7 Deadly Sins of Plato’s Political Philosophy

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Even though we can consider Plato the most important philosopher ever, there is at least one part of his philosophy that is nowadays almost generally refused – his political philosophy. The main credit for this situation belongs to Karl Popper, mainly because of his well-known books *The Poverty of Historicism* and *Open Society and Its Enemies*. It is hard – maybe impossible – to discuss Plato’s politology without reference to these. There were some attempts to rehabilitate Plato, but not very successful. I think that we should read Plato’s politology in a non-metaphorical way. Although we appreciate Plato, we should be honest to ourselves and admit that he was wrong. Karl Popper repeatedly claimed that Plato is the deepest of all philosophers¹ and that his intellectual contribution was enormous². However, some authors try to find a way out and say that Plato’s thinking was highly conceptual and that he never wanted to put it into practice. For instance, Hans Gadamer did this when arguing that *Politeia* was meant to be an unworkable ideal without practical ambitions³. Against these suggestions we can put Plato’s “serious” style of writing and also his unsuccessful attempt to carry *Politeia* into effect – the Sicilian episode.

To sum up, I believe there are three possible ways to criticize Plato’s political philosophy:

The first one criticizes Platonic realism. We can say that the theory of ideas is too fantastic metaphysics, too close to a religious view of the world. It might be argued that realism cannot stand the test of modern nominalism of recent analytic philosophers. Or we can follow Popper’s approach and say that Platonic realism leads to historicism. The theory of eternal ideas concludes with an opinion that history is cyclical and degenerating and that any change is undesirable.

The second way is to criticize Plato’s objectivistic ethics. It is possible to consider Plato’s conception of justice wrong or to replace it with some new conception (for instance that of John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice*). We can also say – similarly to Richard Hare – that Plato identifies ethical norms with the laws of nature, facts to mere conventions⁴.

Last but not least, the third way criticizes Plato’s politology in the strict sense of the word. We can find political institutions recommended by him unsatisfying or ineffective. In my opinion, the first two ways are unnecessarily general and sometimes they just don’t seem to hold water. The easiest way to show the inadequacy of Plato’s politi-
cal suggestions is the last one, i.e. an analysis of his political aims. This will be the point of my essay.

Talking about Plato’s political philosophy, I will use three main sources: the dialogues Republic [Politeia], Statesman [Politikos] and Laws [Nomoi]5. The trouble with these texts is that they do not deal with only one topic, they are often ambiguous and sometimes they contradict each other. (The main differences are between the earlier Politeia and the later Nomoi.) Regardless of these difficulties, we can formulate seven main inadequacies of Plato’s political works, that I call – maybe a bit harshly – seven deadly sins. These are: i) totalitarianism, ii) collectivism, iii) elitism, iv) anti-constitutionalism, v) utopism, vi) censorship and propaganda, vii) misunderstanding of human nature.

I. Totalitarianism

Plato’s state is totalitarian in many different meanings of the word. In this text, I will deal only with the sense of a total state that Mussolini’s admirers used to call Italy of the twenties. This kind of state interferes in every aspect with citizens’ lives, it creates complex norms regarding the most insignificant details of them. There is a rule for everything: how to behave and talk, what to admire and despise, whom to like and hate. Furthermore, the state incorporates mechanisms of control that eliminate any unwelcome behavior. It is absurd that Plato promotes long imprisonment or death for people accused of atheism, when his beloved teacher Socrates was executed for this very crime (Nom 908b). Plato also anticipated some other features of modern totalitarian states, such as economic autarchy, i.e. national self-sufficiency and independence that was striven for in prewar Germany and postwar Russia. Plato was a great advocate of militarism, too, but we may assume that this obsession was due to the time he lived in. Attica during the civil war was not a good place for a pacifist movement.

II. Collectivism

I use the term „collectivism“ for a theory claiming that society is much more important than its members. This term I find more neutral and convenient than the modern term „communitarianism“, which experiences a kind of renaissance since the 1980s. In Plato’s philosophy, we meet a very fundamental version of collectivism, starting with the answer to the first question of Politeia „What is justice?“ Plato’s notion of justice is far away from our recent understanding. He always bears in mind the good of the society without any reference to individual happiness. This opinion is probably based on noble ideas, but has catastrophic consequences. It is believed that Lenin was the author of the proverb “You can’t make an omelet without cracking eggs.” This sentence expresses all the tragedy of collectivistic ideology: an omelet stands for an ideal society and cracked eggs are destroyed human lives. The usual estimation is that during the first five-year plan in the Soviet Union nine to twelve million people died6. That is certainly too many eggs for an omelet, no matter how good it would be.

III. Elitism

Plato’s elitism is of an epistemological type. Man can live a good life in two different ways: one can have the primary knowledge of the good (επιστήμη) or can have the sec-
ondary seeming of the good (δοξα). This distinction has political significance: the ones with episteme are superior to the ones with δοξα. The social stratification of Plato’s polis is based on knowledge, because only the upper two classes participate in education. The classes are strictly separated and there is no way to change one’s position. No western society has ever known such a rigorous separation of classes, this was maybe the case of ancient civilizations in the Far East. The impossibility of changing classes also means that the ruling class cannot be replaced, surely not without the use of violence. This is how Plato breaks another condition of modern democratic societies, which is the possibility of a nonviolent change of regime. In Plato’s state, citizens who are not satisfied with the government cannot take any legal action leading to a change, because the control is firmly in hands of the upper classes.

Someone can object that Plato, maybe, only describes the common behavior of existing societies. It is said that all – no matter how idealistic – societies inevitably tend to some form of elitism. This tendency, often called “the Iron Law of Oligarchy”, is maybe true, but without any doubt it is a negative side effect of democracy, not a required feature of utopia. Modern societies try to be as egalitarian as possible, even though this does not include economic equality.

IV. Anti-constitutionalism

Constitutionalism is one of the main principles of modern statehood that was brought to life by the founding fathers of the United States when writing the Constitution. It simply denotes the rule of law that everyone has to obey. Not persons, but impersonal norms are the real rulers of the state. This is supported by the separation of powers, i.e. a strict distribution of authority into legislative, executive and judicial. Plato’s polis not only ignores the separation of powers – moreover, it makes exceptions to the laws. The ruling philosophers are not subject to the law, they can even change it ad hoc according to their own aims. The main source confirming this hypothesis is the dialogue Politikos, where Plato suggests that the ideal republic does not need laws at all (Pol 293a-e). A statesman, like a doctor, can do anything for the good of the polis, whatever he finds needful. No law can stop him from promoting his will. One can imagine how easily this competence might be misused, how this unlimited power can serve to selfish purposes of politicians themselves. We should remember Lord Acton’s theorem: ‘Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.’

To be fair, I must add that Plato’s opinion on law is not quite clear; mainly in Nomoi there are hints that in real republics Plato suggests that laws should be observed in every situation. But this probably only means that they should not be changed, because they were given to the citizens by the infallible philosophers who founded the polis.

V. Utopism

Utopism, or – in Popper’s terminology – utopian social engineering, means the holistic change of the whole social environment. We have many proofs of this in Plato’s work, while the most significant are the circumstances of founding the new city. A new polis should begin at a new place and only people not older than 10 years should inhabit it (Rep 541a); only these conditions will ensure proper education of citizens, more
accurately of soldiers and rulers. We can say that our recent political practice is rather Aristotelian than Platonic; it means that we prefer deliberate modifications to large revolutions. Almost every politician more or less accepts the traditional argument of British conservatism that people as imperfect creatures cannot anticipate all the consequences of their actions. That is why we should perform experiments of limited impact and wait for the resulting situation; then we can continue or interrupt our effort. To plan a holistic change seems to be always a bad idea. I hope that the 20th century put an end to political utopia, as we could see at least three examples of utopian societies that ended as hell on earth: Nazi Germany based on patriotic ideology, countries of Eastern Europe following the ideals of Marxism, and Islamic utopia of Iran or Afghanistan.

VI. Censorship and propaganda

Plato repeatedly suggests that it is absolutely legitimate to use lies in the name of the truth. The best example of this tendency is the fourth book of Politeia (Rep 389b), where Socrates implies that although it is unacceptable when a regular citizen lies, rulers can do this for the sake of goodness. We can see that Plato is inconsistent in this point; for him the truth is one of the main virtues, but it can be thrown to the wolves if the ruler thinks it is useful. The ruling philosopher is not a lover of wisdom anymore. I believe that this lack of respect for the truth is one of the main reasons why politics is widely understood as a dirty business that includes lying and pretending. Some thinkers (such as Marxists or anarchists) refuse politics as a whole for its negative connotations. For modern societies this is unthinkable and a politician caught lying is usually punished by resigning from his or her political function. (The case of Richard Nixon proves this, while Bill Clinton is an exception to the rule.)

Plato’s proposal of strict censorship is of the same importance. The polis of Politeia knows institutions of inquisitorial type that control both oral and written culture. At the end of book two, in books three and ten Socrates speaks about a bad influence of classical authors like Homer, Hesiod and Aeschylus. He also makes up an obligatory code of proper writing: a good poet describes the God as good, true and unchanging; he praises bravery; he is not interested in extreme emotions (that is why tragedy is unwelcome); he does not write about fortune of the bad people and misfortune of the good ones. These rules apply to the other arts, too: cheerful music is prohibited, painting is refused as a whole because it is a mere imitation of already imitated things. Of course, all these requirements go against the rules of modern societies that consider any form of censorship incompatible with democratic institutions.

VII. Misunderstanding of human nature

History has shown that Plato was wrong in one more respect, in his understanding of human needs and wishes. The problem is that Plato’s polis includes communism of property and sexual relationships in the case of rulers and soldiers. These two classes do not have any personal possessions and they do not have families in the usual sense of the word, because they share sexual partners and they bring up children together (Rep 423e, 457d). Plato also proposes eugenic sexuality connected with “artificial selection” of children and killing of unwanted new born babies (Rep 459d). Nowadays it is clear that these ideas are not only barbarian, but also that they cannot be realized.
Communism of property which was applied in the socialistic countries unpredictably resulted in a lack of interest in work. It seems that people need to possess in order to work at all, because nobody wants to work hard when the economic results are the same for everyone. As regards the communism of sexual relationships, the situation is more complicated. Biologists are positive that the human species is monogamous, maybe with a slight tendency to male polygamy. All the attempts to break the traditional model of parental family have failed, let us mention at least the Israeli kibbutzim or hippie communes of the 1960s. The utopian model of these communes worked only with the first generation of the founders, whereas their children usually returned to the more traditional model of nuclear families. Trying to reform this, we must fail, because the whole evolution of the human race prevents us from succeeding.

I hope I have managed to prove that Plato’s political philosophy is intolerable and possibly dangerous. However, we should understand that it was a product of his times. Plato wrote his political proposals with an experience of democracy at its worst. After the fall of the oligarchic government, his cousin Critias and uncle Charmides were killed, the later victim was Socrates, too. But personal tragedy cannot be an excuse for an immoral theory. We should not forget that Karl Popper started to write *Open Society* on the day when Germany occupied Austria. After all, what counts are the political plans themselves and those of Plato are not to be fulfilled.


**RESUMÉ**

Plátónova politická filosofie by měla být odmítнутa jako celek, protože je konfliktní s hlavními principy moderních demokratických společností. Je totalitní, neboť se zabývá každým aspektem lidského života; kolektivistická, když preferuje společnost před jednotlivcem; elitářská způsobem, jakým Platón zavádí velké a nepřekonatelné rozdíly mezi společenskými „třídami“; antikonstituciální, protože zákony se nevztahují na všechny členy společnosti; utopistická, tedy odmitající postupné reformy a usilující o náhlo celospolečenskou změnu. Platón krom toho obhajuje cenzuru a propagandu, které považuje za legitimní nástroj prosazování zájmů vládnoucích filosofů. A v neposlední řadě je jeho filosofie charakteristická zásadním nepochozením lidské přirozenosti, což se projevuje především v návrhu komunismu majetku a sexuálních partnerů.