

Polish Journal of Political Science

Volume 7 Issue 1 (2021)



Polish Journal of Political Science

Volume 7 Issue 1

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eISSN 2391-3991

Original version: e-book

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Aesopic Fables on Politics

Abstract

In the ancient Greek Aesopic fables political matters were an important part of their contents and message. Voicing popular ideas, the fables were most often critical towards the authorities and the usual methods of government. The fables show political mechanisms, condemn violence and lies in public life. However, they were used also as an instrument of the ruling class propaganda, but even the fables that praise rulers unmask them indirectly. Although they remain highly realistic in their description of life, they promote values important for public life in the times of war and peace, such as finding good allies, honesty and freedom.

Key words: Aesop, fables, antiquity, Greek politics, popular opinion, ancient political science

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The use of Aesopic fables and metaphors in the political discourse is widespread and well known. However, the subject of the initial political intention of these fables seems neglected, even if the works on these fables do note briefly some political allusions in them. Such allusions should be collected and analysed.

From among almost five hundred ancient Greek Aesopic fables which have been preserved, a considerable number speak metaphorically about politics. Their authors were inspired by the realities of their times, primarily by democracy in city states and monarchy. However, animal fables and anecdotes from the Aesopic tradition have an intended universal dimension and some of them sound surprisingly topical. In fact, it is the case with many ancient ideas and stories.

The fables were created by many authors and it took a few centuries to gather them all in one place; only a fraction of them could have been written by the semi-legendary Aesop, who lived in the 6th century B.C.¹ Therefore, their message could not have been and is not uniform. In particular, some fables justify the authorities in power, while others criticise them.

Since they are generally anonymous works originating from the lower strata of society, the fables present a perspective which is quite different from the works of philosophers and political treatises. The observations in them are simpler, fractional. Their value lies in the fact that they represent the perspective of a common man to a much greater extent

¹ I abstain from speculations on the political ideas of historical Aesop. They are sometimes looked for in *Vitae Aesopi*, a Hellenistic legendary story on Aesop (e.g. Kurke, 2011). It is to be rejected.

than other types of ancient literature.² One may note certain continuity between our eras in this respect, between an Aesopic fable and a contemporary political joke.

When interpreting Aesopic fables, the moral behind them is usually taken into account, although one has to bear in mind that those fables quite often portray 'simple life' where the fittest survive. A moral or political message behind the fables is not explicit, but readers have to find it themselves. This was done already in ancient times by adding comments after the fables, *epimythia* (called 'moral' nowadays), although in most cases they were originally absent. More often than not they are inaccurate and deform the message of the fables.

Studies of Greek Aesopic fables usually focus on their historical and literary aspects as well as on their pedagogical uses. The message behind fables, also the political message, was analysed much less often.³ On the other hand, both original Aesopic fables and their subsequent multiple imitations were used in modern times in the political discourse.⁴

Nowadays, Aesop's fables are often limited to school readings for children and few of them are known better. There are many translations, but not always complete. Among the English translations, I prefer the one by Daly, usually quoted below;⁵ the poetic versions of fables were translated

² From their beginning they were perceived as popular and oracular productions; cf. Rothwell (1994–1995). Only later Aesop's fables became a school reading.

³ Cf. Demandt (1991), who discusses Latin fables of Phaedrus as well. More about using them in teaching: Schmidt (1979); Zafiroopoulos (2003) considers only Collectio Augustana, 231 fables. Partial aspect: Charpentier, (2002). In Polish: Wojciechowski (2009–2010).

⁴ Cf. e.g. Patterson (1991).

⁵ *Aesop without Morals* (1961). I also quote from: *Aesop's Fables*, Gibbs (2002); however, he frequently prefers secondary versions of the text. Cf. in Polish: Ezop i inni (2006).

by Perry.⁶ Aesop's fables are variously numbered, so I refer below to the numbers given to fables in three parallel editions in Greek (Chambray, Hausrath, and Perry).⁷

I. Justification of rulers and authorities

It has to be said that even though some of Aesopic fables favour rulers, it often seems that the defence of power and authority presented in them is, in fact, its incrimination.

Aristotle gives an example about a fox and a hedgehog:⁸

Once in Samos, Aesop, in his defence of a demagogue who was being tried for his life, said that a fox was crossing a stream, got carried into a ravine and, being unable to get out, had a hard time for a good while and got covered with bloodsuckers. A hedgehog happening by saw the fox and, taking pity on her, asked if he could pick them off. The fox wouldn't let him and, when asked why, said: "These are full of blood and are not sucking much now, but if you take them off, other hungry ones will come and drink what blood I have left."

Aesop was believed to have concluded from the fable that the accused, as a rich person, would no longer harm the people of Samos, whereas new leaders, who were poor, would steal everything from them. Thus, the fable defends the *status quo* and the abuse committed before. The corrupt ruling class

⁶ *Babrius and Phaedrus*, transl. Perry (1965).

⁷ Chambray (1927); Hausrath (1959–1970); Perry (1952).

⁸ *Rhetorics* 2.20 (1393b–1394a). The fable is not included in the main Greek collection; Perry 427.

tells the citizens that everybody has to steal. The truth is different: taking off bloodsuckers does not increase the number of new ones, whereas prosecuting corrupt politicians prevents further stealing from citizens.

Another fable suggests that there is no escape from the abuse of power and it is better not to try to change it. It is a story about oxen and butchers, preserved only in an altered poetic version:⁹

Once some oxen were planning to destroy the butchers, because these men were their enemies by profession. So they got together and began to sharpen their horns for the battle ahead. But among them was a very old fellow who had done much ploughing of the lands and this is what he said to them by way of advice: “These men slaughter us with experienced hands, and when they kill it is without torture; but if we fall into the hands of unskilled men, our death will be a double one. There will always be someone to slaughter the ox, even if there is no professional butcher.”

Such a fable could be a tool for rulers’ political propaganda. Herodotus (*History* 1.141.1–3) tells a story about how Persian king Cyrus reproached Greeks, Ionians, and Aeolians for not having surrendered voluntarily, but only after Croesus, the king of Lydia, had fallen. In the story, Cyrus is an aulete-fisherman:¹⁰

⁹ Fables of Babrius 21; Perry 290.

¹⁰ He played an *aulos*. A version from the Aesopic collection: Chambry 24, Hausrath 11, Perry 11. An allusion to that fable in the Gospels (Matthew 11.16; Luke 7.31) proves its popularity.

A fisherman who knew how to play the pipes took his pipes and his nets and went down to the sea. First he stood there on a jutting rock and played his pipes, thinking that the fish would be attracted by the sweet sound and come right out of the water of their own accord. When he had gone on playing for some time and nothing had happened, he put his pipes aside, took up his net, cast it into water, and caught a large number of fish. He dumped them out of his net onto the shore, and when he saw them wriggling, he said: “Why you miserable creatures, when I piped, you wouldn’t dance, but now that I’ve stopped, you do!”

Defenders of the monarchy and the aristocracy wrote fables in which common people were treated with disdain. An example of that can be the fable about a lion and a frog – a tribune of the people recognised as a demagogue:¹¹ “A lion heard a frog croaking and turned around in the direction of the sound, thinking it must be some great beast. He waited a little, and when he saw the frog come out of the pool, he walked up and stepped on him with the remark: ‘The sound of a thing shouldn’t disturb anyone until he sees it.’” The fable about noble trees and bramble bush prohibits common people from interfering with disputes of noblemen.¹²

The fables that tell us to stick to our duties and to refrain from the duties of the stronger are also directed against common people interfering with politics (“shoemaker, not beyond the shoe;” incidentally, painter Apelles is believed to have said it to a shoemaker who tried to lecture him on

¹¹ Chambry 201, Hausrath 146, Perry 141.

¹² Chambry 324, Hausrath 233, Perry 213. The similar message is conveyed in the fable about a gudgeon (Chambry 95).

painting).¹³ As examples we can mention the following fables: about a jackdaw imitating an eagle that attacked a ram, about an incompetent singer in front of an audience, about a monkey caught in a fishing net, about a monkey and a camel that imitated its dance, about a lion and a fox that tried to hunt like it.¹⁴

Rulers by nature are the heads of society and a rebellion against them seems to be absurd, just like in the fable about the tail of the snake¹⁵:

Once upon a time the tail of the snake decided that she would no longer follow the head which crept along in front. 'It's my turn to be the leader!' said the tail. The other parts of the snake's body said to the tail, 'You wretched creature, why can't you just keep quiet? How are you going to be our leader when you don't have eyes or a nose, the things that guide the limbs of animals when they move?' But the tail did not listen to the other members of the snake's body, and thus the rational was defeated by the irrational. The back now ruled the front and the tail took the lead, blindly trailing the whole body behind her. Finally the tail led the body into a deep stony hole, scraping its spine against the rocks. Then the stubborn thing began to fawn and beg, "O head, my leader, please save us if you will! I have provoked a harmful quarrel with harmful results."

¹³ Plinius, *Historia naturalis* 35.84–85.

¹⁴ Chambry 5, 156, 304, 306; Hausrath 2, 123, 219, 85, 323; Perry 2, 121, 203, 83, 294.

¹⁵ Translated by Gibbs. Babrius 134, Chambry 288, Hausrath 291, Perry 362. This story is present also in Plutarch's works (Agis 2).

Certain fables praise the virtues of monarchs. An example can be the one-sentence story about a lioness and a fox:¹⁶ “A lioness who was being belittled by a fox for always bearing just one cub said: ‘Yes, but it’s a lion.’” There, the mediocrity of majorities in democracies seems indirectly criticised. The Aesopic fables include also the naive panegyric of the golden age of the monarchy of the lion, before which a sheep could accuse a wolf.¹⁷

A serious attempt at justifying the position of the authorities is made in the fable about the belly and the feet,¹⁸ which promotes an organic concept of society: “The belly and the feet were arguing about their importance and when the feet kept saying that they were so much stronger that they even carried the stomach around, the stomach replied: ‘But, my good friends, if I didn’t take in food, you wouldn’t be able to carry anything.’” Plato knew a comparison of social life to an organism where individual parts have different functions (*Republic* 5.10), but the Aesopic version, with an apology of consumption practised by the rulers, might have been earlier.

The theory of an organic social bond based on nature was later developed by the Stoics. There exist numerous variants of this fable; in Plutarch’s *Coriolanus* (6), the stomach laughs at other body parts; in Livy’s version (2.32.9–12) told by consul Menenius Agrippa to plebeians (494 BC), the entire body gets weaker as a result of a rebellion of the limbs against the stomach. Another fable, about a dog and sheep,¹⁹

¹⁶ Chambry 194, Hausrath 167, Perry 257. A more universal dimension is possible.

¹⁷ Chambry 195, Perry 334.

¹⁸ Chambry 159, Hausrath 132, Perry 130. The use of its main theme by Saint Paul (1 Corinthians 12.21 etc.) proves its popularity.

¹⁹ Perry 356a, another variant in the poetic fables of Babrios (128).

is similar as it justifies the better position of the shepherd and the dog when compared to the sheep: they defend and take care of them.

II. Criticism of rulers

In Aesop's fables, however, a negative view of the rulers prevails. The fables often mention plundering the subjects by force or trickery. Let us have a look at the fable about an old lion and a fox:²⁰

A lion who was growing old and couldn't get his food by force decided he would get it by wit. So he went into a cave where he lay down and played sick. When the other animals came in to visit him, he would eat them. After many animals had been done away with, a fox, who had seen through his trick, came along and, standing at a distance from the cave, asked him how he was. When the lion said he was not well and asked why he didn't come in, the fox said: "Why, I would if I didn't see so many tracks going in but none coming out."

The actual objectives of authorities which pretend to care for citizens are briefly discussed in the fable about the marten and the hens²¹: "A marten, when he heard that the hens in a certain spot were sick, dressed up as a doctor and, taking along the instruments appropriate to his profession, went

²⁰ Chambry 196, Hausrath 147, Perry 142. The alleged use of the fable by Socrates in Plato's *Alcibiades I* (123a) was of a political nature as well: money goes to Sparta, but does not come back.

²¹ Chambry 14, Hausrath 7, Perry 7. Translations of this fable have the cat instead of the marten (*ailouros*) and the birds instead of the hens.

and took his stand near the spot. He asked them how they were, and they replied: 'Very well, indeed, if you get away from here'.

The exploitation of the subjects should at least be kept within reasonable limits, which is proposed by the fable about shearing the sheep:²² "A sheep who was being clumsily sheared said to the shearer: 'If you want my wool, don't cut so close, but if it's my meat you're after, just cut my throat and stop this slow torment'." A similar thought may be found in the emperor's remark quoted by Suetonius, according to which a good shepherd should shear sheep and not skin them.²³ Over-taxation, destructive even for prosperous taxpayers, is also criticised by the famous fable about killing the hen laying golden eggs.²⁴

The exploitation of the citizens is a common goal of politicians, even if they compete against each other. It is indicated in the fable about the snake, the marten (or the weasel), and the mice:²⁵ "A snake and a marten were fighting in a house. The mice in the house, who were always being killed off by both them, came out of hiding when they saw them fighting. But when the snake and the marten saw the mice, they forgot their own fight and turned on them."²⁶

The rulers bend the law to their advantage and do not abide by it themselves, just like in the fable about the wolf and the ass.²⁷

²² Chambry 321, Hausrath 232, Perry 212.

²³ *Tiberius* 32.

²⁴ Chambry 287, Hausrath 89, Perry 87.

²⁵ Chambry 289, Hausrath 212, Perry 197.

²⁶ In the tales featuring weasels, they are presented as cats since weasels were used to catch mice.

²⁷ Chambry 228, Perry 348. Perhaps another animal should be substituted for the ass.

A wolf who was acting as governor of the other wolves established laws to the effect that each wolf should bring whatever he caught in hunting before them all and give an equal share to each so that the others would not be in need and eat one another. But an ass who was passing by tossed his mane and said: "That's a fine idea, but how does it come that you stored away in your lair what you caught yesterday? You'd better bring that out and share it, too". And the wolf, being exposed, abrogated his laws.

As we see, the ideas of socialism and communism were already known in the ancient times ("From each according to his ability, to each according to his need"). What is more, it was known that 'socialist' and 'communist' leaders were liars who cared only for their personal income. Yet another version of that fable may be found in the collection of sayings attributed to Aesop (*Aisopou logoi* 31): "Becoming old, a wolf promulgates laws."

Exploitation and violence prevent building a society, just like in the fable about the fowler and the lark:²⁸ "A fowler set his trap for birds. A lark saw him and asked him what he was doing, and he said he was founding a city. The lark believed him, walked up to the trap, ate some of the bait, and before he knew what was happening, was caught in the net. Then when the fowler run up and seized him, the lark said: 'Well, if this is the kind of cities you're founding, you won't find many to live in them'." As the fable concerns *polis*, a city-state, a political allegory is evident.

²⁸ Chambry 283, Haurath 207, Perry 193. The fable tells of the crested lark, *galleria cristata*, common in Greece.

Politicians recommend harmful nonsense for their own convenience. Here is the fable about the fox without a tail²⁹:

A fox had had his tail cut off by a trap and was so ashamed that he found life intolerable. He decided that he must persuade the other foxes to share his condition so that he could conceal his own loss in the common misfortune. Therefore, he called them all together and urged that a tail was not only unsightly thin but that it was an added burden that they were obliged to carry. One of them interrupted him and said: "My dear friend, if this weren't to your advantage, you wouldn't be offering us your advice."

A mention about an assembly of the foxes indicates that the fable speaks about proposals submitted at assemblies of people.

The rulers, apart from greed, show stupidity, just like in the fable about the monkey and the fox:³⁰

At an assembly of the dumb animals, a monkey won their favour and was chosen king. But the fox was jealous of him, and when he saw some meat set in a trap, He took the monkey to it and told him he had made a rich find and hadn't taken it but kept it as a royal prize for him. He urged him to take it, and the monkey went right ahead without thought. When he was caught in the trap and accused the fox of plotting against him, he said: "And are you, my dear monkey, to be king of dumb animals although you have so poor a wit?"

²⁹ Chambry 41, Haurath 17, Perry 17.

³⁰ Chambry 38, Haurath 83, Perry 81.

One may also find there a criticism of the democratic system since voters are fooled by actors' shows. Moreover, an alternative to vain demagogues seems to be tricksters...

The second most frequent subject of criticism are propaganda lies. Thefts are accompanied by razzmatazz; there is no bread, but politicians propose circuses. Here is the fable about the horse and the groom:³¹ "There was a groom who used to sell his horse's barley to the innkeepers and drink all evening long. He would then spend the whole next day combing and cleaning the horse. The horse said to the groom: 'If you really want me to look good, then don't sell the food that nourishes me!'"

The fable about the peacock and the jackdaw warns against the bad consequences of good appearances for the elections:³² "When the birds were debating who should be king, the peacock argued that he ought to be elected for his beauty. As the birds were on the point of doing this, a jackdaw spoke up and said: 'But if you are king and an eagle attacks us, how will you defend us?'."

Campaigning politicians attribute others' contributions to themselves, just like the jackdaw during the debate for bird king:³³

Zeus wished to set up a king of the birds and he fixed a date on which they were to appear before him. The jackdaw, who knew that he was unattractive, went around gathering up the feathers that dropped from the other birds and fastened them on himself. When the appointed day arrived, he presented himself before

³¹ Chambry 140, Perry 319. Translated by Gibbs.

³² Chambry 334, Hausrath 244, Perry 219.

³³ Chambry 162, Hausrath 103, Perry 101.

Zeus in all his splendour. But as Zeus was about to appoint him king because of his handsome appearance, the other birds gathered angrily about, and each took off the feather that belonged to himself so that in the end he was stripped and became a jackdaw again.

A similar message is conveyed by the fable about the donkey who frightened everyone by wearing a lion's skin until they exposed and beat him.³⁴

Showing off to voters is ridiculed by the fable about the dancing monkeys³⁵:

It is said that an Egyptian king once taught some apes the Pyrrhic dance, and they – for they are said to be very imitative of human action – quickly learned and would dance [...]. One smart spectator threw some nuts he had under his robe in their midst. When they saw these, the apes forgot their dancing and behaved like the apes they were instead of dancers. They smashed the masks and ripped the robes and fought one another for the nuts [...].

A tyrant lies as well, just like the bear exposed by the fox:³⁶ “The bear boasted that he was exceptionally fond of mankind since, as he explained, bears don't pull dead people's bodies to pieces. The fox remarked: 'I'd prefer that you mangled the dead ones, if you'd leave the living alone!'. Since the bear

³⁴ Chambry 279, Hausrath 199, Perry 358.

³⁵ The story is not included in the Aesopic collection: Lucian, *Haileius* 36; Perry 463. According to Lucian, philosophers moralising other people do the same when they see money.

³⁶ Chambry 63, Perry 288. Translated by Gibbs.

boasted that he was kind to people (*filanthropia* in Greek), a virtue that rulers eagerly attributed to themselves, it is presumably a satire on their predatory habits.

Ethical qualifications of politicians are bluntly presented in the fable about the camel in the river:³⁷ “As the camel was crossing a swift-flowing river, she relieved herself. Then, when she saw her excrement floating out in front of her, the camel remarked, ‘Oh, this is a bad business indeed: the thing that should have stayed behind has now moved up to the front!’.” The ancient moral appended to the fable applies it to politics: “Someone could tell this Aesop’s fable about a city where it is not the first-class citizens who rule, but people who are of the lowest order.”

However, this does not exhaust the metaphorical sense of the story. It shows that in confusion, the worst can come to the front. The fable may also tell that abuse comes to the surface in the end, to the surprise of guilty politicians.³⁸

A good summary of the Aesopic evaluation of politicians is the fable about the fisherman³⁹ that gave birth to the saying “fish in troubled waters”:

A fisherman was fishing in a river. When he had laid
his nets and cut off the stream from bank to bank, He

³⁷ Chambry 144, Perry 321. Translated by Gibbs.

³⁸ Moreover, rulers are portrayed negatively also in the fable about the trees that elected king (Chambry 252, Hausrath 293, Perry 262). However, this fable was included into the Aesopic collection during the Byzantine times; it is widely known from the Bible (Judges 9.8–15). This story corresponds with the Aesopic criticism. It is very old, stemming from the Ancient Near East. (Only the thorn agreed to be the king and shortly after it threatened to burn its subjects; this fable expresses a belief that politicians cannot do anything useful and the worst people strive for power).

³⁹ Chambry 27, Hausrath 26, Perry 26. Translated by Gibbs.

tied a stone to a piece of cord and began to beat the water so that the fish would make a reckless attempt to get away and become entangled in the mesh. One of the men who lived thereabouts saw him doing this and complained of his roiling the river and preventing them from drinking clear water. The fisherman replied: "Well, if the river isn't troubled like this, I'll have to die of starvation".

The ancient moral leaves no doubt: "So it is with demagogues in politics. They accomplish the most when they lead their state into strife."

III. Political mechanisms

Political mechanisms – rather impersonal phenomena – are also presented critically and satirically. Let us begin with those associated with democracy. Here are elections depicted in the fable about the camel, the elephant and the monkey:⁴⁰

When the dumb beasts decided to choose a king, the camel and the elephant declared their candidacy and carried on a campaign, claiming preference over all others because of their size and strength. But the monkey declared that they were both unsuited for the office: "The camel because he has no spunk to stand up against those who wrong him, and the elephant because there is reason to fear that if he is king, the pig, whom he fears, may attack us."

⁴⁰ Chambry 145, Hausrath 246, Perry 220.

The fable refers to ancient superstitions about animals. Slanderous accusations are obstacles for the best and strongest candidates.

Consequences of frequent changes in authority are portrayed in an obscene fable about the hyenas, which also refers to superstitions about animals:⁴¹ “They say that hyenas change their nature annually and are sometimes male and sometimes female. In fact, a male hyena once showed unnatural inclination toward a female hyena, and she said to him: ‘Very well, my friend, but remember that whatever you do now you will soon have done to you.’” It would not be clear enough if it were not for the ancient remark: “For elected officials who call those under them to account and later, as it turns out, are called to account by them.” It was about an *archon*, one of the Athenian officials elected once a year.

Two fables are about a career built on the contributions of the predecessors. There is also the fable about the goldcrest and the eagle, which we know only from its synopsis:⁴² the goldcrest was sitting on the eagle’s wings when suddenly it flew up and overtook the eagle. Here is another story.⁴³ “Themistocles said that the Day After was disputing with the Feast Day and said that the Feast Day was full of bustle and was wearisome, while she permitted everyone to enjoy at his leisure the provisions that had already been made. The Feast Day said to this: ‘But if it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t be.’” It was said he had applied that example to himself and to political life: thanks to his activity, Athenians were then living better, but new leaders undeservedly attributed his contributions to themselves.

⁴¹ Chambray 340, Hausrath 240, Perry 243.

⁴² Perry 434; source: Plutarch, *Moralia* 806e.

⁴³ Perry 441; source: Plutarch, *Themistocles* 18.

Abuse and mistakes would be less common if not for the stupidity of the citizens. Demosthenes mocked them as follows:⁴⁴

Once when Demosthenes was being interrupted by the Athenians in a speech he was making before the assembly, he said that he had a little something he wanted to say to them. When they quieted down, he spoke: “On a summer day, a young man hired an ass to take him from the city to Megara. About noontime, when the sun was blazing down, both the young man and driver wanted to get in the shadow of the ass. They got in one another’s way, and one said he had hired out the ass, but not his shadow, and the other that he had hired all the rights to the ass.” So saying, Demosthenes started to leave. When the Athenians stopped him and asked him to finish the story, he said: “Oh, so you want to hear about the shadow of an ass, but you don’t want to hear me talk about important matters.”

People do not know what is good for them. It is illustrated by the famous fable about the frog king:⁴⁵

Some frogs who were bothered at not having a ruler sent representatives to Zeus to ask him to provide them with a king. Realizing their stupidity, he dropped

⁴⁴ Perry 460, source: Pseudo-Plutarch, *Moralia* 848a. A similar story has orator Demades as its protagonist (Chambray 96, Hausrath 63, Perry 63).

⁴⁵ Chambray 66, Hausrath 44, Perry 44. According to Phaedrus, *Fabulae* (1.2), Aesop told that fable about the Athenians and Peisistratos, an Athenian tyrant. In later adaptations, the snake was replaced by the stork.

a log into their pool. At first the frogs were terrorized at the sound and dived to the bottom of the pool. Later, when the log came to rest, they came back and were so contemptuous of it that they climbed on top and used it for a perch. They were so indignant as having this kind of a king that they went to Zeus a second time and urged him to give them a change of rulers, for the first one was too much of a dullard. Zeus was angry at this and sent them a water snake by which they were caught and eaten.

The fable is of a strictly political nature as it tells that – in accordance with the minimal state theory – the authority that does not interfere with the lives of the citizens is better, whereas an alternative is tyranny. Moreover, any change of government is a risk.

Another popular subject of criticism is propaganda and luring others with privileges. The fable about the goatherd and the wild goats warns against it.⁴⁶ “When he found wild goats in the cave with his tamed goats, he fed the wild animals better. However, they ran away at the first opportunity and told him that: ‘If you took better care of us, who came to you only yesterday, than you did of your old flock, obviously, if any others come to you, you’ll prefer them to us’.”

False promises are also tackled the longer fable about the dog at the party.⁴⁷ Encouraged by a friend, the dog went to a party, hoping that it could appease its hunger, but the lord of the house threw out and beat the dog. When other dogs

⁴⁶ Chambry 17, Haurath 6, Perry 6.

⁴⁷ Chambry 178, Haurath 283, Perry 328.

met the poor dog, he did not tell them what had happened, but he claimed he had drunk too much and did not know how he had wound up outside. Who has false hopes of appeasing one's needs at someone else's expense does not want to admit one's defeat afterwards. The fable explains why those who fall for social slogans do not want to draw conclusions and to acknowledge their mistake.

The propaganda of success is discussed also in the following parable.⁴⁸

Once a lion was travelling with a man and in their conversation both of them were bragging. Along the road they came to a monument of a man strangling a lion. The man pointed it out to the lion and said: 'You see how much more powerful we are than you'. The lion only smiled and said: "If lions only knew how to carve, you would see many victims of lions."

Yet another fable warns against propaganda used by the enemy to divide us, as per the principle *divide et impera*. Here is the fable about the lion and the bulls.⁴⁹

A lion was attacking two bulls, hoping to make a meal of them. The bulls, however, both opposed the lion with their horns. Once they had taken their stand, the bulls did not allow the lion to come between them. When the lion saw that he was powerless against the two bulls together, he slyly spoke to one of them and said: "If you hand your partner over to me, I will keep you

⁴⁸ Chambry 59, Hausrath 264, Perry 284.

⁴⁹ Chambry 71, Hausrath 321, Perry 372. Translated by Gibbs.

safe from harm." In this way, he was able to seize both of the bulls.

The use of the Greek term *homonoia*, which means (among others) agreement between citizens and states, signifies that the fable was supposed to encourage the quarrelling citizens or Greek states at risk of invasion to bury the hatchet. The Greek moral added to that fable suggests that its readers understood that: "This fable shows that the same is true of cities and people: when they are in agreement with one another, they do not allow their enemies to defeat them, but if they refuse to cooperate, it is an easy matter for their enemies to destroy them."

The third interesting group contains fables about reckoning with power. It makes them similar to the aforementioned fables which defend power and authority. However, they vary from those fables in the fact that they offer reasonable arguments and show political necessities from a distance.

There is the fable about the horse and the hunter:⁵⁰

A wild boar and a horse used to pasture in the same spot, but the boar would always ruin the grass and muddy the water. The horse wanted to protect himself and went to a hunter to enlist his assistance. The hunter said that he couldn't help unless the horse would take a bit in his mouth and let him mount. The horse agreed to all this. Once the hunter was on his back, he hunted down the boar and then took the horse home and tied him up in his stable.

⁵⁰ Chambry 328, Hausrath 238, Perry 269.

According to Aristotle,⁵¹ the fable was told by Stesichorus (6th century BC) who warned the residents of Himera against leaving their defence to Phalaris, a future tyrant. However, its original political undertone does not have to be explicitly negative; perhaps it is worth restricting liberty in exchange for safety?

The fable about the tree and the reeds encourages compromises in the face of an overwhelming power. Here is one of its many variants:⁵² “An oak and a reed were arguing about their strength. When a strong wind came up, the reed avoided being uprooted by bending and leaning with the gusts of wind, but the oak stood firm and was torn up by the roots.”

The senselessness of fighting with those much more powerful is also depicted in the fable about the lions and the rabbits.⁵³ “Antisthenes said that the lions replied to the rabbits who were arguing before the assembly that they ought to have an equal share of everything: <‘Your arguments, good rabbits, need claws and teeth such as we have’>.” It is also a satire on the semblance of equality in democracies.

The fable about the lice warns against annoyance towards the stronger one:⁵⁴ “The lice kept biting away at a farmer as he was ploughing. Twice he stopped his plough and cleaned them out of his shirt. When they started biting him again, in order to avoid stopping so often, he burned his shirt.”

⁵¹ *Rhetorics* 1393b.

⁵² Chambry 359, Hausrath 239, Perry 70.

⁵³ Aristotle, *Politics* 3, 8, 2 (1284a); Perry 450. Since Aristotle briefly mentioned that fable as a well-known story, the answer of the lions (bracketed by <...>) needs to be reconstructed.

⁵⁴ Perry 471; Appian, *Civil Wars* 1.101, in connection with the reign of Sulla.

IV. Wars and alliances

The themes of war and violence are frequent in Aesop's fables. The law of the strongest prevails in dozens of them. It was understood by the commentators both as a surrender to fate and as condemnation of violence. Some of the fables are more about wars. I do not intend to discuss those which tell about waging wars (e.g. about confrontations of the besieged and the besiegers). I will provide examples of the political dimension of war.

The fable about the lion and the bear,⁵⁵ who fiercely fought over the loot until they were too exhausted to continue and the fox took the loot, obviously shows the consequences of an unnecessary war. The harmfulness of fratricidal wars over supremacy is also portrayed in the fable about Heracles and Theseus.⁵⁶ A dispute arose about which of the gods was greater: Theseus or Heracles. As a result, both gods were angered and each of them took revenge on the country of the other one. Since one hero was the patron of Athens and the other was the patron of Sparta, it refers to wars between them.

Condemnation of an assailant looking for false excuses for assault may be found in the fable about the wolf and the lamb:⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Chambray 200, Hausrath 152, Perry 147.

⁵⁶ Chambray 44, Perry 278.

⁵⁷ Chambray 221, Hausrath 160, Perry 155. Identical in structure is fable 12, Chambray (the marten and the rooster). In "Frankfurter Zeitung", on Christmas 1941, an article on that fable with an allusion to Hitler was published.

The wolf saw a lamb drinking from a river and decided to find a plausible reason for making a meal of him. So when he stood upstream he began to complain that the lamb was muddying the water and not letting him get a drink. When the lamb said he was no more than touching the water with his lips and that besides, from where he was standing downstream, he couldn't possibly disturb the water above him, the wolf failing in this complaint, said: "But last year you made unpleasant remarks about my father." Then, when the lamb said he wasn't even a year old, the wolf said to him: "Am I to be cheated out of eating you just because you are so glib with your excuses?"

A satire on naive pacifism and disarmament can be found in the well-known fable about the wolves and the sheep:⁵⁸

Some wolves were plotting against a flock of sheep but could not get the better of them because of the dogs who guarded them, and so they decided they would have to do it by trickery. They sent ambassadors and demanded the surrender of the dogs, arguing that the dogs were the cause of enmity between them and that if they would deliver the dogs into their hands, there would be peace between them. The sheep didn't foresee the result and surrendered the dogs. The wolves easily got

⁵⁸ Chambray 217, Hausrath 158, Perry 153. There is a variant of this fable (Chambray 218) where the sheep refuse to surrender to the dogs. It is said that the fable was quoted by Demosthenes to the Athenians when Philip of Macedon demanded them to release the leaders (as described in Plutarch's *Life of Demosthenes*).

the better of the sheep and destroyed the unprotected flock.

There are other fables which convey the same message. When the fearsome lion agreed to get rid of his claws and fangs in exchange for a promise of marriage, the girl's father could chase the lion away with a stick.⁵⁹ Encouraged by a friendly lion, the formidable bull got rid of its horns since they were heavy and unnecessary during the time of peace, but, soon after that, the lion ate the bull.⁶⁰

Another war-related and political theme are alliances, just like in the fable about the lion and the dolphin:⁶¹

A lion was straying along the seashore and saw a dolphin bobbing through the water. He invited the dolphin to join forces with him, arguing that it was particularly appropriate for them to be friends and allies, since the dolphin was lord of the creatures of the sea and he of those on the land. The dolphin readily agreed, and it wasn't long until the lion engaged a wild bull in battle and called on him for help. Although he was quite willing to come out of the sea, he couldn't, and the lion charged him with being a traitor. The dolphin replied: "Don't blame me. Blame nature which made me for the sea and doesn't permit me to go ashore."

The manuscripts add the following moral: "Obviously we, too, in establishing our alliances should choose allies who

⁵⁹ Chambry 198, Hausrath 145, Perry 140.

⁶⁰ Perry 469; the fable has been preserved in the rhetorical exercises of Nikephoros Basilakes.

⁶¹ Chambry 202, Hausrath 150, Perry 145. Cf. fable 117 (Chambry).

are able to stand by us in our dangers.” Originally, the fable could be about an alliance with an island state that was of little help in war on land.

V. Hope

Even though political life is presented critically and pessimistically in Aesop’s fables, they sometimes give hope. For instance, in the fable about the wolf and the donkey, mentioned above, the evil intentions of the rulers are exposed and dealt with. Some of the examples mentioned earlier praise rulers’ moderation, like in the defence of the reign of the lion or in the requirement to carefully shear the subjects. The well-known fable about the lion and the mouse reminds of the fact that rulers need the weaker.⁶²

While a lion was sleeping, a mouse ran over his body. The lion awoke, seized the mouse, and was on the point of devouring him. When the mouse begged the lion to let him go and said that if he were spared he would repay him in gratitude, the lion smiled and released him. But it turned out that it wasn’t long until the lion’s life was saved, thanks to the mouse. When he was caught by some hunters and tied on a tree with a rope, the mouse heard his groans, came to his aid, gnawed through the rope, and set him free [...].

Here is the fable about Boreas and Helios:⁶³

⁶² Chambry 206, Hausrath 155, Perry 150.

⁶³ Chambry 73, Hausrath 46, Perry 46. Boreas personifies the North Wind and Helios is the Sun.

The North Wind and the Sun were arguing over their power. They decided to give the prize to the one of them who could make a man who was walking along the road take off his clothes. The North Wind went first and blew hard. When the man held tight to his clothes, the North Wind blew all the harder. But the man felt the cold and only pulled his clothes tighter around him until the North Wind surrendered him to the Sun. The Sun, at first, shone gently on him. When the man took off his unnecessary robes, the Sun increased the intensity of his warmth until the man, no longer able to stand the heat, undressed and went for a swim in the nearby river. *Moral:* The story shows that persuasion is often more effective than force.

In this fable it was shown in an allegorical manner that ruling people should not be based on coercion, but rather on creating conditions for the subjects to do on their own what is required from them. It reminds of the Montesquieu's idea that instead of 'hustling' their subjects, rulers should make their subjects follow them voluntarily. Incidentally, Montesquieu had to be familiar with Aesop's fables.

But the clouds of pessimism are from time to time broken by the rays characteristic of the Greek spirit: appreciation of freedom. Let us finish this paper with two fables – about the way of freedom⁶⁴ and about springtime.

Once, at the command of Zeus, Prometheus described to men two ways, one the way of freedom, and the other that of slavery. The way of freedom he pictured

⁶⁴ Perry 383, the fable from *Life of Aesop* 94 (translated by Daly).

as rough at the beginning, narrow, steep, and waterless, full of brambles, and beset with perils elsewhere, but finally a level plain amid parks, groves of fruit trees, and water courses where the struggle reaches its end in the rest. The way of slavery he pictured as a level plain at the beginning, flowery and pleasant to look upon with much to delight but at its end narrow, hard, and like a cliff.

It is presumed in the *Life of Aesop* that with that fable, Aesop persuaded the inhabitants of Samos towards refusing to kneel before Croesus, the king of Lydia.

Winter and spring:⁶⁵

Winter mocked at Spring and found fault because as soon as Spring arrived no one any longer had any peace, but one man would be off to the fields and woods because he liked to gather spring flowers or admire a rose and put it in his hair, while another would take to his ship and go sailing off across the sea perhaps to meet men of other lands, and no one would give another thought to the winds or flood waters. And he said: "I am like a ruler and a monarch. I bid them look not up at the heavens, but cast their eyes down upon the earth in fear and trembling, and sometimes make them glad to stay in the shelter of their houses." And Spring said: "That is just why men are glad to be rid of you. But they feel that my very name is a thing of beauty – the most beautiful of all names, by Zeus –

⁶⁵ Chambry 346, Hausrath 297, Perry 271.

so that they think of me when I am gone and rejoice when I appear."

Spring follows winter, and freedom follows tyranny.

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The texts selected from the Aesopic fables prove that political matters were indeed an important part of their contents and message. As an expression of popular opinions the fables were most often critical towards the authorities and towards the usual methods of government, although they were sometimes used as an instrument of propaganda of the ruling class. The fables condemn violence and lies in public life. Staying highly realistic, they promote values important for social life, such as honesty and freedom. They are a manifestation of the freedom of speech and courage of their authors (Greek *parrhesia*).

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