

Plato's feasible city: the rational use of belief and imagination in politics

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Abstract-Plato's perfect cities of the *Republic* and the *Laws* have often been criticized as utopias; that is, as unachievable cities. It is my argument that such a "utopian reading" is wrong. Plato's best cities cannot be understood as utopias neither in the literary meaning of the word nor in the sense of theoretical projects of political recast. They must be seen as paradigms of feasible cities. To a broader extent, the conclusion of my argument is that, according to Plato, imagination and belief are constituent elements of a sound political rationality.

Keywords- belief, city, imagination, *Laws*, paradigm, Plato, politics, *Republic*, utopia.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the field of Platonic studies, the word "utopia" is often used to characterize both the literary genre to which the *Republic* and the *Laws* belong, and the essence of their political projects (Trousson 1975, Laks 1991, Bobonich 2002 and 2006, Schofield 2006, pp. 194-249). In these dialogues, Plato exposes the fundamental principles of a just society and government that some consider as unwanted, and others as perfect, but in both cases as impossible to achieve: according to them, a utopia, per definition, cannot exist in this world, as shown by the derogatory meaning of the word in expressions like "utopianism" or "utopian engineering" (Popper 1963, pp. 157-168). Even when some try to give it a positive meaning in subtle combinations like "utopian realism" (Schofield 2006, p. 203), it is always irresistibly understood as synonymous with irrelevance or failure to pass the test of reality.

This "utopian reading", however, is wrong if we refer to the letter of Plato's texts, and it results in a misunderstanding of the spirit of Plato's conception of political rationality. In order to prove this, I will deal first with utopia as a literary genre, and show that only the *Critias* belongs to this genre, but neither the *Republic* nor the *Laws*. Secondly, I will deal with utopia as a theoretical project of political recast, and underline that the "utopian readers" are mistaken about the ontological status of Plato's cities: they misunderstand the meaning and the function of its paradigmatic nature. At last, I will underline how and in what sense Plato makes his just cities achievable both by a peculiar conception of political rationality, and by a practical continuity between these cities and the empirical and imperfect cities where we are living

II. UTOPIA AS A LITERARY GENRE

The division between utopia as a literary genre and utopia as a political project is helpful to make my arguments clearer,

but these two dimensions can merge in the same one text: literary utopias of course have a political meaning and can have some indirect practical effects, as they stimulate the imagination; theoretical utopias as projects of political recast can also be studied from a literary standpoint. The difference lies in the intention and the priority of the writer: literary utopias do not aim at practical implications first, while utopias as theoretical projects do not deal with formal and stylistic issues first.

A. A critical genre

The word 'utopia' was coined in the 15th century by Sir Thomas More. But utopia as a literary genre seems older: Plato is "usually considered as the true creator of the utopian genre, and this is true, but he is quite a special case" (Trousson 1975, p. 28). Plato is considered as the father of this genre because of the numerous references to his dialogues appearing in the works of his followers. For instance, Raphael Hythlodai, More's interlocutor in *Utopia*, refers to Plato when he describes the Utopian customs; and the Genovese speaker in Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun* does the same. However, Plato "is quite a special case" because this so-called and "after the event" fatherhood is based on a misunderstanding. The utopian writers after Plato have found indeed their inspiration in the *Republic* and the *Laws*, but the true roots of the genre are to be found in the *Critias* (Trousson 1975, p. 28), if we are to rely on the definitions of utopia as a literary genre elaborated by various scholars. Let us consider two of them.

According to Trousson (1975, p. 24), the word "utopia" can be used "when a narrative (this excludes political treatises) describes a community (this excludes "Robinson Crusoe style" stories) organized according political, economic and ethical principles corresponding to the complexity of the society (this excludes reversed worlds, Golden Age or Arcadia descriptions); it can be represented either as an ideal to achieve (positive utopia) or as the prediction of hell (anti-utopia); it can be located in a real or an imaginary place, or in time; it can be described as the report of a fictitious likely or unlikely travel." According to other scholars (Negley & Patrick 1968, pp. 108-109), the utopian literary genre contains the three following features: it is fictitious, it describes a given community or State, and it focuses on its social and political structure.

In both cases, a literary utopia is a fiction excluding the conceptual approach of a political treatise. It does not expose the abstract reasoning justifying political or ethical principles on which the community rests: it rather

exemplifies them in the concrete form they take in the institutions of this society. For instance, Raphael Hythloday illustrates how the Utopians hold precious metals in contempt with the following anecdote: “They eat and drink out of vessels of earth or glass, which make an agreeable appearance, though formed of brittle materials; while they make their chamber-pots and close-stools of gold and silver, and that not only in their public halls but in their private houses.”^{vi} The explanation of this odd behaviour is that these metals are less useful than iron, which is indispensable for technical purposes. This explanation, however, just aims at lessening the strangeness of the anecdote. It does not give the anthropological or metaphysical grounds of such an inversion of ordinary values. Then, the function of the utopian narrative viewed as a literary genre is mainly critical. It is not an invitation to imitate and put into practice a socio-political structure based on abstract principles that would have been defined in the narrative, such as justice.ⁱⁱ It is rather designed to make readers aware of good and bad political and ethical aspects of their society by means of its gap with an imaginary state organized in a different way.

B. The Critias as the only Platonic literary utopia

Now neither the *Republic* nor the *Laws* corresponds to these definitions, due to three closely related causes. First, these dialogues are not narratives of a fictitious elsewhere, and they are still less travel narratives. In the *Republic*, the city “in speech”ⁱⁱⁱ is built within a theoretical and conceptual frame, the subject of which is the ideal definition of justice. Having been defined at Book IV as “minding one’s own business and not being a busybody”^{iv}, this principle serves as the abstract root of the three “waves”, which are the conditions of possibility of the just city, exposed at Book V, as we shall see below. In the *Laws*, the laws of the city of Magnesia are inferred from ethical and political principles which have been explained in the first three books: the genuine lawgiver must establish laws making his city “free and wise and in friendship with itself”.^v In doing so, he or she respects and promotes the scale of values theoretically grounded at the very beginning of the dialogue.⁹

Secondly, and consequently, these dialogues do not offer any of the typical impressive and critical details of the utopian narrative. The city “in speech” of the *Republic* is just a sketch of constitution. In Book IV, Socrates and his interlocutors refuse to explore in detail the legislation of the city they are building: “most of the things that need legislation [i.e. the practical details of everyday life], the guardians will, no doubt, easily find for themselves.”^{vi} The same holds true for the education of these guardians – the dialogue just presents a sketch of it (*hupographên*)^{vii} – and for the whole city in general “that could never be happy otherwise than by having its outlines drawn (*diagrapseian*) by the painters who use the divine pattern.”^{viii} In the *Laws* as well, even if the legislation is much more detailed than in the *Republic*, the Athenian Stranger qualifies his discussion with his interlocutors as a “sketch (*hupographêin*) of the

laws of the constitution”.^{ix} The situation is the same in the various fields of the law mentioned in this dialogue. For instance, regarding criminal laws, the Athenian Stranger and his two interlocutors do not establish the nature and the amount of the penalties, they just give the spirit the future lawyers will have to abide by.^x It is the judge’s job to determine the nature of the sentence, “while the lawgiver, like a draughtsman, must give a sketch in outline (*hupographêin*) of cases which illustrate the rules of the written code”.^{xi} Even when they mention definite sentences,^{xii} the *Laws* do not give a full description of the concrete life of the Magnesians. They infer a consistent series of encouragements, prescriptions and sanctions from the set of ethical and political principles that have been rationally grounded in the first three books. Then, the details of the *Laws* are not of the same kind as those of the utopian narratives. Both kinds of details refer to universal principles by means of peculiar instances, but the former are the practical conclusions of a theoretical chain they help to figure out, while the latter are the anecdotal motives of a polemical and critical attack. Plato’s details and outlines correspond to the theoretical use of imagination, that is the rational creativity of the mind in search for the truth.

At last, the *Republic* and the *Laws* differ from the literary utopias by their function and scope. The evident polemical tone of these two dialogues^{xiii} is secondary to their dialectical and practical scope. They both give the theoretical background required to elaborate the intelligible model of a possible, that is an achievable, city, as we shall see below. On the contrary, from the start, the fictitious dimension of the utopian narrative establishes a gap with the real world, and gives up any perspective of theoretical analysis, in favor of criticism and polemic against the contemporary world.

Among Plato’s works, the *Critias* – the third dialogue of the trilogy including the *Republic* and the *Timaeus* – seems to be the only one that fits the standards of the utopian literary genre (Trousson 1975, p. 32). After the theoretical presentation of the principles or conditions of possibilities of the just city in the *Republic*, Socrates says at the very beginning of the *Timaeus* that he would like to hear someone “depicting in words our State contending against others in those struggles which States wage; in how proper a spirit it enters upon war, and how in its warring it exhibits qualities such as befit its education and training in its dealings with each several State whether with respect of military actions or with respect of verbal negotiations.”^{xiv} After *Timaeus*’ explanations about the nature of the universe, Critias, in the *Critias*, launches himself into an account of the population, geographical conditions, economy, and social and political organization of both Ancient Athens and Atlantis. The material conditions of the first city are advantageous to the limitation of the desires and appetites

Of its inhabitants; those of the second are beneficial to their increase. In this respect, these two descriptions are metaphorical of two opposite ways of life. For instance, to

take only one example of those suggestive details so typical of the utopian literary genre, there are elephants in Atlantis: “for there was an ample food-supply not only for all the other animals which haunt the marshes and lakes and rivers, or the mountains or the plains, but likewise also for this animal, which of its nature is the largest and most voracious.”^{xv} This voracity is precisely responsible of the moral and political fall of Atlantis.^{xvi}

Contrary to the *Critias*, the *Republic* and the *Laws* are not utopias in the literary meaning of the word. They can be at most utopias in the sense of unachievable abstract political projects. But is that the case?

III. UTOPIA AS A POLITICAL PROJECT

A. *Is the just city a mirage?*

When it refers to a theoretical and abstract political project, utopia means, as its twofold etymology shows, a perfect (“*eu*-topia”) socio-political world and, therefore, an inexistent (“*ou*-topia”) world. Many scholars describe Plato’s best cities as utopias in this twofold meaning, even if with some differences about the modalities and reasons for the inexistence of these cities. They all consider that a utopia can have no empirical translation, *de jure* or *de facto*. They can be divided into three main groups.

Of the first one, Karl Popper (1963) is the most representative member even if not the founder.^{xvii} This group acknowledges that Plato was sincerely looking to contribute to the happiness of the human kind, but blames him for promoting blindly what they consider as a liberticidal political program, empirically exemplified, according to them, by the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. They see the crimes perpetrated by these regimes as clear evidences against Plato’s projects. These commentators consider that utopias in general, and Plato’s ones in particular, are achievable *de facto* but unfeasible *de jure*. In the next section, I will discuss neither the value judgement of this interpretation nor its obvious anachronism, but its theoretical base that consists in considering Plato’s just city as a program to be put into practice.

For the second group, a utopia is unachievable both *de jure* and *de facto*, and they think Plato agrees on this point. If he describes utopias, it is only in order to underline their limits and blind alleys. For these commentators and Plato, the so-called perfection of this kind of society is based on such extravagant, ridiculous and unnatural conditions that they can be but illegitimate and impossible. This interpretation is shared by Leo Strauss and his two disciples, Allan Bloom and Stanley Rosen. According to Strauss (1964, p. 127), in the *Republic*, Plato mentions all the required conditions to establish a perfect city; but as he knows they are impossible to achieve – “because the equality of sexes and absolute communism are against nature” – he shows

indirectly that political idealism, which pretends to achieve perfection in politics, is preposterous. Through the eccentric description of a so-called utopia, Plato in fact promotes anti-utopianism, for the sake of human kind. Bloom, for whom the abolition of the family in the group of the guardians is

also unnatural in the *Republic* (1968, p. 369), sees Socrates as Aristophanes’ challenger for the prize of best poetical critic of political utopias. In order to prove the superiority of philosophical persuasion on poetical persuasion, Socrates plays the role of a dramatist-philosopher and goes deep into absurdity with the three “waves”, which are the basic conditions of the perfect city. Thus he shows that philosophy is funnier and harsher than comedy. His account of the just city, therefore, cannot be taken seriously. As to Rosen (2005, p. 244), he considers the obvious contradiction between the wisdom of the philosopher-king and the “Machiavellian” noble lie or suggestion of “killing” every citizen older than ten, as evidence of the impossibility of the philosopher-kings and then of the just city, *de facto* and *de jure* as well²²

The last group, of a lesser importance, uses the term utopia in good part, as they consider it as a dimension of every consistent political theory. According to them, a utopia must not be seen as a program to be put into practice but as an alternative speculative direction created in order to cope with contemporary problems. In this perspective, M. Scholfield (2006, p. 203) speaks of Plato’s “utopian realism”. However, although this oxymoron softens the derogatory attack involved in the word “utopia” by the previous commentators, its meaning is ambiguous, for this word still implies that Plato’s just cities are unachievable.

Despite their differences, these three interpretations share the same two grounds that the word “utopia” encapsulates: Plato’s just cities are but pipe-dreams, with no ethical or ontological consistency, and they are therefore unachievable *de jure* or *de facto*. But both this so-called lack of consistency and its implications are wrong.

B. *The city in speech is not a utopia but the only true city*

In Plato’s view, the city in speech is the only true city. The empirical cities are not real cities, as made clear in different passages of his dialogues.

In the *Republic*, Socrates tells Glaucon that the city in speech is the only one to be united, and therefore it is the only one that deserves the name of “city”.^{xviii} All the other ones, that is the cities in which we are currently living, are divided by several kinds of conflicts, the one between the rich and the poor being the most common. For lack of unity, they are not true cities.

The same holds true with the concept of political constitution or “*politeia*”: the just or best city is the only true *politeia*. For, according to Socrates, “there is one form for virtue, and an unlimited number for vice”, represented in politics by regimes like timocracy, oligarchy, democracy and tyranny.^{xix} Even if Socrates uses the term *politeia* to refer to these regimes, they are only “bad and mistaken” forms of *politeiai*, as they do not match exactly the essence of a *politeia*.^{xx} They are cities or *politeiai* only by homonymy, as Aristotle says in the *Categories*: they have the name of the thing, not its concept.^{xxi} This is confirmed by the Eleatic Stranger in the *Statesman*: “all the other constitutions we are talking about [i.e. the empirical or existing ones] we must say not to be genuine, and not really

(*ontôs*) to be constitutions at all, but to have imitated this one [i.e. the genuine constitution, based on science]”.^{xxiii} The ontological superiority of the just city over the other cities is shown here by the adverb *ontôs*: this term is usually used by Plato in the description of the intelligible Forms, as referring to their ontological fullness, contrary to sensible things that imperfectly participate in them and which are therefore less real, despite their empirical existence (Vlastos 1965). Even if there might be no Form of the just city, this adverb is an indication of its ontological superiority over the cities in which we are living.

The Athenian Stranger says more or less the same in the *Laws*. For him, democracy, oligarchy, aristocracy, monarchy and tyranny are not political regimes or constitutions (*ouk eisin politeiai*) but “arrangements of cities” (*oikêseis poleôn*), the names of which come from their predominant and ruling part. In these “arrangements of cities”, the relation between the rulers and the ruled is one of servitude.^{xxiii} Nevertheless, contrary to the *Statesman*, some empirical regimes such as those of Crete or Sparta are “true constitutions” (*ontôs politeiai*), because of their rational balance of freedom and servitude in the relations between the rulers and the ruled. What seems to be a concession to the ontological consistency of the empirical world is actually justified by the practical perspective of the passage, like in the *Republic*, as we shall see.

Ontological fullness is then the exclusive privilege of the just city in speech, which cannot be accused of inconsistency, contrary to what the word utopia implies. According to the usual definition of utopia, the two aspects – *ou*-topia and *eu*-topia – are two sides of the same coin: the perfect or ideal city (*eu*-topia) is an impossible city (*ou*-topia), precisely because of its perfection. On the contrary, in Plato’s view, these two aspects must be separated: the city in speech is not a *ou*-topia because it is an *eu*-topia, a city whose nature is in keeping with what a city must be. In other words, the “utopian readers”, focusing on the negative prefix “ou-” that dooms Plato’s city to be but a pipe-dream, adopt a perspective opposite to his: for him, the perfect city is not a ‘*ou*-topia’ because it is the only true city. The word utopia in this sense would be more relevant for the empirical cities, which are *ou*-topias precisely because they are ‘*dus*-topias’, the prefix “*dus*-” meaning “bad” in Greek. They are not true cities because they are bad cities.

To consider the city in speech as a utopia is to infer its lack of essence from its empirical inexistence or the disasters it implies, while Plato separates these two aspects: the city in speech *is*, but it does not empirically exist. This is confirmed by the fact that it is a model or a paradigm.

C. A paradigm of the city

In the *Republic* and the *Laws* as well, Plato carefully elucidates the misunderstandings about the status of the city in speech. Of course, Glaucon is right when he asks if and how the city in speech can be achieved or not,^{xxiv} for the relevance of philosophy in politics is at stake in this question (Schofield 2006, pp. 239-240), and in a broader extent, the relevance of rationality and theoretical

argumentation in a field in which the many, like Thrasymachus,^{xxv} consider the facts as the standards of every values and actions. But Glaucon’s question – which is shared by some scholars (for instance Annas 1981, pp. 185 sq.) – also has its limits, for it overlooks the ontological status of the just city and its practical function, and the nature of Plato’s political rationality. For to ask if and how the city in speech can be achieved implies to see Socrates as setting forth a political platform to be put into practice, as if he were an ordinary political speaker and leader, and it supposes an insuperable gap between theory and practice. Now these are precisely the ideas Plato rejects when he shows that the city in speech is a model or a paradigm, as made clear by many scholars (Burnyeat 2000, p. 298. Morrison 2007, pp. 234-235. Pradeau 2009, pp. 171 sq.)

As a matter of fact, Socrates says he has “create[d] in words the pattern (*paradeigma*) of a good state”, like a painter who “draws a pattern (*paradeigma*) of what the most beautiful human being would be like and renders everything in the picture adequately but cannot prove that it’s also possible that such a man come into being”.^{xxvi} He confirms later that the city “is a pattern (*paradeigma*) laid up in heaven for the man who wants to see and found a city within himself on the basis of what he sees”.^{xxvii} In the *Laws* too, referring to the most unified city in which everything is communal, the Athenian Stranger states: “Wherefore one should not look elsewhere for a model (*paradeigma*) constitution, but hold fast to this one, and with all one’s power seek the constitution that is as like to it as possible”.^{xxviii}

By nature, a theoretical model cannot be reached empirically. The model of a city is not a city, just like the concept of a dog does not bark. The empirical realization of a model can be but an approximation of it, it can never reach the model itself: the just man is not similar to justice itself, he just looks like it and participates in it.^{xxix} The fact that the just man and justice cannot “come into being”, or that the city “cannot be realized in accordance with our words”^{xxx}, derives from their very natures as models or paradigms. For, as Socrates and the Athenian Stranger acknowledge, the truth of facts is inferior to the truth of speech:^{xxxi} facts always contains a part of inescapable necessity and contingency that one must accept.

However, this does not lessen the value and function of the paradigm, nor those of the philosophical investigation at its source.^{xxxii} A model is a practical and axiological norm. As it gives, as we have seen, the very nature of the thing, a paradigm aims at guiding the empirical achievement of the thing of which it is the model, as it provides its theoretical conditions of possibility. It also serves as a standard for the evaluation of what has been realized in keeping with it, according to the degree of approximation. For instance, the portraits of the just man and of the unjust man enable us to know that “the man who is most like them will have the portion most like theirs”.^{xxxiii} The discrepancy between the model and what is achieved in keeping with it is inevitable, whatever the quality of the approximation. But this discrepancy is not an insuperable distance, since the nature

of the model is to show the good direction to be followed in practice.

Consequently, to infer, most often in a reproachful tone, that the just city cannot exist because of its paradigmatic dimension, and to characterize it as a utopia (*ou-topia*) is to be blind to the ontological superiority of the city in speech, to what a paradigm is and to Socrates' arguments about the relation between the model and the things that are built in accordance with it (Davis 1964, p. 397). It is precisely this "utopian reading" that simultaneously establishes and deplores the gap between theory and practice that makes it impossible to pass from the former to the latter. On the contrary, the function and the nature of a paradigm as a conceptual elaboration in speech consist in establishing their hierarchical and intelligible continuity – "it is the nature of acting to attain *less truth than speaking*"^{xxxiv} – and in enabling one to act accordingly.

This paradigmatic status and function of the city in speech, however, is not enough to assure that its approximations are realizable, nor to totally rid it of the charge of utopia. One must prove besides that the fundamental condition of achievement of the paradigm is realizable itself, at least logically; that it makes sense to propel human action in its direction; and that such a movement can take place in the empirical cities where we live.

IV. A FEASIBLE CITY

The most precise arguments in favor of the feasibility of a city in keeping with the paradigmatic just city are located in two passages of the *Republic*: in the text known as the "three waves" at Book V; and indirectly at Book VIII with the intermediate psycho-political types between the aristocratic one and the tyrannical one. These two passages also define Plato's conception of political rationality.

A. The three "waves": the best and the feasible

To justify the actual possibility of an approximation of the just city requires two things. First, it must be proved that this approximation can logically appear, that its condition of possibility itself is possible. Secondly, it must be explained that living in such a regime is both desirable and reachable by human means.

Logically, these two things should be mentioned in that precise order. For would it not be useless to elaborate a perfect city without being sure from the start that it is reachable? To follow the reverse order would amount to building castles in the air, and acknowledging that those who blame Plato's utopianism are right. Now in the text known as the "three waves", Socrates precisely follows the reverse order. The first two waves deal with the way of life in the just regime, the second – the communism of wives and children – showing more specifically that it is the best way of life. It is only in the third wave that Socrates mentions the condition of possibility of the second wave and of the whole just regime. Why does Socrates follow this reverse order that might jeopardize the credibility of his political project?

The explanation is to be found in the practical perspective of this text, which is designed to avoid both the political quietism and the cynicism. As a matter of fact, according to Socrates, the ultimate condition of possibility of a city in keeping with the just city is the apparition of a genuine philosopher in the political sphere. This event is possible but its probability is very low: genuine philosophers are "few" (499 B4); and when one child gifted with the philosophical character appears in a family of political influence, he is doomed to the corruption that occurs almost inevitably in this kind of family (502 A8-B1). Exceptions can be found, logically, if one adopts the perspective of "the totality of time" (502 B1): in other words, they are very rare. The apparition of the just city, if not impossible, is difficult (499d4-7; 502c5-8).

Thus, as Socrates has to prove the realizability of the just city in order not to be considered as a daydreamer and his words as "mere prayers" (499 C4-5) or nonsense, he has no other alternative than to present the rareness of the philosopher after the arguments showing that this city is the best and the most desirable one. To begin with the low probability of the city would prevent his following arguments about its beauty from being received, and it would be discouraging also for those who would be ready to strive to come closer to it. For lack of an underlying desire for a better world, the purely theoretical rationality, which assures here the logical possibility of the city but acknowledges its low probability, is not enough to prompt people to act in favor of it. The meaning of this passage is clear: the foundation of political action consists in a rational belief in the possibility and utility of political action itself.

For this very reason, the whole passage of the three waves is pervaded by mentions of the confidence Socrates' interlocutors can have in his arguments, and of how far they can trust him. Socrates himself is reluctant to talk about the way of life of the guardians: he fears that his speech might "admit of many doubts (apistias). For it could be doubted that (apistoi'tan) the things said are possible; and even if, in the best possible conditions, they could come into being, that they would be what is best will also be doubted (apistèsetai). So that is why there is

a certain hesitation about getting involved in it, for fear that the argument might seem to be a prayer" (450 C6-D2). Just after, he says that he is himself "in doubt (*apistounta*)" (450 E1). All these precautions are a way of stimulating the curiosity of his interlocutors, and of softening in advance the distrust his original speech might provoke. Glaucon assures him: "your audience will not be hard-hearted, or distrustful (*apistoi*), or ill-willed" (450 D3-4). Socrates can talk: Glaucon grants him the required trust to accept the seriousness of the three waves that are just ready to break.

The first wave (451 B-457 C) deals with the common education of men and women, and the similarity of the political functions they can hold in the just city. Socrates shows first that such a reform is possible (452 E-456 C), and then that it is the best (456 C-457 C). The first step is much longer than the second one because its persuasive function is more important. As a matter of fact, Socrates has to overcome the prejudice of those who find it ridiculous and

laughable that women might be practicing naked at the gymnasium, like men do. According to Socrates, such a prejudice is but the result of ignorance, as was the case with the Greeks in the past: they laughed at the Barbarians because they practiced naked, but they adopted this custom later as they eventually understood its advantages (451 D-452 E). With this concrete example of cultural relativism and its limits, Socrates wants to underline how fragile the prejudice he wants to destroy is, in order to prove analogically that his own proposition is possible and feasible: the prejudice of men against women is analogically similar with the prejudice of the Greeks against the Barbarians. And as the Greeks eventually followed a custom they had seen as barbarian at first sight, it is reasonable to think that men can eventually accept that women might be their equals. Because he argues that the nature of woman and the nature of man are the same if we see them from the standpoint of the required standard for political functions, that is intelligence, Socrates can prove that this prejudice is but ignorance. The similarity of nature allows the similarity of functions, and hence the similarity of the education needed for holding these functions: the women can practice naked at the gymnasium (456 B 8-10). The ridiculous ones, consequently, are not those one would have thought at first, and such a change is good for the desirability of this first wave, as no one wants to be considered as an ignorant. After that, it is not very difficult for Socrates to show that his reform is the best for the city. The important thing in this wave is not simply the refutation of a wrong thesis but the denunciation of a prejudice, of a belief that prevents walking toward the just city, and its replacement by another belief, which is desirable, rational, feasible, and helpful to come closer to the best city.

Things are not so easy with the second wave, which prescribes that “all women [should] belong to all these men in common, and no woman [should] be living privately with any man. And the children, in their turn, will be common, and neither will a parent know his own off-spring, nor a child his parent” (V, 457 C10-D3). Contrary to the first wave, it is hard, not to say impossible, to reduce this wave to mere cultural or social prejudice: this reform seems to go against a sort of natural affective law. That is why Glaucon sees this wave as “far bigger than the other so far as concerns doubt both as to its possibility and its benefits” (V, 457 D4-5). For this reason, it is part of Socrates’ strategy to pretend that only the realization of this reform is problematical (457 D 6-9), as if it were obviously desirable and therefore possible, while it is its desirability which is precisely problematical at first sight. As Glaucon urges him, Socrates eventually accepts to show how very beneficial and desirable it would be, supposing it were achieved (458 B 1-7). He first convinces his audience of its political value and utility – it is helpful for the unity of the city as it creates an affective community – in order to show how desirable it is. And thus, as the difference between the paradigm and its approximations has shown, what is helpful for the unity of the city is politically good even if it does not take the form of the community of women and children strictly speaking.

After it has been labeled desirable, the second wave is now labeled possible.

The desire to see the realization of the just city depends on the reasons one has to believe in its possibility and its perfection. That is why Socrates deals with these two aspects – desirability and realizability – in the first two waves, even if he does not follow exactly the same order in both cases. This is the only way for him to design a desirable political perspective, before dealing with the last condition which, though necessary, might make the whole project more fragile, because of its low probability. Socrates follows this order – the first two waves first, and then their condition of possibility in the third wave – in order to produce a rational persuasion of the imagination, and good reasons to hope and act in favor of an approximation of the paradigm (Burnyeat 2000, p. 308). Although the low probability of the apparition of a philosopher-king reduces the possibility of approximating the paradigm, his theoretical possibility and the desirability of the whole paradigm, supported by the conviction and the impulse of the imagination awakened by the first two waves, can prompt people to act here and now in favor of it, or at least in order not to wander off the path to it. That is what we can see in the *Republic*, Book VIII.

B. Reforms for here and now

Despite the lack of a philosopher-king or a philosopher-queen, and the increasing corruption undermining the empirical political regimes and their corresponding citizens, as described in the *Republic*, Books VIII and IX, Plato considers men can avoid sinking into political quietism or cynicism. In other words, while we are waiting for an improbable but still possible philosopher-king, Plato promotes movements toward his best city, which is called the aristocracy, by preventing movements toward the worst city, that is the tyranny.

In order to make this possible, he proposes reachable actions to men and women. Such is the function of the intermediate steps between aristocracy and tyranny. They provide some concrete suggestions. For instance, in order to slow down the passage from timocracy to oligarchy, and to prevent the rich making the poor even poorer by granting them loans with interest, Plato suggests a law prescribing “that most voluntary contracts [should] be made at the contractor’s own risks”.^{xxxv} In the democratic regime, he identifies a destructive permissiveness, that must be fought against with firmness in order to slow down the degeneration of the cities.⁴¹

Contrary to the claims of the “utopian readers”, who introduce an anachronistic and insuperable break between theory and practice, Plato’s just city is not supposed to appear *ex nihilo*, for it would be unachievable indeed (Pradeau 2009, p. 172). Far from this, Plato rather suggests to start from the current political context to make reforms towards the paradigm, or at least to slow down the degeneration of the empirical regimes.

V. CONCLUSION

The city in speech, therefore, is not a utopia. The “utopian readers” doom this city to be unachievable, and blame Plato for mistakes they make themselves. Plato’s arguments in favor of the realizability of the city are designed to stimulate endeavours in the existing cities for a better, or at least a less bad, civic life. These arguments address the human barriers rather than the metaphysical bounds that prevent the realization of the just city (Burnyeat 2000). They show also that the first step toward it consists in a new conception of political rationality, that gives room to the creative dimension of imagination when it is guided by reason.

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VII. NOTES

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²My translation.

³My translation.

⁴ *Utopia*. Sir T. More [1516]. Retrieved March 4, 2010, from *The Project Gutenberg eBook*, H. Morley (ed.), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2130/2130-h/2130-h.htm>

⁵ Mostly in the case of Thomas More who, despite appearances, does not seem to agree with many habits of the Utopians (Logan, 1983).

⁶ *Rep.* II, 369 A5-6.

⁷ *Rep.* IV, 433 A8 - B1.

⁸ *Laws* III, 693 B3-4 et 701 D7-9.

⁹ *Laws* I, 625 C - 632 D.

¹⁰ *Rep.* IV, 425 C10-E2.

¹¹ *Rep.* VI, 504 D4.

¹² *Rep.* VI, 500 E2-4. See also VIII, 548 C9-D4.

¹³ *Laws* V, 734 E5-6. The idea is the same at 737 D6-8; VI, 768 C3-D7, and more broadly 768 C-771 A.

¹⁴ *Laws* XI, 934 B3-6.

¹⁵ *Laws* XI, 934 B7-C2.

¹⁶ See for instance VI, 774 A1-8 and IX, 877 B6-7.

¹⁷For instance the portrait of democracy (*Rep.* VIII, 555 B-558 C) and the limitations on trade (*Laws* VIII, 847 B-850 A; XI, 916 D-921 D) clearly attacks Athens.

¹⁸*Tim.* 19 C 3-7.

¹⁹*Crit.* 114 E8-115 A3.

²⁰*Crit.* 121 A7- C5.

²¹About this trend of thinking, see Lane, M. (2001), *Plato's Progeny. How Socrates and Plato Still Captivate the Modern Mind*. London: Duckworth.

²²Socrates does not say "to kill" but "to send out to the country all those in the city who happen to be older than ten" at the moment of its foundation, *Rep.* VII, 541 A1.

²³*Rep.* IV, 422 E3-9.

²⁴*Rep.* IV, 445 C5-6.

²⁴*Rep.* V, 449 A2-3.

²⁵*Cat.* 1 A1-2.

²⁶*Stat.* 293 E2-5.

²⁷*Laws* IV, 712 E9-713 A2.

²⁸*Rep.* V, 471 C4-472 B2.

²⁹*Rep.* I, 343 C1-344 C4.

³⁰*Rep.* V, 472 D4-E2.

³¹*Rep.* IX, 592 B1-2.

³²*Laws* V, 739 E1-3.

³³*Rep.* V, 472 B6-C3. See also the previous quotation from the *Laws* for the idea of likeness.

³⁴*Rep.* V, 472 D2; E3-4.

³⁵*Rep.* V, 473 A1-4; *Laws* V, 745 E7-746 D2.

³⁶*Rep.* V, 472 E3-5.

³⁷*Rep.* V, 472 C9-D1.

³⁸*Rep.* V, 473 A1-2. Italics are mine.

³⁹*Rep.* VIII, 556 A9-B5.

⁴⁰*Rep.* VIII, 558 A5-6.