

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

1

Some years ago, I had a conversation with the philosopher Myles Burnyeat in which I asked him how a book like Plato's *Republic* can continue to be admired as it is although so many of the arguments on which it rests are such bad ones. His answer was that I was missing the point: Plato's influence is due to his deliberately not pretending to offer definitive solutions to the questions of enduring interest about which he wishes his readers to reflect. As he subsequently put it in a "Master-Mind" lecture on Plato given at the British Academy, the one thing Plato's commentators ought not to do is pass judgement on his writings as if they were school-room exercises ("Plato, you get four out of ten. Try to do better next time").¹ But why not? *Republic* contains a mixture—some might say a farrago—of arguments of

¹Myles Burnyeat, "Plato," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 111 (2000), p. 7.

different and often puzzling kinds. But if Plato is serious, which he surely is, he wants to persuade his readers that certain propositions in which he firmly believes are true. For the purpose, he deploys a wide range of analogies, similes, metaphors, and myths. But however much more readable these make the book, they have failed in their purpose if the propositions they purport to endorse are at best implausible and at worst demonstrably false.

One possible rejoinder is to insist, with Burnyeat, that all philosophers lend themselves to a diversity of conflicting interpretations and that this is exactly what makes Plato so good to think with. But that won't quite do. *Republic* is not only a work of philosophy. Plato does expound in it metaphysical and epistemological doctrines which, despite all the criticisms to which they have been subjected from Aristotle onwards, are widely regarded as having set much of the agenda for the subsequent practice of philosophy in the European tradition. But it is also a work of sociology. The conclusions to which it invites assent are critically dependent on a set of related propositions about social institutions—that is, about how human beings do, or might, or would behave towards one another under specified historical and environmental conditions. Admittedly, there is no way of conclusively testing speculations about possible states of societies of different kinds until those conditions are realized. But some such speculations are much more solidly grounded than others in what there is good reason

to believe to be generally true about how societies function and evolve. To the extent that *Republic* is a work of sociology as well as philosophy, it cannot be exempted from being assessed as such.

It was with that thought in mind that I took down from my shelves the battered copy in which I had first encountered *Republic* as a schoolboy. There I rediscovered the indignant marginal scribbles in which I had protested at arguments which had struck me as not merely feeble but silly, like the perhaps unserious claim that dogs who distinguish friends from foes are philosophers too (376a) and the apparently serious calculation that a tyrant is 729 times more wretched (*anairoteros*) than a philosopher (587e). I found the famous simile of the Cave in book 7, in which the philosopher emerges from a world of shadows into the sunlight, as arresting as ever but the Theory of Forms no more persuasive than before. I was struck all over again by the weakness of Plato's analogy between the "just" (as *dikaios* is conventionally translated) society (*polis*) and the "just" personality (*psychē*) and confirmed in my view by what I found in the secondary literature in which it has since then been analyzed in exhaustive detail. I felt as resistant as ever to Plato's determination to banish poetry and the visual arts from his ideal society. I found his sociology inept, his psychology rudimentary, and his eugenics ridiculous. By the end of book 9, I wondered whether he himself thought his ideal society anything more than

an exercise in fantasy, and by the end of book 10, where he falls back for a second time on the prospect of reward in the life to come as the reason for behaving justly in this one (613a; cf. 498c), I wondered how he could fail to realize that he was—to use a present-day metaphor—scoring a spectacular own goal.

At that point, however, I was reminded of what Hobbes says about *Republic* in chapter 31 of *Leviathan*, where he describes himself as being “at the point of believing this my labour, as uselesse, as the Commonwealth of *Plato*” (p. 254). As with *Republic*, I had not reopened my copy of *Leviathan* for over half a century. I remembered it, as I suspect is true of most of its student readers, principally for Hobbes’s insistence on the need for power to be concentrated exclusively in the hands of a single Sovereign if a society is not to fall prey to the seditious designs of misguided and unruly subjects. But I was now struck by how Hobbes, after citing *Republic*, voices the hope that “one time or another” his book may fall into the hands of a Sovereign who might “by the exercise of entire Sovereignty, in protecting the Publique teaching of it, convert this Truth of Speculation into the Utility of Practice,” just as Plato affirms the hope that even though his ideal society may be, for the moment, a “paradigm laid in heaven” (592b), it might somewhere be realized by someone with the eyes to see it and the power to implement it. Both Plato and Hobbes are not only passionately concerned to find a way for human

societies to avoid destructive internal conflict but passionately convinced that the right combination of social practices, roles, and institutions could make it possible. Like *Republic*, *Leviathan* contains a multitude of arguments on a wide range of topics of continuing philosophical interest. But, like *Republic*, it is also a work of sociology which must in the same way be assessed as such. Nobody could plausibly charge Hobbes with simple-mindedness. But many of his commentators have charged him with defending his views about the nature and exercise of power with arguments which are far from being as good as they need to be if his conclusions are to carry conviction. Hobbes's sociology is neither as categorically individualist nor as crudely authoritarian as it has sometimes been represented as being. But the proposition that "whatsoever" a Sovereign once instituted does, "it can be no injury to any of his subjects" (p. 124) is (to put it mildly) not easy to uphold; and no commentator has succeeded in extricating Hobbes from the criticism that, as Bertrand Russell put it in 1946, although he is "the first really modern writer on political theory," he "does not realize the importance of the clash between different classes."² He acknowledges the universal desire for assurance of the "power and means to live well" which can never be satisfied "without the acquisition of more" (p. 70). He recognizes that labour

²Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (London, 1946), p. 578.

is “a commodity exchangeable for benefit” (p. 171). He knows that Sovereigns have to extract surplus resources from their subjects by way of taxation if they are to fulfil their function of preserving the internal peace of the Commonwealth and protecting it from its external enemies. But he fails to anticipate that what he calls “Leagues of Subjects” acting in their economic, rather than their political, roles might be as much of a threat to the stability of the Commonwealth as the overtly political Factions which conspire to take the Sword out of the Sovereign’s hands into their own. As the quotation from Russell shows, it is not only Marxists who have concluded that Hobbes’s analysis of the causes of “civil warre” is flawed for that if no other reason. How can a book which is, according to Richard Tuck, “generally held to be the masterpiece of English political thought” (p. ix) be held to be so when it ignores as it does the sociological significance of conflicts of economic, as opposed to ideological or political, power?

But then I reflected that this rhetorical question might be a reflection of a judgement too much influenced in hindsight by Marx. For Marxist historians, England’s Great Rebellion was not a struggle between rival ideological communities or political factions so much as a defining event in England’s evolution out of a feudal mode of production into a capitalist mode through the revolutionary transfer of economic power into the hands of the bourgeoisie. But is Hobbes to be faulted

for not having seen it as such? That further question sent me, once I had finished rereading *Leviathan*, back to *The Communist Manifesto*, which I now reread in the original German text as printed in London in February of 1848. When I did so, it provoked much the same reaction as rereading *Republic* and *Leviathan* had done. *The Communist Manifesto* is very much what it says it is: a manifesto. It is not a treatise so much as a call to arms. But no less than either *Republic* or *Leviathan*, it asks its readers to accept a set of sociological propositions which, if they cannot be upheld, must lead to acceptance being withheld; and they cannot be upheld. So, once again: how can so admired a text be based on such bad arguments?

2

In the chapters to follow, I address only those passages in the three books which bear on their concern with the design of some set arrangements by which harmony and order could be achieved and sustained in human societies. All three take as their starting point a state of the world in which power is unequally shared between those who rule and those who are ruled—in *Republic*, the “*archontes*” and the “*archoumenoi*”; in *Leviathan*, the “Sovereign Power” and the “Subjects”; in *The Communist Manifesto*, the “*Unterdrücker*” and the “*Unterdrückte*.” Among the various institutional forms which this relationship takes, some may be more willingly accepted

than others by the ruled, and some may be more frequently disrupted by more or less violent protests. No society can be completely free of conflict and dissent, and all contain some individuals who behave in ways which violate the norms by which, in their society, criminality is culturally defined. But Plato, Hobbes, and Marx have all set themselves to propose a form of government which, once brought into effect, would bring to an end the conflicts which pit different groups or combinations of the ruled against the rulers, or each other, or both, in attempts either to alter the distribution of power in their favour or to subvert the existing system of its distribution entirely.

This way of putting it may invite objection from historians and philosophers of history who, in the spirit of Collingwood, want to insist that the three texts cannot be properly understood, let alone compared with one another, unless they are interpreted in recognition of the very different historical and political circumstances under which they were written. Collingwood himself put the point directly in his *Autobiography*, when he asked whether *Republic* and *Leviathan*, so far as they are concerned with politics, could be said to “represent two different theories of the same thing.”³ His answer was a categorical no, because the “state about which Plato is writing is the Greek *polis* and Hobbes’s is the absolutist

³R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford, 1939), p. 67.

state of the seventeenth century.” But the objection rests on a pre-emptive assumption about what is meant by “the same thing.” Nobody denies the magnitude of the cultural and social differences between the Athens of Pericles and the England of Charles I: as Collingwood put it, “the thing has got *diablement changé en route*.” But it does not follow that the same questions cannot be asked and answered about the practices, roles, and institutions of the two societies and comparisons drawn between them by reference to the answers given. There could be no such thing as a “theory of the state” if there had to be as many theories as there are states, or if questions about their different methods of selection for political office, or taxation, or military conscription, or passing or amending or annulling legislation could not be answered except in terms with meanings unique to each. To those who allege that comparative sociology cannot be done, the best rejoinder is not to engage in philosophical argument with Collingwood about the “logical bluff” of which he accuses his “realist” opponents but simply to do it; and to those who allege that Plato’s, Hobbes’s, and Marx’s different answers to the question “Can internal social conflict be prevented?” are answers to different questions, the best rejoinder is to look at their answers and then compare them. If their different answers are then judged to have failed for different reasons, that does not mean that they are not failures in pursuit of the same common aim.

From the perspective of comparative sociology, their respective answers to the question which concerns them all turn out to be categorically different in the relative priority they assign to the three forms of power—political, ideological, and economic—by which the incumbents of institutional roles in any and all societies dominate, or are dominated by, each other. Admittedly, none of them conceptualized the roles constitutive of the societies they were writing about as vectors in a three-dimensional social space or estimated rates and distances of inter- and intra-generational social mobility of individuals between higher- and lower-ranked roles in the way that a present-day sociologist might do. But whatever the different idioms in which they do it, all three are talking about how the strong exercise their power over the weak. For Marx, there is no doubt that it is control of the means of production which is the overriding determinant of the distribution of power.⁴ In contrast, both Plato and Hobbes, for different reasons of their own, underestimate the importance of both the forces and the social relations of production. But whereas for Hobbes, despite his recognition of the need

⁴Even if that is not unequivocally stated anywhere in *The Communist Manifesto*, it is so stated in *Capital* (vol. 3, p. 791 in the Moscow English-language edition of 1966), where it is said that “It is *always* [my italics] the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers . . . which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure, and with it the political form of the relation of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the corresponding specific form of the state.”

for the Sovereign to use his control of the means of persuasion to best advantage, it is the Sovereign's control of the means of coercion which is decisive, for Plato, despite his recognition of the need for the Guardians to deploy their and their Auxiliaries' control of the means of coercion to best advantage, it is control of the means of persuasion on which he relies to keep the lower orders in their place. This difference is critical to both the strengths and the weaknesses of their respective attempts to set out how rulers must behave if they are to be accorded legitimacy by the ruled and use it to preserve internal peace. But none of their attempts succeeds, whichever the form of power held to override, if not determine, the other two.

A different possible objection to the task I have set myself is that sociology is not a branch of academic enquiry sufficiently advanced for judgements of success or failure to be as authoritatively pronounced as I appear to think possible. Some readers, indeed, may be as dismissive of sociologists as Plato was of the "Sophists" of whom he so strongly disapproved, as Hobbes was of the "philosophy schools" whose teachings he ridiculed, and as Marx was of the "petty-bourgeois" socialists whose theories he regarded as at the same time utopian and reactionary. But in the course of the last hundred years, there have been not only many important and well-validated discoveries made in the specialized sciences of human behaviour but also many important and well-validated

additions made to the evidence accumulated in the historical, ethnographic, and archaeological record about the workings of human societies of different kinds. It may not be possible to correct—to mark out of ten, if you like—Plato's or Hobbes's or Marx's sociology in the way that could be done for their biology or their physics. But it is entirely possible to point out the limits of their understanding of the range of different ways in which, in societies of different kinds, shared beliefs, representations, and norms relate to economic, ideological, and political institutions and these relate to one another. On three topics in particular, Plato, Hobbes, and Marx can alike be faulted not only for mistakes which they make about the causes of internal conflict but for their neglect of mechanisms and processes whose capacity to reduce and contain it they fail to consider at all.

First, all three underestimate the contribution which the institutional separation of powers can make to the preservation of internal peace. It is not only Hobbes who sees any sharing of power as an inevitable diminution of the Sovereign's capacity to keep order among the ruled. Plato's requirement that in a just society the members of each of his three categories must, unless individually promoted or demoted from one category to another, perform only their own appointed function betrays his fear that if the Philosopher-Kings and their Auxiliaries do not retain an exclusive monopoly of power, the society will start to fall apart. In the case of

The Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels make what is in effect the same point when they say in their preface to the German edition of 1872 that the experience of the Paris Commune has proved that the proletariat cannot wield the existing machinery of the bourgeois state for its own purposes but must abolish and replace it. The idea that social stability might be sustained by ongoing intermediate institutions whose autonomous power might be deployed in the service of successive rulers is as alien to the thought of Plato, Hobbes, and Marx as it is intrinsic to that of Montesquieu, Tocqueville, and Durkheim.

Second, all three underestimate the scope for collaboration between the members of different systacts—whether these are orders, classes, status groups, castes, age sets, or any other sets of similarly located roles—who, even if competitors for power, have a common interest in sustaining the institutions within which their rivalry is acted out. Plato believes that the Producers—the artisans, farmers, and businessmen whom he ranks together—will curb their appetites and defer as they should to their superiors only because they have been persuaded that their superiors are better men than they. Hobbes, while well aware of the mutual cooperation which binds together individuals engaged in criminal or conspiratorial activities, believes that only the fear of physical coercion can lead them to cooperate as they should with the Sovereign and the Sovereign's agents.

Marx, while recognizing that cooperation between proletarians is critical to the overthrow of the bourgeois state, believes that cooperation between proletariat and bourgeoisie can only arise where engineered through bribery, deception, or fraud. But active and willing cooperation across systactic boundaries is commonplace in human societies in the economic, ideological, and political dimensions of power alike.

Third, all three underestimate the extent to which both cultural and social evolution come about through a process, not of either one-way progress in the direction of unanimity and peace or one-way regression in the direction of chaos and strife, but of continuous variation, competition, and trade-off. Mutations in cultural representations and social practices succeed or fail according to the environmental conditions which either enhance or diminish their probability of reproduction and diffusion in the populations carrying them. For Plato, order depends on the ability of the Guardians to maintain their hold over the minds of the ruled. For Hobbes, it depends on the ability of the Sovereign to exact continuing and virtually unconditional obedience from the ruled. For Marx, it depends on the ability of the victorious proletariat to do away with the exploitation of the ruled by the rulers which has been the source of class conflict hitherto. But in all societies, existing representations, beliefs, and attitudes are continually being reformulated at the same time that existing economic,

ideological, and political practices are continually being renegotiated. The maintenance of harmony and order depends, not on an optimal institutional design which, if it can once be realized, will remain in place for the indefinite future, but on an adaptive and flexible mixture of practices capable of moderating and containing both inter-personal and inter-systactic conflict.

More generally still, all three share a common reluctance to meet head-on the challenge which Plato puts into the mouth of the rhetorician Thrasymachus in the opening book of *Republic*. Plato makes Thrasymachus say, in a deliberately crude and offensive tirade, that “injustice” is in every way better than “justice,” which is in any case nothing other than what the strong impose on the weak. But his rejection of Socrates’ claim that justice is both intrinsically good and inherently beneficial to those who practise it demands a much more effective rejoinder than Socrates gives it. Thrasymachus is the prototype of the saloon-bar realist who knows that life is a jungle in which people all lie and cheat whenever they see it as in their interest to do so provided that they can escape getting caught. Nice guys finish last, suckers don’t deserve an even break, politicians are in it for themselves, and morality is for the birds. Plato, Hobbes, and Marx are all convinced in their different ways that once the right people are in power, they will want to do the right thing and will know how to do it, so that harmony and order will thereafter prevail.

But, says Thrasymachus, just look around you! Anyone not distracted by specious philosophical chit-chat from seeing the world as it is knows that the people who will always come off best are those most determined to pursue their own interests at the expense of everyone else. Plato supposes that his Philosopher-Kings will devote themselves unstintingly to the good of society as a whole. Hobbes supposes that his Sovereigns will follow the God-given Laws of Nature in the exercise of their Sovereignty. Marx supposes that his proletarians will use their seizure of power from the bourgeoisie in order to put an end to any possibility of conflict between exploiters and exploited. But, says Thrasymachus, it is pure naivety—he explicitly addresses Socrates as “o most naïve” (*ō euēthestate*) at 343d2—not to expect those who have power to extend it as far as they can. Indeed, the further they do, the more they will be admired for it, conquerors most of all. His challenge, even when less extravagantly stated than Plato makes it, is not unanswerable. But how effectively does Plato answer it? Or Hobbes? Or Marx?