

PHI334 Lesson Plan Aug 30

Today we will discuss commerce, business, and work in Antiquity. Our primary references will be Hesiod, Plato, and Aristotle. The readings are on canvas. While not strictly necessary, it might be helpful for you to have read the texts since a lot of what I am drawing on is contained there.

So, today I want to discuss how business was in antiquity. Specifically:

1. What is business and what modes of commerce there were?
2. Who engaged in business?
3. How were the different modes of business viewed?
4. What can we learn about the essence of business by looking back at how it was?

To begin with, I want to speak about the sources I am drawing from. Hesiod was a poet, and the poem for today, “Works and Days”, is a kind of farmer’s practical guide. He wrote it for his brother. There he recounts some farming practices, and also we glimpse a perspective on trade, farming, and so on.

Plato, a philosopher, offers us a normative account of how business ought to be. Normative means he is telling us what would be the best way to do it with the expectation that we adopt it. His main idea is that labor should be divided since different people are good at doing different things. He was also skeptical of merchants, and we will discuss this in more detail.

Finally, Aristotle was a philosopher as well, a student of Plato’s, and he offers us an account of how, in a sense, commerce and business can come to seem natural and unnatural, and the move away from farming toward greater commerce and money businesses. He is interesting in that he sits at the point where commerce became far more artisanal.

Okay, so to start with, and we talked about this before—business is what one, as it were, concerns oneself with. How did human beings live before settlement? Humans were by and large small tribal hunters and gatherers. What business was back then consisted in attempting to find food and shelter, and moving. There was trade, but internal to the tribe. Rarely tribes traded with each other. They did not fight either—rather, and this is what the evidence suggests, they mostly just avoided one another. Humans used to be conflict avoidant and this makes sense.

So, prior to the emergence of agrarianism, before settling down, the business of people was to mostly just find food any way possible. Presumably there was some division of labor—some, usually either the very enduring or the very strong, hunted. Others, usually those with better sight and tactile ability, gathered. This was the mode of life tribes engaged in, that was the consistent business of each and every human. There was probably distinctions, like I said, between the hunters and gatherers. But I do not think that distinction was significant because (1) you need both meat and berries, and (2) when you kill a deer, there are probably berries around, and when you are berry hunting, if you bring a rock, you can probably spot and kill a hare or some other small animal. So in principle, the business very well could have been monolithic, everyone did the same thing, trying to get food and shelter.

As you know, from either history class or anthropology, both perhaps, eventually tribes of hunters and gatherers began to settle down, some of them. This coincided, and was permitted by, agrarianism. This sort of ability to settle down and farm and keep animals. So, agriculture and animal husbandry. As these tribes settled down, farming became the to-go business, but also the business of defense emerged. This is so because while some tribes settled down, other tribes turned into raiding parties. I am here thinking of the Yamnaya culture, and similar nomadic raiders. To defend against these, some of the tribes designated the strongest to serve as the defensive sort. This was possible because not everyone had to be a farmer, since farming can produce a surplus of food, allowing for others to make their business something else.

This is what I mean. In hunter gatherer tribe, everyone has to work to sustain themselves. There is no specialization in the sense of some being able to work on things while others hunt and gather. This only happens when people settle down and farm, since doing so creates abundance. So, differentiation in the business with which one concerns oneself with can only obtain in a society where there is a kind of surplus or abundance that allows for some to work jobs other than those pertaining to food. Imagine you have 50 people in a village. Say that the 40 are able to produce so much food that the other 10, the very strong say, are permitted to dedicate themselves to combat training, such that they can protect the village from the raiding tribes.

Thus, initially, we see the emergence of a non-monolithic business—some engage in agriculture, while others engage in combat and defense. We see also the hunter and gatherers transforming to raiding parties, where war becomes their business, but still monolithically. Eventually, the agrarian societies grow and the issue obtains—there is now a class of people who are strong and warrior like, and instead of merely defending the city, they claim governance. This is strategic. The grain stores are centralized to protect in case of raids, and those who run the storage units are now those in charge. This becomes a government. A new business emerges, the business of governing.

Hesiod writes around the time where these primitive societies have become sophisticated enough to allow trade, exchange, and so on. We see in Hesiod a heavy emphasis on self-sufficiency and farming. Some will tell you that in Antiquity farming was viewed with respect, but it is important to remember that real respect was given to those who engaged in conquest. Hesiod and Plato lie, because they are intellectuals and therefore praise that which permits them to engage in their business—philosophy. But that is a side point. In the times of Hesiod, most were farmers, some were merchants, and the rest were warriors and rulers. There was a market as well, this falls under merchants.

Merchants were those who bought, sold, and traded items that farmers and some artisans produced. For there to be merchants, there have to be artisans as well, because trading mere farm produce is insufficient for true merchant activity. But the thing about merchants is that it is not work comparable to farming in labor intensity, hence the suspicion we see emerge toward them in Plato and Aristotle. They seem to become wealthy by trading and selling goods, but they do not actually produce those goods. All three, Hesiod, Plato, and Aristotle, recognize their importance, but neither of the three truly trust them.

As for farming, you see in Hesiod's poem that it is basically a farmer's almanac, a kind of guide to successful farming. The work is not for all, and farming for self sufficiency was only the province of those who were free. Most farmers were conquered people, but there was an emerging tradition of self sufficient farmers. This influence we see to this day, in a sense, because the founding fathers of the US, some of them, were very insistent on making sure that those who would come to inherit the newly forged country would be independent and self sustaining farmers. We see this to this day in our isolationist tendencies.

So, to recap, so far, we have farming as being fundamentally central as a business that one engages in. Most people farmed, that was their business, and sometimes they were self sufficient if they were both lucky and free, or they were slaves and hence not self sufficient. There were also merchants. The merchants were important—they bought and sold stuff, their life was a tad better, and according to our contemporary notions, they can be said to be the first business people, but on my definition, business is what one engages in, so the farmers have a business as well. There was also the military conquest class, they were most respected, and often time bled into the ruler class, though the ruler class was more distinct. Governing was their business.

I want to discourse more on Aristotle and Plato. Specifically, on what they say about division of labor, on merchants, and on politics. We see for the first time recognition of the importance of the division of labor, and as I have said, this is what allows for business to become non-monolithic. Plato thought that different people are better fit for different tasks, and we still think that to this day. Some people are very good at engineering, whereas others are very good at art, and some are excellent at public speaking. Business becomes diversified. There is also the business of running the house, in Aristotle specifically, since households were fundamental to the state and the economy.

The point I want to make is that we see the emergence of specialization toward the end of Anitquity. Guilds begin to form. We will discuss the transition to more modern business on Friday, but even already we see the emergence of guilds and associations. The warrior class was not unlike a guild, same with early masons.

Let us wrap up by explicitly answering the four initial questions.

1. What is business and what modes of commerce there were?

Business maintains the essence of being what one engages into fundamentally, but we begin to see the emergence of this notion that merhcant stuff is business, while everything else is production. Farming was a business, but it was viewed as what one does to self sustain or something along those lines. But, still, business was what one does. As for modes of commerce, there was farming, artisans, warriors, merchants, and the rulers. The warriors and rulers overlapped. Sometimes merchants entered politics, but this was frowned upon and so they were not yet the powerful force they are today in the form of multinational corporations.

2. Who engaged in business?

Everyone, but in different modalities.

3. How were the different modes of business viewed?

Farmers were viewed in two ways, as either slaves, in which case poorly, or as self sustaining peoples, in which case well. But, all respect usually went to the warrior class. Artisans popped up and were viewed similar to farmers. Merchants were distrusted. So were money lenders. The ruling class was the warrior class, so respected.

4. What can we learn about the essence of business by looking back at how it was?

This is an open question, so it is more for you to answer and for us to discourse about. But I would argue it allows us to see that business is not just commerce, it is what one does, and everyone has their own business in a sense, understood as the activity one engages into.