

[Finer, Samuel Edward](#). 1999. *The history of government from the earliest times*. Oxford University Press. Pages 120-122.

4.4. The Polity as an *Oikos*

At this point it is necessary to digress a moment, in order to introduce a concept which will recur in this history: the concept of the *oikos*.

Oikos is the Greek household.¹ According to Aristotle, its management is concerned with producing goods for the use of its own members and not for exchanging them with others. The household is *autarkic*. 'The members', he wrote, 'shared all things in common', 'no purpose is to be served by the art of exchange', nor, he adds, by the arts of acquisition.² Finally, this management resides in the household's *despot*-a single ruler. This description of the *oikos* was picked up in the nineteenth century by [J. K. Rodbertus](#). According to him all antiquity was dominated by what he called 'an *oikos* economy' wherein production centred on the household, this being understood to consist of unfree workers: a slave household, in fact. In principle, these households were self-sufficient. Commerce was very secondary. It served merely to dispose of surpluses.

From Rodbertus, the idea found its way to [Max Weber](#), who refined it further, and it is his definition that is current among sociologists today and the one that will be used throughout this book. Weber characterized the *oikos* thus:

1. It is not just any household: it is 'the authoritarian household-of a prince, manorial lord, or patrician'.³
2. Its dominant motive is not capitalist acquisition but the lord's organized want-satisfaction, satisfied in kind. And this remains so if, in order to secure otherwise available goods, it has market-orientated enterprises attached to it.
3. In its pure state, however, it is completely autarkic.

Hence his description-in the pure case, that is, that of self-sufficiency, it is:

An apparatus of house-dependent labour which is often highly specialized, produces all the goods, personal services, economic, military and sacral, which the ruler requires. His own land provides the raw materials, his workshops with their personally unfree labour, supply all other materials. The remaining services are provided by servants, officials, house-priests, and warriors. Exchange takes place only if surplus is to be dumped or if goods simply cannot be procured by any other way.⁴

The Sumerian city-state was an *oikos* just like this. Supreme power vested in the ruler, and the *oikos* as a whole consisted of his palace as master-household and a number of others, arranged hierarchically in relation to it. These lesser households were the temples of the various gods, and their hierarchical position depended upon the position which its deity-the master of his own household-held in the local pantheon.⁵

¹ Hence *oikonomia*, economy, 'the management of the household', Cf. Aristotle, *Economics*, dealing (more unsystematically, it may be said) with just this.

² Barker, *The Politics of Aristotle* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1946), 27 ff.

³ Max Weber: *Selection in Translation*, ed. W G. Runciman and trans. by E. Matthews (CUP, Cambridge, 1978), i. 381.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Gregoire, J.-P. 'L'Origine et le développement de la civilisation mésopotamienne du III^{ème} millénaire avant notre ère', in *Production, pouvoir, et parenté dan le monde Méditerranéen de Sumer a nos jours* (Actes de colloque L'E.R.A., CNRS/EHESS, 1976, Paris, 1981). page 73.

The Sumerian word *e* means, precisely, an *oikos*. But this was not the small, face-to-face community of Rodbertus, but a statist organization, authoritarian and highly bureaucratic, which, outside its social and religious function, existed to satisfy the wants of the lord and master, the *en* and *lugal-despots* to the Greeks. It was, therefore, a production unit, comprising domain-lands, villages, administrative centres, dwellings, workshops, storehouses, and granaries-and it was run by bodies of administrators, accountants, supervisors, and inspectors.

Not merely that. One of its principal characteristics, implicit in the concept of *oikos*, is that it was a storage-redistributive organization. Products were brought into storehouses and granaries and went out again in the form of rations, dues, and gifts. Lands, particularly the cereal lands on which the entire *oikos* depended, were the god's-hence, in some sense, the ruler's. The temple's lands were cultivated by the temple's servants and administered by the chief priests in the name of the god, hence, the ruler.⁶

The temple and the palace formed the town centre; the various neighbourhoods, each with their local temples, developed around them, encircled by the city wall. It has been argued that there was no market-place within the town.⁷ There was indeed a special area at some distance from the centre which was called the *kar*. This was organized and controlled by the palace. *Kar* corresponds more or less to the medieval trading posts of the Italians or the [Hanse](#) in foreign parts, which we call 'the counter'. The *kar* was the counter, into which flowed manufactured goods and raw materials and goods for exchange (since these cities, as we saw, needed stone and metal and building wood). Coinage being non-existent, the process of exchange was assisted by sets of equivalencies. Such equivalencies were equally necessary in redistributing the domestic product between individuals. The goods sent in to the magazines and granaries of the various *oikoi* went out again to the labourers as rations, and the remainder to the 'staff' workers of the city, that is, the scribes, priests, soldiers, and of course the *lugal* himself. The entire, enormously complicated business of checking the natural products in, deciding remuneration to this, that, or the other individuals according to their due, called for quite an army of scribes, accountants, and inspectors.

On the temple domain the land fell into three parts: the god's land, which fed the priests and temple servants; the food-land which was allotted as their means of subsistence to the cultivators who worked the god's land; and the plough-land leased to tenants for one-seventh or one-eighth of the crop. Outside the temple domain which-in [Lagash](#) at all events-comprised a third of the city's total acreage, lay the corn-lands and their cultivators. Their status is conjectural. The view taken here is that of Gregoire: the land was either leased to tenants by the authorities, or allotted to various classes of administrators and soldiers to serve as their subsistence.⁸ Higher court officials did, indeed, enjoy the services of quite extensive holdings of these lands: but this was because they were officials, not because they were private investors. To be brief: all land-tenancies derived from the authority of the state, and all those who held them did so as part of the governing apparatus, or as subjects. Among these slavery was rare (confined to private houses), but extreme dependency was not rare-it was the rule. For seasonal agricultural work, for irrigation projects, or for other massive public works such as erecting the huge [ziggurats](#), all available labour was mobilized by the institution of the [corvée](#) or forced labour.

⁶ A. Falkenstein ('La Cite-temple sumérienne', *Les Cahiers d'histoire mondiale*, 1:4(1953), 784-814) is the scholar largely responsible for the original idea.

⁷ Cf. [K. Polanyi](#), 'Trade and Market in the Early Empires', in K. Polanyi, C. M. Arensberg, and H. W. Pearson (eds.), *Economies in History and Theory* (Henry Regnery, Chicago, 1957), 16-17.

⁸ Gregoire, J.-P. 'L'Origine et le développement de la civilisation mésopotamienne du III^{ème} millénaire avant notre ère', in *Production, pouvoir, et parenté dan le monde Méditerranéen de Sumer a nos jours* (Actes de colloque L'E.R.A., CNRS/EHESS, 1976, Paris, 1981). page 71