

# ON THE RECEPTION OF PLATO'S POLITICAL IDEAS IN POLISH PHILOSOPHY OF THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY\*

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*The main purpose of this paper is to prove that the attitude towards Plato's political ideas among Polish scholars depended on political situation of Poland and Europe. Selected works of three periods are under examination. Before the World War I the enthusiasm towards Plato's political ideas prevailed. In the inter-war period the enthusiasm waned and the utopian project of the Republic was considered as impossible to be carried out. After the World War II Plato's project was negatively evaluated by the opponents of the totalitarianism and communism as well as by the Marxist philosophers. The former considered communism to be a fulfillment of Plato's ideas, the latter thought of Plato as an enemy of the democratic system.*

**Key words:** *Plato, Politeia, Plato reception, Polish philosophy.*

The main purpose of this paper is to provide evidence that some aspects of the attitude towards Plato's political ideas among Polish scholars were influenced by the political situation in Poland at different times.

Let me sketch an outline of the changes in the political situation during the period under consideration. In 1795, after the third partition of Poland, the Polish Republic – or, to be more specific, the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth – ceased to exist. The partitions were carried out by Prussia (Königreich Preußen), Russia (Российская Империя) and Austria (Kaisertum Öster-

reich). The political absence of Poland as a nation state lasted until World War I, when independence was regained only to be lost again in 1939 when Poland was occupied during World War II and later became a part of the Communist Bloc.

## **The enthusiasm before the World War I**

Let us start now with two scholars working on Plato before 1918.

Tadeusz Sinko (1877–1966), an eminent philologist and historian, while teaching at one of Kraków's gymnasiums, wrote a study (in Latin) on the reception of Plato's *sententia* that philosophers should govern the states. Plato's political idea, says Sinko, can be counted among the more unusual of human concepts. "Even if the practice

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and experience of real life tarnished their truthfulness or at least proved that their deployment provided no benefit in private or public life, still, after some time new people will appear, who come to the belief that these *sententiae* are not at all false, and they will spare no involvement or effort to apply these in life” (Sinko 1904: 3). Irrespective of circumstances, asserts Sinko, there will always be those ready to sacrifice everything in order to improve the political life in Platonic manner. Why? Sinko answers at the end of his paper: “Plato’s golden dream has never been totally fulfilled; often it has been proved to be ridiculous, sometimes – eliminated. Nevertheless, it has never ceased appearing in human minds as an image of better times. This is because the entire meaning of the idea, although unobservable by the senses, nevertheless remains in the mind, providing a pattern for shaping human matters. <...> And nowadays, aren’t the high offices reserved for those people who can demonstrate through exams that they possess the knowledge and skills to serve? Socrates, the first author of this divine thought, desired nothing else. And when kings and leaders of our times appoint those with outstanding education and services as their palace advisers, don’t they fulfill Plato’s desire that the government should always have wisdom as its companion and adviser” (Sinko 1904: 55–56). According to Sinko then, Plato’s political ideas were still topical and universal, and in spite of their deficiencies – still very attractive. It cannot be excluded that one day Plato’s project could be fulfilled, and undoubtedly people will make attempts to bring it to life.

Eugeniusz Jarra (1881–1973) defended his thesis on Plato at Lviv University. It was published in 1918 under the title *The Idea of*

*State in Plato and its History*. After World War I his research interests changed and he took a post of Professor of the History and Philosophy of Law at Warsaw University. During the World War II he managed to flee to France and later to England. He later took up a post as a lecturer in England, where he died.

Jarra highlighted the modernity – in his opinion – of Plato’s political ideas, namely spiritual aristocracy. There is only one criterion on which distinctions between individuals can be made – the value of each human being. “There is no more important task for the governors of a state than that of checking to what extent a given individual has been endowed with this or that element [=gold, silver and bronze]” (Jarra 1918: 108). What Jarra emphasized particularly was the possibility of social promotion (or demotion) for everyone. Subsequently talents were not wasted and the most important posts were not taken by anyone on the grounds of his or her birth.

In this respect Plato – according to the Polish philosopher – was ahead of his time, Plato appeared as a modern democrat – if by democracy one means the freedom of social promotion for everyone, limited only by the talents of the given individual.

Jarra claimed that the asceticism of the guardians might have been applied to some extent to the governed class. This was the reason for stating that Plato’s project did not divide people into classes, but that building the perfect state was to be a joint effort. According to Jarra, Plato did not despise the lowest class because if he had done so, he would have broken the most important and fundamental principle of the perfect state: τὰ αὐτοῦ πράττειν. In a perfect state then

there is nothing to despise. Nobody's private interests could be more important than the perfection of the entire state.

In these circumstances a problem might arise: isn't Plato going too far with his concern for the entire state? Isn't he going to annihilate the individual? Jarra had a clear answer to this accusation: "this does not seem to be in accordance with Plato's intention nor with the spirit of the *Republic*'s institutions. <...> it is sufficient to remind ourselves of the decisive point of this doctrine, τὰ αὐτοῦ πράττειν, which means – to carry out the duties appropriate for a given individual, and – related to this – redeployment within the social hierarchy, which can also be accepted on the basis of personal merits. These were the edicts giving the individual an unconditional possibility to excel and gain a personal rank" (Jarra 1918: 144).

Did Plato care about individual happiness, since he was primarily concerned with the entire organism? Jarra's answer is positive: "in the perfect state the happiness of the individual will be measured individually, but not according to arbitrariness, fantasy or the personal delusion of the individual, not according to subjective, individual measure; but in accordance with an objective criterion for the given individual or post. Everyone is to be given what befits him, what is for him most appropriate and through which the whole will become beautiful" (Jarra 1918: 145).

Individual happiness is always in accordance with natural predispositions and with the general purpose of the state. "So a human individual is not 'sacrificed without mercy' by the Platonic state; being placed in a post according to its nature, the individual is equipped with the right view of the

world and can feel totally satisfied with its fate, building at the same time the foundations for the general harmony" (Jarra 1918: 145). Nevertheless, later generations called Plato's project an utopia, an illusory fantasy. They were wrong, says Jarra, to apply their intellectual, social and cultural measures to test an ancient social project. For Plato was convinced that it was possible to fulfill it. Anyway, "the feasibility of the aim is not the only touchstone of its absolute value, and the act, as less perfect, is never able to realize the word, which by its nature is a much more perfect instrument for grasping the truth" (Jarra 1918: 147). In the conclusions of his work Jarra quoted one sentence from the *Republic*, book VII: "with reference to a state and form of government, we have not altogether stated mere wishes, but such things as though difficult are yet in a certain respect possible" (540 d)<sup>2</sup>.

Since Jarra asserted that the society of the time was divided into classes, the remnants of feudalism, Plato was for him a true democrat. Plato's project was interpreted as a perfect state of the future, governed by very well-educated people – the best possible ideal for a future Polish democracy. The project presented in the *Republic* seemed to be a perfect aim, not easy to reach, but not impossible. *Republic* was then interpreted as Plato's reaction to the political crisis of Athens and, at the same time, the *Republic* could be read as a remedy for the political crisis which was eventually to lead to World War I.

These were two interpretations of Plato's political ideas, both very optimistic on the

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<sup>2</sup> The same passage in Greek was placed as a motto at the very beginning of Jarra's book.

issue of their possible fulfillment. Plato was regarded as a political thinker quite ahead of his times, and many of his ideas had already been fulfilled, which reflected well on Plato and also on modern times.

### **The disappointment in the interwar period**

In the period between the two World Wars one may observe a change in attitude towards Plato's political philosophy. Although the interpreters emphasized some of the timeless values of the *Republic*, they also presented Plato's political philosophy as evolving towards a compromise between the ideal project and reality.

In 1928 the second translation of *Politeia* into Polish was published. Stanisław Lisiecki (1872–1960), in his introduction to *Politeia* highlighted the problem of the conflict between the perfect project and reality. He wrote: "The wise man indicates that reality in general always remains far behind the ideal, and so one should be satisfied with building a state which, in the given conditions, would be closest to the ideal of justice" (Lisiecki 1928: XXIX). He did not deny that *Politeia* possessed some eternal values. In considering them, however, Lisiecki started with the following statement: "It is impossible to deny that many ideas developed in the *Republic*, in spite of the logical foundations on which they rest, must, regrettably, be considered to be unfulfillable" (Lisiecki 1928: LX). The greatest disadvantages of the Platonic project are the obstacles which make it impossible for it to be put into practice.

Apart from these obstacles, *Politeia* "contains so many noble and uplifting principles" (Lisiecki 1928: LXI), including

a government consisting of philosophers, the need for knowledge, punishment for injustice, immortality of souls. "These are only some of the many banners which have not lost any of their strength during their twenty-three-century march throughout the world. On the contrary, they have been assimilated and modernized within the human soul. Plato's *Republic*, though unfulfillable on earth, exists, however, as he himself said 'in the Heavens', namely in the world of ideas 'for everyone who wants to see them, and who seeing them wants to form his soul following this example'" (Lisiecki 1928: LXIV). Reality will never achieve perfection.

### **Plato as the one to blame after the World War II**

The translator of the greatest number of Plato's dialogues into Polish – Władysław Witwicki (1878–1948), "Polish Schleiermacher" – worked on the *Republic* during World War II and just afterwards. He was an independent and original thinker, philosopher, psychologist, translator and illustrator. He was one of the first and the oldest students of Kazimierz Twardowski (1866–1938), the founder of the so-called Lviv-Warsaw school of philosophy and logic.

The most important inspiration for his judgment of Plato's utopia was the political situation of Poland at that time. Witwicki, shortly before his death, stated: "Many of Plato's political thoughts and dreams have come to fulfillment in twentieth century Europe, when the totalitarian states started to be formed, when state education and military training for boys and girls began to take place, when women gained equal

rights and when freedom of speech and print was limited. European states, one after another, ceased to be communities of free individuals and became large institutions for rational breeding and exploitation of ethnic groups carried out by armed committees. Not everything in these states went as Plato had intended. He was far from being an imperialist. <...> The state, in his view, was to be a kind of holy order of knights, under the governance of the intellectual elite carefully educated and tested, just like the Church in the Middle Ages or the Jesuit's republic in Paraguay. Nevertheless, the desire to bind people in a kind of beehive or a termites' hill, in a closed unity, in which the individual has its place only as an instrument of the whole has its origins in Plato. He is not concerned with organizing the lowest class. He is interested in the clerks and the army. The rest is passive material, and the livestock of the state" (Witwicki 1947: 36–37).

Judging Plato and the scale of his contribution to the totalitarian ideology of the twentieth century, Witwicki – unlike Russell<sup>3</sup> or Popper – was unable to criticize the communist government directly. So his critical remarks on Plato are also indirectly addressed towards the new political system in after-war Poland. In 1948, the year of Witwicki's death, his translation of *Politeia* was published. He had worked on the text during the war, and after the war he added the introduction.

In the introduction to *Politeia*, Witwicki was much more severe about Plato's project. He blamed Plato's aristocratic point of view

for the contempt he showed for democracy, which was strengthened after Socrates' death. "He attempts to create in his mind a perfect state and to define the perfect type of human soul which would be able to build and maintain such a state. A great escape into the world of dreams from a painful and loathsome reality" (Witwicki 1948: 8). *Politeia*, according to the psychologist Witwicki, was a testimony of the internal dialogue between Plato-poet and Plato-truth seeker. The psychological background to Plato's call for equality of rights for women was highlighted by Witwicki: "In regard to the matters of the heart, Plato did not react to girls' charms and he did not love any woman. This was also reflected in his thoughts on how to organize male-female relations in the future society. Dry and pedantic thoughts. A homosexual as an organizer of marriages and romances. He was always interested in the most talented boys, the most outstanding people and those who were well-mannered as well. All the others were regarded as living material that could be and ought to be formed into a decent family or decent state with an iron hand; without asking them whether they wanted it or not nor whether they felt good in it or bad" (Witwicki 1948: 10–11).

The following passages were even harsher: "Decent institutions are his aim and not the happiness of single individuals. Thus his perfect state reminds us of some kind of great monastery, concentration camp, prison or totalitarian state; hence his projects of the rigorous, strict censorship, the application of lying in politics and ruthless coercion even in the most intimate aspects of life; even if individuals were to suffocate in these fetters. It is such a very modern position. But

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<sup>3</sup> A few copies of Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* were available in Poland. Some passages of this book Witwicki might have found inspiring.

his demands to hand the government over to the philosophers, that is the people with the highest education – it is not a modern demand, as everybody knows” (Witwicki 1948: 11). This last ironic sentence was not included in all the later editions, when Witwicki was unable to object.

Witwicki described Plato’s project as a great monastery, concentration camp, prison and totalitarian state. The *Republic* was considered to be the project of an escapist thinker who could not stand Athenian democracy. Witwicki’s opinion may be compared to that of Popper. Their inspiration for judging Plato was the same – namely, World War II, although Popper’s argumentation was much more detailed. Witwicki, however, was most probably not acquainted with *Open Society*. Plato’s project was regarded as partly fulfilled, but this fulfillment proved to be ruthless and perverted, as Witwicki experienced himself. Plato, to some extent, was the one to blame for all the political oppression of that time. Criticism of Plato was also a disguised criticism of the communist system.

During the Stalinist era, Plato’s political philosophy and the *Republic* were criticized by Marxist philosophers as a naïve, extremely ridiculous project defending the interests of the aristocracy (the bourgeois class) and hostile to democracy.

Let me quote now some passages from the *Lectures on the History of Ancient Philosophy* by Tadeusz Kroński (1907–1958), one of the eminent Marxist thinkers. He gave these lectures in the early fifties: “In the *Republic* one may find an outline of the dialectical progress of political systems. This dialectic is, however, extremely naïve. <...> Nevertheless, in spite of all

the naivety and in spite of the open hostility to democracy, to the ‘wrong’ system, in spite of its entire unscientific nature, it is still an interesting conception and – as a first attempt to grasp the changeability of political systems – it is a work of a genius. The bourgeois historians, however, deliberately blur the political nature of Plato’s philosophical doctrine” (Kroński 1955: 44–45). This last sentence was not true, but it was meant to highlight the only true and scientific reading of Plato by the Marxist historians. The final judgment on Plato’s political philosophy is unambiguous: “It is also doubtless that this system – an apology of the extremest obscurantism, religiosity and social reaction – was an expression of aristocratic hatred of democracy and progressive doctrines” (Kroński 1955: 45). Platonism had a great influence on the history of European philosophy, but what kind of influence was it? Kroński answered this question: “One may confidently say that in all European thought there was not a single reactionary trend which did not have its origin in Plato” (Kroński 1955: 48). Among these reactionary trends he counted Neo-Kantianism, writing: „the truth is ‘eternal’, it is not subject to progress. And if it is, then ethical norms are eternal as is the social order, and the very capitalist order defended by the Neo-Kantians” (Kroński 1955: 48). All of these are probably quite typical opinions published in the Eastern Bloc during the Stalinist period.

## Conclusion

Before 1918 Plato’s *Politeia* was interpreted as a fulfillable golden dream and Plato appeared to be a political teacher of the human race, a creator of a true democratic system.

In the period between the two wars the emphasis was laid upon the *hiatus* between the political reality and perfection of Plato's utopia. Right after the World War II Plato was to blame for all the evils of war and totalitarian states. Critical remarks towards Plato were similar to those expressed in the same period by Bertrand Russell or Karl Raimund Popper. In the Stalinist era, in the 50's, Plato's political philosophy was evaluated in the perspective of the class struggle

as an expression of the aristocratic hostility towards democracy.

As may be concluded, the above studies are just an episode in the history of Platonism, but they provide evidence of the vitality of Plato's political philosophy, which is still worth discussing. These studies also serve as an example of how the evaluations and interpretations of past political projects and utopias are influenced by political situations.

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## PLATONO POLITINIŲ IDĖJŲ RECEPCIJA XX A. PIRMOSIOS PUSĖS LENKIJOS FILOSOFIJOJE

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S a n t r a u k a

Straipsniu siekiama parodyti, kad Lenkijos mokslininkų požiūris į Platono politines idėjas priklausė nuo politinės situacijos Lenkijoje ir Europoje. Apžvelgiami trijų laikotarpių tekstai. Prieš Pirmąjį pasaulinį karą vyravo entuziazmas Platono politinių idėjų atžvilgiu. Tarpukariu entuziazmas išblėso ir utopinis *Valstybės* projektas buvo laikomas neįgyvendinamu.

Po Antrojo pasaulinio karo Platono projektą neigiamai vertino tiek totalitarizmo ir komunizmo kritikai, tiek marksistai. Pirmieji komunizmą manė esant Platono idėjų realizaciją, o antrieji Platoną laikė demokratinės sitemos priešū.

**Pagrindiniai žodžiai:** Platonas, *Valstybė*, Platono recepcija, Lenkijos filosofija.

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