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Women in Plato’s Republic

Luc Brisson

In the course of the 20th century, the Republic underwent a spectacular renewal of notoriety, even if it was not always favorable. Because Plato had harshly criticized the Athenian democracy, he was accused of being the ancestor of the dictatorships of every kind that became established in Europe and Asia. Here, I will not take up the question of totalitarianism, relaunched by Karl Popper right after the Second World War, which has been the subject of so much debate. I will bring up another debate, in order to emphasize its interest and its modernity: that of the place and role of women in society, which was relaunched at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, particularly by feminist movements. On the question of women, Plato displays great originality, and, to some extent, considerable modernity, even if some aspects of his project contravene human rights.

Historical reality in Plato’s Athens

The Republic proposes a revolutionary project for 4th century BC Athens. In it, Plato attacks Athenian democracy (which was very different from ours), in that he makes it responsible for Socrates’ condemnation to death. He wants to overthrow this political system, in order to reconstruct a just city, in which Socrates, and philosophers in general, will not risk death.

Right at the outset, Plato attacks the family, in the broad sense of the oikos (the nuclear family, father, mother, and children), that is the extended family (uncles and aunts, grandparents, in-laws), which is in competition with other families to accede to wealth and power, and transmit them from generation to generation. This competition is a source of conflicts, both internal and external. Internally, it gives rise to a gap, increasingly accentuated, between the rich, who want to become more and more rich, and the poor, who necessarily become increasingly poor. It is therefore the major obstacle to concord in the city. What is more, this competition generates external wars, for to obtain more wealth and increase one’s territory, the city is forced to attack its neighbors.
In order to make conflicts impossible, both inside and outside the city, Plato separates the governing class, which contains a group of warriors and a group of philosophers, from the group of producers, who provide and warriors and the philosophers with the necessities of life. Plato reserves the use of force to one functional group alone, that of the guardians; and he intends to give supreme power to knowledge, represented by the philosophers, chosen from among the guardians. The members of the ruling class cannot possess either property or family (οἶκος), and this rejection of the family implies, as we shall see, a redefinition of the status of women. This was a merciless criticism of Athenian citizenship, which took only men, that is, males, into consideration. They were the only ones able to possess land, and therefore a domain, and to vote in the Assembly and at Court, but, in exchange, they all had the obligation to bear arms.

In 4th century Athens, where Plato lived, the opposition on which all others depended was that between men and women, which was prolonged into another one: public/private. This opposition was not arbitrary, and did not necessarily derive from a will to domination on the part of men, that is, of males. It was the inevitable consequence of defining human beings by their bodies. For if human beings are defined by their bodies, the distribution of social roles between men and women becomes unavoidable. Women are defined by their gender, which enables them to bear children and bring them into the world. But the period of pregnancy makes them quite inapt for work and for combat. And since children must be fed, protected, and educated for several years before they become autonomous, women are bound to these tasks. They are therefore held back in the private sphere. Men, in contrast, who are generally physically stronger than women, are assigned to manual labor and to war; and they are therefore necessary also political actors. As compared to women, who are held back in the private sphere, men reserve the public sphere for themselves.

This state of affairs is confirmed in Greek mythology. Women who reject their condition as women, and hence as mothers, are radically relegated to the side of men, becoming warriors. Jean-Pierre Vernant, who was my teacher at Paris, writes: “Marriage is to girls what war is to boys; for both, it marks the accomplishment of their respective nature, as they emerge from a state in which each participates in the other”. This is why in mythology, two solutions are possible for women who renounce their nature: either they remain virgins, and live without men, either as warriors like Athena or as hunters like Diana; or else they get married, but it is the men that assume the domestic chores, while the women wage war, like the Amazons.

The definition of human beings in the Republic

The status of women in society depends essentially on the definition of human beings. If human beings are defined by their body, a clear distinction emerges between women, whose role is to produce and raise children, and men, who must work to feed their wife and children, and who must fight to protect them.

In Plato, the definition of human beings changes. Human beings are living beings, that is, the temporary conjunction of a soul and a body. The body, which
is made up of the four elements (fire, air, water, and earth), and is dissolved after a certain number of years, is merely a temporary element. Human beings are defined by their soul, for the soul is responsible for all the cognitive and physical movements of human beings, and, above all, it survives them, and can thus be punished or rewarded in another world.

On this earth, the soul, although it remains basically one, is the source of a multiplicity of activities grouped around three functions: a cognitive function, which accounts for the knowledge that may or may not imply the body; an aggressive function, enabling the defense of the body; and a desiring function, which ensures the nutrition and reproduction of the body. It is the excellence of the activities implemented by these functions that allows individual humans to be divided into the three functional groups that make up society: the producers, whose psychic excellence implies their control of desire; the guardians, whose psychic excellence resides in courage, and the philosophers, whose soul is turned toward knowledge. There is thus a direct relation between the three functions of the soul and the three functional groups included in the city; it is the soul’s excellence that defines the place and role of human beings in society, and no longer their body, endowed with male or female gender.

### The consequences for women

It is very hard to know what Plato proposed for the group of producers; but as far as the group of guardians is concerned, it is very clear that they, together with the philosophers, were to form the ruling class. He is aware, moreover, that his propositions will give rise to three waves of protests and sarcastisms; these three “waves” are the integration of women into the group of warriors, the community of women and children, and, now, the establishment of philosopher kings.

### The integration of women into the group of warriors

As I said above, the functional group of guardians must be constituted by those human beings whose excellence of soul consists in courage. It may happen, however, that the human beings possessing this type of soul may be women. Logically, Socrates is led to assert the following proposition:

Can we say, then, that we’ve escaped one wave of criticism in our discussion of the law about women, that we haven’t been altogether swept away by laying it down that male and female guardians must share their entire way of life, and that our argument is consistent when it states that this is both possible and beneficial? (Resp. V, 457b-c, transl. Grube rev. by Reeve).

In other words, women will be able to devote themselves to a military career, which, for a (male) Athenian citizen of the time, was something ridiculous and even scandalous. It was ridiculous, because women were considered to be weaker than men; and scandalous because war remained the privilege that defined men, and more precisely citizens.
Women may find themselves in the group that defends the city if, in their souls, the aggressive function that makes them courageous combatants predominates. It is thus no longer the body endowed with a female sex that makes a difference, but excellence of the soul. For Plato, the fact of being of the male or female sex has no more relevance for the attribution of such-and-such a task than does the fact of having lots of hair or of being bald:

Therefore, if the male sex is seen to be different from the female with regard to a particular craft or way of life, we’ll say that the relevant one must be assigned to it. But if it’s apparent that they differ only in this respect, that the females bear children while the males beget them, we’ll say that there has been no kind of proof that women are different from men with respect to what we’re talking about, and we’ll continue to believe that our guardians and their wives must have the same way of life. (Resp. V, 454d-e, transl. Grube rev. by Reeve).

Every difference of nature is thus based on the predominance and excellence of a specific part or feature in the soul. It follows that a woman in whom the aggressive part of the soul (thumós) predominates will be member of the group of guardians, whose exclusive task is that of weapons, a task for which she will have been prepared by an education based on music and gymnastics. Socrates is very clear on this point: “Therefore, men and women are by nature the same with respect to guarding the city, except to the extent that one is weaker and the other stronger.” (Resp. V, 456a, transl. Grube rev. by Reeve). The difference lies in the fact that a woman’s body is generally less vigorous that a man’s, but this is not always the case.

Sharing women and children

Even if a woman’s soul places her on an equal footing with men, she is nevertheless endowed with a body whose gender gives her a monopoly on motherhood, and, above all, only women can bear children and feed them initially. But if the goal is to dissolve the family group, how can the reproduction of the members of the ruling class be ensured? By separating the procreation of children from traditional marriage, and by replacing marriage by temporary unions that depend on drawing lots:

It follows from our previous agreements, first, that the best men must have sex with the best women as frequently as possible, while the opposite is true of the most inferior men and women, and, second, that if our herd is to be of the highest possible quality, the former’s offspring must be reared (as guardians) but not the latter’s. And this must all be brought about without being noticed by anyone except the rulers, so that our herd of guardians remains as free from dissension as possible. (Resp. V, 459d-e, transl. Grube rev. by Reeve)

The children born from these unions will subsequently be confided to nursemaids. In short, on the sexual level, women are considered as instruments of reproduction, not as objects of desire or pleasure.
It is hard not to accuse Plato of eugenism, insofar as marriages are arranged as a function of the quality of the individuals, and some children, who suffer from problems, will be eliminated. It should be noted, however, that this latter practice, the elimination of inapt children, which revolts us today, was widespread throughout Antiquity, where it was called “exposure” (ékthesis). The famous myth of Oedipus has as its starting point, moreover, an “exposure” (ékthesis). As far as the sharing of women and children is concerned, two remarks must be made: 1) it concerns only the ruling class; and 2) Herodotus speaks of peoples among whom group marriages were practiced (IV, 104 and 172, 2). Plato considers, moreover, that the community of women and children should reinforce the bonds between the members of the ruling class, all of whom would, at least in theory, belong to the same family. As is explained by Suzanne Saïd (1986), the fact that men should share women is an essential element in a strategy aimed at sealing the unity of the ruling class, and at transforming the group of guardians into a united family. We shall see what Aristotle thought of this.

The third wave of sarcasms concerns the attribution of power to the elite of the guardians, as a function of their knowledge.

Since there are women among the functional group of the guardians, it follows that among the group of philosophers who will lead the city, we will necessarily find women, as Socrates clearly says at the end of book VII (540c). This was an absolute revelation for the time. No passage stressing the necessity of the consequences is to be found in the Republic, but they follow from everything that has just been said.

The most important point, however, lies elsewhere. The leader(s) are chosen amongst the guardians as a function of the ability of their soul to devote itself to higher studies. It therefore follows that women will have access to the course of studies described in book VI of the Republic, and, by understanding mathematics and dialectic, may become philosopher-leaders. Once again, we find nothing precise on this subject, but throughout the subsequent tradition concerning the history of Platonism, we find the names of women who attended the Academy:

His disciples were Speusippus of Athens, Xenocrates of Chalcedon, Aristotle of Stagira, Philippus of Opus, Hestiaeus of Perinthus, Dion of Syracuse, Amyclus of Heraclea, Erastus and Coriscus of Scepsus, Timolaus of Cyzicus, Euaon of Lampscacus, Python and Heraclides of Aenus, Hippothales and Callipus of Athens, Demetrius of Amphipolis, Heraclides of Pontus, and many others, among them two women, Lasthenia of Mantinea and Lathenia of Phlius who is reported by Dicaearchus to have worn men's clothes. (Diogenes Laertius III, 46).

Although we cannot verify the validity of these names, we must admit that we find ourselves here in a context in which women can become philosophers and heads of state, which is very surprising for the time, and would not occur again until much later, in the 20th century.
In addition, access to higher education presupposes that women will have previously been educated in a way equal to boys. We find nothing on this subject in the Republic, but in the Laws, the legislation concerning education is perfectly clear. Nothing, as the Athenian Visitor proclaims loud and clear, will “withdraw our recommendation that so far as possible, in education and everything else the female sex should be on the same footing as the male” (Laws VII, 805 c-d). The entire program of public studies of the city of the Laws is therefore open both to men and to women, as we can observe by reading a lengthy exposition (VII, 788a-VIII 842a). Here, the mixed nature of compulsory teaching is forcefully affirmed (VII, 904d-806c). As David Cohen (1987) explains, Plato’s views are revolutionary as compared to the political and legal role of women in Greek cities. In order to contribute to the greatest possible efficacy, each citizen must develop his or her abilities and civic virtues as far as possible, and the most competent must be chosen. Women must therefore participate fully and equally in life and in the government of the city, on pain of depriving them of half of their potential.

In short, because he considers that human beings are defined more by their soul than by their body, Plato is led, quite logically, to place women on the same level as men, from every viewpoint. This position, which was shocking or laughable in Antiquity, has become the rule in our societies. On the other hand, our societies cannot accept sharing women and children, which reduces sexual union to its reproductive function, and therefore has nothing to do with pleasure or desire. I would now like to conclude by evoking Aristotle’s judgment on this program, as well as that of contemporary feminists.

The judgment of Aristotle

At the beginning of Book II of the Politics, Aristotle, Plato’s well-known disciple, gives a violent critique of the sharing of women and children. The first argument concerns the ideal of unity that such a community should establish. Aristotle reverses perspectives:

If it is manifest that if the city advances too far on the path of unity, it will no longer be a city, for a city is by nature a certain kind of multiplicity, and if it becomes too united, it will become transformed from a city to a family, and from a family to an individual; for one might say that the family is more united than the city, and the individual more than the family. (Politics II 2, 1261a16-21, my transl.)

The second argument is even stronger:

... property that is common to the greatest number of owners receives the least attention. People care most for their private possessions, and less for what is in common, or only so far as it profits each individual; for in addition to the other reasons, they think less of it on the ground that someone else is taking care of it, just as in household service a large number of domestics sometimes give worse service than a smaller. (Politics II 3, 1261b33-38)
Finally, after considerations on physical resemblances, and on the question of relations, comes a final argument, which may be the strongest of all:

For there are two things that most cause men to care for and to love each other: what is their own and what is beloved to them. Neither of these can pertain to people governed in that way. *(Politics II, 4, 1262b22-24)*

We today broadly share these considerations, but they risk making us forget Plato’s revolutionary project, and his will to place women on the same level as men.

**The judgment of contemporary feminists**


This debate is interesting, and shows the actuality of Plato. Nevertheless, the debate is contaminated by two ambiguities which are attached first to the definition of a human being by its body (the soul playing as such no role), and second to the meaning that should be given to the term “feminism”. In general, it could be said that feminism is the demand on the part of women for the extension of their rights and of their role in society. But the question is: what rights are we talking about?

As far as social and political rights are concerned, Plato was very much ahead of his time, even of contemporary societies. Yet things become complicated as far as the question of sexuality is concerned. In this area, Plato shows himself to be very conservative. For him, the female gender can only serve for the reproduction of the human species. Pleasure, desire, and above all sexual identity are not taken into account at all. What is more, Plato, who remains aware of the difficulty of imposing sexual norms upon an individual, condemns masculine and feminine homosexuality on social grounds (it cannot ensure reproduction). This is why it seems to me very difficult to try to ask the question of gender, essential for feminism, on the basis of Plato’s *Republic*. The question of gender is situated exclusively on a sexual level, with an individual being able to choose a sexual identity that does not correspond to his physical gender.

I would like to end with a few phrases concerning the reception of Plato’s *Republic* in Japan, on the question of women. I quote Noboru Notomi: “In modern Japan, there were some feminist movements before and after the Second World War, but it seems impossible to find any direct relationship with Plato’s argument in the *Republic*. One argument concerning the status of women is given in the ‘Introduction’ of Kimura Takataro’s first translation of Plato’s *Republic* (1906). He commented on Plato’s argument that women should do gymnastics and military work. He insisted that, while modern people would object to this idea in believing..."
that it would ruin women’s beauty, this attitude revealed a modern prejudice about women. They see women only as objects of appreciation of beauty (and of sexual desire), and therefore do not give them full education. But this male-central view was clearly against the nation’s good. In the old tradition of Japan, women of the Bushi (samurai) family were beautiful but they were well educated like Plato’s ideal. Kimura points out a few examples of women who were both beautiful and brave in war. In the 3rd century AD, Jingu-kougou was the Empress who ruled Japan and led the army to conquer Korea (a half mythical figure). Tomoe-gozen was the wife (or lover) of Minamoto Yoshinaka, and often went to the battlefields with her husband. Kimura uses these historical (or half-historical) women to confirm Plato’s suggestion. Also, Kimura points out that the supreme Goddess ‘Amaterasu’ in Japanese mythology was female, who corresponds to Athena in Greek Mythology, according to his interpretation. Both goddesses are wise, beautiful and brave. Kimura’s main position is to promote nationalism by reading Plato’s Republic, but it may be interesting to see how he compares the Japanese tradition with Plato.”

As we can observe, a reading of Plato’s Republic cannot be reduced to plunging us into the past. It has revived modern and contemporary debates, and particularly in Japan, and this is what I have tried to show in this paper.

Translated by Michael Chase