A 'Legend' in Crisis: The Debate over Plato's Politics, 1930-1960

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Abstract: From the early 1930s to the early 1960s many scholars, whether liberal-minded or socialist ideologues, Marxist or scientific positivists, classical scholars or political theorists and historians, have shown a widespread consensus in discreditling and assailing the man and political philosopher Plato. Such an extensive assault led the ‘Platonic Legend’ to an unprecedented crisis. Philosophically, it was a reaction to the undisguised Platonolatry coming from Oxford and the school of the British Idealists. Ideologically, the appropriation of Plato by Nazi apologists fostered further this vehement indictment. But a lot of other causes worked to the same effect. The general anguish and humanistic anxiety on the eve of World War II and the postwar traumas led scholars to reconsider the meaning of history and historicism, the psychology of the masses and the ethical responsibility of the citizen, the role of propaganda and state education. Such complementary elements converged in sustained anti-Platonic polemics, which in turn provoked a vigorous defence. Here an attempt is made to offer a preliminary survey of this complex debate and to provide a general intellectual framework in terms of which that controversy can be further explored.

This article is about the Platonic tradition rather than about Plato’s thought, hence it is intended to shed light on an integral part of the intellectual history of the period rather than contribute to the understanding of Plato. More specifically, I shall probe into a specific category of the politically engaged English literature on Plato roughly ranging from the early 1930s to the early 1960s, after ‘setting the scene’ — into two sections. The ‘first attack’ (section one) consists of a discussion of numerous critiques based on varied ideological or theoretical backgrounds, all sharing a fierce antipathy towards Plato’s ‘totalitarian regulations’ and aprioristic ethical universalism. This focus on the politically engaged literature explains why some writers on Plato whose work was prominent, do not figure in this account. Karl Popper’s uncompromising assault on the political effects of Platonic philosophy in 1945 reinvigorated the case against Plato as an anti-liberal and caused a number of allies or apologists to come forward; these are dealt with in the second section, ‘Popper’s assault and its aftermath’.

Books and articles linked to this debate are now largely neglected as time-bound expressions of academic hysteria generated by the appalling
political turbulence, but they certainly deserve attention as a remarkable episode in the long march of ‘the Platonic Legend’, as one of Plato’s early detractors put it. On another level, the debate serves as an illustration of the ever-lasting influence of Plato’s ideas on the social and political philosophy of every age. As the classicist and moral philosopher John Renford Bambrough (1926–99) of St. John’s College, Cambridge — and one of Plato’s advocates in the early sixties — observed, ‘[t]he attacks themselves are tributes to the liveliness of his writings and to their influence, as well as to their relevance to modern problems and controversies’.3

It might be difficult to understand the rationale and presuppositions behind the attack on Plato unless one is aware of two consequential uses of his thought over a span of fifty years: first, the appropriation of his political thought and metaphysics by the preceding two or three generations of the British Idealists (roughly, from 1870 to the 1920s); and second, the notorious (mis-) interpretation applied — and the concomitant distorted Platonbild expounded — by a large group of German scholars during the Weimar Republic and the reign of National Socialism hereafter. Both invocations of the philosopher are arguably interrelated, in the sense that Plato’s enrolment in the totalitarian camp might have been easier as a result of the prevalence of the ‘Idealist’ Plato in late Victorian period over George Grote’s Plato who like Mill’s had close affinities to Socrates the Dialectician.4

But before moving on, a triple warning: first, as bibliography of and about scholars who have been involved in the debate is sometimes immense, I shall omit references except when that is necessary to establish the author’s ideological commitments and thus interpret his particular outlook. Similarly, I shall in principle avoid citing non-English literature, except in the introductory section. Second, as the present study mostly aims at a bibliographical record than a critical analysis, I shall not discuss any methodological issues involved in Platonic interpretation. Finally, not all the works involved in the debate represent outstanding scholarship. Despite occasional naiveté, however, they are lively reflections on and testimonies to the moral and intellectual sensibilities of this particular period, and as such they may help historians of ideas to enlarge their investigations in unexpectedly new directions.

4 See, e.g., Philip B. Rice ‘Two Meanings of Liberty’, The Journal of Philosophy, 37 (1940), pp. 376–82. Plato and Hegel, he observed, had provided the classic case on the side of the British who were collectivists, in opposition to ‘Continental individualists’. But ‘The strength of the Nazi-Fascist side lies in its application of the collectivist principle’. 
Setting the Scene

1. The Idealist Plato

In the ‘Preface’ to the first edition of the *Dialogues of Plato*, Benjamin Jowett (1817–93), Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, protested against Grote’s Platonic interpretation, informing his readers that the aim of his introductions was ‘to represent Plato as the father of Idealism, who is not to be measured by the standard of utilitarianism or any other modern philosophical system’. Despite this obvious contradiction in terms (for what is *Idealism* if not a ‘modern philosophical system’?), it is Idealism that dominated the British analysis of Plato’s dialogues until the late 1920s. Jowett himself examined the dialogues in the light of their purported moral intent, portraying Plato as a political reformer who aspired to reconstruct the state by visualizing a higher social good and internal order against the Sophists’ contractual view of politics and empiricist reduction of knowledge to sensationalism. Under Jowett’s aegis the Platonic conception of the statesman as a moral missionary and the business of government as a special vocation soon became more or less standard among scholars.

The pervasiveness of the idealist philosophical current in Platonic interpretation was not, of course, simply an academic innovation but was embedded in the concrete circumstances of the epoch. It was partly political ideology revolving around aspirations for socialist reform, based on a new concept of restrained individualism in the context of nation-states, which dictated the original reconstruction of Platonic philosophy. Late Victorian Platonism, dominated by Idealism, was to a certain degree an expression of the revolt (which filtered into Britain through an acquaintance with a variety of German idealist thought) against the empiricist tendency and the mechanistic view of human life that long dominated English philosophy. The aims of the British Idealists in the late nineteenth century involved overcoming the fragmentation of industrial society and restoring a sense of community based on cohesion, benevolence, and collective social responsibility. To do this they turned away from the Lockean natural rights tradition and hedonistic utilitarianism, and turned for inspiration to Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Hegel.

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Even a cursory review of the list of the most prominent Anglophone Platonic scholars of the period would confirm the victory of Idealism. Among the many studies that shaped late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Platonic scholarship and provoked a liberal reaction in the 1930s are those of Jowett, Walter Horatio Pater (1839–94), Richard Lewis Nettleship (1846–92), David Ritchie (1853–1903), Ernest Barker (1874–1960), Paul Shorey (1857–1934), and Alfred Edward Taylor (1869–1945). Of course, not all of them were actual idealists; yet they shared some of the Idealists’ views on the importance and the interpretation of Plato. Despite variation in style and occasionally divergence in the treatment of technicalities and particular issues (as e.g., the chronology of the dialogues and the *spuria*), these studies were essentially unanimous in stressing the unitary philosophical genius of Plato and the value of his moral and political philosophy for counterbalancing the allegedly extreme individualism and commercialism of the modern age. The Idealist Plato was, above all, a product of the era. One has to turn to the political and philosophical works of the major figures of the school of British Idealists such as Edward Caird (1835–1908), Thomas Hill Green (1836–82), Bernard Bosanquet (1848–1923) and Francis Herbert Bradley (1846–1924), in which considerable Platonic echoes exist, in order to grasp the direction of Platonic analysis during the first quarter of the twentieth century. Incontestably, the foundations were firmly laid by the leading idealist thinkers.

‘Platonic echoes’ is perhaps a mild way of putting it. For a young disciple of Green and Bosanquet like Barker, Idealism was virtually *Platonism reborn*. The idealist school, according to Barker, broke with the egoistic ethics of utilitarianism and introduced a more socialized conception of the nature of human freedom. Social philosophy required new premises corresponding to the pressing needs of modern political life:

Not a modification of the old Benthamite premises, but a new philosophy was needed; and that philosophy was provided by the idealist school, of which Green is the greatest representative. That school drew its inspiration immediately from Kant and Hegel, and ultimately from the old Greek

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8 For Caird, Plato reconciled the fundamental antithesis of form and matter, idea and reality, which was destroying modern moral and political philosophy: see *The Problem of Philosophy at the Present Time* (Glasgow, 1881); further, by expanding the idea of a realm of morality to the entire universe Plato had become ‘the founder of speculative theology’, *The Evolution of Theology in the Greek Philosophers* (Glasgow, 1904), vol. I, pp. 171–2. Caird had earlier criticised Grote’s *Plato* and put forward his own understanding of Platonic philosophy; see ‘Mr. Grote’s Plato’, *North British Review*, 43 (1865), pp. 351-84.
philosophy of the city-state. The vital relation between the life of the individual and the life of the community, which alone gives the individual worth and significance, because it alone gives him the power of full moral development; the dependence of the individual, for all his rights and for all his liberty, on his membership of the community; the correlative duty of the community to guarantee to the individual all his rights . . . these were the premises of the new philosophy . . . Instead of starting from a central individual, to whom the social system is supposed to be adjusted, the idealist starts from a central social system, in which the individual must find his appointed orbit of duty. But after all the revolution is only a restoration; and what is restored is simply the Republic of Plato.9

Should one, then, be surprised at the sight of such a title as The Platonic Tradition in Anglo-Saxon Philosophy, by one of the late voices of Idealist philosophy, John Henry Muirhead (1855–1940), despite the fact that the book contains practically nothing about Plato’s thought? Muirhead’s book is a succinct demonstration of how Platonic philosophy was at the time inextricably amalgamated with an entire idealist tradition.10

The links are profound and informative of the intellectual influences and political ideology which fostered the modern reappraisal of Plato: for Green, individual moral and civic responsibilities were determined by finding ‘the duties of one’s station’. 11 Accordingly, no rights could be ascribed to persons apart from life in a society. A ‘right’ is a power contributory to the common well-being, and as such the individualist argument in favour of a natural ‘right against society’, a right to act without reference to the needs or good of society, is a contradiction in terms. To be sure, it was because ‘Plato and Aristotle conceived the life of the πλήρης so clearly as the τοιχός of the individual . . . that they laid the foundation for all true theory of “rights”’. 12 The argument advanced in modern times, Green observed, on behalf of the individual against the state is alien to Plato’s way of thinking who properly conceived of a citizen (πολίτης) as a member of society (κοινωνία), thus having correlative...

9 E. Barker, Political Thought in England. From Herbert Spencer to the Present Day (London, 1915), p. 11. In his Plato and his Predecessors, p. 456. Barker wrote that under the influence of the British Idealists Plato has found a new circle of disciples that include ‘English working men’ who ‘have read and learned to love the Republic’. Similarly D.G. Ritchie argued earlier that it is thanks to Hegel and to those directly influenced by him, that a better understanding of Plato was possible. Hegel has occasionally been reproached for interpreting the Greek philosophers in the light of his own system, but ‘in doing so Hegel was only restoring to them what was their own’, Plato, p. 195.


11 Green, Prolegomena to Ethics [1883], 5th ed. (Oxford, 1906), sect. 183.

duties and rights which the state imposes and confers. The implication is a more positive role for the state, especially in education, which Green in the footsteps of Plato saw as the tool of moral and social improvement.

The debt to Plato is more emphatically restated in the case of Bosanquet who confessed that Plato was the most important influence on his political philosophy. A typical idealist, Green’s pupil believed that social relations and institutions could be best understood at the level of human consciousness instead of material phenomena. This metaphysical idealism pervades his *Philosophical Theory of the State* (1899) where central assumptions of the liberal tradition are dismissed — particularly those that reflect a commitment to individualism. For Bosanquet, Plato and Aristotle were the progenitors of political idealism:

The fundamental idea of Greek political philosophy, as we find it in Plato and Aristotle, is that the human mind can only attain its full and proper life in a community of minds, or more strictly in a community pervaded by a single mind, uttering itself consistently though differently in the life and action of every member of the community.

This idea is expressed by both philosophers in such phrases as the ‘State is natural’, or ‘the State is prior to the individual’. The Platonic commonwealth utilised thoroughly this position in a way that convinced Bosanquet that ‘there is no sound political philosophy which is not an embodiment of Plato’s conception’.

2. Plato for the Present: Die Platondeutung der Gegenwart

The political aspects of Platonism in Germany during the first decades of the twentieth century were thoroughly stressed within the so-called ‘George-Kreis’. Scholars who belonged to the circle of Stefan George

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14 Bosanquet, *The Philosophical Theory of the State and Related Essays*, ed. G.F. Gaus and W. Sweet (Indiana, 2001), p. 50, emphasis added. See also ‘Plato’s Conception of the Good Life’, p. 628: ‘[In Plato] The facts of morality are exhibited as inherent in the relations of the social whole . . . The principle of individual work or function, displaying itself in exchange of services, is the organic or economic root out of which society springs.’

15 On the Nazi uses of Plato, see the recent account in Melissa Lane, *Plato’s Progeny: How Plato and Socrates still Captivate the Modern Mind* (London, 2001), pp. 121–8 with n. 43 (p. 152) for older literature.
(1868–1933), the poet and one of the spiritual forerunners of Fascism, extolled Plato as the heroic founder and leader of an aristocratic Reich, and emphasised the activist and pedagogical object of his philosophy. In Hans Leisegang’s (1890–1951) words Plato was considered within the ‘George-Kreis’ ‘der Stifter eines neuen Kultus, der Führer und Menschenbildner’ (the founder of a new civilization, the leader and educationalist). A fusing of views on George and Hitler was unequivocally represented, for example, by Joachim Bannes (b. 1906) in his notorious Platon Staats und Hitlers Kampf, a passionate advocacy of the ‘ideals’ of race and leadership. Earlier Kurt Singer (1886–1962), another exponent of the hierarchical Platonic Utopia that bears testimony to contemporary German fascist ideology, could argue that Plato’s Politieia, ‘enthält keine Nachlese von einzelnen Gedanken und Bildern, sondern die Verdichtung des Geistes selber . . . Es ist der Geist des Gerichts, der Sühne, der Entscheidung’ (does not contain a selection of disparate thoughts and forms . . . but it is much more an epitome of the Spirit itself. It is the Spirit of Justice, of Atonement, of Ruling).}

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16 On George’s and his disciples’ (die Georgeaner) intellectual contribution to Nazi ideology see Jethro Bithell, Modern German Literature 1880–1950 (London, 1959), pp. 127–58. See also the period study by Willi Koch, Stefan George, Weltbild, Naturbild, Menschenbild (Halle, 1933). The idea of the primacy of practical over theoretical inclination in Plato was systematically developed from the 1920s by Edgar Salin, Platon und die griechische Utopie (München, 1921), and Ernst Howald, Die Platonische Akademie und die moderne Universität (Bern, 1921). ‘Georgean’ influences can also be traced in Paul Friedländer’s Platon, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1928), trans. in English by Hans Meyerhoff (New York, 1958), and Werner Jaeger’s Paideia: die Formung des griechischen Menschen (Berlin, 1934). Jaeger’s study was translated by G. Highet, Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1946–47).

17 See H. Leisegang’s useful period piece, Die Platondeutung der Gegenwart (Karlsruhe in Baden, 1929), p. 44. See also p. 165, my translation: ‘Plato’s theory of the ideal state has been selectively used by communists and socialists in the same way as is invoked by contemporary national-socialist thinkers and racial theorists to lend support and clarify their own political ideas.’ On George and Plato see the work of the sympathetic F.J. Brecht, Platon und der George-Kreis (Leipzig, 1929).


19 K. Singer, Platon, der Gründer (München, 1927), p. 148. Other sources that are more less relevant to this strain of Platonic interpretation and are relevant to the understanding of the politically engaged Platonic literature during this period are inter alia: Ernst A. Hornfeffer, Der Platonismus und der Gegenwart [1920], 3rd edition (Erfurt,
The classic pattern of a ‘perfectly political man’, the national citizen connected at the same time with humanity (‘national humanism’), was, according to Lothar Helbing (1902–86), the author of Der dritte Humanismus (1932), no one else but Plato.20 Platonism and humanism, politically understood, should have become the basis for the education of a new aristocracy and a class of leaders. Through a disciplined elite the example of a new humanity was to be set.

Another aspect of the classical reception in Nazi Germany (and closely related to politicised Platonic interpretation) was the exaltation of Dorismus. The Doric order had a definite vogue for its strength, simplicity, and organic form. As Elizabeth Rawson (1934–88) has effectively shown there was an increased sympathy with Sparta because it seemed to fit the Aryan theory, or some versions of it, so well. The Spartan constitution appeared as the work of a conquering military aristocracy. Plato’s name was inevitably associated with this interpretation and in the work of Gottfried Benn (1886–1956), Dorische Welt (1934), he emerges as the last great Dorian. Similarly, the philosopher gets high marks in the work of Hans Günther (1891–1968), Rassengeschichte des Hellenischen und des Römischen Volkes (1929), ‘for his 1927); Ottomar Wichmann, Platon und Kant. Eine vergleichende Studie (Berlin, 1920); Gustav Kafka, Sokrates, Platon und der sokratische Kreis (München, 1921); Heinrich Barth, Die Seele in der Philosophie Platos (Tübingen, 1921); P.L. Landsberg, Wesen und Bedeutung der platonischen Akademie (Bonn, 1923); Albert Goedeckemeyer, Platon (München, 1922); K. Hildebrandt, Nietzsche’s Wettkampf mit Sokrates und Platon (Dresden, 1922); Ernst Howald, Das Leben Platos (Zurich, 1923); R.H.H. Lagerborg, Die platonische Liebe (Leipzig, 1926); G. Heintzeller, Das Bild des Tyrannen bei Platon; Beitrag zur Geschichte der griechischen Staatsethik (Stuttgart, 1927); J. Stenzel, Wissenschaft und Staatsgesinnung bei Platon, series: Kieler Universitätsreden, no. 3 (Kiel, 1927) and Platon. Der Erzieher (Leipzig, 1928); Heinrich Scholz, ‘Der platonische Philosoph auf der Höhe des Lebens und im Anblick des Todes’, Philosophie und Geschichte, no. 34 (Tübingen, 1931); Karl Gronau, Der Staat der Zukunft von Platon bis Dante (Braunschweig, 1933); Robert Boehringer, Das Antlitz des Genius. Platon (Breslau, 1935) and Platon. Bildnisse und Nachweise (Breslau, 1935); (see also Boehringer’s Mein Bild von Stefan George [München, 1951]); H. Freyer, Die politische Insel. Eine Geschichte der Utopien von Platon bis zur Gegenwart (Leipzig, 1936); (Freyer was the author of the conservative Pallas Athene: Ethik des politischen Volkes [Jena, 1935]); Dieter Roser, Erziehung und Führung. Versuch über Sokrates und Platon (Stuttgart, 1936); Walter Becher, Platon und Fichte: die königliche Erziehungskunst. Eine vergleichende Darstellung auf philosophischer und soziologischer Grundlage (Jena, 1937); Heinz Reuschel, Die Rassenfrage bei Platon (Markkleeberg, 1937); Franz Kallfelz, Die Charakterkunde in der antiken Philosophie von den Anfängen bis Platon, series: Neue Deutsche Forschungen, no. 254 (Berlin, 1940); Otto Kern, Die Religion der Griechen, Von Platon bis Kaiser Julian (Berlin, 1938), vol. III; Walthier Kranz, Die Griechische Philosophie, zugleich eine Einführung in die Philosophie überhaupt (Leipzig, 1941). Kranz published the Die Kultur der Griechen (Leipzig, 1943).

20 Quoted in A. Liebert, ‘Contemporary German Philosophy’, Philosophical Review, 45 (1936), p. 49. Lothar Helbing is the pseudonym of Wolfgang Frommel (I owe this information to Prof. Ward Briggs).
political views and his racial purity; and with the Spartans he is exonerated from all taint of pederasty, which spread from pre-Nordic Crete.21 Apparently, a growing number of admirers of the new Germany considered it as closely related to ancient Greece, in character as well as blood. This trend which grafted ‘Dorian’ ideas on to a Hellenism laid stress on a strong Staatsgedanke, on patriotic and military education which they could trace in Plato’s doctrines and especially in the Republic.

It is obvious that as with Hegel and Darwin, the appropriation of Plato as a progenitor of fascism was testimony to the selective looting of ideas engaged in by its ideologues. But the detractors neglected this. As Eugène N. Tigerstedt (b. 1907) observed, ‘such antidemocratic, totalitarian interpretations form the real, though unacknowledged, basis of Popper’s attack on Plato, for he has simply and uncritically accepted them, only burning what they adore.’22

I

The First Attack: A Warfare of Ideologies

The first attack came from the liberal camp and betrayed a strong hostility towards the social and political tenets of Idealism. It was directed both against Plato’s moral propriety (with regular accusations for pederasty) and his autocratic proposals for the organization of human society, comparable only to fascist totalitarianism.

The moral indictment was directly addressed by John Jay Chapman (1862–1933), the American poet, dramatist and critic. In his Lucian, Plato and Greek Morals (1931), Chapman attacked vehemently the ‘modern, sympathetic view of Plato as it appears in conventional writers on Hellenism’: those who regard Plato ‘as an authority on Divine Truth, and themselves as teachers of morality and religion’, like ‘Mr. Jowett’ who had wrapped Plato’s philosophy with Christian doctrines.23 Instead, those idealizing Hellenists should have exposed to the world the moral disease permeating the Symposium, the ‘most effective plea for evil’, ‘a sort of lurid devotional book — the

23 For a conservative advocacy of Plato at the time, invested with Christian tones, see Alburey Castell, ‘Plato as a Social Reformer’, International Journal of Ethics, 40 (1929), pp. 121–7. Castell examines Plato’s politics in the light of the ‘intensely’ corrupt democratic procedures in Athens and concludes that ‘If we are to get the most fruitful perspective on this man’s ideas, it is necessary to conceive him as a doctor diagnosing society’s ills and prescribing a cure. Corrupt and mob-ridden politics. Cheap educational ideas. Immoral religious traditions. Enervating and ultra-fashionable fine arts. A neglected, uneducated, hidebound womanhood. A narrow and selfish home life’ (p. 126).
sulphurous breviary of the pederast’. Plato was not a philosophic thinker, but ‘a prince of conjurers’ who, being totally unable to grasp the import of Socrates (a man solely interested in moral truth and usefulness) made him the master of romantic speculation and indeed ‘a fabulist’ and ‘a hierophant who utters vague mysteries’. All things considered, Chapman argued, it remains a riddle why Plato, the writer of ‘fairy tales’, contradictory ideas, and suspicious morality should have been considered the greatest philosopher of all time.24

Were Plato’s conception of love ‘pathological’ and his ‘sex-regulations’ perverted?25 An affirmative answer would effectively assist the demolition of the Platonic Legend and such was the declared task of Warner Fite (1867–1955), at the time Professor of Philosophy at Princeton in the book under that meaningful title.26 Fite’s philosophical lineage rendered him particularly fit for such a task. His critique of Plato’s idea of impersonal unity and social harmony, in which individualism constitutes an intrinsic aberration, is largely a corollary of his ethical and political philosophy which he developed in various writings.27 Fite shared also the aspirations of the American New Realism movement, which attacked the hegemony of idealist philosophy and claimed the resurgence of pragmatism in politics, metaphysics and epistemology.

According to Fite the modern idealistic version of Plato by the ‘disciples’ (among whom he counts Bosanquet, W.R. Inge, Taylor, Shorey, and Frederick J.E. Woodbridge (1867–1940)), was profoundly wrong, just as idealist political philosophy itself had been. The Plato of Idealism appears as a ‘divine figure’, a proto-Christian interpreter of human nature, a lofty moralist and an inspired political thinker whereas his doctrines were expressions of deep partisan prejudices, shaped by the historical forces of his day. The prevalent idea


25 It must be observed that in the early 1930s the Viennese legal scholar Hans Kelsen, by employing the new tools of psychoanalysis, argued that Plato’s political thought was determined by irrational and subconscious factors and principally by his homosexuality. See his ‘Die platonische Liebe’ in the Freudian journal Imago, 19 (1933), pp. 34–98. Interestingly, it was translated by G.B. Wilbur and appeared during the war in the American Imago, 3 (1942), pp. 3–110.

26 See W. Fite, The Platonic Legend (New York & London, 1934). On the ‘perverted sex-regulations’ of Plato see chapter III, ‘Platonic Morals and the Modern Sentiment’. On the jacket of the book one reads that ‘In this amazing book . . . the mask falls from Plato with startling results. The author maintains, among other things, that Plato was no believer in equal opportunity, that his sympathies were purely aristocratic, and that his conception of love was pathological’.

of Plato is that of ‘a super-mind, super-soul, super-person, enjoying a vision of eternity which takes him out of the course of history’. In the Republic (largely a Spartan ‘military autocracy’ and a model of conservative exclusionary policy) Plato envisaged a stratified caste society in which the interests of a small privileged leisure class would have prevailed. Even worse, the philosopher depicts a society in which the value and dignity of the individual are downgraded. Plato was ‘offended by the very idea of individuality’ and instead was attracted by such suspicious formulae (analogous to the idealist rhetoric of recent times) such as the ‘whole mind of the community’ and the ‘personality of the state’.

Thus, granted the poverty of his political vision and the parochialism of his economic policy, Plato — ‘the defeated aristocrat’ — had virtually nothing to teach to the modern world. But what would have been Plato’s verdict on modern politics had he had the chance of personal interaction? How would he have reacted to the political doctrines and dictatorial practices of the day? Here the socialist foes of Plato entered the scene, applying rigidly the Marxist ‘historical’ interpretation.

Plato’s imaginary journey to the modern world was the substance of the book by Richard Howard Stafford Crossman (1907–74), educated at Winchester and later fellow of New College, Oxford, who became Labour MP for Coventry East (1945–74) and minister in the Labour governments of 1964–70. In Plato To-Day, published in May 1937, Crossman contrasted sharply the liberal Socrates with his famous pupil, ‘the systematic exponent of an authoritarian creed’ who tried ‘to rationalize his hatred of the mob into a theory of human stupidity’. Crossman’s commentary is a typical specimen of a left-wing politically engaged diatribe on Plato: ‘The political philosophy of the young Plato was at bottom a longing to return to the Homeric age of chivalry...The working classes must be put in their place: the gentry must regain their old self-confidence and sense of responsibility.’ In Plato’s eyes, according to Crossman, the Athenian democracy had degenerated into licentious anarchy because it applied egalitarianism indiscriminately. Being convinced of the moral and political corruption around him, Plato embarked on a programme of political reform which he sketched in the Republic. A thoroughgoing regimentation of society, the iron rule of an aristocratic élite, and the exclusion of the common man from all participation in the affairs of polis, are the fundamentals of his political dream: ‘the new Athenian Sparta’. In the imaginary dialogues that Crossman has Plato hold in his travels to contemporary Great Britain, Stalinist Russia and Fascist Germany, the Greek philosopher disapproves of materialism, recommends and applauds the existence of a small governing class especially trained for political responsibility as well as

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28 Fite, The Platonic Legend, pp. 2–3.
29 Ibid., pp. 39–40, 74, 81, 88.
the exclusion of the ordinary citizen from the affairs of the state, and even admires the various ‘noble lies’ that National Socialist and Communist regimes have been employing to deceive the common people.31

A definitive application of Marxist sociological analysis, aimed at demonstrating that Plato was the ancient progenitor of totalitarianism, can be found in the work of the Canadian scholar Alban Dewes Winspear (1899–1973). In The Genesis of Plato’s Thought (1940) Winspear claimed that to understand Plato one must have full knowledge of the transformations that Greek society underwent in the post-Homeric period, keeping in mind that the stages of economic change and class conflict were essentially mirrored in Greek thought. Winspear’s contextual reconstruction is, like Crossman’s, inextricably dependent on Marxist assumptions. Thus, a growing mercantile progressive Greek society clashed with the disciplined mystical morality of the Pythagoreans who were concerned to defend the ancestral customs and hence the position of the landed proprietors.32 The Pythagorean creed professed a moral discipline which insisted on permanence, unity and harmony against change and progress — a disguised apologia for the interests of the conservative landowning élite. Plato’s political thought should be examined in relation to the broad social and political environment that produced it. It will thus emerge as the epitome of the reactionary struggle that started with the Pythagoreans.

Plato cherished the interests of the landed aristocracy.33 He pleaded for the ultimate control of reason over human desires simply with a view at perpetuating the rule of the governing few and subduing the egalitarian aspirations of the masses. The ‘progressive’ political philosophy of the Sophists, who were in classical times authoritative exponents of materialism and ethical relativism, had to face the ‘idealist’ school of early Greek philosophy, which included Pythagoras’ successors — Plato being the most renowned and influential figure.34 Evidently, Winspear’s account was a complete reversal:

31 ‘But even admitting all these criticisms, I still find the Republic the greatest book on political philosophy which I have read. The more I read it, the more I hate it: and yet I cannot help returning to it time after time. For it is philosophy. It tries to reach the truth by rational discussion and is itself a pattern of the disinterested research which it extols. It never bullies or deceives its reader or beguiles him with appeals to sentiment, but treats him as a fellow philosopher for whom only the truth is worth having’, Plato To-Day, p. 275.
33 See a similar argument even in such a dispassionate account as that of G.M.A. Grube, Plato’s Thought (Boston, 1935), p. 261. Similarly, in reviewing Winspear’s book G. Vlastos agreed that the author ‘hits the truth when . . . he remarks that “in practice Plato leaned heavily towards the landed aristocracy”’, Philosophical Review, 51 (1942), p. 423.
34 Winspear’s arguments met the approval of the Christian socialist scholar Eric A. Havelock (1903–88) in Canadian Forum. Winspear’s work, in his judgment, marked a new departure in Platonic scholarship and ‘perhaps the beginning of a new tradition in
whereas the generations of Green and Barker sided with the Idealist Plato, who had confronted — they believed — the individualist and contractarian Sophists (in their judgment the ancient analogue of Benthamite utilitarian radicals), Winspear and other similar detractors joined the latter whom they conceived of as the ancient forerunners of liberalism.

In an anti-Platonic campaign Benjamin Farrington (1891–1974), in his Science and Politics in the Ancient World, reconfirmed from another point of view (and yet one not far from the ideological and conceptual categories of socialism) the results of the anti-Platonic critics. For this Professor of Classics at the University College of Swansea, Plato was a distinguished member of the ruling class that feared the impact of scientific thought upon the traditional system of ideas and beliefs. His opposition to advanced scientific thought was much more effective than unorganised popular superstition. Plato’s mission was to black out scientific innovation and technology (the liberating forces of human beings) through metaphysics and a system of ethical and political philosophy. Indeed, Farrington wrote, ‘[w]e cannot but be impressed with the tenacity as well as the intellectual content of the Platonic tradition. But, equally, nobody can pretend that the system has not got a political side to it. It is the philosophy of an oligarch. The ethics, the science, the religion are quite consciously held as part of the creed of an oligarch’.35 In class-antagonism Farrington saw the principal factor for what he understood as the stagnation that early overtook Greek scientific thought.36

The question as to whether Plato would have approved of the National-Socialist state or the extent of his agreement with totalitarian Platonism interpretation. Conforming to the rules of ‘historical interpretation’, Winspear properly situated Plato’s work within the process of Greek society, ‘a process conditioned by economic forces and determined by deep underlying class conflicts’. See ‘The Riddle of Plato’s Politics’, Canadian Forum, 21 (April 1941), p. 15. Robert B. Todd has kindly forwarded to me the following information: ‘The Forum was a left-wing magazine, associated with the Canadian social democratic party, known at the time as the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), now known as the New Democratic Party (NDP).’ Fifteen years later, Havelock would explore how ‘Greek liberalism grew and flowered in an intellectual climate which lay outside those walls with which Plato’s idealism and Aristotle’s teleology surrounded the Greek citizen and his city-state’. See The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics (London, 1957), p. 11.


36 According to a reviewer, G.E. Kirk, Journal of Hellenic Studies, 59 (1939), p. 299, Farrington has proved that Plato ‘died convinced of the inherent superiority of one class over another and its consequent prior claim on the good things of life . . . [He] has done well to remind us of the falseness and superficiality of such a social doctrine and the danger of accepting these philosophers as teachers and guides to social conduct for all time’ (emphasis added.)
practices became gradually (and as the outbreak of war was looming) emblematic of the whole debate. Thus Melvin Miller Rader (1903–81), the democratic socialist thinker, had no hesitation in listing Plato among the precursors of modern fascist ideologies, along with Machiavelli, Fichte and Hegel.\textsuperscript{37} Such a blending of ‘Platonic Ideology’ with Fascism by three German nationalist thinkers — Theodor von der Pfordten (1873–1923), Hans F.K. Günther and Hans Alfred Grunsky (b. 1902)\textsuperscript{38} — is explored in an interesting paper read in April 1937 by the idealist philosopher R.F. Alfred Hoernlé (1880–1943).\textsuperscript{39} In drawing several analogies between the militant ideology of the Partei and Platonic politics, the role of the Führer (resembling closely the philosopher-king of the Republic),\textsuperscript{40} the physical and mental responsibilities of the selected élite supporting the Leader, the importance of Schulung for translating a certain Weltanschauung into practice, the motto Gemeinnutz [geht] vor Eigennutz (common good before private good), Hoernlé concluded that Plato’s kings, possessing the absolute truth, would be legitimised to employ dictatorial methods in order to propagate it. Yet, ‘I would hope . . . that his [Plato’s] absolute truth would be free from the excessively nationalistic temper of Fascism and National-Socialism, and free too from the racial temper of the latter’.\textsuperscript{41}

A similarly cautious treatment of Plato’s alleged fascism was that of the scholar of Marxism Harry Burrows Acton (1908–74), subsequently known to a wide readership through his Illusion of the Epoch.\textsuperscript{42} Having examined the constituent elements of fascism, Acton argued that there are modes of thought associated with this oppressive ideology which are in opposition to Plato (like

\textsuperscript{37} M.M. Rader, No Compromise. The Conflict between two Worlds (New York, Left book Club, 1939) with a preface by Harold Laski. See further Rader’s Ethics and Society; an appraisal of social ideas (New York, 1950).

\textsuperscript{38} On Pfordten see, T. von der Pfordten an die deutsche Nation (München, 1933); Hoernlé refers to Grunsky’s Seele und Staat and Günther’s Platon, mentioned in n. 18 above.

\textsuperscript{39} See his Idealism as a Philosophical Doctrine (London, 1924), and Idealism as a Philosophy (New York, 1927). On Hoernlé’s relation with Bosanquet, see Muirhead, Bernard Bosanquet, pp. 16–7.

\textsuperscript{40} On the concept of leadership in National Socialism and its alleged relationship with Platonic elitism, see M. Margaret Ball, ‘The Leadership Principle in National Socialism’, Journal of the History of Ideas, 3 (1942), pp. 74–93.

\textsuperscript{41} R.F.A. Hoernlé, ‘Would Plato have approved of the National-socialist State?’, Philosophy, 13 (1938), pp. 166–82. The paper was read before the Philosophical Society of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. See also Otis Lee, ‘Culture in the Third Realm’, International Journal of Ethics, 47 (1936), p. 76, for a reference to the use of Plato for contemporary emulation in Germany.

its aversion to utilitarian moral codes and its approach to war). But in his attitude towards government and democracy Plato has much in common with fascism: ‘He was prepared to welcome a rigid censorship of art and morals... He held that the average man is not fit for political responsibility and cannot be educated for it... He advocated the teaching of social and political myths which the rulers themselves did not believe in. He believed in the need for a State religion with the punishment of heretics.’ Plato’s association with fascism would be questioned, however, by Cyril E.M. Joad (1891–1953), Professor of Philosophy and Psychology at Birbeck College, who believed that there are fundamental differences between the philosopher’s and the fascists’ programmes.

In a more clear-cut way and in an earnest cry out against the ‘nightmare which now rides the storm in Europe’, the American educationalist Edward O. Sisson (1869–1949) characterised Plato’s Republic as the ‘original philosophical charter of fascism... one of the most dangerous items in the education of the western world’. Plato’s anthropological premises based on the inherent nature of distinct classes led to the deification of the leader, whereas his disciple Hegel taught the absolute supremacy of the national state (‘Hegel’s supreme and all devouring Deity’) and the subordination of the ‘precious uniqueness of individual personality’. Similarly a critic in the Journal of Education, Charles Race, maintained that ideal hierarchy, educational aims, rigid law and censorship, all validate the comparison of the Platonic system of government with those of Hitler and Stalin. Even the classical scholar Gilbert Murray (1866–1957), in a 1944 study on the Peloponnesian War would maintain, invoking the poor evidence of Alcibiades I (107e), that ‘Plato seems to treat war as a normal incident of political life, not in the least as a

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public evil to be abolished’. ‘Hitler and Ribbentrop’ would agree with him in his treatment of war and conduct towards other cities. 48

But the most severe indictment against Plato for being ‘a totalitarian reformer’, by documenting the utilization of the Republic for carrying on Nazi propaganda, was made by the Austrian sociologist Otto Neurath (1882–1945) and the educationalist Joseph Albert Lauwerys (1902–81), at the time Reader in Education in the University of London. In Germany, they wrote, ‘Hitler’s advent [was characterised] as the victory of Platonism’, and this statement should not be considered as a falsification of the views of Plato. ‘After all, in the Republic . . . one finds, plainly and openly expressed, the view that the main purpose of the State is to preserve the purity of the race and to organize the people for war against foreign barbarians.’49

Closely related to the accusations against Plato for rationalizing ancient and modern authoritarianism was the discussion over his treatment of slavery. A negative attitude was surprisingly reflected in the study of Glenn R. Morrow (1895–1973) — later author of the monumental Plato’s Cretan City (1960) — who tried to show, by investigating into ‘the status called δουλεα in Platonic law’, that Plato in the Laws diverged to the worst from Attic law in the details of legislation in dealing with slaves. 50 His disposition towards greater severity and less liberalism as regards the treatment of the slaves is above all unequivocally attested in the Laws, even though ‘not one word of condemnation of the institution itself in all the Platonic writings’ can be detected. Plato’s legal apparatus regarding slavery should be examined in the light of his cardinal political lesson: namely, that ‘[t]o assign to all men equal functions, with equal rights and duties, is to act contrary to nature and justice; for true equality requires the subordination of the inferior to the superior’. ‘Thus the slave’s δουλεα is, in a rightly ordered state, subjection to legitimate

49 See O. Neurath and J.A.Lauwerys, ‘Nazi Text-Books and the Future’, I and II, in The Journal of Education 86 (Nov. and Dec. 1944), pp. 521–2 and 574–6. Their articles provoked a reaction from G.C. Field, who argued that the analogues drawn between Plato and Fascism or Nazism were based on arbitrary selectiveness. This is foremost reflected in disregarding Plato’s stigmatisation of tyranny as the most degraded form of government. In effect, the close affinity between ‘the careers of Mussolini and Hitler’ with Plato’s description of the tyrant would not allow for such an idealization of modern dictators on Plato’s part (‘Plato’s Republic and its Use in Education’, Journal of Education, 87 [April 1945], pp. 161–2). Neurath and Lauwerys replied in May 1945, defending further their thesis against Field, arguing that Platonic institutions are much like the Nazi ones; see ‘Correspondence’, pp. 222–4. On the use of Plato’s theory of education by Stalinist Russia with a view to ‘transforming’ bourgeoisie human nature, see Simon Doniger, ‘Soviet Education and Children’s Literature’, Journal of Educational Sociology, 8 (1934), pp. 162–7.
authority, δουλε α so often extolled in the Laws.’51 It needs to be observed, however, that Morrow would reverse his judgment of Plato by one hundred and eighty degrees just a year after, this time challenging both the academic apologists in Germany and the British or American liberal or socialist Platonist critics.52

‘Slavery in Plato’s Thought’ was interestingly the subject of an early study by Gregory Vlastos (1907–91), first read at a meeting of the American Philosophical Association in December 1939. In that scholarly but no less polemical piece Vlastos could not resist the temptation of citing approvingly Farrington (confessing that ‘I owe much to this stimulating essay’), arguing that ‘[t]here is another world-view that is the antithesis of Platonic idealism, and would be persecuted in the Platonic utopia as false, wicked, impious, THE DEBATE OVER PLATO’S POLITICS, 1930–1960 77

51 G.R. Morrow, ‘Plato and Greek Slavery’, Mind, 48 (1939), p. 200; see also his ‘Plato’s law of slavery in its relation to Greek law’, Illinois Studies in Language and Literature, 25 (1939), no.3. For E.R. Dodds, Plato’s Laws is a proposal for ‘a completely “closed” society, to be ruled not by the illuminated reason, but (under God) by custom and religious law’, the institutions devised are means to ‘the conditioning of human cattle’, The Greeks and the Irrational (Berkeley, L.A., London, 1951), p. 216. (Yet, as R.B. Todd shows in his article in this volume, Dodds’ position is odd: a liberal sympathiser with Plato’s anti-democratic attitudes. Such seems to have been also the position of another eminent scholar, George H. Sabine (1880–1961), Professor of Philosophy in Cornell University. Sabine argued that Plato’s ‘enlightened despotism . . . cannot be merely assumed to be the last word in politics’. His omission of law and the influence of public opinion in the Republic ‘simplified his problem beyond what the province of human relations will bear’. But the ‘true romance of the Republic is the romance of free intelligence, unbound by custom, untrammelled by human stupidity and self-will, able to direct the forces even of custom and stupidity themselves along the road to a rational life. The Republic is eternally the voice of the scholar, the profession of faith of the intellectual, who sees in knowledge and enlightenment the forces upon which social progress must rely’. See A History of Political Theory [1937], 3rd edition (London, 1951), p. 67.) According to the Hellenistic historian Frank William Walbank (b. 1909), Plato’s Laws is as much a symptom as a cause of the decline of the ancient Greek world: ‘A strict and ruthless censorship, the substitution of myths and emotional ceremonies for factual knowledge, the isolation of the citizen from contact with the outside world, the creation of types with standardised reactions, the invoking of the sanctions of a police-state against all kinds of nonconformity — this is Plato’s final disastrous contribution to Greek political thought.’ See ‘The Causes of Greek Decline’, Journal of Hellenic Studies, 64 (1944), p. 11.

52 In his presidential address to the Western division of the American Philosophical Association at Ohio State University in April 1940, Morrow did not hesitate to argue that ‘Plato adheres very closely to that conception of the rule of law which is a cherished part of our political heritage’. Moreover, in his ‘generous provisions for appeal in civil cases [Plato] has improved upon the best level of Athenian justice, and the famous idea of a mixed state, with its balancing of powerful forces, lives today embodied in our tradition and practice’. All things considered, ‘Plato has set forth some of the primary conditions of freedom and justice . . . [and his doctrines have] little kinship with the totalitarian glorification of irresponsible “leadership” . . . ’ Morrow, ‘Plato and the Rule of Law’, Philosophical Review, 50 (1941), pp. 123–6.
subversive. It is associated with Ionian physics and the contract theory of the state. It is scientific in temper, empirical in its theory of knowledge, democratic in its political sympathies’. Plato, according to Vlastos, and ‘other of his class [insinuating the Old Oligarch] complained that democracy was much too lenient with slaves’. Unfortunately they ‘never went so far as to charge what seems so evident to us to-day: that a consistent democratic philosophy would repudiate slavery altogether’.

Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) in his account of Plato in the History of Western Philosophy, published almost simultaneously with Popper’s work, draws together a great deal of the anti-Platonic literature. An attack on the Pythagoreans for their fatal union of mysticism and mathematics (which he detected also in the Phaedo) is combined with an uncompromising censure of Plato’s anti-empiricism and obsession with ethical speculation. For Russell, Platonic philosophy (as ‘the vision of truth’) reflected the growth of mysticism and metaphysics as an antidote to sophistic rationalism, and constitutes the first sign of defeat and decay in Greek society due to social and political causes. Plato’s asceticism, revealed in his renunciation of the pleasures of sense, would eventually lead him to ‘appalling cruelties and persecutions’ like Hitler who ‘in our own day’ believes that ‘liberation from the tyranny of the body contributes to greatness’. His political utopia is, alongside his mental philosophy, equally repulsive: the Republic ‘will almost certainly produce no art or science, because of its rigidity; in this respect, as in others, it will be like Sparta. In spite of all the fine talk, skill in war and enough to eat is all that will be achieved’.

G. Vlastos, ‘Slavery in Plato’s Thought’, Philosophical Review, 50 (1951), pp. 303–4. In a 1959 ‘Postscript’ Vlastos confessed that ‘in the twenty years which have passed since I wrote this paper I have learned and unlearned things which would lead me to express myself differently on some topics’, Platonic Studies, 2nd edition (Princeton, 1981), p. 162. The Postscript was added when the essay was reprinted in M.I. Finley, ed., Slavery in Classical Antiquity (Cambridge, 1960). As shown above (n. 33) Vlastos’ involvement in the debate dates back to the early 1940s. In a review of John Wild’s Plato’s Theory of Man (Cambridge, Mass., 1946), he would emphasise once more Plato’s radical dissociation from the logic and ethics of democratic rule. See Philosophical Review, 56 (1947), pp. 184–93.

B. Russell, A History of Western Philosophy (New York, 1945), pp. 115, 123, 135. It should be noted that in his earlier The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism (New York, 1920), p. 30, Russell observed that history presents no parallel so close to the Republic of Plato as the Communist regime in Russia. It is interesting to observe that Isaiah Berlin (1909–97) published a complimentary review of Russell and seems to have then endorsed the substance of Russell’s treatment of Plato. See ‘A History of Western Philosophy’, Mind, 56 (1947), pp. 155–6. On Russell’s political philosophy, with full bibliographical guide, see the recent study of Alan Ryan, Bertrand Russell. A Political Life (New York, 1993).
It should not be supposed, however, that scholars in the 1930s were unanimous in casting strictures upon Plato. Sympathetic views of Plato’s politics, cast in the old idealist style, were occasionally making their appearance. Francis M. Cornford (1874–1943) in his ‘Plato’s Commonwealth’ defended such a view. Plato, according to Cornford, sought to discover a type of social order that shall be stable and harmonious. A social order cannot be stable unless it provides ‘a frame within which the normal desires of any human being can find legitimate scope and satisfaction’. Plato thus outlined the redistribution of wealth ‘so as to level down the distinction between rich and poor’ while not ignoring the fact that there are various types of human nature. The business of education is neither to smooth out natural differences nor to level them up or down to the same pattern. ‘Education should develop each type to the fullest life of which it is capable; and the social framework should provide a place in which that type can make its contribution to the life of the whole community.’

In drawing from Nettleship’s Lectures on Plato’s Republic, Hywell David Lewis (1910–92) argued that Plato’s ideal community emphatically embodied the doctrine of the social contract with its insistence on partnership and the positive function of the State. In a similar vein, Erich Frank (1883–1949) who published extensively on Hegel and Kant, sometime Professor of Philosophy in Heidelberg and in the forties at Harvard, maintained in a markedly sympathetic account that Plato’s ideal state (in which ‘true freedom and virtue could be materialized’) was developed in opposition to sophistic individualism in order to meet the ‘urgent need of finding a way out of the moral and political chaos that he was experiencing’. Less sophisticated but equally straightforward was the defence offered for Plato by Paul Shorey’s pupil Stella Louise Lange (b. 1899) (St. Mary’s College, Notre Dame), who pointed out that ‘[t]he tendency to describe Plato as a snobbish, aristocratic reaction- ary is characteristic of one type of semi-popular philosophical literature and semi-scholarly literary criticism of this generation’. Plato’s ideal state, according to Lange, ‘is democratic in the truest sense’, inasmuch as being aware of natural inequality (of mental endowments) he designed a state in which all would serve according to merit and ability as modern democracies.

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56 H.D. Lewis, ‘Plato and the Social Contract’, Mind, 48 (1939), pp. 78–81. Lewis edited and wrote a number of books in the series of the ‘Muirhead Library of Philosophy’ and he seems to have been a voice from the past, versed in idealist literature, even though he was characteristically critical of Green’s philosophy.  
do.58 The classical scholar Joseph Clyde Murley (1899–1952) of Northwestern University (who omits ‘Joseph’ in his signature), similarly protested against the tendency to identify Plato’s ideal state with ‘the Bolshevists and Nazis’ who have set up ‘some mysterious entity called the state, apart from, and not derived from, the individuals composing it’. Plato instead was a contractarian, even though paternalism and some sort of propaganda exist in the Republic. But they are benevolent in intent and emerge out of Plato’s literary plan to describe the just man and his political role (the just man is also the highest ‘type of human individual’).59

A noteworthy intervention in the debate on the pro-Platonic side was that of the moral theorist Guy Cromwell Field (1887–1955), Professor of Philosophy at Bristol and author of the influential Plato and his Contemporaries (1930). Field acknowledged that in modern dictatorships one may find elements that might somehow be linked to Plato’s political ideal, yet a closer and unprejudiced look at it would show that the philosopher’s insistence on specialization for all functions in society does not undermine the democratic principle but reconfirms it (the Prime Minister and the Cabinet being the modern analogue of Plato’s βασιλικ τ χνη and the guardianship).60

The controversial relationship between ‘Plato and Democracy’ was elaborated from another angle by William Ralph Inge (1860–1954), author of the Platonic Tradition in English Religious Thought (1926) and a noted student of Neoplatonism. For Inge there was an indissoluble relationship between Christianity, Platonism and Western Civilization.61 Plato’s opposition to democracy emerged from his ideal system of values, which in turn sprang from his religious convictions; but it was a critique of ‘Athenian democracy’ (the

60 G.C. Field, ‘Plato’s Political Thought and its Value To-Day’, Philosophy, 16 (1941), pp. 237–9. Field wrote in a note that this was a paper originally delivered to the Classical Association some time before the outbreak of the war. Faced with the terrible events, his belief in Plato remained substantially the same, hence ‘I have not thought it necessary to make any alteration . . . in the original form’. Three years following this publication Field returned with another article: ‘On Misunderstanding Plato’, Philosophy, 19 (1944), pp. 49–62, which intended to rebut Crossman’s view of Plato as the first Nazi. Instead, he argued, ‘modern democratic ideas represent a compromise between — or perhaps a synthesis of — Greek democratic ideas and Plato’s criticisms of them’ (p. 52). For yet another sustained defence of Plato by Field, see The Philosophy of Plato (London and New York, 1949), esp. chapter 10, ‘Plato To-Day’.
61 Similarly Arnold Toynbee called Plato ‘the first and greatest and most Christian of all the Hellenic philosophers’; yet, such an estimate was not a hindrance to occasional accusations for cynicism, militaristic politics and even inhumanity. See A Study of History (Oxford and London, 1934–39), vol. VI, p. 168, vol. I, pp. 247–9.
historical pattern of extreme individualism), whereas for the moderns there is no such thing as absolute negative liberty. Thus Plato’s hypothetical disapproval of modern democracy is not only anachronistic but improbable too.\(^{62}\) The same subject is dealt with by Joseph P. Maguire, who explores the type of democracy condemned by the Greek theorists (including Plato). The δηµοκρατία condemned (‘the irresponsible sovereignty of the popular Assembly’, the reign of demagogues, the use of ostracism, ‘the litigiousness, lack of discipline . . ., sycophancy, or legalized blackmail’, etc.) ‘is by no means the exact equivalent of modern democracy’. In Plato’s Republic there can be found all the superficial marks of totalitarianism, nevertheless his theory of ethics, politics, and education is based on the necessity of subordinating the materialistic and aggressive-irrational instincts of men, which communism and fascism cultivate, to ‘moral rationality’. To both Plato and democratic theory, ‘our universe is a product of reason, and man himself is a rational being . . . He is a free being, in Rousseau’s sense of moral freedom’.\(^{63}\) In a similar vein, Whitney Jennings Oates (1904–73), later author of Plato’s View of Art (1972), maintained that Plato’s insistence that politics and ethics are fundamentally fused offers a model ‘for effective thinking on the true nature and structure of democracy’. Indeed, Plato held the priority of the state over the individual, but he was unwavering in his belief that men ‘are and must be morally responsible’ and education was the only means to the realization of free moral responsibility. But such is also the underlying principle of modern democracy and hence Plato is an indispensable ally from the past.\(^{64}\)

Leo Strauss (1899–1973) joined from another perspective the Platonic apologists. Dealing with the ‘present crisis in political philosophy’, Strauss argued that ancient political philosophers (including Plato and Aristotle) conceived of political philosophy as an ‘attempt to replace opinions about political fundamentals by genuine knowledge concerning them or by the science of political fundamentals’.\(^{65}\) In its struggle to transcend doxa or common opinion.

\(^{62}\) W.R. Inge, ‘Plato and Democracy’, Fortnightly Review (Dec. 1944), pp. 364–70. In his Plotinus (London, 1918), p. 74, Inge wrote that Plato ‘was a poet and prophet . . . The true Platonist is he who sees the invisible, and knows that the visible is its true shadow’.

\(^{63}\) J.P. Maguire, ‘Some Greek Views of Democracy and Totalitarianism’, Ethics, 56 (1945), pp. 138, 143. See also a continuation of this argument in his ‘Plato’s Theory of Natural Law’, Yale Classical Studies, 10 (1947), pp. 149–78.


ion, classical political philosophy was thus identical with political science and intrinsically related to the life of political community. Its guiding object was to establish the rule of an enlightened statesmanship. In thus implicitly repudiating fashionable ideological visitations of classical thought, Strauss defended its trans-historical validity and called for a renewal of ancient political philosophy and in particular that of Plato.

Despite some friendly voices from resolute Platonic enthusiasts, in 1938 Paul Shorey could speculate on the chief causes ‘of distaste for Plato’. Plato, according to Shorey, ‘is supposed to be undemocratic, aristocratic, bookish, antiscientific, scholastic. Some regard him with suspicion as the covert ally of mysticism and superstition. To many wholesome natures the entire rhetoric of poetical idealism and Platonic love is repugnant’.66 In the late 1930’s Shorey might have thought that he was pronouncing a judgment, but considering what followed it was still part of a prophecy.

II

Popper’s Assault and its Aftermath

The most celebrated and the most sustained attack on Plato was the first volume of Karl Raimund Popper (1902–94), The Open Society and its Enemies (1945).67 His indictment rested more or less on the premises of his predecessors, but these were now supplemented with a vast philosophical apparatus. An obvious methodological commonality revolves around the historicist and sociological ‘priority’ of any ‘serious interpreter’, viz., to contextualize Plato (both socially, historically and psychologically) and thus expose him as a class-motivated reactionary. Faced with what he considered as dangerous instability and moral anarchy of Athenian society, Plato envisaged a ‘closed society’ in which progress should have been arrested, a mystifying idea of collective good should have been the absolute criterion of value, and the individual should have been subordinated to tribal prescriptions. It was Plato’s belief (derived from his ‘historicist pessimism’), that the existing states of his times were decayed forms of a primal perfect state, which could be reconstructed by employing autocratic devices, such as censorship, propaganda, racism, autarky, eugenics. Once reconstituted, the ideal state should have resisted change.


67 Popper’s bio-bibliography is immense and cannot be cited here. On his treatment of Plato and its theoretical and ideological background, of which only a skeletal résumé can be offered here, see R. Bambrough, ed., Plato, Popper and Politics: some Contributions to a Modern Controversy (Cambridge, 1967); and more recently Ian Jarvie and Sandra Pralong, ed., Popper’s ‘Open Society’ after fifty years: the continuing relevance of Karl Popper (London and New York, 1999). A very useful general account on Popper is the recent work of G. Stokes, Popper: Philosophy, Politics and Scientific Method (Cambridge, 1998).
A relatively close analogue to the ‘open society’ in antiquity, i.e. an association of free and tolerant individuals, respecting each other’s rights, was the Athenian democracy at the time of Pericles. It was the embodiment of Sophistic humanism and Socratic enlightenment — movements that embraced progressively-minded individuals who had dared to question old moral prejudices and intellectual barriers. But Periclean democracy had its entrenched enemies: the political party of the oligarchs and the formerly privileged aristocratic classes. In effect, it was a struggle between Reaction and Progress. Plato, early indoctrinated with love of Sparta, and motivated by his ‘hatred of the society in which he was living, and by his romantic love for the old tribal form of social life’ soon forgot the teaching of the ‘individualist’ Socrates (the proclaimer of the open society and the first great preacher of critical rationalism) and sided with the enemies of freedom. 68

Plato’s pathological hatred for the actual state of affairs was the real basis of his political programme:

His fundamental demands can be expressed in either of two formulae, the first corresponding to his idealist theory of change and rest, the second to his naturalism. The idealist formula is: Arrest all political change! Change is evil, rest divine. All change can be arrested if the state is made an exact copy of its original, i.e. of the Form or Idea of the city. Should it be asked how this is practicable, we can reply with the naturalistic formula: Back to nature! Back to the original state of our forefathers, the primitive state founded in accordance with human nature, and therefore stable; back to the tribal patriarchy of the time before the Fall, to the natural class rule of the wise few over the ignorant many. 69

The principal elements of Plato’s political programme are based on his historicism and had to be combined with his sociological doctrines concerning the settings for the stability of class rule. Thus, in the Republic he demands (a) the strict division of the classes (the strict separation of the ‘herdsmen and watch-dogs’ from the ‘human cattle’), and (b) the identification of the fate of the state with that of the ruling class. From these two elements others can be derived, as e.g., the absolute monopoly of the ruling class in all aspects of life; suppression of all kinds of innovation; full economic independence (autarkeia) of the state. This programme, Popper argued, can ‘be fairly described as totalitarian’. Those who object to this characterization or are indecisive are deceived: ‘I believe that Plato’s political programme, far from being morally superior to totalitarianism, is fundamentally identical with it. I believe that the objections against this view are based upon an ancient and deep-rooted prejudice in favour of idealizing Plato.’ Actually, ‘it seems to be a

69 Popper, The Open Society and Its Enemies, p. 86.
consistent and hardly refutable interpretation . . . to present Plato as a totalitarian party-politician, unsuccessful in his immediate and practical undertakings, but in the long run only too successful. 70

Plato’s political programme, according to Popper, was dictated by a most dangerous philosophical approach. This approach ‘can be described as that of Utopian engineering, as opposed to another kind of social engineering which I consider by the name of piecemeal engineering’. The Utopian approach demands that only ultimate ends should determine political action, and in the realm of politics that end is the Ideal State. But the utopian plan to realize an ideal state (or to remodel the whole of society along its lines) is one which requires a strong centralized rule of a few (analogous to Friedrich von Hayek’s ‘collectivist planning’). That requirement would effectively suppress any movement for political or religious liberation and may easily lead to dictatorship. Diametrically opposed to ‘utopian engineering’ (or ‘historical prophecy’) is ‘piecemeal social engineering’ (or ‘piecemeal social experiments’) which is roughly the application of trial and error techniques to social and political problems. The latter is distinctive of liberal democracy and does not aim at remodeling society as a whole. Relying on experience, piecemeal engineering ‘would mean the introduction of scientific method into politics, since the whole secret of scientific method is a readiness to learn from mistakes’. 71

Popper’s attack immediately made a deep impression on classical scholars worldwide. From some quarters his book was praised for its extensive and varied learning, his championship of rational thought as well as for its uncompromising defence of liberal democracy. But both complimentary reviews and hostile responses to Popper constituted a vital part of the debate, and are lively testimony to the contemporary crisis of Platonism.

Three sympathetic assessments by prominent Platonists deserve to be mentioned first. According to the political philosopher and Master of Balliol College, Alexander D. Lindsay (1879–1952), Popper’s was ‘an exciting book’ which should be widely read. Himself a committed democrat, Lindsay believed that Popper exposed the ‘idealizing’ Plato who had indeed defended ‘an inquisition and religious persecution’. 72

Gilbert Ryle (1900–76), later author of Plato’s Progress (1966), announced unhesitatingly that after Popper ‘Platonic exegesis will never be the same

70 Ibid., pp. 87 and 169 (emphasis added).
again’. Writing a few months after the surrender of the German forces to the Allies Ryle warned his readers that the ‘survival of liberal ideas and liberal practices has been and still is in jeopardy’. Popper effectively exposed Plato’s irrational prophecies, and showed that ‘[t]he arts of indoctrination, inquisition, political lying and the censorship of opinions and tastes’ are present in the Republic and the Laws.73

Another distinguished Plato scholar, Richard Robinson (1902–96), Professor at Cornell and Oxford and author of Plato’s Earlier Dialectic (1941), similarly confessed his substantial agreement with Popper that ‘Plato was an enemy of democracy, of equality, and of freedom, and that he aimed at the good of a super-being, “the city as a whole”, rather than at the goods of all the citizens’. Nevertheless, Robinson remarked, Popper’s ‘depressing thought’ somehow flawed his book inasmuch as he was not content ‘to point out the dangerous nature of Plato’s doctrines; he must also condemn Plato as a criminal and speculatively attribute the worst causes and motives to his doctrines’.74

Was Plato’s Republic ‘a caste state, based on racial differences?’ Was it a theocratic system? Was it the ancient communist prototype? All these questions, alone or combined together, can be found in several articles published under the impact of Popper’s attack on the ‘Platonic legend’. The epigraphist and archaeologist Charles Bradford Welles (1901–69), argued that Plato grasped fundamentally the principles of communism, and established the ‘pattern of the modern authoritarian state’.75 The Oxonian Michael B. Foster (1903–59) agreed with Popper that Plato’s conception of justice was not ‘equalitarian’, though not with the inference thereby drawn that such a conception is ‘identical with that adopted in modern totalitarianism’.76 Gerhard J. D. Aalders (b. 1914) sounds a similar mode of thinking in arguing that there were indeed ‘totalitarian element and tendencies’ in Plato’s thought, but not the exact embodiment or prototype of the fascist state.77 In replying to Popper, the classical scholar Richard S. Bluck (1919–63) reached the conclusion that Plato’s Republic is not the ancient analogue of dictatorship, but a ‘theocracy’. ‘In Plato’s view the ideal state should acknowledge a divine force external to itself not only as the sanction of its laws, but also as the ever-present guide to interpretation of them, and its Guardians, having constant reference to it,

should put these into effect: it should be, in fact, a theocracy. For John A. Faris (b. 1913), Professor of Logic at Queen’s University, Belfast, Popper has falsely represented Plato’s Republic as based on inflexible class division (‘mutually exclusive endogamous classes’), whereas Plato had provided for education in accordance with personal — and not class — qualifications.

The fact that Popper’s polemic was published almost simultaneously with the end of War World II (it was written in New Zealand where Popper emigrated in 1937 under the threat of German invasion in Austria) proved of material importance in terms of its reception. Initially welcomed by academic or amateur enthusiasts, it would soon encounter the critical verdict of philo-Platonists. The greatest attempt at a complete Ehrenrettung of Plato came from Ronald B. Levinson (b. 1896), Professor of Philosophy at the University of Maine. In Defense of Plato is an amazingly massive rehabilitation. ‘Who would have thought the old man had so much bad blood in him? Defamer of his native Athens, betrayer of his master Socrates, racist, statist, propagandist unabashed, equivocating, man-hating, boy-loving, frustrated aristocratical snob.’ Levinson’s six hundred pages are a meticulous and passionate examination of basically English anti-Platonic literature. Other major responses to Popper and the current anti-Platonic trend are those of John D. Wild (1902–72), Professor of Philosophy at Harvard and John H. Hallowell (b. 1913) who was Professor of Political Science at Duke University.

Wild’s Plato’s Modern Enemies and the Theory of Natural Law is an attempt to challenge the contention that Plato’s doctrines have any connection with modern totalitarianism; it is argued instead that Plato is the intellectual ancestor of modern democracy (an idea sporadically found in earlier defences). Wild’s account is based on the belief that Plato was the founder of the Western tradition of moral realism and natural law philosophy. Plato was not explicitly a political democrat, but his ethics of natural law are embedded in the foundational logic of modern democracy. In the same line, Hallowell argued that Plato supported natural law which came to fruition in modern democratic governments.

78 R.S. Bluck, ‘Is Plato’s Republic a Theocracy?’, Philosophical Quarterly, 5 (1955), p. 73. Bluck was the author of Plato’s Life and Thought (Boston, 1949), in which he tried to investigate Plato’s philosophy in the context ‘of his own environment and the problems of his age’.


Lesser (but no less significant) attempts at defending Plato against the spell of Popperian destructive analysis are also found in article form. Eric[h] Unger (1887–1950) for instance pointed out the ‘curious feature noticeable in the development of contemporary political philosophy . . . [i.e.] the ever-increasing hostility of eminent intellectuals against Plato’, and went on to demonstrate that all concepts used by the anti-Platonic detractors have acquired their meaning in a world which is far removed from the framework of Plato’s political speculation. He concluded that attempts to demolish Plato’s political philosophy, so grossly ‘deviating from the normal course of logical and detached examination’ are emotional in character and animated by personal bias. The moral philosopher Henry David Aiken (1912–82) of Harvard University, attacked Popper for his ‘inordinate and partisan zeal’, defending in turn the ‘dualist’ Plato: ‘It is this Socratic Plato, for whom the polar ideals of order and freedom, unity and difference, personal integrity and collective security, individual conscience and public opinion . . . all have their inviolable rights in any adequate social order.’ Robert Sherrick Brumbaugh (1918–92), Professor at Yale, tried to reconfirm the continuity of the Platonic tradition by exploring Plato’s influence in all fields of human knowledge. Thus, he argued, ‘[b]y every criterion, except the fortuitous one of date of birth, Plato is the most important contemporary philosopher in the United States today’. The studies of Plato which continue to appear are actually significant parts of the advancing philosophic speculation of the present day. Plato’s ever-lasting importance, against contemporary odium, was equally highlighted by the experienced Platonist and editor of Jowett’s dialogues, William Chase Greene (1890–1978). In Greene Platonism reclaims its Socratic lineage, as a critically reflective activity of the individual living in a free society:

[A] bold infiltration of philosophy itself into all our contemporary activities and disciplines, a criticism of their trends and standards and objectives . . . It has no ready formula for the solution of our complex problems of war and peace. But it does bid men examine the very foundations and assumptions of their various speculations and activities in the light of the Good, at the same time that it invites their criticism of itself. Such a seasoned and open-minded Platonism we need today.

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85 R.S. Brumbaugh, ‘Plato Studies as Contemporary Philosophy’, *Review of Metaphysics*, 6 (1952), pp. 315 and 324. This article was a prelude to his *Plato for the Modern Age* (New York, 1962).
A noteworthy defence of Plato, at least for its consistency and some remote idealist echo, was that of the historian of philosophy, Rupert C. Lodge (1886–1961). His triptych ‘Plato on Education’ (monograph), on Freedom and on Progress (single essays) were designed to challenge ‘the present day severe criticism, skepticism, and even contempt’ against Plato. In ‘Plato and Progress’ which comes chronologically first, Lodge maintained that the regulations of Plato’s model city, ‘which represent experience plus idealism’, are perfectly compatible with the idea of progress. What is excluded from it is ‘anything which might mitigate against the orderly development of the rising generation to full maturity’. Chapter XI of his Plato’s Theory of Education involves a comparison between Platonic and modern theories of education. Lodge went on to argue that the widespread onslaught of criticism on Plato for constructing an educational scheme only for the few is not in accordance with ‘the textual facts’. While Plato does not ‘work out in detail a complete educational system for his non-civic classes’ (i.e. the agricultural and commercial population), he ensures that ‘for each class there shall be a type of training which will fit it for the performance of its specific function in the community’. In fact, ‘we can compare Plato’s educational ideal with the educational ideal of the most modern authority of democracy and education. John Dewey defines democracy as primarily “associated living, conjoint communicated experience”’. In a similar vein, ‘Plato and Freedom’ includes a juxtaposition of Plato’s and modern ideas of freedom. The major thesis, which Lodge sought to prove, is that ‘If we read the Dialogues, all the dialogues, simply and without preconceptions’ we shall see that ‘Freedom, the average individual’s freedom of choice of thoughts, of words, of a career, what you will, is never, even remotely, in question’.

In the early 1960s the debate starts to fade. At the time Popper’s attack seems to have been valuable more as a reminder of how ‘noble minds are reduced when passion temporarily usurps the place of reason’. Hallowell would revert to the old, albeit debatable, harmonious link between Platonism and Socratism, contending that ‘Plato looks for a guide to salvation... not in the form of a leader like Hitler or Stalin, but of a teacher like Socrates’. Plato, Hallowell maintained, is neither an individualist nor a collectivist. He certainly does not ‘conceive of society as an entity having a life or thoughts apart from the individuals who compose it’. The moderns’ loss of faith in Plato is due to ‘the loss of conviction in the existence of a transcendent order of truth

and of justice’, which in turn ‘endangers the perpetuation of a free society’.91 The great historian of ancient philosophy, W.K.C. Guthrie (1906–81), commented on the debate — which reminded him of the ‘old-fashioned religious controversies’ — assuring his audience that whatever Popper may have said or the Nazi intellectuals claimed as their own from the Platonic heritage, ‘Hermann Goering would hardly have qualified for rulership in the Platonic State’.92 Laszlo G. Versényi, author of *Socratic Humanism* (1963), would go a step further by reinstating Plato as ‘a friend rather than an enemy of democratic institutions’: ‘Philosophically, he is certainly a better friend of democracy than democracy’s would be defenders, his avowed critics, could ever hope to be’.93

With such a chorus of distinguished advocates, one would think that the ‘Platonic Legend’ was nearly, if not completely, restored. And yet, a scholar like Anton-Hermann Chroust (b. 1907) of the University of Notre Dame, could state in 1962 that ‘Plato’s political and social theories . . . may fairly be called the most savage and uncompromising attacks upon progressive (and humanitarian) ideals that have ever been recorded in Western history’. Encountering such admonitions for ‘order, discipline, and survival’, and as the Cold War and nuclear crisis were already a substantial part of daily rhetoric shaping political agendas and decision-making,94 Chroust urged his readers to remember how deleterious Plato’s political philosophy is:

> Despite the tide of lofty thoughts, brilliant images and persuasive words which Plato unleashes in his socio-political (and ethical) writings, the critical reader cannot help but perceive the sinister message which these works convey. It would be gratuitous to draw analogies with recent events in the domains of political actuality which as often as not seem to be attempts to realize Plato’s political or social program. This much, however, may be suggested: in a time such as the present, when the free democratic societies are once more under deadly attack, both from without and from within, Plato is the last person to whom we should turn for comfort and advise as to how we may survive as free men.95

At the time Chroust was publishing his indictment, William Boyd (1874–1962) — the veteran Platonist and pupil of Edward Caird in Glasgow

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94 The world came close to nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962.
— wrote in his ‘Foreword’ to the new edition (1962) of his 1902 Introduction to the Republic of Plato:

In the years which have elapsed since this book made its first appearance there has been a very considerable change in the philosophical atmosphere. The idealistic philosophy which drew its inspiration from Plato in the ancient world and from Hegel in the modern has lost much of its influence on religious and political thinking. The emphasis in our times is on analysis rather than constructive thinking, and there is a distrust of metaphysical attempts to reach beyond the realm of verifiable experience. It is little wonder that under these conditions Plato, the first great metaphysician and one of the pillar apostles of Idealism, should have come under increasing criticism. The Republic, once regarded with a reverence usually reserved for the Scriptures, has been shaken on its pedestal. 96

A voice from the past certainly, and a reliable statement by one who lived long enough to see the glory and the decline of a philosophical legend.

Closing Remarks

Throughout the years 1930–60 the Anglophone community of classical scholars and intellectual historians showed an extensive concern with Plato’s politics. A crystallized anti-Platonic trait was to a certain degree a continuation of the polemic against philosophical idealism and the so-called ‘metaphysical theory of the state’ — a reaction so eloquently expounded by Leonard T. Hobhouse (1864–1929) in the late 1910s when the idealist movement was practically in full retreat. 97 Palpable ideological diversity and different philosophical backgrounds on behalf of the Platonic critics make, however, generalizations difficult. It is simply wrong to identify these attacks with a homogeneous championship of the cause of individualistic liberalism.

Despite ideological differences critics were, nonetheless, united in their methodology: namely, the application of a contextualist interpretation of philosophical texts. All emphasised that Plato’s philosophy cannot be understood unless a satisfactory account of the specific social milieu and political structure of the philosopher’s age — against which his writings must have been a response — is produced. Such ‘contextual reconstructions’ often amounted to imaginative partisan fabrications, or at best consisted of superficial and ungrounded documentaries. As a result, their conclusions were ideologically based, drawn from the seemingly neutral deployment of facts. Such distorting representations of an overly politicised classical antiquity mirrored,

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through countless invocations of political parallels, the contemporary stock of ideas and the political intentions of the scholars engaged in the debate. Popper, for instance, in applying a sophisticated machinery of sociological technique and psychological vocabulary to discredit Plato, showed himself clearly motivated by a close concern with contemporary politics. From his critique Popper elaborated normative prescriptions for social and economic reform in a troubled era, and his theory of scientific rationality had explicit political intentions.

Eminent or rising scholars like Berlin, Havelock, Vlastos, Robinson, Ryle, Lindsay, and many others joined unhesitatingly Fite’s and Popper’s side. Apart from exemplifying the relativistic nature of thought, their role in the debate is, perhaps, a painful reminder of how complex is the pursuit of an objective and reliable intellectual historiography. The analytic method of modern Platonic studies, dispassionate and coldly academic, arguably owes however much to that memorable crisis of the ‘Platonic Legend’. Wise academics learn by their mistakes. The debate re-opened also the philosophical discussion on the proper reading of texts, which continues to the present day. But it may also be responsible for the decline of the idea that books like Plato’s can be held to be repositories of a political and moral wisdom that could be learned and applied to the modern world, something which accounts for the professionalization of the intellectuals and the increasing confinement of the study of ancient political thought to the academic terrain.98

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