

# On the title of Plato's Republic (POLITEIA)<sup>1</sup>

by Lancelot R. Fletcher

## I

When I started to write about the meaning of the title, I intended to add just a few words to what Bloom has to say about the derivation of the Greek title, Politeia, and about the meaning of polis. But then a number of questions occurred to me:

The first question was simply, what did Plato mean by his title? At first, I thought it would be sufficient to talk just about what I mentioned above--the derivation of politeia, etc. But then I saw that there was much more to it, because Plato had chosen a word with enormous and complex resonance both for his own time and with respect to the time of the dramatic setting of the dialogue.

A second and perhaps more clearly philosophical issue derives from the fact that politeia is both strange and familiar at the same time. The strangeness requires little argument. What I mean by the familiarity is that the word that is the root of politeia, namely polis, has penetrated our ordinary language in the form of such words as politics, police, policy, metropolis, etc. If we take its real Latin translation, civitas, moreover, we see that indirectly it has given us civic, civilization, etc.

If politeia were merely alien, the attempt to translate it adequately would be challenging, perhaps, like the attempt to translate Chinese poetry into English, but it would not necessarily be philosophical. But because the word politeia is both alien and familiar at the same time, the attempt to translate it is not only an effort to come to know that which we do not know, and know that we do not know. In addition, it becomes an effort of coming to know again that which we already know but have somehow forgotten. In other words, the problem of translating politeia is a problem in acquiring self-knowledge; a process of coming to know that which we do not know that we know, and therefore we do not know that we do not know it.

## II

Bloom tells us that "Republic" is the English equivalent of Cicero's Latin translation of the Greek title, which was "Politeia." The word politeia is derived from polis by way of polites, meaning citizen. Polis means the city, not in the sense of a settlement, but as "the community of men sharing a way of life and governing themselves, waging war and preserving the peace." The polites is the citizen, literally one who belongs to the city. Politeia is derived from a verb, politeuo, meaning to act as a citizen. Bloom suggests that the best word by which to interpret politeia is the word, "regime."

John Sallis in "Being and Logos" largely follows Bloom:

"The word which is translated "Republic," following Cicero's Latin translation, is "politeia." This word does not mean "republic" in the sense of "state" or "nation"; for,

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in fact, in Greek political life there was nothing corresponding to the modern state or nation; indeed, it would be exceedingly difficult to overstress the radical difference between the modern state and the Greek city. Thus, "politeia" is to be understood in reference to the meaning of "polis," from which it is derived. But the two do not mean the same: politeia is not city but rather regime, in the broad sense in which we speak, for example, of the "ancien regime" of France; or, alternatively, politeia is constitution, not in the sense of the laws of the city or the document in which the laws are set down, but rather in the sense of the basic make-up of the city, the ordering or arrangement of men with regard to political power."

In my opinion, "regime" is not a satisfactory translation of Politeia. The word "regime" is derived from a Latin word meaning rule. It has the same root as such English words as regulate, regal and regiment. The word regime totally forgets the city and the actions of the citizen, which the word politeia will not allow us to neglect. It is not that the notion of rule was absent from the Greek polis. But the essence of the polis was the combination of the notion of rule with the notion of equality, such that rule was not understood as the domination of one individual by the force or will of another, but the subordination of all to a rule applying equally to all which all give to themselves. To quote Victor Ehrenberg,

"...it was not the individual citizen who exercised political rule as judge, Councillor, official or member of the Ecclesia (assembly), but the whole body of citizens, represented by law court, Council, office or popular assembly. The public spirit of the citizens, which really held the Polis together, rested on their identity with the state--that is to say, on the basic fact of "politeia." This is also the reason why the representative principle remained alien to the Polis. It was essential that the individual should share in the life of the state directly and personally. The Polis was not only the soil from which the autonomous individual arose--lastly in conflict with it, though never without it--but it was the citizen of the Polis in his voluntary and unquestioned devotion to the state that represented Greek man in his perfection." (The Greek State, p.91)

What about the alternative translation that Sallis proposes: "constitution"? This has a good deal to recommend it. The most important thing being that it is the standard translation of Politeia as it appears in a number of other titles, most notably a work by Aristotle: "Athenaios Politeia." Nobody, as far as I know, has ever proposed translating that title as "The Athenian Republic," but the standard translation is, "The Athenian Constitution." or "The Constitution of Athens."

In addition to this, English nouns ending in "tion" like constitution are analogous to Greek nouns ending in "eia", like Politeia and paideia in a significant way: in general, both groups of nouns are derived from verbs and tend to refer both to an action and to the result of that action. Constitution, for example, can be understood as the act or process of constituting something, or as the finished result of that act. In the case of Politeia, I think it is very important to understand this as both the act or process of being a citizen (for which the word "citizenship" suggests itself as appropriate) and the result of that process.

On the whole, I think "Constitution" is a lot better than "regime," but it is still inadequate for the reason that it completely omits reference to the polis and the polites.

### III

Here is the definition of Politeia from the Liddell & Scott Greek-English Lexicon:

"The relation of a citizen to the state, the condition and rights of a citizen, citizenship, Lat. civitas. 2. the life of a citizen. II the life of a statesman, government, administration. III Civil policy, the condition of a state, constitution. 2. a commonwealth: a republic. [from politeuo]"

Politeia is derived from Polis by way of "polites" (citizen) and "politeuo" the verb.

Polis means city, originally not in the sense of settlement, but in the sense of fortified place. For the purpose of the following analysis, it is important to bear in mind, first that the notion of polis contains, not merely the notion of a place, but also the notion of certain actions, actions of mutual defense and protection, for which the place is designed, and, second, that these actions implicitly presuppose a plurality of individuals.

("Acropolis" can be translated either as "high fort" or "high city". The word for the settlement in or near the fortified place was "astu". It is worth noting that Latin preserves exactly the same derivation, even though the words are completely different. In Latin the word from which our word city is derived, "civitatem", bears the same connotation as polis, as may be seen from the fact it is also the root of the word citadel. The word for the settlement in or around the fortified place was urbs, from which we have such English words as urban and suburb. Note also that both Greek and Latin have given us words that describe the character or personality of the city-dweller: "astute" and "urbane". Also "politic", "civil" and "civilized".)

politeuo, according to my Liddell and Scott Greek-English lexicon, means: to be a citizen or freeman, to live in a free state. To have a certain form of government (namely a polity) to have public affairs administered in a certain way.

Politeuo is a verb derived from the noun polites meaning citizen. It may be that the difficulty of translating politeia starts with the fact that in English it is somewhat less customary to derive verbs from nouns than it is to derive nouns from verbs. We have a large class of agent nouns--nouns that denote one who performs a certain action. But to take a noun and make it into a verb denoting the action by which the thing referred to by the noun expresses its essential nature can be done in English, but rarely without a sense of neologism.

So let us look at the whole etymology: Politeia is a noun derived from a verb (politeuo) derived from a noun (polites) derived from another noun which, however, designates a place designed for a certain kind of action by a plurality of individuals (in other words, a noun with verbal connotations). Again, politeia is the noun which refers to the actions which express the being of those individuals whose specific nature is constituted by the fact that they belong to the polis. Thus politeia constitutes the citizens as citizens and, at the same time, constitutes the city as a city.

## IV

As mentioned above, Bloom's note on the title tells us that Republic, is Cicero's Latin "translation" of Plato's title, which in Greek was Politeia. "Re Publica" literally means, the people's thing. The thing that belongs to the people or the thing that primarily and essentially concerns the people. How does this differ from Politeia? In the first place, it substitutes "people" for "citizens." (Not all of the people who reside in a particular city are citizens of that city, so what is of concern to all of the people is not necessarily the same as what is of concern to citizens insofar as they are citizens.) In the second place, all reference to the city is suppressed by translating politeia as Republic. Finally, the ambiguity of politeia, referring to both the action of citizens and the result of the action, is suppressed by Cicero's translation, as politeia is simply becomes a thing ("re").

What is most puzzling is that Cicero used this manifestly inaccurate translation of Politeia when, it seems, a perfectly adequate Latin translation of Plato's Politeia was available to him, namely "Civitas." If Cicero had so chosen, we would now know this book either as "citizenship" or as "Civilization."

I think there is a kind of historico-philosophical lesson to be had from the fact that Cicero chose to translate Politeia as he did, and that is that already by Cicero's time (which was a lot closer to Plato's time than ours, but still several centuries later) the relationship between the activity of citizenship and the boundedness of a city had become obscure. We need to note how this issue becomes a problem even in the discussion between Polemarchus and Socrates.

## V

In order to fully appreciate what Plato had in mind in giving this work the title Politeia, it is necessary to say something about the historical context of its dramatic setting. (It might also be nice to say something about the historical context of its publication, but while the dramatic date of the dialogue can be specified with reasonable precision, it is almost impossible to pin down the date of its publication to anything less than a range of ten or twenty years.)

Bloom, along with the majority of scholars, gives the dramatic date of the dialogue as "around 411 BC." In the footnote in which he gives this date, Bloom alludes to the oligarchic coup in 404 BC that briefly brought to power the junta known as the "Thirty Tyrants," and he says, "The conversation of the Republic takes place in the shadow of the "Thirty." But then Bloom makes an extremely odd, ahistorical comment: He says, "The men who gather here in happy days for a theoretical conversation are soon to fall on evil ones in the practice of politics."

In my opinion this is a fundamental error on Bloom's part – or rather it indicates that he has approached the dialogue with a predisposition to find in it a theoretical discussion – an assumption that I would strenuously dispute. 411 BC was by no means a time of "happy days" for the citizens of Athens. In fact, 411 BC was the date of another oligarchic coup and of a political-social-constitutional crisis that was, if anything, even more profound than that which occurred in 404 BC. Once we become clear about the nature of the crisis which forms the dramatic context for the discussion of the Republic, we may recognize that in such a context the discussion contained in the Republic might well appear as far from entirely theoretical. In connection with our inquiry into the meaning of Plato's title, it is particularly important to note that rhetorically the constitutional crisis of 411 BC revolved around a call

for a return to the "patrios politeia," usually translated as the "ancestral constitution." Indeed, while discussing the "constitutional convention" at Colonus (a place just outside of Athens proper which was the setting of a famous play by Sophocles) in 411, Aristotle specifically identifies Cleitophon as having offered an amendment calling for an investigation of the ancient constitution of Cleisthenes. Cleitophon was one of those present in the Republic (he speaks very briefly in Book I).

Even apart from the oligarchic coup of 411 BC, it is hard to understand how one could describe that period in Athens as one of happy days. 411 BC was the 20th year of the great Peloponnesian war. More importantly, it was only about two years after the disastrous defeat of the Athenian expeditionary force in Sicily, described by Thucydides in one of the greatest passages in all of classical literature which concludes,

"This was the greatest Hellenic achievement of any in this war, or, in my opinion, in Hellenic history; at once most glorious to the victors, and most calamitous to the conquered. They were beaten at all points and altogether; all that they suffered was great; they were destroyed, as the saying is, with a total destruction, their fleet, their army, everything was destroyed, and few out of many returned home."

To understand the magnitude of the Athenian defeat, consider the following. It is estimated that the Athenians lost approximately 35,000 men in Sicily in a few months. This is at the same order of magnitude as the total losses sustained by the U.S. Army in Viet Nam over a period of eight years. The U.S. losses in Viet Nam were sustained by a country of more than 200 million. The Athenian losses in Sicily were suffered by a city whose total population at the time was less than 300,000.

Given the scale of the defeat suffered by the Athenians, and especially given that the decision to mount the expedition had been controversial at its inception and had been opposed by many as foolhardy, it is not surprising that the defeat gave rise to a major constitutional crisis. In fact it appears that the Sicilian defeat was only the occasion which brought to a head a conflict which had been gathering in Athens for more than a decade. While the government during this period was increasingly democratic (increasingly dominated, that is, by the concerns of the many, especially by the many poor), the men of the wealthier classes, particularly the intellectuals, became increasingly antidemocratic in their sentiments and, to some extent, in their actions.

Although the initial actions taken after the Sicilian defeat were in the nature of stop-gap measures, there was an increasing amount of public conversation about the need to alter the democratic form of government in order to bring about a solution to the constitutional crisis. As Martin Ostwald observes,

"Between the reforms of Solon and the defeat in Sicily, Athens had indeed developed democratic institutions, but neither Athens nor any other Greek city had developed a theory of democracy--or, for that matter, a consistent view of oligarchical government--of articulate principles of popular sovereignty to provide any guidelines in 413 BC." [Failing to find such principles elsewhere,] concerned Athenians had to find in their own political heritage a model to create a system of government that would not repeat the mistakes of the immediate past. Accordingly, about this time Athenians became concerned to bring the constitution of this state back into line with the patrios politeia....Even opponents of the democracy had to

present their programs as attempts to restore the political conditions of a rosier past. The wish to bring the past to bear upon reshaping the present did not abate until the stabler democracy, based on the principle of the sovereignty of the law, emerged in the years following the overthrow of the Thirty Tyrants."

In summary, then, the Republic is set in the midst of a period of extraordinary political breakdown, when a series of defeats, emergencies and scandals had created a widespread feeling that the existing political institutions were not working satisfactorily and had generated an unusual public conversation in which fundamental questions about how public affairs should be organized were suddenly perceived as requiring immediate, urgent attention. And the single word around which these discussions revolved was Politeia.

There was a treatise entitled "Athenaion Politeia", usually translated, "The Constitution of the Athenians," which seems to have appeared about 425 BC and which was at one time attributed to Xenophon, although that attribution is now generally discounted. Now the author is generally referred to as "the Old Oligarch."

Aristotle published a treatise with almost the same title, which is usually translated as "the Athenian Constitution." This work, of course, was written some years after the Republic. It is one of the most important sources for information about Athenian political history, and it contains detailed accounts of the oligarchic coups of 411 BC and 404 BC

Apparently there is extant the text--or fragments--of a speech entitled "On the Constitution [or Politeia]" from the last decade of the fifth century. This speech is usually attributed to one Herodes, but at least one scholar has assigned it to Critias. This attribution, if valid, would be extremely important, since Plato, as well as Glaucon and Adeimantus, were Critias's nephews, and also Critias appears to have been part of the audience to whom Socrates recounted the events described in the Republic on the following day (if one accepts, as I do, the hypothesis that the summary of Socrates' discourse from the previous day which is given at the opening of the Timaeus is intended to refer to the Republic).

## VI

When I studied the Republic with Allan Bloom in 1962, his translation had not yet appeared in print, but he distributed sections of it in mimeographed form to the students in his small seminar. As he was passing out the copies of his translation of Book I in the first class, I remember his saying something like this: "A good translator must be either supremely intelligent or a complete idiot. A supremely intelligent translator would understand both languages perfectly and would also understand exactly what the author meant and would therefore be able to find precisely the words that would perfectly express in the second language what the author meant to signify in the original. A complete idiot would translate like a machine, always rendering a given word in the original by the same word in the translation, with no sensitivity to context or connotation. Unfortunately, most human translators are neither supremely intelligent nor complete idiots, so their translations tend to tell us as much about the translator as they do about the author." In short, translation without interpretation is humanly impossible. In fact, in Greek the same word--hermeneia--(from which we have the word hermeneutics) is used for both, and also for understanding.

But the philosophical issue presented by the problem of translating Politeia is not the philosophical issue of translation in general.

It has been said that Politeia is untranslatable because the word has no exact English equivalent. The lack of an exact lexical equivalent is the commonest problem encountered by a translator. The fact that it is a common problem does not, of course, mean that it is devoid of philosophical interest. The absence of exact lexical equivalence among different languages has led, for example, to a good deal of discussion about the degree to which the differences among languages reflect differences in ways of thought that are embedded in cultural or linguistic practice. At its extreme, this sort of discussion leads to linguistic, cultural or historical relativism, according to which lexical difference is ultimately incorrigible and what we are left with is the awareness of difference and limitation.

But that is not the only possibility. Sometimes the lack of lexical equivalence simply sets the stage for interlinguistic loans. For example, "suttee" or "sati" is a Sanskrit word which may originally have meant "virtuous or chaste woman" and which came to mean the practice of self-immolation by a widow on her dead husband's funeral pyre. The practice was alien and revolting to native English speakers when they first encountered it, and there was certainly no English word for it, so the English language has simply incorporated the Sanskrit word.

These, then, are in general the two alternatives that translators have for translating words in the original language that refer to things that are alien to speakers of the second language: they substitute an explanatory definition for the original word, or they can borrow the word itself and relegate the definition to a footnote.

To suggest that the difficulty of translating Politeia is because the institution to which Politeia refers is essentially alien to English speakers is at least misleading, if not flatly false. Yes, it is true that we have nothing that is exactly equivalent to the Polis, and it is also true that "City-State" is not an adequate translation of the word Polis. And it is true that "citizenship" and "constitution" are not adequate translations of politeia, although they have been used.

But it is also true that, far from being alien to us, the institutional background of politeia is our own, and our everyday language is replete with words that take their origin from the same linguistic fountain that gave life to politeia. It is in this context that we find the philosophical significance of the problem of translating the title of the Republic.

For the fact is that we cannot seriously attempt to define politeia without either using a word that is clearly related to it, like "politics," or else a word that is derived from a Latin or Germanic equivalent (as citizenship is derived from the Latin equivalent for Polis or, to take a more remote example, "bourgeois" is derived from a Germanic root--Burg--meaning city, interestingly enough, with the same associated meaning of "fortress" that we see connected with Polis and with Civitatem.)

Consider the following words: Citizen, citizenship; Civil, civilized, civilization, civic, civics, civil servant, civil rights, civilian, civil law, civility, civil liberties, civil war; Polity, politician, politics, police, policy, politic, political.

From all of these words there is only one aspect of politeia that is missing, and that is not an unfamiliar one but in a way the most obvious: the city.

No, the difficulty of translating politeia is not that it is institutionally alien, but quite the opposite: Politeia is difficult to translate because it is too familiar, too intimate, too deeply

within us. Politeia is difficult to translate because we are somehow constituted by it and do not know it. **Politeia is difficult to translate because the attempt to translate this word forces us to confront the fact that we do not know ourselves.**

This, of course, is exactly the purpose of Socratic philosophy.

Now, you may ask, if these considerations arise in connection with the difficulty of translating Politeia, how can they form any part of Plato's intention, since presumably Plato did not write with the aim of making philosophical points that would not be available for people who read him in the original but would only be intelligible for readers of a language that did not exist at the time he wrote his dialogues? But in fact the relationship between translation and interpretation lets us know that this point does not really depend on interlinguistic interpretation. The self-forgetting about the nature of the polis which nonetheless permeates our language was at least as true for Plato's contemporaries as it is for us. It is clear from the usage of Patrios Politeia, as ancestral constitution, that much about the polis and about the polites (citizen) had already become opaque for men living in Plato's time.

It is also clear from Aristotle's Politics that the word Politeia was already problematic in ancient times. This is indicated by the fact that Politeia is used by Aristotle both to designate any of a number of possible forms of governmental organization and at the same time is used to specify a particular form of governmental organization, which Aristotle holds to be the best.

Translation asks the question, "What does X mean?" or "What IS X?" where X is a word in a foreign language. Socrates asks, "What does X mean?" or "What IS X?" where X is a common word like justice or courage or wisdom or piety.

At first it may seem rather bizarre to suggest that the question confronting the translator is anything like the question confronting a person who is questioned by Socrates. After all, the translator is concerned with words that are strange to him and stranger to his audience, and his task is to make those words intelligible to his audience by rendering them in terms that are already familiar to them. Socrates, on the other hand, asks his interlocutors to define words that are already familiar to them. Words that they use habitually. But the consequence of being questioned by Socrates in this way is that the words suddenly show up for them as strange, as words whose meaning they do not fully understand. Socratic questioning thus puts us in the position of the translator, except that with Socrates our own words become for us a foreign language.

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