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Plato as Critical Theorist (Review)

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Thakkar, Jonny. *Plato as Critical Theorist.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018. xii + 373 pp. Cloth, $39.95–"Dissatisfaction with our present way of life and despair at the prospects for orienting ourselves toward some alternative," Jonny Thakkar observes in *Plato as Critical Theorist*, "might be two sides of the same coin . . . [W]hat ails us might be precisely our inability to live as idealists." To address this dissatisfaction and despair, Thakkar turns to Plato's *Republic*, which offers, on his reading, an ideal theory critical for treating the ills of contemporary life. Beginning from root ontological assumptions and climbing to the crown of the philosopher kings, Thakkar argues that Plato's idealism does not float deracinated among ethereal unworldly objects but is rather grounded in real politics with implications for today. The *Republic* teaches its readers how to live as idealists and thus how to realize the promise of philosophical rule, both of self and of the political community.

Thakkar structures the book in two parts, one of which he devotes to exegesis of the *Republic* and the other of which he uses to graft his account of Platonic idealism to contemporary liberal democracy. The treatment of the *Republic* ramifies from three key claims. First, Thakkar argues that philosophy does not seek understanding of some different aspect of the same objects sought by ordinary perception (which comports with what Thakkar calls the "two worlds view") but rather sees both the formal and sensible aspects of things. Thakkar advances a "one world metaphysics" as the basis of this argument: the forms are structural and substantial; full knowledge of anything requires knowing its place in the system and the forms provide principles of unity. Philosophical knowledge describes the capacity to discern the structure of reality. Idealism concerns itself with this systematic interconnection.

Philosophy pursues knowledge of the forms not to the detriment of politics or political knowledge but instead to serve politics. This constitutes the second key stake in Thakkar's reading of Plato. Philosophers conduct the holistic inquiry into form and function that allows them to ensure the health of their subjects. Because philosophy involves both a form of desire and a form of cognition, philosophers guard themselves as well as the city. Like a young sapling, the beautiful city (*kallipolis*) requires continual nurture and tending; the philosophers' mastery of the forms–their prowess at "ideal theory"–allows them to do this.

Thakkar's third stake consists in an argument about how philosophers combine aesthetic and ideal theory, disseminating ideals through images. The philosophical rulers of *kallipolis* make it beautiful in two ways. First, the philosophers themselves serve as educative models. Second, the interlocutors in the *Republic* construct ideals from their dialectical investigations. In *kallipolis*, writes Thakkar, "the stage will be populated with heroes like Socrates." An idealist not only represents ideals in his person but propagates them through his deeds.

Thakkar's reading of the *Republic* sets the stage for his grafting of Platonic idealism to contemporary liberal democracy. Creating such a hybrid requires some cutting. The "idea of citizens pulling together to achieve the good life is appealing," Thakkar writes, "[but] Plato's picture of society is obviously illiberal and antidemocratic." Lest the graft fail, Thakkar preserves only what will take to the rootstock of liberalism: "normative functionalism," which Thakkar describes as the view that institutions become better if they cohere around a single good; and "philosophical citizenship," which involves making political philosophy "part of every day life." Normative functionalism sustains a critique of the malfunction of contemporary capitalism: when moneymaking becomes entrenched to the detriment of the crafts (and broader social life) it is meant to serve, the goods necessary for flourishing may or may not be produced. A well-functioning society, according to the Platonic idealist perspective, would meet basic needs as well as realize human potentials; unchecked capitalism risks poisoning both.

Philosophical citizenship modifies Plato's philosopher kings to render the ideal compatible with liberalism's commitment to democratic participation. As Thakkar's reading of the *Republic*

highlights, governance includes not just formal political institutions but all aspects of social life. A healthy society capable of transmitting excellence requires a particular cultural environment; in the wrong conditions, human beings will wilt and die. Only philosophical citizens can pursue governance with an eye toward human flourishing.

Can this strange hybrid survive–and will it thrive? Thakkar argues that the resultant critical theory can shift today's social imaginary, inspiring liberal citizens to comport themselves as idealists and exciting them to fight for institutions supportive of ideal flourishing. Yet realizing society's best possible function only within the structures of liberal democracy involves a significant concession at odds with both Plato's criticisms of democracy as well as Thakkar's own assertion that Plato's argument is "true." Is the noble lie of Thakkar's political Platonism the suggestion that we can make Plato safe for contemporary democracy?–Joel Alden Schlosser, Bryn Mawr College