PLATO'S IDEAL BEDLAM

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Another look at those philosopher kings

by I. F. Stone

THE OLDEST and hoariest idea of political philosophy is that ordinary people cannot be trusted to govern themselves. It is also the most persistent. For if one looks closely enough, one will find that it is still the hidden first premise of all bureaucracies, however diverse they may otherwise be, whether in the capitalist democracies, the Communist dictatorships, or the makeshift military despotisms into which most of the Third World has been liberated.

The most glamorous packaging of this ancient and disdainful notion was provided more than two millennia ago by Plato. No other thinker has ever gotten away with so much egregious nonsense as this fastidious Athenian aristocrat, so seductive are his artistry and charm. The foremost example, and the best known, is his proposal for government by "philosopher kings."

This, the most famous of Plato's utterances about politics, appears midway in the *Republic*. There, as almost everyone knows, Plato has Socrates say that until philosophers become kings or kings become philosophers, there is no prospect of happiness for the human race.

Plato waged a lifelong vendetta against democracy, although that vendetta was only made possible by the free speech and free inquiry the democratic institutions of his native Athens allowed him. It was democracy that enabled him to pursue his teaching unmolested and to found an Academy that lasted for nearly a thousand years. It was closed down by two forces that shared his own belief that absolute government was best: the Roman Empire and the Roman Catholic Church. It is ironic but fitting that the Academy should have fallen victim to the very doctrine its founder propounded.

Plato's preference in government assumes different forms in different dialogues, but the underlying theme is the same. In the *Politicus*, or *Statesman*, Plato taught that the "right form of government must be sought in some small number, or one person" with absolute power, *unrestricted even by law*, to the point where the ruler or rulers may "purge the city for its good by killing or banning some of its citizens."

Martim Avillez

This practice is no stranger to our turbulent times.

In Plato's *Laws*, the government is a gloomy theocracy, buttressed by an inquisition that is embodied in a Nocturnal Synod empowered to execute those whose heretical or dissident views it cannot "correct." The best-known form of the Platonic ideal is sketched in his *Republic*, which was not a republic at all in the modern meaning of the term, but what we would call an absolute and authoritarian regime, presided over by one or more philosopher kings.

Everyone, including Plato, admitted that so miraculous a combination of genetics and politics as a philosopher king was unlikely to occur. Nevertheless, the idea of a philosopher king has ever since been reverently touted as the loftiest imaginable form of good—indeed, perfect—government. All through the ages, ambitious climbers (and even philosophers, in their more practical moments) have borrowed the phrase to flatter a wide variety of monarchs from the Roman emperor Constantine to Frederick the Great and Napoleon I. But few scholars have subjected the idea to common-sense examination. Perhaps this is because the scholars felt themselves to be philosophers and took the heady flattery implied in the idea of philosopher kings as no more than their due. One notable contemporary exception, however, is Karl Popper, in whose *The Open Society and Its Enemies* Plato's ideal state is shown to be a totalitarian nightmare. Milton and Jefferson, as the foremost champions of

I. F. Stone was for many years the editor and publisher of I.F. Stone's Weekly, *a Washington newsletter. Last March he delivered the annual William Kelly Prentice Classics Lecture at Princeton. This article is part of a book in progress.*

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free speech and free press in the Anglo-American tradition, felt the same revulsion for Plato's utopia.

NEITHER PLATO nor the Platonists, dazzled by the genius of their master, recognize the fundamental difficulty that at once strikes the fresh and irreverent reader of the *Republic*. Philosophers spend their lives disagreeing with one another, and they disagree about everything. How could a government of philosopher kings be kept from breaking down into a disputatious bedlam? How would they ever come to agreement and decision? Even those who call themselves the followers of the selfsame teacher manage to disagree, often violently, about just what it was that their master actually taught them. The warring sects of Christianity provide the most notorious example. The followers of Socrates were busily disagreeing and founding rival schools of Socratic philosophy even while he was still alive.

St. Augustine, himself one of the earliest and greatest of the Christian Platonists, saw this tendency quite clearly. In an astute and astringent passage in *The City of God* he noted with some amusement that "so contradictory were the opinions maintained among the Socratics" that "incredible as it seems for adherents of a single master" they differed even on what he defined as the Supreme Good, some asserting that it was "virtue" and others "pleasure."

Plato understood this problem quite well. He himself had seen the followers of Socrates develop into antagonistic sects. One of his bitterest feuds was with the Cynic Antisthenes, one of the oldest and earliest Socratics. In fact, Plato's own Academy was not free from dissent and schism. His most famous pupil, Aristotle, seceded from the Academy during Plato's lifetime and founded a rival school at the Lyceum. Within a century after Plato's death his Academy had abandoned his absolute Idealism and become a stronghold of absolute Skepticism. This was a complete somersault in metaphysical theory.

Plato took a firm though somewhat startling step for dealing with philosophic feuding. He decided, in effect—and quite conveniently—to outlaw all but one school of philosophy from his utopia. He never says so explicitly in the *Republic*, but in his Seventh Letter we find it clearly stated that it is not just philosophers who must come to power but the "right kind" of philosophers. This means, of course, those who agree with Plato. Even the philosophers, indeed the philosophers especially, have to toe the party line in his utopia. In short, the concept of the philosopher king is a cloak for the dictatorship of one school of philosophy, Plato's own.

IN MODERN times the idea of the philosopher king has been interpreted as a way of mobilizing the best minds and foremost experts and applying their views in the solution of complex problems. A British Platonist of the last century, Bernard Bosanquet, who was also a Hegelian, interpreted the philosopher-king idea as a metaphor for this mode of procedure. "Somehow or other," he wrote, "the best and deepest ideas about life and the world must be brought to bear on the conduct of social and political administration if any real progress is to take place in society."

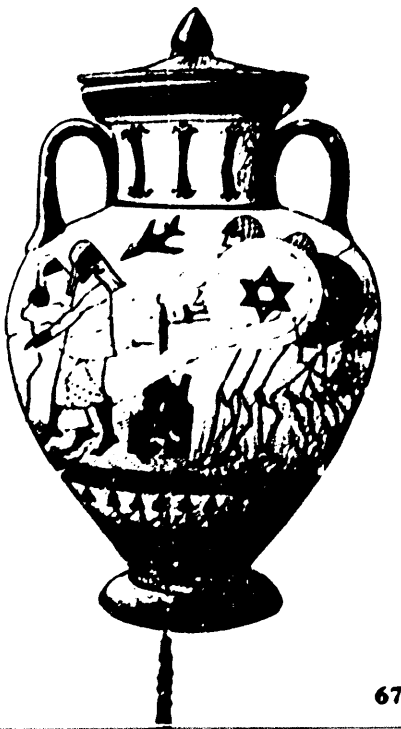
There are two fundamental misconceptions in this not uncommon view of Plato's world view. Plato, first of all, was not interested in progress, real or otherwise, but in stability. He wanted to create a perfect society and therefore a changeless one, since any change from the perfect would by definition be imperfect.

Second. Plato was not interested in bringing the "best and deepest ideas" to bear on the problems of government. The pluralism implied by Bosanquet would have displeased Plato. For Plato there was only one set of ideas that were real, and those were his own. Bosanquet's interpretation, like those of many apologetic scholars before and since, smacks of eclecticism, even relativism, and an openness to new ideas. Such notions were deeply alien to Plato.

Once in his life, Plato was given his chance to reform a government and create a utopia. Plutarch tells the story, and it illustrates how differently Plato's mind worked from that of such latter-day followers as Bosanquet. The opportunity came in Sicily, where a new tyrant, Dionysius II, summoned Plato to his court in Syracuse and asked him to reform the government. Such an invitation had long been Plato's dream. One way to achieve his utopia, as Plato tells us in his *Republic*, would be to find a tyrant willing to place his dictatorial power at the disposal of a philosopher. This is what Dionysius seemed ready to do.

Plato did not proceed by mobilizing experts in trade, economics, law, and government for their "best and deepest ideas." From Plutarch's account, he seems to have sought the reformation of society by teaching the rulers higher mathematics.

Plato was deeply influenced by the Pythagoreans, for whom the secrets of existence were to be found in mathematics, particularly geometry. Plato's first step was to set the tyrant and his associates to work on geometry lessons.



Geometry in those days was learned and taught by drawing diagrams in the sand. Plutarch tells us the tyrant's palace was soon strewn with sand "owing to the multitude of geometricians there." Every courtier was eager to curry favor by conforming to this strange new fashion.

An opposition party, however, began to form at court. The oppositionists could make little sense of what was going on. They saw it as a kind of cuckoo Athenian plot to get Syracuse into the power of Athens by persuading Dionysius to dismantle his military dictatorship and rely instead on the axioms of geometry to keep himself and them in power.

The opposition was apprehensive, Plutarch tells us, lest "the Athenians, who in former times had sailed to Sicily with large land and sea forces [during the Peloponnesian War] but had perished utterly without taking Syracuse, should now, by means of one sophist [Plato], overthrow the tyranny of Dionysius." This tyranny depended on a private army of mercenaries, and the anti-Platonists feared that Plato would get Dionysius to dismiss them "in order to seek in [his] Academic philosophy for a mysterious good, and make geometry his guide to happiness." Mathematics suddenly seemed subversive. Whatever its merits, Plato's schoolmasterish plan came to naught when it was discovered that his sponsor at court, Dion, an in-law of the tyrant, actually was conspiring to take power himself.

The point here is that Plato's procedure as a reformer bore no resemblance to what we think of as government by "experts." Plato was not concerned with the here and now, but with the eternal. His idea of a perfect government was a hierarchical society governed by mathematical mystics free to devote their lives to the contemplation of ineffable metaphysical mysteries while a special policing caste kept the lower, but producing, classes in awed submission.

The strangest aspect of Plato's utopia is that it put the reins of government in the hands of those who care least about human concerns. Plato makes Socrates say outright that "the man whose mind is truly fixed on eternal realities has no leisure to turn his eyes downward upon the petty affairs of men." Instead, "he fixes his gaze upon the things of the eternal unchanging order." This may qualify him to be the abbot of a monastery, where men retire to meditate. But is such a man the kind to run a government?

IF NOVELS—and utopias—can be read psychoanalytically as daydreams, the vicarious fulfillment of subconscious fantasies, then the *Republic* may be read as a schoolmaster's daydream, the vision of society as an enlarged schoolroom, peopled by dutiful, submissive, and adoring pupils and ruled over by a professor who brooks no disagreement.

The most paradoxical feature of Plato's republic is that although it was to be ruled by philosophers, in it no further philosophizing was to be allowed. To maintain the one "correct" philosophy, the Platonic party line, there was to be no freedom of speech or of teaching or of inquiry.

Plato's philosopher kings were to establish a monopoly of education, screen out potential dissenters from higher schooling, control the content and means of communication, censor the poets and especially the theater, establish a state religion, and formulate a theology to which all must conform.

Few have noticed that Plato was the first to use that word, theology—*theologia* in Greek—and to use it in its full medieval and modern sense. Little wonder that, as a model for his republic, Plato preferred Sparta, the most regimented city in ancient Greece, over

Athens, where freedom of inquiry welcomed the clash of contesting philosophies. Only by authoritarian means, Plato seems to have believed, could philosopher kings batten down the hatches against all the storms of change. For Plato change was the enemy.

It is said that in his youth Plato was a follower of Heraclitus, perhaps the greatest of the so-called pre-Socratic philosophers, whose oracular fragments still stir our awe and admiration by insights that anticipate all the main trends of modern philosophy. Heraclitus was obsessed by change. No man, as he once put it, could step into the same river twice. Everything was perpetually changing and being changed.

Plato swung to the opposite pole of thought. Since the visible universe was constantly changing, he rejected it as unreal. He sought refuge in a world of invisible 'forms' or 'ideas' in which he saw the only unchanging, and therefore true, reality. This perfect world existed somewhere in the celestial stratosphere, beyond even the stars, and was perceptible only to the mystical vision of the initiated.

Plato was a refugee from change, and found refuge in this otherworld of the changeless. It was this otherworldliness in Plato that later drew many of the Church Fathers to him. "No school has come closer to us," St. Augustine says in *The City of God,* "than the Platonists." The two were closest in their intolerance and their readiness to hunt down dissenters. "You must not consider the constraint in itself," St. Augustine wrote in a once-famous letter that consecrated the persecution of heretics, "but the quality of the thing to which one is constrained, whether it be bad or good." This was the doctrine that ultimately lit the fires of the Inquisition and is on the direct line of descent from Plato to the Politburo and Mao.

Nor are these conceptions safely outmoded in the so-called free world. The current revival of religious fundamentalism in all three Western religions—Christianity, Islam, and Judaism—has brought to the surface a fresh impatience with the liberal tradition. Plato's advocacy of strict censorship is no longer a harmless antique.

A fresh defense of Platonic censorship that all three varieties of fundamentalism would find congenial turns up in the most authoritative recent Catholic history of philosophy. This is

Frederick Copleston's multivolumed *History of Philosophy*, which has run through at least nine printings since its first appearance in 1948, a work of otherwise admirable sweep and scholarship. In describing Plato's utopia, this learned Jesuit father writes that "it is the duty of the public authorities to prevent the ruin of the morality" of the people. He says that "to speak of the absolute rights of Art is simply nonsense, and Plato was quite justified in not letting himself be disturbed by any such trashy considerations." So the First Amendment is trash?

PLATO'S BOLD aim in the *Republic* is nothing less than to fashion a New Man. He has Socrates explain the process of this creation, or re-creation, in the most beguiling and spiritual terms. First the philosopher refashions himself and then he refashions mankind.

Socrates begins by saying that the "true" philosopher "contemplates a world of unchanging and harmonious order, where reason governs and nothing can do or suffer wrong." The true philosopher, "like one who imitates an admired companion," tries to fit his own self to this celestial vision, so that he himself will, "so far as man may, become godlike."

If summoned to take the reins of power, our godlike philosopher will show that he does not lack "the skill to produce such counterparts of temperance, justice, and all the virtues as can exist in the ordinary man." Like an artist, he will remake man and state "after the divine pattern."

Sounds lovely, doesn't it? Then Socrates is asked how this "artist" will set to work. And here the shivers begin, for Socrates replies:

> *He will take society and human character as his canvas and begin by scraping it clean. That is no easy matter; but, as you know, unlike other reformers [i.e., the moderates and gradualists] he will not consent to take in hand either an individual or a state or to draft laws, until he is given a clean surface to work on or has cleansed it himself.*

In other words, the philosopher will not take over rule unless given total and absolute power. Socrates uses the metaphor of the painter, and this is charming—until one begins to see what it really entails.

"Combining the various elements of social life as a painter mixes his colors," Socrates says, "he will reproduce the complexion of true humanity." This "true" humanity, it soon becomes clear, is decidedly not existing humanity. Socrates goes on to say that in this task of re-creating human character the philosopher will be "guided by that divine pattern whose likeness Homer saw in the men he called godlike." These of course were not ordinary men but heroes and demigods. So, Socrates continues, the philosopher king "will rub out and paint in again this or that feature, until he has produced, so far as may be, a type of human character that heaven can approve."

Here Socrates' interlocutor interjects admiringly, "No picture could be more beautiful than that." But we who have just lived through two experiments in creating a New Man, Nazi-Fascist and Communist, may not find this quite so attractive. To "rub out and paint in again" conjures up memories still fresh of crematoriums to "rub out" whole races and Arctic gulags to "paint in" new characters by "corrective labor."

The nightmarish climax of this wacky mystic vision comes in a too-little-noticed passage at the end of Book VII of the *Republic*. There, finally, Socrates says he will show the "speediest and easiest way" a perfect city and perfect people "could be established and prosper." He says the philosopher kings could simply expel all inhabitants over the age of ten, "take over the children, remove them from the manners and habits of their parents," and bring them up in accord with the new customs and laws imposed by the philosopher kings. This would indeed be a "clean slate."

The Platonic commentators skip over this frightful suggestion with embarrassment. None of the questions that would arise in a real discussion of such a proposal is raised. We are not told how these self-proclaimed practitioners of the highest virtue would justify the condemnation of every adult inhabitant to the loss of his city, his home, and his children. Plato's suggestion seems the archetypal model for the utopias we have seen in this century. In every one of them some sort of genocide has lain across the threshold to the earthly paradise they promised.

IN THE construction of Plato's utopia, fundamental problems of morality and power are glossed over or ignored. The underside and scaffolding have to be kept in the dark; they would otherwise make the process of erecting Plato's ideal society too repulsive. The gruesome details are made easy to hide by the absence of normal thrust and rejoinder in the dialogue, which needs only be compared with the agonizing debates in Thucydides to see how far the highly touted Socratic dialectic falls short of the genuine article. In these fixed boxing matches, the opposition always takes the count, and Socrates always walks off with the verdict while smugly advertising his humility.

But when it comes to maintaining power in the new ideal state, the mechanism is clear to all whose eyes are not too clouded by Platonic piety. The fundamental step is to disarm the citizenry and to allow weapons only to a professional police-soldier caste.

Plato calls them *phylakes*, which basically means watchmen or guards, but which is usually translated into English with a word of gentler connotation, *Guardians*. According to Socrates, the Guardians are to serve as "watchers against foemen without and friends within, so that the latter *shall not wish* [my italics] and the former shall not be able to work harm to the City." Of course, nobody asks Socrates how these Guardians are to make sure that the

disarmed citizenry will not even "wish" to throw a monkey wrench into the works. Apparently the citizenry was not only to be spied upon but to be brainwashed against any desire to dissent.

Aristotle once observed that politics was the struggle between the rich and the poor. One way of easing the struggle was to achieve internal peace by widening the rights of citizenship to the poorest class, as in the participatory democracy of Athens, thus creating a sense of community. The other was to hold down the lower classes by denying them fundamental rights and treating them as a race apart, as was done in Sparta and Crete. That was also Plato's solution.

Plato was an absolutist in every aspect of his thought, and his politics ran true to form. As Aristotle, his first and most famous critic, pointed out, "There will inevitably be [in Plato's republic] two states in one, and these antagonistic to one another": on one side the Guardians, "a sort of garrison" or occupying army; on the other "the Farmers, Artisans, and other classes." Aristotle saw a parallel between Plato's divided state and Crete, where the ruling class forbade the workers gymnastic exercises and the right to bear arms, thereby ensuring their inferiority in physique and in weaponry.

But these lower classes in Crete were slaves, and their lack of strength kept them so. Were the common people in Plato's republic to be slaves, or citizens? It is difficult to answer the question. Certainly both commoner and slave would be accorded fewer rights than they had in Athens. In Plato's republic the common man, like the slave, would be taught to know and observe his place. But the *Republic* sometimes blurs the distinction between them by equating the status of a free commoner with that of a slave.

The great contemporary Platonist Gregory Vlastos, in a seminal essay on slavery in Plato's thought, calls attention to an often overlooked passage in the *Republic* wherein this blurring takes place. The passage has often been fuzzed in translation, probably because a literal rendition struck many translators as too shocking.

Paul Shorey's masterly translation provides the most exact rendering of the Greek text when he has it say that the ordinary citizen of the republic "ought to be the slave of that best man who has within himself the divine governing principle." The word in Greek is *doulos*, which unambiguously means slave, although in this passage it has rarely been translated that bluntly.

Plato explains that this subordination is of course for the common man's own good, and not for his exploitation. Shorey, who was a great scholar but a frightful reactionary, even welcomes the literal implication of *slave* with a learned footnote in the Loeb Library bilingual edition of the *Republic* quoting a wide selection of antidemocratic theorists in support of Plato. The one from Carlyle is representative of them all. Of all "the rights of man," Carlyle once wrote, "the right of the ignorant man to be guided by the wiser, to be gently or *forcibly* [my italics] held in the true course by him, is the indisputablest." It is a pity Thomas Paine did not live to provide the rejoinder.

PLATO KNEW that submission could not be won by force alone. How did he propose to make this new bondage acceptable? His answer was that a sense of irremediable inferiority had to be inculcated in the minds and souls of the lower classes. This bit of mental engineering was to be the achievement of what Plato called the Noble Lie.

To understand the Noble Lie one must understand that in Plato's utopia the truth is demanded of the governed but mendacity is to be a creative tool in the hands of the philosopher kings. Socrates is quite specific about this:

> *For if we were right in what we were just saying and falsehood is in very deed useless to gods, but to men useful as remedy or form of medicine, it is obvious that such a thing [i.e., lying] must be assigned to physicians, and laymen should have nothing to do with it."*
>
> *"Obviously," he [Socrates' interlocutor] replied.*
>
> *"The rulers then of the city may, if anybody, fitly lie on account of enemies or citizens for the benefit of the state; . . . .*

This kind of sophistry is still the rationalization for what the CIA calls its "disinformation" activities. Socrates goes on to make sure that mendacity and perjury* remain a monopoly of the state:

> *No others may have anything to do with it [i.e., lying], but for a layman to lie to rulers . . . we shall affirm to be as great a sin, nay a greater, than it is for a patient not to tell his physician or an athlete his trainer the truth about his bodily condition, or for a man to deceive the pilot about the ship.*

The questions inevitably following from this—for instance, what happens when a citizen contradicts an official lie, will he be punished for telling the truth?—are not aired in the *Republic*. What Socrates is leading up to there is the propagation of the one whopping falsehood upon which the whole structure depends: those in the ideal city were to be taught that, although all citizens are brothers, the god of creation used an admixture of gold in fashion-

* Victor S. Navasky's new book, *Naming Names*, on the witch-hunt of the Fifties, gives on pages 14 and 15 the sworn testimony of an FBI man in which he says, in quite Platonic fashion, that where the interests of the government were at stake he was ready to lie even "under oath in a court of law," something he would do "a thousand times." Similarly, in 1975, Richard Helms admitted that as head of the CIA he had lied under oath to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, to hide the CIA's covert efforts to overthrow the Allende government in Chile. He escaped with a suspended sentence in a plea bargain with the Justice Department that allowed him to plead no contest to a mere misdemeanor. Platorism still has its triumphs.

ing those fitted to rule, silver in making the Guardians, and, for the lowest class, composed of the farmers and craftsmen, iron and brass.

The common folk were to be taught that the rulers and soldiers had precious metal in their makeup and were intrinsically superior to the lower class. Thus, the myth would stamp a sense of inferiority on the lower class so indelibly that it would be forever submissive to its "betters." This would be a caste system, like India's, not merely a division into classes; in short, social status would be inherited, although provision would be made for ruthlessly upgrading or downgrading occasional "sports" in the breeding process.

The question of how this Noble Lie would be enforced during the first and unbelieving generation and of what steps would be necessary in later generations to prevent disbelief from cropping up again are never even faced in the *Republic*, but it is not difficult to see where they lead. The greatest danger would lie in the brightest and best minds; indeed, among those instinctively philosophical in their nature and thus naturally prone to examine beliefs for themselves. The rule of philosopher kings would find its most dangerous enemy in dissident philosophers.

Obviously the underside of this utopia would have to be an omnipresent secret police; to listen in on private conversations and meetings to detect subversion and nip it in the bud. The ancient world was as familiar as the modern with such "thought police." Aristotle discusses the spy systems of tyranny at length in his *Politics*. To maintain the myth of intrinsic inequality in a Greek city would require extensive measures of surveillance and control. The net effect would be to get rid of the brighter and bolder spirits, intimidate the inferior, and encourage servility and lip service.

Needless to say, this hardly seems the way to create an ideal society or a shiny New Man. It resembles, in fact, the manner in which Sparta, that most unideal city, dealt with its helots, or serfs. It had an institution called a *krupteia* (or secret service). Young Spartans armed with daggers were sent out into the fields, where they hid themselves and could listen and observe what went on among the helots. Usually by night, but sometimes by day, they emerged to murder potential troublemakers and keep the "uppity" helots in their place by intimidation. Their ultimate purpose was to debase and degrade. But so, really, was Plato's. The lower classes were to be bred or bullied into believing the myth that they were intrinsically inferior to their rulers.

In this respect, indeed, the human landscape for most of the two-and-a-half millennia since Plato wrote has resembled his ideal city. Until the comparatively recent American and French revolutions, the common man almost everywhere was regarded, and conditioned to regard himself, as of a nature inferior to his betters.

Most of the Platonists, and the classical scholars over the intervening centuries, have reflected—as Plato did—the ethos of the landed aristocracy, of the gentlemen born to no pursuit other than that of governing, policing, and indoctrinating the lower classes, whether in the officer corps of the armed forces, in the various churches and universities, or in the government itself.

The English gentleman, like the Prussian Junker and the landed nobility of Europe well into the nineteenth century —and some even to this day—shared the lofty condescensions of the Attic gentry, which Plato embodied in its utmost perfection. And most of mankind until recently provided the mire in the human garden where these exquisite creatures bloomed for their day.

Plato remains the darling of the hierarchs, whatever their guise, a sacred cow to both the Left and Right. To dare an irreverent look at him and his doctrines is to unite even the otherwise irreconcilables of Right and Left in his defense. His philosopher kings are still with us, though in new guise, in wide stretches of the earth. □