

Natalie Harris Bluestone, *Women and The Ideal Society: Plato's «Republic» and Modern Myths of Gender*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts, 1987 (1988). Pp. X+238. Hardcover, \$ 25.00. Paperback, \$ 11.95.

Women and The Ideal Society is not a book that can be easily ignored but it can be easily read and enjoyed, even if the reader is not in agreement with the author's views. One of the aims of the author is «to trace the history, from roughly 1870 to the present of... passages on women guardians» (p. 12); «to focus attention on the feminist writers of the last decades who have at last entered the dialogue» (p. 15); «to steer a course between the Scylla of sexism and the Charybdis of separatism» (p. 16); and «to underscore the value of the scholarly enterprise and pay tribute to that activity of explicating the texts of others which is so often disparaged or underrated» (p. 18). It is, of course, the question of philosopher kings/queens that concerns Natalie Bluestone in Book V of Plato's *Republic* (473d), where Plato proclaims: «Until the philosophers rule as kings or those now called kings... genuinely and adequately philosophize, and political power and philosophy coincide in the same place... there is no rest from ills for the cities... nor I think for human kind» (Allan Bloom translation). Underlying all of Bluestone's argument is that there has been a systematic bias against women philosophers and that Plato actually includes philosopher queens as well as kings among his proposed rulers in his ideal state.

Bluestone does an excellent job in showing how past and present interpreters have dealt with the Platonic assertion that women could serve as equal partners in the governing of a just society –whether these interpreters have been classicists, historians of philosophy, political theorists or feminists. She categorically and rightly rejects the arguments of those who would ignore Plato's assertion or who would classify it as ridiculous or comic or even utopian. She cites Adela M. Adam, the *only female* scholar to write about the relevant section of Book V before the New Wave commentators of the 1970's, who sees that Plato, «despite the philosopher's intense conservatism in some respects, on the question of the education and duties of women was perhaps the most daring innovator the world has ever seen» and in the *Laws* «'whenever he remembers his principles' actually means women to take a wider share in government» (p. 71). Adam is the first to use the term «philosopher-queens».

Feminists have been right in pointing out inconsistencies in Plato (the attitudes disclosed in the myths of the *Symposium* and *Timaeus* as against the relative egalitarianism of the *Republic* and the *Laws*; the discrepancy between the misogyny indicated throughout the dialogues and Plato's claim that men and women have the same nature; the contrast in arrangements for women in the *Republic* as against the *Laws*; finally, how women can be inferior in capacity if men and women are equal in nature).

Despite the negative criticism of certain feminists, Plato was not concerned with equality for the sake of women's individual fulfillment. According to Bluestone, Plato maintained three related propositions: (1) the capacity to perform certain tasks is innate and can be detected very early; (2) such capacities are not, in general, «sex-linked»; and these innate abilities in all areas, even given optimal conditions for development, will always produce fewer results in most women. Plato, says Bluestone, was ambivalent about women. In both the *Republic* and the *Laws* we can see that there is (1) a strong argument that women as a class are equal to men in capacity, although on the whole, weaker in all pursuits; and there are (2) other statements and intimations that women are more cowardly, less trustworthy,

innately worse than men. Later on, in discussing the views of E.O. Wilson, the founder of sociobiology, who finds women's disadvantage to be slight and calls for «sex-biased education» to compensate for biological differences by which it would be «possible to create a society in which men and women as groups share equally in all professions, cultural activities and even athletic competition» (p. 170). Bluestone notes that both the modern biologist and the ancient philosopher are in agreement that such control over society would result in a more productive and harmonious society.

Bluestone is insistent that Plato has much to contribute to our understanding and development of a modern society:

«The *Republic* proposes a society which succeeds in fulfilling the natures of all. But it is a class society based on a very dubious idea that some people's biological nature fits them *only* to serve others through manual labor. Plato firmly believed that very early we could decide what each citizen could do best, and that by each one pursuing his natural bent, the welfare of all would automatically be fostered. His *polis* would be led by those who are genetically bred for all-round superiority and who have gained true knowledge and great love for the best and the most beautiful. Among the best he proposes absolute equality with the lighter tasks assigned to the females. He assumes that males *as a class* do everything better, an assumption which belies an undeniable unconscious prejudice against women. Nevertheless, he also assumes that this slight class superiority of men will not affect the process of finding women to make up their share of the guardian group. Given the cultural context, his assurance of complete equality in kind, no matter what its motivation, stands out as a unique declaration. It adds to the importance of the *Republic*, contributes to its continued vitality, and explains some of the renewed interest in it today» (pp. 190-191).

That in a nutshell is the essence of Natalie Harris Bluestone's *Women and The Ideal Society*.

It should be noted that *Women and The Ideal Society* discusses much, much more than is hinted at here. One can get a very good sense of virtually all the important women's issues from this book in compact and intelligible form and some sense of feminist scholarship about Plato and related matters. Bluestone tries to pursue a reasonable middle course among feminists and at the same time be fair to Plato's position, as ambivalent as that might be. She insists that Plato is important but she does not make clear that the *Republic* is concerned primarily with the question of justice (*dikaioyne*) –the just society and the just man– and the ultimate definition of Plato is based on the proper functioning of experts, each doing that for which each is best suited, and that in an ideal society («a pattern laid up in heaven»).

Women in today's world may also be working toward an ideal society, one to which all can contribute to the fullest, but in the *real* world the question of power and who holds that power will continue to be debated and will thwart all efforts to establish an ideal society. Needless to say, what constitutes the ideal society will remain a highly controversial topic; but Plato's claim that the best should rule, regardless of sex, will also serve as a constant reminder of the ideal –and the real.

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