John Lombardini, *Plato's Political Thought*, Leiden: K. Brill, 2024, 120 pp., ISBN 978-90-04-69221-3

Leonardo Rodríguez Acuña
Universidad de los Andes, Chile
Santiago, Chile
lrrodriguez@miuandes.cl, leonardorodriguezacuna@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5524-7700

There are few introductory text dedicated exclusively to Plato's political thought. Prof. Lombardini's book addresses this task, offering topics for discussion and basic bibliographical guidance of contemporary interpreters. The work consists of a general introduction (1–7), four thematic sections (7–101), and a conclusion (101–103). The cross-cutting theme that unites the different sections is Plato's relationship to Athenian democracy. He does not present an exhaustive review of each topic, but distinguish the "standard" interpretations of scholarship with some challenging works and novel research approaches.

The section "Plato, the Academy and the *Seventh Letter*" (7–30) addresses the debate surrounding Plato's political praxis, according to historical grounds. Lombardini adopts a skeptical position, stating that there is no conclusive evidence for Plato's direct involvement in Greek politics, nor that the Academy ever had as its main objective the promotion of a political agenda. There are different interpretations on this question, but given the scarcity of reliable evidence, these depend more on the position taken regarding the dogmatic or non-dogmatic nature of Platonic thought (16). Although we have a record of some political academicians, this alone is not evidence to declare an institutional objective of the Academy, since they could be *outsiders*, interested in practical studies, but without interest in theoretical studies or a strong commitment to the Academy (18).

One of the main sources for this discussion is the *Seventh Letter*, since it narrates a biography supposedly written by Plato, in which his political intentions are made explicit. But the authenticity of the letter has been a subject of great dispute. The standard view is that "Plato may have written the *Seventh Letter*, but even if he did not, it still must have been written by

https://doi.org/10.14195/2183-4105_26_6

someone familiar with his philosophy and his interventions in Sicilian politics" (19). Lombardini counters this view with the work of Michael Frede and Myles Burnyeat, who not only deny Plato's authorship of the letter, but also (esp. Burnyeat) deny that the letter was written by anyone truly competent in Platonic philosophy. Lombardini values the arguments of Frede and Burnyeat as the best ones against the standard view, but they remain questionable arguments, and, in short, it seems that the discussion will never be settled (28–29).

It is interesting noting Lombardini's point about how Burnyeat's work has marked a shift in the focus of scholarly research. Without considering the *Seventh Letter* as written by Plato, but rather as a "tragic prose" (cf. *Laws* 817b1–5) written later, this opens the possibility of analyzing how attempts have been made to adapt Plato's political thought to the new realities of the Hellenistic world. Other scholars have pursued this line of research with other letters attributed to Plato or other classical authors (30).

Without any reliable evidence concerning Plato's political praxis, Lombardini moves on to reconsider the problem of his political thought in light of the influence that Socrates may have had on him. He addresses this in the section "Socratic Politics and the Socrates Problem" (31–57). As is well known, the reconstruction of Socrates' thought is also a contentious issue. The standard view has antecedents in Schleiermacher and others, but its most influential representative in the 20th century is Gregory Vlastos, who sees in Plato's early dialogues a portrait of the historical Socrates. In these early dialogues, in Vlastos's view, Socrates is a "friendly critic" of Athenian democracy, since—as in the *Crito*—he is committed to obedience to the city and shares certain Athenian values, although he criticizes others (38). It is noteworthy that Vlastos, like others, rejects the historical authenticity of Xenophon's Socrates, whose thought is oligarchic—since the Xenophonian Socrates maintains that philosophy is incompatible with democracy—considering Xenophon an incompetent philosopher and historian.

Although there are precedents in Strauss and others, Lombardini highlights Louis André Dorion as a 21st-century interpreter who has played a leading role in vindicating Xenophon and his portrait of Socrates. Dorion has argued against the standard view, without being able to settle the discussion about the Socratic Problem. Nevertheless, Dorion's work has allowed the research to shift towards a comparative analysis of the sources, where what is sought to reconstruct are rather "the debates surrounding the legacy of Socrates among his immediate successors" (44). Following this approach, Lombardini argues that both Plato and Xenophon in their own way address the Aristophanic criticism according to which Socrates mocks Athenian democracy (50). Where Plato writes about Socrates with his own irony—a point Lombardini does not develop, but presumably he is in line with Vlastos's treatment of it—Xenophon presents Socrates' more direct mockery of his interlocutors (e.g., of Euthydemus in *Memorabilia* 4.2), but which also has a pedagogical function (52–54). What both would like to safeguard is the political utility of spending time with Socrates.

Lombardini notes how Dorion's approach has opened up new types of research, incorporating other sources commonly excluded from the Socratic Problem, such as the Minor Socratics or later sources. However, it should be noted at this point that the approach commented by Lombardini, like that of the previous section, while interesting in itself and contributing to

Classical Studies, is clearly outside the scope of the book, i.e. *Plato*'s political thought.

The section "Plato as Social Critic: the *Republic*" (57–82) primarily addresses the discussion surrounding Plato's critique of democracy in this dialogue. While in the previous section Lombardini considered the dominant view of Socrates as a friendly critic of democracy, in the case of the *Republic*, he maintains that the usual interpretation is that of a radical critic, among other reasons because in this work he supports the expulsion of adult citizens to make way for a completely new regime (61–62). This difference has been thematized by Josiah Ober, who argues that Socrates' condemnation would have convinced Plato that it is impossible to improve the Athenian people and, consequently, he would become a "rejectionist critic" of democracy, i.e. someone who rejects that society can improve based on its own values, and instead advocates for a refoundation (63–65).

A view like Ober's has been disputed by different interpreters. Lombardini highlights two sets of alternatives. The first set—the author comments on the work of Sara Monoson and Danielle Allen—does not deny that Plato is a critic of democracy, but argues that he is not a rejectionist critic, given his commitment to some principles and institutions of Athenian democracy, which would have had repercussions for posterity (66–68). The second set—he comments on the work of Peter Euben and Jill Frank—attempts to offer more democratic readings of the *Republic*, emphasizing the freedom of expression and non-dogmatic inquiry inherent in the dialogue, as well as certain signs—such as the structural similarity between the philosopher-kings and -queens with the tyrant—that would leave the attentive reader of the *Republic* with questions. Rather than affirming that Plato is a democrat, these interpretations rely on the idea that Plato encouraged his readers to think for themselves and not rely on his arguments (71–77).

This second group of alternative readings depends on the distance between Plato as a writer and what his characters say. The emphasis on the interpretation of dramatic and poetic aspects has been elaborated upon by various scholars in recent decades. Along these lines, Lombardini primarily comments on the works of Andrea Nightingale and Christopher Bobonich. The creation of the philosophical dialogue as a genre does not necessarily imply that the arguments presented are backed by Plato's authority (79–80). Furthermore, Platonic epistemology—the difference between knowledge and opinion—as well as the reception of Aristotle and other Platonic disciples on political matters confirm that Plato could not possibly intend his readers to take the positions established in his writings as a final solution, which would save them the research effort necessary to be true philosophers.

Finally, the section "Beyond the *Republic*: The *Statesman* and *Laws*" (82–101) is devoted to a discussion of whether there is a shift in Plato's political thought in his later work, particularly regarding his assessment of Athenian democracy. Lombardini presents opposing interpretations and argues that there are no definitive arguments for interpreting a shift, even though Plato develops new arguments in which it seems that Plato values more a certain ideal concept of democracy (83). In the case of the *Statesman*, the specificity of political knowledge is better addressed, i.e. the knowledge of *kairos*, the "opportunity" for all the other arts to unfold harmoniously (85–86). In addition, more attention is paid to imperfect regimes, which imitate the ideal, where democracy appears to be relatively valued. However, Plato's assessment of Athenian democracy is

discussed. There are two contrasting interpretations: Melissa Lane argues that Athens would not be an example of good democracy because the assembly makes and unmakes the laws (89–90); on the other hand, Anders Sørensen rescues the history of Athens at the end of the Peloponnesian War, with the search for the reconstitution of the *patrios politeia*, which would be seen by Plato as an example of good democracy (92–94). Lombardini insists with Allen on how Plato's dialogues helped to establish a vocabulary favorable to the figure of Solon and the *patrios politeia*.

There is a similar situation in the *Laws*, since democracy appears as one of the pure constitutional models, and even Plato seems to have in mind the risks of democracy in light of the history of Athens. There is a discussion here as well. André Laks represents a unitarian reading, since he argues that the *Laws* is a complementary work to the *Republic* insofar as it would attempt to make the project of the ideal polis more practical; on the other hand, Bobonich represents a developmentalist reading, for whom the *Laws* confirm a change in Plato's political thought. The discrepancies between the two authors are partly explained by considerations about moral psychology (97): for Laks, Plato's moral psychology does not fundamentally change, but with the exception that in the *Laws* the irrational elements of the soul are stronger—since this project would be adapted for humans rather than gods—which would explain the institutional adaptations. Instead, Bobonich argues for a shift in Platonic moral psychology toward a view in which all parts of the soul somehow understand the Forms and work together to generate desires, leading to greater optimism among the majority and, consequently, the adoption of more democratic institutions (98–99). Lombardini does not take sides with either interpretation, but when it comes to assessing Athenian democracy, he discusses the implications of both readings for the Magnesia project as if it were a Platonic proposal inspired by Solon's democracy.

Prof. Lombardini's book may be misleading given its title, since while it addresses some problems in Plato's political thought, the focus is on the question of Plato's commitment to politics and his assessment of Athenian democracy. The book does not dwell into philosophical discussions concerning the intellectual categories with which Plato conceives politics, except for some brief mentions in the final section on *technē politikē* or moral psychology. In the first two sections, the author highlights some new areas of academic research, as I have explained above, but them do not specifically address Plato's thought. Therefore, it seems to me that this is a text for a classicist or a historian. That said, the book manages to present a useful and up-to-date introduction to the problems it addresses. The four sections include a reasonably varied bibliography. It is commendable that it manages to do all this in just over 100 pages. Reasonably the author adopts a generally skeptical position on the matters he deals with, since the evidence of Plato's assessment of Athens is uncertain.

IN MEMORIAM