

## DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS: THE SPELL OF PLATO AND THE RETURN TO THE CLASSICS

### AS INSTITUIÇÕES DEMOCRÁTICAS: A SEDUÇÃO DE PLATÃO E O REGRESSO AOS CLÁSSICOS

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O objecto deste texto, relativo a um projecto de pesquisa em curso, é propôr a análise das leituras que fizeram Karl Popper e Leo Strauss da filosofia política de Platão. Muito distintos entre si, ambos os pensadores viram contudo na *Républica* uma das mais poderosas críticas da democracia e construíram interpretações e argumentos polémicos em confronto com Platão.

Hoje há também dois “relatos” que colocam em questão a democracia. O primeiro tem a sua origem nas ciências sociais, que constata certos defeitos inerentes ao sistema: assimetria de informação e problemas de agência entre governantes e governados. O outro, antes mediático ou popular partilha com o anterior a crítica dos mecanismos de decisão democráticos, mas acrescenta-lhe uma visão extrema da política e dos políticos democráticos que justifica a apatia senão o desprezo de tudo o que é político.

As duas leituras, de Popper e de Strauss, por muito diferentes que sejam, partilham entre si certos traços como o anti-historicismo, a não neutralidade axiológica, um certo racionalismo (crítico ou zetético). Procuraremos sugerir neste texto que possuem o poder de alargar, no tempo e no espaço, o horizonte dos debates sobre os “regimes constitucionais - pluralistas” contemporâneos.

**Palavras-chave:** Democracia, Platão, legitimidade política, Karl Popper, Leo Strauss.

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The purpose of this paper, that reflects an ongoing research, is to suggest the usefulness of an analysis of the readings of Karl Popper and Leo Strauss on Plato's political philosophy. Very different as they are, both thinkers saw in the *Republic* one of the most powerful critics of democracy and built interpretations and polemic arguments by contrast with Plato's arguments.

There are currently two arguments questioning liberal or constitutional democracy. The first originates in the social sciences, which point out a number of defects that are innate in the system: asymmetry in information and agency problems between governors and governed. The other is rather popular or media-based but it shares with the first the criticism of democratic decision-making mechanisms albeit adding an extreme view of politics and politicians that justifies apathy or even contempt for everything that is "political".

The two interpretations, by Popper and Strauss, different as they are, also share with each other certain characteristics like anti-historicism, axiological non-neutrality and a certain (critical or zetetic) rationalism. We consider that they have the ability to widen, temporally and spatially, the horizon of the debates about contemporary regimes and democracy.

**Keywords:** Democracy, political legitimacy, Plato, Karl Popper, Leo Strauss.

## 1. Democracy and its discontents

There are currently two arguments questioning liberal or constitutional democracy. The first originates in the social sciences, which point out a number of defects that are innate in the system: asymmetry in information and agency problems between governors and governed, concessions to Populism, cyclical instability, short-sightedness, poor turnouts at elections, capture of the system by bureaucrats or interest groups, etc.. The other is rather popular or media-based but it shares with the first the criticism of democratic decision-making mechanisms albeit adding an extreme view of politics and politicians that justifies apathy or even contempt for everything that is "political".

In fact it could appear to anyone reading the papers nowadays that democracy is under fire precisely at the moment of its greatest expansion. It has apparently more friends on the outside than convinced fans on the inside. It is still unsure whether the recent changes taking place in Arab countries will come to represent the fourth wave of democratisation, but what does already seem to be difficult to deny is that democracy is also seducing the Islamic world, in spite of all the theories about the "cultural" requisites or social preconditions for democracy.

On the contrary, at the same time, within the West the effectiveness of democratic governments is being questioned. Non-elected entities (the IMF, ECB, etc.), even if not amounting to a suspension of democracy as such, seem to be necessary for obtaining certain results. That is, democracy needs to be sacrificed temporarily, because electoral cycles lead to such political short-sightedness, or inconsistency in policies, that it does not have sufficient resources for overcoming “the crisis”, etc.<sup>[1]</sup>.

After all, these criticisms are not new. The difference is that, previously, those who defended the superiority of non-democratic solutions did it in the name of central planning and against the more or less free markets that proliferated in political democracies. Today it seems that we have to choose between democracy and submission to the markets. The alignments are different. But, before, even those recognising that a certain success, or a certain optimism about the results and a minimum of effectiveness on the part of governments, were needed to legitimise democracies, remembered that anyone not prepared to pay the price of his freedom loses it quickly.

In addition, those disaffected with democracy do not stop at questions of effectiveness. Not only does the quality of those elected, or of the political “class”, get criticised. Both from the left, which feels a certain nostalgia for forms of direct democracy, or even the masses in the streets, and from the right, responding to populist worries typical of a “closed society”, one hears prognostications about the fortunes of democracy, which invariably prophesy social tumults, when not appealing to the revolt of new generations without a place in the “system”. Or there is even a search for alternatives to constitutional democracy (and a request, for example, for “true democracy now”), while at the same time it is pointed out that party-based democracy does not have an exclusive on legitimacy.

One possible reaction for a democrat is to defend that the system that allows free reflection, should not be questioned: among “gentlemen”, in a civilized society, democracy is just not for discussion. This is a reaction that is British in style, if not in substance; something like saying that a society is decent, in order to avoid high-sounding words like justice or excellence. But what exactly does this way of underrating the problem mean? It means, in part, that we have spent too long analysing the defects of democracy and too little time remembering that it needs to be cherished. And that per-

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1 I have already tried to clip the wings of certain attempts to “scientifically” justify this false need in the critical book I wrote about *Public Choice*, entitled *Votos, governos e mercados* (*Votes, governments and markets*), but probably too timidly.

haps the extreme view of democracy, that we have tried to describe, has at present become the normal one.

## 2. Karl Popper, Leo Strauss and the crisis of our times

Another possible reaction, however, is to seriously discuss the ideas of those disaffected with democracy, which have been with us for a long time, because they are also part of Western tradition. This, in spite of the enormous differences between them, was the reaction of two philosophers of the last century: Karl Popper and Leo Strauss. Both thought and wrote at a moment in which liberal democracies seemed to be obsolete systems, destined to perish.

In a similar environment a liberal can feel, as Karl Popper describes when writing the preface to the second edition of *The Open society*, like a voice from the past, speaking against an implacable wind that sends his words back to him, because he is unable to descry any reference point with which he can defend democracy, or the rights of man, in a non-democratic country, if it is not its tradition or the conviction of the majority, or the most representative part thereof. Nation, language, citizenship, rights, justice and even rationality are historical and always belong to a tradition.

Leo Strauss shared this sentiment. When he introduced himself to the students and teaching team at Chicago University in Autumn 1949, with his conferences on “*Natural right and history*”, he declared that the “self-evident truths” of the father’s of the American constitution risked being devalued to just another interesting piece of antiquity, or even some antique trinket, speaking in the name of a civilisation that is declining, tottering and unsure of itself, falling into a disqualified relativism.

Even though he seldom took public positions on concrete political questions, nobody would confuse these warning calls by Strauss with the words of a “last liberal”, like Popper, worried with the minimising of suffering, the possibility of deposing governments pacifically and the open society<sup>[2]</sup>.

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2 What makes it possible today to immediately see Leo Strauss as a conservative, of a certain type, is the embarrassing way in which he spoke of things such as: natural law, virtue, magnanimity, the failure of leaderships, the duties of citizenship, excellence, morality or the hierarchy of goods. He even went so far as to suggest that there was perhaps some type of criterion for distinguishing between good and evil, lofty and degenerate ends, a statesman and a despot. Nowadays it is impossible to talk about such things without seeming to belong to a world that has disappeared. It would even be a little disturbing: if we accepted that there are lofty or degenerate ends, it might turn out that freedom of religion and sexual orientation were not based on “equally legitimate ultimate ends”; if the ultimate purpose of a society was the “excellence” of its members, it would be possible to justify public policies discriminating Opera from *Hip hop*

### 3. The spell of Plato: is democracy still a philosophical problem?

Popper's and Strauss' agendas and even their ideals were, thus, very different. Curiously, nevertheless, both chose to explore their ideals by comparing them with Plato.

It was at different moments of their lives, with many parallels, that they elucidated or explored Plato's texts. Popper, who considered himself a man of the Enlightenment, wrote especially when he was young: almost everything he published on the question was finished before he was forty. Until he was about forty Strauss preferred to dedicate himself to studying the moderns, and the majority of his academic output on Plato only appeared at the end of his life: after he was sixty five he hardly wrote about anything except "the Problem of Socrates" and the philosophical and historical questions related to this.

Certainly their interpretations are very different, even irreconcilable. But as many have already pointed out, they have more than one common enemy on the other side of the inkwell: tyranny, historicism, logical positivism, Hegel, Nietzsche. In fact, if they fight over interpretations it is because both of them judge that it behoves to take Plato's assertions "seriously" and they throw overboard any pretensions to "axiological neutrality", to talk face to face with this great thinker from a remote, if not tribal, past. Both agree that the *Republic* contains one of the most devastating critiques of democracy.

Evidently, while Popper concludes that the most urgent thing is to bury Plato, Strauss suggests that we need to go back to the classics. Popper asserts that this is necessary for maintaining progress towards an open society; Strauss that it is necessary in order to avoid a universal state.

These two modern interpretations of Plato are among the most famous and almost no current bibliography ignores them completely, although classicists tend to consider them marginal, if not anachronistic: the quality of Popper's erudition is disputed, whereas that of Strauss is rarely questioned, even if, some say, it suffers from serious methodological and stylistic

songs, whether their words encourage delinquency or not; if it was possible to justify attributes for a politician or a general such as cruel or disastrous, it might seem that there is a defence for "value judgements", capable of distinguishing the Swiss Republic from a black despot, contrary to what Hans Kelsen suggested. Now, this is something we are not inclined to concede easily. In the public arena, in intellectual milieus, in a university or on the television it is a given that all cultural manifestations are equal and, as to the rest, they are just very debatable value judgements. (See references in this magazine, pp. xxx-xxx).

defects. In fact, both handle Plato's ideas as if they were contemporary and not with a love for the antique.

Both interpretations startle us because they presuppose that there is a way of approaching democracy that is not what is characteristic of empirical sociology: measuring inequalities, counting votes by social class, sex or profession, studying forms of participation and appurtenance, etc.. They believe that there is a characteristically philosophical way of dealing with political regimes, based on a view of the whole. Which should not, after all, be a surprise, since the regime problem is one of the oldest of all political philosophy problems.

Can one discuss the question of "best regime" in absolute terms, independently of the circumstances of time and place? Is the delineation of political institutions a genuine philosophical problem? Today we perhaps think that philosophy should deal with more abstract things: happiness, freedom, recognition, values or ideas of justice. Which means that, in spite of the optimism that seemed to temporarily sweep through academic circles, Rawls' return to the question of justice was not enough to close the gulf that had opened in the twentieth century between "desirability" and "feasibility".

In this abyss a by no means small role is played by ignorance of political questions from the perspective of the citizen and the statesman, in favour of a *more geometric*, formalisable approach using models with higher chambers composed of three senators, waiting lists that are mathematised but empty in their core, and correlations between economic development and political stability. Ministerial cabinets, political speeches or the common good do not belong to the enchanted circle of new political science except as epiphenomena (whether as the result of the decline of the middle class or of the positioning of the parties in Hotelling's continuum, etc.).

We follow the hypothesis that it is still possible to learn from Plato' critique, the most devastating critique of democracy, just as how Popper or Strauss studied it. The replies they formulated, they who were among the "friends of democracy" but not among its adulators, perhaps make it possible to see this problem with particular perspicacity, the fruit of the special circumstances in which they lived<sup>[3]</sup>.

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3 This idea nevertheless exasperated Strauss, who considered that philosophers are not children of their time but, at most, adoptive or step-children little loved by their time.

#### 4. Methodological problems: appropriation and the “state of the art” of research into Plato

Appropriating words and ideas conceived in other circumstances, even when the cultural distance separating us does not appear insurmountable, is not a task without problems. And using these authors as guides for reading Plato seems a really problematical enterprise.

The Cambridge school, which usually defines itself with the term “New history of philosophical thought” (Pocock, Quentin Skinner, John Duhn, Peter Laslett, etc.) notes that the history of political thought is an activity “with its head in the present”, appropriating the writings of the great thinkers to extract profit for the present moment. These authors considered the process reprehensible: “we should learn to think by ourselves” (Skinner, 1969) and aim to completely separate history from thought and treat “the political thought phenomenon as a strictly historical one.” (Ibidem)

The texts studied by an historian, they suggest, always require some type of explanation or reflection and a historian is constantly tempted, by the nature of the material, to interpret or correct it, i.e. in a non-historical way. This temptation needs to be resisted. They in fact defend the opposite of the immersion that Isaiah Berlin, or romantics before him, suggested to historians. The danger is that historians end up creating not so much history as a de-contextualised philosophical reconstruction. Are Popper or Strauss really listening to Plato? Or inventing their own version?

Plato wrote first and foremost dialogues, in which various philosophers appear to us in conversation with non-philosophers. The participants vary but Socrates is almost always present, although not always actively. The opinions expressed by Plato’s main voices, even Socrates, are not always identical. Researchers into Plato from the 19th Century onwards often followed F. Schleiermacher’s approach by interpreting these dialogues in terms of the “development” of his thought over time<sup>4</sup>. And many 20<sup>th</sup> Century researchers adopted an (essentially speculative) “chronology of composition”, as opposed to the previous unitary interpretation (e. g. Shorey, 1903; Von Harnim, 1914: cfr. Kahn, 1996), in part because they were thus able to explain this varying of the positions of Plato’s spokesmen.

Classicists in general agree that there are dialogues from when Plato was young, like the *Apology* and *Crito*, in which the “historical” Socrates refutes the other speakers, dialogues from the middle period, like the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, in which Plato ascribes his own ideas to his master and, finally,

4 Taylor (2001), Grote (2004-5) and Gregory Vlastos (1991) and Idem (1981). Cfr. Zuckert (2009).

dialogues from Plato's last period, in which he prefers to ascribe his most mature philosophical ideas to other characters – except only for the *Philebus* (Cfr: Khan, 1996).

Campbell and Dittenberger carried out pioneer work, which led to much “stylometric” research in which particular details in his writing (changes and similarities) are used to perform a “comparative dating”. This dating presupposes a chronology based on the contents of his ideas in certain reference works (Ledger, 1989; Brandwood, 1990). Some particulars, in fact, link Plato's *Cratylus*, *Laws*, *Philebus*, *Statesman*, *Sophist* and *Timaeus* to each other (Thesleff, 2009)<sup>[5]</sup>.

Various researchers have recently recalled that there is no ancient source suggesting any radical changes in Plato's thought (e. g. Dorter, 1994). It is also acknowledged nowadays that, in general, Aristotle is a problematical guide to the interpretation of Plato<sup>[6]</sup>.

## 5. Two interpretations of Plato's program

Karl Popper adopts the received chronology, generally defended at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and resolutely distinguishes between the thought of Socrates and Plato, interpreting Plato's political works in terms of a totalitarian program. This theory, which was much criticised at the time, was also defended later, with nuances, by Klosko and others (Cfr. Klosko, 2006; Bobonich, 2008).

In spite of the doubts he sometimes expresses, Leo Strauss does not differ essentially as regards the dating, but considers that Plato generally follows Socrates' program and, in particular, that it is necessary to pay attention to the dramatic context in the dialogues, given that he, unlike Aristotle, did not write treatises. And he generally tends to interpret Plato's political writings in the light of a conception of the whole that is fundamentally sceptical.

*The Republic* is, thus, in the first case a totalitarian blueprint and in the second a utopian composition which shows the limitations there are in political solutions in a somewhat comical way. What both take seriously is the contents of Plato's proposals and arguments: in one case refuting them, and in the other learning from his pointing out of the limits of the political.

5 Thesleff nevertheless shows that the affinity does not point to any comparative dating; the (almost) only indication for a comparative dating is that *The Laws* were written in wax.

6 Excellent debates on all these questions in Annas and Rowe (2002).



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