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Authors	Szakolczai, A#rpa#d;Horvath, Agnes
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The gravity of Eros in the contemporary: Introduction to the Special Section

Agnes Horvath and Arpad Szakolczai

The question of Eros, understood in the broader sense of passionate devotion, takes us back to classical philosophical anthropology, the very foundations of social and political analysis, and in particular the work of Plato, which argues that imitation and not rationality is the moving force of social and political life. For Plato rationality, or reliance on the powers of reason, is not an anthropological constant, rather a capacity to be acquired and developed in order to resist the overwhelming powers of mimetic processes, particularly strong in 'in between' situations (on *metaxy*, see Voegelin, 1978). Historically, an ignorance of the role of imitation in politics resulted in the reduction of rationality to a tool in the instrumental furthering of imitative processes in order to promote particular political agendas; the central problem with contemporary media-driven politics. This special section argues that the imitative and multiplicative aspects of modern politics can be understood through analyzing the way in which subjugation to Eros, both in the narrow sense of 'sexual' pleasures (Foucault, 1986) and the broader sense of blind, unconditional, passionate devotion, is a main consequence of socially disruptive situations. Plato's analysis of Eros as a force that deprives one of one's faculties of distinction and judgement, thus allowing a potentially overwhelming capacity for imitative receptivity to take hold and to drive

attempts to possess qualities and constitute identities, but that can at the same time shake up, turn around and elevate, will be our main methodological guiding tool.

The overwhelming dominance of Eros in the contemporary world is well known by everybody – at least as far as the signs and symptoms go. We live in a world that has become totally penetrated and impregnated by Eros, in both private and public. The conviction that sex is the ultimate goal of human life was given its solemn, authoritative justification by the thinking of Freud. While the problematisation of Freud is also part of the contemporary intellectual landscape (see Dufresne, 2003; Esterson, 1993; Forrester, 1996; Webster, 2005),[1] the damage was done; and, apart from deconstructing Freud, one should also explore better ways of thinking about the force of sexual love and passionate devotion.

The papers in this Special section suggest a return to Ancient Greece, and in particular the thinking of Plato.

The Socratic Symposia

These papers were associated with the Fifth Socratic Symposium, organised by the journal *International Political Anthropology* and the *Marsilio Ficino Association for Neo-Renaissance Studies* (three were part of the six papers presented, while the fourth written for the occasion). The 'Socratic Symposia' are organised by a group of social scientists – sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists – who became convinced, following up hints among others by Foucault, Voegelin, Jan Patocka, and Gregory Bateson, about the vital contemporary relevance of Plato's thinking. Plato was the first European thinker to produce a body of writings that survived in its entirety and is

discussed up till now. Still, time and again his work became ignored and bypassed in two opposite and yet closely related ways: it is either canonised, dogmatically, as the founder of philosophical idealism, the source of rationalist philosophy; or is reviled as an eternal utopian. Thus, with a series of symposia organised each year since 2006 on Plato's birthday (November 7) around a single Platonic dialogue, we attempt to think the present through the ideas of Plato.

The dialogues selected so far form a kind of symphonic structure, sharing a complementary focus. The 'First Symposium' was devoted to the *Ion*, with the emphasis placed on mimetic art. For the second, we selected the *Statesman*, focusing the problems created by the contagious proliferation of mimetic politics in democratic Athens, with politicians resembling, in Plato's vision, to satyrs and centaurs (*Statesman* 291A-B, 303C-D), and the possibility of the emergence of real statesmen.[2] The 'Third Symposium' discussed the *Timaeus*, focusing on the notion of Place or Space (*khóra*), which renders possible every genesis, but also the materialisation of its falsifications. The fourth, devoted to the *Sophist*, discussed the Mask as a symptom of imitativeness. Plato there directly tackles the paradox of nothingness, or how and why to discuss something that does not exist. Ontological and existential nothingness belongs to the very nature of the Sophist, who possesses the remarkable ability of representing and thus conjuring up the non-existent as local and vice versa. Plato emphasises that false statements may seem to be true, thus calling attention to the fact that our understanding of reality can be just as problematic as that of non-reality. We also explored the parallels between Plato and Weber, partly concerning charisma, and partly through the manifold resonances between the *Statesman* and the *Sophist*, on the one hand, two dialogues that closely belong together, and Weber's two famous

lectures on politics and science as vocations on the other. The 'Fifth Symposium' turned to the *Symposium* itself, in order to provide a new angle on the debate on love, focusing on the formative and transformative, thus also educative, aspects of *Eros*. This was followed through a close reading of some selected passages of the *Laws*, focusing on a related dimension in Plato's thought; how the mind functions according to one's emotions, through the example of mass sensations generated by theatrical performances, especially comedy, or the transformation of democracy into a *theatrocracy*. The Seventh Symposium, held in 2012, was on the *Philebos*, where the discussion concerning the primacy of reason or pleasure is conducted through Plato's famous *methodos*, which is by no means 'method' in the neo-Kantian sense, concerning the one, the many, the limit (*peras*), and the unlimited (*apeiron*), the latter being a way to thematise becoming and nothingness, and resulting in the primacy accorded to measure, which can be translated as *ratio* in the sense of proportionality, in contrast to the preference accorded to an empty free space.

The *Symposium*

The *Symposium* is, and was always been, one of the most popular and influential dialogues of Plato.[3] This is certainly due to its theme, but also to the fact that – in contrast to dialogues considered as obscure, like the *Philebus*, or supposedly dry, not dialogical, like the *Sophist* or the *Statesman* – it is very engaging. However, the easy intelligibility of the dialogue is deceptive, and Plato goes out of his way, by a very elaborate introductory staging, to warn the reader that more is there than meets the eye.

Such warnings, however, were hardly heeded, and the reception history of the dialogue is mostly a history of misunderstanding – much of which is not even benevolent.[4] Over the long centuries, two opposite readings became dominant, indicating a 'schismogenic' process (Bateson). On the one hand, the *Symposium* was interpreted, by opponents of Platonic thinking, primarily Sophists, as the eulogy of a characteristic drunken philosophical orgy – strangely recalling the manner in which the Christian agape was treated in the early centuries AD. On the other, defenders of Plato, like Ficino, were as if forced to argue that Plato rather promoted a purely spiritual kind of love, alien to any bodily contact; the life-hostile 'Platonic love', which similarly misreads the text. Such distortions of Plato's thinking were transmitted to Europe during the Quattrocento, around the 1453 sack of Constantinople, by the Byzantine *dotti* (learned men), received as the wise sages of the East, but who sold as the deep truth both esoteric and exoteric speculations cultivated in the Byzantine court society by long generations of court intellectuals and sophists.[5]

The reason why such misreading has not been cleared up until today is partly due to the force of tradition, especially as the enormous influence of the Byzantine world on European thought has never been properly understood; and partly through the character of contemporary philosophy. Philosophers bred on centuries of Cartesian logic and Kantian analytics, arguably themselves versions of sophistic, being very distant from Plato's thinking, focus on the discursive argumentation of the text, and in this regard found the *Symposium* wanting. This is because they consider the elaborate, mediated, theatrical and mythological setting of the dialogue as purely negative, a diversion from the central argument of the text. However, as all papers of

this special section agree, the set-up of the dialogue is very much part of its substance. Without attention to this, and understanding the reasons for Plato's proceeding, the text becomes a series of decontextualised pieces of argumentation, whose meaning can easily be turned to its opposite.

Our aim is to draw out the contemporary relevance, in the tradition of the Dilthey's and Weber's *Verstehen*, starting with its exact theme. In plain English, the dialogue is about 'love'. However, staying here would mean to read it through two millennia of Christian interpretation of love, immediately distorting the original meaning – and we need this original meaning in order to render Plato's ideas relevant as both a diagnostic tool and an orienting concept *today*, including its genuine, vital importance towards the very development of the Christian idea concerning the converting power of love. The dialogue is rather about *Eros* as a force generating devotion or subservience, and in order to understand the difference and persistent freshness of Plato's ideas, we need to reconstruct the context into which they were set.

However, before embarking on such an exercise, we must realise that the Dialogue is not simply about the truth concerning *Eros*. It also claims to offer a full, true picture of Socrates. The central part of the new, true image is presented, in a highly theatrical manner, through a speech of Alcibiades; but other and similarly theatrical aspects of the dialogue also much contribute to this picture. This immediately opens up an entire series of questions concerning the need for such a new image. And here one must immediately realise that the two, seemingly so separate themes are tightly connected, as the image presented of Socrates is

stunningly close to the way the Dialogue depicts *Eros*. The most important similarly concerns the in-between character of both, warning about the difficulty of coming to terms with them, as the in-between is always hazy, indefinite, uncertain, and can be captured truthfully only in a roundabout manner. The 'object' and 'subject' of the Dialogue, *Eros* and Socrates, just as its form and its substance, the message and the reasons for the message are all tightly interrelated, forming a whole that must be approached most carefully, where understanding assumes the use of careful hermeneutical and genealogical methods, otherwise one risks of imposing an arbitrary, dogmatic meaning, failing to make use of the strikingly fresh intellectual power packed inside this deceptively casual work of philosophy *and* art.

All four papers of the Special Section approach the dialogue in this spirit, trying to unearth some vital insights that Plato can offer, through his understanding of the crisis of Athens, and its significance for human life on this planet, for our contemporary times, the 'gravity of *Eros*' in our present.

Plato's Eros *in context*

Eros is one of the most elusive divine figures of Greek mythology. The name has no etymology; it does not appear as a divinity in Homer, only in Hesiod; has few places of cult; and its features are imprecise. However, where appears, it is considered as one of the oldest deities, assigned the role of a founder of culture, specifically linked to the foundation of cities, even to the foundation of Athens, through Athena, and its main cults also considered as archaic (Fasce, 1977).

The features of *Eros* in Greek mythology and thought are fuzzy due to its fundamental ambivalence, being an elementary, irresistible force (in this capacity already appearing in Homer), which produces both incomparable pleasures and sufferings. The discrepancy between Homer and Hesiod signals that it took a considerable work of mythic thought to generate a personalised deity who could represent this primordial but highly ambivalent force. Poets of the classical period, like Alcman and Sappho, brought about a further personalisation through the poetic formulation of the experience of being assailed by the pleasures and terrors of love, leading Sappho to invent the word 'bittersweet'. The ambivalence of *Eros* is particularly clear through its representations in the visual arts: *Eros* is male, but full of effeminate features, and so also often represented as a hermaphrodite; it is winged, but also shows chthonic features, through his robe and Phrygian cap.

The Sophists further 'humanised' this deity, though in a very particular an highly problematic manner, as they broke the unity of the figure into two opposite extremes, in line with Plato's claim that the Sophists cannot think the in-between, thus are forced to think in dualisms, jumping too quickly from the one to the many and back (*Philebus* 17A). On the one hand, they exalted, out of context and beyond limits, the pleasures associated with erotic experiences, giving rise to an entire literature of 'erotic stories' (*logoi erotikoi*), which would eventually give rise to the erotic novels of the Hellenistic period, that would be revived, in two waves, in the Byzantium. On the other hand, however, the Sophists presented erotic desire as an irresistible external force that shows no mercy to human beings, irresistibly overpowering them, as in the *Encomium of Helen* by Gorgias, who absolves her from all guilt, blaming rather the divine. With this, the Sophists not only ignored the in-between-ness of *Eros*,

destroying the unity of human experience, preaching self-abandon and undermining the care of the self, but also alienated their audience from the divine, represented as a blind or even explicitly hostile external force that only requires unconditional devotion. One can immediately perceive the parallels with modernity, like the thinking of Freud, who similarly externalised *Eros* as the libido, a irresistible force completely outside human beings, whose 'repression' generates intolerable psychic pressures, resulting in various pathological symptoms, thus exonerating those who used this theory to justify giving up their integrity.

This is the context in which Plato partially returns to the archaic and classic characterisation of *Eros* (passionate devotion) as an in-between force, characterising it not as a deity, but a *daimon* (Fasce, 1977: 183-8; Osborne, 1994: 108-10), thus going beyond not just the Sophist dualism, but the assertion of an irredeemable ambivalence as well, proposing Eros as a *converting force*. Conversion is a term usually associated with Christianity. However, while the idea is not present in the Old Testament, it draws on an old European tradition, particularly present in Minoan Crete (Szakolczai, 2007), while the full theoretisation of conversion was connected to the thinking of Plato (Foucault, Hadot), in particular the 'turning around' (*periagoge*) of the *Republic* (Voegelin). It is exactly here that the *Symposium* breaks new ground.

In the famous cave scene at the beginning of Book VII of the *Republic* the turning around, or leaving the cave and ascending to light, is due to an external compulsion that literally forces one to leave the cave (Barney, 2008). It is this negative external force that in the *Symposium* is replaced by the positive force of *Eros*. However, as the papers try to show, Plato is extremely careful is specifying

what kind of *Eros* can produce a positive converting force. This assumes a connection with beauty, to be sure, as beauty is fundamental to move the human soul; but such beauty is not to be searched in the object of one's love, as that would remain a mere desire for possession, but incorporates an overall concern and care for beauty at the level of the entire surrounding environment, which can be conducive to the elevation of the soul towards the contemplation or beholding of the essence of beauty, and thus, beyond possessing and object, to perpetuate beauty by engendering beings that are beautiful – children as well as objects or work of art. Plato makes here no distinction whatsoever between the body and the soul or mind, ideas or physical objects, human, animate or inanimate beings, rather connects a phenomenology of the world as full of beauty (a *cosmos* not a *chaos*) to the conversion of the human soul to the proliferation of beauty; two concerns so well captured by the term 'epiphany'. The meaning is that only by becoming thoroughly permeated with the beauty of the world can one develop a kind of love that escapes one's own limited self, with its wishes and desires for exclusive possession, and rather start living a spiral of giving through engendering in beauty.

The converting power of love, however, as the papers by Horvath and emphasise, can work both ways. It can elevate, but can also bring down; just as a spiral can move upward or downward, once the Pandora's box of the unlimited is opened up. Love implies an opening up and emptying of the self, rendering one vulnerable; it sets up a relationship of influencing and thus power that can be used and thus abused consciously. Capturing the problem of an irresistible external force from the opposite side, *Eros* might become a means for manipulation, turning an in-between into a tool. Whoever manages not simply to seduce another person, but also

to inculcate a loving devotion, gains almost unlimited control over that other person, thus starting a spiral in the opposite direction: instead of elevating, through beauty, to giving and creating, provoking a descent into the hell of dependency, subjugation, destruction and sacrifice.

The paper by Agnes Horvath offers an interpretive understanding of Communism, derived from Plato's analysis of *Eros*. The central idea is that the capacity of *Eros* to fluidify or liquidate borderlines can be instrumentalised by purposefully inciting devotion and thus fixating it towards an ideology. The striking lifespan of Communist parties, with the enormous and sudden success of mobilisation after world wars and the similarly comet-like disappearance due to exhaustion, leaving only a void and a general sense of lethargy, can be explained by arguing that they experimented with such techniques of seduction for political purposes on a mass scale. This implies first the evocation of an oceanic, blissful feeling of happiness, luring large segments of the population into empting oneself, abandoning integrity, helped by the situation of devastation and suffering. Apart from generating blind devotion, the inciting of such expectations also helped to perpetuate the liminal conditions, while after a time the failure to meet expectations was ruefully turned against those who were caught by the enchanting tricks, generating feelings of guilt for the foolish desire of unlimited pleasure. This then became channelled into a passion for suffering, entrapping not only those who were seduced, but the entire population into a gigantic sacrificial mechanism, violently forging into a unity those whose integrity became dissolved, with the elimination suffering as the supposed justification for political rule transmogrified into the idea that only those who suffer can rule, engendering an auto-poietic system of self-victimisation. While Communism

as a political system today belongs to the past, Horvath argues that this model has eerie relevance for contemporary politics, where it is increasingly taken for granted that social cohesion can only be based on common suffering, thus substituting the noble ideas of common good with base symbols and feelings, transforming the political body into a community of sufferers, destroying personality and community; an idea that derives strength from generalised feelings of guilt about giving up one's integrity to the system of 'passionate interests' (Tarde and Latour), masked by the schismogenic pairs of cold 'rational choice' and irresistible libido, on which the logic of consumer capitalism is based.

The Socrates of the **Symposium** *in the context of Plato's works*

The converting power of *Eros*, through beauty, inaugurates a shift between the *Republic* and the *Symposium*; two dialogues considered as 'transitional', finished around the same time. Given that the *Republic* is rightfully considered as the culmination of 'Socratic dialogues', this clearly indicates a problem Plato started to perceive with his master, or at least the image he previously constructed in the Dialogues. This partly reflects changes in his understanding of the Sophists, visible in the need felt to offer a conclusive new image of the Sophist as well, contained in the eponymous dialogue, widely considered as opening Plato's last period. But it also hints that, as several papers argue, the need felt for a new image of Socrates was due to that fact that certain things increasingly bothered Plato about his master, and that these had to do with *Eros*. This could only mean that for Plato Socrates failed to find a proper balance between pedagogy and erotic.

Bonner's paper argues that the theatrical set-up of the *Symposium* intimates a failure of Socrates as pedagogue. Socrates was a strong teacher who managed to focalise the attention of students in such a decisive that they, instead of learning how to take care of themselves, became fanatical followers of their master. This can be complemented through the seemingly opposite case of Alcibiades, on whom Socrates failed to exert a sufficiently strong impact – effective in the presence of Socrates, but not lasting. This failure was particularly serious, as the entire career of Socrates was motivated by his efforts, after the death of Pericles, to secure a proper education for the designated heir; and particularly emphasised by the setting of the dialogue, in 416BC, so just before Alcibiades started the disastrous expedition of 415-3, motivated by his own hubris rather the genuine good of Athens. The reason for this failure, Bonner suggests, is double. On the one hand, the method of Socrates is to dislocate their interlocutors from their taken for granted ways, to feel them ashamed of the life they were leading, forcing them to turn around. Such a negative stimulation, however, produces two opposite excesses, schismogenic pairs: either, as in the case of Alcibiades, it remains ineffective, once the direct impact of the shaming is forgotten; or it produces brainwashed devotees. On the other, the particular technique used by Socrates on Alcibiades is also singularly mistaken. On the one side, Socrates was attracted by the beauty of Alcibiades; on the other, he managed to control himself and refuse gratification. Alcibiades tells the story in order to praise the resilience of Socrates; however, it is not difficult to see how this attitude is deeply flawed. As it is only self-evident, a teacher can hardly do something worse than to fall in love with his student; thus, the eventual ability to resist the consumption of such a relationship is hardly sufficient to produce a proper education; it rather nurtures hubris in the

student. The outcome, the disasters produced by the hubris of Alcibiades, thus can be directly attributed to Socrates.

Any engagement with *Eros*, argues Bonner, is a risky business, and doubly so when the pursuit of *Eros* becomes explicitly conflated with education. Devotion can inspire, but also distort. *Eros*, as Socrates states at the end of his speech, requires respect and care; one must yield to it, but also preserve oneself; dealing with *Eros* can be compared to a tightrope walking. As Socrates failed with Aristodemos, Apollodorus, and Alcibiades, a central concern of the Dialogue is Plato's attempt to come to terms with his own handling of the legacy of his master.

Szakolczai similarly argues that the Dialogue represents a problematisation, by Plato, of Socrates, even a definite distancing from his master, without implying a complete repudiation; and that this is connected to the attitude of Socrates concerning *Eros*. Such distancing is indicated by an entire series of reversals, from the outlook of Socrates through the directionality of the journeys, culminating in Socrates subscribing to the teaching he learned from Diotima, thus being reduced to the status of a student. Central in this process are the emphatic parallels between *Eros* and Socrates, particularly strong in between the two characterisations offered in this dialogue (Osborne, 1994: 94-5), by which Socrates is neither divinised, nor reduced to the status of an external object, but is identified as an in between being who cannot serve as a proper guide, as itself needs the right channelling and guidance.

Just as important as the parallels with *Eros* are the links tied between Socrates, Aristophanes, and the Sophists. According to the *Apology* the *Clouds* of Aristophanes,

where Socrates was ridiculed as an *alazon* (intruder) and arch-Sophist, much contributed to the condemnation of Socrates; and Plato's search for the causes of the collapse of Athenian democracy increasingly put the blame on the imitative arts, in particular comedy, culminating in the *diagnosis* of theatrocracy in the *Laws*. Szakolczai interprets the series of elaborated theatrical devices as indications of Plato acknowledging that a number of features in the conduct of Socrates indeed establishes perplexing parallels between himself and the Sophists, most particularly the conscious conflation of education and erotic.

The Section ends with a paper that is neither about the *Symposium*, nor about the *Eros*, yet brings in a fundamental complementary perspective. It discusses *Lysis*, a dialogue on friendship (*philia*), which is notoriously difficult to date, focusing on the figure of Hermes. Friendship as a word is an even less satisfactory rendering of *philia* than love was for *Eros*, as the Greek word taps into much of what we mean by love: it implies a strong positive emotional tie, though – just as friendship – it has no sexual connotation.

The two dialogues also share a number of similar modalities. Just as the *Symposium*, *Lysis* is also full of dramatic devices and uses of mythological elements, both serving to emphasise the participatory and not discursive aspect of the dialogue. In particular, the dialogue starts by a journey, recalling not only the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, the dialogues devoted to *Eros*, but also the *Republic*, thus opening up an entire field of interpretive possibilities concerning the meaning of this – highly liminal – device, and its relation to changes in the way Plato understood the contrast between Socrates and the Sophists, all the more so as the argumentative style of

Socrates in the dialogue, as von Heyking argues, would be characterised as Sophistic in the *Euthydemus*, often considered as a follow-up dialogue. It also takes place during a festivity, or a ritual event close to theatre, opening up another loop for interpretative understanding.

Even more important are the similarities between *philia* in *Lysis* and *eros* in the *Symposium*. Both imply a taming of violent, primary impulses, and an opening up of the individual soul towards an ascent to the divine. According to von Heyking, the central achievement of Plato in *Lysis* is to express this opening up experience, that can be traced back to shamanism, and is most present in Greek religion and mythology in the figure of Hermes. The parallels between Hermes and *Eros* in Greek mythology and religion are also intriguing, all the more so due to the evident affinity between Hermes, god of speed, commerce, language and communication, but also a thief, liar and snatcher of souls, and the modern world, and also because both evoke the more general anthropological figure of the trickster.[6]

The parallels with the famous passage in the Symposium, concerning the ascent towards the essence of beauty, are also most evident, opening up the question of how from this perspective the relative chronology of the dialogues concerned can be revisited, beyond purely stylistic concerns. This, however, cannot be attempted here.

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Notes

1. Of particular significance is Foucault's concern with power, politics and sexuality, partly explaining his return to antiquity the last period of his work, including Plato (see especially his 1983 lectures at the *Collège de France*), even though these concerns were not brought coherently together before his passing away.

2. The papers of this Second Symposium are forthcoming (see Horvath and O'Brien, 2013).

3. It has been recently argued that, with the possible exception of the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*, it is 'the most influential of Plato's dialogues' (Cooksey, 2010: 2).

4. For a recent, but unfortunately not too illuminating discussion of the reception of the dialogue, see Lesher, Nails and Sheffield (2006).

5. For further details, see Szakolczai (2013, chapter 4 and 5).

6. The Conclusion to Silvana Fasce's book is entitled 'Eros *trickster*' (1977: 191-205). About *Eros* as trickster, see also Horvath (2008).

7. For other items cited in this Introduction, see the papers.