
WOMEN AS CITIZENS IN PLATO'S "POLITEIA"

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The demand for citizenship has been a fundamental request of the individual man in all the stages of human history, as his incorporation in, or his exclusion from a political system, defines the recognition of his personal value and power in relation to the others; in a nutshell, the formation of his social identity.

For women, things are more complex. Their multiple identities, some of them determined by their nature and others by their social position and the entailing cultural context, seem to demand from them the adoption of conflicting roles. Two functional social frames, that of the city - the public one - and that of *Oikos* - the private one - appear to partition, in terms of value, the activity of the human genders (sexual/reproductive): the woman is determined by her function according to nature (because of pregnancy, lactation, upbringing); while the man is determined as the possessor of *logos*, the foundation of human civilisation. Hierarchical and domination relationships, which derive from this partition are obvious in Ancient Athens of the 4th and 5th centuries BC, where the criterion of gender remained unchanged in all stages of the political and social alterations. Nailed down to obligations of housekeeping, their family and their reproductive circle, women were strictly subordinated and subjugated to men, who determined the wider borders of the human city.

The main characteristics of the social life of women remained their confinement to the interior of the house, their occupation with the upbringing of children and their absolute exclusion from politics, which was the exclusive privilege of men, even though the concept of citizenship was gradually being expanded to include a broader body of citizens according to the prevalent perception about the organisation of the state (reforms of Solon and Kleisthenes, etc.), so more and more categories of people, with or without property, of gentle origin or not, participated in the processes of governing, and were acknowledged rights. Women were defined by men, their fathers, husbands, sons and brothers, themselves being anonymous, since even their own names were allowed to be mentioned in public, as Thucydides stresses in Pericles' "Funeral

'Speech'.¹ They were excluded from wealth, property and a place in public ceremonies and entertainment, as well as from public offices. Women remained oppressively restricted to a deadlock of political existence. They existed in order to give birth and to wisely bring the heirs to the political positions and privileges, which could never be shared with men equally. They existed to entertain men as *hetaerae* (courtesans), thus acquiring a name,² a reputation, wealth, but neither respect nor political power. There were strict laws which controlled the behaviour of women, their confinement to the frame of the nuclear family, their duties in and out of their marriage and the freedom of their actions. These laws prove that the human sexuality constituted a threat to the Athenian androcentric system, to the "reign of Phallus", as Eva Keuls characterises it,³ and that female erotic behaviour was considered to be a principle danger and the main culprit for the probable disorganisation and disruption of this system.

Through these conditions of assessing the value of the physically differentiated human nature, Plato's work on the ideal republic suggests an ideal political landscape, in which, for the first time in human thought, the physical and mental activities of an individual blend harmoniously towards a common target: the liberation from the functional frame of the natural necessity (with reference to the body and the sexes), and his reaching a full state by transcending the limitation of sexes and thus becoming a kingdom of spirit.

So is Plato a feminist? In his voluminous work, the *Republic*, the concept of justice as the foundation of the ideal society, education within society, the principles and values of the society, the metaphysical and cognitive perceptions of the rulers of the society, the way societies spring up and decline, as well as political views on religion and art, are all analysed. The political model, which Socrates describes, is that of a primitive and self-sufficient society, where the citizens - depending on their skill - keep themselves busy with specialised work as doctors, hairdressers, merchants, artists, poets, and organised soldiers. In this society, those who are considered suitable for guarding and protecting it have received proper musical and physical education, so that their nature can develop naturally. Thus, their intellectual abilities are developed to the highest possible degree, which differentiates them from the other professionals, craftsmen and farmers. The guardians of the city must not own property, or have a private family life. Children must grow up in public establishments, after they are divided into their

main occupations. The preservation of the unity of society as a body is achieved. The society will develop harmoniously and productively, as the uplifting and elevation of all the citizens is achieved - through education and laws - to the highest possible level of the moral goodness, which constitutes the nucleus of the Platonic political philosophy.⁴

The model of the ideal Republic is projected by Plato as a compensation for the non-acceptability of the political organisation prevalent in Athenian democracy. According to Plato, the structuring of the society - based on the structuring model of the human psyche - is a fundamental⁶ future for political correctness. The unifying course towards perfection looks common: the purification from passions and self-interests; the liberation from a compulsion to acquire material objects, constituting a principal duty of the class of guardians, who cultivate the virtues of the soul, and reason not for self improvement but in order for themselves to be useful for the common good of the *polis*; love for one's self; individualism, as a result of detachment; and personal fulfilment, are all inconceivable according to Plato. The term "human rights",⁷ in the modern individualistic sense, has no value in his work, whether it is about natural rights, the absolute human value in the Kantian sense, or about social rights, which emerge from legal and social conventions. Plato does not deal with this at all in the construction of the ideal *Polis*. Because of this, the *Polis* - in a subversive to the modern atomocratic perception - is built upon for the society of citizens, that is, only to the fulfilment of the human being, wherein relations to others, equality, freedom and happiness on a personal level are indifferent, even non-existent as values, when they do not aim at the common good.

Is the inequality of the genders refuted by Plato in this way, and is there social concern for the female soul as well? What is the place of women in Plato's *Republic*?

In the 5th Book of the *Republic* Plato deals with the woman's place in the ideal *polis*, since he is not indifferent to the fact that they form half of the society, which constitutes a powerful numerical percentage in terms of energy and could be exploited for the common good.

So, he mentions that women - after receiving education similar to that of men - could hold even the highest office of guarding the *polis* (the city), since the biological differences from men concern

their bodies, but not their souls. After receiving special education and freeing themselves from the family and domestic ministration (child-birth is only a short break), they could assume the highest political duties, equally with men, if they were found suitable.⁸

The amazement caused by the naturalness of Plato's argument subsequently gives rise to a number of objections to this unheard of opportunity for women. Does this mean that the biological difference between men and women is no longer a criterion for segregation? How could the male and female natures both accomplish the same achievements by means of different biological directions?

Plato's argumentation extends in two different directions: on the one hand, an analysis is made of the potential of human nature (male or female) and the activities that characterise the human soul "beyond gender" are explored; and on the other hand, the practical applications which ensure such a function are considered.

It is made clear that the biological differentiation is restricted to the fact that man impregnates and woman gives birth.⁹ It therefore has nothing to do with assuming high political responsibilities on the part of the woman. This is because she has a natural aptitude, and in addition to that, if she received the special musical and physical education and freed herself from the domestic ministrations, then there would be no biological difference that could stop her from dealing with the governing of the Republic - just like men do. Being less strong than men, physically, means that she should be assigned lighter duties; the fact that the woman is inferior to man in all her occupations - a fact absolutely acceptable according to Plato¹⁰ - could be compensated for by means of the special education which would improve her weak natural aptitude, provided she was gifted and talented. The negative female properties - cowardice, fear when in public, weakness of character and the tendency to hesitant and passive behaviour - constitute a "*para physin*" female behaviour, because of habitual "addiction" to auxiliary social roles that tie her down, in the sense that she does not deal with the "*ondos oda*" but with the "phenomena". The reasoning part (*logistikon*) of the female soul is presented as something different from that belonging to man, as it is degraded by lower elements of her dealing with survival "*kata physin*" situations. However, what Plato cares about is not what a woman is, but what a woman could be, that is, some women's ability to control the parts of their soul and deal with Philosophy, since the criterion for

Philosophy lies in the human intellect and not in the body. The Platonic dualism in the distinction between body and soul - which has become the object of feminist criticism - seems to be surpassed by its own creator; the souls of the philosophers are desexualised and, as such, they have equal opportunities of access to the conquering of virtues and their perfection, of the Art of Goodness.

The practical application of such an intellectual and political equation is achieved in Plato's *Republic* through three presuppositions, as applying to both sexes: a) the same physical education; b) the same education of the soul; c) the nuclear family and personal property.¹¹

a) Physical education could strengthen the female body and enable it to even participate in battle. Women could fight in order to protect the city; moreover, their harmony and strengthening are more important than the spectacle of their naked bodies in the gymnasium, since nakedness does not shock men, due to the fact that women are protected by the cloth of virtue of their Soul.¹²

This Platonic remark explicitly implies the absolute self-restraint of philosophers, the absolute binding of passions,¹³ as well as the de-sexualisation of the female body, even of the naked.

b) Musical education, as well as dealing with literature, mathematics and dialectics, educates the soul of guardians (regardless of sex), so that the thirst for knowledge and their inclination to science and not to the semblance of things would broaden their ability to cultivate intellectual virtues, self-awareness, the total control of passions, prudence and justice, all of which are necessary qualities for the governing of the republic. The specialised education of the guardians entails, by all means, their separate place in the hierarchy, and, as a result, the inequality among citizens. The only difference is that the criterion for differentiation is removed, from the possession of material goods, titles of nobility, origin and gender, and the ability to possess *logos* as the utmost common principle is emphasised, as well as the rule for the management of one's self and of others.

c) The most basic presupposition, however, for the shifting of people from one class to another is the abolition of the nuclear family and personal property in the class of the Guardians.¹⁴ The common ownership¹⁵ seems to benefit the lower class of the artisans on an individual level, because they possess money and

property, while the guardians renounce any kind of material power, which could render them tyrants and enemies of their fellow citizens. Interest in the protection of individual interests is eliminated, everything belongs to everybody and the only thing the guardians care about is the disinterested love and care for the prosperity of the community.

The joint ownership of women and children, however, seems to be of great importance for the development of women as *phylakithes*, despite the fact that it introduces unprecedented moral principles, and abolishes the emotional bonds of kinship, the monogamy of women¹⁶ and the discrimination of free sexuality. Since the traditional, external factors that determine female subordination are broken down, the realm of "private" breaks down and the woman is expected to construct a new identity in the realm of "public", that is, to manifest her political presence in the realm of culture. The traditional institutions of marriage and family - which, in part, are regarded as obligations obstructing a person to function freely in public - in practice, burden the "lower" women as boring tasks, even if they constituted a model of disciplined education of young Athenians in order for them to turn into citizens. The Athenian citizen does not seem to invest in his wife emotionally or intellectually. He does not go beyond teaching her to manage material goods and raising the legitimate successors to his fortune. This abolition of the material aspect of family may have been damaged much less than the limitation or denouncement of pederasty and of the existence of courtesans, since they were true sources of satisfaction for his inner intellectual and erotic needs.¹⁷

This unexpected unique opportunity for the breakdown of her "domestic role" and for the release from her housekeeping and material ministrations, seems to introduce the woman into a new scope of activities, similar to that of man; it also provides her with the opportunity to devote as much time as man does, to occupy herself with political administration. At this point, several commentators, from Plato's contemporaries to contemporary feminists, study the consequences of such a structural social change in the nature and place of women.

Since, throughout the Platonic work, Plato does not seem to be interested in the importance of male oppression of the woman's psychic world, or in the importance of the woman's personal desire for self-determination, personal development and self-improvement, it would appear that the main interest in the *Republic* lies in securing

the unity of *polis* through joint-ownership, and in the qualitative contribution of woman for the common good. This social result is based on new moral and ontological focussing:

Firstly, the exercising of authority is free from gender in a political sense, where the wishes of the many "worse" men, children and women are subject to the wisdom of the few, the "better", who could be represented by both men and women. The authority of the guardians - men and women - would be free from wealth and personal pleasures, loving ways - not like that of the "big brother" in George Orwell as J. Annas points out - since their private lives, thoughts and actions are not of interest to the republic; what is of interest is their offer of protection to the weak, as a gift and a privilege, in order for them to be self governed.¹⁸

This recognition of the differentiation and diversion of the subjects offers a reassurance of the concept of citizenship, which is based upon the overthrowing of social relations and, as a result of that, of the intellectual categories that structure them. The moral value of this way of life ties in the controlling of pleasure, which M, Foucault believes to constitute a self-restraint subject with access to what he calls "Aesthetic of Existence".¹⁹

Secondly, the desexualisation of women is considered by many feminists to be an abnormality of the female nature, since all the orientated female elements that are connected with life, and are related to motherhood, care and tenderness are weakened, while there is reinforcement of the controlled intellectual structuring of thoughts and actions of an *Androgynos* woman.²⁰ In an inspired answer, A. Saxonhouse²¹ states that nature is definitely twisted, but the "injustice" takes place on an individual/personal level and it is combined with the comparison between the relationship of men to women and that of philosophers to politics. Both philosophers and women, according to Saxonhouse, retire into private life (*idiotouvoun*): women do that by confining themselves into the house and philosophers by developing a thought which is free from market, public opinion, political needs and choices. Since, however, those who retire into private life do not have a place in active politics, they are considered to be "useless" - as Thoukididis says - to the political community. Dealing with politics and the imposition of that in an authoritarian way - as the only way of a "*kata physin*" existence in the Platonic republic - gives meaning to a psychic and physical shifting (as a result of a reverse in attitude), from their natural environment and to a loss of a passive identity (in terms of

participating in public affairs); an identity that they earn anew and reconstruct according to the terms of a political activity. The price of this reverse, Saxonhouse says, is: a) the eliminating redefinition of the woman's and the philosopher's nature from life to death, as politics - being mainly competitive - functions within the frame of death, and the participation in war does not take place in the defence of the rights of life and love - as the heroines in Aristophanes do, but in order to eliminate the enemies of the community; and b) the rediscovery of the lost nature in an erotic way: the woman as giving birth and as a biological pursuit of wisdom herself, the pederast philosopher as a lover of knowledge having "*kata physin*" heterosexual, and therefore fertile, way of thinking. Fallus, as a symbol of creativity²² and not of masculinity seems to belong to both sexes and its *Rhein* would fit Plato's republic. Because the opportunity that the latter gives women, by weakening the category of gender as a cause of their exclusion from political process, a talented female's nature is fulfilled in two ways: firstly, by improving her ethos through her masculine logical control of the weaknesses of her emotional nature, and secondly by contributing to the refinement of Philosophy itself - according to Allan Bloom's comment -through her differentiated co-functionality with the other sex.

In conclusion, Plato seems to be a feminist only in our imagination. It is extremely utopic even to imagine that, as a modern thinker, he would play a leading part in any claim for the improvement of the individual conditions of life and women. This, nevertheless, conceals, in my current opinion, a long settled matter for him, as to the conflict of the two sexes.²³ The deconstruction of the concept of gender in the *Republic* where women philosophers also rule, could characterise him as a post-modern philosopher, to a greater extent than we gradually discover him to be. He renounces conflicts between men and women as belonging to a world that is more aggressively modernised and seemingly sensitised to the human rights, our own modern world, where people still oppress each other, fight and kill each other, excluded from the blissfulness of the Platonic Utopia.

Notes

1. Thukidides 2.45.
2. Pseudo Dymosthenes: "Against Neaira", 122.
3. Eva Keuls, 1985, *The Rhein of Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Greece*. New York.
4. Costas Boudouris, 1976, *Platonic Philosophy*, Athens.
5. *Republic* 456.
6. *Rep* 462a-e.
7. Julia Annas, 1981, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*. Clarendon Press: Oxford.
8. *Rep.* 457c.
9. *Rep.* 454e.
10. *Rep.* 455c, e.
11. *Rep.* 452a, 456d, 457d-e.
12. *Rep.* 453a, e, 457b.
13. *Rep.* 389d-e.
14. *Rep.* 424a.
15. *Rep.* 462c.
16. *Rep.* 461c.
17. G. Marrow's comment in Susan Mollez Okin: "Philosopher Queens and Private Wives", in: *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 6 (1997, 345-369).
18. Julia Annas: "Plato's Republic and Feminism", in: *Philosophy* 51, 1976, 307-321.
19. M. Foucault: "L'histoire de Sexualite" Vol. 2 Πάρτυας, Αθήνα.
20. Gosling: "admiration of manliness".
21. Arlene Saxonhouse, 1976 "The philosopher and the Female in the political thought of Plato", in: *Political Theory*. 4, 195-212.
22. The way Phyllis Greenacre and S. Chassequet Smirget use the word "Phallus", speaking about male and female creativity.
23. Plato in *Timaeus* gives a different female name "Chora" for an archaic place, existing before the creation of the One, the Father, See also Plato's *Timaeus* 48a-53c.

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