

Plato's *Republic* in Its Athenian Context

Plato's *Republic* is an internal, constructive critique of Athenian democracy as it was practiced during the Peloponnesian War, when the dialogue is set. The diseased city Socrates attempts to purge is Athens, and his improvements should be evaluated in that context as counter-weights, not absolutely. Plato's critical assessment of the Athenian political system, which was often lawless during the war, is accomplished through two strategies—one argumentative, the other rhetorical—that I track through a series of eleven matched sets of Athenian institutions/practices vs. Socratic proposals. Failure to consider *Athens* in relation to Socrates' arguments for change has led to the misconception that Plato was dogmatically committed to a single political doctrine for all and all time.

Plato's *argumentative* strategy is to heighten the contrast between wartime Athens and Kallipolis, much as he contrasts the just and unjust man (2.360d8–362c8). His *rhetorical* strategy is to structure his narrative like a temple pediment or Λ , with elements of the first half of the dialogue arranged to correspond to elements of the second. The historical examples I use in illustration of Plato's argumentative strategy begin at 1.327a1–328b8 with (i) the actual demographics of Athens mirrored in the class backgrounds of the twelve known participants gathered in Polemarchus' house in Piraeus. (ii) Socrates' proposed communal society based on the needs of its citizens (2.369b7–372c2) is checked by Glaucon, who desires the Athenian luxuries then available. (iii) Athens' citizen militia is replaced by professional soldiers (2.373e10–374d7). (iv) The Athenian educational practice of memorizing epic poetry is amended (2.376e1–3.394b3), then superseded by a sustained effort at gaining knowledge (5.475e3–7.541b5). (v) Under the democracy, the Assembly dissolved daily, the Council executive changed ten times per year, its *epistatês* daily, the nine archons annually; and no one could serve twice, so corruption was common, and persuasive speakers held sway. Against this, Socrates posits that a *polis* requires expert overseers (3.412a9–b2). (vi) The existing Athenian founders' myth, autochthony, is replaced by the myth of metals (3.414d1–415c7) wherein Solon's four classes, based on birth and wealth, are replaced by three classes based on natural ability. (vii) The democratic practice of keeping administrative tasks so simple that any citizen selected by lot could perform them competently is replaced by a strict specialization of labor that demands expertise in a single task (4.434c7–435b7). (viii) Socrates' proposed training and education of women (5.451c3–462e3) displaces an Athenian system far worse for females than that of any known ancient *polis*. (ix) Factionalism, favoritism, and law-suits disappear when the nuclear family is abolished (5.457c10–458d7). (x) Rule by wisdom, philosopher-rulers, is proposed (5.473c11–e4) to correct the disastrous consequences of the democratic Assembly's so often overruling Athenian law. (xi) Eight *endoxa* about justice in the text are opposed by the Platonic form of justice (6.511c2).

Plato's *rhetorical* strategy proceeds by mapping a corresponding deterioration of Kallipolis (8.543a1–9.576b9), demonstrating that any realization of it would be temporary.

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