

PLATO'S CRITIQUE OF DEMOCRACY AND HIS CONCEPTION OF EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY*

by

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ABSTRACT: In the history of the interpretation of Plato's political thought, the topic of Plato's criticism of democracy has dominated over his proposal of general and obligatory education (especially literacy) of the *demos*. Why should we think that the critical aspect is more important than the constructive one? The following paper seeks to demonstrate that these two themes of Plato's political philosophy are complementary and that awareness of their close interconnection is conducive to our understanding of the reason for, and aims of, Plato's criticism of democracy as exercised in Athens in the 4th century BC. These arguments are constituted by such main questions as: What does the word *demokratia* mean to Plato? Why is the quality of laws essential to his description of a "correct regime" (*orthe politeia*)? Why does a citizen of the law-abiding city of Magnesia in the *Laws* have to be a reader? Why did Aristotle associate Plato's name with the utopian ideas presented in the *Republic*, not with the idea of general education as expressed in the *Laws*?

INTRODUCTION

Criticism of democracy and education for democracy may be, but not necessarily are, mutually exclusive. The criticism may be a constructive element of the so-called deliberative democracy which derives its theoretical inspiration mainly from Jürgen HABERMAS' concept of "critical rationality"¹. It is beyond doubt that good civic education, that is one which stimulates the citizens' sense of civic and political responsibility, is a *condicio sine qua non* of such a democracy. But it remains a question as to whether without citizens who understand their rights and duties democracy exists at all. It is even more difficult to ascertain whether Plato criticised his contemporary democracy as a concerned beneficiary of a democratic element and democratic culture, or – as Karl POPPER recognised, with

* I am very grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their useful critical comments on an earlier version of this paper.

¹ More in SCHOFIELD 2006: 55–59, with a discussion of Peter EUBEN's position that Socratic dialogues reflect the "Habermasian dimension" (EUBEN 1994, 1996). Cf. WALLACH 2001: 400–410, for continuity and discontinuity between RAWLS' and HABERMAS' "deliberative democracy" and Plato's political art.