

# Plato's Political Philosophy and its Assessment in the Discourse of Modern Political Science

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Plato's doctrine of the ideal state is the first form of political philosophy in the written history for European thought. The influence of Plato on the formation of political philosophy cannot be overestimated, since its further development in one way or another was based on the discourse and methodology that was set by his dialogues. This study aims to identify common discourses and dialectical foundations of the most influential modern schools of political philosophy converging in the ideas of Plato. Also, the study is aimed at identifying the main forms in which the philosophical ideas of Plato function in modern political philosophy in an explicit and implicit way. The contribution of the research and its novelty lies in the disclosure of the implicitly immanent features that connect political philosophy with the ideas of Plato as its primary source.

**Keywords:** behaviorism, constitutionalism, Plato, political philosophy, polity, rational choice

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## INTRODUCTION

The political doctrine of Plato is presented mainly in the dialogues 'Republic' and 'Laws', although it is also reflected in many other dialogues, where questions of friendship, eros, polity, duty and other important concepts of his philosophy are revealed (Fallis 2021; Wise 2021). Among the ideas that underlie Plato's political philosophy, researchers identify as the most important two: justice and virtue, which are consistently discussed in the largest number of dialogues and are the basis of ideas about the ideal social structure (Cairns 2019; Garver 2019; Kasimis 2016; Sentesy 2020).

For the most part, Plato's ideas were rethought by his direct follower Aristotle in the spirit of rationalism and empirical research. This movement towards rationalisation to a greater extent captured precisely the political philosophy of Plato, which, as it seemed, in an obvious way contradicts the observed empirical reality. The formation of the main political schools of understanding politics in the 20th century is associated with rationalistic currents that gravitated towards empirical comprehension of politics and its sociologisation (behaviorism, structuralism, institutionalism and the theory of rational choice) (Harold 2017; Strauss 2017). Perhaps it was precisely in connection with this tendency to rationalise the understanding of

political phenomena that Plato's objective idealism in the middle of the 20th century was perceived as the source of the ideology of fascism and totalitarianism in general (Abdolahpour Chenari 2019; Orwin 2018; Zheng 2021).

It should be mentioned that, according to many researchers, a significant irrational current in philosophical thought, as well as conservatism and liberalism, as well as their more modern currents, are also closely connected with the traditions of Platonic political philosophy (Strauss 2022; Wise 2021). Conservatism saw in Plato's politics the organisation of society, first of all, based on tradition and values, which are considered unchanged (Callahan 2019). Liberalism was inspired by Plato as the forerunner of most of the criticisms of core liberal values, such as individual freedom, conduct and democracy. On the other hand, liberal thinkers relied on Plato's ideas of personality and soul as personifications of the ideas of personal freedom (Fraistat 2021).

From this point of view, one can even consider the parallels between the ideas expressed by Plato and his description of 'political reality' and modern trends that are fundamentally changing the political landscape and ideas about it. Development of new totalitarianism, rejection of the idea of democracy as an inevitable goal of the development of society and liberal democracy as the 'end of history'. The most influential trends in political philosophy of the 20th century either rely on Platonism as the basis for their own criticism, or use it as an operational tool for their internal discourse (Landemore 2021; Olssen 2021; Sharpe 2021). Political ideas are realised in two ways, implicit and explicit. Implicitly, when these ideas are directly discussed within the framework of political discourse, they are based on them and the bearers of the discourse realise their connection with the ideas of Plato. This connection can be both in the form of commitment and in the form of criticism when Plato's ideas are repelled, opposed or denied. The implicit realisation lies in the fact that the same thing happens unconsciously when the bearers of political discourse either do not realise the connection with Platonism, or do not consider it necessary to explain it for some reason (Sharpe 2021; Strauss 2017).

At the same time, Plato and his works or ideas are often not mentioned, even in those cases when researchers eventually come to the same conclusions that were formulated in general by Plato. Modern trends in political thought need to reveal the deep sources and general phenomena of their discourse in order for further searches in political sciences to be more fruitful and adequate to the tough challenges that society and the state face in the 21st century.

## METHODS AND ASSESSMENT

Many modern researchers think entirely within the universalised discourse of Plato, which was based on the reality of completely ordinary and predictable social relations. Thus, by the very fact of belonging to the focus of Platonic discourse, they confirm the reliability, strength and stability of the world of Plato's ideas, despite the long history of overcoming it in political philosophy (Leung 2022; Strauss 2022). The study is based on the analysis of the existing expressed philosophical and political discourse, and therefore uses the hermeneutic research method through the analysis of ideas and texts in their historical interpretation. The study of historical connection occurs through the prism of the analysis of interpretations proposed by other interpreters, which demonstrates how the hermeneutic connection of the Platonic ideas proper with their refraction by further interpreters (Rosfort 2019).

Researchers should avoid the involuntary negative idealisation of Plato, which manifests itself in virtually all of his later commentators and opponents (Salkever 2020). The political philosophy of Plato, strictly speaking, is a historical phenomenon precisely in the meaning of this term, as dialectical materialism understands it. Considering Plato's ideas and discourse hermeneutically through the prism of phenomena that for Plato were in the distant future, it must be remembered that Plato could not comprehend the things that modern philosophers try to comprehend through the prism of Platonic ideas. Plato historically belonged to a world that was at the slave-owning stage of development, had a certain level of technical perfection, handled a certain amount of data, and all this influenced Plato's thought about society. It is difficult to expect that Plato's ideas correspond to the discursive problems presented by modern capitalism, because Plato knew nothing but slavery and his usual law and economics. In the same way, Plato did not observe the sequence of revolutions from France to Russia, and moreover, did not know the very concept that transformed the world of social and political understanding of reality. Therefore, the influence of Plato's ideas and his assessment by modern currents of political philosophy should be considered very carefully, both from a hermeneutic point of view, and from the point of view of applying his discourse to contemporary problems.

Analysing the assessment of Plato by modern currents and schools of political philosophy, in this study the author relies not on citing and analysing individual statements of representatives of these schools about Plato or his ideas, but on the hermeneutic connection and historical dialectical connections of ideas formulated in the 20th century with Plato's ideas. The statements of philosophers about Plato can be an important and significant discourse for understanding the philosophical heritage of Plato and its reflection in the philosophising of subsequent eras. However, the subject of the research presented here is to a greater extent the current state of political philosophy and its significant connections with its origins, because Plato cannot be perceived otherwise than as the source and beginning of political philosophy per se. By analysing the refraction of the concepts of 'Republic', 'Laws' and other dialogues in views that claim to understand the modern world of polity, we hope to recognise the movement of political thought that governs society.

## PLATO IN DISCOURSES OF MODERN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

### Constitutionalism

One of the main problems, which was posed by the early constitutionalists, is whether democracy is a consequence of economic development, or the victory of democracy leads to an acceleration in the achievement of social welfare (Polin 2019). This issue is unambiguously resolved within the framework of Marxist theory and sociology, since the development of the means of production precedes the formation of certain economic relations and requires the emergence of new forms of such relations (Rockmore 2021). Accordingly, only with the formation of an appropriate economic basis, namely, the emergence of a structured society in a certain way, does democracy appear. But recognising the dominance of the role of the economic base before the formation of forms of social relations and forms of political structure, dialectical materialism, neither in the classical Marxist form, nor among neomarxists, does not insist on a high level of economic development and welfare as the conditions for the emergence of democracy (Singpurwalla 2021). Indeed, the various forms of

direct democracy in ancient Greece, or representative democracy in Rome, did not presuppose general prosperity and were successfully held in difficult times when wealth was falling. The many tyrannical empires both in the Ancient World and in the Middle Ages flourished for centuries without even knowing the rudimentary forms of democracy (Sharon 2019).

For our consideration, the very formulation of the above question is important, and Plato implicitly set the discourse of the relationship between welfare and democracy in the 'Republic', offering his proof that any form of government is doomed to degeneration, and democracy is the weakest of these forms (Cammack 2021; Kasimis 2021). If any form of polity degrades, then it does not depend on social wealth and does not even depend on the distribution of this wealth in society, that is, on the class structure of society. For Plato, the organisation of society and government lies in the nature of the people who make up society, so he sees the solution in the form of an ideal state only in the distribution of castes, respectively, the inclination to a certain type of behaviour and organisation of life from birth. The most important thing for understanding Plato is that in his ideal society a person's place is determined not by social status, not by subsequent education and not by merit, but by natural innate characteristics and perhaps their upbringing or social conditioning (Amat 2019). In fact, teaching and pedagogy as a whole plays a dual role: separating and supporting. In the early stages of learning, it allows you to identify aptitude and separate members of one caste from others; and then performs a supporting function, teaching everyone in accordance with his natural preferences (Kasimis 2016).

We can say that the entire subsequent history of constitutionalism as a trend in political philosophy stems from a reaction to Plato's confidence in the inevitability of corruption of any type of state structure. At the same time, the constitutionalists started from two inevitabilities: the inevitability of the degradation of any social structure to its corrupt form of 'rule of one or a few', on the one hand, and from the fact that Plato's 'ideal state' cannot be realised, on the other. The state of Plato expects a radical change in the essence of the people who make up society due to their separation, limitation and division into groups (sages, warriors and others). If Plato, as the researchers point out, considered this to be quite realisable, and even applied his own conditions in an attempt to realise his ideal of a correct device, then the constitutionalists already took it for granted that this was impossible (Cammack 2021; Okike 2017). If we accept both of these premises as a basis, there is nothing else left but to look for a structure of relationships in society that would not allow degradation to occur while maintaining the same nature of people that they had before.

## **Behaviourism**

Behaviourism may seem to be the only direction of political philosophy that completely escaped the influence of Plato's ideas due to the attempt of behaviourists to bring the natural-scientific statistical and empirical research apparatus into the sphere of politics (Mróz 2018). Rationalism in the logic of 'Republic' and 'Laws' is not always obvious, but a number of researchers reasonably insist that Plato's observations are based not on an abstract idea, but on a consistent study of empirical material alive for him and his era. The history of the Athenian Union and the war with Sparta provided for the author of the 'Republic' rich and fresh in the memory of the living participants historical material of the change of forms of government and their reasons, argumentation for criticising both democracy and tyranny (Cammack 2021; Doyle 2020; Seery 2019). Despite the fact that behaviourists, based on their own methodology, practically do not mention Plato and move away from discussing his generalisations, which

from their point of view look intuitive, it is difficult to deny Plato that his conclusions are based on empirical material and generalisation of experience, and not on a set of ideas that should describe social and political reality (Backman, Cimino 2022; Sari 2023).

One of the later behaviorists, S. M. Lipset, rediscovering the political class after Marx from the point of view of behaviourist methodology, expressed his belief that it is the social class that is one of the main determinants of political behaviour (Smelser, Lipset 2018). Moreover, sociological studies of behaviourists came to this conclusion based on the dependence of political party preferences on the preferences of parents and social conditions and the economic context of the masses who showed certain preferences (Peters 2019). Plato does not yet consider classes, but understands the presence of groups united by interests, but he comprehends the behaviour of these groups not through the prism of economics, property, or even power in terms of position and degree of dominance in society, but from the point of view of virtue and justice.

Both virtue and justice are provable and are not ideas dependent on the consciousness or position in society of an individual. Long-term consideration of the question of justice by Socrates in the dialogue 'Republic' leads to an understanding of the absoluteness of these ideas and the rejection of the relativistic views of Socrates' opponents (Sentesy 2020). If these most important ideas are cognisable for any person and are unchanged regardless of the personal context of each human, then belonging to social groups with certain interests is determined by only two factors: 1) natural abilities and natural innate inclinations and 2) the pouring or lack of philosophical education, allowing a person to know ideas that exist independently of him. These ideas should guide his/her behaviour in polity, and if they are properly cognised, the polity will be fair, and the state will be ideal (Cairns 2019).

Behaviourists, considering behaviour, do not comment on its nature, but try to predict the results of the behaviour. By rejecting Plato's idealistic poetic philosophy and refusing to regard ideas as the basis of politics, behaviourists find themselves dependent on Plato as the ground from which they start, and at the same time develop the methodology that served Plato himself – that is, empirical observation.

### **Rational Choice Theory**

The theory of rational choice is, according to many modern researchers, the dominant trend in political philosophy (Geddes 2018). This approach to political practice and to theorising is closely related to Platonism, and often refers to its ideas as a starting point in the search for an adequate understanding of polity. The understanding of rationality is often formed from utilitarian theory and the concept of the 'invisible hand of the market', that is, political economic theories (Bosworth 2021). The current state of the theory of rational choice no longer elevates political phenomena exclusively to rationally acting individuals. The rational choice model has a heuristic value already because it is confirmed by the observed facts (Geddes 2018; Opp et al. 2019). A number of studies, for example, the often-mentioned phenomenon of rent-seeking, directly intersects with the behaviour described in Plato's dialogues as one of the most important reasons for the degradation of successively different types of political structure. In modern theory, 'rental gains' are understood to mean a situation where interest groups with some kind of monopoly persuade governments to protect their dominant positions through a regulatory process. Plato's description is devoid of the definitions developed by later sociology and political philosophy, but it says the same: those who gain access to the distribution of wealth and management tend to keep them for themselves and prevent

others from taking them away or reaching an equal position (Bosworth 2021; Opp et al. 2019). Mueller's conclusion in his short review of the literature on rational choice appears to be a more modern rendition of the 'Republic' part. He writes that the best and simplest way to avoid the problem of pursuing rental benefits is to avoid introducing institutions that create sources of them. Those regulatory systems and those regulatory bodies that push (lead to) the pursuit of rental benefits and sometimes provide for their existence in the form of a Militant Democracy (Lührmann 2021). Plato did not know 'institutions', for him the most natural and accessible institutional means was the nature of man. In addition, Plato does not trust institutions, demonstrating that each of the institutions he knows, be it a gathering of citizens (democracy), the will of the richest few (oligarchy), military power in the hands of one (tyranny), equally does not give the desired result, that is, a just society. Plato abandons institutions, and the institutionalists, and after them the followers of rational choice, abandon virtue, due to the fact that it is not rationalised.

At the same time, the adherents of this theory, for example, Riker, come to the conclusion that since the governance system of the strong majority is subject to manipulation, this justifies the introduction of strong constitutional restrictions, which are implemented by the judicial order, similar to the practice of the Lockhart times in the US Supreme Court (Riker, Zavoina 2019). This typical transition from democracy to tyranny is even directly described by Plato in 'The Republic', and even with an indication that the tyrant can use the court to restrict the will of the majority against the stupidity committed by this majority (Cammack 2021).

In a strange way, rationalistic critics of Plato's idealistic concepts commit the denial of negation predicted by dialectics and return to Plato's conclusions at a new round of evolution of the notions of polity (Hampton 2018; Longino 2020; Thelen, Mahoney 2015). By abandoning the idea of virtue and trying to evaluate political phenomena with empirical tools, researchers get about the same picture that Plato received and come to similar conclusions. But for Plato, as has already been said, there were no 'institutions', but only people who carried out politics (Peters 2019). The emergence of institutions as phenomena representing political functions, but abstracting from a specific person in politics, can be viewed as a step of democracy on the next round of the dialectical development process. In this view, power for all (as we consider democracy in the broadest discourse of this concept) is abstracted from its carrier to the function performed, embodied in the institution (Boner 2018; Strauss 2017).

Thus, here we observe the effect of repulsion from the idealistic ideal of Plato towards rationality, which, through the dialectical process of negation of negation, leads to a return to Plato's ideas at a new stage, conditioned by new forms of political life.

## **Marxism and Fascism**

The harshest critic of Plato was K. Popper, and it was his view of the ancient philosopher as almost the herald of fascism, who opposed democracy and an open society, that for a long time determined the angle from which Plato's political philosophy was considered (Zheng 2021). Nietzscheism is naturally considered the source of the political ideas of fascism, and the views expressed by Popper in his criticism of Plato surprisingly coincided with Nietzsche's criticism of Plato. The Nietzschean roots of such a reading of a number of the most important themes of the 'Republic' and 'Laws' seem obvious to many modern researchers of Plato's philosophical heritage (Marren 2021). First of all, this manifested itself in Plato's attitude to art, to the expression of public opinion and his harsh criticism of democracy (Garver 2019; Klein, Schillinger 2021; Landemore 2021). Nietzsche sought in Plato an early antique

reinforcement of his critique of the lack of will of democracy and its weakness, which does not allow the 'superman' in his understanding to manifest itself (Bett 2019). On the other hand, Marxist criticism of Plato also often singled out two main claims against him: for his criticism of democracy, for his idealism, which was at odds with empirical materialism legitimised by Marxists (Egyed 2022).

In fact, Plato's ideas are very close to the traditional discourse of China and India, and a number of researchers noted the striking closeness of Plato's ideal state to the ideology of varnas in the Vedic tradition, and the ideology of control over art is almost an accurate quote from Confucius, who noted that music should be controlled, for it is capable of destroying the state if used improperly (Hu, Jia 2021). In this case, Popper's criticism of Plato has the features of the same mistake that was mentioned above: one should remember the historical nature of any philosophising. We go Plato corresponded to those empirical observations of the life of ancient society, which were carried out not only by him, and it is not surprising that with similar initial conditions, in different local geographic points, thinkers came to similar conclusions.

And if the connection of Plato with the ideology of fascism attributed to him by a number of Popper's followers is an obvious aberration of distance and a methodological error, then criticism from Marxism is more serious. Refusing to recognise the proto-fascist ideology in Plato's Republic, or to see it as an enemy of an open society, we use a dialectical and historical approach. And it was from the point of view of this approach that Marxists criticised Plato as the founder of subjective idealism, who could not recognise the material, economic and social roots of the phenomena that he was trying to generalise (Zheng 2021). If Popper and many other researchers, who accepted his point of view without any special clarifications, thought in the categories imposed by Plato, relying on his ideals of society, without even realising it, then the Marxists criticised Plato more consciously. Their claims to Plato were based on methodology, not content. An attempt to rely on ideas that are not based on the basis of real life, with its forms of relations, means of production and economic incentives, inevitably leads to inadequate solutions to the problems of modelling an ideal social structure. From the point of view of Marxist criticism, Plato's 'proto-fascist' caste society with the maximum restriction of free will came about precisely because of an attempt to make virtue the basis of social structure, as an abstraction that is the same for all (Rockmore 2021).

Fascism and Marxism represent two more original forms of relations between later thinkers and Plato's basic political ideas. Fascism operates with the superficial content of Platonic ideas, in fact, ignoring the underlying ideas of one virtue and justice for all, as well as the idea of selfless service to society as the basis of good. Marxism rejects the idealistic methodology, finding in it the cause of a dangerous error that creeps in when trying to build a 'state according to Plato' in reality. These two different political doctrines are considered here together in relation to Plato, because they both consistently rejected the political doctrine of Plato, at the same time, relying on his ideas.

## CONCLUSIONS

The ideas of Plato's political philosophy continue to be present in an explicit and implicit form in all the most influential modern trends in political philosophy. The form of existence of Platonic ideas is determined by two main approaches. Plato's ideas about the state, justice, cyclical changes in society, the inevitability of degradation of any form of arrangement of society to tyranny, criticism of democracy and ideas about an ideal society set the sequence of discourses within which most modern trends in political philosophy exist and develop.

The questions posed by Plato and the problems posed continue to generate new answers or attempts to evade these answers, which become the discursive basis for the significant views of the schools of political philosophy. The second form of existence of Plato's ideas in modern political philosophy is manifested in the fact that these schools start from the teachings of Plato and, implementing the basic principles of dialectical development, return to his idea at a new evolutionary stage.

The contribution and significance of this study is to return the teachings of Plato to the place that it actually occupies at the basis and at the root of all influential schools of political philosophy of our time, and thus to reveal the common roots of the discourse of modern politics.

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## Platono politinė filosofija ir jos vertinimas šiuolaikinių politikos mokslų diskurse

### *Santrauka*

Platono doktrina apie idealią valstybę yra pirmoji politinės filosofijos forma rašytinėje Europos istorijoje. Neįmanoma pervertinti Platono įtakos politinės filosofijos formavimuisi, nes tolesnė jos raida vienaip ar kitaip buvo paremta jo dialogų nulemtu diskursu ir metodika. Šiuo tyrimu siekiama nustatyti įtakingiausių šiuolaikinių politinės filosofijos mokyklų bendrus diskursus ir dialektinius pagrindus, susiliejančius į Platono idėjas. Be to, tyrimu siekiama nustatyti pagrindines formas, kuriomis Platono filosofinės idėjos eksplicitiškai ir implicitiškai funkcionuoja šiuolaikinėje politinėje filosofijoje. Tyrimo naujumas tas, kad nagrinėjami imanentiniai bruožai, siejantys politinę filosofiją su Platono, kaip jos pirminio šaltinio, idėjomis.

**Raktažodžiai:** bihevizmas, konstitucionalizmas, Platonas, politinė filosofija, politiškumas, racionalus pasirinkimas