



Reversing Plato's Anti-Democratism: Castoriadis' "Quirky" Plato

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Cornelius Castoriadis was a man of tremendous import on the European continent. A seminal social and political thinker and radical anti-communist, Castoriadis co-founded the legendary activist bloc *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and helped launch their famed journal of the same name. Many of his dedicated supporters credit him with single-handedly inspiring the May 1968 rebellion in France. Castoriadis worked as a professional economist at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and was a practicing psychoanalyst and distinguished Sovietologist. He constituted the critical conscience of the international Left for decades until his death in December 1997, in Paris, at the age of seventy-five.

Nevertheless, Castoriadis' pioneering ideas are better known than his name, since his ideas were so radical as to necessitate his writing under pseudonyms, in order to avoid deportation, until he finally gained French citizenship in 1970.^[1] Among his most radical ideas is the unwavering conviction that common people can manage their lives, their communities, and their countries by instituting self-governance. Kings, managers, professional politicians, priests, therapists, and all other "experts" and rulers, for Castoriadis, can neither guarantee people's success nor rescue them from their folly, if they refuse to manage themselves with vision, self-discipline, and resourcefulness.

This conviction constitutes a radical break with the tradition of philosophical ideas about commoners. Since its inception in ancient Greece two and a half millennia ago, philosophy has tended to pose itself over against the common people of their societies, with their *doxa*, their petty, shallow concerns, and their unappeasable appetites. Socrates says repeatedly that he cares not at all what the common man thinks; his true judges are reasonable truth-loving men—philosophers. The ancient Greek term *hoi polloi* translates literally as "the many" but its connotation retains the archaic prejudice against commoners as ignorant, base, and morally barren. Ancient Greek philosophers, in keeping with this prejudice, tend to remain anti-democratic, favoring for rule those with merit over the mediocre many. Both Plato and Aristotle, at their most sympathetic, consider democracy to be the worst of the best, and the best of the worst, of all political forms.

Cornelius Castoriadis' love for the ancient Greek philosophers is undeniable. His treatment of Plato in his lectures on the *Statesman*, even at their most critical, evidence his deep appreciation for Plato's genius. Castoriadis names Plato the first to move beyond philosophical opinion, challenging his reader to choose between the bad (demagogues and sophists who deceive and lead people astray) and the good and just (Castoriadis, 2002, p. 4). He also names Plato the first "philosopher of suspicion," pressing sophists and other deceivers to explain *why* they are saying what they do say, seeking the subjective reasons for their deceitful practices (Castoriadis, 2002, p. 4). Castoriadis sees the "quirky" Plato providing a "second foundation" for



philosophy, philosophy's "second creation," reconfiguring philosophy as research, an endless questioning of crucial things (Castoriadis, 2002, 48, 49, 52, 53).

However as a fervent socialist and political critic, Castoriadis has an equally ardent love for common people. For him, the best state is the one in which the least of the citizens has a significant share of political voice and the greatest opportunity to partake in the "explicit self-creation" that composes democratic life. Each citizen must actively contribute to the evolving forms of the "imaginary institution of society" (Castoriadis, 2002, xviii). Thus, Plato and Castoriadis are opposed at fundamental levels on the question of democracy.^[2] Castoriadis must resolve the contradiction if he is to maintain his simultaneous loves—for the anti-democratic Plato and for the shoemaker, the carpenter, and other common folk.

Plato's *Statesman* is often taken as Plato's clearest statement of his elitist political convictions; here we see ideal governance reduced most radically from the (*Republic's* and the *Laws*) elite esoteric few to an elite mysterious one, the royal man. The guardian class has disappeared, no auxiliaries help to distribute or balance power, no nocturnal council oversees or advises. Ostensibly, in this dialogue Plato endorses dictatorship. Castoriadis' lectures on the *Statesman* offer a convenient opportunity to analyze how he deals with Plato's anti-democratism. Castoriadis presses Plato hard on his political elitism at every turn of the dialogue, but ultimately offers a new sympathetic interpretation from which Plato emerges more compromising, more democratic. Whether this reading is legitimate or colored by his desire to resolve his contradictory loves is the overriding question of this paper.

1. Castoriadis' Quirky Plato

Castoriadis opens his lectures on Plato's *Statesman* with his evolutionary interpretation of the Platonic corpus; four phases of Plato's evolving thought situate the *Statesman* in the final phase, acting as a "bridge" to the *Philebus* where Plato is seen to abandon crucial theories of his youth (Castoriadis, 2002, p. 17-19). Castoriadis reads in the *Statesman* a new metaphysics which appreciates earthbound realities, a new politics for the people and by the people, and a new logic that reconfigures the question of justice from the *who* of fitness for rule to the *how* of just distribution.

Let us examine how Castoriadis harvests a radical democrat from the Plato concealed in the *Statesman*. The dialogue is a continuation of the earlier exercises in *diairesis*, begun in the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*, another "grid-mapping of the highest human activities" distinguishing knowledge from praxis (Castoriadis, 2002, p. 19). Castoriadis, like the Eleatic Stranger, is riveted to the *diairesis*. Making little of the opening lines of the dialogue, he simply notes "a short preamble" and then moves on to analyze the first definition of the statesman.

Castoriadis straightway expresses his outrage at Plato's use of the monarchical idiom [the *Statesman* (*politikos*) is subtitled "On Kingship" (*peri basileias*) and "the royal art" is *basilikē technē*]. He calls these terms "an enormous abuse of language," "a monstrosity for Greece," and a deceit on Plato's part, since Plato knows full well that the Greeks took great pride in having overcome monarchical forms of government, as despotic and barbarian (Castoriadis, 2002, p. 119, 130). The Persians had kings; the Greeks had statesmen.



The search for the statesman culminates in a definition of the “royal man” as a shepherd; but this definition is fragile, the divisions incomplete, and it leaves the statesman’s right to govern vulnerable to challenge by other feeders and rearers. A further division shows him to be a caretaker of a specific herd of creatures. But many arts care for people; the true statesman must be separated or divided from these rivals to properly establish his unique fitness for rule. The stranger monologues at great length, a very tedious and boring *diairesis*, but for the comic absurdity of a species-part distinction that names human beings, not rational animals nor conflicted multifaceted souls, but two-footed, wingless creatures of the class of gregarious and tame herd-stock (262a-268c).

Then, the Stranger suddenly abandons *diairesis* for *mythologos*, and enters into the “first digression,” the myth of the reign of Kronos (268d). Here two cosmic eras are depicted: a timeless age when Father Kronos shepherds the world toward perfection by constant attendance and right measure, and then the “reverse universe” of counter-perfection, under the reign of the neglectful Zeus.

At one time the god himself guides the all (*tō pan*) traversing its cycle in conjunction with it. But at another time, he lets go, when the periods have achieved the measure of the time appointed by him. Then [the cosmos] reverses spontaneously (*automaton*) back to the opposite direction, since it is alive and has a share in *phronēsis* thanks to the one who fitted it together in the beginning. (269c4-d2)

The present era represents loss—of wholeness, divine guidance, and lawfulness—as individual things rush blindly toward natural destruction—age, disease, pain, and death—under the blank eye of a careless god.^[3]

Castoriadis sees revolutionary metaphysics concealed in this mythical tale, Plato’s growing sympathy for the actual over the ideal, which will crystallize later in the dialogue and become full-blown in the *Philebus*. The myth, interprets Castoriadis, witnesses Plato’s abandonment of the ideal world of the Forms (*eidoi*) as the sole realm of the “real.” Hereafter, the realm of historical human affairs will be fully real, though corrupt and wanting political and philosophical doctoring. The image of retreating and careless gods undermines the significance of the ideal as models for human affairs. When the gods fail, Castoriadis’ Plato is admitting an essential gap, “a cleavage in Being,” between the law (perfect gods, ideal forms) and the lived reality of frail material and human things (Castoriadis, 2002, p. 30). This, for Castoriadis, is the first dawn of Plato’s “anti-utopianism” (Castoriadis, 2002, p. 31).

This dawn is quickly followed by another. The “second sailing” for a fresh definition (launched at 279b) sees the Stranger “boringly hold[ing] forth” (he admits at 286b) for seven long Stephanos pages, to redefine the statesman as a kind of weaver. The royal weaver entwines the various activities or arts necessary to the life of the city: “the primitive species, then . . . the instruments, vessels, vehicles, shelter, diversions, and nourishments” (289a-b). Castoriadis finds here yet another concession to reality and another glimpse of Plato’s new metaphysics: all the arts of the city are *necessary*, even those which provide mere amusements to the citizens. Castoriadis highlights this passage as a critical moment in Plato’s corpus: “the humanization of Plato” (Castoriadis, 2002, p. 42).



After three more “incidental points,” the Stranger embarks upon a second digression on the differing forms of regimes (291d), followed by a third digression that declares statesmanship to be a science. The peculiar talent of the statesman is the application of a “real criterion” in judging constitutions, a “scientific understanding” of governance (293c) that renders unnecessary the laws. The Stranger explains why the statesman is not beholden to the laws:

Laws can never issue an injunction binding on all, which really embodies what is best for each; it cannot prescribe with perfect accuracy what is good and right for each member of the community at any one time.” (294a-b)

The statesman, as a dedicated doctor to his materially-challenged citizen-patients, jettisons universal prescriptions, and personally “attends the bedside” of every citizen at every moment, measuring each individual situation as it arises and indicating the best course of action for every challenge. Kronos may be absent, and Zeus may not care, but the true statesman steers the ship of state with the individualized care of the *Timaeus’ demiurgos*, measuring at every moment.^[4] The statesman knows what is best for each occasion because he, like Kronos, embodies the highest form of the *phronēsis* that all things share, the highest form of the virtue of *sophrosune* (prudence) as it pertains to the art of governance—the right handling of situations, the right measuring of appropriate responses.

Castoriadis feigns scandal at the statesman’s bedside manners. He charges Plato with attempting to “fix the things in the city into place, to stop the evolution of history, to stop self-institution, to suppress self-institution,” since the image implies absolute power invested in a single ruler, whose singular scientific expertise makes impossible his consultation with others. Castoriadis pushes the image further than Plato does, claiming that rule and indeed truth are vested, not merely in the godlike *phronēsis* of the statesman, but in the knowledge and the will of this royal man, a will that is not to be reined in, even by city laws (Castoriadis, 2002, pp. 5, 29, 123).

The prognosis seems dim for Plato, but Castoriadis will soon reveal this harsh reading of the dictatorial statesman as a set-up, meant to stage the ultimate redemption of the beloved Plato. Castoriadis makes two calculated interpretive moves to accomplish the redemption: first, the laws are reinterpreted as Plato’s “absolutes” so their abandonment represents a rejection of absolutes *per se* (Castoriadis, 2002, p. 16-17); and second, the impossible ideal of a bedside counselor-ruler is reinterpreted as an admission of the impossibility of dictatorship, the more impossible, the more a city grows. Castoriadis cites Plato’s “lawless dictatorship” as evidence of his (Plato’s) abandonment of absolutist politics, his departure from political elitism, and his surrender to historical reality. Castoriadis highlights a radically elitist, anti-democratic, even dictatorial Plato only to deliver us to a Plato who has overcome all these anti-democratic sins. Having admitted that utopias cannot work, a new “anti-utopian” Plato yields to the social-historical and to the radically democratic.^[5]

The dialogue could well end after this definition has been fleshed out, but almost as an afterthought, the *diairesis* begins anew to shift the focus of the statesman’s weaving from the arts of the city to the virtues of citizens (308e-309e).

Taking the human characteristics of energy and temperance, the royal man assembles and unites their two lives through concord and friendship and, thus producing the most excellent and most magnificent of all fabrics, envelops



therein in each city, all the people, slaves and freemen, draws them together in its weft and, assuring the city, without lack or failing, all the happiness it can enjoy. (283c-285c)

This “incidental point” represents the “principal compositional quirk” (*bizarrerie*) of the dialogue for Castoriadis. The Stranger tells how the virtues are to be blended: Whatsoever is sharper than the occasion warrants, or seems to be too quick or too hard, is called violent or mad, and whatever is too heavy or slow or gentle, is called cowardly and sluggish; and almost always we find that the restraint of one class of qualities and the courage of the opposite class, like two parties arrayed in hostility to each other in the actions that are concerned with such qualities. (308b)

Expert mixing cures fundamental rifts in the city’s integrity, without which “the men who have these qualities in their souls are at variance with one another” (308c). For Castoriadis, the closing mixing analogy encapsulates Plato’s final word on statesmanship. Ignoring the obvious allusion to compulsory eugenics in the virtue-mixing analogy, Castoriadis asserts this final imagery as Plato’s condemnation of prior attempts at political theory “in the *Republic*, as well as . . . the *Laws*” (Castoriadis, 2002, p. 30).

For Castoriadis, Plato is in this dialogue trading in two of his most critical theories—his theory of virtue as knowledge of the forms (*eidoi*) is exchanged for a new view of virtue as a mixing art; and his idealistic ontology is abandoned for process ontology. The political implications of these theory-shifts mean a jettisoning of utopian politics with its ideal city, its ideal laws, and its ideal rulers, for a compromise with reality—an imperfect state with its imperfect laws, incompetent rulers, and faulty citizens, struggling in real historical situations to recreate themselves and their systems anew. The statesman’s weaving and the two types of measure (at 283c-284c) admit that the human historical world, a mixed reality of shifting identities and conflicting attributes, has little to do with the ideal. Human lives are better, happier, for those imperfections and eccentricities finding measure (*metrios*) in communities of just distribution. Castoriadis interprets: “[n]o regulation will ever be able to get a tight grip upon the perpetual alteration of social and historical reality . . . such a regulation . . . kills the social-historical; it kills its subject and its object” (Castoriadis, 2002, p. 31). Plato is

once and for all condemn[ing] the reign of the instituted and seek[ing] the correct relationship, the just relationship between the instituting and the instituted, . . . a Constitution of society that would permit society itself to fulfill this role, which even the royal man, if ever he were to exist and to be accepted by all the citizens, would never be able to fulfill, that of the correct government, therefore of self-government at all echelons. (Castoriadis, 2002, p. 31)

Plato, in Castoriadis’ reading, has, by the close of the dialogue, become a process philosopher, a moral relativist, and a radical democrat.



2. How Quirky is Castoriadis' Reading of Plato?

Castoriadis sees the *Statesman* as a critical turning point in the Platonic corpus witnessing Plato's "humanization" (Castoriadis, 2002, p. 42). He makes sense of, brings order to, this "quirky" dialogue by making three assumptions: Plato posits theories; Plato places his theories in the mouths of chosen interlocutors, including the Eleatic Stranger in this dialogue; and the theories transform over time, thus granting an evolutionary reading of Platonic philosophy. Citing dramatic transformations in Platonic theory allows Castoriadis to resolve the new ideas of this dialogue with contradictory views proposed in other dialogues—before and indeed after it—resulting in the redemption of Plato as a reformed idealist *cum* enlightened democrat.

Castoriadis' democratization of Plato depends on an evolutionary sorting of theories across the Platonic corpus, but is he justified in this reading or is it a sophism—a deceitful misuse of the Platonic *logoi*? To account Castoriadis' reading as legitimate, we must begin by agreeing with Castoriadis' attribution of theories to Plato.

A. Is Plato a Theoretician?

There are great difficulties with this attribution. Plato writes dialogues which stage living philosophy because, as he admits in the *Phaedrus* (258d, 259e ff., and 278a) and again in the *Seventh Epistle* (341b, 344c ff.), he sees great dangers in written discourse. Dialogues are as close as Plato can come *in writing* to overcoming the troublesome limitations in writing—its tendency to harden and blurt out dangerous truths to just anyone, and its failure to conform to the soul of the listener, and fill its peculiar needs in a living language that is meaningful *for that soul*. Any theory-view of the dialogues must first answer Plato's critique of written discourse *per se*. Moreover, if Plato is serious about presenting "theories" to contradict the Socratic doctrine of humility, would he stage his initial treachery of Socrates' doctrine by launching the "theories of soul's immortality" in the emotionally charged setting of the impending death of Socrates in the *Phaedo*? Furthermore, if Plato is presenting theories, why the mixing of literary style? Why close each logical proof and argument by falling into metaphor and myth, since the latter, elusive appeals to the imagination, could only undermine the authenticity of the former? If Plato is rigorously constructing philosophical theories, why does he repeatedly resort to myth, explanations that belong to a pre-philosophical era?

In fact, throughout the dialogues, Plato repeatedly challenges the ideas that come to be accounted his theories; he introduces them with disclaimers and apologies, and with gestures of shame and concealment (such as veiling Socrates' head), to undermine in advance the authenticity and reliability of the positions being explored. Socrates reports some as hearsay, others as secret doctrine, others as opinions of the many (which are never to be trusted for their truth). Indeed if we study the individual contexts and the introductory passages launching the "theories," we soon notice that the explorations speak *to* a particular audience, more than they express the speaker's ideas, let alone Plato's.

B. Do Platonic Theories Evolve?

Even if we grant the existence of Platonic theories, can we grant that they evolve? [\[6\]](#) Once we admit the notion of a theory, then we simply find ourselves faced with far too many of them! Plato seems to launch an idea, take it back, redeem it again, and



then toss it for another, perhaps simpler, perhaps more complex. There is no clear logic to these “sailings” that would grant a definitive chronology.

Take, for one clear example, Plato’s explorations of the soul: at one time, a physical principle of life, at another, a charioteer and steeds, another, a many-headed monster; once, an eerie shade in the underworld; then a mere principle of movement; in a single dialogue, a perishable attunement and then an un-attuned force; now beautiful, then ugly and burdened with moral barnacles; better in motion than at rest, now incapable of rest and always moving, at one time invariable and incomposite; then singular, self-serving and individualistically wayward, then again a fragment of the universal Whole-Soul (*psyche pantos*), caring and embracing all. The soul, after being explored in each of its various aspects, returns to an earlier simpler image; this is its “real image” after all, we are told. The whole exploration follows no logic, and so remains utterly baffling.^[7]

C. Who Speaks for Plato?

Even if we grant Plato as a theoretician and allow that his theories can be sorted chronologically, how can we be certain whose voice, among the many interlocutors of the various dialogues, speaks for him? Plato is a master of concealment, and, even in the *Apology* that stages Socrates’ trial, a historical event at which we know Plato to have been present, Plato doggedly refuses to reveal himself and declare his philosophical position.

One could certainly make an argument that Plato speaks through Socrates, the paradigmatic philosopher, master of the tradition and of Plato’s youthful philosophical experience, whose death provided the motivation for Plato to abandon political life, tragedy, and poetry, and join the quest for wisdom. But in the (dramatically) earliest dialogues, Socrates is depicted as holding no theories. His explorations of the crucial terms of philosophical import invariably consist in *reductio ad absurdum*, demonstrating the impossibility of certain human knowledge that might be declared *theoria*.

If we grant that Plato expresses theories by placing them in the mouths of chosen speakers, can we count the Eleatic Stranger as a worthy spokesperson for Plato, as Castoriadis automatically does? The Stranger is a student of Parmenides, the “reverend and awful” PreSocratic whom Socrates has already murdered in the (dramatically earlier) *Theaetetus* (at 152e). Furthermore, the Stranger does not strike one as the calibre of person that Plato would choose as his mouthpiece. Indeed the Stranger is negatively (if subtly) contrasted to Socrates in fundamental ways; Castoriadis would have seen this, had he more carefully considered the opening framework of the dialogue, always a crucial indicator of a dialogue’s content and direction.

At the outset of the *Statesman*, Socrates thanks Theodorus for his introduction to the Stranger; the Stranger is not so gracious as Socrates, accepting the compliment without reciprocation. The Stranger does not invite Socrates to discussion, but settles for poor imitations of Socrates—the inexperienced Young Socrates and Theaetetus, the Socrates-look-alike. Socrates and Plato are leery of imitations. Moreover, the dialogue’s opening framework witnesses Socrates admonishing Theodorus, a mathematician, for wrongful measurement, in equating the three proposed dialogue subjects: sophists, statesmen, and philosophers are not equal things, Socrates warns. The sophist is the least of these unequals, but, as soon as the *diairesis* begins, we see



that the Stranger has more in common with the sophist than with either of the higher human kinds.

Indeed, the Stranger had already distinguished himself from philosophers and aligned himself with the deceitful sophists, when he admitted in the *Sophist* that he prefers monologue to dialogue. The Stranger cares little for the needs of his listeners; he is not playful and leisurely in his philosophy, as is Socrates, but serious and unrelenting, as is a sophist orator. The Stranger proves in the *Statesman* that he is neither philosophical nor statesmanlike, but of the lesser kind. Holding forth at unreasonable length and “boringly” in his *diairesis*, he evidences his lack of appropriate measure; he may be able to divide and separate, but he possesses nothing of the superior art of “measuring things rightly” that characterizes the statesman and Socrates, who always tailors his discourse to fit its difficult concepts to the needs of his interlocutors.

There is insufficient evidence to allow that the Eleatic Stranger speaks for Plato. Strangers, Plato and all Greeks knew, are under the sign of the neglectful god Zeus, who is a careless guide. Zeus has great skill in the arts of war, is devious and shrewd in martial strategy, but he is a fickle ruler, an inconstant helmsman, and certainly no philosopher. Strangers, again as Plato and all Greeks knew, must be welcomed generously, bedded and fed, and helped on their travels, but they should not be trusted—they may turn out to be gods or they may turn out to be monsters. Plato is neither of these.

Plato shifts from image to image, and from logical “proof” to mythical tale. Perhaps the sole Platonic position of which we may be certain is mirrored in this shiftiness, staged rather than argued, proven, or theorized, performed in the performative contradictions of the corpus. Plato’s tireless explorations can be compared to living philosophical speech, living truth among good-natured friends that fits the needs of the listeners. Does Socrates’ living speaking not mirror the god’s and act out the task of the statesman of our dialogue, who sits at the bedside of every person and leads her toward the moral light?

We only very rarely catch glimpses of Plato, as he evades our intrusive will for his “theories.” We see him in Socrates’ method in the *reductio ad absurdum* of Socratic humility. We witness him in the performative aspect of his corpus, as he takes up each new image, each myth, each logical discourse, much as one might take up a beautiful piece of pottery, turn it about, admire its contours, test its strength, its fragility, its beauty, its flaws, and measure its ability to “hold water.” In enacting exploratory method again and again to investigate matters of philosophical import, Plato is simply practicing the human wisdom that Socrates has taught him is prudent and fitting a philosopher.

It seems safe to assume, then, that Plato never makes a serious attempt to posit theories. We can never be certain of his definitive position on any matter explored in the dialogues, with the possible exception of his position on positioning *per se*, his theory on the viability of theories. His multiple depictions of the nature of the soul, his multiple “proofs” of immortality (misinterpreted from *logoi*), his cities *in eidoi* (cities in the form of ideas, wrongly interpreted as “ideal cities”), a reverse universe, ships tossed at sea, monsters who patrol the deep, orderly parades of gods ascending the crest of the heavens, horses writhing in sweat and blood as they wrestle to mate with their beloved—each of these depictions represents an experiment in thought to

charm the soul of the reader, to challenge our hardened truths, and to call us to our higher instincts and to the philosophical life.

3. Apologia for Plato's Anti-Democratism

Is Plato a radical democrat or is he anti-democratic? What is the place of common people in his philosophy? We do know that the image of commoners he places in the mouth of the Eleatic Stranger is a crude one: ordinary people are herd animals, needing constant attendance by leaders of higher knowledge and skill, if they are to be kept from running amuck. To press the imagery of the ominous myth of the reverse universe, commoners comprise the class of human beings most bound by the material necessity that holds sway during the decadent present era under the reign of the careless Zeus.

We see, from the imagery of the *Republic*, that commoners are least receptive to the benefits of the formative arts—education, gymnastics, music, and philosophy. They are granted no leisure time for reflection in the “simple city” (*Republic* 2.372).^[8] In the second city, they are excluded out of hand from the education that can be expected to better more responsive souls (*Republic* Bks III-VII).

However, if Plato believes that commoners are a hopeless class, degraded on the scale of natural distinctions to the basest materiality of their drives, then why does he have Socrates (*Republic* 3.414b) admit, in great shame, that natural distinctions are a lie? There are no diverse metals in the hearts of men, Socrates admits with veiled head to the scandalized Glaucon. Plato sees no real justification for a state's hierarchical orderings, no justification for the distinctions that keep common people in their lowly places. Indeed, the “truth” of the *Republic* that outweighs the “noble lie” is that anyone of sufficient merit, anyone with the talent and motivation, can assume any rank in the hierarchy that one rightly deserves. Any task, even that of the statesman, is attainable by any person (male or female) who demonstrates the merit that sets her or him apart from the common many.

Plato is an elusive thinker. He insists that we make our own way toward truth. In so far as Plato gives us any hint of his position on important matters, we may assume that he aligns himself with Socrates. Plato, like Socrates, is likely a rigorous meritocrat, neither passionately supportive nor vehemently obstructive of things mediocre—common values, petty concerns, or ignoble people. Common things are not his concern, since they are as incapable of any real harm as they are of any great good; great things, not small, are precarious (*Republic* 497d). Plato admits the democratic state as the least harmful of the worst kinds of states, but that admission does not mean that Plato—and we—must settle for the mediocre. Those who are seeking to institute justice in their social worlds must concern themselves with higher things and greater goods, lifting ourselves from the common to the loftiest ideals.

Modern scholars are reluctant to admit their illiberal tendencies. However, students of history can understand Plato's demand for breaking from the mediocre herd of one's society to reach for higher ideals and more exacting rules of engagement. Ordinary people comprised the “Liverpool 38” who, caught up in their mundane affairs of shopping, walking the streets, and riding the buses, witnessed two ten-year-olds abduct two-year-old Jamie Bulger from outside the butcher shop, walk him, bully him, and thrash him, the two-and-a-half mile trek to the railway line where they beat him to death; no one intervened. Ordinary Rwandans, fired by the



demonizing rhetoric of their leaders, slaughtered their Tutsi neighbors, till nearly a million corpses clogged the roads and the rivers of that paradisaal post-colony. The general herd of ordinary Germans followed Hitler enthusiastically to the “Final Solution,” and not for the comprehensible reasons they claimed in the aftermath. Most recent scholarship (Gotz Aly’s *Hitler’s Beneficiaries*) shows that ordinary Germans were neither bureaucratically banal in their evil, nor ignorant of the depth of Nazi barbarism, nor fearful of reprisals for nonparticipation. Ordinary people became enthusiastic Nazi supporters because they were the direct beneficiaries of Nazi looting of their European victims. Common people driven by their appetites were quite happy to support projects of murder, pillage, and genocide.

Plato recognizes what every corrupt leader knows, every trainer in the military, every war-mongering president, every genocidal regime: only a great mind can concoct great schemes of creation and destruction, but those schemes can only be realized by conscripting masses of willing executioners—mindless, common, uneducated people who follow their appetites and their leaders as blindly as herd animals, and rarely ask moral questions.

Castoriadis is a great thinker, as he was an exemplary citizen-activist laboring for political and social justice. However, as a scholar of Platonic philosophy, he sadly misses the mark. His reading of Plato as a radical democrat, overcoming his severe elitist convictions as he reaches philosophical maturity, is insincere and unjustified by the text. It constitutes a sophism. But perhaps Castoriadis is less interested in accurately portraying the ancient thinker’s political ideas than in highlighting the gaps between political theory and Western democratic realities. Perhaps his “quirky” reading of Plato’s *Statesmen* is meant to shock and scandalize the reader for the sake of his (Castoriadis’) higher purposes: to prod us all-too-apatetic consumers toward political awakening, to compel us toward fully engaged, passionate, self-instituting democratic citizenship.

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[1] Castoriadis was born (1922) in Constantinople and raised in Athens. In the radically polarized atmosphere of wartime Greece, the young Castoriadis joined the most left-wing Greek Trotskyite faction, and from his youth faced threat of death from both fascists and communists.

[2] Pierre Vidal-Naquet highlights the fundamental opposition between Plato and Castoriadis, in his foreword to Castoriadis' book on the *Statesman* (Castoriadis, 2002. xiii-xviii). He notes that Castoriadis celebrates the immortal contribution of the Athenians as their integration of historicity into their political forms, over against Plato, for whom the statesman's most crucial task is to block the historical process.

[3] The fallen age echoes Hesiod *Works and Days* (lines 170-200) and also echoes Plato's *Phaedrus* (246a ff.) where individual soul breaks off from the Whole-Soul.

[4] In Hesiod's myth depicting the ages of mortals, too, Kronos' guardian daemons, resurrected from an earlier golden age, counsel and protect the later, imperfect humans. (*Works and Days*, lines 109-124)

[5] Castoriadis then extrapolates this yielding toward the most extreme possibility: "self-government at every echelon of society" (Castoriadis, 2002, p. 31).

[6] Martha Nussbaum sees Plato evolve from a hardened idealist to a passionate, realistic lover of faulty human things, but she cites the moment of transition between the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, explaining that Plato's newfound erotic love for Dion of Syracuse teaches him the "fragility of goodness" and opens him to truths about beauty, love, and the human condition that could not be gleaned from rational contemplation of the forms (M. Nussbaum, 1986, pp. 189-197). B. A. G. Fuller too supports an evolutionary view of Plato, yet his reading leads to an altogether opposite conclusion to Castoriadis': Fuller sees Plato moving from a youthful flexibility in mystical ontological speculation toward a hardened absolutism. Far from gaining a sudden appreciation for reality, Fuller thinks "Plato's mysticism grows [increasingly] puritan [from his middle-aged writings such as the *Statesman*] and finally fanatic in the *Laws*" (B. A. G. Fuller, 1931, pp. 281-82). Not all scholars accept the evolutionary reading, however. Edward Urwick sees Plato's politics as *consistently* "perverse and unreasonable," "hopelessly reactionary" and "absurdly ideal" throughout the entire corpus. Urwick charges that Plato is "forever harking back to a golden age where human beings lived, like veritable children, in complete submission to divinely wise guides."^[6] Urwick, as many other scholars, does not understand Plato to ever abandon his utopist tendencies. Though Plato may, at one time, mull over society and its ills (*Republic*), at another explore the nature of best governance (*Statesman*), and at yet another carve out the contours of the second best state (*Laws*), Plato remains constant in his politics. According to Urwick: "No other politics interests [Plato] in the least . . . his interest is not in the laws but in the [utopian] goal which is his vision" (Urwick, 1983, p. 45).

[7] Equivocation, modal fallacy, ontological mismatch, and special pleading are but a few of the many faults of the six "proofs" of its immortality. T. M. Robinson notes: "The remarkable thing is that the same Socrates who is so adamant about correctness of definition in ethical discourse in the so-called 'Socratic dialogues' makes so little attempt to give a coherent, internally consistent definition of the soul in the *Phaedo*."



T. M. Robinson (1970), p. 32. It is absurd to imagine that a thinker of the stature of Plato failed to notice the faulty logic of his own arguments, or is attempting to deceive us by slipping us logically faulty and mutually-contradictory “theories.” Huntington Cairns assures us in his Introduction to the *Parmenides*: “[Honesty] is only what is to be expected from Plato, never out to defend his own views, always with one object alone, to know the truth.” Huntington Cairns, Introduction to *Parmenides* in E. Hamilton, H. Cairns (1989), p. 920.

[8] Even in the simple city, the one most pleasing to Socrates, the worker class is admonished to mind their own business, keep to their specific labors, and refrain from wasting their time in the marketplace, waiting about and mixing with each other, no doubt a sure occasion for getting into trouble and hatching plots of revolution (*Republic* 2.372).

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