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Review of Jean-Francois Pradeau, *Plato and the City* and of Thanassis Samaras, *Plato on Democracy*

SCHOFIELD, Malcom, in 3. *Plato 3* (2003) , [En ligne] , January 2003

These two studies are chalk and cheese. Samaras gives us a big book, based on his 1996 Warwick PhD thesis, which engages robustly and argumentatively with a great quantity of the twentieth century scholarship on Plato's political philosophy written in English, and presents a clear developmentalist picture of Plato's progress from Socratic anti-democrat [1] to a theorist who deliberately builds democratic, or at any rate Solonian, elements into his final version of the good city. From Pradeau – who teaches at the Université de Paris–X Nanterre – we have a brief essay (originally *Platon et la cité*, 1997) lightly referenced [2] which spins its interpretations discursively and advocates a unitarian account of Plato's idea of a science of politics. On one thing they see eye to eye. The *Laws* is for both of them the mature culmination of Plato's thinking about politics, not the sad evidence of waning intellectual powers so often diagnosed in the past. Thus they join the swelling ranks of what one might call the *Laws* revivalist movement.

I

Pradeau's study describes itself as an 'introduction'. Do not be misled. What the author offers is a reflective and selective treatment of some key dialogues – *Menexenus*, *Republic*, *Timaeus-Critias*, *Statesman*, *Laws*, but very little on *Crito* or *Gorgias* - which already presupposes a good working knowledge of most of these texts. So for example there is no presentation of the main argument of the *Republic* about justice (indeed little reference to it at all), nor of such crucial passages as the return of the philosophers to the cave (the cave is never mentioned) or the noble lie (the subject of the briefest of allusions on p. 61 and at p. 97 n. 117). For each of the other main dialogues he discusses Pradeau includes a tabulated summary of the structure and contents of the work, but integration of this into the overall argument of the chapter is rather variable.

The reader is occasionally allowed to glimpse other ways of reading Plato. These are generally given short shrift: e.g. 'Plato's oeuvre as a whole manifests a sustained thematic coherence, unaffected by the dramatic upheavals that some scholars seek to detect' (p. 6). The 'biographical' interpretation of the second-best city of the *Laws* as the product of disillusionment on the part of the ageing Plato is unceremoniously dismissed as 'long-standing but false' (p. 135) – although in the pages that follow Pradeau does give a sense of where some of the main lines of battle are drawn, even if some of the chief protagonists are notable (none more so than André Laks) by their absence.

On the chronology of the dialogues Pradeau adopts 'the most generally accepted' sequence, detailed at p. 7 n. 4, 'purely for reasons of convenience' (p. 7 n. 3). For all that, his Platonic unitarianism does recognise development of a kind, and the story of that development actually relies rather heavily on chronological assumptions. One might call it 'dynamic unitarianism', borrowing the label from Samaras, who defines his own approach to Plato's political thought as positing 'a unity within which every new development stands in a discernible relationship to the philosopher's previous position' (p. 1). So far as I can see, the only quarrel Pradeau could pick with this formulation is over the word 'position'. He would downplay talk of different positions or doctrines: for him later dialogues characteristically explore *problems* previously left hanging [3].

Thus, for example, the treatment of political knowledge in the *Euthydemus* 'may be considered as the matrix of later developments' (p. 39). Its 'questions and requirements', particularly those relating to the content of political knowledge and the means by which it can be made effective in society, are more precisely formulated than in 'the more generalised critique of the early dialogues' (ibid.), but will help to inform both 'the *Republic*'s description of the excellent constitution' and the *Statesman*'s examination

of 'the *technique* of a political technician' (ibid.). Suppose, however, that the *Euthydemus* were not transitional between early and middle period works, but later than *Republic*, and designed indeed to be read as presupposing it and raising problems about it (as Myles Burnyeat is inclined to think), or even – as that 'inveterate developmentalist' M.M. McCabe proposes – that it was 'written, or fits best with, dialogues that are later still'. [4]] Then the whole trajectory of Pradeau's narrative would need radical revision.

Of course, there *could* be versions of unitarianism – as with, for instance, Neoplatonism or the Tübingen school – for which the order of composition of the dialogues was quite irrelevant. In Pradeau's case, however, it palpably isn't: 'the question of the city', he states in his Introduction, 'can be seen to be the subject of a growing preoccupation in Plato's oeuvre as a whole' (pp. 6-7).

The *Republic* 'paves the way for an enquiry that is continued in the later dialogues' (p. 75). The new definition of the city in the *Statesman* 'enables Plato to resolve the difficulty that was connected with the genesis and growth of the city in the *Republic*' (p. 88). The *Laws* 'resolves problems that the *Republic* did not seem able to tackle', such as 'the development of the city, its body, the conflicts that may disrupt it, and the modes of behaviour of its citizens' (p. 137). At one point (p. 137) Pradeau goes so far as to describe Plato's philosophy as an adventure in problem-solving. I suspect many readers will find this a refreshing and appealing approach to Plato's progress. But a reading of Plato's progress is unequivocally what is on offer. That being so, its author surely needs to be prepared to engage with issues of chronology and their bearing on the interpretation of Platonic intertextuality more vigorously and with more commitment.

The reasons for Pradeau's enthusiasm for the *Laws* may by now be beginning to emerge. His Plato is clear from the outset that political salvation can be secured only by hard-won theoretical knowledge of the truth. But, to start with, Plato's interest in the thesis is little more than as a special case of a more general insistence on the need for knowledge to govern every area of our behaviour. It is only gradually that he starts to confront the problem of the specific content of political knowledge as a topic of interest in its own right, and the question of how it can be made to shape society. When he does so, he begins with analysis of the city. His diagnosis of political malaise, adumbrated in the *Menexenus*, locates the greatest threat to all forms of human society in conflict and dissension. The remedy will be to find for the true city something unavailable in any contemporary *polis*, whether democratic or not: a unity that is appropriate to human nature.

The challenge posed by the threat of *stasis* is first spelled out explicitly in the *Republic*. But working out a way of meeting it, and of specifying the political knowledge required, is not achieved until the late dialogues, above all in the *Laws*. It is in the *Laws* that Plato makes legislation the instrument of appropriation of knowledge, and develops in detail the complex educational and constitutional provisions and the mathematical and cosmic principles of order – first articulated in the *Timaeus-Critias* – by which the city becomes 'the active author of its own transformation' (p. 164) through the deliberations of the Nocturnal Council. Pradeau sums up the claims he makes for the *Laws* in the astonishing epigram: 'the city philosophises' (p. 165). *Plato and the City* is a stimulating read. I have found it growing on me. A particular strength of Pradeau's interpretation is the sense it enables us to make of the clustering of writings on political themes in Plato's latest period, and in particular of the connections between the abortive cosmopolitical project of *Timaeus-Critias* and the much more nearly complete *Laws*. It got me puzzling all over again as to *why* Plato became so obsessively and massively preoccupied with the political in the last decade or so of his life. The epigram, however, left me more dazzled than persuaded. Boring Anglo-Saxon questions started to queue up. Isn't the *Laws* concerned with a second-best city, in which laws (and preludes to laws) substitute for philosophy? Isn't the very word 'philosophy' virtually banished from the vocabulary of the dialogue? Aren't the Athenian Visitor's elderly interlocutors selected for the part precisely because the philosophical horizons of the *Laws* are to be decidedly limited? [5] Presumably Pradeau would stake all on his assessment of what the Nocturnal Council is and does: more on that below...

II

Samaras's admiration for Plato is much cooler than Pradeau's. In making antipathy to anti-democratic authoritarianism in politics shape his whole treatment of Plato's political thought, he puts himself more in the company of twentieth century writers such as Popper and (more recently) the Woods than with what one might call mainstream Plato scholarship – which, I take it, is dedicated, in whatever national or other variants, to starting with Plato's questions rather than ours. Not that there is anything historically insensitive about Samaras' approach to the enterprise. In fact although he agrees with Popper's assessment of the *Republic* as an authoritarian work, he is rightly severe on the way the anachronistic categories employed by Popper, Crossman and others – such as the open and closed societies, the individual and the state, assimilation of Athenian to modern liberal democracy – distort their understanding and evaluation of Greek political thought: see especially Ch. 5, 'The Debate over Plato's Totalitarianism'.

Nonetheless, the passion which drives his own argument is undoubtedly the conviction that the *Laws* 'deserves a place in the pantheon of the great works of political theory' (p. 351) for its substitution of historical experience for metaphysical principle as the basis for constructing a political order. Authoritarianism is consequently moderated, since the dialogue envisages widespread political participation on the part of a citizenry from whom 'unshakeable true opinions', rather than any more demanding standard of knowledge, will suffice for virtue (here Samaras's argument is convergent with the much fuller and more elaborate treatment of this aspect of the *Laws* offered in Christopher Bobonich's *Plato's Utopia Recast* [Oxford University Press, 2002]). Samaras lays particular stress on Plato's provision of a limited but real element of democracy in the 'mixed constitution' of the *Laws*. 'The idea of "checks and balances"', he suggests (p. 350), 'is coherently advanced ... probably for the first time in Western political philosophy in

the *Laws*.⁷ *Plato on Democracy* is on any reckoning a significant contribution – sharp, vigorous, lucid, well-informed, and trenchantly written – to the study of its subject, which anyone intending to work seriously on Plato’s political philosophy will need to use. Above all Samaras loves an argument. He is refreshingly catholic in his choice of sparring partners. We have all read far too many books and articles on Plato whose scholarly and philosophical frame of reference is dominated by a small number of fashionable contemporary names. There is nothing of that tendency in Samaras, although, as noted above, he does mostly limit himself to scholarship in English. Thus Barker figures in his index as prominently as Brisson, and references to Cornford and Skemp outscore those to Richard Kraut and Charles Kahn. On the other hand, despite a few references to Leo Strauss’s writings, Samaras does not engage with Straussian approaches to Plato. He mentions Sara Monoson’s *Plato’s Democratic Entanglements* at one point, and Josiah Ober’s *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens* too; but debate with them is not on his agenda either, perhaps in part because these works have appeared since he worked out his main lines of argument.

Some of Samaras’s longest and best chapters constitute, *inter alia*, judicious critical guides to the literature, and on that account they make ideal starting points for further exploration. I have in mind particularly the main chapter on the *Statesman* (Ch. 10, ‘The Historical Perspective’), which wrestles with Rowe on the status of law, and then with a variety of writers from Skemp, Guthrie and Klosko to Scodel, Mishima, Gill, Lane, Cooper and Bobonich on the dialogue’s conception of virtue. There is also a superb treatment in Ch.17 of ‘Opinion, Persuasion and Freedom of Will in the *Laws*’, where Samaras convincingly reargues Bobonich’s case in favour of a commitment to rational persuasion and free ethical choice on Plato’s part, against both Stalley’s objections and the scepticism of earlier writers such as Popper and Morrow – without however pretending that Plato’s ethical theory is anything other than ‘vigorous (to use an anachronism) anti-liberal’ (p. 324).

Not all chapters work so well. For example, in Ch. 14 Samaras argues for Plato’s having employed ‘one specific and concrete historical model’ in his construction of the constitution of the *Laws*, that is, the reforms of Solon – despite the dialogue’s failure even to mention his name. Nobody will disagree that Plato’s provision for a hierarchy of four property-based classes is indebted to Solon’s scheme. But most of the rest of the scrupulously presented evidence marshalled by Samaras for his thesis amounts to nothing stronger than a tissue of possibilities, not least because the detail of Solon’s political settlement was as controversial and obscure to Athenians of Plato’s day as it is to us. I think Samaras has overstated a case which would have been more powerful if restricted to a claim about what matters most to his argument: the role of Solon in the dialogue’s appeal to historical experience. Book III argues at 693C-694B (cf. VI.756E-757A) that cities have flourished most when their constitutions have struck a balance between monarchy and democracy, between wisdom and freedom (and the friendship between ruler and ruled that in the view of the Athenian Visitor characteristically goes with freedom). This was the kind of stability achieved by the constitution of ‘Attica’ at the time of the Persian wars (698A-C; cf. VI.756B-E). Here the conjunction of a mention of magistracies based on the four property classes and an associated reference to a mixed ‘ancestral constitution’ is sufficient on its own to establish the key importance of Solon in the *Laws*’ invocation of history.

III

Nobody would disagree that Plato’s approach to questions of statecraft in the *Laws* differs very considerably from that advocated in the *Republic*. How far that is because Plato changed his mind – as Pradeau denies but Samaras proposes – out of ‘disillusionment with regard to the moral and political limitations of human beings’ (Samaras, p. 166), and how far because he was asking and answering different questions, or simply proceeding from different but not incompatible assumptions, will of course remain a matter for fierce debate. Samaras cites in his support familiar arguments: the transposition of a golden age of divine rule ‘to a different cosmological era’ from our own in the myth of the *Statesman* (*ibid.*); the *Laws*’ thrice-repeated warnings about the inability of human nature to withstand the corrupting effects of absolute power (p. 288). Pradeau for his part contrives to avoid discussing these passages, but adopts no less familiar considerations in defence of his alternative position: (a) did philosopher-rulers ‘really ever exist even in the *Republic*’ (Pradeau, p. 144; cf. p. 48 n. 65)? (b) the *Republic* itself ‘recognises that perfect unity can never be achieved in the city’ (p. 146; nor perfect justice, one might add); © it remains the case that in the *Laws*, as in the *Republic*, the rule of intelligence remains the key to good statecraft (pp. 138, 142). One might think that a reexamination of Book XII’s description of the Nocturnal Council might help to clarify the issue. Pradeau makes much in this context of what he sees as Plato’s philosophical ambitions for the Nocturnal Council (pp. 154-66). But, in a careful chapter devoted to discussion of this notorious institution, (Ch.16) Samaras argues that its curriculum of study focuses much more emphatically on astronomy and theology than on dialectic; he stresses its *advisory* role; and he is in no doubt that ‘it is completely unPlatonic to expect a large body like this Council to possess the political expertise that Plato always insisted is extremely rare’ (p. 292).

I remember A.J. Ayer introducing the first session of a class I attended in Oxford in the mid-1960s – I think on causation – with the remark that while our topic had for centuries been a subject of unresolved controversy, he was sure we could settle the basic issues by the end of term. Optimism still springs eternal. But after reflecting on these two books, one is tempted to feel that in the case of the debate about Plato’s political philosophy all attempts at a definitive solution of the problems of its development are destined to be tantalising if not Sisyphian.

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Footnotes

[1] Ch.1 puts a forceful case for the view that Socrates' political stance was 'anti-democratic'.

[2] Some sloppinesses disfigure the bibliography and index: e.g. H. Krant for R. Kraut; Dodds, Eric D.; Owen, Guilym E.L.; and misattribution to Christopher Rowe of a chapter in the *Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought* by Terry Penner.

[3] The labels 'unitarian' and 'developmentalist' are, after all, pretty crude categories. In these terms Pradeau and Samaras are both (like myself and no doubt many other Plato scholars) adherents of 'developmentalist unitarianism'. But that capacious umbrella can accommodate a host of interestingly different and indeed incompatible interpretations of Plato.

[4] 'Indifference Readings: Plato and the Stoa on Socratic Ethics', in T. P. Wiseman ed., *Classics in Progress* (Oxford 2002) 363-98, at p. 364, nn. 6 and 7. See also ['Developing the Good Itself by Itself: Critical Strategies in Plato's *Euthydemus*'. *Plato*, Issue 2 ->20

[5] Pradeau (like Samaras) appears to have no particular interest in Plato's philosophical uses of the literary form of dialogue.