PLATO'S POLITICS 'TODAY'

MACHEK (D.), MIKEŠ (V.) (edd.) *Plato's* Gorgias. *Speech, Soul and Politics*. (Brill's Plato Studies Series 17.) Pp. x + 241. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2024. Cased, €139. ISBN: 978-90-04-69905-2. Open access.

HAN (I.) *Plato and the Metaphysical Feminine. One Hundred and One Nights*. Pp. x + 186, ills. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. Cased, £70, US$90. ISBN: 978-0-19-284958-8.

BALOT (R.K.), *Tragedy, Philosophy, and Political Education in Plato's* Laws. Pp. xiv + 425. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. Cased, £78, US$120. ISBN: 978-0-19-764722-6.

doi:10.1017/S0009840X25100577

The seventh chapter of M. Vegetti's book *«Un paradigma in cielo». Platone politico da Aristotele al Novecento* (2009) is aptly titled 'Defending Plato from Popper (or from Himself?)'. In this chapter Vegetti underscores an aspect highly relevant to contemporary interpretations of Plato's political thought: the necessity of addressing the accusation of totalitarianism advanced against Plato by K.R. Popper in his seminal work *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945). Vegetti identifies three principal interpretative options that emerged in the twentieth century to counter Popper's criticisms:

1. To refute Popper's claims by defending Plato as a liberal-democratic thinker.
2. To agree with Popper that democratic positions are absent from Plato's dialogues but argue that Plato did not earnestly endorse undemocratic political ideas, instead presenting them as purely utopian or ironic possibilities.
3. To reinterpret Plato as an apolitical thinker by emphasizing an ethical dimension in his dialogues – particularly in the *Republic* – that transcends any explicit political agenda. (M. Vegetti [2009], pp. 121–2).

Although to varying degrees, with differing intentions and driven by distinct methodological approaches, the three works under review can be interpreted from such a perspective.

The collected volume *Plato's Gorgias: Speech, Soul and Politics*, edited by Machek and Mikeš, originates from the twelfth Symposium Platonicum Pragense and examines this dialogue, which is central to an analysis of Platonic political thought, from three perspectives: rhetorical aspects, ethical discussion and political dimension. The editors highlight one of the volume's strengths in the preface:

> A collective monograph, by the simple fact of not being a product of a single author, cannot offer a unifying interpretation of the whole of the dialogue, and a collection of

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> interpretations, by not being a running commentary, cannot discuss the purpose and meaning of each of its arguments. But they can substantially help in both these directions. In addition to that, a collection of papers may offer a further benefit: variations of perspectives in a relatively short space, making thus clearer that reading Plato is not possible without constant examination, of the *interpretandum* as well as the *interpretans*. (p. viii)

These methodological premises highlight a crucial aspect of the hermeneutic engagement with the Platonic dialogues – namely, and in full accordance with the intention of the dialogues themselves, that they do not leave the reader, and thus the interpreter, indifferent, but instead provoke a transformation during the reading process. Nonetheless, it is possible to detect, particularly in the first part of the volume, which is dedicated to rhetorical aspects, a certain exegetical affinity among the contributions. Both Mikeš and F.C.C. Sheffield, for instance, address Gorgias' claim in *Gorgias* 456d–457c that rhetoric is an ethically neutral activity, demonstrating how the arguments advanced by Socrates during the discussion refute this claim. Their contributions complement each other. Sheffield argues that rhetorical discourse cannot be regarded as morally neutral because, as a *techne* and similarly to philosophical dialogue, it aims to cultivate a good soul. However, there is a performative difference between rhetorical discourse and philosophical dialogue: whereas dialogue educates towards a 'harmonious relationality' (p. 47), rhetorical discourse is characterised by a self-centredness that tends to disregard the perspectives of its interlocutors. Similarly, Mikeš identifies a distinction between rhetoric and dialectic. Still, unlike Sheffield, he focuses on content rather than on performative aspects: while rhetoric seeks to persuade by instilling false beliefs in the souls of its audience, dialectic aims to eliminate false opinions, intending to achieve true knowledge through true opinions. Essentially along the same lines is the discussion of J. Dow, who observes that, in the dialogue, Socrates significantly alters the meaning of concepts such as 'true rhetoric' and 'true politics', reinterpreting them in the light of his own philosophical stance and methodology. The 'true politics' advocated by Socrates in the *Gorgias* is, therefore, nothing other than the philosophical dialogue he himself practises. What is particularly interesting in Dow's interpretation is that it partially revises what might be described as the reappraisal of Plato's critique of rhetoric seen in recent years, which, in certain respects, is reflected in T. Irani's contribution. To suggest that Socrates modifies the concept of true rhetoric by transforming it into a manifestation of elenctic dialogue is, essentially, to uphold the severity of Plato's critique of rhetoric, as it was understood in antiquity and much of Platonic scholarship up to the mid-twentieth century. In this exegetical paradigm, the *Gorgias* represents the *pars destruens* of Plato's approach to rhetoric, while only the *Phaedrus* may be regarded as the *pars construens*, in which a distinct, philosophical form of rhetoric is advocated. Irani, on the other hand, focuses on the formal aspects of rhetoric to demonstrate how these – when applied to a rhetoric aimed at teaching rather than persuasion – remain substantively valid even for Plato, the author of the *Gorgias*. Whether one adopts a more optimistic or a more critical view of Plato's stance on rhetoric, there is little that changes fundamentally: virtually all contributions analysing Plato's critique of rhetoric in the *Gorgias* tend to interpret this aspect of his political philosophy in a largely apolitical manner. Politics, as conceived by the Sophists – and particularly by Gorgias, Polus and Callicles in the *Gorgias* –, is understood as the imposition of one's will through persuasion. This contrasts with Socrates' 'true politics', which is not merely strategic manoeuvring but rather a form of civic education.

Similarly, L.-A. Dorion finely sketches the similarities and differences between Socratic *elenchos* and corporal punishment as a means of liberating individuals from great evils. Dorion aims to argue for a bipartition of the soul in the *Gorgias*, distinguishing it from both

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Socratic intellectualism and the tripartition of the soul in the *Republic*. However, it seems to me that Dorion thereby draws the *Gorgias* into closer alignment with the *Laws*. Dorion argues that Socratic *elenchos* frees the soul through rational argument, whereas punishment achieves liberation through the coercion of emotions and affections. Additionally, he notes that in *Gorgias* 504d–e Socrates introduces a third possibility for liberating individuals from great evils, which is akin to rhetoric. This third possibility is neither Socratic *elenchus*, which is reserved for dialogue between two interlocutors, nor corporal punishment, which is designed to help those lacking the rational capacity necessary for undergoing *elenchos*. Thus, the parallel with the *Laws* becomes evident: the rhetoric, which can free from great evils and whose methodology remains unspecified in the *Gorgias*, bears similarity to *peitho*, which in the fourth book of the *Laws* stands in contrast to *bia*, the force or violence of punishments, most of which are corporal (711c5).

The other contributions to the volume (N. Thaler on inner-soul conflicts; E. Cucinotta on moral excellence; Machek on the difference between causing and suffering injustice; M.-P. Noël on the links between tragic and philosophical heroism; V. Konrádová on the final myth of the dialogue) also align with an interpretative approach that particularly emphasises the ethical aspects of the dialogue. The final contribution by M. Erler goes further and explicitly proposes reading the *Gorgias* as an anti-populist manifesto (p. 216). Erler dwells on the analogy that Socrates develops in *Gorgias* 501d–503c between political rhetoric and Athenian theatre and highlights how this analogy advances a concept of Athenian politics as a form of populism, with rhetoricians and politicians often adapting to the audience's impulses to gain approval. Socrates' (and Plato's) 'true rhetoric' and 'true politics' challenge this assimilation by introducing a normative dimension grounded in factual reality and rationality. This model aims not to pander to popular tastes but to offer a consistent political framework based on immutable principles. One might ask whether this interpretation is excessively shaped by the current global political situation and should not be considered part of ongoing efforts to bring Plato into dialogue with modern theories of liberal democracy (cf. G.M. Mara, *The Civic Conversations of Thucydides and Plato: Classical Political Philosophy and the Limits of Democracy* [2008]). Erler's interpretation, like all those proposed in the volume, is deeply rooted in what we might call a continental methodology, faithful to both the philosophical content and the historical contextualisation of Plato's dialogues. Erler rightly speaks of the spread of populism in the politics of fifth-century Athens, which is denounced, for example, in Aristophanes' comedies and the work of Thucydides. Drawing parallels with the current situation is not the explicit aim of Erler's historically focused interpretation, but arises naturally and allows for an emphasis on the timeliness of Plato's thought.

Highlighting Plato's relevance for contemporary 'political' reflection is also the aim of Han's book, which proposes new interpretative hypotheses for the more explicitly political dialogues: the *Timaeus–Critias* pair, the *Republic* and the *Laws*. Han's goal is, in my opinion, rather ambitious: to employ philosophical and hermeneutical theories developed during the twentieth century by avowedly 'anti-Platonic' authors, such as G. Deleuze and L. Irigaray, as exegetical tools for interpreting the Platonic dialogues. Han's enterprise is interesting and praiseworthy for two reasons: firstly, for the attempt – which, I regret to observe, has not always achieved complete success – to combine the Platonic text and twentieth-century 'philosophy' and, secondly, for shifting the emphasis to certain aspects of Platonic writing that have previously received insufficient attention. The claims Han sets out to advance in the book are twofold. Firstly, Han argues that Platonic philosophy – despite its evident yearning for the perpetuity of ideas – is characterised by a keen awareness of becoming, which Han describes as a 'feminine' metaphysical principle. Secondly, Han proposes – in line with some recent publications focussing on 'visual' aspects in the analysis

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X25100577 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of literary works (cf. A. Capra and L. Floridi [edd.], *Intervisuality: New Approaches to Greek Literature* [2023], and on Plato, especially, S. Bidermann and M. Weinman [edd.], *Plato and the Moving Image* [2019]) – to offer a cinematic reading of the three dialogues at the centre of the analysis, relying mainly on Deleuze's theory of cinema. This confluence of approaches – a philological reading, the use of cinematic theories and an interest in aspects important to feminist criticism – constitutes both the book's strengths and its weaknesses. Each of these three elements, taken separately, presents interesting, sometimes even novel, analyses of Plato's texts and provides ample food for thought for re-evaluating their relevance.

An interesting example of the potential and the difficulties of a cinematic reading is Han's analysis of the three waves in *Republic* 5. For instance, Han suitably argues:

> Book V also depicts moving content. What takes place is essentially the perception-image deployed by Rohmer in the prologue of the film *La collectionneuse*. The "I" that initially speaks and represents the distinct center – Socrates in this case who "foresees" and "fears" (προορῶν ἐφοβούμην) (Pl. *Resp*. 453c9) – evolves into an impersonal "someone" (τις) and, after falling (ἐμπέσῃ) (453d4–5), is dis-centered. He dissipates into, or enters into a relation with, his surrounding environment, claiming that it is necessary "for us" to swim (ἡμῖν νευστέον) and to try "to be saved" (πειρατέον σῴζεσθαι) (453d8). In this way, Plato creates a sequence that portrays the transition from the subjective point of view of Socrates to the external world of his metaphorical surroundings – a little swimming bath or the biggest ocean in which he would hope to find a passing dolphin. By making these kinds of abrupt shifts, from the masculine section to the feminine one, and from inner to outer, Plato, in effect, deploys a cinematic technique: such gaps that are produced between two scenes or "shots" comprise what Deleuze calls in *Cinema 1* the "movement-image," or the "image of movement," that links up with others. This theoretical concept is both relevant and useful because it brings into focus a certain animation at play and elucidates how different elements assemble or disassemble and create territories or deterritorialize. (p. 73)

On a purely technical level, applying a theory of film can indeed offer a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms that Plato employs to engage the audience in the dialogue. On a substantive level, it is worth noting, however, that the ramifications of such an analysis may give rise to certain unnecessary analogies. Thus, to describe Plato as a 'photo or film editor' who has assembled the *Republic* from various excerpts (p. 72), is undoubtedly an attempt at modernisation. Nevertheless, Plato's technique may be likened to the work of a collage maker, or another type of artist (such as a musician, mixer or writer). Furthermore, to invoke, in this context, the hypothesis regarding the existence of a proto-*Republic*, which could have been the target of Aristophanes' comic irony in the *Ecclesiazusae* as a universally accepted claim rather than as a subject of scholarly debate (as it is in fact), may excessively diminish the importance of intertextuality in the analysis of Plato's dialogues. Besides, such a claim can be interpreted as a remnant of a certain apprehension among Classicists and historians of philosophy to assume either that Aristophanes and Plato were inspired – in the *Ecclesiazusae* and the *Republic* – by revolutionary political ideas circulating in Athens at the beginning of the fourth century BCE or that Plato might even have drawn inspiration from Aristophanes in conceptualising certain aspects of his *kallipolis* (see for an examination of this question, *i.a.*, A. Capra, *Aristofane. Donne al Parlamento. Introduzione, traduzione e commento* [2010], pp. 16–31, who argues for viewing Aristophanes as Plato's inspirer; and L. Canfora, *La crisi dell'utopia: Aristofane contro Platone* [2014], *passim*, who, like Han, supports the theory of a Proto-*Republic*).

Similarly, the application of exegetical tools derived from feminist theories can, at times, be highly productive, while at other times it may offer limited clarification of aspects already explored and established by more traditional interpretations. A striking example of

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the innovative potential – though further scrutiny would be required, in my opinion, to ascertain the validity of the approach – is the feminist interpretation of the *chora* in the *Timaeus*. Han's reading, adequately supported by lexical and intertextual analysis such as a comparison with Hippocrates' *On the diseases of women*, interprets the *chora* as a reification of the female reproductive apparatus and, consequently, as a representation of the feminine as the origin and manifestation of becoming (pp. 36–43). On the contrary, the feminist approach seems to bring little that is new to the examination of the revolutionary waves in *Republic* 5. Han's position, which essentially argues that the women of guardian rank are nothing more than, in Han's Deleuzian terms, a *simulacrum* of man, has already been advanced numerous times in Platonic scholarship and, in my opinion, argued more cogently by scholars such as S. Föllinger (*Differenz und Gleichheit. Das Geschlechterverhältnis in der Sicht griechischer Philosophen des 4. bis 1. Jahrhunderts v. Chr.* [1996], pp. 56–117).

In general, it is precisely on the level of Platonic exegesis that Han's book is most problematic. The decision to focus on the comparison between Plato and modern philosophical theories, such as those of Deleuze and Irigaray, is highly valid and compelling, as it effectively underscores Plato's continued relevance today. In other words, such an approach illustrates that A.N. Whitehead's well-known remark – that the history of Western philosophy is but a series of footnotes to Plato – continues to hold true to some extent. However, this approach sits uneasily with Han's other aim, i.e. providing a reading of Plato's dialogues that enhances our understanding of the Athenian philosopher. Despite its innovative methodological intent, Han's analysis does not appear to yield results that substantially diverge from those achieved by more traditional readings. As an example of these similarities, I have mentioned Han's discussion of Platonic 'feminism'. However, it is Han's core claim – centring on becoming and its association with the feminine – that in my opinion ultimately is somewhat conventional. Attempts to emphasise the Heraclitean aspects of Platonic thought have been advanced in studies devoted to the investigation of Platonic epistemology and physics (cf. A.J. Mason, *Flow and Flux in Plato's Philosophy* [2016]; cf. also A. Macé, *Platon, philosophie de l'agir et du pâtir* [2025^2]). The binary structure of the cosmos based on the interpenetration of being – which Han identifies as the masculine element – and becoming – equated by Han with the feminine element – could be interpreted as a reformulation of the *Prinzipienlehre* of the so-called unwritten doctrines, in which the One is opposed and complemented by the *aoristos dyas*. Certainly, Han offers appealing readings of various Platonic passages and does not resort to the unwritten doctrines, which, especially in the English-speaking world, have never had much exegetical prominence. However, the focus on two opposing and complementary principles, although in Han's case it can be traced back to anthropological-structuralist interpretations (such as those of the so-called *École de Paris*), is itself comparable to the opposition between the One and Indefinite Duality of the ancient tradition. The *aoristos dyas*, just like the feminine principle in Han's analysis, serves as a principle of ambiguity, indeterminacy and multiplicity. Even if the mechanisms Han identifies for representing or connoting the feminine in the *Timaeus*, the *Republic* and the *Laws* are inherent in the text and do not originate from the unwritten doctrine of primordial principles, the similarities to such a (possibly) dualistic interpretation are evident. This, of course, does not mean that Han's analysis is unjustifiable or problematic, but simply that the problems associated with the exegesis of Plato's dialogues still persist today, despite the use of different methods of analysis. Nevertheless, the attempt to highlight the Platonic legacy even in philosophical theories that expressly declare themselves anti-Platonic is to be welcomed, even if, in the end, it contributes only modestly to our understanding of the political thought of the founder of the Academy.

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A still different approach is presented in Balot's book, in which he explicitly states that his interpretation of the *Laws* is inspired by the readings of the German-American philosopher Leo Strauss and his followers (p. 4). Indeed, the so-called Straussian school is one of the few that has consistently maintained an interest in the *Laws* – a dialogue that, until the early twenty-first century, was largely overlooked by scholars of Platonic philosophy and left primarily to historians and philologists. Balot particularly asserts that his interpretation rests on three methodological principles. Firstly, he seeks to offer a holistic reading of the dialogue; secondly, he considers the text's literary and dramatic elements; and thirdly, he argues that the Athenian Stranger engages both with the dialogue's readers and its internal interlocutors (pp. 9–11). Organised into twelve chapters, the book traces the structure and the thematic development of the *Laws*, arguing – against both interpreters who view the dialogue as Plato's departure from his earlier position that only philosophers can live virtuously and those who read it as a 'totalitarian manifesto' – that the citizens of Magnesia cannot achieve rational self-governance on their own through education and legislation, but need philosopher-rulers, who have authority over the laws. Nevertheless, Balot states that the ultimate aim of the law is to cultivate the *eudaimonia* of the *polis*.

After all, Balot's interpretation does not seek to reconstruct the fundamental tenets of Platonic political thought in the *Laws*; rather, it is better characterised as a 'metapolitical' reading, focusing on the philosophical nature of the ideas presented in the text. In this regard, too, Balot skilfully navigates between two opposing positions. On the one hand, he appears to agree with M.L. Bartels's interpretation (*Plato's Pragmatic Project. A Reading of Plato's Laws* [2017]), who sees no form of philosophy in the *Laws* at all. On the other hand, he recognises the presence of a latent philosophical potential in the dialogue, which leads the Athenian to a continual reassessment and modification of his positions. This is articulated with remarkable clarity in the concluding paragraphs of the book:

> He [i.e. the Athenian Stranger] has, to be sure, progressed much farther than they [i.e. the Dorians] ever could in the understanding of mathematics, astronomy, ethics, and politics. He is, however, aware, as they are not, that his supposedly newfound (cf. 819d–e) grasp of incommensurable magnitudes is simply one movement in a long, slow, and never-ending process of discovery, refinement, and transformation. … Instead, he continually seeks to improve his own understanding, in the recognition that all hypotheses and scientific understandings must remain provisional, because new developments will always threaten to overthrow previous accounts of cosmology and so on. The result is that, even in the case of the best human being, to be human is to live a swinish life (cf. 819d–e); the necessity against which he cannot fight is, therefore, to investigate (cf. *skopounta*, 820c5) questions within the framework of graceful and worthy leisure. … In the Athenian's presentation, the only relevant distinction among human beings is that between self-knowing swine and oblivious swine. The Athenian's own qualifiedly swinish life involves the additional risk of taking on, of necessity, responsibilities for which he knows he is not suited – namely, the care of the human herd (818b–c). (p. 361)

This interpretation considers two central aspects of the position of the *Laws* within Platonic political thought. Firstly, the dialogue's political project is explicitly conceived for 'men, not gods' (*Laws* 853c–d), a detail indicative of a more pragmatic Platonic realism – if such a term is appropriate, given that the *Laws* remain, in any case, a theoretical model, which needs to be adapted to real-world needs. Secondly, it highlights the Athenian Stranger's intellectual and rhetorical superiority over his interlocutors and, implicitly, the contrast between his proposed project and the Doric constitutions, which were frequently idealised within the intellectual and political discourse of fifth- and fourth-century Athens. Nevertheless, while Balot's arguments present some valid insights, they occasionally extend beyond the available evidence. A compelling example of this tendency to go beyond

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'simple' textual data is Balot's analysis of the figure of the Cretan Cleinias (pp. 29–55), which, in certain respects, serves as an antecedent to the examination of and legislation on atheism of Book 10 (pp. 233–99). In Balot's interpretation Cleinias exhibits a 'tyrannical' disposition, a characterisation based almost entirely on certain 'conventional' assertions he makes concerning the axiology of goods. In particular, Cleinias 'derives his conception of the "good things" from "the many" (661a4–5), despite the contempt he had earlier expressed for their "ignorance" (*anoian*, 625e5)' (p. 46), and simultaneously 'believes that living tyrannically (etc.) is "shameful"' (p. 47) – a stance that, in Balot's view, aligns him with Polus in the *Gorgias*. The comparison between Cleinias and Polus is stimulating, so far as it highlights the inconsistent nature of Cleinias' reasoning. However, I believe it is an overstatement to claim that Cleinias possesses a tyrannical nature: his adherence to conventional thought – due, as Balot aptly observes, to his Doric education – does not necessarily denote a disposition that fits the portrayal of the tyrannical man in Book 9 of the *Republic*.

The three volumes present distinct methodological approaches to the enduring challenge of rendering Platonic political thought more accessible. The volume on the *Gorgias* edited by Machek and Mikeš largely emphasises – through the majority of its contributions – that the 'true politics' proposed by Socrates in the dialogue is fundamentally tied to Socratic dialogue and the elenctic education staged within the dialogues themselves. Han's monograph engages the founder of the Academy in conversation with postmodern theories, tracing the subtle connections between contemporary ideas and Plato's thought, thereby highlighting its topicality. Finally, Balot's analysis of the *Laws* interprets Plato's final dialogue as conveying a message that, while pessimistic, remains tinged with hope: though acknowledging the limitations of both humanity and legislation, it does not deny the continuous search for more robust political and philosophical foundations.

Despite these differences (and some points of criticism) the three volumes represent a significant contribution to Platonic scholarship, demonstrating how Plato can be read beyond the currently prevailing analytical 'exegetical paradigm'. Furthermore, they are part of a broader revival of interest in Plato's political philosophy, which has been unfolding since the start of this decade – as evidence of this trend, two volumes on the *Laws* have been published in the last three years (J. Pfefferkorn, *Platons tanzende Stadt. Moralpsychologie und Chortanz in den Nomoi* [2023]; L. Walmsley and S. Delcomminette [edd.], *Pathos kai Nomos – Le traitement des affections dans les Lois de Platon* [2025]).

This plurality should not be understood as an invitation to present – as Han does, apparently to justify her approach – a reader's own version of Plato (p. 28). Rather, it is inherent in Plato's dialogues. Indeed, the interpretative openness of Plato's philosophy is already evidenced in the well-known anecdote reported by Olympiodorus in his commentary on the *First Alcibiades*: on his deathbed, Plato dreamed of being a swan beyond the reach of hunters, and Simmias interpreted this dream as emblematic of the dialogues' inherent elusiveness (Olympiodorus, in *Alc*. 2.155–62).

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