



# Plato and The Stranger

## Another Possibility of Democracy

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*The significance of the rampage on Capitol Hill, therefore, is that it raises the specter of the West burning its relation to this tradition in the name of populist fantasies. It is a move intent on destroying the difference made by the idea of Europe or the West. It is an effort to spare the West the challenge of self-critically measuring itself up to the exigencies of a mode of speaking respectful of difference or otherness, and of a way of life that reserves a constitutive place for the other. Confronted with this challenge to the heritage of Europe and the West, and the absence of any alternative models, the only – and urgent – task is the recourse to the legacy of the West itself, and the yet-to-be-mined resources it contains, resources that, because of historical development, have been ignored and overlooked, or that, because of their radicality, have been resisted.*



fter the attempt on January 6, 2021, to overthrow American democracy, any reflection on the nature of the Western world will no longer be able to ignore the inherent fragility of its democratic constitution and the values associated with it. But, of course, this attempted coup has been in the offing since the beginning of the Trump administration, with its anti-global politics – in particular, its efforts to cut as many of its ties as possible to the United States’ former democratic allies, especially in Europe, thus disengaging itself from its democratic tradition and its history. This effort to replace democracy with an authoritarian regime in essence similar to those that dominate most of the rest of world, an effort whose break with globalism would have been welcomed by several of democracy’s traditional enemies, would not only have revealed, by its contorted nationalism, the deep flaws of the United States’ so-called exceptionalism. The attempt at replacing American democracy with an undemocratic regime also sheds a sharper light on what has been happening already for some time in the European Union, where several nations have drifted back into populist authoritarian regimes. However, the failure of the coup in the United States should in no way produce any complacency whatsoever. The fact that the beacon of democracy has been tempted by populist autocratic government – that is, by an attempt to overthrow democracy with the help of its own institutions – as opposed to the outright grasp of autocratic power in other parts of the world on the basis of religious or ideological pretenses, has brought to light again the extreme fragility of any democratic institution. Without political vigilance, the democratic institution is exposed to threats that besiege it not only from outside, but also from within, in that, in seemingly democratic ways, it can serve to abolish democracy. But what these recent events have also called to our attention once more is the fact that what is specific about the West, in distinction from much of the rest of the world, is the extent to which a democratic conception of political life, of political life in the first place – since its beginnings in ancient Greece, where in the sixth and the fifth centuries BC, in a moment of extraordinary awareness of the possibility of reinventing itself as a whole, Athens gave itself a constitution that, with its absence of monarchical structures, constituted its unique difference from all the regimes of the time, which without exception were autocratic – is interlinked with this heritage.

The significance of the rampage on Capitol Hill, therefore, is also that it raises the specter of the West burning its relation to this tradition in the name of populist and tribal fantasies. What this event makes conceivable is the threat of cutting off all relations to the historical tradition of inherited responsibilities toward oneself and others in democratic constitutions, a tradition which represents the difference that so far has been mainly, though imperfectly, represented by Europe, and more generally by the West. To speak in this context of difference is in no way to evoke superiority, whether geopolitically or geophilosophically, not least because this difference has not only been realized by the West in very limited ways but has also often been perverted for imperialist and colonialist purposes. Rather than being an existential difference, this difference is constituted by a task – an infinite task, more precisely. This difference is a challenge above all to the West itself, the challenge of constituting itself without looking for roots in the particular, that is, in difference from the particular in the form of the ethnic, tribal, or native.

The annihilation of the difference in question by way of an overthrow of Western democracy by populist autocracy aims at achieving a generalization of tribalism, one that culminates in a return to the nation (“a nation is not a nation without borders,” as Trump has trumpeted), but which at the same time also encourages the proliferation of borders within it – that is, the flourishing of tribalism on all possible levels. It is fed by intolerance of all otherness, fostering a state of affairs violently hostile to difference or otherness in all forms, whether it comes from within or from the outside. In thought, the name for this difference is enlightened reason; in political life, it is equality and democracy. The Western tradition behind these exigencies has to be traced back to ancient Greece which, already before the Ptolemaic Age when Egypt was under Greek rule, was a first experiment of cosmopolitanism. The heritage thus bestowed upon the West is not only a heritage of injunctions in accordance with which the West has sought, however imperfectly, to operate, but has also been the foil against which the West could critically be measured, and measure itself, especially where it not only fell short of its foundations, but betrayed its own heritage on the basis of ethnic superiority and the resulting abominations. Only this legacy – which enables a self-criticism that conservative forces within the West decry as a nihilistic surrender of its specificity – is what, at least tendentially, sets the West apart not only from itself, but from much of the rest of this world.

Against what is perceived, and undoubtedly not always without reason, as the West’s arrogance or so-called Eurocentrism – namely, its obliviousness to the specificity of other cultural formations and their accomplishments – numerous critics have championed non-Western models as alternatives to Western thought-culture and political life. It would be fascinating to know what these non-European or non-Western models are and, in particular, how they have been successfully realized or are actively striven for in other parts of the world. But, if such models exist, and if indeed they are not merely regional and native sets of exotic

customs, why would they have to be considered as models for the West, if the parts of the world in which they originated dispense themselves from realizing them? All differences considered, as of now, it only appears that if such non-European models exist elsewhere, they do so at best only latently, and have been firmly repressed or adapted for autocratic purposes by undemocratic regimes of all shades. The presence of alternative ways of thinking and publicly acting is demonstrated only if they can present themselves first as alternatives to the oppression of intellectual freedom and civic life in the countries of their origin. In any event, no factual or conceptual alternatives to the European model have been offered so far as a possible response to the shortcomings and the real or perceived failures of Western modes of thinking and acting.

The recent events in the US, and the violent effort to substitute an autocratic model for the democratic one, as well as a mode of speaking of the order of conspiracy posts, tweets, and memes propagated through social media platforms – a mode of speaking that is no longer one of storytelling or myth, in distinction from rational discourse – in a move intent on destroying the difference made by the idea of Europe or the West, is an effort to spare the West the challenge of self-critically measuring itself up to the exigencies of a mode of speaking, respectful of difference or otherness, and of a way of life that reserves a constitutive place for the other. Confronted with this challenge to the heritage of Europe and the West, and the absence of any alternative models, the only – and urgent – task is the recourse to the legacy of the West itself, and the yet-to-be-mined resources it contains, resources that, because of historical development, have been ignored and overlooked, or that, because of their radicality, have been resisted. Indeed, to reach back to the potential resources of the conception of speaking as *logos* and of life in community as political, it is necessary to first establish the reasons why the inherent possibilities have not yet been resorted to and realized to confront the limitations of their dominant interpretation. For this to be possible, criticism of the dominant interpretations of the sources in question is inevitable. The West draws its conceptions of discourse and politics to a large extent, though not exclusively, from the unheard-of event of the irruption of abstraction, in the shape of the first science in a strict sense – mathematics – and, resultingly, of the disciplines of philosophy and politics in 6th and 5th century Greece. The abstraction at the heart of the constitution of the first science is also the very condition of possibility of the universal thrust of philosophy and politics.

It is generally admitted that philosophy begins with Plato, but what this means is to a large extent determined by the traditional reception of Plato that Aristotle's appropriation and criticism of his teacher's thought made possible – Platonism, in short. Within the framework of this interpretation of Plato's works, Plato's presumed theory of eternal and immutable ideas, which would be the object of the philosopher's theoretical gaze, makes him a thinker in contempt of public life in all its fleeting and uncertain nature, disdainful, in particular, of democracy and political life in general. Furthermore, Plato's elaborations on the ideal

state in the *Republic* and the *Laws* are more often than not qualified as xenophobic and as championing totalitarianism. By contrast, Aristotle's rejection of the Platonic ideas, and his outright acknowledgment of the ever-changing nature of public life, has earned him the reputation of the more progressive thinker, more of a predecessor of the ideals of Europe and the West, whose take on politics, rather than that of Plato, is held to have stood at the beginning of Western political thought. It is thus not particularly surprising that taking one's starting point in Plato rather than in Aristotle in order to reflect on the legacy that ancient Greece has bestowed on Western thought and politics is often judged to be a conservative gesture, if not even worse than that. But apart from the fact that Aristotle's judgment of the doctrine of his teacher itself deserves a closer critical look, there is the fact that in Plato's late dialogues another Plato, distinct from the earlier one, seems to be at work, a Plato whose importance for the inauguration of Western philosophy has still to be fully realized and brought to bear on the legacy imparted to the West.

In two of these late dialogues – the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*, both part of a trilogy that also includes the *Theaetetus* – Socrates is replaced by a stranger, the Eleatic Stranger. Though really only relatively recently, this surprising and unexpected change has, of course, drawn the attention of scholars, not least because the problematic of the *Sophist* also forces this stranger to commit what in his own words resembles a parricide, namely a thorough refutation of “father” Parmenides' doctrine regarding Being and Non-being. Yet little or no attention has been paid to Plato's reasons for introducing a stranger in his late dialogues to begin with, more precisely in one dialogue that concerns philosophical thought, and another about life together in a *polis*. The philosophical significance of Plato's introduction of a stranger into his late elaborations on these crucial issues has barely, if at all, been explored. Nor have Plato scholars been attentive to the strangeness of this very stranger – a stranger without a patronymic – whose homeland or place of origin, even though he is referred to as being in birth from Elea, is far from being established in an unequivocal way, if being from that faraway place is supposed to mean that he is a companion of Parmenides. Why, to begin with, would Plato bring an adherent of the Parmenidean doctrine to Athens for him to refute its father there, rather than at home? The stranger of the two late dialogues is not only a foreigner in Athens, having no identity because of his namelessness, his lack of any distinctive features, and the doubtfulness of his affiliations, both locally and philosophically; as the Stranger (with a capital S), he is the non-native par excellence. Undoubtedly, it has been argued that this Stranger is none other than the late Plato himself, that is, a Plato who after his second visit to Syracuse has become aware of the inner limits of the Socratic method. However, the dramatic introduction in these late dialogues of a stranger is not, I hold, an insignificant move, especially since it occurs in the context of decidedly new insights into the philosophical *logos* and life together in a community. The introduction of a radical stranger, a stranger to all native identity, has, I submit, theoretical implications, and is – rather than a rhetorical or merely literary device – of the order of an argument.

What the Stranger brings home to the Athenians in both dialogues is that philosophical thought and democratic interconnectedness, both of which are Greek inventions, harbor the possibility of a radical transformation of thinking and political life that would break in thought and in practice with all ethnic authority and customs. Even though in the first dialogue of the trilogy, the *Theaetetus*, there are no explicit hints at the imminent introduction of a stranger in the two following dialogues, Socrates' devastating interrogation of only one current of Greek thought – Protagorean sophistic – and his substitution of the sophist's universe of elseness by one of otherness, I argue, anticipates the Stranger's arrival so as to be able to complete what Socrates had only begun, namely the critical investigation of the two currents of thought in Greece – that is, also that of Parmenidean thought.

Indeed, in order to overcome the *sophist's* resistance to letting himself be nailed down, in the *Sophist* the Stranger is led to take on the formidable task of examining the entirety of Greek thought hitherto, a critical examination and ultimate refutation that culminates in the parricide of father Parmenides. The dismantling of the Parmenidean verdict regarding Non-being as something of which one cannot speak without contradicting oneself, and the subsequent reinterpretation of Non-being as Other than Being, rather than as its negative binary opposite, opens the space for a novel conception of speaking in which philosophical discourse is crafted in terms of a weaving together of distinct discursive "ideas" such as Being, Motion and Rest, Sameness, and above all Otherness – in short, a weaving together of what is called the Stranger's doctrine of the "greatest kinds." In distinction from all previous philosophical thinking, which, according to the Stranger, amounts to nothing more than storytelling – in other words, to culturally or ethnically restricted myths about Being and Non-Being that are intelligible only to natives, and moreover only to a few initiates among them – the novel mode of philosophical speech that emerges from the Stranger's intervention is a mode of discursivity based on universal "categories" in which alterity, and the relation to the other, is the rule.

Whereas the process of defining the sophist as a fabricator of false speeches and a deceptive imitator of knowledge that he does not possess serves to highlight the specific kind of discursive knowledge that distinguishes the philosopher, the *Statesman* is an inquiry into the knowledge that characterizes a true statesman and sets him apart from the philosopher. In this latter dialogue Plato continues the investigation of interconnectedness, but this time on the level of civil community: a statesman's task consists in weaving together contrary virtues which allow themselves to be interlinked by themselves on the basis of their intrinsic relation to their respective others. On an even deeper level, the statesman's art consists in inciting the members of a community to act in such a way that – rather than intending specific purposes or shaping their community in accordance with traditional forms of statehood – first and foremost takes place for its own sake: a praxis constitutive of democratic

life, a life that Aristotle will later call *bios politikos*. In the same way as the philosophical discourse which results from an interconnection of the basic building blocks of speech that are entirely immanent to speech – that is, without the intervention of some transcendent instance – the *polis* that the statesman brings about involves the arrangement of contrary virtues by themselves, without the intervention of a theocratic figure of authority. Against the foil of the myth of a golden age in which Cronos was in charge of all the needs of human beings, statesmanship is something that only becomes a necessity once the world is abandoned by the god. But such an exclusively human statesman also differs from all types of statesmanship hitherto in that he does not represent a faction, as do the leaders in all existing constitutions, but rather the whole of the citizenry involved in a praxis that has its end in itself, into which he disappears again once the *polis* itself has been formed. The notion of statesmanship that emerges from this dialogue is not only one for a thoroughly mundane or secularized human realm, but is also, I argue, intimately interlinked with a fundamentally democratic thrust so far unheard-of in Plato's writings.

Needless to say, this conception of statesmanship conflicts with all sacred Athenian beliefs and customs. Indeed, the Stranger's argument that the true and living art of the statesman must – in order to foster, together with the members of the *polis*, a just community – be able to occasionally ignore the law as that sacred but rigid institution that is linked like none other to inveterate beliefs and cherished customs, is a demand whose seeming outrageousness some contemporary Plato scholars still share with the Athenians of the 5th century. In the same way as the parricide of father Parmenides was required to develop an appropriate conception of discursive philosophy, true statesmanship is not possible except through a radical break with customs and beliefs, including the authority of the law.

With this, the problematic of the Stranger – and the reasons why Plato resorts to such a figure in his late dialogues – comes into sharper relief. If the *Theaetetus* lays the ground for the arrival of the Stranger, it is in order to make good on Socrates' unfulfilled promise to not only put just one of the two dominating trends of Greek philosophy – Protagorean philosophy with its roots in a tradition that reaches back as far as Homer – on trial, but also the lone authority of Parmenides' influential doctrine. In other words, it is because such critical examination requires a courage that no native Greek could be willing to muster. Indeed, if with the discovery of philosophy and politics the Greeks realized that there are ways to uproot and transform their customs and native forms of conceiving and acting in both domains, it is because, from a dramatic perspective, the Stranger is required to confront them with this possibility that has arisen in their milieu precisely for the reason that it goes against the grain of the authority of the ordinary, the customary, and the traditional – in short, of all that has sprung from the native ground. But this does not exhaust the reason for Plato's recourse to the figure of the Stranger.

The extraordinary privilege that Plato accords to the Stranger in both of these late dialogues – in which he is welcomed by his Athenian hosts and given *carte blanche* to refute the authority of father Parmenides in order to develop a novel way of philosophizing, and in the domain of politics, apart from his criticism of all forms of constitutions so far, to demand that a statesman worthy of the name be able to disregard the rule of law in order to establish a *polis* in which everyone is accorded his or her just place – has not, in my view, been fully recognized by Plato scholarship. A number of Plato scholars are in agreement that something new takes place in these late dialogues, but the seismic change they register in Plato’s thinking can only be brought into view by way of a particular attention to the provocative nature of the Stranger’s considerations. By highlighting the unheard-of dramatic role of the Stranger in the dialogues in question, I do not in any way wish to advance the idea that the native is to be replaced by the stranger. It is not a question of eliminating the traditional and the local, or of romanticizing the stranger and the foreigner, but rather of making room for the dynamism between both. In other words, the role of the stranger is to be understood from how he or she affects that which is proper to oneself – in other words, as a chance to rethink what is properly one’s own, and to actualize its dependence on the other, thus setting it into its specific limits. Recognized thus as having a fundamental role to play in relation to what is one’s own, the Platonic Stranger enacts in his interactions with his hosts a paradigm of being in community beyond the difference of the foreign and the proper. More precisely, in the context of the two late dialogues it is a question of showing that – in both discursive and political life – otherness on the one hand, and the stranger or the foreigner on the other hand, are indispensable to the constitution of both. I would argue that in these late dialogues Plato bestows on the West a philosophical and political legacy, at the core of which the stranger holds a prominent place not simply because he is recognized in his autonomy, but because it provides him and the foreigner with a previously unheard-of constitutive role in the way one thinks on the basis of otherness and lives with others in a community – in other words, in the way one relates to oneself.

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