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# Reading Money: Leslie Kurke on the Politics of Meaning in Archaic Greece

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THE PHARAOH APRIES once sent his subject Amasis to persuade some rebellious soldiers to submit. While Amasis was talking to them, a man standing behind him put a helmet on his head and said that he was crowning him as pharaoh. Amasis, pleased with the suggestion, went on to seize power from Apries. At first the Egyptians despised the humble origins of their new pharaoh. But Amasis chopped up a golden footbath, made it into a statue of one of the gods, and it set up in the most convenient place in the polis. This the Egyptians revered greatly. Amasis then explained to the Egyptians that the revered statue was once something into which they vomited and pissed. His own case, continued Amasis, was similar: he had once been an ordinary person, but now the Egyptians had better honor him as their sovereign. In this way—concludes Herodotus, whose narrative this is (2.162–72)—the Egyptians were brought to think it just to be slaves.

The conclusion is of course incredible. What then is the point of the story? Leslie Kurke has an answer, which derives from one of the central tenets of her fascinating book.\* The tenet is stated, with characteristic lucidity, as follows. Coinage

represents a tremendous threat to a stable hierarchy of aristocrats and others, in which the aristocrats maintain a monopoly on precious metals and other prestige goods. With the introduction of coinage looms the prospect of indiscriminate distribution, exchange between strangers that subverts the ranked spheres of exchange-goods operative in a gift-exchange culture. This threat, in turn, rep-

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\*Leslie Kurke, *Coins, Bodies, Games, and Gold: The Politics of Meaning in Archaic Greece*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). xxi + 384 pages, paper, \$29.95.

resents a social and political threat to elite control, for one of the premises of the system of ranked spheres of exchange is the complete identification of self and status with the precious metals possessed and controlled. Hence the aristocratic monopoly on precious goods within a closed system of gift-exchange guarantees an absolute (naturalized) status hierarchy. Coinage represents a double threat to that system, for it puts precious metal into general circulation, breaking down the system of ranked spheres of exchange, and it does so under the symbolic sphere of the polis. As stamped civic token, coinage challenges the naturalized claim to power of the aristocratic elite (46–47).

This gives rise to an antithesis between “essentialism” (viewing money as worth the value of its metal) and “functionalism” (viewing only the symbolic function of coinage). The parable enacted by Amasis “rejects essentialism and valorizes functionalism” (93). The precious metal is less important than its function. This subversion of the elitist language of metals is also a “movement from the privacy of the symposium to the center of the city.” Symbolic “circulation” in the city and trickiness, both rejected by aristocratic ideology, are espoused by this interesting pharaoh, who must be understood, like other eastern despots in Herodotus, as a version of a Greek tyrant.

Kurke’s method is to discover more and more material to embody her overlapping polarities. Amasis is crowned not with gold but with a helmet that must have been of bronze (cf. 2.151–52)—an inversion of the Hesiodic associations of gold with sovereignty and bronze with fighting. As pharaoh he justifies the amount of time he spends drinking and joking with his drinking companions by another parable—the need to unstring a bow when not in use—that seems to subvert the traditional association of sovereignty with *stringing* the bow. Whereas aristocratic ideology values honesty and consistency, Amasis had been a thief, and in order to become pharaoh changes sides. And as pharaoh he rewards the gods who had (in mantic shrines) rightly condemned him as a thief, and neglects those which had acquitted him—thereby

inverting (aristocratic) reciprocity. Even the fart that Amasis tells Apries' messenger to take back to his master finds its place in Kurke's framework: Amasis' appropriation of signification is also, as an expression of the "grotesque body," a symbolic inversion of aristocratic hierarchy.

All this occurs in a narrative that stresses the political role of the people of Egypt. Amasis is introduced as just "Amasis," and it is "one of the Egyptians" who crowns him. It is "all the Egyptians" who defeat and execute Apries. In the footbath narrative Amasis is said to have been a *demotes* (member of the people) and the Egyptians are *astoi* (fellow citizens). Significantly, it is the belief of the people that makes the bronze helmet a crown, the recast foot-bath a god, Amasis a pharaoh, and themselves slaves. Coinage is worth what people believe it to be worth: Amasis' transvaluation of metals may be read, claims Kurke, as an "allegory of coinage," a challenge by the tyrant and people to the "aristocratic monopoly on signification."

The framework of polarities expands still further. The Amasis narrative itself forms a contrast with Herodotus' account of Darius. After the conspirators for the Persian throne had agreed that the one whose horse first whinnies after sunrise should be king, Darius wins by the trick of his groom exciting at the right moment his stallion by the smell of his favorite mare: the stallion whinnies, and there is thunder and lightning from a clear sky. Whereas this use of the body—genitals and nostrils—subverts, according to Kurke, Darius' claim to kingship by defiling the solar and equine symbolism of a divine ordeal, Amasis by his fart chooses the bodily code to destabilize the hierarchy and thereby to subvert not his own but Apries' claim to the throne. As king, Darius richly rewards a man from whom he had when a mere spearbearer received a gift. But Amasis, as we saw, inverts this model of royal reciprocity, ignoring his private interest in rewarding the public truth of mantic shrines. The story of Darius "takes place entirely within the frame of the aristocratic *hetaireia*," whereas the Amasis stories "transpire in the public space of the city."

All this exemplifies, without doing full justice to, the skill of Kurke as a reader. Her overlapping organizing polarities are essentialism and functionalism, consistency and changeability, hierarchical aristocratic propriety and the grotesque body, hierarchy and universal circulation, symposium and public space, reciprocity and public justice. What do they mean, or rather what are they *doing*? An answer must first introduce her two fundamental polarities.

The first is the polarity, which Kurke has taken from Ian Morris,<sup>1</sup> between the middling and the elitist traditions. Morris finds in archaic poetry two strands, both aristocratic, but the one an assimilation to “the dominant civic values within archaic poleis” (the “middling tradition”), the other (the “elitist tradition”) claiming authority in “an inter-polis aristocracy which had privileged links to the gods, the heroes, and the East.” For Kurke, Amasis is a “‘middling’ hero among the Greeks in Egypt,” i.e., among the Greek mercenaries and traders that seem to have been Herodotus’ informants for the latter part of book 2.

The other fundamental polarity is that formulated by the anthropologists Jonathan Parry and Maurice Bloch, and applied to the Greeks of the archaic and classical period by Sitta von Reden,<sup>2</sup> namely between the long-term and the short-term transactional orders. The former is positively valued, in that it perpetuates the larger social and cosmic order, whereas the latter is the sphere of individual acquisition. The two orders are separate but, as Parry and Bloch put it, “organically essential to each other. This is because their relationship forms the basis for a symbolic resolution of the problem posed by the fact that transcendental social and symbolic structure must both depend on, and negate, the transient individual.” This model has been applied to the development of the Greek polis by von Reden. In Homer the long-term order is embodied in lavish sacrifices to the gods and aristocratic gift-exchange, the short-term order in the profit made by individual traders. Subsequently, according to von Reden, “the introduction of coinage indicates a shift

of authority over social justice from the gods to the polis.” Kurke adopts the idea that with the advent of the polis a shift occurs in the relation between the two transactional orders, but adds her insistence that the civic appropriation of the long-term transactional order was surrounded by *conflict*—between the middling and elitist traditions. Her project is to trace, in the sixth and fifth centuries (primarily in Herodotus but also in lyric poetry, some visual images, and occasionally other kinds of text), this bipolar struggle for the control of signification.

Herodotus’ account of Amasis exemplifies one pole in this struggle. What about the contrasting account of Darius? The Persians, according to Herodotus (3.89.3), say that whereas Kyros was a gentle father who received gifts rather than tribute, Darius was a petty trader (*kapelos*). What we know of the Persian empire suggest that this scheme has more to do with Greek conceptions than Persian reality. In the picture of the emperor as money-grubbing retailer, argues Kurke, Greek elitist ideology reduces the public domain of money to retailing, to the victory of the short-term transactional order over aristocratic gift-exchange. Accordingly Darius is the only person in Herodotus who wants to leave *coinage* as his monument (the grand word *mnemosunon*).

The Herodotean Amasis is the tyrant represented by the middling, the Herodotean Darius by the elitist tradition. Kurke shows how Darius’ petty desire for individual gain is consistently represented as a threat to the long-term transactional order, whereas Amasis’ inversion of elitist values reconstitutes the long-term transactional order by “re-routing it through the public space of the city.” For instance, Darius even desecrates a tomb for gain (1.187), whereas Amasis, in a version that Herodotus regards as magnified (*semnoun*) by the Egyptians, preserved his own corpse from future mutilation by the trick of having another corpse buried well above him. Whether or not the Persians subsequently mutilated the wrong corpse, popular memory “magnifies” the memory of Amasis. And so here again, according to Kurke, “the trick-

ster tyrant reinvents the long-term transactional order with the complicity of the demos.”

Before I attempt a critique, here is a selective summary of the rest of Kurke's argument. Like the pairing of Darius and Amasis, there is in Herodotus antithetical evaluation of Polykrates and Kroisos. It is significant that Polykrates is said both to issue *counterfeit* coin and to perform a series of acts that abuse the aristocratic principle of reciprocity, culminating in the fateful rejection by the gods of Polykrates' gift of the ring that he throws into the sea. It is generally agreed that Herodotus' sources here for this (elitist) account are the descendants of Polykrates' aristocratic opponents. The sequel to Polykrates' death, by contrast, is narrated from a “middling” perspective (3.139–49). As for Kroisos, whereas in epinikion his generosity serves to endorse aristocratic gift-exchange, one Herodotean narrative associates gift-exchange and oriental luxury with the grotesque body (Alkmaion stuffing himself and his body with Kroisos' gold) and another opposes them to Solon's vesting of the long-term transactional order in the polis.

We move from part 1, entitled “Discourses,” to part 2, entitled “Practices.” The book as a whole can be described as an extended commentary on Herodotus 1.94, which attributes to the Lydians the prostitution of their children, the first ever minting and use of gold and silver coinage, the earliest retail trade, and the invention of the games now played by themselves and by the Greeks. This is not, according to Kurke, a haphazard list. Part 2 extends her framework of polarities to include prostitution and games. The opposition between two kinds of prostitute, the *hetaira* of the aristocratic symposium and the *porne* of the public space, expresses the opposition between gift-exchange and the circulation of commodities, with the elitist tradition creating the *hetaira* so as to differentiate itself from that universal availability of purchased sex celebrated by the egalitarianism of the middling tradition.

Certain passages of Herodotus take an elitist view of the Lydians, for instance by combining their luxury with courage

(1.79.3; cf. 71.2–4), but others undercut this view, for instance by associating their luxury with feeble effeminacy (1.155.4) or by attributing to them the prostitution of their daughters as well as the invention of coinage and of retail trade. His matter-of-fact narrative of Rhodopis undercuts the elitist construction of the *hetaira*. But his accounts of the Babylonian practices of bride auction and temple prostitution offer eclectic models of civic structure which do not allow us to “extract a single consistent constitutional preference.”

What of the last item on Herodotus’ list? What have coinage, prostitution, and retail trade to do with *games*? Games occur in other lists of inventions, sometimes along with other symbolic systems—such as number, weights and measures, and written laws—that, as second-order organizing principles, seem associated with the order of the polis. A board game described by Pollux is actually called “polis.” In the *Odyssey* the suitors’ game of *pessoi* (draughts) is a merely symbolic, disembodied contest, whereas Odysseus will transform the symbolic contest of the bow into an aristocratic, embodied contest of strength. Games involving the body (ball games, athletic games) and games of chance (as trials of divine favor: *kottabos*, *astragaloi*) have an elite association, whereas the board game might be valorized, in opposition to the bodily ideal of the elite, as an image of the rule-bound activity of citizens all equal in status. The only game that the Lydians do not claim to have invented, according to Herodotus, is *pessoi*, because, says Kurke, “they cannot conceptualize the symbolic order of the city.”

The final chapter proposes that the opposing ideologies of essentialism and functionalism merge in the fundamental doubleness of the coin as precious metal with civic stamp. Pure silver was chosen to be the material of civic coinage at least partly in “symbolic opposition to the elitist identification with gold.” Athenian coins, like Athenian citizens, were made of the same material—pure, precious and autochthonous (from Laurion)—distinct from both elitist gold and the impurity and mere conventionality of bronze coinage.

MY CRITIQUE STARTS from the most obvious weakness in Kurke's elaborate edifice, that there seems to be no evidence for elite hostility to coinage before Plato and Aristotle. Kurke addresses this problem by arguing that this silence is in fact *suppression*. Aristocratic poetic texts suppress the threat of coinage by focusing "only and obsessively on essence, that is on the quality of metal" (46). The imagery of metallurgy expressing the real quality of a man forms a coherent system with absence of coinage. When the imagery of coinage does appear, she argues, it is in what she claims is evocation by Theognis of *counterfeit* coin as an image for untrustworthy figures outside his own *hetaireia* (117–24, 963–66). "Thus coinage only ever figures in the negative—there is only bad coinage—and it is aligned precisely with the space outside the *hetaireia* and with anti-aristocratic qualities" (55).

There are several objections to this argument. As Kurke herself admits (58), "we can cite no text in the middling tradition that breaks the aristocratic ban on the naming of money" (in the archaic period). This suggests that there were reasons other than elitist ideology for the non-mention of coinage. As for the passages of Theognis, there is no mention of coinage. The word that Kurke takes to refer to counterfeit coinage (*kibdelos*) means mixed or adulterated, and is in this context much more likely to refer not to coinage but to uncoined precious *metal*. Both passages belong to the Theognid topos in which man is compared to (pure or impure) metal. Kurke argues that the analogy—with a man who "has a tricky heart in his breast" (122)—suggests the "concealed interiority" of a coin of base metal concealed by a covering of precious metal. But the point is the distinction—inhering in the *adulteration* referred to by *kibdelos*—between appearance and reality. The Greek barely brings out *interiority* ("in his breast" is *en phresin*). And there are further reasons for excluding coinage here. Theognis' city, Megara, did not produce its own coins until the fourth century.<sup>3</sup> Martin West



dates him, and the earliest *Theognidea* (including 117–24),<sup>4</sup> long before the introduction of coinage into mainland Greece, which now seems to have been in the middle of the sixth century at the earliest. And even if we suppose that as early as the mid-sixth century—the more usual dating of Theognis—there were available in Megara the coins of other states, and that already some of these coins were counterfeit, it seems unlikely that Theognis and his contemporaries were already familiar enough with counterfeit coins for them to be (merely) evoked as an image of untrustworthiness. Further, Theognis 115 refers to *kibdelos* gold and silver, but it was even less likely that *gold* coins were circulating in Megara than silver ones. And anyway coins were *more* likely to be consistently pure than unstamped metal.

I have dwelt on this because it exemplifies the dangers of subtle reading in a historical vacuum, a point to which I will return, and because it removes what would be the only clear instance of “elite” hostility to coinage before Plato and Aristotle.<sup>5</sup> The Herodotean report of Darius’ desire to make coinage his monument does not have to exemplify elite disdain for coinage, for it may have emerged merely from the Greek explanation of why, alone of mortals, he had himself depicted on coins (with which Greeks were familiar). The earliest reference to coinage is fragment 69 of Alkaios (if the “staters” are coins), which in an earlier book Kurke cited as illustrating the “rabid opposition” of the aristocracy to money.<sup>6</sup> Here she rightly omits this idea, for although the fragment does express the startling power of money to marginalize gift-exchange, it does also if anything exemplify aristocratic *use* of that power, not hostility to it. It is striking that the openly elitist *parabasis* of Aristophanes’ *Frogs* should identify the elite (*kaloï k’ agathoi*: 719, 728) with *coins*. For Kurke this is an example of the “fusion” of opposing ideologies: all citizens are common currency, but some citizens are better than others just as the good old silver coins and the new gold ones are better than the new bronze ones. But the proud identification of *kaloï k’ agathoi*

with the city's regular coinage ("the best of all currencies, rightly struck and sounded among the Greeks and barbarians everywhere") adds to our doubt that there was ever elitist hostility to coinage in the first place.

One possible explanation of the absence of coinage in our literary sources between Alkaios and Herodotus is that coins were envisaged as (pieces of) precious metal. Take for instance fragment 90 of Herakleitos of Ephesos, which is unusual in actually making explicit the universal circulation of money that is important to Kurke's overall argument. Kurke mentions it only in a footnote, and briefly excludes him from both elitist and middling traditions as "a philosophical maverick pursuing his own course" (which he certainly was not: e.g., Pl. *Theaet.* 179d; the Derveni papyrus), even though he valorizes both civic law and the board games that Kurke associates with the polis. Why does Kurke not accept him into the middling tradition? Perhaps because of the credible report of Herakleitos' elite background, but more likely because fr. 90 refers to goods as exchanged for *gold* and gold for goods (to illustrate how, in his cosmology, fire is an exchange for all things and all things for fire). Herakleitos valorizes the polis, law, board games, and (at least in its cosmological sublimation as fire) the circulation of money, and yet, despite living in a city that had been an important center of coinage even before his birth, refers to money in circulation as simply "gold." This combination cuts strikingly across Kurke's division between elitist gold and middling coinage.

To be sure, this kind of combination is elsewhere freely admitted by Kurke. She allows that even Aristotle also gives a positive account of coinage—as enabling communality (*koinonia*, EN 1133ab). "Even within the elitist construction" of the *hetaira*, the male participants of the symposium "occasionally refashion her as a *porne*" (219). Opposite attitudes to sympotic *hetairai* (companionability and differentiation) are even manifest in two pictures on the same cup (211). The *Against Neaira* uses *hetaira* and *porne* as "inter-

changeable terms" (219 n.110). We have seen that the parabasis of Aristophanes' *Frogs* is said to "fuse" the opposing ideologies. In the *Odyssey* Odysseus as bowman "himself controverts or problematizes an ideal of embodied warfare" whereas the ideology of embodiment is elsewhere in the *Odyssey* endorsed (260 n.18). The "bricolage of civic ideology" generally "opposes what is valorized by the elitist tradition but, on occasion, can also appropriate it" (300). Herodotus' Samian stories incorporate both elitist and civic traditions. He narrates the disposal of women at Babylon "at a skew line to current oppositions," and so we "cannot extract a single consistent constitutional preference." In ascribing to the Lydians the invention of the dice, as well as of the elite pastimes of ball games and knucklebones, he produces "an unsettling fusion of long- and short-term transactional orders, of marketplace with palaistra and symposium" (295). He "is difficult to place along the ideological spectrum we have traced out"; his position "shifts and wavers" (60).

There is, in short—in the non- (or anti-) elitist opposing of functionalism to essentialism, *porne* to *hetaira*, coin to gift, polis to direct access to the divine—a "messiness" that "should not surprise us; with Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau we need to recognize that the logic of practice is complex and elaborated even if it defies the laws of theory" (334). But Bourdieu and de Certeau are able to observe in detail the practices whose messiness they theorize. The attempt to save the schema by appealing to the concept of "messiness" parallels the attempt to explain the lack of evidence for aristocratic hostility to coinage by appealing to "what Macherey calls the silences that structure the discourse of the text" (25). Again, there is a crucial difference from the theory evoked: Macherey, as a Marxist, assigns a crucial role, in the structuring of texts, to relations of production, whereas Kurke distinguishes herself from Macherey by focusing rather on "ideological struggle." As for the variety of perspectives within Herodotus, Kurke evokes in explanation, apart from the obvious likelihood of multiple

informants (66), various factors which are—as is usual with factors of this type—assumed to need little or no explanation themselves: irony (60), an “open agora of logoi” (333), the deliberate juxtaposition of “irreconcilable representations” (171), the desire “precisely to disturb the narrative’s perfect symmetry” (118), “destabilization” of an opposition (220).

Sometimes the middling-elitist scheme seems insufficiently comprehensive for all the material she attempts to organize by it. I give two examples. The middling tradition is identified with egalitarian discourse that “celebrates the universal availability of *pornai* as an emblem and badge of democracy” (219). But we must remember that the middling tradition, though anti-elitist, is nevertheless defined as *aristocratic* (19–20), and it is difficult to join Kurke in imagining it seriously espousing the universal availability of prostitutes that is humorously praised in a fragment of the New Comedy poet Philemon (fr. 3 K.A.). The same may be said of the implicit valorization, ascribed by Kurke to the middling tradition, of farting and pissing in the Amasis narrative. Here, unusually, Kurke feels able to identify a specific group as source, namely the Greek traders and mercenaries of Naukratis. In what sense, if any, should we regard such people as aristocratic? Moreover, although Amasis is indeed a version of a Greek ruler, Kurke should have taken into account the other ingredient—Greek humorous contempt for Egyptian subservience, notably in the conclusion that the Egyptians were brought to think it just to be slaves.

At this point the degree of messiness might cause us to question the basis, as well as the illuminative power, of the middling-elitist distinction.

For Ian Morris “the differences between the two poetic traditions came down to a single point: the elitists legitimated their special role from sources outside the polis; the middling poets rejected such claims.” These sources are the gods, the heroes, and the east. For Kurke the “highest goods of elitist ideology” are “the gods, gold, the East” (316). For

both Morris and Kurke a crucial context for the expression of elitist attitudes is the symposium, which for Kurke forms an important opposition to the public space of the city. Morris stresses the association of the symposium with lyric monody, which generally expresses elitist ideology, and with oriental luxury: the elite “virtually mixed with the gods themselves, just like the ancient heroes,” and “felt like the kings of the East” (*Demokratia* 33). “Luxury bridged the gulf between mortals and gods” in the symposium and in the dedication of luxurious objects. Giving a “gold cup or a bronze tripod to the gods . . . gave the dedicator a direct experience of the gods which was denied to ordinary mortals.”

Morris barely provides any evidence for the subjectivity he describes. Moreover, dedications to the gods, whether of humble or expensive objects, occurred in the *public, civic* space of the sanctuaries. It is difficult to see how the elite had, or thought it had, more direct access or greater loyalty to the gods or heroes than anybody else (whether through dedications, mystery cult, prayer, oracles, sacrifice, dreams, and so on). Indeed—turning to the middling perspective—Kurke’s view that “the sixth and fifth centuries saw the city’s attempt to displace the divine at the apex of the long term transactional order” (238) is not unproblematic, as is indicated merely by the central role of deity in such expressions of civic consciousness as the poetry of Solon (fr. 4.1–6; 13.17–32, 63–76; etc.), Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*, and the Parthenon frieze.

As for Lydian luxury, it is attacked by Xenophanes, who is claimed for the middling tradition by Morris and Kurke. But the Kolophonians whom he attacks are described as coming with their purple cloaks into the *agora* (i.e., Kurke’s public space). Both Morris and Kurke give instances of the same poet occupying both middling and elitist positions: what matters is not the individual but genre and context. But Xenophanes’ spellbinding description of the joys of the well-ordered *symposium* (fr. 1), ignored by Morris and Kurke, belongs to the same genre as his middling attacks on Lydian

luxury and on athletes as not benefiting the treasury of the polis. The *Theognidea*, which seem to consist of elegies for the symposium (see esp. 239–40), are claimed by Morris for the middling tradition, but by Kurke as embodying contestation and negotiation between the two ideologies. It is not clear that the aristocratic symposium is as antithetical to the polis as Kurke maintains.<sup>7</sup> And elitist opposition to the polis (rather than to enemies in the polis) is—outside Homeric epic, with which Kurke is only marginally concerned—as hard to find<sup>8</sup> as elitist opposition to coinage. Opposed views on Lydian luxury may be associated with moralizing on moderation or even perhaps with different poetic genres, but have not been convincingly aligned with opposing attitudes to the gods or to the polis or to money. Nor have any such oppositions been convincingly aligned with opposed classes—even though Morris claims that “the Orientalising movement was a class phenomenon” and Kurke claims in her preface that her concern will be with “material symbols that identify and reproduce different class fractions.”

This concern with class never materializes. What kind of opposition then is the opposition between elitist and middling traditions? Who are the groups engaged in it, and what exactly is at stake? Certainly it is a “political struggle” (e.g., 18) and an “ideological struggle” (e.g., 25). Is it also an economic struggle, or even just an opposition between groups with different economic interests? Some such opposition is required in any sensible definition of class. Kurke does refer to economic opposition, but whereas some (notably Marxists) subsume political and discursive conflict into economic conflict, she belongs to those who do the opposite. To be sure, there is “an ongoing struggle over the constitution of value, and who controlled the higher spheres of exchange, between the traditional elite and the emerging city-state” (12). But the struggle is “preeminently political” (18). “The constitutive silences of Greek texts are first and foremost political, and economic only in so far as different symbolic economies support different paradigms of social and political order” (25), and “economic contestation” is mentioned only as

something that is “played out” through “concrete discourses” (35). This privileging of the social, political, and discursive over the economic may seem at odds with the focus on money, but then coinage is “one among a number of signifying practices . . . a privileged signifier” (4) that “we must situate . . . squarely within the frame of the political and social contestation Morris elucidates” (22). The indiscriminate distribution promoted by coinage is a “social and political” threat to elite control (47). She insists that “a conflict over economic systems is also, inextricably, a political conflict” (181), but has no interest in the inevitable corollary that at least some political conflict is also, inextricably, economic conflict.

We can in fact divide into three levels the terms Kurke uses of the contestation at the heart of her argument. First there is “economic,” subsumable into all the others, then “ideological,” “social,” and “political,” which are themselves subordinate to the third level: “signification” and the “discursive.” The political and social struggles “fueled” the battle over value and signification (35). What matters is what she calls (32) the “struggle for discursive control.”

At issue is who controls signification and who has the power to constitute the culture’s fundamental hierarchies of value. While these issues have “real life” implications . . . such a struggle over fundamental hierarchies of value can *only* [emphasis by RS] be a discursive one . . . it is not as if there is some “reality” we are struggling to get to behind the texts, images, and practices, if we can just break through their screen by patient source criticism and sifting of “facts” (23).

The discursive struggle has “real life implications,” but does not emerge from or express a real life struggle, any struggle other than itself.

The inference from the undoubted fact that all facts are mediated by discourse to the conclusion that discourse can speak only about itself is no less odd an illusion, and no less produced by social pressure, than, say, the belief that Athena was born from the head of Zeus. The pressure making for

the postmodern illusion is, of course, the social division of labor with its intellectual subdivisions (literary critics and philosophers control only discourse). Corresponding to those on campus who give the impression that there is only discourse, there are those outside it who give the impression that there is only money. The earliest instance of the latter category, incidentally, is a sixth-century poet not mentioned by Kurke, Pytherrmus, to whose dispiriting view that “the other things were after all nothing, except gold” (*PMG* 910) I will briefly return in my penultimate sentence.

But Kurke is too intelligent a critic to succumb to the illusion. She does, for instance, use source criticism and the sifting of facts (by others) to ground her view that Herodotus’ sources for the Amasis story were Greek mercenaries and traders in Egypt. But the social pressure is still there, even though it makes only for the *privileging* of the discursive. Such privileging is defensible, especially where, as for the ancient world, discourse constitutes most of our evidence. Kurke does in fact largely ignore a kind of discourse—the inscriptional—that provides a unique window on the “real life” functioning of money in the polis. But even this is defensible: it is unreasonable to emphasize omissions from a book as broad in scope as this one. A more serious problem perhaps is that because Kurke’s fundamental opposition is so oddly disembodied, it is all the harder to justify its lack of fit (exemplified above) with her texts by appealing to “the messiness of practice” (334). What practice exactly? Where bipolar discursive struggle is imagined as expressing only itself, it may be difficult to maintain the fundamentality or explanatory power of the bipolarity against the proliferation of discursive messiness. Kurke’s book is an outstanding achievement, but remains within the limitations set by the privileging of the discursive.

It may be replied that any correlation of discursive with “real life” oppositions is itself impossible for the ancient world. Perhaps. But it is not often even attempted. Consider for instance the fact that Kurke, despite having the vision to steer away from the fashionable cul-de-sac of indeterminacy



fetishism towards the main road of “political and social struggle,” does not engage at all with Geoffrey de Ste Croix’s magisterial work on real life class struggle in the ancient Greek world. Does she, for instance, regard status (Finley) or class (de Ste Croix) as the more useful concept in understanding the society about which she is writing? Class, for de Ste Croix, “is essentially a relationship, and the members of any one class are necessarily related *as such*, in different degrees, to those of other classes. The members of a Weberian class or status group *as such*, on the other hand, need not have any necessary relationship to the members of any class or status group *as such*.” For de Ste Croix a crucial opposition is between those who by virtue of their command over the labor of others were *free* to lead a civilized life (the “propertied class”) and those who had to work to maintain themselves, and he cites in illustration the remark of Aristotle that “it is the mark of an *eleutheros* (free man, gentleman) not to live for the benefit of another.”<sup>9</sup>

Such freedom I would describe as imagined self-sufficiency, and would accordingly adduce another passage of Aristotle, quoted for a quite different purpose by Kurke (149), the beginning of his *Politics* where he states as a principle that “self-sufficiency is an end and what is best.” As exemplifying this general principle Aristotle has in mind here the polis, for the individual separated from the polis is—he has to point out—not self-sufficient. But of course the implication of *Politics* 1256a14–58b6—that the individual household should be self-sufficient (for this is natural) to the limited extent possible—follows from the general principle. Hence perhaps the ambivalence, noted above, of Aristotle on coinage, as unnatural but after all required for communality.<sup>10</sup>

Now it seems to me that this idea of freedom or self-sufficiency, which expresses a central, real life class opposition that does not coincide with Kurke’s “central ideological division” and is ignored by her, is at least as important to understanding the social significance of money, and change in the long-term transactional order, as the ideas that she does

discuss. One probable reason why the rapid pervasion of the Greek polis by coined money in the sixth century was, despite the egalitarian potential rightly emphasized by Kurke, *not* in fact rejected by the elite was that its possession is likely to enhance the illusion of self-sufficiency, for it embodies—in concentrated, concealable, and mobile form—abstract and general power over the labor of others, thereby tending to free its owner from relations based on other forms of coercion or on the code of reciprocity. As we gather from theorists of money such as Simmel, or may infer from Kurke's description of Polykrates' violation of the reciprocity of gift-exchange, money promotes individualism.

Kurke is in a sense right. The elite despised trade, especially petty trade, and even the latter used coined money. But consider the attitude of Plato, an elitist if ever there was one. He disparages the currency (*nomisma*) of the majority of the people as polluting (*Republic* 417a). But elsewhere he says that coinage does good because it renders homogeneous and commensurable (*homalos kai summetros*) the being (*ousia*) of things of whatever kind (*Laws* 918a). And the guardians of his ideal state should have divine gold and silver money (*chrusion kai argurion*) from the gods always present in their souls (*Republic* 416e). His attitude to coinage is no less ambivalent than that of Aristotle. The unchangeable homogeneity that, Kurke argues (50), is what makes the elitist Theognis compare a true companion to gold is in fact more reliably achieved as the abstract value of coinage.

The ambivalence of Plato consists in on the one hand appreciating the abstract ontological homogenization achieved by coinage but on the other hand imagining true value as detached from vulgar circulation; and this imagining is the illusion—strengthened by money—of self-sufficiency, with the self-sufficiency withdrawn securely into the soul. This brings us to what seems to me to be the real change introduced by money into what Kurke calls the “long-term transactional social and metaphysical order.” What I mean is the creation of metaphysics in the more specific, philosophical sense. The

qualities of Platonic money in the soul—divinity, homogeneity, unchanging permanence, self-sufficiency, invisibility—reappear in the one being, the good, that is finally revealed to the philosopher (*Symposium* 211) and that has further characteristics of monetary value: superior distinctness from all else while being the abstract source of all value.

What I suggest is that at the apex of the long-term transactional order the anthropomorphic deities were not replaced, as von Reden and Kurke believe, by the polis, but—at least in the minds of some of a broad elite—by the metaphysical sublimation of the impersonal, homogenous, abstract, transcendent, seemingly self-sufficient power of money, a process that is first observable in Anaximander in early sixth-century Miletos (perhaps the very first thoroughly monetized society in history) and that culminated in the metaphysics of Parmenides and Plato. We can for instance in this way make sense, whereas Kurke can not, of Herakleitos. Indeed, the crucial opposition is exemplified by Herakleitos and Parmenides, representing the opposed complementary aspects of money. Money, to have value as money, must circulate—and yet seem to have value independently of circulation. Herakleitos' cosmos—a single system united by the constant “exchange” of everything from and into fire (“like goods for gold and gold for goods”) according to the *logos* embodied in the fire (like *logos* in money)—projects onto the cosmos the *circulation* of goods driven and regulated by monetary value,<sup>11</sup> whereas the abstract, homogeneous, unchanging, self-sufficient One (all that there is) of Parmenides is the projection of monetary value *detached from circulation*. It is only partly in jest that I say that Parmenides turns out to be a philosophical version of our dispiriting friend Pythermus. But this is a complex story, which I will tell in more detail another time, and which to a large extent complements rather than competes with Kurke.

## NOTES

1. I. Morris, "The Strong Principle of Equality and the Archaic Origins of Greek democracy," in J. Ober and C. Hedrick, eds., *Demokratia. A Conversation on Democracy, Ancient and Modern* (Princeton 1996).

2. J. Parry, and M. Bloch, *Money and the Morality of Exchange* (Cambridge 1989); S. von Reden, *Exchange in Ancient Greece* (London 1995).

3. T. R. Martin in M. H. Hansen *Sources for the Ancient Greek City-State* (Copenhagen 1995), 276.

4. Recently Robin Lane Fox argues for 600–550 BC (in R. Brock and S. Hodkinson, *Alternatives to Athens* [Oxford U. P., 2000], 37–40).

5. In a footnote (47 n.15) she refers, as evidence for "the threat coinage represents to the aristocracy," to passages in Gernet and Howgego. The Gernet passage states that "money proceeds originally from the nobility" and that "money proves fatal to the nobility" but provides no evidence for either proposition. What Howgego states to be a blow to aristocratic local patronage is not coinage but *wealth* freed from the closed aristocratic spheres of gift exchange (nor does the supporting scholarship he cites concern coinage).

6. *The Traffic in Praise: Pindar and the Poetics of Social Economy* (Ithaca, NY 1991), 252–53.

7. Both Morris and Kurke quote the remark of O. Murray that "the *symposion* became in many respects a place apart from the normal rules of society, with its own strict code of honor in the *pistis* there created, and its own willingness to establish conventions fundamentally opposed to those within the polis as a whole" (in O. Murray, ed., *Sympotica. A Symposium on the Symposium* [Oxford 1990], 7), which Kurke admits may be overly schematic. Nowhere in *Sympotica* is real evidence provided for Murray's view, but Schmitt-Pantel in her contribution to it argues that in the Archaic city the symposium "does not belong to the private sphere," and recently N. Fisher has argued in detail against the social exclusivity of the symposium in late fifth-century Athens (in D. Harvey and J. Wilkins, eds., *The Rivals of Aristophanes* [London 2000], 355–96).

8. See e.g., the first chapter, entitled "L'identification de l'aristocratie à la cité," of Alain Fouchard, *Aristocratie et démocratie: idéologies et sociétés en Grèce ancienne* (Besançon 1997).

9. *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (London 1981), 90, 116–17; Aristot. *Rhet.* 1.9, 1367a32.

10. Similarly, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (1097b6–16) regards the complete good as self-sufficient but wonders how far the self-sufficient unit should extend (e.g., parents' parents?), and discuss the view, held by some, that happy, self-sufficient people do not need friends (1169b2–10).

11. Accordingly, where Kurke is not wrong to see the board game in Herakleitos as a symbol of political order (263–70), I would include also the *economic* dimension, seeing the game as rule-bound yet absolute competition between two parties and so symbolizing the opposition between the

two parties to a monetary transaction, an opposition historically unprecedented (at least in its ubiquity) in that it is regulated and unified by nothing other than the (monetary) *logos*. This balanced tension, through which *logos* drives and regulates the whole system of circulation, is expressed by Herakleitos also in his images of the bow and the lyre (fr. 51) and his statement that war is communal and conflict is justice (fr. 80).