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978-1-107-07288-6 - Performing Citizenship in Plato's Laws

Lucia Prauscello

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

Ancient Greeks repeatedly claimed that what makes a *polis* is not territory or buildings, and not even its institutions, but its inhabitants: that is, its human material. What defines a *polis* is its citizens: it is the disposition of the rulers and ruled towards each other and towards the city as a whole that decides the quality of governance. In this sense Greek political thought gives particular emphasis to the moral character of the citizenry as something that pre-exists and determines political ideology, decision-making and even institutional make-up. This is most true of Plato, for whom, as is often noted, statecraft coincides with soulcraft.

Citizenship studies in Classics is a thriving field,<sup>1</sup> yet scholars have usually concentrated on the Aristotelian and post-Aristotelian normative view of citizenship. Plato's (utopian) contributions to this subject have been often neglected, and what work has been done in this direction in the past decade or two has been for the most part limited to Plato's *Republic*.<sup>2</sup> With a few important exceptions<sup>3</sup> recent studies on the political and social structure of the second-best city promoted in the *Laws* have focused on either strictly institutional issues and its underlying historical background (the extent to which Plato's utopia is indebted to Athenian social and legal practices) or on the requisites of statesmanship (the duties of the divinely inspired lawgiver and the higher echelons of Magnesia's

<sup>1</sup> Cf., to quote only a few, Keyt and Miller 2007, Liddel 2007, Christ 2006, Farenga 2006, Boegehold and Scafuro 1994, Loraux 1993 and the still seminal work by Manville 1990 (esp. ch. 1).

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Kamtekar 1998 and 2004, Brown 2004, Vasiliou 2008: chs. 7 and 8, and 2012, Wilberding 2009.

<sup>3</sup> See, above all, Bertrand 1999, Bobonich 2002 and Kraut 2010.

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society).<sup>4</sup> This is not without good reason: from the very beginning of the *Laws*, the political *technē* is identified with the skill of recognizing the different natures and dispositions of the souls of the prospective citizens and the capacity of ‘taking care’ of them. This is clearly stated at *Laws* I.650b6–9, where the Athenian Stranger says that ‘this, that is, to know the natures and dispositions of the souls (τὸ γινῶναι τὰς φύσεις τε καὶ ἔξεις τῶν ψυχῶν), would rank as one of the most useful aids for that art which is concerned to take care of these (θεραπεύειν): and we say, I take it, that this is the art of statesmanship’ (ἔστιν δέ που, φαμέν, ὡς οἶμαι, πολιτικῆς). From the start of the *Laws*, Cleinias and Megillos, the interlocutors of the Athenian Stranger, and with them also the ‘external’ audience are left with no doubt that legislative activity and political art have a precise addressee: the souls of the polity.<sup>5</sup> Yet scholarly emphasis on statesmanship in the *Laws*, although fully justified by the purpose of the text itself, has at times obfuscated an equally interesting and complementary aspect of Plato’s political vision, the ‘craft’ of citizenship. In Magnesia, in fact, the only *technē* worth practising by a good citizen is ‘the cultivation of virtue’ (8.847a5–6 ἡ τῆς ἀρετῆς ἐπιμέλεια).

The present book aims to redress this imbalance by shifting the focus away from the craft of statesmanship towards that of citizenship, and in particular ‘ordinary’ citizenship (that is, not the higher echelons of the second-best city), in Plato’s last major reflection on society and its moral premises. The personal limits and interests of the author mean that the coverage of this huge topic is far from exhaustive, not least because some aspects of Magnesian citizenship (the economy of blame and praise, the written and oral aspect of the voice of the law and the sacralization of the ‘public voice’) have already received excellent treatments from various quarters.<sup>6</sup> I have instead focused on two lines of inquiry for which I thought I

<sup>4</sup> Institutional issues: Pierart 1974, Sanders 1991; historical background: Morrow 1960, Brunt 1993; statesmanship: see, among others and from very different perspectives, Schofield 1999a, Brisson 2009 and 2012, and Rowe 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Brisson 2012; Larivée 2003b.

<sup>6</sup> See, above all, the several contributions by Bertrand and Laks.

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could still contribute something new from a cultural historical perspective: the ethical and psychological underpinning of a distinct *rhetoric* of citizenship promoted within the communicational utopia of the second-best city (Part I); and the ways in which this rhetoric is implemented, on a practical level, through specific, ritualized forms of public discourse, namely Magnesia's collective choral *performances* (Part II). My aim is to show that the rhetoric and performance of civic ideology promoted in Magnesia open channels of communication along which 'real' interpersonal relationships can flow. Both parts of the book are unified by a common concern: to investigate in some detail how the *forms* of political and social discourse in the second-best city (choral performances included) hinge on the premise that the ways in which the citizens speak and are spoken to about their mutual relationships with each other and with the city are not only a consequence of but in a sense also contribute to *shaping* those very same relationships.

Part I ('Performing ordinary virtue in Plato's utopias: citizenship, desire and intention'; Chapters 1 and 2) focuses on Magnesia's political self-definition: the promotion of a *vision* of 'perfect citizenship' (to become an ἄκρος πολίτης) made normatively available to the 'ordinary' citizen, via a significantly 'more open' re-deployment (if compared with the *Republic*) of the language of desire in general and erotic desire in particular (Chapter 2). Chapter 1 represents the necessary first step towards a sustained comparison of the concept of 'ordinary' civic virtue in Plato's two utopias, Callipolis (*Republic*) and Magnesia (*Laws*). Its goal is to sketch the range of the various emotional and cognitive motivations to which the citizens of Callipolis can resort as members of a political and social community in which virtue is the paramount criterion for any sense of civic identity. From the perspective here adopted, a particularly salient issue is to test the extent to which the 'erotics of beauty' of Book 3 of the *Republic* can really be said to apply, in its supra-personal form, to the psychological profile of Callipolis' second class (the auxiliaries). Likewise, to put Callipolis' communitarian ideology of citizenship in a closer dialogue with the diverse notions of citizenship

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developed in contemporary Athens helps us gauge the degree to which Plato's own vision of ideal citizenship is part and parcel of a broader political reflection on his own time. Chapter 1 thus provides the background picture on the basis of which to evaluate the differences and analogies in Plato's articulation of the concept of 'ordinary' citizenship in the *Laws*.

Chapter 2 is devoted to the *ordinary* virtue of the Magnesian citizen, with specific attention to what I call the 'erotics of citizenship' promoted in the *Laws*. A semantic analysis of the language of erotic desire in the *Laws* shows that a paradigm of 'erotic' citizenship (to be eagerly in love with the *idea* of becoming a *perfect* citizen) resurfaces at key points in the work. This paradigm, while representing a logical extension of the 'erotics of beauty' of Book 3 of the *Republic*, is also a specific product of the education of sensibility nurtured by Magnesia's 'correct education'. In Magnesia not only 'correct opinion' (*doxa*) but also 'desire' (*epithymia*) and 'erotic passion' (*erōs*) are, with due qualifications, acceptable emotional and cognitive dispositions accessible to the 'common' citizen to foster civic excellence. At the same time I argue that Plato's idiosyncratic use, in the *Laws*, of the language of desire and *erōs* with reference to *civic* virtue must be read against the broader late-fifth- to mid-fourth-century BC debate on issues of citizenship, desire and intention. This particular deployment of the language of *erōs* allows Plato to emphasize, in the *Laws*, the notion (and feeling) of citizenship as 'a mode of belonging by choice': 'volitional belonging' and its self-propelling motivational agency form an important complement to the rhetoric of persuasion enacted in the second-best city. Passionate desire (*erōs*) must be enrolled into the landscape of Magnesia's civic virtues. By underlining the volitional aspect of citizenship I hope to show that Plato is again exploiting, on his own terms, what had become one of the most pressing questions of the Athenian political discourse in the first half of the fourth century BC: what does it take to be a truly good citizen? Are formal, external criteria enough? Plato's answer, in the *Laws*, is that to enroll fully as a citizen, one must

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be motivated by an inner *desire* to be so; it is the degree of civic desire that is the only adequate criterion to award or withdraw citizenship.

Part II of the book ('Citizenship and performance in the *Laws*'; Chapters 3 to 5) analyses in detail, by means of case studies, how this erotics of citizenship is implemented in the second-best city, at the level of both the moral psychology of the embodied person (the physiology of pain and pleasure; see Chapter 3) and communal social practices (Chapter 4). In these two chapters, the focus turns to some specific forms of ritualized public discourse: Magnesia's choral performances and the ways in which they all become a fundamental channel for shaping, feeling and communicating a strong sense of civic identity and unity. In particular, it is argued that Magnesia's choruses contribute to the second-best city's behavioural policy by means of their own *performativity*: in the new Cretan colony, 'ordinary' citizenship itself will be troped as a performative action. It is thus within this framework that we must read also the much discussed claim by the Athenian Stranger that the whole *politeia* of Magnesia enacts 'the best', 'most beautiful' and 'truest tragedy' because it 'reproduces the most beautiful and virtuous life' (7.817b3–5). This claim is made possible only by Plato's careful negotiation of the mimetic status of Magnesia's choruses. The 'choral' project of the *Laws* entails a constant process of mediation between strictly dramatic (tragic mimesis) and non-dramatic (lyric mimesis) modes of performance. In Magnesia, the choreut-citizens are both speakers and recipients of the views that they promulgate, and it is this identity between performer and audience that guarantees that the collective ideology disseminated through choral performances reaches the entire political body. In their choral performances they can just be 'themselves': a group representative of the *polis* performing how to be, above all, 'well-ordered citizens' (*eunomoi politai*). The adoption of a lyric modality of experiential mimesis allows them to re-enact endlessly their own self-likeness. According to Plato, orderly vocal and kinetic activities are powerful means to connect the rational and irrational parts

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of the soul, thus helping humans experience the divine oneness and harmony between perceptions, emotions and reason. Choral performances thus represent, via the collective, social nature of rhythm, the most genuine form of 'embodied morality' (Chapter 3).

Chapter 5 turns to the negative foil of Plato's utopian citizenship, the discursive practices that must *not* be enacted by the virtuous citizen: comedy, abusive language and the rhetoric of invective and verbal aggression. In particular, comedy in the *Laws* is presented as the social space in which Magnesia's citizens can and must become vicariously acquainted, at a rational level, with a form of moral and aesthetic 'otherness' with respect to its collective identity. Magnesians must attend comic performances in order to acquire a (merely) rational apprehension of morally bad models of behaviour. This brings us close to another remarkable feature of Magnesia's policy towards its own citizens: the necessity to exert control, quite literally, over the citizens' *modes* of speech. Comedy will provide a negative model of what has to be avoided not only in terms of experiential and representational mimesis but also in terms of specific speech-acts.

Finally, in the Epilogue, I briefly situate Plato's last reflection on citizenship against the fourth-century BC varied discourse on the authority of the law and its relation to human nature. By comparing Plato's theorizing on citizenship with the Athenian contemporary political practice, I argue that the overt promotion, in the *Laws*, of a model of *citizenship-as-practice* represents a powerful counter-hegemonic critique of the Athenian normative model of *citizenship-as-achievement*. Education in citizenship values is seen by Plato as a lifelong training whose 'prime mover' resides in the psychic and affective dimension of the individual.

Before releasing the reader, two further qualifications are in order. In the past two decades or so, Plato's *Laws* has been repeatedly taken as the litmus test for either a 'developmental' or a 'unitarian' reading of Plato's 'mature' thought. From the content of the book as a whole, it is evident that I broadly align myself with those who favour a 'unitarian' interpretation of the

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*Laws* as part of a broader Platonic continuum.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the book I have thus adopted Gill's approach in considering the voice of the Athenian Stranger 'not so much as Plato's voice as the voice of [the *Laws*] distinctive project'; that is, the Athenian Stranger's voice in the *Laws* represents 'the main vehicle of this complex, but wholly explicit, act of negotiation between philosophical and conventional discourse'.<sup>8</sup> Although this approach may not be shared by every reader, it is my hope that (s)he may find that the present inquiry still addresses issues relevant to the interpretation of the *Laws* from a synchronic perspective. Secondly, and no doubt because of my personal education as a scholar, I have consciously embraced a reading of the *Laws* that sees the philosophical and religious discourse as complementary rather than antagonistic.<sup>9</sup> Again, what seems to me to justify this approach is the interpretative pay-off that can be gained by unravelling how Magnesia's communicative strategies are deeply indebted to the social and religious fabric of the Greek classical *polis*.

<sup>7</sup> For this approach and its methodological justifications, see Rowe 2003, 2010 (cf. also Gill 2003). It goes without saying that a unitarian reading does not imply that Plato never modified or revised his thought but that he envisaged these revisions and modifications as fundamentally coherent with his life-long philosophical concerns.

<sup>8</sup> Gill 2003: 44 with n. 6. For the intended double readership of the *Laws* that is, the 'common' layman and the 'practised' Platonic reader, see Rowe 2010.

<sup>9</sup> The same point of view has been adopted recently also by Peponi's 2013 collected volume: see in particular Kowalzig 2013: 175–6.

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In both the *Republic* and the *Laws*, the implementation of a well-ordered society is predicated on the maximization of the happiness and well-being (*eudaimonia*) of the whole civic body. In the first-best (Callipolis) and second-best (Magnesia) cities, the main aim of true statesmanship, be it embodied by philosopher-rulers or divinely inspired legislators, is to promote first and foremost the common good – that is, the happiness of *all* the individual members of the *polis*, not only one section of it.<sup>1</sup> In both cities, the primary component of civic happiness is virtue (*aretē*):<sup>2</sup> to promote the happiness of the *polis* as a whole coincides with promoting virtue in all its citizens, notwithstanding subjectively and objectively differential parameters.<sup>3</sup>

The first part of the book explores some of the ways in which a particular kind of virtue – that is, what has come to be called in contemporary scholarship the ‘lesser’ virtue of the ‘ordinary’ citizen (respectively the second and third class of Callipolis and those who do not partake, in Magnesia, of the ‘higher education’ reserved to the guardians of the law) – is troped and fostered within the political and social discourse of the first and

<sup>1</sup> Cf. e.g. *Resp.* 4.420b3–c4, 4.421b5–c5, 7.519e1–520a4; *Laws* 4.715b3–4. For a (non-exhaustive but useful) collection of related passages in the *Laws*, see Bobonich 2002: 577 n. 104. Cf. also Irwin 2010: 99–100.

<sup>2</sup> Citizens made happy by practising virtue in the *Laws*: cf. e.g. 4.718a3–b5, 8.829a1–3. Promoting virtue in *all* the citizens of Magnesia: cf. e.g. *Laws* 1.630b8–e4, 3.688a1–b4, 4.705e1–706a4, 6.770c7–e4, 9.853b4–8, 12.963a1–4.

<sup>3</sup> See Morrison 2001 on the complex and not entirely symmetrical relationship between the happiness of the city and the happiness of its citizens in Callipolis; his conclusion (the well-being of the city and the sum of the well-being of the citizens are not absolutely identical: the priority of the common good means that under some circumstances individual well-being must be checked) holds true also for Magnesia (cf. also Schofield 2006: 219–20 and Irwin 2010: 94–5).



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second-best cities.<sup>4</sup> The differential 'degrees' of virtue and happiness accessible to the citizens of Plato's utopias (both in the *Republic* and the *Laws*) have recently received increasing scholarly attention.<sup>5</sup> Yet there has been no sustained comparison of the 'lesser' virtue of the 'ordinary' citizen in the two Platonic works. A comparative analysis of the rhetorical strategies by means of which a distinct 'rhetoric of citizenship' is developed and implemented within the ideal societies of Callipolis and Magnesia will provide a useful background against which to gauge some significant re-deployments and 'extensions' of this rhetoric in the *Laws*.

To study in some detail the concrete ways in which this more 'open' rhetoric of citizenship is enacted in the second-best city will be the task of the second part of the volume. In Part II, the focus is on the spectrum of the diverse affective and cognitive motivations available to the citizens of the ideal Callipolis and Magnesia to qualify as members of a virtuous community. The overarching question addressed is the following: what motivates the lower echelons of the 'ideal cities' to act virtuously? What degree of intensity and compulsion is required by the grid of affective and non-affective commitments that Plato envisages will bind the citizens together in his two communities? And, above all, what kind of *desire*, in particular, must be activated in the souls of the citizens to reach this end?

<sup>4</sup> A balanced survey of the often radically different approaches adopted by modern scholarship towards the concept of 'possibility' and 'feasibility' of Plato's utopian project(s) can be found in Vegetti 2000. For the *Republic*, my own position is broadly in agreement with that of Burnyeat 1992 as refined by Morrison 2007: the paradigmatic nature of Callipolis does not undercut the value of its possible *human* approximations. On the *Laws* as at the same time a 'utopian' and 'possible' project, see Schofield 2010b, Laks 1991 and 2012: 29–37, Jouët-Pastré 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Samaras' objection (2002: 38–9) that the concept of 'degrees of happiness' jeopardizes the unity of virtue is ill-founded, cf. Kamtekar 2004. 'Ordinary' virtue in the *Republic*: Klosko 1982, Kamtekar 1998 (restricted to the 'imperfect' virtue of the auxiliaries) and 2004 (producers' class included), Brown 2004, Schofield 2006: 270–5 (on the economic class), Wilberding 2009 (on the 'second-best' morality of the auxiliaries), Vasiliou 2008, ch. 7 and 8 (moral/cognitive capacities of the non-philosophers), and 2012 (an attempt to bridge the gap between the 'ordinary and political', virtue in *Phd.* 82a11–b1 and the *dēmōtikē aretē* of the *Republic*). For the *Laws*, see Saunders 1962a: 47–9, and above all Bobonich 2002: ch. 5 (esp. 411–75), Kraut 2010 and Brisson 2012.

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Because Chapters 1 and 2 are strictly interconnected and develop a common thread of ideas, it makes sense to outline here the main stages of the argumentation. In Chapter 1, after a general sketch of the similarities and differences in the constitutional and political make-up of the ideal and second-best city, close attention is given to (1) the ways in which the paradigm of civic *philia* is ideologically supported in the *Republic*, and (2) the emotional and epistemic resources available to the different classes of citizens to reach this goal. Emphasis is put on the *forms* of desire made experientially available to the citizens of Callipolis: the education of the young guardians culminating in the ‘erotics of beauty’ (3.403c6 τὰ τοῦ καλοῦ ἐρωτικά) of Book 3 of the *Republic* is put under scrutiny to test the extent to which the Socratic ‘move’ from abstract *philia* (‘love’) to extra-personal *erōs* (‘passionate desire’) is warranted for the second class of the ideal city. Furthermore, attention is paid to the psychological framework within which the second (auxiliaries) and third (producers) classes are encouraged to conceive of each other vis-à-vis the rulers and the city as a whole. This second aspect allows us to see how the rhetoric of citizenship promoted by Callipolis is premised on the assumption that the ways in which citizens express themselves about their reciprocal mode of social interaction can positively contribute to creating and cementing those very same relationships.

It is against this background that Chapter 2 switches to the ordinary virtue of the Magnesian citizen with specific attention to what I call the ‘erotics of citizenship’ promoted in the *Laws*. In this chapter, the focus is primarily on what I think is, in some (relatively few but significant) passages of the *Laws*, an unnoticed expansion and deployment of the language of desire in general, and erotic desire in particular, with specific reference to the civic virtue of the ‘ordinary’ citizen.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Laws* 1.643c8–d3 and e4–6; 3.688b2–4; 6.770c7–d6; 8.837d4–6; on the ‘higher’, divine ladder (ἔρως θεῖος) of the erotics of statesmanship at 4.711d6–7, see §2.3. To the best of my knowledge, this specific aspect of the *Laws* (use of erotic terminology to foster civic virtue) has passed unnoticed among scholars. Moore 2005 and 2007 focus more narrowly on sexual legislation; the same applies to Boehringer 2007. Ludwig 2002, 2007 and 2009, although adopting a broader framework, is also silent on the issue.