This book offers a clear and useful sequential commentary on the words and ideas of the Greek text of Plato’s *Politikos*, drawn from the most recent Oxford Classical Text of the dialogue edited by D.B Robinson (1995). It completes the study of the dramatically linked trilogy in Plato’s dialogues conducted by the author, who has previously published commentaries in the same series on the *Theaitetos* and the *Sophistes* respectively. There are many illuminating invocations of the two preceding dialogues in this study of the *Politikos* (for example, p.32 noting the «Herold» *keryke* at Pol.260e1 as a parallel with the *Sophistes* (pp.31–2), and p.35 on Pol. 261e4–7, prophesying that Young Socrates will grow up with phronesis, as resonating with Th. 177e1–2. It is beyond the scope of this short review to assess the overall reading of the trilogy that emerges from these three studies. Instead, I will focus particularly on a distinctive and controversial aspect of the present work: its insistence on reading Plato as a political realist («Platon als Realist», p.114), who in the dialogue advocates an «ideale Demokratie» as expressing the «bestmögliche politische Wissen» (p.12), and in this (and in other respects) has lessons to draw for European politics today (p.19 and passim). Before engaging with these claims in particular, I will survey notable features of the commentary more broadly.

Seeck makes little concession to literary and characterological approaches to the dialogues (at one point he simply writes «Der Gast (Platon)», p.55, p.100, passing over in silence those interpretations that take the Eleatic Visitor to be a deliberately flawed protagonist). Instead he reads the dialogue relatively straight, treating all parts of it on a par. He does offer a clear, brief statement of his view on the perennially debated question of whether Plato wrote, or intended to write, a dialogue entitled *Ho Philosophos* to accompany *Ho Sophistes* and *Ho Politikos*, these being the subject of Socrates’ question to the Eleatic Visitor at the outset of the Sophistes as to whether in his country they are considered one, two, or three *gené* (Sph. 217a7–9). In Seeck’s view, Plato may well have intended to write the *Philosopher*, but it is still more likely that he did not do so because he was less rigidly or abstractly a *Platoniker* than his most orthodox followers would become (pp.13–14).

This brings me to an overview of Seeck’s reading of the dialogue, which he prefaches with an elegant heuristic analysis of the dialogue as if it were a piece of music, identifying its main methodological and political topics and outlining their interweaving (p.7). He remarks that in deploying the method of division in establishing a «Begriffspyramide» (p.15), and in his methodological excursus in the early divisions of the *Politikos*, Plato evinces «eine gewisse Sympathie für sophistische Formalismen» (p.41). Seeck takes the results of the early divisions seriously – even defending the ultimate definition of man as a ‘featherless biped’, that would be mocked by Diogenes of Sinope. It is perhaps due to the limitations of the commentary as a genre however that one does not receive a clear

---

¹ He does however at one point note dramatic failures of the Athenian democracy, mentioning the Sicilian expedition and the execution of Socrates (p.137).

GNOMON 3/87/2015
sense from this book of the extent to which the early divisions are to be conserved or valued in the overall project of the dialogue.

I turn to the *Muthos* (myth or story) that occupies a good chunk of the dialogue, being proposed as a kind of inference from three existing legends by the Eleatic Guest / Visitor («Gast») himself. The resulting inferential story, told in the dialogue in an avowedly playful spirit, sets a peculiar reading of the Age of Kronos – in which, among other things in the context of a story of cosmological reversals, in one stage the god directly steers the cosmos and god and his daimones directly steer the lives of humans and animals, while in another stage the god lets go of the tiller (while still standing on the bridge, as it were) and the cosmos and living beings within it must live as *automata* (271d1 – here just applying to humans). Without engaging directly with the controversial three-stage reading initiated by Luc Brisson and defended by Christopher Rowe¹ in opposition to the traditional two-stage reading, Seeck offers a judicious analysis that does justice both to the strong motifs of a two-part cycle emphasized in parts of the myth, and also to the more complicating moments of the story where the dynamic appears less simply two-stage, or even less cyclical altogether. (He notes for example «einem nicht-zyklischen Geschichtsbild», p.62; he likewise captures the *automatos* phase of the cosmos and the complex role of the god within it in the nice phrase *gott-fern*, contrasted at p.56 and passim with *gott-gelenkt*; he follows Robinson and others in striking out the partly attested *nyn* at 271d4 as not fitting with the proper understanding of the cycle, p.63).

A somewhat idiosyncratic aspect of Seeck’s treatment of the myth is his repeated comparison of the Age of Kronos, identified with the Golden Age in Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (a relation that is clearly intended even though Plato subverts and complicates many of the Hesiodic features), with the biblical idea of paradise in the Garden of Eden (e.g. p.53) – though the moral and religious perspectives in the two are in crucial ways different. Another claim that I would question is his emphasis on the flawed nature of the cosmos as being what leads it to turn in a ‘false’ direction. I see the nature of the cosmos as having a more complex effect in Plato’s text: it may, due to its nature, start to turn in the opposite direction from the way that the god had been previously steering it, but it is also in its nature to imitate that god-guided movement as closely as possible by still maintaining a circular path (273ab).

In the dialogue, as Seeck notes, the myth is ultimately put to the purpose of identifying two flaws in the definition of the statesman that the prior divisions had reached. That earlier definition had confounded the human statesman with the divine statesman (the god), while at the same time failing to differentiate the proper task of the statesman from the task of other practitioners of *technai* or *epistemai* (the dialogue uses both terms fairly interchangeably) whose objects are also in varying ways the human herd. Yet while the myth points out these failings in the early divisions, it suffers from a methodological flaw of its own: offering a *paradeigma* (both in the sense of its divine protagonist, and in the sense of the myth itself as *paradeigma*) that is too grand and large to be maximally useful.

¹ Some basic materials for Brisson’s and Rowe’s readings are in the short and selective *Literaturhinweise*; Seeck only rarely, perhaps to keep the commentary short, engages in debates with the secondary literature, though he evidently knows much of it well.
This flaw in the myth leads the Visitor to reflect on the method of paradeigma; to illustrate that method with a set of divisions of its very own paradeigma, the art of weaving; and then to offer a new set of divisions of the rival arts to statecraft in which statecraft emerges as a form of political weaving. In the course of these endeavors, the Visitor also offers a further methodological excursus on two kinds of measurement (one of them, due measure, being necessary to establish just how much of the myth, and arguably just how grand a figure, it would have been appropriate to tell or invoke for the dialogue’s purpose of defining the statesman), and a political excursus on whether the true statesman is to be defined by reference to ruling in accordance with, or contrary to, laws.

Seeck’s treatment of these topics is generally straightforward, with illuminating asides on Plato’s vocabulary, though with occasional strange moments or claims. In his discussion of paradeigma, I was puzzled by his repeated use of the phrase tertium quid (p. 80, 83; cf. tertium comparationis, p. 94), as if comparing a target to its model requires in the dialogue some third thing, when on the contrary, the Visitor is clear that it is the very same element within the two structures (target and model) that is to be compared until it can be recognized as such (even if its ‘sameness’ is an abstract feature rather than a complete identity). On measure, he offers an interesting parallel with the Gorgias (449b9–10), and makes the provocative claim that measurement is not problematic in practice but rather in theory (p. 96). Perhaps most provocative is his claim that «Der Gast (Platon)...ihm selbst nicht um das Wissen über die irdischen Dinge...geht» (p. 100).

Let me now turn to the most obviously political parts of the dialogue, the excursus on law and imperfect constitutions, and the concluding divisions that lead to the definition of the statesman as a political weaver who has been distinguished even from his closest kin and rivals (the rhetor, the general, and the jurist or judge). As noted above, Seeck’s most distinctive and controversial claim in this book is that the dialogue seeks to vindicate an ideal democracy as indeed its political ideal. He argues this from a particular reading of the excursus on law and the imperfect constitutions, taking the qualified defense of a law-governed democracy in that excursus to be the «bestmögliche» political ideal (and describing the law-abiding king as «sehr gut», p. 114) and so to be the political moral of the dialogue most relevant to the present day.

While the present reviewer finds this thought-provoking and stimulating, it is hard to square with the very much qualified nature of this defense in the text. Being ruled by law is superior to being ruled by lawless arbitrary will, but this is set within the broader argument that lawfulness is not a definitional criterion of statecraft. Seeck doesn’t engage with the sharply deflationary interpretation of ζοος απεικόνισης and ζοος (generally) by Christopher Rowe, on which these superior but still second-best regimes are not even credited with making laws on the model of the best laws but rather simply on the attractive advice of some advisor. Perhaps one indication of the oddness of Seeck’s emphasis comes from his asking why Plato did not invent a name for the bad kind of democracy (p. 110). He answers this question by suggesting that Plato wanted to avoid bequeathing a

---

Schlagwort to his opponents, but an alternative answer would be that the question is rather why he did not invent a name for the good kind of democracy.

It is an intriguing thought that in this ‘realistic’ assessment of what is necessary in a democracy, Plato is writing as if drawing on a handbook of sophistic political theory (p.145). But Seeck’s assimilation of the démos of this regime (Volk) to its role in a Volksversammlung goes beyond anything that the text can support. The references to orators and jurists at the end of the dialogue seem rather to be to severely redesigned institutions – roles which are to be assigned specifically on the basis of knowledge, and hence not – or at least not obviously – by majority vote. Similarly, while Seeck rightly observes that there is a presumption of institutions of accountability (euthuna) in this regime of political weaving, it should be noted that euthuna in ancient Greece was not an institution restricted to democracies, though it was arguably ‘especially associated with democracy’.

Nevertheless, while it is not to my mind wholly persuasive, Seeck’s emphasis on the best-possible (imperfect) constitution of the dialogue as its most relevant teaching for the present day is certainly stimulating. It gives a special savor to what is generally a good and useful guide to the dialogue.

Princeton

Melissa Lane


Nel 355/4 Demostene compose e pronunciò, come synegoros, un discorso contro la legge proposta da Leptine che intendeva abolire l’ateleia attribuita dall’assemblea come beneficio per gli euergetai, con esclusione dei figli dei tirannicidi. Si tratta di uno dei discorsi che accompagnano il passaggio dell’oratore dalla pratica della logografia forense all’oratoria assembleare, nella quale esorrà poco tempo dopo con l’orazione Sulle simmorie, e appare decisivo per inquadrare le sue posizioni agli albori della carriera. La contro Leptine si colloca in una fase cruciale della biografia politica e intellettuale di Demostene, ma anche della storia di Atene, sconfitta nella guerra sociale e immersa in uno scenario politico di grande incertezza, dopo la caduta dell’egemonia tebana e l’irruzione sulla scena politica greca di Filippo II. Sul piano politico, si tratta della prima presa di posizione di Demostene nello scontro tra l’élite economica e sociale e il demos, che serpeggia lungo tutto l’orazione e diventerà un leit-motiv nelle demegorie degli anni successivi. La questione della fiscalità deflagra nel delicato equilibrio tra aspettative della polis e ricompensa dei benefattori, ma anche nel quadro di una più ampia ideologia delle timai: un tema decisivo per l’evoluzione dei rapporti di forza nella democrazia ateniese del IV secolo.

1 Seeck offers a peculiar interpretation of the Visitor’s claim that those who are mired in ignorance and baseness should be made into ‘slaves’ (309a5–6): he suggests that this «sollen vermutlich nicht rechtlich zu Sklaven gemacht werden, sondern wie Sklaven behandelt werden», and further softens the implication by suggestion that the Visitor is referring to people like Alcibiades.