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# 1. Recovering the classical foundations of political anthropology

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Then we must refer to those who pursue the individual thing that exists in itself as lovers not of belief but wisdom. (Plato, Republic V, 480A)

## INTRODUCTION: THE STAKE OF POLITICAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

The world in which we live is increasingly dominated by economics. Everything around us – as conveyed by media, politicians and experts – seems to depend on economic considerations. Even politics, it is now considered as almost an axiom, is fundamentally about decisions concerning budget. Sociology, the discipline that came into being to study the specific features of the modern world, is waging a seemingly ultimate battle against the dominance of economics, once political science all but resigned itself to accepting rational choice. Sociology proclaims that the ultimate foundations of human life are *social*. The argument, properly understood, still has a strong appeal; however, sociology committed three fatal errors that strongly undermined its position. To begin with, through the abstract universalism of structural-functionalism, going back to Durkheim, it reified ‘society’ into an empty abstraction. Second, through its focus on critique, it further cut itself off from the central, joyful, life-affirming aspects of daily human reality, inculcating an eye that is obsessed with negativity, searching everywhere for signs of oppression, repression, discontent and suffering, and thus fails even to consider the timeless wisdom of human existence that such an attitude only proliferates what it purportedly tries to remedy. Finally, with social constructivism it assumed a terminology that rendered it unable to properly tackle the problems posed by the technological transformation of the very conditions of human existence.

In contrast to these positions, this chapter argues that such foundations are *anthropological*, even *political-anthropological*. From this perspective political anthropology is not simply a sub-discipline of politics or anthropology, or an interdisciplinary field in between these disciplines. Rather, it performs a foundational role. This idea goes against both modernist and post-modern epistemology. Modernist epistemology would attribute such foundations to economics, a claim that was mediated by the Kantian assumption of rationality as an anthropological constant. Post-modern epistemology opposes the very idea of such foundations – a position which from the perspective of political anthropology belongs to the problem itself, and offers no way out.

However, the stake of political anthropology is not merely epistemological, but implies a radical (in the original etymological sense) problematisation of modernity; a

recognition of the depth of its crisis. Political anthropology does not simply offer a return to the basic anthropological foundations of human life, but also claims to diagnose modernity at its very core. It argues that modernity was not simply about knowledge and well-being; rather, it was a specifically *political* project;<sup>1</sup> and the driving force of this project was a certain 'humanist' vision of the world – a vision that pretended to be all-encompassing, emancipating and empowering everyone, but which rather profoundly uprooted and disempowered almost every living being (not only humans) on the planet.

These claims define an agenda that certainly cannot be taken up within the limits of a handbook entry. However, they go at the heart of what political anthropology is promising to be about and explain the return to classical foundations this chapter advocates. So – before turning to the concrete arguments – a few clarifying comments must be offered.

To begin with, starting with 'crisis', we have to make sure not to limit the scope of political anthropology to daily, routine-like and ordinary politics. Quite on the contrary; the need to incorporate out-of-ordinary conditions, or situations of crisis, was central to the works of John Maynard Keynes (1964) and Max Weber, the most important – and much misunderstood – classic figures of economics and sociology. They both recognised that a 'general theory' that fails to incorporate situations of crisis has very limited value, and were close to proposing that, instead of an elusive search for such theorising, one should start with the *concrete* or the *given* and approach from there the generalisable *problem* of its dissolution. From such perspective of valorising the concrete, and instead of talking about 'crises' of modernity, modernity itself must be understood as a situation of crisis: the modern world, since the Enlightenment, but to a considerable extent since the Reformation, is nothing else but the crisis of European civilisation. *This* is our condition, our reality, a condition that places in danger our very existence as humans; and so facing this condition is the starting point of any meaningful undertaking.

Modernity as crisis also implies that modern thought, on its own, is incapable of facing itself, its own crisis, itself *as* crisis. A proper analysis of the modern condition requires a set of concepts derived from outside the modernist epistemological framework (see Argyrou 2013). Such distance can be established in two directions: in space and in time. In space, this means relying on the experience of non-modern, non-European societies; in time, it implies the fundamental significance of even distant historical experiences. These directions are anthropological, and in two senses: in the contemporary sense of social and cultural anthropology, originally concerned with the experience of non-modern, non-European societies; and in the sense of classical philosophy, comparative mythology and archaeology, all posing fundamental questions about what it means to be human.

The modern world is in permanent crisis, *is* permanent crisis; and it does not only directly challenge our very being humans, but also generated an extremely particular situation in which the reality of the real itself has become problematic. How to handle a reality that has ceased to be real? What does it mean that the everyday reality in which we all live is no longer really real? These are extremely vexing, troublesome, impossible questions. Much of the best in thinking, and culture in general, over the past century represents an attempt to take seriously and face this challenge: from

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche through to Heidegger, Auden and Beckett, up to Gregory Bateson and Alfred Gell, which again cannot be reviewed here. However, two things are certain about this situation. First, the main epistemological frameworks of modernity, positivism, critique and (social) constructivism are constitutionally unable even to approach and understand these questions, not to mention say something meaningful; they either ignore or trivialise them (see Argyrou 2013, Boland 2019). Second, discussing the problem requires an anthropological perspective, and in all the different meanings of the term.

However, this anthropological perspective must also be political. This is because modernity, including the idea of a *political* economy – something that was inconceivable for classical thought – was an explicit political project (about this, see for example Hirschman 1977). It is this emancipatory political project that ended up in the current situation of permanent crisis and utter disempowerment.

## MODERN POLITICISED HUMANISM: ASPECTS OF A DIAGNOSIS

The project of politicised humanism goes back at least to the arrival of the Byzantine *dotti* in Renaissance Italy in the 15th century (Szakolczai 2013a) – who derailed the Renaissance by emptying its very essence, literally provoking the Reformation – and continued by the Enlightenment and then the various projects of modernity. It has two, closely connected aspects, one positive and one negative. Positively, it is based on a series of promises about the future, offering generalised well-being, empowerment through education and political participation and emancipatory freedom – all of which, however, require sacrifices in the immediate present. The direct mobilising force and concrete substance of such promises, however, was negative. The project was oriented against three concrete targets: Nature, God and Tradition. In the name of science and technology politicised humanism declared war against Nature, with the aim to pacify wild natural forces, subjugating them to human control; a war against God, or the divine, and all its servants, in the name of enlightening and liberating mankind from the slavery of such (supposedly imagined) powers; and a war against Tradition and all its political, social and cultural supporters, again in the name of enlightening and liberation. In each case, a radical break and new start was promised, embodied in the central slogan and driving force of Revolution.

A comprehensive and sober analysis of these promises is much on the agenda today; there is hardly any problem more worthwhile to discuss. This chapter can only offer a starting hint for such a discussion by recognising a current, widespread malaise of powerlessness, a direct outcome of the humanist project, and alongside the dimensions where empowering was promised. We as human beings, alone and together as members of any political community, are currently radically disempowered in face of three anonymous forces set in motion, like a Jinn liberated from its bottle, by the project of politicised humanism. The first of these are ‘market forces’, supposedly objective and irresistible, escaping the control of any political entity and – through globalisation – increasingly and paradoxically dictating the agenda of human existence: the more limits are removed from ‘freedom’, the more most of us are tied down by the invisible cords of generalised limitlessness. The second is technology, again supposedly only serving

the interests of mankind, but increasingly showing the same independence of any human control as market forces.

Most social scientists today agree that the first development is a problem; criticising the capitalistic economy was always in intellectual fashion. The second diagnosis, the problematisation of technology, is less widely shared, as belief in the fundamentally beneficial aspects of technological progress is deeply entrenched, and particularly so among Marxists. The third basic diagnosis of disempowerment, while being just as fundamental, is even more controversial as it directly tackles contemporary democracy and the ideal of the public sphere: the crisis of modernity not only has economic and technological aspects, but also includes a genuine crisis of democracy – not simply a democratic deficit, to be solved by further democratisation, but a crisis *of* democracy, as we know it, due in particular to the public sphere. This crisis and its disempowering aspects are particularly clear as concerns media power. Markets, technology and the media within the democratic public sphere are the three broad, external, impersonal forces that increasingly dominate our lives, constituting the background of daily existence, much more threatening than worries about terrorism, showing the emptiness of humanist promises at their very core. This is the situation we must analyse; and the tools of political anthropology seem to be tailor-made for such purposes, especially by considering Plato as the first political anthropologist, and in particular through his claim concerning the inner essence of the indestructible soul.

## THE RETURN TO ANTHROPOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

The idea that the understanding of modernity must be placed on anthropological foundations goes back to classics of modern thought. Max Weber incorporated anthropological aspects into his work, in particular in his studies of religious charisma, while Émile Durkheim directly championed an anthropological foundation for sociology. However, this anthropological foundation was highly problematic. Durkheim was dogmatic in his thinking, adhering to an extreme version of positivism, neo-Kantianism and Enlightenment evolutionism, and also most authoritarian. His designated heir, Marcel Mauss, noticed this early on, but for various reasons could not stand up against the commanding figure of his second father.

Durkheim's most important contemporaries were directly challenging his ideas and positions; but instead of engaging in a dialogue Durkheim rather used his academic power to silence them – a strategy continued by his heirs. Such contemporaries included: Arnold van Gennep (1981), who in his *Rites de Passage* introduced the idea of 'liminality'; Gabriel Tarde, who suggested the centrality of the term 'imitation', thus re-directing sociology to Platonic foundations, close to the ideas of Alexis de Tocqueville; or Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1975) and his focus of participation, away from Durkheim's neo-Kantian concept 'collective representations'. But even Marcel Mauss (2002) himself, whose ideas about the importance of praying (theme of his unfinished dissertation) and gift giving contrasted with the Durkheimian focus on rituals of sacrifice, this latter being an idea which Mauss still supported with his early works.

These concerns and concepts, pushed to the margins of anthropology and sociology, reappeared only from about 1970 onwards. The work of van Gennep on rites of

passage and liminality was continued by Victor Turner (1967, 1969, 1985). 'Imitation' became promoted by René Girard (1972, 1978, 1982), who recognised, through studying 19th-century French novels (Girard 1961), that the modern idea of 'autonomous desire' is a romantic illusion, and who developed, against Freud, a theory of 'mimetic desire'. The ideas about participation were taken up by Colin Turnbull (1968, 1973) in his classic studies of hunter-gatherers (see also Elias 1987).

A similar fate happened to two further concepts, also proposed by trained anthropologists who should have played a dominant role in the new discipline, but instead became marginal, maverick figures. These are the 'trickster', coined by Paul Radin (1972), and 'schismogenesis', invented by Gregory Bateson (1958, 1972; see also Horvath and Thomassen 2008). Radin was one of the first PhD students of Franz Boas, (re-)founder of American anthropology. While destined to become, like Boas's other students, a founding professor of an anthropology department in the US, he never gained a stable university position, and did not even publish his work introducing the trickster until the book appeared, under the instigation of Károly Kerényi, in 1956. Bateson, on the other hand, was one of the first students studying for a PhD in anthropology in Cambridge, advised among others by Radcliffe-Brown, Durkheim's main follower in the UK, and Bronisław Malinowski. However, during his fieldwork in Papua New Guinea Bateson realised that the structural-functionalist theories of his teachers proved useless in explaining what was going on, in social life just as in rituals. Thus, relying on the knowledge he gained about Plato in Cambridge – centre for Plato scholarship for centuries, also seat of the 'Cambridge ritualists' who combined studying Plato with analysing rituals collected by anthropologists – he developed his own conceptual arsenal, focusing on ethos, *eidos*, and schismogenesis. Thus, paradoxically, but perhaps not surprisingly given the inherent paradoxes of modernity, the political anthropological foundations of analysing the modern world must be built on the ideas of maverick anthropologists (see Szokolczai and Thomassen (2019) for more detail).

## FOUNDATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

The first, and arguably most important, of these concepts is liminality.<sup>2</sup> Liminality helps capture and analyse, with a degree of analytical rigour, what happens under ephemeral and fluid conditions of transition, or the dissolution of the given.<sup>3</sup> Rites of passage are those rituals that assist the passage of a group of individuals, or an entire community, through major turning points in life: birth and death, adulthood and marriage, illness or other types of crises, or simply the rhythm of seasons. They have three phases: rites of separation; the rite itself, a performance or testing; and the rites of re-aggregation. The main liminal moment is the middle stage, but each of the three phases is liminal in its own way. Taking as an example the initiation rites as performed in small communities, in the rites of separation the initiands are removed from their families and placed in a hut at the border of the village where they are preparing for the performance. There they undergo various modes of deprivation, including food, drink, sex, clothing and shelter. In the middle phase they must demonstrate, openly, in front of the entire community, that they are ready to become full adult members of the community. The rites of re-aggregation celebrate the successful passing with a feast.

During such a ritual, however, not only the initiands are separated from their normal surroundings; the entire community as well enters a suspended state, as if a state of emergency, where normal structures no longer function and some activities are prohibited (in particular sexual relations and the consumption of alcoholic drinks). Normal order is only restored after the feast – with celebrations easily becoming ‘disorderly’. Thus, such rituals can only be performed under the guidance of ‘masters of ceremonies’, who are – and Turner (1967: 95) explicitly uses this terminology – comparable to the ‘absolute rulers’ of early modern Europe.

The concept has been developed through studying rituals actually performed in various populations of the world. However, as in his later works Turner came to realise, probably the oldest model of such rituals, as a kind of conversion experience, is pilgrimage (Turner and Turner 1978). This will have major relevance for understanding the evidence – the cave art, especially wall paintings that survive from the Palaeolithic – as it can help identify long-distance pilgrimage walks as the oldest conversion experiences of European culture. It also helps overcome the metallurgical connotations, the focus on the transformation of substances still present in studies of the ritual process.

A social, political or economic crisis can thus be analysed as a real-world, large-scale moment of transition in which the taken for granted, stable structures of social and human life are suddenly suspended, and there is an intense search for a solution. This is exactly the type of situation that was at the centre of Max Weber’s (1978) political sociology, the problem of an ‘out-of-ordinary’ (*ausseralltägliche*) situation, for which he developed the term ‘charisma’. For Weber, out of ordinary situations cannot be solved by ordinary, traditional-customary or rational-legalistic means because the stability that is the basis of such solutions is undermined. They require the appearance of a special kind of person who has ‘charisma’. Weber clearly intimated that Europe after WWI required such leaders, but there are never guarantees that such persons would arrive.

Political sociologists and political scientists over the past century were continually applying the Weberian terminology to the actual ‘out-of-ordinary’ political leaders of the past century, without paying attention to the question whether these leaders had genuine charismatic qualities. When writing her PhD dissertation about the manner in which Communist power emerged, as a continuation of our study about the dissolution of Communist power around 1990 (Horvath and Szokolczai 1992), Agnes Horvath realised that in the case of Communist leadership the Weberian concept is useless, even misleading. Horvath eventually found the concept of trickster in anthropology. Trickster figures abound in folktales, mythologies and ethnographic accounts in most cultures of the planet (see Bright 1993; Dumézil 1986; Kerényi 1972, 1986, 1991; Pelton 1980; see also Horvath 2008, 2013a). They are marginal figures, outside stable structures and communities, without feelings of belongingness, incapable of love and trust. They are outsiders and lonely wanderers, moving from one place to another, always in search of conditions where they could suddenly jump from the periphery to the centre, making themselves useful, even indispensable. Thus, tricksters are living paradoxes, both outcasts and culture heroes – in many cultures even considered as second founders of the world. The conditions that favour their rise are situations of distress or crisis, where stabilities are dissolved, emotions become

high and people look for somebody who can guide them out of disorder. This is the time that is ripe for tricksters to act – a type of period that was theorised by Lenin, a *par excellence* modern trickster figure, alongside other 20th-century ‘leaders’ like Stalin, Hitler or Mussolini, as a ‘revolutionary situation’.

In order to understand the trickster mode of operation we need to review in some detail what happens in uncertain and anguishing periods of transition. As the taken for granted order of things has become suspended, the forms of conduct that were previously followed could no longer offer guidance. This means that there is a strong stimulus for new solutions, and thus the work of the mind is particularly excited. However, this happens together with increased emotional involvement, as in an emergency not only the mind but the emotions as well become incited, thus making difficult or blocking outright the work of thinking. In great distress individuals look for each other in search of a solution or model to follow. They can easily be induced to follow a course of action that otherwise they would never take, particularly characteristic of crowd behaviour, especially in panic – analysed by Gustave le Bon, a major source for the thinking of Durkheim, Tarde, Pareto and Freud – and also, through Sorel, of Mussolini, Hitler and Lenin. Thus, liminal situations jointly incite both reasoning and emotions.

Under such conditions imitative processes easily can spiral out of control, characteristic of violent mob action, even scapegoating, analysed so well by René Girard (1972, 1982). However, the situation is different if there are some people within the community who manage to use their sense and offer a solution, with a relatively clear head. These are, in Weberian terminology, the genuinely charismatic persons who rise up to the opportunity and lead the community out of the crisis. The problem is that the same situations also favour tricksters, who can also use a clear mind – as they are not emotionally involved in the community – but who do not have an interest in finding a solution. Quite the contrary: as a trickster can only gain attention and renown in a crisis, its only interest is in perpetuating situations of crisis. Thus, while it captures attention with slogans that seem to offer a way out – people in a state of distress are not terribly good at making distinctions, their sense of judgement being undermined – the suggestions only spiral further the very forces that generated the crisis in the first instance.

There can be two basic outcomes of such a situation, which can also be combined. If a temporary situation of crisis is perpetuated, we are faced with a paradoxical condition of permanent liminality. This can be illustrated with the case of Communism, where after a long and particularly devastating war the central interest of Communists, who gained power by instrumentally using chaos and confusion, was not to search for peace and stability, so much wanted by everyone; rather, it was to perpetuate, with various tricks, such extraordinary war-time conditions until the entire population became exhausted and terrorised, no longer able to offer resistance to the group of tricksters who took over and monopolised power (Horvath and Thomassen 2008). But there are many other forms and possibilities of permanent liminality, and – strikingly – modernity itself can be considered as a permanent state of liminality (Szokolczai 2000).

The second main outcome is schismogenesis, which means that a temporary breach or fracture in the social fabric, instead of being healed, is rather extended and aggravated until it becomes a permanent condition. The trickster logic here implies that

instead of finding a way to close the gap and resolve the conflict, the diverging positions are rather getting more and more distant from each other, until the previous unity is replaced by two sets of strongly different identities. Bateson's concept models the process by which identity is replaced by the two new identities, based on a dialectics of redefinitions by 'self' and 'other', including the progressive taking into account in the definition of the self how the other 'labelled' this self. Following Bateson's rule, such schisms can multiply; thus a new identity can itself split into two halves. The European Reformation of the 16th century offers a perfect example, with fracturing only being stopped by all partners recognising the others so as not to allow further destructive splitting, leading to the establishment of the official churches. A very similar movement happened with the various branches of 'socialism' in contemporary times.

## BEYOND AND BEFORE CONTEMPORARY ANTHROPOLOGY

The series of anthropological concepts introduced above has striking affinities with some key concepts in classical philosophy, in particular the thinking of Plato. This starts with liminality, which has two close equivalents in Plato's thinking: *apeiron* and *metaxy*. *Apeiron*, meaning the limitless or unlimited, is the Greek equivalent of 'liminal', derived from the Latin *limes*, with *peirar* signifying the 'limited' – thus *a-peiras*, the limitless. The word is present not only in Plato but is also already central to the first aphorism of Anaximander; thus it represents the 'first word' of Greek philosophy (Patočka 1983: 70), as the source and origin of all things. It also played a major role in Pythagorean thinking, while in Plato it is central in one of the last, most difficult and little studied but crucial dialogues, *Philebus*: the dialogue that, arguably, around the two conceptual pairs, 'one-many' and 'limit-unlimited', offers the core 'methodological' ideas of Plato. *Metaxy* is a term specific to Plato and is not often considered as a philosophical term, but was singled out for attention in his late work by Eric Voegelin. It was central to his *Anamnesis* and *Ecumenic Age*, discovered together with his other methodological key word, 'historiogenesis', helping to identify the constructs that were created to fix the course of history into preconceived schemes, an idea similar to Pocock's interpretation of the 'Enlightened narrative', interestingly both developed in studies concerned with the rise of fall of empires.

The other anthropological concepts discussed above also have close affinities with Plato's thinking. This goes without saying for imitation, central to Plato's diagnosis of the influence of Sophists on the agora, applies to the trickster as the characterisation of the Sophists by Plato offers a quite comprehensive presentation of the main features of the trickster. The same holds true for participation (*methexis* or *metalepsis*): the terms were also important for Aristotle, while Bateson's categories were developed explicitly on the basis of his familiarity with Plato's ideas.

## THE RETURN TO PLATO

Such a return to Plato was not a mere academic exercise, an attempt to return to the classic figures of a discipline. It was proposed, quite independently, by a number of the most important independent thinkers of the past century, who furthermore gained quite singular personal experiences about the characteristics of the modern: they had a vital interest in the diagnosis of their times; explicitly posed an anthropological agenda; and often had explicit and quite unconventional political concerns. Such thinkers include Michel Foucault, Jan Patočka, Eric Voegelin, Mikhail Bakhtin, Johan Huizinga, Béla Hamvas and Károly Kerényi. It is through their vital interest in capturing the heart of their times that, much to their own surprise, through Nietzsche and *pace* neo-Kantianism, they recognised a kindred spirit in Plato – not in Plato the classic academic philosopher, founder of rational thought, but in Plato the passionate diagnoser of his own times. The return to Plato was thus based on a recognition of multiple affinities: between the time of Plato and our own times – a time of dissolution and crisis, or a liminal moment; a type of time that exerts a particular influence on thinking and thus, by implication, between their own basic stance and that of Plato. This led to a radical reassessment: Plato was not an abstract, theoretical, idealist thinker; rather, he was someone who took up the problems of his own times, pushing them to their extreme limits, and thus discovering some genuinely ultimate truths.

It is by realising the diagnostic basis of Plato's thought that we can reconsider him as a founder of political anthropology. Going right to the heart of the matter, Plato's political philosophy, indeed his entire thinking, was sparked by a perceived crisis of Athenian democracy. This was not an ideological position against which the self-appointed defenders of modern democracy could raise their indignant voices. Rather, it was a personally reached, difficult position concerning the *concrete* crisis of politics in his own much-beloved city; the starting point motivating his search for the causes and the way out, resulting in the foundation of political philosophy, indeed of philosophy *tout court*.

At both the level of politics and knowledge Plato recognised the pernicious effect of the Sophists. The conflict between Socrates, Plato and their followers and the Sophists is neither antiquarian nor a personal matter, but concerns a fundamental issue as related to the activity of thinking and the search for knowledge: the relationship between reality and knowledge *as* a problem. Central for the Sophists was a limitless, unrestrained 'interest' in gobbling up knowledge and in proliferating arguments for the sake of disputing; an interest that, from the perspective of Socratic thinking, amounted to a downplaying of the value of reality, contributing in a fundamental way to the political crisis of Athens. The crisis of Athenian democracy, for Plato, was not simply a political matter, but was rooted in a much more serious problem, a certain loss of reality. Philosophy was concerned not so much with true knowledge than with reality: Plato had a passionate interest in the realness of reality, in reality as a value. A philosopher was somebody who was concerned with what it means to exist; it is in this way that he presented the philosopher at the end of the fifth chapter of the *Republic* as a lover of wisdom, perhaps his most important and emphatic definition of his neologism. And the word itself, like any coined word, in contrast to the value of words having an established, meaningful sense, mattered little to him: in the *Republic*, as in

other dialogues belonging to the same period, in particular *Phaedo*, the word is used quite frequently. But in his last dialogues it all but disappears: in *Philebus* it only appears once; in the *Laws*, not at all.

It is at the deepest level of this problem of reality, apparent in the joint crisis of democracy and knowledge, that we return to the anthropological problem of the person, the soul, or the self. Here again we cannot enter the extremely complicated semantic problems related to the various words, only offer a few clarifications. By 'person', following articles by Agnes Horvath (2015a, 2015b, this volume), I understand the concrete individual human being as an intact whole and a value. This means a quite paradoxical definition, following the sense in which Plato problematised the impossibility of capturing reality through words.<sup>4</sup> Neither does it conceive of the human being in terms of an abstraction – as proposed by Kantian thinking or modern economic rationality – nor in the sense of universalistic human rights. It rather refers to the *concrete*, individual human being: *any* human being that exists, that is real and authentic; but *only* in the sense that one is real and authentic and not a mere copy, a fake, a construct, a mime, a follower of ideologies and fashions, having given up, as a more or less conscious 'choice' or an act of self-negating conversion, the essence of his or her own inner self. It is this reality of the human person that was a central concern of Plato, best visible in his interest in the care or concern for the self or the soul and its harmonious order, singled out for attention by Voegelin, Patočka and Foucault alike.

The central issue concerning this care is the relationship between substance and activity, an issue that posed considerable problems to all three thinkers. Concerning Foucault, there is a problematic priority given to practice over substance. For Foucault the care of the self primarily implied formation or transformation of the self; a technique or technology by which somebody is supposed to reach a 'new' self. However, for Plato, as Voegelin and Patočka saw here better, the idea of such a 'new self' is highly problematic, emptying 'care' out of meaning, assigning it to the service of its opposite, a mere instrument for fabricating human beings; a technological project ignoring the very idea of the person. The care of the self for Plato was inseparable from a concrete, substantial sense: the care of one's *own*, concrete, existing self, *or* the soul. Voegelin (1957, 1978) placed here particular emphasis on the *order* of the soul, following his earlier recognition that after Hobbes in modern thought order became problematically separated from meaning.

Foucault (1984) was apprehensive about entering into this argument as he did not want to make a metaphysical commitment to belief in the existence of the immortality of the soul – even though he was well aware of the problem of the project of modern 'political rationality', involving the shaping and disciplining of individuals. However, such commitment is not necessary in order to realise the significance of Plato's ideas about the soul as the *essence* of a human being (or the concrete person). From Plato's perspective 'soul' is merely a word: it is indeed a word (*psyche*), though with rich semantics, that is used – and has to be used, as such a term is necessary to be able to talk about our own anthropological distinguishing feature, what renders us human – to capture the *concrete essence* of a human being. It is different both from the legalistic concept of human rights and the metaphysical idea of the immortality of the soul, though it does not deny any of these.<sup>5</sup> A crucial term by which Plato's idea of the soul can be captured only appears in a few, albeit important, places in his work. It is not

assigned a particular emphasis by his commentators; yet, it is in this way – through the action of the soul, through its resistance (in the Weberian–Foucauldian sense) to external influences – that a crucial specificity of the soul, the essence of any concrete human being, can be captured.

## THE SOUL AS THE INDESTRUCTIBLE

This crucial feature of the soul is that it is *indestructible* (*adiaphthoros*) – as in *Phaedrus* 245D, 252D, *Phaedo* 106E (twice) and *Laws* 768B, 918E (twice); or *adiaphthartos*, as in *Apology* 34B and *Laws* 951C.<sup>6</sup> The term can mean ‘imperishable’, in the sense of immortality (this is close to the meaning in *Phaedo*), or ‘incorruptible’, as in the case of magistrates (this is the specific meaning in *Laws* 951C). However, the place where it is closest to the sense implied in this chapter is in *Phaedrus*, a dialogue centrally concerned both with love and with the difficulty of expressing reality, especially its most important aspects like love and the soul, with mere words; and in its crucial introductory discussion of the soul. The indestructibility of the soul means that the inner essence of any human being simply cannot be changed, altered or transformed by any external force; thus, it is identical to the idea of the ‘first power’ as inner force, as exposed by Agnes Horvath in her chapter. It offers the vital anthropological foundation that we, all of us, as human beings, in our inner essence, are indestructible.

The point can be illuminated by etymological considerations and contemporary uses of the term, much following some hints by Roberto Calasso (2005, 2010). Etymologically, the Greek term is traced to the Sanskrit *aksara*, meaning ‘indestructible’ in the sense that it cannot be liquefied, as *ksara* in Sanskrit means ‘to flow’, as a liquid. The term was explicitly connected to the soul in Hindu thought, where the *atman* is defined in the *Upanishads* as both intangible and indestructible: ‘it is intangible, for it cannot be grasped, indestructible, for it cannot be destroyed’ (as in Parrinder 1973: 30). Indestructibility as the essence of the soul thus means that it cannot be reduced to a flux; a sense that has vital relevance in the context of Newtonian science, which offers the void and the flux as the fundamental states of the universe. Assuming the essence of the soul demonstrates that social understanding cannot be placed on a ‘truly’ scientific or Newtonian basis. The significance of the word, and this meaning, is also underlined by two crucial modern uses. One is by Franz Kafka, in his *Zürau Aphorisms*, where the term appears 4–5 times (it never appears in any of Kafka’s literary works). In its most important location Kafka states that: ‘The indestructible [*unzerstörbar*] is one; every single human being it is and it is at the same time common to all, thus the connection [*Verbindung*] between human beings is indissoluble like nothing else’ (Kafka 2006: No. 70/71). The second is by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, contained in a essay written about his travels in Greece at the time when he was occupied with his unfinished novel *Andreas*, which states that ‘in my innermost core I am indestructible’ (as in Miles 1972: 57).

The foundational anthropological idea concerning the indestructibility of the inner essence of the person, however, has a proviso. The soul cannot be destroyed by any force external to the self. Such forces can constrain, subjugate or even kill any human being; but they cannot reach the inner force or integrity of the person. This can only be

given up by the person itself. Our inner essence, after all, is not completely indestructible – though only we ourselves can destroy it.

At this point we enter another huge paradox, as evidently nobody in his or her right mind could possibly destroy one's own inner essence, least of all in an enlightened, modern world. Yet, the single most important, archetypal modern work of art, the only successful modern myth, a founding work of German culture contemporaneous with the supposedly foundational works of modern European philosophy, Goethe's *Faust*, is right about such selling – alienation, destruction – of one's soul. Thus, the connection between modernity and self-destruction is evident – just as, evidently, it was so for Plato's Athens. The explanation is to be found in the nature of *Eros* – one of the most important themes of Plato, treated in two key dialogues, *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*.<sup>7</sup>

## PLATO ON THE TWO-FOLD NATURE OF EROS

*Eros*, for Plato, is closely connected to the nature of the self, its formation and re-formation; thus the problem of conversion, and so also education, including the forces of imitation. *Eros*, on the one hand, is the strongest of human pleasures, connected to sexual gratification, playing a vital part in human life. But the pursuit of pleasure as an aim, not to mention a central or sole aim of our life, is highly problematic for Plato: pleasure and pain are foolish counsellors (*Laws* 634A–B, 644C, 714A, 863B; *Republic* 583C) – quite a shocking claim from a Benthamite utilitarian perspective,<sup>8</sup> just as for the followers of Freud.

Even further, *Eros* is also impersonated as a quasi-deity, a demon, or an in-between being. This idea again has crucial consequences. To begin with, it underlines the significance of erotic pleasure, meriting the assignment of a separate deity – though only a demon. However, given that *Eros* is a liminal being, it renders any idea of an erotic, or sexual, identity meaningless. Identity must be something stable; a liminal identity makes no sense, except for the very rare and highly ambivalent situation of something temporary becoming permanent. The liminality of *Eros* is also connected to imitation – the force of sexual desire, as Girard would rediscover recently, is highly mimetic, even contagious. Sexual passions, the anticipation of sexual pleasure, can be incited by words, images, and especially by theatrical representations.

It is here, and due to this, that *Eros* plays a fundamental role in politics, especially the public sphere, even transforming experienced reality. The collapse of Athenian democracy was due to the spread of a certain mimetism in the public sphere, helped by the imitative arts, especially theatre – an impact that would be repeated in the rise of the modern world, starting with Elizabethan England (Agnew 1986). It is against such mimetic forces that Plato evoked the counterforce of reason; the origin of Western 'rationalism' thus can be traced to an attempt to resist the contagious force of mimetic conduct, in particular sexual passion. The most famous image of the presumed converting power of the force of reason, through philosophy, is offered in the cave parable (*Republic*, Book VII), where love plays no positive role.

Plato, however, would reconsider his position in two crucial dialogues about love, *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*.<sup>9</sup> The former gives, with the help of a highly elaborate set-up, an explicit retraction of the position in the *Republic* on love. Socrates at first

pronounces, in refutation of a Sophist treatise on the instrumental use of love, a negative discourse on the force of love, close to the perspective of the *Republic*; but then, as an explicit self-correction, offers a different, much more positive discourse, introducing the soul. This position is taken further in the *Symposium*, a dialogue with an even more elaborate and theatrical framing, where the converting power of love plays a central role. In this dialogue love becomes outright a way to get attuned to the true realness of reality, through recognising the beauty of the world and connecting this recognition to the engendering, creative or birth-giving aspect of *Eros*.

This also implies a significant displacement of the thematisation characteristic of the *Republic*. There, the diagnosis of Athens' situation, and its overcoming, was posed in terms of the moving forces of individual life, in particular the search for pleasure, in contrast with the requirements of having a good life in common, or justice; thus, the need for the converting, constraining force of reason. In his mature, late works Plato's focus shifts from the polis to the world at large, motivated by a *recognition* of its beauty and harmony, the central *thaumazein* experience of the *Timaeus*.<sup>10</sup> Such recognition is not merely intellectual, but also a combined aesthetic, ethical and even erotic experience. It no longer requires an external force, the force of reasoning by the philosopher to return one on the right road, but one's own inner recognition of the nature of reality and one's own place in it.

Conversion, in this sense, does not imply a radical change, a transformation, a new, constructed identity – Plato's opposition to any such alteration is principled and unrelenting (see in particular *Laws* 797); rather, it implies a return and reassertion of what one has already been, in his or her essence. Its equivalent, at the level of knowledge, is the focus on the memory, leading *in extremis* to the position – whose paradoxical character Plato certainly recognised – that it is not even possible to acquire new knowledge; one can only recall, from the inside, what one has already known. Conversion thus ultimately implies a conversion to the self, to oneself – to one's own essence that one cannot reject without destroying one's own inner stability and being; a position radically different from 'egoism' – indeed, where the egoism/altruism contrast loses any meaning.

It is on the basis of such clarification of the very essence of our world – as beauty and harmony, as graceful, measured proportionality, as having being offered as a gift, as Being beyond Becoming; and as having one's own inner force and indestructible essence – that Plato also returned to the problem of politics. His last works, the *Statesman* and the *Laws*, present a politics with solid anthropological and even cosmological bases. Within the limits of this chapter, only three major points can be mentioned. To start with, these dialogues contain a more precise diagnosis of the collapse of democracy in Athens, where – much relying on the concept of the *khora*, or the empty space or void in the *Timaeus*, the receptacle of Becoming – the emphasis is placed on the role of the public sphere, in particular the theatre as the culprit, as it allowed the pleasure principle to sneak into politics, through the practice of popular elections. Through catering for votes and voters the rhetoric of demagogues fills public discourse, politicians are transmogrified into centaurs and satyrs (*Statesman* 291A–B, 303C–D), and democracy (or rather *politeia*, constitutional government) is transformed into a 'base theatrocracy' (*Laws* 700E–1B), the rule of theatre – something that, as Cicero noticed, would be repeated in Rome as well.

Second, the basis of politics is not the free public sphere, a mere void, rather something substantive: concrete human persons with integrity and inner stability who did not forget to take care of themselves. While the expression ‘care of the self’ is discussed more in the early dialogues, it is also present in the *Laws*. Furthermore, this last dialogue, implicitly but markedly, adds a new element in the form of *walking*. Walking, as it survived in the practice of pilgrimage, is not simply a mode of reaching a definite target, but a crucial activity in itself (Doi 2011), a genuine technique of self; in particular, as it is again argued by Agnes Horvath, it is a modality of retrieving one’s own inner self (Horvath and Szokolczai 2018).

Third, the corollary is that politics is not a ‘rational science’ to subordinate individuals to the common interest, not even to set up the conditions for the free play of self-interested individuals (whatever that could mean). Rather, it is the art of how individuals who took care of themselves, who preserved or retrieved their inner force, can live in harmony together; how – in the terminology of the *Philebus* (16C–7A) – the many and one can live together, incorporating both the limit: not so much the neo-Kantian or Durkheimian constraint, rather the measure that must be kept for harmonious living; and the unlimited (the *apeiron*, or the liminal) – the ever changing, desire, what always emerges and must happen, but yet must be pacified and accommodated within the dimensions of the limit, or the measure.

## CONCLUSION: PERMANENT LIMINALITY AS THE ABSURD DAILY REALITY OF MODERNITY

Through the contemporary return to Plato, much connected to a revival of interest in anthropological foundations, in particular through the concern or care for the meaningful order of the soul or the self – as pioneered by Eric Voegelin, Jan Patočka and Michel Foucault, and in line with the work of Agnes Horvath – this chapter reached the foundational anthropological position of the indestructibility of the inner essence of the concrete human person. As no external force can destroy this inner essence, power – a central concept of politics, in any sense – ultimately lies with the concrete human person, and not outside it. However, somewhat paradoxically, even the indestructible can be destroyed – though only by the person itself. Even more paradoxically, such highly irrational acts have vital significance for the modern world, as evidenced by the importance of the Faust myth.

The conditions of possibility of such self-destruction are both extremely personal and highly political. They are most evidently personal; but they are also political, as such conditions can be best captured by the term ‘liminality’ – the sudden suspension, or liquefaction, of the taken for granted societal order. Such situations are evidently dangerous, threatening, even terrorising; and yet they are also part of the human condition, especially as concerned with the necessary changes accompanying the cycle of life. Among passions connected to the oceanic feeling of liminal dissolution, a central role is played by erotic love. One of the most important legacies of Plato concerns his extremely insightful analysis of the role *Eros* – for him a demon, an in-between or liminal being – can play jointly in human and political life.

The central point concerns the links between liminality, imitation and *Eros*. Under conditions when the existing order is undermined, both at the level of the individual soul and political community, imitative processes can quickly proliferate, in particular when, instead of proposing a return to order, the inciting of erotic passions becomes artificially propagated in the public sphere. This can be both direct, implying a systematic inciting of the populace for erotic acts, offering as models the most varied kind of ‘loves’; and indirect, meaning to incite passion for abstract entities – which however can easily be substituted with concrete beings – like the nation, the state, the race, the proletariat, or anybody who is suffering.

When this happens, the result is that systematic strategies of self-destruction become widespread and explicitly propagated as models to reach the ‘good life’ through the public sphere. The outcome is a paradoxical, absurd situation of permanent liminality, which captures the heart of the modern condition (Szokolczai 2000, 2017a, 2017b). The way out is simple as a principle, though quite difficult to realise at the level of concrete human conduct: it is to keep, and restore, by each and every one of us, our inner essence.

## NOTES

1. About this, see Hirschman (1977); but see also the semantic history of the word ‘political economy’.
2. See the extensive recent literature on the field, much connected to the initiative of International Political Anthropology: Horvath (2013a); Horvath et al. (2015); Thomassen (2009, 2014); Szokolczai (2009); Wydra (2009).
3. Following explicit hints by Mauss (2002: 59), the ‘given’ is connected to ‘gift’ and thus considered as a value, in contrast to a mere ‘fact’ to be overcome.
4. This is particularly evident in *Phaedrus* and the *Philebus*; for excellent commentaries, see Ferrari (1990) about the former and Migliori (1993) about the latter.
5. For reasons of space, this chapter cannot extend to the classical foundation of political anthropology as connected to the dimension of the sacred, or the divine, central though it is – among others – to the thought of Plato. On politics and the sacred, see Wydra (2015).
6. For this analysis use was made of the excellent site containing Plato’s dialogues: [www.perseus.tufts.edu](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu).
7. For an extended discussion of the *Symposium* and its relevance for our times, see the special section ‘The gravity of *eros* in the contemporary’ in the December 2013 issue of *History of Human Sciences*; in particular Bonner (2013), Horvath (2013b), Horvath and Szokolczai (2013) and Szokolczai (2013b).
8. For devastating and – for political anthropology – fundamental attacks on Bentham and his utilitarianism, apart from Foucault (1979), see also Calasso (1983) and Voegelin (1999).
9. About this sequence of *Republic*, *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* I follow Moore (1973) and Lönborg (1939).
10. On the importance of recognition, in contrast to mere ‘cognition’, see Pizzorno (1991, 2000, 2007).

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