



From Homer to Max Weber: The Sociology of the *Odyssey*

Maria Wiśniewska*

INTRODUCTION

Historically, societies have functioned and flourished in the Mediterranean for millennia before they became the subject of study in a scholarly discipline born only two centuries ago – and, predictably, called sociology.¹ The study of how people interact to ensure survival and prosperity dates back much earlier, to Aristotle’s *Politics*. The European languages have adopted this word and extended its meaning from Aristotle’s concept of things concerning the πόλις to the practice of how modern communities are governed.

However, societies existed long before the 4th century BCE. They were not described by scholars but were sung about in oral poetry, eventually written down as Homer’s epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*,² and in the post-Homeric cycle. Famously, the epic describing Odysseus,

* Faculty of “Artes Liberales,” University of Warsaw, Nowy Świat 69, 00-046 Warsaw; maria_wisniewska@onet.pl. The research results presented in this chapter have been obtained within the project on “The Modern Argonauts: A Multicultural Educational Programme Preparing Young People for Contemporary Challenges through an Innovative Use of Classical Mythology” led by Katarzyna Marciniak at the Faculty of “Artes Liberales,” University of Warsaw, with funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon Europe Research and Innovation Programme – ERC Proof of Concept Grant (Grant Agreement No 101122976).

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- 2 On some political aspects of Homeric poems, see, for example, Catanzaro, *Politics Through the Iliad and the Odyssey*; Deneen, *The Odyssey of Political Theory*; and Hammer, *The Iliad as Politics*.

Ἄνδρα [...] πολύτροπον, ὃς μάλα πολλὰ
 πλάγχθη, ἐπεὶ Τροίης ἱερὸν πτολίεθρον ἔπερσεν·
 πολλῶν δ' ἀνθρώπων ἴδεν ἄστεα καὶ νόον ἔγνω,
 πολλὰ δ' ὃ γ' ἐν πόντῳ πάθεν ἄλγεα ὄντα κατὰ θυμόν,
 ἀρνύμενος ἥν τε ψυχὴν καὶ νόστον ἐταίρων,

the man of many devices, driven far astray after he had sacked the sacred citadel of Troy; many were the men whose cities he saw and whose minds he learned, and many the woes he suffered in his heart upon the sea, seeking to win his own life and the return of his comrades,³

is filled with divine interventions, higher- and lower-ranking gods, mythological creatures, and fast-paced, fantastic action, portraying him as an exceptional, strategic thinker and leader, a master of persuasion, and a realist who knows how to deal with his fellow men. From under the layers of myth and magic emerges the personality of a politician who remains relevant and almost modern.

The purpose of this paper is to establish, using sociological concepts defined in the following section, whether the behavior of this Homeric hero allows us to identify him as a potential archetype for today's social roles. This translates into an inquiry into how Odysseus performed in his role as a politician within his network of connections and mutual relations as a king, military commander, and wanderer. Ancient literary testimonies about Odysseus provide a series of his interactions, which will be reviewed below in light of his three incarnations and across the spectrum of social capital he accumulated.

Why choose Odysseus among his many fellow kings fighting in the Trojan War? It was an easy decision: Odysseus played a crucial role in ensuring Achilles' participation, which was the prophesied condition of a Greek victory in the war, and he invented the ruse of the Trojan Horse, which allowed the Greeks to capture Troy; he then became the protagonist of the *Odyssey*. No other Homeric hero is displayed with greater depth, detail, and character complexity; the other royal personalities pale in comparison.

Classicists have been analyzing Odysseus from cultural and literary perspectives.⁴ While the Homeric world, in its mythological and

3 Hom., *Od.* 1.1–5; throughout the paper, the Greek text and translation follow A. T. Murray, revised by George E. Dimock, *LCL*, 104.

4 Among them, for instance, Slatkin in her 2005 *Homer's Odyssey* and in 2020 "Odysseus"; Hall in her 2008 *The Return of Ulysses*, or Marciniak, "Odysseus," 396–421.

historical dimensions, appears extensively researched,⁵ sociological assessments of the King of Ithaca are few and far between, and it seems advisable to clarify the approach by first discussing the tools to be used in the paper.

Society can be defined in different ways, for instance, by the range of possibilities; as a set of individuals living in a given territory; or as a field of continuously occurring events that constitute it as an acting subject. Various ways of looking at the subject of sociological research have transformed today's sociology into a multi-paradigmatic discipline, offering different visions of society.⁶ It has been suggested that, because of their differences, they could be considered three separate sociologies. They do not cancel each other out but rather complement one another, broadening the field of view.

THREE SOCIOLOGIES

The first, chronologically, is the oldest and focuses on the structure of society. Its forefathers were the founders of modern sociology, Auguste Comte (1798–1857) and Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), and its leading figure was Talcott Parsons (1902–1979). In this vision, groups of individuals are distinguished and treated as components of an entire society that forms an integrated system. In sociology, this view of society is called the systemic-functional approach. According to Piotr Sztompka, “individuals are subject to the functional requirements of the whole: organizational formats, social roles or institutions are created as specific structures in response to the needs or imperatives of the system.”⁷ In consequence, humanity is viewed as the global society within which smaller entities function, such as political, economic, and cultural subsystems. Description of society in this sense often includes a biological metaphor – society as a unique organism, an entity composed of organs, tissues, and cells, mutually connected and subject to growth and diversification in response to the organism's needs at a given stage of its development.

The second sociology appeared in the late 19th century with Max Weber (1864–1920). He viewed society as a set of social actors, and for

5 See, e.g., Moses I. Finley's *World of Odysseus*; Hans van Wees, *Status Warriors*; Kurt A. Raaflaub's "Homeric Society," and more recently, Corinne Ondine Pache's *The Cambridge Guide to Homer*, in particular Jean Paul Crielaard's *Homeric Communities*, 227–45, and Thomas Jenkins' *Homer in Social Thought*, 526–28.

6 See Ritzer, *Klasyczna teoria socjologiczna*, 315–22.

7 Sztompka, *Socjologia*, 47.

him, the role of sociology was “to interpret with understanding” their activities. To quote Sztompka again: “As society does not exist outside or above the social actors, there are no ‘laws of history,’ transcendent developmental tendencies, independent of human beings.”⁸ From this perspective, society can be described using a metaphor borrowed from physics – as physical science looks for elementary particles, sociology looks for the most minor, fundamental component of society, and finds it in a social actor.

Finally, the third sociology was launched by Georg Simmel (1858–1918), who observed that individuals in a society are not “atoms” isolated from one another and that their agency results from continuous, diverse interactions that dynamically form relations between them.⁹ Using a geometrical metaphor, one can say that these relations do not assume various forms or shapes; instead, as they continuously change, they create “figurations.” According to this vision, society *exists* to a lesser extent and instead “becomes” – a result of ongoing interactions and relationships among individuals. Such figurations create a network of connections, with social actors as its nodes. In consequence, this “third sociology” is a discipline studying “people acting in the area of mutual relations,” who impart to this area a continuous dynamic of functioning and becoming, and leave the fixed, often unintended results of their activities to the following generations as structural and cultural frames for consecutive activities.¹⁰ Interaction episodes constitute units of analysis ruled by mechanisms such as ties, obligations, reputations, brokerage, and reciprocity.¹¹ In other words, humans, as social individuals, exist within a network of relationships with others and may occupy diverse social positions within it. Society determines the norms, as defined by legal and cultural rules, for each such position, detailing the personal attributes and behavior expected of people occupying it. One can say that such people enter roles that are socially regulated. Accordingly, they must not behave at will, but should follow socially accepted models of behavior in these roles.¹² In the network of social positions, one can distinguish the roles of a mother, a father, a physician, a judge, a teacher, a professor, a trainer, a policeman, a priest, a bishop, and a politician, among others.

8 Ibid., 51.

9 For more on this topic, see Sztompka, “On Inter-Human Space,” 26–41.

10 Sztompka, *Sociologia*, 55.

11 See, e.g., Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties.”

12 For more on this topic, see Sztompka, *Society in Action*, and Biddle, “Recent Developments in Role Theory.”

Some positions are more regulated, others less so. A practicing doctor must have acquired an adequate medical education, hold a university diploma, and have completed a medical residency supervised by a more experienced physician. One expects doctors to devote time to diagnosing the health problem and recommending an efficient therapy. However, one knows from experience that not all doctors behave like that; people who perform social roles may be closer or farther from the normative ideal. If these deviations from the norm gain social acceptance, they may change previous expectations concerning the given role and even create new models of behavior. As L.P. Hartley knew very well, the past is a foreign country par excellence, where things are done differently, and ancient authors thus provide a privileged perspective for a better understanding of both ancient and contemporary social models.

THE SOCIAL ROLE OF A POLITICIAN

A case in point is the role of a politician, a person directing the affairs of state. Society, with its functioning and diverse aspects, offers politicians a range of activities, as they are active participants in social interactions. They may act individually or in groups, defined as institutional actors of political life, such as political parties, social movements, or parliaments. They are not always positive, and in a pejorative context, a politician may be associated with manipulation, machination, manoeuvring, jockeying for position, Machiavellianism, or opportunism.¹³ A politician may assume various positions in the social structure: a member or leader of a party, an elected official, a member of a local government, a mayor of a city, a member of local or national parliament, a diplomat, a minister, the prime minister, the president of a state, and many others.

Taking an example from Central Europe: the Constitution of the Republic of Poland determines the formal conditions for holding political positions, such as the minimum age for the position of an MP, a senator, or the president of the state, as politicians elected to these positions must implicitly have an adequate experience in order to reach the political goal, to ensure the common good. The Constitution protects parliamentarians from prosecution for their political activities by granting them immunity. It also forbids combining an MP's mandate with certain other public functions

13 See *New Oxford Thesaurus*, 731.

or economic activities.¹⁴ Acts of parliament, or legal acts of lower instances based on the constitutional dispositions, may determine other formal conditions for assuming political positions. However, one will not find regulations or normative instructions regarding the proper performance of political roles, the duties related to playing those roles, or personal requirements.

Still, over the course of history, social *praxis* established specific models. The dual perception of a politician discussed above in itself mirrors the results of social practice and the perception of the concept. Models of political behavior can be found in the oldest literary texts, beginning with the epic of Gilgamesh. According to Aristotle, “political animal” is by nature a social being, born to live in a politically organized human community; and politics is the art of control and reaching agreements – within an organized human community – between interests of diverse social groups.¹⁵ Politics, in this sense, has been inextricably connected to the social, communal, and collective existence of humanity. Aristotle considered politics to be one of the three spheres of human activity, along with ethics and economics. If ethics taught people to be good human beings and the economy taught them to be good stewards, politics shaped people as citizens.¹⁶ Even though politics has evolved, social expectations towards politicians endure.

This provides a basis for reviewing Homer’s model of a politician’s role in the *Odyssey*. Stanisław Juliusz Kołodziejczyk once wrote: “There is no time period in history that would want or was able to completely turn away from Homer, possibly because each found in him what it was looking for.”¹⁷ And indeed, besides the stories of heroes and their deeds, of cities, lands, peoples, institutions, and social relations from the dawn of Greek civilization, the *Odyssey* also portrays Odysseus as a politician. Interpreting the behavior of a character in Homer’s epic through sociological concepts does not mean attempting to reduce this reality to a comparable sociological reality, as if it were merely a poeticized expression of history. On the contrary, this is one way of investigating how the myth of Odysseus and his personality resonate in modern society.

14 See *Konstytucja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*.

15 Wnuk-Lipiński, “Polityka,” 135.

16 Aristotle, *Pol.* 3.2.1–3.

17 Kołodziejczyk, “Posłowie,” 390.

THE ODYSSEAN ARCHETYPE

Perceived from this viewpoint, Odysseus appears in the poem in three distinct incarnations: the king of Ithaca, the commander of troops and the navy during the Trojan War, and the wanderer seeking to return home after the war.

The King

As the king of Ithaca, he holds a political position within the island's social network. He is also the exemplary son of his parents, Laertes and Anticlea, the husband of Penelope, and the father of Telemachus. He loves his country and takes care of its inhabitants' well-being. Penelope describes him as a king who

οὔτε τινὰ ρέξας ἐξαΐσιον οὔτε τι εἰπὼν
 ἐν δήμῳ, ἧ τ' ἐστὶ δίκη θείων βασιλῆων·
 ἄλλον κ' ἐχθαίρησι βροτῶν, ἄλλον κε φιλοίη.
 κείνος δ' οὔ ποτε πάμπαν ἀτάσθαλον ἄνδρα ἐώργει.

[...] did no wrong in deed or word to any man in the land as the custom is of divine kings – one man they hate and another they love; yet he never dealt intemperately at all with any man.¹⁸

Athena corroborates this opinion in her conversation with the gods on Olympus, when she attempts to convince them to help Odysseus, imprisoned by the nymph Calypso, with reference to the people whose lord he was (“λαῶν οἴσιν ἄνασσε”), suggesting that he enjoyed among his compatriots a position of authority and trust:

πατήρ δ' ὥς ἦπιος ἦεν

gentle was he as a father.¹⁹

The events in the faraway Sparta – the abduction of Helen by Paris and the violation of Menelaus' sacred laws of hospitality and marriage – lead the Achaeans to declare war against Troy, forcing Odysseus to face a new challenge. Agamemnon, the brother of the betrayed Menelaus, takes the high command and summons

18 Hom., *Od.* 4. 690–93.

19 Ibid., 5.11–12.

Odysseus to present himself with his troops to defend the honor of the Greeks. To avoid the call to arms, despite the pledge to unconditionally support the man chosen by the lovely Helen made before her marriage, Odysseus resorts to a ruse by pretending to be a single-minded madman obsessively focused on plowing his fields. Yet Agamemnon's messenger, Palamedes, outsmarts him by grabbing his son, Telemachus, and putting the baby in front of the plough. Odysseus reveals his real state of mind by saving his son and, now unable to avoid the call to arms, joins Agamemnon's army with his fleet and troops. The episode displays his intelligence, ingenuity, and cunning. He does not want to go to war, but having "lost" to Palamedes, he does not protest and accepts the challenge. This dramatic episode comes from the post-Homeric cycle, namely from *Cypria*, but Homer himself repeatedly praises his wisdom and character in the *Odyssey*. In one passage, it is Zeus who says:

πῶς ἄν ἔπειτ' Ὀδυσῆος ἐγὼ θείοιο λαθοίμην,
 ὃς περι μὲν νόον ἐστὶ βροτῶν, περι δ' ἰρὰ θεοῖσιν
 ἀθανάτοισιν ἔδωκε, τοὶ οὐρανὸν εὐρὺν ἔχουσιν;

How should I, then, forget godlike Odysseus, who is beyond all mortals in wisdom, and beyond all has paid sacrifice to the immortal gods, who hold broad heaven?²⁰

In another, it is Nestor who declares:

ἔνθ' οὐ τίς ποτε μήτιν ὁμοιωθήμεναι ἄντη
 νῆθελ', ἐπεὶ μάλα πολλὸν ἐνίκα δῖος Ὀδυσσεὺς
 παντοίοισι δόλοισι,

there no man ventured to vie with him in counsel, since noble Odysseus far excelled in all sorts of wiles.²¹

In still another passage, Menelaus estimates that

οὐ τις Ἀχαιῶν τόσσ' ἐμόγησεν,
 ὅσσ' Ὀδυσσεὺς ἐμόγησε καὶ ἦρατο.

no one of the Achaeans toiled so much as Odysseus toiled and endured.²²

20 Ibid. 1.65–67.

21 Ibid. 3.120–22.

22 Ibid. 4.106–7.

And Helen herself admits:

πάντα μὲν οὐκ ἄν ἐγὼ μυθήσομαι οὐδ' ὀνομήνω,
 ὅσσοι Ὀδυσσεύης ταλασίφρονός εἰσιν ἄεθλοι·
 ἀλλ' οἷον τόδ' ἔρξε καὶ ἔτλη καρτερὸς ἀνὴρ
 δῆμῳ ἔνι Τρώων, ὅθι πάσχετε πῆματ' Ἀχαιοί.
 αὐτόν μιν πληγῆσιν ἀεικελίησι δαμάσσας,
 σπεῖρα κάκ' ἄμφ' ὤμοισι βαλὼν, οἰκῆι ἑοικώς,
 ἀνδρῶν δυσμενέων κατέδου πόλιν εὐρυάγυιαν· [...]
 πολλοὺς δὲ Τρώων κτείνας ταναήκει χαλκῷ
 ἦλθε μετ' Ἀργείους, κατὰ δὲ φρόνιν ἤγαγε πολλήν.

All the labours of steadfast Odysseus I cannot tell or recount; but what a thing was this which that mighty man wrought and endured in the land of the Trojans, where you Achaeans suffered woes! Marring his own body with cruel blows, and flinging a wretched garment about his shoulders, in the fashion of a slave, he entered the broad-wayed city of the foe [...] he had slain many of the Trojans with the long sword, he returned to the company of the Argives and brought back plentiful tidings.²³

Most importantly, he stole the Palladion from the city, a miraculous statue of the goddess Athena, which had the power to ensure the protection of Troy against any conquest. The theft of Palladion was not mentioned in the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, but comes from the *Little Iliad*, part of the post-Homeric cycle. In the *Odyssey*, Menelaus, confirming Helen's opinion, adds:

ἤδη μὲν πολέων ἐδάην βουλήν τε νόον τε
 ἀνδρῶν ἡρώων, πολλήν δ' ἐπελήλυθα γαίαν·
 ἀλλ' οὐ πω τοιοῦτον ἐγὼν ἴδον ὀφθαλμοῖσιν,
 οἷον Ὀδυσσεύης ταλασίφρονος ἔσκε φίλον κῆρ

Before this have I come to know the counsel and the mind of many heroes, and have traveled over the wide earth, but never yet have my eyes beheld such a one as was steadfast Odysseus in heart.²⁴

23 Ibid. 4.240–46, 257, 258.

24 Ibid. 4.267–70.

The Military Commander

These traits of character are why Odysseus, in his second incarnation as a participant in the Trojan War, is tasked with the most difficult challenge and plans activities to achieve victory over Troy.²⁵ He is the one whom Agamemnon sends to bring Achilles, on whose presence, according to an old prophecy, the fate of Troy depended. In implementing this command, Odysseus tries all possible ways – provocation, lies, and crime, when he lures Agamemnon’s daughter, Iphigenia, to the camp, realizing she may be sacrificed to the gods to ensure favorable winds. While in some sources Iphigenia is saved by Artemis, who makes her a priestess in her temple, Odysseus is nonetheless ready to proceed without qualms, determined to achieve his goal. Iphigenia’s tragic story is not told by Homer but recounted in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, Sophocles’ *Electra*, and Euripides’ *Iphigeneia in Aulis*.

Odysseus will be the author of the ruse to hide a dozen Achaean warriors, including himself, in the belly of a wooden horse to get inside the walls of Troy and open the way to the Greek army. Odysseus’ ruse allowed the Greeks to exact a bloody revenge on Menelaus’ behalf and to recover Helen. As one of the leaders of the siege, Odysseus proves to be determined, clever, brave, and unencumbered by scruples when seeking to achieve the goal. The story of the Trojan Horse is not mentioned in the *Iliad*; it is only referred to in the *Odyssey* and told in detail in the *Epic Cycle*, in the *Little Iliad* and the *Sack of Troy*. Vergil’s *Aeneid* (book 2) is the main Roman source of the narrative.

The Wanderer

Finally, one sees Odysseus in his third incarnation as a wanderer trying to return home. Nestor tells Telemachus that his relations with Odysseus were always good:

ἐνθ’ ἢ τοι ἦος μὲν ἐγὼ καὶ δῖος Ὀδυσσεὺς
οὔτε ποτ’ εἰν ἀγορῇ δίχ’ ἐβάζομεν οὔτ’ ἐνὶ βουλῇ,
ἀλλ’ ἔνα θυμὸν ἔχοντε νόω καὶ ἐπίφρονι βουλῇ
φραζόμεθ’ Ἀργείοισιν ὅπως ὄχ’ ἄριστα γένοιτο.

25 For Odysseus as a man of many talents and an exceptional strategist, see, e.g., Detienne & Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, 22–23; 227–29.

Now all the time that we were there noble Odysseus and I never spoke at variance either in the assembly or in the council, but being of one mind advised the Argives with wisdom and shrewd counsel how all might be for the best.²⁶

However, after the victory, a disagreement arises between Menelaus and Agamemnon. The former wants to embark on the return journey as soon as possible, while the latter insists on delaying to sacrifice a hecatomb in honour of Athena. The returning army is divided into those who agree with Menelaus and those who support Agamemnon:

ἤωθεν δ' οἱ μὲν νέας ἔλκομεν εἰς ἄλα δῖαν
κτῆματά τ' ἐντιθέμεσθα βαθυζώνους τε γυναῖκας.
ἡμίσεες δ' ἄρα λαοὶ ἐρητύοντο μένοντες
αὐθι παρ' Ἀτρεΐδῃ Ἀγαμέμνονι, ποιμένι λαῶν·

[I]n the morning some of us launched our ships upon the bright sea, and put on board our goods and the women in their deep-bosomed garments. Half, indeed, of the host held back and remained there with Agamemnon, son of Atreus, shepherd of the host,²⁷

says Nestor, who agreed with Menelaus. As before, he was joined by Odysseus, who, after departure, changed his mind and led a group of warriors back to join Agamemnon. Not the right decision; Nestor with Menelaus returned home, while Odysseus, having lost his companions, reached Ithaca alone after wandering for ten years. It is the only instance when Odysseus makes an error: his political instinct fails him; he picks the wrong side and suffers dire consequences. As long as Nestor and Odysseus agreed, they remained successful. As soon as they fell out, trouble began.

At the beginning of the return home, a storm pushed Odysseus' ships toward the shores of Thracia, a territory inhabited by Cicones. He lost many companions fighting with them. As he recounts himself to Alkinoos:

ἔνθα δ' ἐγὼ πόλιν ἔπραθον, ὤλεσα δ' αὐτούς·
ἐκ πόλιος δ' ἀλόχους καὶ κτῆματα πολλὰ λαβόντες
δασσάμεθ', ὡς μὴ τίς μοι ἀτεμβόμενος κίοι ἴσης.

26 Hom., *Od.* 3.126–29.

27 *Ibid.*, 3.153–56.

I sacked the city and slew the men; and from the city we took their wives and much treasure, and divided it among us, that so far as lay in me no man might go defrauded of an equal share.²⁸

Unfortunately, his authority among the soldiers is no longer what it was during the war. Despite Odysseus' order to swiftly return to the ships, the soldiers remain on the shore, celebrating the victory over the Cicones:

τόπρα δ' ἄρ' οἰχόμενοι Κίκονες Κικόνεσσι γεγώνευν,
οἷ σφιν γείτονες ἦσαν, ἅμα πλέονες καὶ ἀρείους [...]
ἦλθον ἔπειθ' ὅσα φύλλα καὶ ἄνθεα γίγνεται ὥρη [...]
στησάμενοι δ' ἐμάχοντο μάχην παρὰ νηυσὶ θοῆσι [...]
ἔξ δ' ἀφ' ἐκάστης νηὸς ἐυκνήμιδες ἑταῖροι
ᾤωνθ'· οἱ δ' ἄλλοι φύγομεν θάνατόν τε μόρον τε.

Meanwhile, the Cicones went and called to other Cicones who were their neighbors, at once more numerous and braver than they [...]. Soon they arrived, in numbers like the leaves and flowers that bloom in the spring, at dawn [...]. Setting their line of battle by the swift ships, they fought [...] six of my well-grieved comrades perished from each ship; but the rest of us escaped death and fate.²⁹

During the journey, he loses the rest of his companions – some perish in the clash with the cyclops, when Odysseus sacrifices them to save himself and his remaining companions, others in the battle with cannibalistic Laestrygonians, and the rest during the following stages of the journey, to finally reach Ithaca alone, after ten years of wandering and many adventures.

The price Odysseus paid for his political error in planning for the return home was high. During his solitary wanderings, Odysseus is no longer a politician. His social position in Ithaca is of no significance, but the relationships he maintained during his life, particularly his relations with the gods, remain meaningful.

The most notable is Athena's favor, as the goddess admires his intellect and comes to his aid in the most challenging and seemingly hopeless situations. As Nestor recalls:

28 Ibid., 9.40–42.

29 Ibid., 9.47–48, 51, 54, 60–61.

εἰ γάρ σ' ὡς ἐθέλοι φιλέειν γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη,
ὡς τότε Ὀδυσσεύος περικηδέτο κυδαλίμοιο

Ah, would that flashing-eyed Athene might choose to love you even
as then she cared exceedingly for glorious Odysseus.³⁰

Poseidon's disfavor towards Odysseus, caused by the blinding of Poseidon's son Polyphemus, is also important:

ἐκ τοῦ δὴ Ὀδυσῆα Ποσειδάων ἐνοσίχθων
οὐ τι κατακτείνει, πλάζει δ' ἀπὸ πατρίδος αἴης.

From that time forth Poseidon, the earth-shaker, does not indeed
slay Odysseus, but beats him off from his native land.³¹

Ultimately, it is Athena who wins this contest between the gods, with Zeus expressing his will:

Ποσειδάων δὲ μεθήσει
ὄν χόλον· οὐ μὲν γάρ τι δυνήσεται ἀντία πάντων
ἀθανάτων ἀέκητι θεῶν ἐριδιαινέμεν οἶος.

Poseidon will let go his anger, for he will in no way be able, against
all the immortal gods and in their despite, to contend alone.³²

Odysseus' bet pays off; Athena does not fail him. The error he makes splitting off from Menelaus and Nestor may be explained by how diligently he cares about good relations with his divine protector. He did it because he wanted to sacrifice to Athena.

The favor of the gods, of his son, and of his devoted subjects, who assist him in his return home and in vanquishing Penelope's suitors, demonstrates the importance of good relations, their value, and the fact that they may be exchanged for other precious things, like, for instance, help and support in tasks undertaken and goals achieved. One could say that Odysseus had social capital at his disposal;³³ to use a colloquialism, he realized that who you know might be more important than what you have.

30 Ibid., 3.218–19.

31 Ibid., 1.74–75.

32 Ibid., 1.77–79.

33 For more on this topic, see Coleman, *Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital*; Lin, *Social Capital*, and Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," 241–58.

CONCLUSION

Homer, in his sketch of the character of Odysseus, creates an image of an individual in action, and in constant interaction with others – with family members, subjects, soldiers, leaders, the gods, friends, and enemies. He assigns him various positions and social roles: a king, a soldier, a sailor, a leader, but also a world-weary human being who surrenders his fate to the gods. In each of his roles, by building his network of relationships, Odysseus grows his social capital and exploits it to achieve his goals. One may be tempted to say that Homer was a good sociologist, even if sociology as a discipline did not appear for several millennia, in perceiving individuals as causal factors in society, reminiscent of what was later termed the third sociology.³⁴

Homer's Odysseus, as a politician, is devoted to the common good, determined, intelligent, ingenious, clever, but also cruel, unscrupulous, inclined to take risks, and ready to sacrifice others for his goals. This Homeric model of a politician has been socially accepted for centuries. Over time, social expectations of the role of a politician evolved towards rejecting cruelty, deceit, and Machiavellianism; such behaviors are no longer considered acceptable in politics. Still, other traits of politicians described by Homer in the character of Odysseus, such as the care for the common good, intelligence, wisdom, ingenuity, creativity, cleverness, and efficiency in action, remain constant, socially expected attributes of politicians. They are what remains from the Homeric model.

Vocation and Responsibility

The groundwork leading to the contemporary understanding of politics and social roles was laid by Max Weber in his 1919 Munich lecture, given to the Free Student Union of Bavaria and entitled *Politik als Beruf*, "Politics as a Vocation." Describing the ideal type of a modern politician, Weber talks about the individual who is "independent, exceptional, of above-average qualities, able of ethical reflection, guided only by his own sense of responsibility, and consequently seeking to achieve his goals."³⁵ Odysseus consistently

34 See Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*; Turner, *Face to Face*.

35 Holona, *Max Weber i jego dzieło*, 42.

prioritizes and acts upon his sense of duty and understanding of the role he, unwillingly, but accepted, and must fulfil.

On the other hand, he defines politics as “a drive to participate in power or to influence the division of power, whether between states, or within a state, among groups of people the state encompasses.”³⁶ One must add that Weber understands power as “a means in service of other goals, ideal or egotistical, or in service of ‘power for power’: in order to enjoy the sense of prestige that it confers.”³⁷

Weber distinguished three possible ways of being a politician: occasionally, collaterally, and permanently. Occasionally, you are a politician if you exercise your right to vote. Collaterally, when you join a political party and act if required. In such cases, politics is not the main content of your life, neither in ideological nor in material sense. However, being a politician is a permanent profession, remunerated for the work. Odysseus, as a hereditary king, is a “permanent” politician, fully aware of the legitimacy of his role and his duties towards his subjects, companions, and fellow Greek leaders. He demonstrates charisma in the merciless conditions of the war and an exceptional ability to convince and sway others to his responsible beliefs and ideas. One wonders to what extent Weber’s frequent use of Homer³⁸ betrays the echo of the Ithacan in his political incarnation, even through centuries of modification by successive generations.

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36 Weber, “Polityka jako zawód,” 266.

37 Ibid., 267.

38 For his “excessive use” of Homer, see De Fidio, “Max Weber on Bronze Age Societies,” 81.

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents the protagonist of Homer's *Odyssey* from a sociological perspective, specifically within the framework of the so-called "third sociology," which views society as a realm of constant interaction among individuals. Its dynamic network of relationships places every acting individual in its nodes – social positions or roles. This process generates both group and individual social capital, which shapes each individual's life course. In this perspective, Odysseus is an acting individual occupying a political position in ancient society. The interpretation of his behaviors, as described in various episodes of the *Odyssey*, reveals his personal attributes, modes, and methods of action; and their combination produces an archetypal image of the role of a politician, later echoed by Max Weber.

KEYWORDS: network of relationships, social position, social role, social capital, political position

Od Homerja do Maxa Webra: Sociologija *Odiseje*

IZVLEČEK

Članek analizira protagonista Homerjeve *Odiseje* s sociološkega vidika, natančneje z vidika tako imenovane »tretje sociologije«, ki družbo obravnava kot področje nenehnega medsebojnega delovanja posameznikov. Njena dinamična mreža odnosov postavlja vsakega posameznika v ustrezna vozlišča – družbene položaje ali vloge. Tak proces ustvarja tako skupinski kot individualni socialni kapital, ki oblikuje življenjsko pot vsakega posameznika. V tej perspektivi je Odisej dejavni posameznik, ki zaseda politični položaj v antični družbi. Sociološka interpretacija njegovih ravnanj, kot so opisana v različnih epizodah *Odiseje*, razkriva njegove osebne lastnosti ter načine in metode delovanja; njihova kombinacija ustvarja arhetipsko podobo politikove vloge, kot jo je kasneje obravnaval Max Weber.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: mreža odnosov, družbeni položaj, družbena vloga, družbeni kapital, politični položaj