

THE *OIKOS* AS A POLITICAL DEVICE IN PLATO'S WORKS

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I. Introduction

It has often been claimed that Plato's perfect city or *polis* rests on the abolition of the *oikos* or *oikia*, that is the family as household, and as the economic production unit from which the words "economy" and "economics" derive. For instance, according to Carlo Natali, Plato wants to "get rid of the household (*oikos*)", and "the abolition of the *oikos* is the consequence of the equality of functions between men and women".¹ In the same way, Allan Bloom claims that "[in Book V], the family is abolished".² And Luc Brisson considers that for Plato "the family is the main enemy of the city".³

The *oikos* is indeed considered by Plato as an anti-political force. In many passages, egoistic desires occurring in the *oikos* are shown as the motives of our actions, whereas the perfect city is possible only if we are able to share the same values, and act for the sake of the common interests. That's why in the *Republic*, Plato asks the rulers to live together, with no private property and no private or individual relationships.

Yet, despite this criticism of the traditional *oikos* as an anti-political force, Plato does not get rid of it. As I intend to show, his policy consists in converting it into a political device for the sake of the unity of the perfect and just city. I will first remind what the traditional conception of the *oikos* was in Plato's time, as a

¹ "L'élimination de l'*oikos* dans la *République* de Platon" in *Études sur la République*, M. Dixsaut (ed.) with the collaboration of A. Larivée, vol. I, Paris, Vrin, 2005, pp. 221 and 213 [my English translation].

² *The Republic of Plato. Translation and Interpretive Essay*. New York, Basic Books, 1968, p. 385.

³ *Les Lois de Platon*, Paris, PUF, 2007, p. 104 [my English translation].

background for a better understanding of his own conception. Second, I will expound in what sense the *oikos* is an anti-political force in Plato's works. Third, I will show how the *oikos* becomes one of the main political devices used by Plato to promote his perfect state.

II. The traditional conception of the *oikos*

In Plato's time, the *oikos* was on the one hand a farm estate and a house to manage, on the other hand a family including, in a broader extent, non-free people such as slaves. It was both a material or economic institution and a moral institution dealing with ethical values. It had a productive function and an educative function.

The standard conception of the *oikos* of that time can be found in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*. The second part of this dialogue is the report to Critobulus by Socrates of a dialogue he had himself with Ischomachus about the best way to take care of one's *oikos* and its moral benefit. Ischomachus stands for the aristocratic citizen devoted to the perfection of his soul. Here he is presented also as a pragmatic man interested in farming and not only in war matters, as it used to be the case when previous writers, like Homer or Pindar, depicted the ideal man. This is an innovation: farming has become the best way for self-achievement. However, despite this break from tradition, Xenophon's portraiture of the ideal farmer citizen remains traditional because, as we shall see, it is still inspired by warlike features and keeps in accordance with customs. Three main features of the traditional conception of *oikos* can be drawn from this book.

Increasing the income of the *oikos*

In Ischomachus's view, being a good *oikonomos*, that is a master of an *oikos*, consists among other things in getting "wealth increased by honest means",⁴ that is in increasing the income of the *oikos* with no bounds but always in accordance with a moral behaviour. Being as rich as possible was one of the traditional moral values in ancient times,⁵ as a sort of evidence for the moral ability of the citizen. In this respect, material benefits were seen as going hand in hand with moral benefit.

⁴ Xenophon, *Oec.* XI, 8.

⁵ M.I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy*, Berkeley, The University of California Press, 1973, p. 40; *L'Économie antique* French transl., Paris, Minuit, 1975, p. 42.

The *oikos* is a miniature *polis*

According to the traditional conception of the *oikos*, the difference between the city and the *oikos* is not a difference in nature but only in degree. The house is a miniature city. Then,

the management of private concerns differs only in point of number from that of public affairs. In other respects they are much alike [...] and the men employed in private and public transactions are the same. For those who take charge of public affairs employ just the same men when they attend to their own; and those who understand how to employ them are successful directors of public and private concerns, and those who do not, fail in both.⁶

As a result, according to Ischomachus, there is a unique ability for power which "is common to all forms of business alike: agriculture, politics, estate-management (*oikonomikē*), warfare."⁷ The model of the good commander, both for the *oikos* and the city, is the military chief. For instance, the good master of the *oikos* must refer to the statesmen Draco and Solon and their laws to command to his slaves.⁸ As a result, the good citizen has to be a sort of good military commander in his *oikos*.⁹

This assimilation of the *oikos* to the city was part of the ideological background justifying the growth of the Athenian empire over the seas at the middle of the 5th century. Plato will criticize this identification because it implies unceasing warfare and political instability.

Men and women functions in the *oikos* are different by nature

Ischomachus says the division of labour in the *oikos* should be made in accordance with nature:

since both the indoor and the outdoor tasks demand labour and attention, God from the first adapted the woman's nature, I think, to the indoor and man's to the outdoor tasks and cares. For he made the man's body and mind more capable of enduring cold and heat, and journeys and campaigns; and therefore imposed on him the outdoor tasks. To the woman, since he has made her body less capable of such endurance, I take it that God has assigned the indoor tasks.¹⁰

⁶ Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, III, 4. Cf. *Aeschines, Against Timarchus* I, 30 (I owe this reference to C. Natali).

⁷ *Oec.* XXI, 2.

⁸ *Oec.* XIV, 6-8.

⁹ *Oec.* XXI, 8-9. See also IX, 15.

¹⁰ *Oec.* VII, 22-23.

Some characters in Plato's dialogues somehow share the same view, for instance Meno: he sees the "woman's virtue [...] as the duty of ordering the house well, looking after the property indoors".¹¹

III. The traditional *oikos* as an anti-political force in Plato's works

Plato criticizes these three aspects of the traditional conception of the *oikos* as obstacles to the unity of the city.

The economic extension of the *oikos* as detrimental to the unity of the *polis*

To understand better his criticism of the first point, we need to refer briefly to his conception of the city and politics, and to his anthropological theory.

In Plato's view, the best city is the one that is really one, because its citizens share common values. On the contrary, the civil strife or *stasis* is "a war as to which it would be the desire of every man that, if possible, it should never occur in his own State, and that, if it did occur, it should come to as speedy an end as possible".¹² The lack of unity is the main danger that the good statesman must prevent. That's why in the *Statesman*, the statesman is compared to the weaver of a well-united city. And in the *Republic*, Socrates says the governors of the Kallipolis "should let it grow so long as in its growth it consents to remain a unity, but no further".¹³

According to Plato's anthropological theory, men are motivated by a tendency called *pleonexia*, implying that everyone wants "to have more of something than someone else".¹⁴ As reported by Glaucon, "every creature by its nature pursues the *pleonexia* as a good".¹⁵ The common expression of this violent tendency, deeply rooted in our souls, consists in the lure of money and material goods.

These political and anthropological considerations combine in the undermining role of the lure of money toward the required unity of the city. In Plato's view, the expansion of the traditional *oikos*, aiming at increasing its wealth, is necessarily damaging to the unity of the city, because such an *oikos* is motivated by its self-interest first, with no care of the public sphere. This boundless desire of wealth

¹¹ *Meno*, 71 E 4-6.

¹² *Laws* I, 628 B 1-3.

¹³ *Statesman* 310 E 5-9; *Republic* IV, 423 B 6-7.

¹⁴ J. Gutglueck, "From *pleonexia* to *polupragmosunè*. A conflation of possession and action in Plato's *Republic* 349 B-350 C", *American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 109, N°1, 1988, pp. 20-39.

¹⁵ *Republic* II, 359 C 3-5.

inescapably results into *stasis*: “[The ordinary cities] are each one of them many cities, not a city [...]. There are two at the least at enmity with one another, the city of the rich and the city of the poor, and in each of these there are many [...]”¹⁶ Under such conditions, the just or good city cannot emerge, for

no man's nature is naturally able both to perceive what is of benefit to the civic life of men and, perceiving it, to be alike able and willing to practice what is best. For, in the first place, it is difficult to perceive that a true civic art necessarily cares for the public, not the private, interest – for the public interest binds States together, whereas the private interest rends them asunder.¹⁷

So it is clear that, against the traditional view, Plato cannot allow the unlimited growth of the income of the *oikos*. That's why in the best city Plato deprives the guardians of private property and of living inside an *oikos*. They will live a common life. Regarding the economic aspect of the *oikos*, they will be forbidden to possess anything, in particular gold and silver, and to be involved in trade. For

whenever they shall acquire for themselves land of their own and houses (*oikias*) and coin, they will be house-holders (*oikonomoi*) and farmers instead of guardians, and will be transformed from the helpers of their fellow citizens to their enemies and masters” and this would implicate a shipwreck for themselves and the *polis*.¹⁸

Then, as an economic institution, the traditional *oikos* is seen by Plato as destructive of the city, because its care implies means and ends incompatible with the care of the city.

Privacy of the traditional *oikos* versus the community of the best *polis*

The same holds true for the *oikos* as a sphere of moral values and a family. As we have seen, the good city must be unified, but this is possible only if people share common values, as made clear by the Athenian in the *Laws*:

[the best city is the one] in which there is community of wives, children, and all chattels, and all that is called ‘private’ is everywhere and by every means rooted out of our life, and so far as possible it is contrived that even things naturally ‘private’ have become in a way ‘communized’, – eyes, for instance, and ears and hands seem to see, hear, and act in common, – and that all men are, so far as possible, unanimous in the praise and blame they bestow, rejoicing and grieving

¹⁶ *Republic* IV, 422 E 5-423 A 1.

¹⁷ *Laws*, IX, 875 A 1-6.

¹⁸ *Republic* III, 417 A 5-B 5.

at the same things, and that they honor with all their heart those laws which render the State as unified as possible.¹⁹

In order to fulfill this political requirement, the statesman of the just city has to smooth the different values and moral standards of the different *oikoi* that compose the city and that are, as such, anti-political forces. For every family usually makes the interest of its *oikos* the standard of its own values and wants to universalize them. Privacy and private interest then prevail over the sense of community and common good required by the true political life. Plato deals with this issue in the *Laws*, in the account of the birth of the cities. According to the Athenian, at the very beginning of the *poleis*, there were several *oikoi*, but ancient statesmen were not successful in building a truly political unity because each one of these *oikoi* had its proper rules and values. In each family, "the fathers stamped upon their children and children's children their own cast of mind. These people then came into the larger community furnished each with their own peculiar laws".²⁰

In order to avoid this danger, Plato considers the *oikos* and the *polis* as two different kinds of societies by nature. The city is not a big family, the family is not a small city. That's why in the *Republic*, the *oikos* serves as a model only for the relations between the rulers, as we shall see, but not for the whole society, which is compared to a single individual, not to a family.²¹ At the same time, and contrary to Xenophon's identification, being a good *oikonomos* in Plato's best city is not enough to be a good statesman: the latter needs to be a philosopher, as shown by the philosopher kings in the *Republic*, whereas the former is rarely able to devote himself to philosophy.²²

Women as an anti-political gender

Plato's last criticism about the traditional *oikos* deals with the nature and function of women. According to Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, the *oikos* as a moral institution is the realm of women. But he cannot consider them as an anti-political gender, precisely because he thinks the *oikos* and the *polis* are quite the same and differ only in size. On the contrary, Plato, as part of his careful distinction between the *oikos* and the *polis*, has two arguments to say that women are an anti-political gender.

¹⁹ *Laws* V, 739 C 1-D3.

²⁰ *Laws* III, 681 B 4-6.

²¹ *Republic* V, 462 C 7.

²² *Republic* VI, 497 E 6-498 B 1.

As a first argument, which can seem odd to us and has been viewed as highly controversial,²³ Plato considers they are by nature reluctant to public life. In the *Laws*, the Athenian claims that their "gender is most secretive and intriguing".²⁴ Referring to common meals, he says that in ordinary states, women will never accept such an institution:

The female sex would more readily endure anything rather than [the common meal]: accustomed as they are to live a retired and private life, women will use every means to resist being led out into the light.²⁵

As a second argument, Plato knows that women in the *oikos* are an anti-political gender not only by nature, but also because they are not allowed to participate to any political activity and do not receive any political education. Due to this situation, they cannot transmit truly political and common values to their children. In the *oikos* as Plato can watch it in Athens, women have nothing but a domestic power. They raise their children, in particular their sons, so that they might expand the wealth of the *oikos* as much as possible, without caring for the damages it might cause to the city, because they have no idea of the requirements of the true political life.

Both for "natural" and political reasons, women stand for a private principle, opposed to public life.

IV. Making the *oikos* into a political device for the sake of the best city's unity

Does then Plato intend to abolish the *oikos*, as claimed by some commentators? Such is not the case. The *oikos* is not abolished: it is transformed into a political device for the sake of the best city's unity. Plato uses the internal force of possession which is typical of the *oikos*, and converts it so that it could be beneficial to the city as a community.

The *oikos* as a political model for common life in the *Republic*

This conversion first occurs in the *Republic*, in two steps. First, private relations are forbidden among the group of the rulers:

²³ See *Feminist Interpretations of Plato*, N. Tuana (ed.), The University of Pennsylvania State Press, 1994.

²⁴ *Laws* VI, 781 A 2-4.

²⁵ *Laws* VI, 781 C 5-6.

The women shall all be common to all the men, and none shall cohabit with any privately; and the children shall be common, and no parent shall know its own offspring nor any child its parent".²⁶

This excerpt is the clearest denial of the traditional conception of the family in Plato's works.

Second, the *oikos* is convoked as a model for the relationships between the guardians themselves. Socrates establishes that inside the group of the guardians, for every generation, all the women are the mothers of all the children, and the same for the men as fathers. He adds that for every generation, all the babies that are born at the same time are brothers and sisters.²⁷

The family relations are then no more individual, but they still exist as such. They are now turned toward many people, so that their private dimension might disappear. If Plato abolishes the family as a closed social unit, he does not abolish the strength of family feelings: he uses them in order to establish a stronger unity among the rulers of the city, because the best city depends on their unity.

Reinventing the *oikos*: the *klēros* in the *Laws*

One could object that the *Republic* is preoccupied mostly with the rulers, not with the ordinary citizens. What about them? Do they still live in traditional *oikoi*? Plato does not say a single word about it in the *Republic*. But it is one of the most central topics in the *Laws*. In this dialogue, the traditional *oikos* is converted into what the Athenian calls a *klēros*. As described in a long passage,²⁸ the *klēros* is a 5040th portion of the territory of the common city. It is composed of two parts, one close to the city center, and the other one in the countryside. Each part is made of a house and a land. All the *klēroi* are supposed to be equal in size and productivity. As shown by the four following characteristics, the *klēros* is still an *oikos* but a "political *oikos*" aiming at the city's unity:

1. the *klēros* does not belong to the citizens but to the city. Then they cannot sell it and there is no private property.
2. as the harvests are common to all the citizens, they cannot overlook their *klēros* and are obliged to exploit it (even if not directly because they are forbidden to work).

²⁶ *Republic* V, 457 C 6-D 3.

²⁷ *Republic* V, 457 D-461 D.

²⁸ *Laws* V, 737 C-745 E.

3. there is a limit of wealth, so that individuals cannot think first of their self interest in exploiting their land.

4. the members of the family do not belong to themselves but to the city itself.²⁹ Being a member of a family consists first in being a member of the city.

The *kleros* is then the reinvention of the *oikos*, based on the required unity of the city. The familial and economic institution is converted so that men and women become political animals, that is people interested in the common good, even if they would prefer to satisfy their own interests.

V. Conclusion

I hope I have shown enough that the *oikos* is not seen only as an anti-political force but as a possible political device for establishing the best city, in two ways: as a model for some political relations in the *Republic*, and as a renewed basic social institution in the *Laws*.

This political use of the family unit can be interpreted in two ways at least. We can see the Platonic family, mostly in the *Laws*, as being ordered to abide by the laws and values of the rulers, as if it had no active participation in the political world. But in converting the *oikos* into a political device, Plato might mean something else: even if ordinary people don't rule the city, they have a political power in the sense that the becoming of the city depends directly on their private behavior and the values they inculcate to their children inside the family unit.

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²⁹ *Laws* XI, 923 A 5-B 1.

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