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Plato on Power and Rationality





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Introduction

Power is one of the most important concepts in contemporary philosophy and one of the most enigmatic realities in human life. Above all, there are power relations, they appear in everyday life: when we take the bus, when we pay the taxes, when we organize a plan with our friends, in all these situations there are power relations between people and institutions. Power is something real but, although real, it is not easy to define. It is rather something that involves many aspects. What is power? Is it just the capacity of having control over other people? Is power the capacity of doing certain things without impediments or rather the organization of forces toward one direction? There are too many concepts involved in the definition of power: strength, force, control, direction, order, will, rationality. It seems to be something that cannot be grasped in a single concept, but rather it must be explained trying to connect all these previous concepts in the right way. The question, then, is how all these concepts should be connected and if there is a way to define power correctly.

Both in postmodern philosophers and in the Frankfurt School we find some similarities in the way they understand power and its relationship with rationality. Although their thoughts go through very different paths, it can be said that power is understood in terms of control, and reason and rationality appear as mechanisms or instruments in service of power.

Foucault, on the one hand, has explored the relationship between power and knowledge (*pouvoir-savoir*). With his archaeological method he tried to show that modern sciences are constituted through a process of setting control, and with the genealogical perspective he searched the influence of power in the construction of truth. Nietzsche's will to power appears as a reality that creates truth, so rationality is nothing more than a way of generating a system of control. Foucault holds that power and truth are two linked concepts: power builds truth; truth legitimizes power. In this binary structure power-knowledge truth is nothing more than a construct. Through his analysis of the constitution of sciences he tries to show that truth is the result of a persuasive discourse that generates control. In the background there is only power in terms of control and domination¹. The role of reason in the constitution of power is to generate truth in terms of persuasion.

On the other hand, some philosophers of the Frankfurt School pointed out that there is an instrumental relationship of reason towards power. The search for truth appears as an impossible enterprise because reason is only the human capacity of setting means towards an end², it is an instrument that operates through the construction of totalities and concepts³. The desire for rationality obeys a logic of domination. It is not possible to use reason without pretension of control: there is always an interest of domination in the use of rationality⁴ because reason operates through rigid concepts that establish a regime of control⁵. Power, thus implicitly understood, is nothing else than the capacity of control and domination.

¹ See FOUCAULT, M., «Il faut défendre la société». *Cours au Collège de France 1976*, Gallimard/Seuil, Paris, 1997, pp. 13-30.

² See ADORNO, T.-HORKHEIMER, M., *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, in T. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. III, Frankfurt am Main, 1997, p. 22.

³ See HORKHEIMER, T., *Eclipse of Reason*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1947.

⁴ See MARCUSE, H., «Industrialisierung und Kapitalismus im Werk Max Webers», in *Kultur und Gesellschaft*, vol. III, Frankfurt am Main, 1965.

⁵ See MARCUSE, H., *One-Dimensional Man*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1966, p. 181.

We find, therefore, a very similar concept of power in two apparently different schools of thought which have been dominant in continental philosophy for the last decades. Power is understood explicitly or implicitly in terms of domination, and its rationality is seen as an instrumental source of setting control. However, there is a question that arises from these views: Is power just domination, or could it be completed in a richer way? Understood in terms of strength and domination, power does not seem to be a capacity of achieving some goods, and it seems difficult to see it in a positive way.

The aim of this book is to explore the relationship that Plato establishes between power and rationality. In doing so I think it is possible to see some of the problems that arise in the contemporary comprehension of power. Plato's cultural debate, although far in time, has many similarities with the contemporary context. As I will try to show in detail, there was also a cultural problem towards the relationship between power and rationality. This is the first purpose of these pages: to explore what Plato says about power in order to offer a new way of understanding its relation with knowledge and rationality. For this purpose it will be necessary to focus on the main dialogues where he develops this relationship and see if his philosophy of power is coherent or if, on the contrary, it presents unsolvable problems. This study might help to get a more precise definition of power.

The second purpose of this book, which goes hand in hand with the first one, is to analyze if Plato presents the same view on power along the main political dialogues. A general topic of discussion among Platonic scholars is what kind of development we can find in Plato's thought along the dialogues. The extreme developmental interpretation claims that there is a strong change in his psychology and ethics from the first Socratic position to his theory of ideas, whereas in his final period he would have become more 'realistic' in his political views. This interpretation has gained weight in the recent years, and we find several studies of his ethical and political thought in

this direction⁶. On the other hand it is also possible to find other interpretations of his ethical and political writings that try to find the common concepts among the dialogues in order to show a more unitary view of Plato⁷. In none of these developmental or unitary studies do we find an approach to the concept of power in his political philosophy. Moreover, the concept of power and its relation to justice plays no role in many of the studies of Plato's political philosophy. In most cases the question of power appears as a secondary concept with little importance in his thought. As I will try to show, the concept of power, although not explicitly developed by Plato in any of his dialogues, can be found very clearly in the *Gorgias*, *Republic I*, *Statesman* and some passages of the *Laws*. This concept of power, moreover, always remains the same along these dialogues, and can be taken as a proof for a unitary reading.

This analysis on the problem of power can also be useful to better understand Plato in his cultural context. His philosophy is not only a piece of abstract speculation, but rather it is an answer to the problems of his time. I would like to show how the question of power and its relation to rationality was a present problem in Plato's cultural context and how he tries to face some of the sophist and popular views. At the beginning of the 4th century B.C. Athens is a city that has experimented power with all its meaning. Its citizens know the meaning of supremacy, but also the meaning of submission. Athens, which had the greatest naval power in the Mediterranean and was the leading State among Greek cities, has lost all its power and has gone into nothing, leading to the Spartan domination. Both experi-

⁶ See KLOSKO, G., *The Development of Plato's Political Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006; BOBONICH, C., *Plato's Utopia Recast : His Later Ethics and politics*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2002.

⁷ See SAUNDERS, T., *Plato. The Laws*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1970, pp. 27-28; BERNARDETE, S., *The Being of the Beautiful*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984; ROWE, C., «The Republic in Plato's Political Thought», *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*, G. R. F. Ferrari (ed.), Cambridge University Press, New York, 2007, pp. 27-54; BERTRAND, J.-M., *De l'écriture à l'oralité. Lectures des Lois de Platon*, Publications de la Sorbonne, Paris, 1999; PIERART, M., *Platon et la Cité grecque*, Belles Lettres, Paris, 2008.

ences of having power and suffering exterior power have a deep influence on the political, intellectual and social context in which Plato develops his own philosophy. The Peloponnesian wars; the decline of democracy; the consequences of sophist rhetoric; and the supremacy of the Spartan forces: it is a very special context in which the reflection on justice, power and rationality becomes necessary. Plato has seen the power of a proud city that adorns its temples with the best works of art at the cost of oppressing the other Greek cities. Athens was a city that desired more power, governed by politicians with great eagerness for domination. What kind of mysterious thing is power that blinds the eyes of the rulers? Was Athens living a real position of power, or was it rather an illusion that led to the ruin of the city? What does it mean to be powerful: just to have the military forces, or is it necessary to assure an order to settle power along time? Athens had strength and culture, but something failed in order to preserve its power. For Plato it is clear that the main cause of this ruin of power must be found in the ignorance of justice. The “great” Pericles is for him the sophist that led Athens to the disaster: a clear example of the decaying society that he paints ironically in his dialogues. That was Athens: a city eager for money, honours and pleasures: its power was as unreal as the weak force of spirit of his citizens.

This is precisely where the Platonic reflection on power should be placed. His concept of power does not appear in an explicit way in his dialogues, but rather this concept is present continuously along his thought. Obviously, one of his main problems is to grasp the relationship between power and knowledge, which is found in the question of the political art. The exercise of power in Athens had led to instability and loss of power. It was not real power, because, as we will see, something can be said to be real only in as much as it is stable along time. However, stability cannot be based only on strength, but in the rational order grounded on justice that transform the mere force into a real capacity of achieving certain goods. In this way, the platonic reflection on power consists in defining the art

of good ruling: what kind of knowledge is necessary to govern the city.

Nevertheless, it must be considered that the platonic reflection goes far beyond the nature of the art of politics. The core of the problem is to know the meaning of being powerful. Even if we take power as strength the result is that the just man is the really powerful one. Although it might seem paradoxical, Plato establishes an original link between power and rationality, strength and knowledge. Reason does not operate as an instrument of domination, but rather gives shape to power creating spaces of freedom.

In the following pages I will try to explore Plato's concept of power and its relation to knowledge. This is not an easy task for various reasons, and it is necessary to make some methodological remarks. In first place, Plato did not explicitly develop his theory of power in any of his dialogues. We do not find Socrates asking his interlocutors what is the definition of power, as it may happen with virtue, justice or rhetoric. However, it is an implicit concept in his political dialogues. Especially in Socrates' encounter with Callicles and Thrasymachus we see that Plato places the problem of power with all its implications. What does it mean to be powerful? Is power the capacity of having control, the ability to dominate the citizens in order to achieve our own good? Is there power without justice? Is injustice something powerful? In this sense it seems possible to reconstruct Plato's philosophy on power with a right interpretation of his dialogues. I will therefore follow an interpretative method directed to the comprehension of his concept of power.

Secondly, there is a problem considering the vocabulary that Plato uses when referring to power. In our modern languages we speak of "power" to refer to a wide range of situations. "Power" is a very abstract word that does not have a single equivalent term in ancient Greek. There are instead several terms that refer to the exercise of power, and it seems necessary to analyze them properly in order to understand Plato's view on power. For this reason I have preferred to begin this investigation by making some philological remarks on the terms used by

Plato. As we will see, in these uses of the terms we already find the deep complexity of power, that on the one hand can be seen as the ability of domination, and in the other hand can be understood as the capacity to do certain things.

In this analysis of power I follow a chronological order of the dialogues, although I will show that there is no evolution in the way Plato understands power and rationality in his thought. What we find in his dialogues are different perspectives that can be joined in a well elaborated plot from the conceptual point of view.

I. Philological remarks on Plato's concept of power

What is power? How do we speak about it? In the ordinary language we use the word "power" in many different ways. We can say «the president has a lot of power», «the army took the power», «our country does not have the power to change the situation», «he thinks that he has power but he is really powerless», «he is a powerful football player». We use the word "power" as a very abstract concept that we apply to very different situations. Moreover, there are other words that we use to speak about power: to rule, to dominate, to give orders, etc. It seems clear that power is a very difficult thing to define, and that in most cases we speak about power without a strict definition. There are many words related to power and none of them seem to cover all its meaning.

The problem that we find in our modern languages happens also in the Greek language and more precisely in Plato's terminology. The first difficulty that arises when one tries to approach Plato's views on power is that he did not explicitly develop a concept of power in any of his dialogues. The second one is that he does not use the same terms when he speaks about power. It is therefore necessary to make a philological approach to the main terms he uses, trying to define their main meanings in the Greek tradition. Afterwards, it will be possible to go on with a philosophical comprehension of his views on power. For

this reason the following pages will be dedicated to grasp the meaning of the words in their cultural context: this philological approach will be very useful in order to correctly understand the dialogues.

When Plato speaks about power he does not always use the same terms with the same connotations. The main terms he uses are ἄρχειν (and ἀρχή), δύναμις, κρατεῖν (and κράτος), ἐπιτάττω and ἐξουσία. I will focus on them with some attention. There are other terms that appear also in his dialogues and can be interesting to analyze briefly: βία (and βιάζομαι), ἰσχύω (ἰσχύς), οἰκεῖν and ῥώμη.

1. Ἄρχειν, ἀρχή

One of the main terms we find in Plato's terminology around power is ἄρχειν and ἀρχή. Specifically in the *Gorgias*, *Republic* and *Statesman*, he uses them to refer to the political power, in the sense of government. However, before proceeding to the term ἄρχειν in Plato it is necessary to see its use and connotations in Greek literature.

The word ἀρχή is used in the old Greek in two main senses: i) to express the idea of "origin", "beginning", "basis"; ii) to express the idea of "government", "command". Power in terms of ἀρχή seems to have the connotation of "root of order and command", "originating power": to have ἀρχή is to be in a position of setting an order and organizing society. It could be compared to the Latin word *potestas*.

Chantraine suggests that the use of ἄρχειν as "to be the chief", "to have the power" could have its origin from the concept of "taking the initiative"¹. The use of the term ἄρχειν as "to start" and "to take the initiative" are the oldest in Greek litera-

¹ «Le sens «être le chef» peut être issu du sens de «prendre la initiative de», soit en faisant le premier geste, soit en marchant le premier». CHANTRAINE, P., Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque, Klincksieck, Paris, 1968, p. 121.

ture², and the use of it as “to command” and “to set an order” would have been derived from them, although both uses of the word already appear in Homer.

It seems interesting, however, to consider a possible way in which the word ἄρχειν had been used to express the political basis of the community. The concept of “setting an order” would be linked to that of “starting”. Someone arises as a chief because he takes the initiative to do something and he gives orders to the others, who previously did not know what they had to do. We observe that ἄρχειν referred the concept of power as order: the need from the beginning in the community of someone with intelligence to organise the others. It is also related to power in the sense of origin or main principle from which the orders and commandments spring. Ἀρχή is the main source of power that gives organization to the social community. It must be noted that the word ἀρχή was used by the natural philosophers to express the concept of a first principle and origin of the natural world.

In a broader sense, by the time of Plato the word ἄρχειν is used to express the idea of some consolidated power: the exercise of political power in a community. Moreover, in many contexts it is used in the sense of “domination”. For example, Thucydides speaks of ἄρχειν as the domination or hegemony of one community, in the sense of “great power over the others”, “empire”: «It will be remembered that we held rule over (ἡρξάμεν) more Hellenes than any other Hellenic state»³. But that kind of domination is not necessarily bad. Ἀρχή is the rule over others, but not in the sense of slavery. It can be a tyranny depending on how it is exercised: «Your empire is a despotism (τυραννίδα ἔχετε τὴν ἀρχὴν)»⁴. In a general sense it can be sense that ἄρχειν is “to hold the command”, as when Alcibiades says that he is in a better position to have the power (προσῆκει μοι

² Frisk notices that the first meaning was “to be the first” (*der erste sein*), “to start something” (*anfangen*). See FRISK, H., *Griechisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Carl Winter, Heidelberg, 1954-1972, vol. I, p. 159.

³ THUCYDIDES, *History of the Peloponnesian war*, II, 64.

⁴ THUCYDIDES, *History of the Peloponnesian war*, III, 37.

μᾶλλον ἐτέρων ἄρχειν⁵). As Woodhead remarks: «Ἀρχή expresses [in Thucydides] both the exercise of power once it has been obtained, and the sphere of that exercise - what in case of Athens we customarily call “the Athenian Empire”, although in this day and age»⁶. In Thucydides’ approach ἄρχειν is the act of government and domination over a particular place:

The active verb, ἄρχειν, is a fine thing, both in principle and specifically for the subject of the verb. In the passive it is obnoxious, and even worse when it is rubbed home: ἄρχεσθαι κατὰ κράτος («to be ruled on a basis of force») expresses the unpleasant reality of the situation, and is contrary to the τιμή, the honour, and ὠφελία, the advantage, of the ruled (οἱ ἀρχόμενοι) .

In Thucydides there is a clear dichotomy between exercising the power, which is something honourable, and being governed, which it is hateful.

In the case of Isocrates, ἄρχειν is related to the idea of domination over the others (the hegemony of Athens was due to its great power, ἀρχὴν μεγίστην⁸). In Xenophon, on the other hand, it is used in the sense of giving orders to the others, as when Socrates said that in the art of weaving it was necessary that the women give orders (ἀρχούσας) to the men, because they know how to exercise the weaving⁹. There is a clear relation between the use of ἄρχειν and the use of the intelligence: the soldiers obeyed Clearchus because he knew what to do¹⁰. Ἀρχειν is related to the exercise of commandment over the others, but not in the main sense of domination, but of setting an order.

We face, then, one of the main problems of the use of the terms referring to power. The act of power can be seen as “force” and “domination”, on the one hand, and on the other

⁵ THUCYDIDES, *History of the Peloponnesian war*, VI.16.

⁶ WOODHEAD, A. G., *Thucydides on the Nature of Power*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1970, p. 39.

⁷ WOODHEAD, A. G., *Thucydides on the Nature of Power*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1970, p. 40.

⁸ ISOCRATES, *Panegyricus* 107.

⁹ XENOPHON, *Memorabilia* III, IX 10-11.

¹⁰ See XENOPHON, *Anabasis* II, 2, 5.

hand it can be understood as “setting and order”, “organise the community”. Even in the Greek literature we find this dichotomy: Thucydides and Isocrates seem to use ἄρχειν and ἀρχή in the first way, Xenophon in the second one.

What happens in Plato? He does not seem to use the term in a very specific way, and it usually means “to have the government”, “to give orders”, “to rule”. As we will see, one of the main questions in his political thought is how to find the appropriate way of ruling the city, and it is for this reason that we find the word in many of his dialogues. For the purpose of this investigation I will try to bring some main passages that reveal the way in which he uses the term.

In the *Gorgias* we find Plato trying to grasp the real meaning of ἄρχειν. It is noteworthy the difference he makes between the act of ruling (ἄρχειν) and that of doing whatever one wishes (ὃ τι ἂν βούλεται), for example speaking about the tyrant:

Will he be happier than if he escapes and make himself despot, and pass his life as the ruler in his city, doing whatever he likes (ἄρχων ἐν τῇ πόλει διαβίῃ ποιῶν ὃ τι ἂν βούλεται), and envied and congratulated by the citizens and the foreigners besides? (473 c).

There is a difference between the power of ruling and the power to do whatever one wants. This is one of Plato's main concerns in the *Gorgias*, to explain the real nature of ἄρχειν. In fact, Callicles speaks about ἄρχειν in the opposite way, when he says that there is a right that «consists in the ruling and advantage of the stronger over the weaker (τὸν κρείττω τοῦ ἥττονος ἄρχειν καὶ πλεόν ἔχειν)» (483 d). The act of ruling (ἄρχειν) is for Callicles the domination over the others, which is precisely what Plato is trying to refute. The act of ἄρχειν means setting an order in the community. This is a meaning of ἄρχειν that can also be found in the *Statesman*, when he criticizes democracy:

And suppose that rulers of the people (ἄρχοντες) are set up annually, whether from the rich or from the whole population, on the principle that whoever is chosen by lot should rule, and that these rulers exercise their authority (ἄρχοντας ἄρχειν) in commanding the ships or treating the sick in accordance with the written rules (298 e).

It would be grotesque to give the rule of the city to those who do not know how to set an order. Government in terms of ἄρχειν is the rule over others, which implies setting an order, and not just domination. This is the reason why Plato will state in this dialogue that power needs true knowledge, and the best way of ruling (ἄρχειν) is not by doing, but by giving the right orders to those that are able to do: «For the art that is truly kingly (βασιλικήν) ought not to act itself (πράττειν), but should rule over those that have the power of action (ἄρχειν τῶν δυναμένων πράττειν)» (305 d).

To rule is not to dominate the others, but to have the ability to direct forces toward an objective. Thus, it would be appropriate to say that for Plato ἄρχειν is not used in the sense of having power (domination) over others, but as the act of setting an order in the community. We find this same use of the term in the *Republic*:

The city in which those who are to rule (οἱ μέλλοντες ἄρξειν) are least eager to hold office (ἥκιστα πρόθυμοι ἄρχειν) must be the best administered (οἰκεῖσθαι) and most free from dissension, and the state that gets the contrary type of ruler (ἄρχοντας) will be the opposite of this (VII 520 d).

The main goal of ἄρχειν is the good life of the city, and in this sense power as ἄρχειν is for Plato the ordering of forces in order to find the good state of the community. For this reason the ones who should rule are those who don't want to take advantage of it.

2. Δύναμις

One of the main terms used by Plato to speak about power is δύναμις (specifically in *Gorgias*, *Republic I* and *Statesman*). What is the difference between ἄρχειν and δύναμις ἔχειν? The