

**REVIEW ARTICLE –
PHILOSOPHY, HISTORY, AND DEMOCRACY**

*Josiah Ober*¹

John R. Wallach, *The Platonic Political Art: A Study of Critical Reason and Democracy* (University Park Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), xi + 468 pp., \$65.00, ISBN 0 271 02075 X (cloth); \$25.00, ISBN 0 271 02076 8 (pbk.).

Plato was born into a new, exciting, and very confusing world. The polis of Athens, in the late sixth, fifth, and fourth centuries BC, was remarkable for accomplishment in many spheres of activity. From the perspective of traditional Greeks, the radically enhanced capacity of the Athenian people to get things done was awe-inspiring and frightening. Lacking any better explanation, Athens' rivals resorted to claims based on 'nature', explaining the restless drive to do and have more as an innate Athenian quality. Or so we are led to believe by the speech of the Corinthian ambassadors in the first book of Thucydides' history (1.70–71), who characterize Athens and its accomplishments for their Spartan allies. Thucydides' readers will learn, as they work through his complex account of the twenty-seven year war, that the Corinthians offered a fair description of Athenian activity but that 'innate nature' is a weak explanation for Athenian performance. Fifth-century writers, including Herodotus (*Histories* 5.78) and Pseudo-Xenophon ('The Old Oligarch', *Politeia of the Athenians* passim), had already pointed to the inadequacy of such facile explanations, by linking the Athenians' success directly to their political culture.

Democracy, inaugurated in the last decade of the sixth century and refined in the course of the next two centuries, was somehow related to the remarkable Athenian rise to cultural and military preeminence. But how, precisely? And was it a good thing? The first problem for ancient political theorists came in identifying the relationship between democracy and success: Why should the extension of political rights to ordinary men and their inclusion in decision-making and judicial processes have helped make Athens into a great and powerful state? The second problem was even more pressing: What were the implications of democratic success for ethics and morality? If democracy promoted greatness, why did it not promote a corresponding rise in goodness or true happiness?

For anyone coming of age in the mid- or late fifth-century BC (as did Socrates and Plato respectively), the contrast between democratic Athens and the more traditional poleis who were Athens' rivals was striking. The traditional polis was defined by the carefully delimited maximin calculations of a society

¹ Center for Human Values, 5 Ivy Lane, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey 08544, USA. Email: jobert@princeton.edu

balanced between aristocrats, focused on the glories of a long-ago heroic past, and agricultural smallholders (the so-called ‘hoplite class’), confronted by the exigencies of thin soil, uncertain rainfall, endemic inter-state warfare, and family demography. In the traditional polis (Sparta provides the ideal type for Thucydides’ Corinthians), fundamental change of any sort meant degeneration: Hesiod’s description in the *Works and Days* of the ‘races of man’, represented as a sequence of metals (from the long-lost age of gold, through subsequent eras of silver and bronze, to the recent and pain-filled age of iron), exemplifies conservative traditional-polis ideology. The Athenians, by contrast, defined themselves by the political, social, and cultural changes they themselves had fostered. Tremendous advances were made in architecture, music, visual arts, military strategy, anthropology, rhetoric, drama, astronomy, mathematics, historiography, medicine, and so on. The net result, sometimes referred to as ‘the Greek Enlightenment’ or even ‘the Greek Miracle’, was to transform the experience of polis life and to challenge thinkers like Socrates and Plato to make sense of it all.

The connection between Athens’ success and democracy lay in processes of learning, in the communication of knowledge fostered by the open culture of the democratic polis. Each of the many individual advances that collectively constituted classical Athenian success came about because individual Athenians were capable of effectively learning from others. The process can be traced, for example, in the development of vase-painting: beginning in the mid-sixth century, and continuing through the fifth century, Athens dominated the Mediterranean market for artfully decorated ceramic vases (the Etruscans of central Italy were especially avid customers). The development of artistic technique, from the early and experimental black-figure style through mature red-figure points to steady and (in the aggregate) remarkable advances in representational art. Among the great accomplishments of twentieth-century classical scholarship was sorting out the ‘workshops’ in which Athenian black- and red-figured vases were produced by expert painters working closely with equally expert potters. The upshot is that it is now possible for art historians to trace the development of the craft, decade by decade, from workshop to workshop, mapping over time the complex network of didactic relationships between individual potters and painters that resulted in the extraordinary efflorescence of one particular craft. In Plato’s *Apology* (22c–e), Socrates makes a point of asserting that Athenian craftsmen did indeed know ‘many and fine things’ — although they made the mistake (in Socrates’ view) of believing that their craft knowledge offered them more general insight into the ‘greatest matters’, i.e. politics, ethics, and morality. It seems reasonable to suppose that in acknowledging the (albeit limited) knowledgeability of the craft-worker, Plato’s Socrates was alluding, not only to a mechanical capacity to produce valuable craft-objects, but to a didactic capacity to teach and learn, and thus to improve the craft overall and over time.

Today we have no direct access to the didactic techniques (based on oral instruction and practical example) that allowed craftsmen working in a network of pottery workshops to rapidly develop an original form of art. But by the mid-fifth century, Athens was increasingly a city of written words. Literate Athens-resident intellectuals sought to understand the techniques and processes that allowed various craft-products to be produced. The Greek word for craft is *techne*: one practiced, for example, the *techne* of pottery, or of rhetoric; if appropriately skilled one might in due course teach that *techne* to others. Over the fifth century, Athenian writers developed an expansive new literary form, which was also called the *techne* (we might say, the technical manual). Such a *techne* might include illustrative examples, but was also meant to explain and teach the ‘theory’ of the practice of the craft. A remarkable extant example is the *Defence of Helen*, written by the rhetorician Gorgias. This extraordinarily intricate text, a tongue-in-cheek attempt to exculpate Helen from any personal responsibility for her catastrophic adulterous liaison with Trojan Paris, serves as a catalogue of the ornate ‘Gorgian figures’ that characterized the famous rhetorician’s verbal artistry. But it also presents a theory of rhetoric, an attempt to explain the complex relationship between speech, force, and eros that ultimately yields the ‘product’ of persuasion. The point is that Gorgias (like other writers of ‘technical manual-*technai*’) believed that some elements of ‘craft-*techne*’ could be expressed, generalized, and taught through the written word. The ‘technical manual-*techne*’ thus complemented (indeed perhaps anticipated, if we imagine it as a sort of advertisement for the master’s skill) the face-to-face pedagogic master and student relationship.

The production of ‘technical manuals’ led some Athenian intellectuals to imagine that the various craft-*technai* (i.e. the multiplicity of elements that collectively characterized the new Athenian scene) might be understood at a higher level of generality: that it should be possible to conceptualize a ‘master’ craft-*techne*, and then to write a master technical manual-*techne* to explain and advertise it. The quest to identify and accurately describe the master *techne* dominates much of the work of Athenian ‘sophists’ and ‘philosophers’ from the mid-fifth through the mid-fourth century. Given the highly competitive atmosphere in which intellectual work in Athens was undertaken (Plato’s *Gorgias*, *Protagoras*, and *Symposium* give a nice sense of the various contexts in which intellectual competitions were held) it is hardly surprising that various competing conceptions of that master *techne* were advanced. Some of these developed into what we would today think of as academic disciplines and were given a definitive (ancient) literary form by Aristotle. Thus the master *techne* of living eventually becomes formal ethics (the *Nicomachean* and *Eudamian Ethics*), the *techne* of ruling/governance becomes political theory (the *Politics*), and the *techne* of deliberative arguments/speaking becomes rhetoric (the *Art of Rhetoric*).

Aristotle, writing in the second half of the fourth century, abandoned the idea that there really was a master *techne*, in favour of systematic philosophical presentation of each candidate-discipline and their conceptual relations to one another. But we should not allow Aristotle's brilliant and monumental project of systematization to obscure the earlier era, in which competing conceptions of the master *techne* were vigorously advanced and just as vigorously challenged, and in which the hope of establishing the primacy one's own candidate discipline for a discriminating audience of peers and potential students was very real. Those studying what they believed was a master *techne* looked forward to profoundly enhanced capacities and knowledge: when one had grasped the *techne* of governing (for example), one would presumably know all that is necessary about living and speaking. Protagoras of Abdera, who spent much of his long career in Athens, evidently (the evidence comes primarily from Plato) taught his students that the master *techne* was indeed governance, and he offered to teach it to anyone who could pay his fees.

Protagoras' *techne* of governance was presumably intended to generalize and operationalize (for the aspiring political leader) the insights available in another expansive Greek literary genre closely related to the technical manual-*techne*: the '*politeia* of x': That is to say, a text describing the political culture, institutions, and ideology of a given polis, e.g. Athens (an anonymously authored fifth-century *Politeia of the Athenians* is ascribed to 'Pseudo-Xenophon', a fourth-century one to 'Pseudo-Aristotle') or Sparta (Xenophon, *Politeia of the Lakedaimonians*). Aristotle set some of his own students the task of collecting these; some 158 *politeiai* of Greek and a few non-Greek states were ultimately collected or produced at the Lyceum and provided some of the material that informed Aristotle's own political writing. Protagoras' goal was, we may suppose, to teach his students the essence of *politeia* itself, to teach them *politeia* as a master *techne*.

Protagoras came to Athens in the mid-fifth century for some of the same reasons that attracted Gorgias of Leontini and the other so-called sophists ('sophist' was a term of opprobrium among the Athenians, which is the point of Plato's Protagoras' boast that he alone was willing advertise himself as such: *Protagoras* 317b). Sophists came to Athens because it was the most important, wealthiest, most interesting Greek city of the age. But for those who sought to teach the arts associated with political life, Athens was especially enticing because of Athenian democracy, the startling political experiment that, as we have seen, played a clearly recognized but conceptually obscure role in the Athenian rise to prominence and imperial power. Fifth-century democratic Athens was (as Plato's Socrates complained: *Gorgias* 519a) full of 'harbours, wall, shipsheds, and tribute': the trappings of wealth and imperial power. The extent of Athenian power, along with the diversity (in terms of class background) and self-confidence of the mass of ordinary Athenian citizens (the *demos*) made the job of leadership an extraordinarily rewarding, but also extraordinarily risky

business. And so the promise of being taught the secrets of a master *techne* of governance was especially enticing. In Plato's *Protagoras*, Socrates' young friend Hippocrates is like a kid who cannot wait for Christmas in his eagerness to learn from Protagoras.

Political leadership in democratic Athens was not closely linked with institutionalized magistracies and not limited to members of old and distinguished families. To be a leader required the capacity to present ideas to huge audiences of men who had contributed by their own talents to the creation of the great collective enterprise. Protagoras, Gorgias, and their fellow sophists each claimed to offer the special skill-set, the master *techne*, that would allow an ambitious Athenian to achieve prominence in the city. The exemplar in the Platonic corpus is Callicles, the student of Gorgias who is Socrates' primary interlocutor in the dialogue *Gorgias*. Plato's Callicles believes Gorgias' claim that rhetoric, as a master *techne*, will lend him the technical ability that he requires to dominate his fellow Athenian citizens and thus to satisfy his own strong desires. The problem that emerges through his elenctic conversation with Socrates is that Callicles has no capacity to associate his desires with that which is genuinely good for him. His incapacity to desire rightly means that he has no hope of actually living a good life, which, in the dialogue, sustains Socrates' implicit claim that a (still hypothetical) *politike techne* — an art of living as well as of ruling — trumps Gorgias' spurious claims for rhetoric as the master *techne*.

Callicles proves unable, in the end, to grasp the import of Socrates' demolition of the foundations of his belief in rhetoric as a master *techne*, and Plato's dialogue explains why: Callicles is too much 'in love with' the *demos* of Athens. As a besotted lover, Callicles is compelled to say and act just as his lover demands, and is too easily satisfied by the favours (e.g. the capacity to prosecute and kill whomever he wishes through judicial process) that his *demos*-lover offers in exchange for his obedience. Callicles' fantasies of employing the art of rhetoric to enter a realm of perfect 'natural' freedom in which he might do just as he wishes and have whatever he wants, is exposed as a grandiose illusion by Socrates' deliberately coarse metaphorical description of Callicles as an 'itchy' *kinaidos*, as a habitually passive homosexual whose unseemly desires are routinely satisfied by his ever-dominant *demos*-lover (*Gorgias* 494e). Despite Callicles' protests, Socrates demonstrates that his abasement is a product of miseducation: Gorgias' school of rhetoric turns out to be just a cover for the deeper, indeed inescapable, education offered to all ambitious Athenians by the practices and ideology of the democratic city itself. The *politeia* of the Athenians turns out (in Plato's dialogue) to be a system of indoctrination that maintains the *demos* in its position of dominance and effectively blocks the sort of profound ethical thinking that might allow a given Athenian to pursue the true *politike techne*. This vision of democratic culture as false education also informs Plato's *Republic*, where we learn (492a–93d) that the

sophists themselves are mere tools of the Great Sophist, i.e. the *demos*, which seeks, generally successfully, to teach each and every resident of Athens how to think and speak, how to desire and how to behave. In sum, craft, politics, education, and the productivity of democracy were extremely important elements in the conceptual tool kit that Plato took up from his native polis, and sought to reconfigure in his philosophical dialogues.

In *The Platonic Political Art*, a book that every political theorist interested in Greek thought will certainly want to read, John Wallach argues powerfully that the search for a true ‘political art’ — a master *techne* that would unite politics with ethics, governance with living well — stands at the centre of Plato’s moral philosophy. He furthermore, and more problematically, seeks to show that a proper understanding of Plato’s political art can (and indeed was intended to) improve democracy. Finally, and most problematically, he suggests that reasonable democrats today should embrace the sort of improvement that Platonic critical reason has to offer. Wallach’s aim is to prove his points by re-situating Socrates and Plato in their Athenian context (the burden of Part I). The goal of Wallach’s approach (which he calls ‘critical historicism’) is to strip Plato of the trappings of ‘Platonism’, such that ‘Plato begins to look less like a doctrinal Platonist and more like a critical, political theorist of a particularly interesting sort’ (p. 29) — that is, we might say, less like Alisdair MacIntyre and more like Sheldon Wolin (cf. heading 2.a on p. 59: ‘Plato’s life as a philosophical-political vocation’). Wallach admirably challenges Karl Popper’s over-simplistic depiction of Plato as an authoritarian promoter of totalitarianism, and hopes to bring his own Plato and a concern for virtue back into the modern political-theory conversation. But — and again more problematically — he wants to claim that his Plato is to be identified with the real, historical Plato.

The problem is that there are only two ways to access the historical Plato: through the ‘Platonist’ tradition (Aristotle and following) and through Plato’s own dialogues. Having rejected the Platonist tradition (especially Aristotle), Wallach is left with the dialogues and their contexts. Given that Plato never writes *in propria persona* — and that there is no warrant for claiming that one or another of his characters systematically speaks directly for the author — context is especially important for deciding what Plato actually meant. One approach to contextualizing the dialogues is to employ techniques associated with Quentin Skinner and other intellectual historians, in order to situate the dialogues in the intellectual milieu of a ‘critical community’ of Athenian intellectuals concerned with democracy as a problem. I have, it is only fair to say, argued in detail for just such an approach. But Wallach rejects that sort of contextualization, seeking to place Plato’s work in a wider Athenian (and Greek) cultural and historical context. This is a challenging undertaking, given the wide breadth of what is potentially relevant: it requires the author to have mastered all of classical Greek culture and history.

Wallach has read a great deal about Plato and about Athens (see his very extensive bibliography and detailed notes) and has thought hard about both, but he makes some basic mistakes, e.g. on Athenian government institutions and in translation of Greek terms. More worryingly, he endorses a ‘golden age followed by decline and fall’ conception of Athenian history as the primary frame for the historical Plato’s philosophical enterprise: his Plato is profoundly dismayed by Athens’ ‘fall’. The implication seems to be that if Athens had not lost the Peloponnesian War, and thus had not entered a ‘decline’, Plato would never have been confronted by ‘disturbing trends’ (p. 59) in Athenian politics and so his take on the relationship between the political art and democracy would be very different indeed. But why then are the political dialogues, which are by any account highly critical of Athenian politics as usual, set in the imperial ‘golden age’ of the fifth century and why does Plato’s Socrates spend so much time reviling fifth-century political leaders? If we abandon decline and fall as the historical frame, and focus on democratic Athens’ unexpected recovery during precisely the period in which Plato was writing, it becomes evident that Plato’s real problem is with Athenian democracy as such, not with some fallen ‘age of iron’ version thereof.

Wallach’s attempt to define a ‘historical Plato’ is subject to many of the objections he raises against other scholars’ attempts to define a ‘historical Socrates’. This is not fatal to the enterprise of the book as a whole, but does cast doubt on any claim that we can know just what positive beliefs Plato (as opposed to the characters in his dialogues) actually held about democracy. It is, I suppose, likely that Plato had well-grounded opinions on politics (*inter alia*), and that some of what he taught in the Academy reflected those opinions. But we have only the Platonist tradition for the Academy’s curriculum, and (absent my posited critical community) the dialogues themselves stand in an ambiguous relationship to the doctrines taught by Plato and his contemporaries. Clearly the dialogues concerned with political *techne* and *politeia* must be somehow related to contemporary works in the genres of technical manual-*techne* and ‘*politeia* of x’. But it is unclear just what relationship Wallach supposes they do have. The claim that both Socrates and the Athenians regarded the elenchus as a sort of craft-*techne* (pp. 102 ff.) — a claim evidently meant to build a bridge from the early dialogues in which the concept of *politike techne* is absent to the middle dialogues in which it is important — is unsupported by the texts and seems as unlikely, on the face of it, as does the claim (p. 197) that Protagoras did *not* conceptualize his own practice as a *techne* and never articulated the idea of a political *techne*.

Along with the concept of *techne*, the antithesis between *logos* (word, speech, argument) and *ergon* (fact, deed, thing) lies at the centre of Wallach’s account: ‘Plato’s Socratic Problem’ is, for Wallach, the problem of conjoining *logos* with *ergon*, a problem that became acute with the trial and death of Socrates. *Logos/ergon* is a well known antithesis in Greek literature, and

particularly important (as Wallach points out) to Thucydides. But Wallach's intense focus on it may obscure what is, for Plato, a more fundamental ethical issue: the relationship of *logos* and *bios* (the conduct of an individual life). One thing that does seem clear about the historical Socrates is that he claimed to have unified *logos* with *bios*. That is, he lived his life strictly in accord with unrefuted positions reached in the course of uncoerced conversations. This does not mean that the historical Socrates ever claimed to have final moral knowledge. Dialogue was an ongoing process; if any of his *pro tempore* moral assumptions was refuted in the course of conversation, his behaviour would presumably have changed as a result.

Although Wallach describes Socratic virtue as somehow incoherent (p. 116), it is the moral coherence of Socrates' willingness to follow the unity of *logos* and *bios* to its conclusion (his execution) that set for Plato his 'Socratic problem'. Accepting the premise that life should follow argument, Plato set out to test Socrates' moral assumptions that he had both a duty to obey Athenian law and a capacity to improve the Athenians through elenctic conversations in public and private spaces. If those assumptions were wrong, then something other than a Socrates-imitating *bios* was indicated for the philosopher. Since neither Plato nor his students imitated Socrates' style of life, there is *a priori* reason to believe that Plato discovered arguments to refute certain of Socrates' moral assumptions. The dialogues can be read as engaging 'Socrates' in an extended virtual conversation, wherein key arguments that led the historical Socrates to engage in public conversations and to accept the unjust sentence passed upon him by the democratic authorities are refuted. But such a reading is predicated, once again, on the assumption that Plato wrote in the context of a 'virtual' critical community — a community that included his own departed teacher.

Wallach offers his own readings of a number of dialogues, at varying levels of detail. His extended treatment of the *Protagoras* (pp. 146–78) is especially good, rightly emphasizing the troubled relationship of the doctrines espoused by Plato's Protagoras with conventional (democratic) Athenian thinking, and elegance of Plato's Socrates' exposure of the trouble that results from attempting simultaneously to embrace conventionalism and to offer students mastery of the art of governance. Following the complexities of Plato's arguments is Wallach's strongest suit; this fine section owes little to 'critical historicism'. Turning to the *Gorgias*, Wallach is worried (pp. 180–81) by Plato's (I would say deliberate) vagueness regarding the dramatic date of this dialogue; such vagueness makes it difficult to situate the dialogue within the 'decline and fall' historical frame. Yet, once again turning away from critical historicism and to the argument of the dialogue, Wallach offers an excellent treatment of Socrates' *politike technē*, the originality of this conception as an art of soulcraft, and why such an art must reject conventionalism and thus abandon the ordinary conception of politics as concerned with power and collectivities.

Yet democracy, of course, is fundamentally concerned with power (*kratos*) and a collectivity (*demos*). The art of politics to which the *Gorgias* points (and which the *Republic* elucidates) is presented by Plato as a radical alternative to democracy, not as a critical corrective of it. Wallach suggests that the *Gorgias*' criticism of rhetoric need not necessarily be read as a criticism of democracy, but this distinction cannot stand in light of the dialogue's detailed exposure of how Callicles' soul has been systematically corrupted by the false education offered by his *demos*-lover. Gorgias' course in rhetoric does its part by misleading Callicles into believing that there is a technique by which a would-be leader may love the *demos* as its master, rather than as its instrument. But the groundwork of miseducating Callicles is done by the democratic culture itself: there is no compromise offered, in the *Gorgias* or the *Republic*, between the Socratic art of politics and the Athenian practice of democracy.

The *Republic* (*Politeia*: notably not '*politeia* of x') offers a detailed expression of the political art alluded to in the *Gorgias*. The key move in the *Republic*, one that serves to define the Socratic art of politics and renders democracy an impossibility *ab initio*, is what philosophers have sometimes called the 'unique aptitude doctrine': the establishment of a 'principle of specialization', whereby each individual is to do one and only one thing in society. This turns out to mean that those engaged in any sort of productive work (the craft-*technai* as ordinarily conceived) are *ipso facto* unsuited for the work of governance, which is turned over to an elite of specially-educated rulers. Initially it appears that the rulers will be a fairly extensive class of guards, but ultimately rulership is entrusted to the much more restricted group of philosopher-kings. The latter govern on the basis of certain knowledge (derived from their apprehension of the Forms); and thus all of the ordinary business of democratic politics, based as it must be on decision-making under conditions of dissent and uncertainty, is written out of the picture.

It therefore seems wrong for Wallach to suggest (p. 287) that Callipolis is not directly opposed to democracy, but only to the injustice produced by any regime of power. It is certainly true that the stated goal of constructing (in words) an ideal state is to prove that justice is a good unto itself, free from any instrumental considerations. But the democracy-eliminating 'unique aptitude doctrine' is explicitly put into place as a foundational principle and at the very beginning of the project, 'the greatest part of any enterprise' (*Republic* 377a); it is not a potentially revisable side-effect that emerges along the way. Education in Callipolis is intended to prevent the sort of miseducation that Callicles received from the *demos*; notably it is systematically designed (e.g. through careful censorship of literature) to eliminate dissent. Among the dialogue's central criticisms of poetry is that it teaches people that change is natural and desirable (388e) and that disobedience to established authority is possible (389d–90a). Given the educational goal of eliminating all resources that might allow for even the conceptualization of dissent, it seems specious to

claim (p. 306 ff) that Callipolis is founded on the principle of rational consent on the part of the governed.

Of course the *Republic* was not Plato's last word on the political art; the *Laws*, long wrongfully neglected as a benighted product of Plato's dotage, has been the recent focus of renewed philosophical attention. Wallach provides a good overview of this long dialogue, clearly elucidating its concern for eliminating all forms of civil conflict (including political dissent and majority rule: p. 361) and its elitist premises (e.g. the strictly oligarchic principle that only landed proprietors may be citizens: pp. 382–83). It thus seems a sort of sleight of hand to claim that it is also compatible with democracy. How, for example, can an educational plan for the systematic behavioural conditioning of children, who are to be taught through 'pain and pleasure' to 'hate what ought to be hated' *before* they have become rational beings (*Laws* 653b–c) possibly be correlated with 'quintessentially democratic criteria' for good citizenship (Wallach, p. 363)? To claim (p. 367) that the Athenian Stranger's endorsement of a fictive 'ancestral' Athenian constitutional order constitutes praise of 'a form of democracy' is to elide the political force of the well-known practice of democracy's critics (e.g. Isocrates, *Areopagiticus*) of manufacturing fanciful and highly elitist 'ancestral constitutions' for Athens, to which real Athenian democracy could be negatively compared.

Wallach's conclusions seek to bring his historicized Plato into the modern conversation. He suggests that Plato's view of political virtue (that the *demos* is not virtuous but should be) is a salutary corrective to both self-satisfied Athenian notions (that the *demos* needs to be and is virtuous) and modern assumptions (that the *demos* neither is nor need be virtuous). Wallach counterpoises Plato's political art, with its great concern for conflict and its avoidance, with the political theories of Rawls and Habermas. Wallach accuses both modern theorists (and their many followers) of failing even to confront the problem of conflict. By contrast, Plato confronted conflict head on. But it remains questionable whether Plato's solution to the problem of conflict (centred on the unique aptitude doctrine) has anything of positive value to say to democrats, ancient or modern. Wallach writes hopefully of an 'almost oxymoronic' perspective of a 'democratically Platonic political art' (p. 418). I fear that such a perspective is simply oxymoronic. That is not, however, to question whether Plato is a valuable interlocutor for practitioners and theorists of democracy. It is, I think, quite certain that ancient Athenian democracy was changed and probably improved by an engagement (at various levels of remove) with Plato's staunchly (as I see it) critical take on contemporary democratic practices — and I see no reason why a similar engagement could not play a role in changing and improving modern democracy. But the engagement I imagine need not make of Plato a friend of democracy; it need not suppose that he actually had the slightest interest or hope of changing Athenian political culture for the better.

Among Wallach's primary goals is to move the discussion of Plato and politics past the World War II and Cold War dichotomies most clearly exemplified by Popper's *Open Society and Its Enemies*. That he certainly has done. Wallach's historicist reading of Plato is much more convincing, subtle, and more deeply grounded in the texts than Popper's. But part of the Cold War legacy is a bipolar conceptual universe in which friends and enemies exist in worlds apart. Michael Walzer has argued, eloquently and convincingly, that it is possible for democracy to learn from severe critics — but with the proviso that those critics must be 'internal' — in that their criticism consists of calling the democratic regime to be true to its own deepest and truest values. Wallach expends a good deal of effort in seeking to make Plato into something like an internal critic of Athenian democracy — into the sort of critic who embraces core values compatible with democracy, and hopes to further the project of instantiating those values within the democratic regime. But in the end, Plato simply does not fit the bill: it requires ignoring too many key passages in the dialogues to make Plato over from a staunch critic, who believed that only a wholesale revolution in politics, one that would replace the power of the *demos* with the rule of an elite of the wise (and the laws they promulgated), could bring about genuine conditions of justice.

Once we have transcended the simplistic World War II era dichotomy of 'friends and enemies' that so rightly troubles Wallach, the dialogues of a staunch 'external' critic, the products of a genuinely revolutionary thinker who was the declared enemy of injustice but not of any existing regime in particular, can emerge as a resource for democratic change. One need not accept the positive claims of Plato's political art to feel the force of his critique of Athenian democracy as a regime of power that produced systematic injustices. Accepting the fallibility and provisional nature of democratic processes, and thus acknowledging that we will never eliminate all instances of injustice, does not mean that we should allow ourselves to ignore the sharp wake-up sting that comes with reading the works of the finest student of Athens' most famous gadfly. That Plato, unlike Socrates, could not have cared less whether we modern democrats (who are by definition unsuited to master his political art) even notice that sting, is entirely beside the point.

I have myself been quite critical, in the course of this review, of some of the arguments in Wallach's impressive book. But that should not distract readers from its virtues. It is the great success of Wallach's passionate and erudite account of the Platonic political art that it presents today's political theorists with a complex and rebarbative Plato, a critical thinker who is in no simple sense an enemy of democracy, and who is entirely worth the trouble of reading with great care and close attention to history.