

Safe for Philosophy?

Somebody once said that the purpose of Plato's political thought was to make the world safe for philosophy, i.e., the death of Socrates is not just dramatic, it is *the* problem. (For Plato? Or Plato as synecdoche of philosophy writ large, recalling Whitehead's "series of footnotes to Plato"?) Growing up in the 70s and 80s, this thought seemed rather overheated to me.

Looking back, I wonder whether my youthful normal is more truly seen as a time of an odd complacency, at least in the US, for upper middleclass academics and their cossetted offspring. Sure, there were lots of worries. Things were very political, demonstrative, even. In hindsight, however, the children of the left/'68 were somewhat uncritically secure in their convictions. Without doubt, their positions on the issues of the day [no war in Vietnam, fewer nukes, women's "lib," civil rights, the environment, natural foods, usw., many beliefs that have become canonical] were simply right. But such positions were also understood to be issues in the sense that they were understood to be "counter" to something, the "establishment." Or, on the other hand, actual communism, with guard dogs, watch towers, and shootings, hippie dippy Marxism notwithstanding. There were a lot of possible pins on the map, and so the field of argument seemed wider, somehow. Rephrased, nobody wanted to live in Soviet Moscow but its very existence, counterpoised with, for example, Des Moines, Iowa, created a kind of intellectual space in which one might discuss, say, Solzhenitsyn, and be comfortably uncertain.

Strange as it sounds today, being uncertain didn't seem to be a bad thing, back then. Indeed, many academics cultivated uncertainty as a personal style, in the form of playful irony. Not just leaving people unsure of where you stood, but actively sowing the seeds of doubt, now seems like a luxury from another age, like turtle soup and wormy chestnut paneling. Naughty. The death of metanarratives was proclaimed, too. Not incidentally, those were the salad days of the expanding university, a high degree of at least middleclass academic prosperity, and so forth.

In the US at large, we now see that those 70s and 80s were the waning days of what my friend Schlegel the economic historian calls the associationalist economy. My students, most in their mid 20s, have no real understanding that in the years after WWII, the US established an economy of relatively high wages and various forms of civic cohesion, for a relatively broad middle class, not least in the University. It's not a world they have known, and it didn't last forever, of course, but the lineaments of the construction and decline of that economy are coming into focus now.

So, the salad days passed for US academics, and things tightened, in all sorts of ways. There seemed less space to be "free to be, you and me" as I grew up singing. Really. Wow. Of course, there was more space to be "me" understood as a non-cis gender identity, which went from camp to marriage (marriage? that institution that seemed, in some circles, doomed?) equality with blinding speed. But I digress. Also, marijuana and widespread gambling. Otherwise, however, things tightened in the North Atlantic middle classes that form the backbone of the University. (Things tightened for the lower classes, too.) Jobs. Party lines. Prospects, unless one catapulted into substantial wealth, which was glaringly possible, even celebrated. Moguls became celebrities while the rest of us submitted to the latest dictats from HR, most moral. And so the new normal is establishing its parameters, enforcing the terms of

discourse. We are in a sort of Cromwellian phase, establishing the new model workforce, also in the University.

Cromwell, of course, has a point. Morals matter. Socrates was charged with “corrupting the youth,” that is, poisoning the polity by betraying/precluding/perverting its future. And so he was executed. Frankly, I might kill somebody for that, too, if I were sufficiently convinced. More generally, any state (as it perceives itself) must protect itself from threats (as it perceives them), or else it would not survive long. Foreign troops are the easy example, but there are other threats to a regime. Ideologues, viruses, witches, subversive peoples (Jews, Blacks, helots, rednecks, whatever) . . . and maybe philosophers on those rare occasions when enough people listen. Time to castrate Abelard. (Speaking of symbolism, as a response to corrupting the youth, a genetic threat, castration is so fitting – much better than hemlock. But Socrates was quite old, so castration would have been pretty pointless.)

Abelard recalls us to the University, which was often considered a place – if not an entire republic, at least a walled garden – held safe for philosophy. The University, it was believed by some (me), created a space in which politics could be subordinated to ideas. It’s easy to mock, to note the limits, breaches and hypocrisies, of course, and I’ve done a fair amount of that, too. But it’s the ideal that is interesting me now. However much that ideal was achieved, more or less, in some times and places, the ideal itself now seems largely gone. If the University was some kind of solution to the problem of how to live as an intellectual, it no longer seems to be, or is at best a very compromised solution.

Which is not to say that academic life is not privileged and even pleasant – in many ways it is both. And there is work to be done. In the sciences one can still solve problems, increasingly practical, “innovation.” In the “critical” social sciences and the humanities, one can still advocate. And surely, we need new drugs and social improvements, and even the legitimization of the mandarin class, with its comforts. Across the university, however, knowledge is understood in terms of service, that is, ethically. There simply is no money, in this wealthiest of all societies, for idle speculation. Again, the Puritan suspicion of idleness, sloth, en route to luxury. There might be dancing, an earlier age would say. None of this encourages, much less establishes a space for, thinking as an adventure, a play, a meditation on failings, an affair with the truth, or better still, wonderous confusion en route, maybe, to understanding.

Instead, the University serves the regime, hence ethos, which of course needs to be enforced. The UNC Chapel Hill history department webpage, which I somewhat randomly ran across the other day, provides a perfectly ordinary example:

“Though the History Department uses the name Pauli Murray Hall for our building, on official maps you will find it as Hamilton Hall. Joseph Grégoire de Roulhac Hamilton’s intellectually *dishonest historical* and archival work *promoted* white supremacy. In contrast, Pauli Murray *marshaled unassailable* evidence and analysis *in the service of racial and gender equality*. In July 2020, all of the departments housed . . . “ [emphasis supplied]

Evidently, the academic discipline of history is not understood to be a species of philosophy, but, to use the old language, rhetoric. The academic persuades especially the youth to preordained

ends; deviation is to be punished. Philosophy is professionalized and becomes, literally, sophistry. Protagoras is defeated by Socrates only in dialog, a literary form, and some classrooms, not on the streets of Athens or anywhere else. And, it generally will be claimed by responsible people, it was always thus. The Hamilton for whom the UNC history building was named wasn't a thinker, either, it is said, but also an advocate – for the evil positions held by an evil regime. Presuming Hamilton's political and personal mendacity, the bigger truth is either you are with us or against us, even in the University.

Plato ends the Republic by pointing out that the vision offered therein is impossible, not least because the Philosopher does not want to be king. I now think (took me forty years to understand?) that Plato is not only saying something psychological and epistemological, but something deeply social, human, and in a sense, anti-philosophical. No place can be “made safe” for philosophy, or not for long, because places require rules, decisions, a degree of certainty, not the free play of thought, which turns upon itself in wondrous confusion. How can you rest community – livelihood, the aged, and especially children? – on something so ephemeral as speculation? You cannot, because thought doesn't converge. It criticizes, plays, dances, dreams, subsides when the wine is enough. A man on an adventure who has lost his way, as Musil says. Politics requires sterner stuff. Lust secures the next generation, biologically, and similar dark drives – power, fear, the fierceness of parents – secure the next generation politically. Plato knows that the republic of ideas is literally a contradiction in terms. Or, to put it in much more contemporary language, Plato knows that the Borg wins, has to win, most of the time, or else society would not function.

Insofar as this is so, then Western political philosophy was in some sense over even as it began. But as usual with Plato, there is more: political thought does happen, but happens vis-à-vis a world as imagined, and such imaginings are real, I can see them – and here we are close to what I think of as Plato's natural theology, maybe mine. At any rate, political thought would be far poorer without the dream of a republic safe for philosophy, like law that could not imagine justice. And to finish on the mundane: despite everything, sometime thinking happens, even in the University. But not in a safe space.