
Review

Plato as Critical Theorist

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Max Horkheimer claimed that in its attempt to emancipate humankind from slavery, critical theory ‘resembles Greek philosophy...in the golden age of Plato and Aristotle...[because] the new dialectical philosophy...has held onto the realization that the free development of individuals depends on the rational constitution of society’ (1972, p. 246). Jonny Thakkar’s *Plato as Critical Theorist* could be summed up as a sustained, erudite, and lucid elaboration on Horkheimer’s claim. To evince the importance of ideal theory for people discontent with the contemporary iteration of social, political, and economic life, Thakkar reorients us towards Plato’s *Republic* as a vision of an ideal constitution – crucially distinct from an unrealizable utopia – that situates humans within the rational structure of the cosmos wherein each person will realize her ideal form and function. Doing so will make the present seem strange and, by changing us, will begin to transform our condition to the betterment of our individual and collective lives. Thus, for Thakkar, Plato’s ‘ideal theory and critical theory...[are] two sides of the same coin’ (p. 217).

That said, Thakkar pushes Horkheimer’s inferences too far, especially in his efforts to reconcile both Plato and critical theory to liberal democracy. Although grounded in an ancient work of political theory, Thakkar attempts to make a serious contribution to *contemporary* political theory. Thus, rather than the Frankfurt School, Raymond Geuss’ and Amartya Sen’s critiques of ideal theory set the stage for this task and – given his admission that liberal democracy has won the day (pp. 1–5) – John Rawls ultimately judges Thakkar’s reprisal, with a special place reserved for Karl Marx, too.

What does this ambitious project amount to? ‘Political Platonism’, which means that ‘if humans are to flourish, the societies into which they group must be consciously regulated by philosophers, with each citizen doing the job assigned to her’ (p. 36). If Seyla Benhabib denied Horkheimer’s claim, because ‘the normative standards of critical theory are not based upon an ontology of nature that Plato and Aristotle share’ (1986, p. 5), Thakkar rather provides an unorthodox interpretation of Plato’s forms (Chapter 1). Instead of the familiar two-world view, Thakkar



interprets an object's form to denote its place within a cosmic, teleological perspective, knowledge of which is called *sophia*. *Sophia* is then central to Plato's *political* philosophy because the only society worthy of the name is that which has a unity with the teleological good. Thakkar admits that this good and the unity it governs are hypothetical (p. 31 n. 47 and pp. 52–56), but philosophy is about having faith in, discerning, and working towards it. 'Doing [philosophy] well requires a holistic back-and-forth between our understandings of particular things in their current states and in the best possible states, and that requires a holistic back-and-forth between our understandings of the best possible states of individual things and of the wholes of which they are parts. What it requires', he concludes, '...is ideal theory' (p. 227).

At this point, Thakkar explains why philosophers must rule: only they can produce and maintain the necessary conditions for philosophy. But rule, for Thakkar's Plato, means 'to exercise control over [people's] souls' (p. 170). Chapters 2–4 concern different aspects of this idiosyncratic understanding of rule: first, guarding against the corruption of the philosopher-ruler's own soul so that *sophia* can be acquired (Chapter 2); second, shaping people by directing 'linguistic and cultural usages' (p. 151) and disseminating images of rational order to 'engender true belief about what counts as just, beautiful, and good' (p. 165) (Chapter 3); finally, seeing the *Republic* as modelling philosophical rule in a non-ideal society by creating myths and caricatures for ideology critique (Chapter 4). While for Plato, ideal rulers would rule 'from above' (p. 331), Thakkar argues that soul-control does not *require* formal positions of power to be effective, thereby anticipating Thakkar's transition into liberal democracy and his desire to placate anyone who sees 'the specter of theocracy and totalitarianism' (p. 217).

Turning to the present in the second half of the book, Thakkar modifies Plato's theory 'whenever it seems to conflict with...the foundational commitments of contemporary Western society' (p. 224). By this he means liberal democracy, and the result is 'philosophical citizenship', which is the focus of Chapter 6. Relaxing the requirements of *sophia*, Thakkar looks for commonsense and quotidian equivalents of philosophic rule to allow for widespread participation. Perhaps more importantly, Thakkar argues that philosophical citizenship passes the Rawlsian public reason test, even improving upon it by embodying other civic virtues. In the final chapter (Chapter 7), then, Thakkar returns to Geuss' challenge for political philosophy to address contemporary realities by narrowing his focus onto capitalism. To do so, Thakkar outlines the affinities between Plato's critique of moneymaking and Marx's critique of capitalism as well as the complementarity of their imagined ideal societies.

Plato as Critical Theorist is carefully considered, well structured, and intellectually generative. But if by espousing Aristotle's emancipatory ambitions Horkheimer elided Aristotle's famous justification of slavery, Thakkar perhaps also downplays some limitations to Plato's ideal society for us today. At the beginning



of *Republic* Book II, Plato's Socrates states, 'I think cities come into being because each of us has many needs' (369b, my translation). What follows is a reckoning of the *polis*' members based on their fulfilling certain needs, namely for food, shelter, clothes, and 'bodily needs' (369d). But if one jettisons cosmic goodness – as Thakkar seems to (p. 244) – then Plato's theorization suffers from a fallacy. It presupposes what it is trying to explain, namely society as the interlocutors suppose it. The imagined members are 'unencumbered' individuals that the interlocutors then constitute entirely in terms of the community's needs, as though already a part of it. This fails to explain how individuals could constitute themselves in society and suggests that community simply requires people to subject themselves to an authoritative determination of needs. Thakkar perhaps detects a problem and gets Plato – and himself – off the hook by misrepresenting the passage, claiming that 'Socrates does not specify which kinds of needs are at issue here' and that the 'point is perfectly abstract' (p. 278). Given the weight Thakkar places on this passage to evince one of the central interpretative tools of the book – the 'teleological hypothesis' (p. 54) – this problem affects much of *Plato as Critical Theorist*. Here, I can only mention two further ways that it does.

First, Marx criticized Plato's *Republic* because 'the labourer must adapt himself to the work, not the work to the labourer...' (1976, p. 487 n. 57), meaning the productive system is preeminent to the worker's detriment. While this could also describe my criticism above, Marx actually refers to Plato's emphasis on timing (*kairos*) in the laborer's work, meaning she operates according to a program that is not her own. The point is important here because it indicates a significant difference in normative emphasis between Plato and Marx – community versus individual *and* community, respectively – that problematizes Thakkar's attempt in chapter 7 to align both with his political ideal.

Second, in this passage, Plato presupposes a pool of individuals of whom only some are deemed useful on account of serving the community's purported needs. Thakkar's own recurring illustration of a functional soccer team suggests the extent to which this has been absorbed into his project. How should the exclusion of the useless be judged in light of the conditions Thakkar establishes for the success of his project, namely that it be 'action guiding' (p. 220) in light of 'political life today' (p. 217) and thus a 'genuine ideal' (p. 218)?

We could criticize Plato's ideal society for the same reasons that Thakkar calls Aristotle's justification of slavery 'bad': namely, because our 'deepest institutional and evaluative commitments come into conflict with it' (p. 221). Thakkar does not elaborate further, but he implies the universal natural rights that have informed especially liberal political thought and global institution building since at least the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. But if so, we would have to say that Plato's ideal also 'clashes unavoidably with our society's commitments' making it 'historically impossible' but also 'odd to describe [it] as merely impossible today, as if it could in principle be the subject of utopian longing' (p.



221). Easy as this seems, it is not quite so simple, owing to the complexity of political life today.

For instance, we could question whether contemporary societies are best characterized as liberal-democratic owing to their demonstrated less-than-universalistic perspective and wavering commitment to protecting human rights. Consider the rift within avowedly liberal-democratic countries, evinced by their unwillingness to uphold the international reforms that were created to prevent a recurrence of humanitarian disasters by operating in accordance with what Hannah Arendt called ‘the right to have rights’ (1973, p. 296). In this context, bringing Thakkar’s ideal to bear on our societies may be ‘practically possible’ because it is aligned with current practices of exclusion, but not because either are straightforwardly liberal-democratic.

Or, we could question the unity and coherence of liberal democracy regarding universal natural rights and thus call into question its normativity on that score. Marx had already questioned liberalism’s coherence, in an essay (1978) that Thakkar does not discuss, precisely because the individual is riven between (hu)man and citizen.

In the end, if liberal-democracy is taken to characterize our contemporary condition, then a more nuanced account of its relationship to international institutions and the movement of peoples is necessary. While not within the ambit of Thakkar’s book, given the central exclusionary logic at work in Plato’s *Republic*, it arguably should be, considering his conditions for Plato’s status as a critical theorist.

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