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# Plato and ἀδύνατον: *The Alibi of One Utopia*

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*Keywords:* Plato; political philosophy; Republic; colonization; utopia;  
logos; impossible landscape; territorialization.

*Abstract:* The paper discusses the realistic application of Plato's Kallipolis, providing results of recent studies on Greek colonization and cultural poetics. The Republic is just one among other colonization projects proposed by Athenian intellectuals in 4th century BC. Participants of the dialogue are quite familiar with real colonization practices. Socrates gives concise and clear indications on the typical recolonisation scenario to implement. The notoriously enigmatic saying that the ideal polis is to be found "nowhere on earth," should be examined in the context of legendary tales about the foundations of colonies.

δεῖ μὲν οὖν ὑποτίθεσθαι κατ' εὐχὴν, μηδὲν μὲντοι ἀδύνατον<sup>1</sup>.  
Aristotle. *Politics*, II. 1265a17

He saw things which had not been seen before him and  
which were rediscovered only in our own time.  
Karl Popper. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*



WE ENCOUNTER a strange inversion. Aristotle calls Plato to φίλος, a friend, and spends twenty years in communication with him. Popper calls Plato an enemy and lives two thousand years later in a non-overlapping aeon. “Fellow” Aristotle repudiates Plato’s political thought in view of reality: the hypothesis of the ideal polis is impossible, ἀδύνατον. “Remote” Popper, on the contrary, discerns such an undeniable connection with reality that it is equated to a crime without expiration. Why? In trying to answer this question, one can remember, along the lines of Deleuze, that philosophy is a matter of friendship, while in hard times even a good friend cannot be trusted.<sup>2</sup> Or one can conclude, along the lines of Schmitt, that politics rest upon the distinction between a friend and an enemy, and hence it should not be excluded that enemies comprehend our politics even better than friends<sup>3</sup> [Schmitt 1932]. However, we will choose a different scenario: what role does ἀδύνατον play in politics? What if the “impossible” symbolises not the end of history, but rather its beginning?

Below we will return to the famous finale of *The Republic’s* Book IX, the source of constant inspiration for at least two mutually exclusive groups: leisurely dreamers devising utopian projects and austere realists who never get tired of expressing their indignation over inappropriate fantasies. But first let us turn to Socrates, not at the triumphant moment which serves as a prologue to the majestic vision of Er, but in a more formal part of the dialogue where practical particularities regarding the foundation of Callipolis are discussed. At the end of Book VII, imbued with bold ideas and images (the symbol of the cave, the hierar-

1. “One should propose arbitrary hypotheses, as long as they are not impossible.”
2. See Gilles Deleuze’s letter to Dionys Mascolo from the August 6, 1988 [Lambert 2008: 37–38].
3. The congeniality of friends is discussed in the finale of the speech “Über das Zeitalter der Neutralisierungen und Entpolitischen,” included in this edition.

chy of the sciences, the definition of dialectics), Socrates utters a phrase in which he expresses the hope that what was said by his companions with regard to the state and its organisation is “not merely vain dreams but something, although difficult, yet possible”: *μη παντάπασιν ἡμᾶς εὐχᾶς εἰρηκέναι, ἀλλὰ χαλεπὰ μὲν, δυνατὰ δέ πη* [Plato *Rep.* 540d2–3]. This phrase is read as a foretelling of Aristotle’s critical response, stated in the epigraph,<sup>4</sup> but now we will focus our attention on its continuation: “Someday true philosophers will become the rulers of the state,—Socrates says,—and then in the future they will establish their own state (*διασκευωρήσονται τὴν ἑαυτῶν πόλιν*).” “How exactly?”—his interlocutor reacts laconically, and the readers find themselves, at first glance, in a strange situation. Were the previous five books of *The Republic* (exclusive of Book I standing on its own) not dedicated to the very theme of how to organise a new polis in the future? It becomes necessary here to take caution and to remember the logic of the preceding speculation.

It starts with the analogy between the soul of a human being and the state (in Book II). Socrates suggests that it is necessary to examine the origin of justice and inequality, imagining in the mind’s eye (*θεασαίμεθα λόγῳ*) the emerging polis [369a5]. In such a way, what we behold is a mental experiment. The theoretical status of this contemplation is confirmed in the subsequent books.<sup>5</sup> The analogy between the soul and the state formally ends only in Book IV, after which the essential part of Book V is allocated to the consideration of the thorny subject of the commonness of wives and children. Finally, in the middle of the same book, the direct question of the implementation of the ideal mode of life is raised [472b], and, further on, the claim to prove the possibility of the foundation of the described polis is put forward [472e4]. With some reservations, Socrates agrees to provide the required evidence, claiming that, for the transformation of a bad state structure into an ideal state structure, only one change is necessary, yet a radical change—philosophers must come to power. Socrates’ words trigger a lively reaction from his companions, and for this reason the end of the fifth and the beginning of the sixth books are concerned with the definition of a true philosopher. This fascinating digression from the general line of argument for the feasibility of Callipolis should not, however, cloud the fact that the philosophers’ coming to power does not mean an automatic transformation of the polis into an ideal one. The radical

4. The quotation, stated in the epigraph, formally belongs to *Laws* and not *The Republic*.

5. For example, Book IV: *νῦν μὲν οὖν ... πλάττομεν* [420c1], “now we are molding in our imagination.”

change offers only an *opportunity* (ἄν...ἔλθοι εἰς τοῦτον τὸν τρόπον τῆς πολιτείας πόλις [473b6], αὕτη ἡ πολιτεία...φύη τε εἰς τὸ δυνατὸν καὶ φῶς ἡλίου ἴδῃ [473e1]). At this stage, there is nothing yet said about the practical means of transforming the given polis into the ideal one. A clarification emerges in the middle of Book VI. The rise to power of philosophers is a matter of happy chance, one possibility in a sea of infinite historical possibilities, which someday will most certainly result in the acquisition of monarchical power by people of philosophical nature. It might happen anywhere, although not everywhere, “in some barbaric locale, far away, beyond our horizon” [499c9]. This rectification, put somewhat in brackets, is very important, and for this reason this perplexity should be pinpointed in order to make way for our subsequent attempt at its clarification: why do Greeks, the founders of a new city, find themselves outside of Greece? Finally, the key passage:

They will begin by taking the State and the manners of men, from which, as from a tablet (πίνακα), they will rub out (καθαρὰν ποιήσειαν ἄν) the picture, and leave a clean surface. This is no easy task. But whether easy or not, herein will lie the difference between them and every other legislator—they will have nothing to do (ἐθελῆσαι ἄν ἀψασθαι) either with individual or State, and will inscribe no laws, until they have either found, or themselves made, a clean surface. [501a2–7].

This mysterious text obscures rather than clarifies the question of the establishment of the ideal polis. The first stage is a catharsis, a religious rite, the cleansing of the city and the morals of the people. Previously, there was no reference to this, whereas the mentioned “draft of the state’s structure” is implemented only at the next stage. However, Socrates’ interlocutor does not pay any special attention to the “innovation,” taking it for granted. The polis, along with its entire population, is in need of cleansing—an extraordinary event, but from the point of view of the interlocutor, it is apparently expected. Further particularities appear only at the end of Book VII, where, in effect, speculation on the matter of the actual establishment of the ideal state actually ends. And again, the companions, evidently understanding each other without words, are content with Socrates’s sparing elucidations about how the philosophers will enact the foundation of the city:

They will begin by sending out into the country all the inhabitants of the city who are more than ten years old, and will take possession of their children, who will be unaffected by the habits of their parents; these they will train in their own habits and laws, I mean in the laws which we have given them: and in this way the State and constitution

of which we were speaking will soonest and most easily attain happiness, and the nation which has such a constitution will gain most [540e5–541a7].

The modern reader sees in this description an awkward synthesis of cynical biopolitics and political opportunism. The proposed plan of the seizure of power is a military operation in its scope. Even if one puts aside the moral side of the matter, can it be argued that the practical realisation of the political project of *The Republic* merely relies on Socrates' singular phrase? Such carelessness makes one suspect that the companions intentionally do not attach value to practicalities inasmuch as they do not believe in success and do not want to realise their plans. Indeed, does not the proof of possibility turn into the demonstration of helplessness? Does it appear that the genuine meaning of Plato's ἀδύνατον is impotence, incapability of practical deed?

There is an element that is left without attention. In Book III, after the narration of the myth of earth-born people educated as if in a dream, Socrates also briefly speaks about the transition of power in the city to the control of ideal wardens:

Now, let our earth born men equipped with armoury go forth under the command of their rulers. And when they reach the destination, let them look around and pitch their camp in a high place which will be safe against enemies from without, if the enemy pounces like a wolf at the flock, and likewise against insurrections from within, if one dares not to obey the law. There, let them sacrifice and set up their tents [415d7–e4].

This description resembles the annexation of a city by a foreign army: if the warriors were locals they would not need to look around. This plan differs from the one outlined above with regard to several details: here, the appearance of the philosopher does not play a role; the sacrifices performed after the seizure of power apparently do not constitute a part of the rite of the cleansing of the city; inhabitants are allowed to live in the city and not in the village. The differences in the plans of the seizure of power can likely be explained by the gradual change in the conception of *The Republic*, which had been created over the course of several decades. It is reasonable to regard the books, from the second to the fifth, as a product of the initial version of the dialogue where attention is primarily drawn to the accomplishment of wardens and not philosophers. The assumption about the existence of such a version is legitimate [Thesleff 1982] inasmuch as the recitation of *The Republic* in the beginning of the dialogue *Timaeus* corresponds to it and not to the text that came down

to us [*Tim.* 17a-19b]. One way or another, aside from detailed theoretical speculation about the organisation of Callipolis, Socrates proposes two concrete plans of military seizure of power in some already existing city for its subsequent transformation into an ideal city. The laconism of plans is, theoretically, not an objection to their realisation: who completely discloses the aim of “revolution”? Only those who do not wish for its success. On the contrary, true conspirators limit themselves to a hint. The hint links the theme under discussion to generally accessible knowledge. If illustrative examples of the realisation of analogous plans are contained within the limits of common knowledge in the classical epoch, then the hint given in *The Republic* by Socrates fulfills its function and is sufficient, notwithstanding its desultoriness. In this case, the “subtlety” of the hint testifies not to the helplessness of thought in the face of reality but to carefulness with regard to the treatment of reality, the realisation of which is conceived as desirable and possible.

\* \* \*

In the *Seventh Letter*, Plato describes his situation during the years of political standstill that followed the Civil War (404/3 BC) and the execution of Socrates (399 BC):

...it was not possible to be active in politics without friends and trustworthy supporters (*ἀνευ φίλων ἀνδρῶν καὶ ἐταίρων πιστῶν*); and to find these ready at my hand was not an easy matter...though at first I had been full of a strong impulse towards political life, as I looked at the course of affairs and saw them being swept in all directions by contending currents, my head finally began to swim; and, though I did not stop looking to see if there was any likelihood of improvement in these symptoms and in the general course of public life, I postponed action till a suitable opportunity should arise [*7th Let.* 325d1–326a2].

The *Seventh Letter* is the apology of Plato-the politician. It was written (by Plato himself or one of his disciples) in the wake of the tragic Sicilian events that led to the death of Dion (354 BC).<sup>6</sup> Notwithstanding the possibility of a biased approach to the description of the relationship between Plato and the tyrant Dionysius II of Syracuse, the letter is precious for it contains “Plato’s point of view” on earlier political events dating back to the time of *The Republic*’s conception or its earlier versions. It follows from this letter that Plato always aspired to take

6. For the events in Sicily in relation to the participation of Plato and members of the Academy see: [Cambridge Ancient History 2008: 695–706].



part in public activity, yet he gave up on direct participation in political life upon the discovery of the incurable malady of the existing political system. Nevertheless, Plato continues to ponder a better polity and, as we know, those thoughts constituted the basis of several dialogues. Is Plato's political interest limited to theory? This does not follow from the "autobiographical" quotation stated above. On the contrary, there Plato talks about the search for friends necessary for the realisation of plans. It is doubtful that what he means is co-authors of dialogues, ideal friends-philosophers (who were only possible in the imaginations of the classical epoch).<sup>7</sup> "Hetaireiai," communities of friends (*ἑταῖροι*), were secret political clubs in Athens [Cambridge Ancient History 2008: 577–578]. Technically, there were neither parties nor other legal mechanisms, providing instruments of consolidation for the opposition in the city. Thucydides writes about hetaireiai in the epoch of the Peloponnesian war: "...members of hetaireiai <...> plunged headfirst into any dangerous affair. Indeed, such organisations were by no means aimed at the good of society within the framework established by the law" [Thucydides *Hist. Pel. War* iii 82.6]. At the time of the notorious trial, with regard to the case of the "mutilators of the Hermai" in 415 BC, participants of one such hetaireia were charged, and it became clear that among them there were several young aristocrats associated with Socrates and Plato's relatives [Nails 2000: 18]. For this reason, Plato's words can be understood as the affirmation of the fact that after the reconstruction of democratic rule, the oppositional forces were destroyed and it was impossible for Plato-the politician to find trustworthy allies who were capable of conspiring together.<sup>8</sup> What remained was to wait for good luck, however it was not equivalent to a retraction from practical activity.

In the 390s BC, Plato was not the only one who found himself in a situation of uncertainty following turbulent times. The works of Xenophon, another faithful follower of Socrates, who, like Plato, belonged to

7. One cannot agree with the statement that the classical epoch did not know and, moreover, could not even imagine a friend as a companion in political struggle, that Greeks never put friendship to a close relationship with war as it is claimed (referring to Deleuze) in the above mentioned article by Lambert [Lambert 2008: 44].
8. An interesting parallel to the theme of solitude from the *Seventh Letter* comprises the introduction to *Will To Power*, also written by a person from the closest circle, Nietzsche's sister, who remembers her brother in such a way: "Back then, he was overcome by the painful assurance that he will never find for himself a co-partner for his most difficult works, that he will have to do everything, everything by himself and undertake his difficult journey in complete solitude" [Nietzsche 2004: 16].

the aristocratic “party” defeated in the Civil War, contained important particularities about the epoch. Xenophon was older, and at the moment of the catastrophe in 404 BC, he did not merely dream of politics, but played an important role, serving in the aristocratic cavalry, occupying a privileged position under the rule of the Thirty. The victors-democrats sent the cavaliers into exile to Asia to join Cyrus’s army with one transparent goal: to neutralise these people forevermore and to never see them again in Athens.<sup>9</sup> The wandering of the Hellenic troops, described in *Anabasis*, stands parallel to Plato’s political pursuits. At the very time when Plato regrets the absence of faithful companions, Xenophon finds himself at the head of a mighty and disciplined military machine wandering about without definite aim, in blind nostalgic longing after the defeat of Cyrus’ expedition. Once, Xenophon nearly achieves what Plato dreams of in vain. The Greek mercenaries strive to reach Hellas, although they know that there they are castaways without a home. The most they could count on was to found a new settlement, either in a barbarian country or among Greeks. It is not surprising then that

Xenophon, who had before him numerous Hellenic hoplites, peltasts, archers, slingers and cavaliers, who owing to training were highly skillful in their profession...came to think that it would not be a vain idea to found a city, having multiplied in such a way the possession and power of Hellas [v 6.15].

Only one thing interferes with Xenophon’s plans—the warriors’ desire to return to the motherland by all means. The regular occupation of cities falling their way is an everyday necessity for the Hellenic regiment: stopping for rest or to buy provisions, they virtually invade a populated locality each time. Ambassadors of Sinope complain: “Rumours have reached us that allegedly you entered the city by force and some of you took up in people’s abodes and as though you, by force and without permission, collect from the territory whatever you need” [v 5.11]. The seizure of a city in the third book of *The Republic* is described in much the same way: a wandering regiment enters a city and stays there forever. The nomadic machine of war acquires at last its territory.

Isocrates, another elder contemporary of Plato and his adversary in the understanding of philosophy, dreams of a new form of politics—all-Greek, Panhellenic—and also sees its realisation in the establishment

9. See: [Xenophon *Gr. Hist.* iii 1]: “Athenians sent [to Asia] those who served in the cavalry under the rule of the Thirty, assuming it would benefit democracy if they were far away from the motherland and died.” Cp.: [Németh 2006: 88–89].

of new cities on Barbarian lands. He praises the history of the colonisation of Asia Minor in *Panegyricus* (380s BC) and discerns in it an exemplary strategy for future conjoined warfare with Barbarians [iv 34–37, 99, 122]. In one of his last speeches (346 BC), Isocrates addresses Philip II of Macedon with a plan of the invasion of Asia from Cilicia to Sinop and the foundation of cities with the purpose of settling them with “wandering” Greeks who were left without a roof over their heads and hence are dangerous (κτίσαι πόλεις ἐπὶ τούτῳ τῷ τόπῳ καὶ κατοικίσαι τοὺς νῦν πλανωμένους δι’ ἔνδειαν τῶν καθ’ ἡμέραν καὶ λυμαينوμένους οἷς ἄν ἐντύχωσιν) [v 120].

But not only political losers and schemers think about the foundation of colonies. As a result of the defeat in the Peloponnesian war, the Athenian thalassic empire broke down, and subsequently, in the middle of the 4th century BC (when *The Republic* was nearing completion, whereas the work on *Laws* was only beginning), the restoration of authority and the might of cities by means of a new wave of colonisation became the priority of revanchist policy of the official power. In the 360s and 350s BC, the most energetic efforts were undertaken for the return of lost domains [Figueira 2008: 466]. Athens learns the lesson from the past. Earlier in the 6–5th centuries BC, polis gathering momentum turned allied cities into dependent colonies, having achieved that not only “in deed” but also “in name,” thus creating a legend about itself as responsible for all Ionian colonisation [Lurie 1957: 206]. In a retrogressive movement from an ideological construct to military practice, mythological narratives became the direct motive and justification for the expansion. The major part of the imperial colonising activity in the 5th century BC can be considered “repeated colonisation,” inasmuch as its subjects were those Greek cities that Athenians’ perceived in their imagination as heirs of Athenian colonisation [Figueira 2008: 456]. In concurrence with this, it is only in exceptional cases that colonisation takes place in a barren place. Even with regard to archaic colonisations, researchers have suspicions that legends about autochthony were invented by the victors for the purpose of legitimizing their conquests, whereas in reality the “tabula rasa” method was used [Crielaard 2009: 57]. Thus the Athenian colonisation during the classical period was an entirely conscious recolonisation. A new city was founded in place of an old one, while the inhabitants of the old city were expelled in the majority of cases. The Peloponnesian war and accusations of collaboration with Sparta became a convenient excuse for clearing the local population. Colonisation became an instrument for the punishment of the disobedient, it was frequently accompanied by ἀνδραποδισμός, or the extermination of adult men and the taking of women and chil-

dren as slaves. In addition, military service was the main duty of the new colonists in the city; they became its guardians [Figueira 2008: 443, 450, 452, 507]. Plato's *The Republic* undoubtedly contains many novelties previously unheard of in the classical epoch, however, all of them relate to the description of a "better polity," that is, to the organisation of the state's mode of life emerging *after* the territorialisation of the war machine as such, after the seizure of land for the ideal city. But those two passages from the dialogue where the plans of a city's capture are scarcely mentioned, are, in the context of Athenian colonising practices, absolutely transparent to those who are familiar with its realities. The suggested methods are traditional forms of biopolitics characteristic of the epoch. One can even discern in Plato's propositions an aspiration to the execution of a soft version of colonisation. The former population of the city do not undergo total extermination, exile or transformation into slaves: they either remain to live under the protection of guardians-invaders, or are partially transferred to the country.<sup>10</sup>

In the 4th century BC, weakened Athens acts more carefully than at the time of the blossoming of its empire, but this does not bring about the desired results. The historical moment is irretrievably gone. Therefore, all the more intensively, the best minds of the city continue looking for the redeeming secret of successful colonisation. Isocrates substitutes the conception of imperial colonisation, *ἀποικία*, discredited in the eyes of the allies, for the terminologically more neutral *κληρουχία*, while remembering to clarify that it serves the purpose of protecting the local population and not of looting [Isocrates *Pan.* iv 107]. Plato, for his part, proposes concepts of the best state structure. Therefore, in the context of the epoch, his projects, laid down in *Laws* and *The Republic* (on the basis of colonisation in both cases), are just a few of the many projects presented on the political "market of ideas" and at times they have to "compete" with fairly exotic alternatives. In such a manner, Philip II of Macedon, the addressee of Isocrates' advice, founds cities for the single purpose of exerting control over occupied territories. One such colony today is Plovdiv in Bulgaria. In 342 BC, its population of two thousand was constituted of criminals brought from Macedonia. The place was nicknamed Poneropolis, "the city of scoundrels" [Figueira 2008: 488].

10. The hypothesis that it is easier to get along with children than with adults has a political-philosophical prehistory, see the fragment from Heraclitus [121 DK = 105 Marcovich]: "The Ephesians deserve to be executed all without exception, whereas the city should be entrusted to beardless youths, for they expelled Hermodorus, the best [man] among them, with the words: 'Let nobody be the best among ourselves, and if one such is found, let him be in a strange land, with others!'"

Even if the antipode of Callipolis became a reality, to what degree was the “beautiful city” of Plato divorced from the realities of its epoch? The Athenian colonists of the 5th century were Ariston, the father of Plato and two of Socrates’ companions in this dialogue—Glaucon and Adeimantus, and also the metics, Lysias and Polemarchus, sons of Cephalus, in whose house the conversation described in *The Republic* takes place. These people would not bother to delve into much detail about such an ordinary event as the foundation of a city by means of recolonisation. What, then, remains ἀδύνατον, from the point of view of the interlocutors? The “impossible” of this kind is their everyday reality.

\* \* \*

In 355 BC, Dion of Syracuse, Plato’s close friend, came to power in Sicily. Members of the Academy helped to overthrow the unpopular Dionysius the Younger. The new ruler, who technically did not become a tyrant, wielded almost unlimited power and had the unique historical opportunity to implement Plato’s political project, although not as radical as it appears in *The Republic*. Plato’s *Eighth Letter*, the authenticity of which also raises serious doubts, contains the project of mixed constitution, ascribed to Dion, restricting both royal power and popular freedoms. The fact that political instructions were included in Plato’s letter addressed to Dion’s friends, even a forged one, is telling. Dion’s policy was perceived as the implementation of the Academy’s ideas. Soon, however, Dion fell victim to a conspiracy, never having proceeded with the reforms. To move from the seizure of power to its exploitation in practice proved itself to be a difficult task. The impossibility only opened up in the abundance of opportunities: the “tabula rasa,” ready to embrace the draft of the ideal state, turned out to be an overloaded system of coercive relationships that compelled Dion to undertake fatal steps. The peripeteia missed its catharsis.

A few years before these events, Plato received an invitation to visit Sicily, hinting at the possibility of realising his political ideal. The philosopher did not make his decision instantly. In the *Seventh Letter*, he lists the doubts tormenting him, the validity of which was confirmed afterwards, leading the mission to fail.<sup>11</sup> The letter gives a retrospective view on the events, but the *story* told in it testifies that Plato realises the impossibility of the whole undertaking from the very beginning; however, irrespective of this, he sets out in order to found a state. In its

11. A relatively fresh attempt to draw an up-to-date line under the arguments over the authenticity of the *Seventh Letter* and Plato’s participation in real politics is made in the work [Schofield 2007].

content, the story is fictitious, but in its form it is the ordinary “truth” of Greek historians. It is precisely under these circumstances, when the beginning of the journey is linked to its impossibility, that legendary foundations took place. For instance, here is what Herodotus tells us about the foundation of Cyrene by someone named Battos, a random and unwitting man who also suffered from a speech impediment:

When Battos had grown to be a man, he came to Delphi to inquire about his [stammering] voice; and when he asked, the prophetess thus answered him: “For a voice thou camest, O Battos, but thee lord Phœbus Apollo sendeth as settler forth to the Libyan land sheep-abounding.” He thus made answer: “Lord, I came to thee to inquire concerning my voice, but thou answerest me other things which are *not possible* (ἀδύνατον), bidding me go as a settler to Libya; but with what power, or with what force of men should I go? [Herodotus *Hist.* iv 155, italics added]

What is impossible structurally and in terms of genre makes the *history* of foundation. The stories of Greek historians about the celebrated colonisations of the archaic period naturally reveal the breach in the vision of reality. The legitimising source of colonial trajectories, diverging on the periphery of the ecumene, is the Delphian Oracle, the word of God famous for its ambiguity. The future founder of a city must solve a riddle given to him by god, with no right to reject this honorary and dangerous mission. The premise of the Oracle’s riddle usually rests on the confusion of traditional views on the nature of things, while the answer to the riddle often consists in the resolution of logical contradictions among names, for example, relating simultaneously to flora and fauna. Colonists must be quick-witted, both geographically and logically: what helps them in their search for the right landmark is the ability to differentiate homonyms and to determine the accuracy and appropriateness of names [Dougherty 1993: 49–52]. In Herodotus’s and Thucydides’s accounts, the practical realities of colonisation transform into events occurring in the sphere of logic:

There is a story that Alcmaeon, son of Amphiaraus, during his wanderings after the murder of his mother was bidden by Apollo to inhabit this spot, through an oracle which intimated that he would have no release from his terrors until he should find a country to dwell in, which had not been seen by the sun, or existed as land (μήπω ὑπὸ ἡλίου ἔωρᾶτο μηδὲ γῆ ἦν) at the time he slew his mother; all else being to him polluted ground. Perplexed at this, the story goes on to say, Alcmaeon realised with great difficulty that what he was talking about were these washes [between the islands in the bed of the river] [Thucydides *Hist. Pel. War* ii 102.5–6].

The extreme case of a logical problem is contradiction, impossibility. Such impossibility is the situation of an ordinary man (Battos) confronted with the necessity to accomplish a divine mission, but it marks only the beginning of the journey. From the point of view of an omniscient god, there is no contradiction and impossibility, truth reigns here. For this reason, the typical “colonial landscape” described by the oracle has the logical status of “impossible but true.” As C. Dougherty notes: “We find the majority of enigmatic colonial oracles precisely in the context of the ‘impossible but true’ landscape. In this regard, an oracle describing the spot allocated for the foundation of a colony as ‘land that is not land’, or the place where ‘man is beaten by a wooden dog’, greatly resembles the poetic device named *ἀδύνατον*” [Dougherty 1993: 50].

Greeks regarded polis life as a higher and more intensive stage of existence in comparison with a natural one. Colonisation was an act of culture, man’s victory over the forces of nature, its anthesis was the mythological redivision of lands linked to the act of divine violation. The conditions of the colonial riddle usually reflected some natural impossibility that was eventually resolved due to the use of mental resources available to an ordinary person. The solution of the riddle is the task of man, the manifestation of his humanity, the attribute of civilisation and culture. The colonist logically neutralises the natural contradiction contained within the riddle, resulting in the intensification of human life, its exaltation over the natural level. Natural impossibility succumbs to man if translated into the field of logic. Logos masters physis. The riddle does not remain without consequences, it always imposes responsibility. The example of radical responsibility is the life of one who deciphers the riddle. The most famous example of a “deadly riddle” in Greek literature is the story of Oedipus and Sphinx. Colonists find themselves in an analogous situation: their life depends on the solution of the riddle. Battos cannot return home upon the failure of his mission: “...the Theraians sent Battos with two fifty-oared galleys; and these sailed to Libya, and then came away back to Thera, for they did not know what else to do: and the Theraians pelted them with missiles when they endeavoured to land, and would not allow them to put to shore, but bade them sail back again” [Herodotus *Hist.* iv 156]. The life of the colonist entirely depends on whether he can solve the task given to him by god. In the form of a deadly riddle, the extensive and intensive forms of life coincide. The salvation of the colonists’ “bare life” depends on their ability to become a cultural hero. The paradigm example of a “deadly riddle” in the history of philosophy is the mission of Socrates. Apollo entrusts him with an unexpected duty through the Pythia—he must check the truth for incogitability: “What can the God

mean, what is the interpretation of his words (*αἰνίττεται*) when He says that I am the wisest of men? And yet he is a God and cannot lie” [Plato *Apol.* 21b]. The successful solution of this riddle as well as of Sphinx’s riddle in Sophocles’ tragedy *Oedipus the King*, turns out to be fatal. It legitimises the status of the discerning man as the wisest among people, but in the end his superhuman wisdom leads him to his death. Socrates knows what is ahead of him, but he does not abandon his search for truth, assuming that an unexamined life is not worth living [38a]. He inverts the equability of extensive and intensive life: the latter engulfs the former completely, “bare life” is equated to death—the fatal step that has had important consequences for the history of political thought.<sup>12</sup>

The dramaturgy of the solution to the “deadly riddle” of the colonial type implies temporal cohesiveness and newsworthiness.<sup>13</sup> The riddle must be unraveled *in due time*, this organises the dramaturgy of events. In *Poetics* Aristotle holds up the composition of *Oedipus the King* as an example where the moment of recognition happens at the moment of a reversal of circumstances (*peripeteia*) [Aristotle *Poet.* 1452a35]. *The Apology* is an early work of Plato attempting to write tragedies in his youth. The moment when Socrates solves the Oracle’s riddle at the trial becomes a turning point: Athenians realise that reality is far more dreadful than assumptions, for Socrates is much more dangerous in his own speeches than in the accounts of his prosecutors. He is the wisest, he is an outcast, he is a *pharmakos* (some wonderful texts are dedicated to this subject)<sup>14</sup> [Derrida 2007]. Plato himself uses yet another word—“paradigm” (Sophocles also uses it in his tragedy when the Chorus speaks of Oedipus as a paradigm). Socrates is a paragon of riddle and its solution. God uses him as a paradigm (*ἐμὲ παράδειγμα ποιούμενος* [Plato *Apol.* 23b1]) in order to propose a riddle to people and furnish a divine answer. As in Sophocles’ tragedy, in Plato the administer of justice discovers a terrible truth and blinds himself. Having initiated a show trial, a demonstration of the abuse of power by

12. The indistinguishability of extensive (“banal,” “bare”) life and death is in particular characteristic of all the tradition of political and ethical thought “after Nietzsche,” from Heidegger to Deleuze.

13. “The majority of ambiguous oracles in Greek literature only obtain the correct understanding retrospectively; with this background, it is important to point out that, as a rule, it is said about colonial oracles that they were successfully interpreted *at the right moment*—as if signalling Apollo’s support for the expedition” [Dougherty 1993: 50, italics added].

14. It is interesting to read this manifesto of deconstruction in tandem with Vernant’s classical structuralist research on the king Oedipus [Vernant 1990].



the victors in the Civil War, the Athenian demos fears Socrates no less than the defeated aristocrats. It is not merely a “teacher of tyrants” that comes before the court but the personification of the superhuman dimension of politics which Athenians are no longer able to restrain but can only hide from their sight. Xenophon, in his *Apology of Socrates*, notes Socrates’s inexplicable loftiness, whereas the peripeteia of the procedural drama happens, in his opinion, when Socrates began to “exalt” himself [Xenophon *Apol.* 32], i. e. the cause of the judges’ fatal exasperation was the story with the oracle. Assumptions were made that the oracle was Plato’s artistic innovation (in a similar way tragedians invented their own versions of myths), for Xenophon is a dependent source: he personally did not attend the trial and writes his text in the wake of Plato’s testimony. In any case, Plato skillfully placed the story with the oracle in the composition of *The Apology*, imparting the judicial process with the dramatic form of “deadly riddle.”

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In the finale of Book IX of *The Republic*, there is a wonderful exchange of retorts summing up lengthy speculation about the ideal polis (and according to the opinion of some, Plato’s whole political project):

[Glaucon:] ...I understand; you speak of the city of which we are the founders, and which exists in idea (*ἐν λόγοις*) only; for *I do not believe that there is such as one anywhere on earth* (*γῆς γε οὐδαμοῦ*)?

[Socrates:] *In heaven there is laid up a pattern of it* (*ἐν οὐρανῷ ἴσως παράδειγμα*), methinks, which he who desires may behold... [Plato *Rep.* 592a10–b3, italics added]

It is fair to ask whether it is astrology under the guise of politics that is presented to the public by the philosopher, who forbade attending the Academy to all incompetent in geometry, that is in the science dealing with figures drawn on earth? The criticism of Deleuze and Guattari, apparently directed at the given quotation by Plato, sounds like an accusation in professional inadequacy: “Concepts do not await us already finished, after the fashion of celestial bodies. Concepts do not have heavens” [Deleuze, Guattari 2009: 15]. Asmus states in his comment: “This is a model of an ‘ideal’ state, that is of such that, according to Plato’s opinion, should have existed, but up to now has not yet emerged and is found nowhere in reality. Consequently, the dialogue *The Republic* is characterised as literary, and is included in the genre of so-called Utopia” [Plato 1994: 540] It might be possible to agree with Asmus’ remark but under a significant reservation: in Plato’s time, the genre of Uto-

pia consists of the colonial parables, usually beginning with a prophecy telling about some “impossible landscape.” These parables are partially witty and partially absurd; however, they had been preserved in history insofar as they narrated about foundations of real poleis.

The cited dictums from Book IX describe two views on the feasibility of Callipolis’ state structure. The first perspective, a human one, is expressed by Glaucon: the described “landscape” is impossible. The second perspective, a divine one, is presented by Socrates: the “landscape” might be impossible but true. Thucydides’ Alcmaeon must have found “the land that is not land.” The future founder of Callipolis also must find a land that is not land but something having its image in heaven. This is a typical situation established in terms of the genre in which the future founder of the city finds himself upon receiving an oracle, with a mission linked to it. Many will hear an oracle, it will be available to “[him] that desires,” but by no means does it relate to anybody. Battos was a secondary figure in the Greek kings’ retinue that visited Delphi but it is precisely to him that the mission of the foundation of Cyrene was assigned. He ignored the will of god for as long as possible, trying to carry on with his former life, however, he was eventually condemned and expelled by enraged citizens in order to found a new city, and save the only thing that he still fully owned as an exile—his life. The foundation of a city is the drama of “deadly riddle,” a reversal of circumstances between the highest and the lowest points of human existence, between a pharmakos and a founder of a colony, between “bare life” and a “cultural hero.” For this reason, no matter how detailed instructions are, the success of the whole enterprise depends on the future “colonist” who will certainly learn about his mission because its completion decides the matter of his own existence in the world:

...and beholding [the pattern in heaven], [man] may set his own house in order. But whether such an one exists, or ever will exist in fact, is no matter; for he will live after the manner of that city, having nothing to do with any other [592b3–5].

Among the interlocutors in *The Republic*, there are future victims of civil turmoil: Polemarch, Lysias, Nicias. This is typical of Platonic dialogues: in *The Laches*, courage is discussed with military leaders who will soon afterwards suffer a fateful defeat. In *The Charmides*, the question of moderation is discussed with the future tyrants, Critias and Charmides, who will also suffer a defeat and die. Each of these dialogues proposes its own version of “deadly riddle.” The logic of reasoning in them is connected with history and the nature of events, creating a problem and verifying its solution.

Aristotle's objections are mainly founded on the demonstration of disparities between Plato's suggestions and widespread opinions or the realities of the epoch. Both, according to the opinion of Aristotle, are the inevitable obstacles on the way to the realisation of the political project containing some inexecutable requirements known in advance. Evaluating the political projects described in *The Republic* and *Laws*, Aristotle even claims that *any* of the known or existing alternatives have prominent advantages in comparison with them:

Other constitutions [non-Platonic] have been proposed <...> which all come nearer to established or existing state structures than either of Plato's [*The Republic* and *Laws*] <...> other legislators begin with what is necessary [Aristotle *Pol.* ii 1266a.34].

Strauss, as if developing this thought of Aristotle draws the following conclusions about *The Republic*: "The just city is impossible. It is impossible because it is directed against nature" [Strauss 1964: 127]. A retrospective journey into the dramaturgy of stories about the foundation of Greek cities shows that colonisation as an act of culture is always directed against nature. The foundation of a city, being a Delphian riddle, begins precisely with the impossible.<sup>15</sup> Aristotle draws the conclusion about the impossibility of Platonic projects on the assumption that there is no connection with reality. Fiction, which has no place in reality, is called by the Greek word "utopia." The absence of the suspect on the scene of the crime is called in legal practice by the Latin word "alibi." What are the relationships between alibi and utopia? Does utopia have an undoubted alibi?

In 1938, Karl Popper began to work on the book *The Open Society And Its Enemies* [Popper 1992]. This took place under conditions hardly disposed to "the contemplation of patterns in heaven," against a backdrop of calamities: "I made the decision to write this book on the day when I learnt of Hitler's invasion of my native Austria." Popper finishes his work in 1943, as an émigré. There is no reason to believe that over the course of the five difficult years deciding the fates of the author and of the war, Popper had an abundance of time which he could dedicate

15. It is interesting that contemporary historical studies on the antique polis find themselves in the analogous situation of the "impossible beginning" (in particular, intellectual efforts consolidated around the Copenhagen Polis Centre): "No matter what was called polis in archaic and classical sources, the fundamental [methodological] principle consists in the following: this polis can deviate from some [theoretical] ideal of Antiquity and the early modern period, but it is impossible to have a polis if it is not a genuine one" [Morgan 2003: 5].

to the pursuit of “political astrology.” On the contrary, the thinker addresses the “deadly riddle” of his epoch, the genesis of totalitarian regimes. Popper’s gesture is anachronistic and unjust, yet it cannot be denied philosophical significance. Popper strips Plato of his political alibi, so surely guaranteed by the utopia of his thought. He deports the Greek philosopher from antiquity, inaccessible to modernity, ignores the obvious impossibility of his projects and brings him to the trial of history, charging him with the cruellest crime of our times.

It is not a matter of friends or enemies, far or near; the issue is *ἀδύνατον*, symbolising not the end of history, but the certainty of its beginning. For Aristotle, “the reader” (his nickname in the Academy) reading Plato, there is nothing at stake. For him, it is one text among many: “To take the best out of the possible” is the principle of selection. It is a given that the scope of his reading is extensive. Popper has much at stake and attempts to accomplish the inconceivable. For him, the reading of *The Republic* and *Laws* is dictated by the necessity to solve a “deadly riddle.” Against his wishes, he finds himself in a situation of a colonist looking to grasp at straws when there is nothing to rely on. At this moment, even the landscapes of Callipolis or Magnesia do not seem out of place to him: “Plato develops a strikingly realistic theory of society” [Popper 1992: 68]. Utopia invades reality, the alibi is annulled, the impossible demonstrates its kinship with truth. Arendt writes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that our epoch is characterized by a constant clash with “elements of unprecedented unpredictability,” moreover, it is precisely the exploitation of the impossible as a political resource that leads to success in the struggle for power. Arendt says that under the Nazi regime, history acts in the mode of an oracle and notices something which would have been very familiar to the ancient Greeks regarding the organisation of historical existence: “‘Prophecy’ becomes a retrospective alibi: only that happens which has already been prophesied” [Arendt 1962: 348–349] Nietzsche concludes on Plato’s political career, his “reversed reflection”: “His designs were possible...But success failed him: so he attained the fame of a fantasist and a utopist” [Nietzsche 2004: 496].

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Plato’s follower, Alain Badiou, makes *Xenophon’s Anabasis* the emblem of political pursuits of the entire past century [Badiou 2010]. The dramatic crisis of Badiou’s essay is reached upon the comparison between Saint-John Perse and Paul Celan’s poems, named after the work of the famous Greek. The epic imperial expansion into the unknown, the remote areas of which are safely secured by the inflow of colonial goods, is set against the anti-rhetorical movement “into the distance, into the

untravelling, beyond the bounds.” For Perse, the problem lies in the ethical choice between a heroic voyage and repose, whereas for Celan this very journey is dubious, it embodies the “impassable-true.” Forty years elapse between the writing of the two poetical *Anabasises* in the 20th century, the same two generations divide Plato and Aristotle’s dates of birth. During this period, the poetics of work, activity and intensive movement within the extensive horizon of traditional politics manages to give way to bewilderment with regard to the necessity of a journey into the absolutely impassable. The short (according to the expression of Buckler and Beck) [Buckler, Beck 2008: 4] 4th century BC is the inverse of the short (if one follows Badiou) 20th century AD. The Athenian century ends with centrifugal expansion and the neutralisation of the impossible. The 20th century unfurls under the sign of the intensification of “the political” and the totalisation of conflicts. In the epoch of Plato and Xenophon, as well as in the epoch of Celan and Popper, the inconceivable has not yet been moved to the horizon and reduced to the object of leisurely opportunists’ attention—it rages under everybody’s feet: land that is not land, the “impossible/impassable/true.” Badiou gives the past epoch another name—“the century of anti-Platonism.”<sup>16</sup> The case of Popper, the acknowledgement of Plato’s relevancy through imputing him with responsibility, can also bear the name of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Arendt, Derrida and Deleuze (as well as Aristotle himself, inasmuch as we interpret the impossible in his work not as a condemnation but as a problem, that is the beginning of an exploratory journey).<sup>17</sup>

Plato’s utopia does not have an alibi, its impossibility has shown its fulfilment, its price is taken into account in the political economy of modernity.<sup>18</sup> Does it enhance the value of Platonism for thought?

16. As it is possible to conclude from the unauthorized summary of Badiou’s seminar *Pour aujourd’hui: Platon!* (24 Octobre, 2007), openly available for access.

17. Giorgio Agamben believes that the traditional interpretation of the definition of the “possible,” offered in the ninth book ( $\theta$ ) of *Metaphysics* [1047a24–28], trivialises Aristotle’s text, reducing it to tautology. He proposes a new interpretation and concludes: “Potentiality (in its double appearance as potentiality to and as potentiality not to) is that through which Being finds itself sovereignly, which is to say, without anything preceding or determining it (*superiorem non recognoscens*) other than its own ability not to be. And an act is sovereign when it realizes itself by simply taking away its own potentiality not to be, letting itself be, giving itself to itself” [Agamben 1998: 32].

18. See the following statement of a Canadian researcher about the influence of American neoconservatism in general (and Leo Strauss’ disciples in particular), having a direct relationship to Plato’s concept of “kings-philosophers”: “When I wrote this book in the 1980s, I could not even conceive that the tyr-

Our main argument was technically a structuralist one: the founder of Callipolis is included into the binary opposition, parallel in its structure to the opposition of tyrant-pharmakos from Vernant's classical work on Oedipus. The ambiguity of the oracle defines the logical matrix of archaic epistemology. But why did the Greeks use the oracle? Did it happen for the sake of reducing the boundless multitude of variants to two, or for the sake of dramatising life, since the ambiguity of interpretation led to extremes? The curtailment of variants makes sense when there is a principle difference between them. But even if the impossible is possible, what is left to do with the truth that is indubitable? In other words, while Plato's colonist had a fair chance to be a vain dreamer, the experience of the 20th century apparently testifies to his almost unavoidable implication in the crime. The "Sicilian voyage," the risk of travel in a gale, is the new curse of thought after the epoch of activism, when the main disdain is addressed to "cabinet dreamers," sunk into the earth. Heidegger's rectorial speech, Foucault's Iranian epopee (Averincev, Bibikhin, Mamardashvili). By engaging in politics, the thinker is destined to compromise himself. One who is not capable of thought is exposed to another danger—without realising this, he becomes an Eichmann. An alternative no longer offering a choice. "A fox there was, naive to the degree that he not only fell into the trap all the time, but he could not even explain the difference between a trap and not-a-trap" [Arendt 2000: 543]. Foucault calls problematization a philosophical stake in historical analysis, the turning point in the development of discursive practices [Foucault 2001: 171]. The problem of the present, understood as an epoch in which utopia is devoid of an alibi, lies in the fact that the impossible is bound to happen. A fancy turns into fantasy, becoming a branch of production and not a resource for critical thinking. Love for wisdom appears not as modesty, but hypocrisy in a world burdened by knowledge and responsibility. The furnishing of an alibi for a utopia becomes a moral problem. Another problem is representation, the exposure and limitation of the impossible, for which it is necessary to indicate once more a place not existing on this earth.

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any of "sages" would come so close to realisation in the political life of such a great country as the United States" [Drury 2005: 12].

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