

Paul Cartledge (Cambridge)

'How academic was Plato's Academy? A judicious historical review'

Maybe that's how it always has to be with philosophers. We who think we understand truth, wisdom, utility, freedom, liberty, happiness and the cosmos really know nothing at all about life as it is. Those of us who think we really understand power – state, monarchies, tyrannies, despotism – have seen those things only as we enjoy wine by looking down the neck of a bottle...

'Diderot' in Malcolm Bradbury *To the Hermitage* (2000) p. 452

[Abstract

Thanks to Plato (and Hekademos, perhaps, not to mention Horace), there are 'academies' littering the Western world's educational sphere today - from the Academy of Athens where we are now (founded 1926) to Athens Academy (a college preparatory school in Georgia, USA). And 'academic' has entered global Englishes as both noun and adjective. My title plays on one of the more debased versions of the English adjective 'academic', meaning (in Webster's dictionary definition) 'Theoretical, speculative, having no practical or useful significance'. Scholars have taken polarised views of Plato's original Academy: on the one hand (men), it was devoted to - and intended to generate nothing more or less than - pure theoria ; on the other hand (de) it was the RAND Corporation of Classical Greece (Trevor Saunders, in a Festschrift for quite another Webster). Go, figure - or at any rate Discuss!

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Lecture

To the memory of Trevor Saunders (1934-1999)

i. Preface

I'm sure it was intended as an honour for me to open proceedings at this glitteringly distinguished *thiasos* or *sumposion* – I'm going to take it as such, anyhow. And I hope you won't think it otiose if I open by recapitulating the Organizers' brief:

Plato's Academy was one of the oldest and most prestigious educational institutions in ancient Athens. Its activity lasted for at least three centuries (from c. 387 to c. 86 BCE), and the influence it exercised on later thought is almost impossible to overestimate. Somewhat surprisingly, however, there still seems to be no comprehensive study examining the existing evidence which concerns the exact nature, organization and historical significance of this institution, providing a reasonable assessment of its impact on its immediate as well as its broader social and intellectual environment.

Four main approaches have been selected as appropriate launching points for such a survey of the evidence:

1. History of Philosophy.
2. History of Science.
3. History
4. Archaeology.

I'm a historian – which means that, like Pierre Vidal-Naquet (1995: 21), 'when I study Plato's thought, I do not consider it as a timeless doctrine', and that 'The Plato with whom I'm concerned is the one who was witness to the changes, or what some would call the crisis, that affected the Greek city in the fourth century BC' - so I'm going to have a stab at at least SOME of the organizers' suggested topics under heading 3, 'History': The status of the Academy within contemporary Athenian society - The Academy and Athenian politics - The involvement of the Academy in Sicilian politics

And I'll do so with a view to enabling other specialists coming from different areas of research to enlarge their perspective and encourage interaction between the various fields, and with the aim of contributing to achieving a more comprehensive understanding of the importance of the Academy as an educational and social institution. I note that several of the other speakers have been allotted or have

chosen germane topics of a historico-archaeological kind – I’ll try not to step on their toes, or to get down and dirty in the academic sandpit with them. It was perhaps rather injudicious of me to subtitle my contribution ‘a judicious historical review’ – I await colleagues’ judgments on that claim with some justifiable trepidation.

ii. *The challenge of Mathematics*

An inscription above the entrance to the Academy read – in my paraphrase – ‘The Mathematically challenged are barred’. At least, that’s what a ten-centuries-later source claimed was written above the entrance way (<http://plato-dialogues.org/faq/faq009.htm>). Whether or not it in fact was so inscribed (and Vassilis will surely enlighten us; see meanwhile Fowler 1999), it does seem to me to correspond quite neatly to a central and fundamental strand of Plato’s thinking – his search for propositions that are above and beyond the reach of merely human tinkering or corruption. Pythagoras no doubt would have disagreed, but most of us think that a training in the analytic truths and logic of mathematics, even applied maths in the form of practical geometry, are not necessarily the best training for, let alone the best method of doing, practical politics – and perhaps especially not the kind of in-your-face participatory politics that characterized the Greek *polis* (citizen-state), and above all not the extreme democratic version of them practised in contemporary Athens.

(A brief biographical interjection: I take Plato to have lived from c. 427 to 347 BCE, and to have founded the Academy in c. 385. Democracy, if of different kinds and strengths, mostly ruled ok at Athens during that period, from 427 to 411, then again, after an oligarchic interlude of a year, from 410 until spring 404, then again, after another year-long oligarchic interruption, from 403 on. Plato was thus about 23 when the Spartan-imposed and Spartan-backed *dunasteia* or junta later nicknamed the ‘30 Tyrants’ struck; whether or not we believe the *Seventh Letter* attributed to Plato to be in any sense genuine, its bloodstained regime – and one of its longer-term fallouts, the trial and self-execution of his master Socrates – cannot but have impacted upon him and his political thought in a major way. But it was not the only factor determining or influencing his approach to questions of statecraft, since, for instance, that approach differs very considerably as between the *Republic* of c. 375 and the subsequent *Laws*, when the Athens where he spent almost all his life was relatively stable politically. To explain that shift, it doesn’t seem unreasonable to invoke Plato’s Sicilian experiences of the early 380s and more especially early 360s.)

iii. *The RAND Corporation*

For those innocents like me who wouldn’t recognize a think-tank if it hit them in the face, the RAND corporation was founded in 1948, as an offshoot from the Douglas aircraft company of Santa Monica, California, where its ‘campus’ is even today located. When it was still called ‘Project RAND’ (short for ‘R(earch)AND

(development), nothing to do with Ayn Rand ...), it produced its first report, in 1946, entitled 'Preliminary Design of an Experimental World-Circling Spaceship'. Today its mission as a nonprofit, nonpartisan institution with over 800 researchers on tap is to help improve policy- and decision-making through research and analysis on such 'issues that matter' as health, education, national security, international affairs, law and business, and the environment. Plato might have been puzzled by the very notion of an Experimental World-Circling Spaceship, but he would not have been fazed by the idea of researching and analysing health etc with a view to improving related policy- and decision-making.

So far, so plausible therefore is my late respected friend and colleague Trevor Saunders's suggestion that Plato's Academy should be viewed and understood as a kind of ancient Athenian or more broadly ancient Greek proto-RAND Corporation. He himself advanced that claim with all due respect for the – grossly inadequate - supporting evidence. On the basis of the primary and secondary ancient sources that he deemed usable he attempted to reconstruct how Plato and other 'members' (his scare quotes) of the Academy may have engaged in practical politics, but confessed that it was only by reading 'between' the sources' lines that he was able, he thought, barely to discern a 'major enterprise in moral and political education' directed towards 'the persuasion and education of such rulers and states as were prepared to listen'. Or rather such rulers as Plato *thought* might or should be prepared to listen – but actually were not always so. Such rulers and states as, notably or notoriously, Dionysius I and II of Syracuse – whose 'lure' (Mark Lilla's word) Plato found apparently irresistible - or, less excitingly but more plausibly, Lycurgus of Athens, the case for whose applied platonism has much more recently been re-proposed by my former Cambridge PhD student Danielle Allen (herself now a 'member' of a distinctly Academy-style Institute at Princeton...). The RAND Corporation analogy was not actually Saunders's own invention – but rather Alvin Gouldner's: hence the question-mark in the title of Saunders's article. But Saunders's answer to that question – while being careful to distance himself from Gouldner's own 'colourful judgement [that] goes wildly beyond the evidence' (210n.2) - was firmly in the affirmative, and it is based overwhelmingly on his reading of the *Laws*, a work which he himself translated for the Penguin Classics series in 1970.

It's a measure of Saunders's scholarship that, before reading his answer into or out of or between the lines of the *Laws*, he devoted several pages to 'Areas of Uncertainty' (pp. 201-203), concluding that there were just 11 known cases maximum (possibly only 9) which satisfied both of his criteria for the Academy's fulfilling an advisory function of that political sort aimed at 'educating the ruler in Academic ways of thinking' (203). Of all the provisions of the *Laws* Saunders believed that the ones most likely to bear the closest relationship to what Academic men tried to do in the field were those that deal with the arrangements for founding a new state. That seems to me initially plausible, that is, to cohere with my strong impression that Plato preferred tabula rasa scenarios to the Aristotelian method of working with in order to ameliorate the conditions of existing states, however imperfect when judged by the highest and most exact politico-ethical standards.

Raphael's Vatican fresco 'The School of Athens' leaps to my mind in vivid, perhaps too vivid, illustration.

Saunders backs up his point by pointing to the opening of Book IV and the similarly long and complex passage at the beginning of Book 6. These are by way of corroborating a general point Saunders makes about the unbalanced quality of the work as a whole – whereas e.g. economics is scanted, theology, education and homicide are treated 'at startling length'. So too the arrangements for the founding of a new state: not only is the legislator's raw material expatiated upon, but so too are the transitional arrangements for the establishment of the polity's constitution. Moreover, for the specifically and crucially educational legislation to be effective, it is stressed that it must be firmly based on intimate empirical knowledge of the characters, beliefs, prejudices and practices of the colonists, that is the first new citizens. Saunders then concludes his discussion with reference to what he calls 'persuasive addresses' in the *Laws* that he thinks very likely reflect what Academy advisers actually did on the spot, on the job, as required or requested: for conspicuous instance, that on religious duties at 715eff.

iv. The proof of the pudding must proverbially be in the eating: what of Saunders's 11 (or 9) actual cases (p. 202)? They come mostly from Plutarch *Against Kolotes* 1126c, supplemented by Plutarch's *Life of Dion* and by the Sicilian universal historian Diodorus. The cities or peoples Plato and/or his pupils allegedly 'advised' include Syracuse (Dionysius II via Dion), of course, Elis, Cnidos, Stageira, Arcadia (Megalopolis), Pyrrha, Atarneus (Hermeias), to which we could add Klearchos, the tyrant of Heracleia on the Black Sea, and the (democratic) Athens of Lycurgus (as argued most recently by Allen). A recent compendious discussion of them is by George Klosko, who concedes, with considerable litotes, that 'The evidence for all these instances is not above reproach' (!) but then goes on to conclude that the 'unavoidable implication' of it all taken together is that Plato is 'quite the opposite of a utopian thinker' [meaning by that a totally disengaged, detached and purely speculative political theorist]. To me, however, it doesn't seem that jumping from the interpretative frying pan of Plato the unworldly theorist into the fire of Plato the totally engaged would-be political actor-adviser is necessarily the most compelling conceptual move.

My own inference from his early (pre- as well as post-*Republic*) experience at Syracuse in particular, where Plato seems to have made no fewer than 3 visits and to have got his fingers quite severely burned, would tend in the exact opposite direction. However much he might have wished to be able to apply some version of Academy doctrine to the second biggest city in the then Greek world, in practice any direct translation of ideas into practice was going to prove impossible, at any rate there – as even the naivest political operator should surely have very quickly gathered. It's unfeasible – and probably dangerous – to try to analyse any ancient figure from a post- or sub-Freudian point of view, but I can't help thinking that the *Laws* reads as a kind of massive 'displacement activity' (*Verschiebung*) on Plato's

part. At *Laws* 803b Plato's Athenian surrogate says (in Saunders's translation) 'Not that human affairs are worth taking very seriously – but take them seriously is just what we are forced to do, alas'. Alas, indeed. With Peter Brunt (1993: 313) I'm inclined to think that Plato may indeed have been 'a politician *manqué*', but that, burned by his experience of actual politics, he displaced his longings very largely onto theoretical projections. With Brunt, too, I am myself inclined to see the city of the *Laws* as being very far from a blueprint for a practically realisable fourth-century Greek city.

v. *Contemporary resonances*

Plato's Academy still has some interesting contemporary resonances. I don't mean just in the amusing historical detective novels of Jose Carlos Somoza... but also in the courteous but fierce (in a Scandinavian sort of way) debate between Estlund and Rasmussen over the (de)merits of 'epistocracy'. Of course, it should be 'epistemocracy', or even 'epistemonocracy', but we get the – platonic – point: should *kratos* be differentially placed in the hands of, or even exclusively reserved to, those 'in the know', even those uniquely blessed with a very special, indeed esoteric understanding of 'knowledge'? Aristotle for one, I believe, was not of that persuasion, and on sound grounds. Every *tekhnê*, he believed, had its own special standards of accuracy, and of proof, or knowledge, if you like. He did not accept the validity of Plato's Forms, whatever exactly they were, as a – let alone the – royal road to political wisdom and effective political action. And I believe he was right not to. At any rate, if the proof may indeed be said to be in the pudding, as I suggested earlier, what Plato whipped up or tried to in Syracuse, or say Klearchos actually made in Herakleia Pontike, did not have the recipe for lasting political success.

Ironically, indeed, possibly the closest one may come to finding a successful practical politician in 4th-century Greece whose success was genuinely owed in some substantial measure to what he may have learned from Platonic teaching is Lycurgus in democratic Athens – Lycurgus the hereditary Athenian aristocrat with the Spartan name, but whose period of ascendancy between 336 and 324 was anything but lakonizing in the manner of the Thirty Tyrants, or indeed ideologically driven at all, at least not in any dogmatic way. Indeed, it's arguable in every sense of that word just how (far or in what way) Platonist Lycurgus's politics really were. But IF they were, then I can't help feeling that Plato himself might well have regretted that, since stabilising an inherently unjust and immoral political regime in a technocratic way, as Lycurgus did for post-Chaeroneia Athens, would have been for him, surely, a misapplication of political science, not the way for a truly philosopher-ruler to go.

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