 1990; Yack, 1993, and Nagel, 2006). Thus, the polis was not only different in its size and structure, but it also made possible an alternative form of rule, namely that of politics. The realm of politics offered a way to overcome the limits imposed by the tribe-empire dichotomy, taking the virtues and valuable aspects of both while avoiding their unwanted vices.

Politics is an in-between arrangement, a way of life between the familiar parental rule embodied by tribal rule and the dominance and submission required by imperial rule of the empires or hegemonic units of the pre-classical world. For the Classical (i.e., Greek, and Roman) World, politics was embodied by the polis. So much, however, seems to be merely history for us today, as modern thinkers suggest that the State embodies the political, which can be seen in the thought of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, etc. (see Viroli, 1992 and Strauss, 1959). Here, we find another distinction: we must resist collapsing the two, for the polis is by no means merely a primitive precursor or a rudimentary version of the modern state. The assumption that the polis is either simply understood as a state, or an early primitive form of one, occurs all too often, but doing this is a category error; it reflects a modern prejudice of reading the past as a mere primitive precursor to the contemporary present. Such a worldview follows from a belief in man's ever-increasing knowledge and ability to shape and control his environment. It consequently distorts the past and colours it, so we fail to see how the modern world is a break from that past (see Strauss, 1959 and Voegelin, 1959). Only by understanding that ancient past on its terms can we know the reasons and justifications that led the advocates of modern thought to engage in such a project. Just as the modern use of state is not interchangeable with the ancient polis, our invocation of society is distinct from what is meant by community, properly understood.

The move away from the *civitas* to the state and the coming-to-be of society

The origins of the concept of *society* are usually traced to the Latin *societas*, particularly through Leonardo Bruni's influential translation of Aristotle's *Politics*.⁶ This raises the question of what *societas* itself meant. Was it equivalent to the Greek *koinonia*? In Roman usage, *societas* derived from *socius* (plural *socii*), meaning partners or associates (Berger, 1953, p. 709). It denoted contractual relations—partnerships formed for a specific enterprise (Daube, 1938)—and in Roman law was closely tied to agreements of utility rather than shared political life. Unlike *koinonia*, which in Latin was rendered *communitas*, *societas* never referred to the realm of politics, embodied in the polis or *civitas*.

In a broader sense, *societas* described relations between cities, especially Rome and its *socii*—partner cities or tribes bound by loyalty to Rome. This was a relationship of mutual need and advantage, largely skewed toward Roman benefit, not a bond of shared communal life (Berger, 1953, p. 708; Daube, 1938). The scope and distance of these arrangements made them unlike *koinonia*.

At best, *societas* referred to large associations resembling Greek leagues (*summakhiā*). But as Aristotle argued, such alliances lacked the depth of *politikē koinonia* (*Politics* 3.9.1280b30–35). Greek leagues ruled through hegemony—leadership closer to mastery than genuine political rule—just as Rome dominated its *socii*. In both cases, the tie was instrumental rather than communal (Meier, 1990; Manent, 2006, 2013).

For Aristotle and other classical thinkers, neither *societas* nor *ethne/gentium* could ground political community: the former was too narrow to be self-sufficient, the latter too large and diffuse (*Politics* 3.9.1280b30–35). Only with modern political thought, and the emergence of the state, did *societas* acquire a political form. Here, state and society appear as two sides of the same phenomenon, often treated as co-constitutive. Thinkers from Hobbes and Locke to Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel advanced this view, cementing the modern intertwining of state and society (Skinner, 1996; Pateman, 1995; Strauss, 1953; Barker, 1942; Sabine, 1937, 1951).⁷

This shift marks a decisive break from the classical conception of political life. Where the Greeks and Romans understood communal bonds (*koinonia/communitas*) as the foundation of self-sufficient political communities, modern thought reconceives human association through the lens of contractual interdependence, utility, and co-formation of state and society. The political and the social are no longer fused in a shared public life but are distinct, mutually dependent structures—a transformation that underpins the very architecture of modern governance.

This reconfiguration of human association—from communal *koinonia* to contractual society—raises critical questions about the consequences of separating the political from

6 This is why Bruni's translation of *koinōnía politikē* as *societas civilis* was the radical recasting of politics away from the Ancients preparing the way for the moderns. See Schmidt, 1986; and Schütrumpf, 2014, pp. 28–38 and 65–76.

7 Product and the ground of political legitimacy. More contemporary analyses can be found in Lefort (1998) and Honig (2001). The issues under consideration connect to the well-documented “paradox of founding”, a problem extensively discussed by democratic theorists and political philosophers. This paradox raises the question of how a political community can legitimately establish its own foundational authority without presupposing that very authority. Classic treatments include Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (Rousseau, 2013), where the general will is invoked as both the

the social. Hannah Arendt's writings are especially useful here, as they illuminate how modern society diminishes public life and redefines the space of human engagement. Arendt argued that the concept of "society" is absent from ancient political thought and is a product of modernity. In *The Human Condition* (1958) and *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), she contrasts the Greek polis—defined by public life and political engagement—with the modern idea of society, centred on private interests and social relations (Arendt, 1958). For the ancients, life revolved around the political community, where citizens actively participated in governance and collective decision-making. The notion of society as a sphere distinct from politics simply did not exist; political and social life were intertwined within the public realm (Arendt, 1951, 1958).

Arendt maintains that modernity introduced a decisive shift toward the social, privileging private interests and broad networks of relationships. This shift, she argues, diluted the significance of politics, undermining the vibrant public life that had once defined the polis (Arendt 1958). The absence of "society" in antiquity thus signals a fundamentally different conception of human relationships, one in which political life was primary.

To grasp how "society" comes to be understood as a distinct category, Émile Durkheim's distinction between Mechanical and Organic Solidarity is instructive.⁸ He recasts what the Greeks called *koinonia* and the Romans *communitas* as forms of Mechanical Solidarity—social cohesion grounded in similarity and homogeneity. Such communities shared common ways of life and enjoyed relative self-sufficiency in meeting their needs (Durkheim, 2013, pp. 57–87).

By contrast, society proper corresponds to Organic Solidarity. It arises in larger, more diverse populations whose members are bound together not by sameness but by interdependence. As needs and desires proliferate, no individual or small group can remain self-sufficient. The division of labour develops, generating networks of mutual reliance in which each unit contributes goods or services to satisfy the collective whole (Durkheim, 2013, pp. 88–116). For Durkheim, society thus emerges from market relations—not from the abstract logic of the market itself, but from the structures and relationships formed through exchange and specialization.

Durkheim's contemporary, Ferdinand Tönnies, made a similar distinction in *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1887). *Gemeinschaft* resembles *koinonia*: organic, intimate, and rooted in shared values. *Gesellschaft*, by contrast, reflects voluntary and contractual associations akin to those described by Hobbes and other moderns. Tönnies highlighted the loss of moral intimacy and mutual responsibility in modern society, anticipating the concerns Durkheim would formalize empirically—particularly the impact of industrialization and urbanization on social cohesion (Tönnies, 2001).

Modern political and social thought increasingly treats society and state as two sides of the same phenomenon. The concept of the state itself, emerging in the works of Machiavelli, Hobbes, and their successors, rests not on the classical view of humans as political animals but on the modern view of individuals as selfish and wilful beings. Humans, on this account, are not naturally communal; they are solitary individuals who may choose

8 While Durkheim's (2013) distinction between Mechanical solidarity and Organic solidarity is similar to Tönnies's distinction between *gemeinschaft* (community) and *gesellschaft* (society), the social anthropologist and historian Alan Macfarlane suggests that Durkheim's terminology of mechanical and organic is the wrong language for the right argument. And one can see Durkheim here in general agreement not only with Tönnies but also with Max Weber (see Macfarlane, 2002, pp. 108–120).

to join with others but need not do so. Their selfishness inevitably produces conflict over scarce goods, leaving all insecure. The desire for safety, however, compels individuals to unite under a state strong enough to protect them (Strauss, 1959, pp. 9–55).

Taken together, Arendt, Durkheim, and Tönnies illuminate how the modern category of *society* arose in contrast to the classical idea of *community*. Where the ancients grounded human life in the polis as the highest form of association, modern thought increasingly emphasized individualism, contractual relations, and social interdependence. Recovering this distinction between community and society is thus essential for understanding how political and social life became separated in modernity—and why this separation continues to shape the way we think about the state, authority, and human association.

As developed in the logic of Hobbes, Locke, and their successors, the state is a voluntary association, in that people consent to join it (Barker, 1942; Strauss, 1953; Sabine, 1937; Macpherson, 1962, and Skinner, 1996). Yet, it is an artificial association created solely to get the security that man, by his selfish nature, cannot obtain through private or individual actions. Yet this leads to the proclaimed connection between the “state” and the “market” and what is ultimately assumed to be an apparent relationship.⁹ At one level, they look similar, but there is a significant difference, which is not only a matter of force or coercion, as libertarians, following Thomas Paine’s logic, argue that government is merely a necessary evil (Paine, 2000, pp. 4–6; also see Hayek, 2013, pp. 113–117 and Popper, 2011).

The key difference lies not in the parts themselves but in the kind of relation binding them. In the market, the fundamental relationship is trade—the exchange mechanism that defines its logic. Modern political thought often extends this framework to society and its twin, the state, treating both as the aggregate of interrelations among individuals. Within this view, society and state are reduced to instruments that generate benefits—security or material well-being—for their members.

The problem with this reduction is that the market rests on a single relationship: exchange. What it obscures is the political community, where members are not merely actors pursuing individual gain but co-owners of a shared whole. As Rousseau notes, citizens collectively possess their community; it belongs to them, and they belong to it (Rousseau, 2013, pp. 172–174). Membership yields utility, but that utility arises from participation in a union that also fosters affection and solidarity, akin to what Aristotle and others called friendship (Yack, 1993). Utility is an outcome, but never the sole purpose, of political life.

Even society, though larger and looser than community, cannot be reduced to utility alone. It offers its members a common identity and sense of belonging—less intense than community, but still meaningful. Community persists within the modern social order, localized and particular, but distinct from the broader structure of society.

Community, moreover, encompasses more than present relations. It binds the living to their ancestors and progeny, extending membership across time. This temporal depth produces a complexity irreducible to the two-sided act of trade (Yack 2012; Lasch 1991; Hont 2015). To misapply market logic to community is to mistake reciprocal belonging for transactional exchange and to overlook the enduring human desire for, and reality of, genuine community.

9 The “market” is raised here because Durkheim (2013), Smith (1904), Parsons (1991), Hont (2015), and Elias (2000) argue that the market and its logic ultimately give shape to how society comes to be. Both Popper (2011) and Hayek (2013) explicitly interconnect market and society. Also, see Nisbet (1953) for an overview of this pattern of linking the market and society in social theory.

Conclusion

Understanding the distinctions between community and society and their related political forms is fundamental to grasping the complexities of human social life. The shift from the polis to an emphasis on the state and society has significant implications for our conception of governance, leadership, and the potential for genuine human fulfilment. In the classical understanding, the polis was more than a political entity; it was the culmination of various forms of communal life, from the family to the village, each contributing to the richness of human experience. The polis represented a complete and self-sufficient community where individuals could live fully, engage in meaningful relationships, and participate in the collective pursuit of the common good. Within the polis, people could achieve *eudaimonia*—a state of flourishing that encompasses both material well-being and moral and intellectual development.

In contrast, modern political thought often reduces human interactions to a market-society framework, where relationships are primarily transactional and self-interest-driven. Thinkers like Hobbes and Locke conceived the state as an artificial construct designed to maintain order among self-interested individuals. This perspective overlooks the deeper, more complex bonds that characterize a true community—bonds rooted in shared history, culture, and a collective commitment to future generations. By prioritizing individualism and economic exchange, the market-society model fails to provide the conditions necessary for the kind of communal life that fosters true human flourishing.

Recovering the distinctions between community and society and revisiting the classical idea of the polis can deepen our understanding of political life and the forms of governance most conducive to human well-being. In re-examining the classical polis with how it embodies a given community (*koinonia*), we can come to recognize the limits of the market-society model; these crises often stem from a lack of genuine community and a disconnect between individuals and the larger social body. The classical model of the polis, founded on the ground of a given community, offers valuable insights into the kinds of social and political structures that support human flourishing. By re-examining and reclaiming these distinctions, we can move beyond the narrow confines of modern political thought and toward a more holistic understanding of governance—one that emphasizes the importance of community, shared values, and the common good. This approach is essential for fostering the social cohesion, leadership, and sense of belonging urgently needed in today's world.

In conclusion, the ancient concept of the polis and its focus on communal life provide a timeless framework for understanding and improving human social and political structures. By embracing a more holistic approach to governance—one that values community, shared purpose, and the common good—we can work toward a society that sustains us and enables us to thrive. This shift in perspective is vital to addressing our time's leadership and social cohesion challenges and creating a future where true human flourishing is possible.

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