

Image manipulation and utopianism – Sparta’s legacies to modern Europe

Classicist KENNETH ROYCE MOORE delves into one of the oldest and most important ingredients of Western civilisation

Spartan tradition, both real and idealised, had a profound influence on such notable philosophers as Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, Diogenes the Cynic, Zeno of Cyttium and others [**EDITOR’S NOTE:** Zeno of Cyttium (c 340-265 BC) was the founder of Stoicism]. This is especially the case in terms of those who speculatively explored political theory and that which we would today refer to as utopianism and, by extension, the subsequent Western traditions that derive from their philosophies.

The image of Sparta, if not the reality, represented what amounted to, for some at least, a social order superior to any of other ‘natural’ constitutions of the era – a thing to be examined, refined and, if possible, replicated. However, it was clearly in conflict with the actuality of ancient Sparta; the image came about largely through the pro-Lakonian works of Xenophon and others, not the least being the philosophers named above, along with the official version of Spartan affairs that issued, albeit in a tightly controlled manner, from the Spartans themselves. The truth still remains overshadowed by the legend. Cartledge refers to this phenomenon as “the partly distorted, partly invented image created for and by non-Spartans (with not a little help from their Spartan friends) of what Sparta ideally represented”.¹ In other words, they were effectively no strangers to the modern concept of political idealism. They sought to propagandistically reshape their past and present, thereby attempting to control their future as well, along a specifically ideological course. No small part of the legacy of Sparta, and perhaps that which so impressed the utopian philosophers, was her native skill for re-inventing her own traditions, time and again, with notable success.

The Spartan *politeia* underwent a series of revisions and constitutional reforms – not, as the pro-Lakonianists would necessarily have us believe, all

at once. The first round of reforms appear to have come about in the seventh century BCE, as Whitby says, when there were some “internal wranglings over the constitution” as well as, perhaps more profoundly, the revolts of the enslaved populace of Messenia. These and other political events seem to have necessitated some deliberate cultural re-ordering.² According to the official tradition, the mytho-historical Lykourgos, a lawgiver *extraordinaire*, took control and revised the Spartan *politeia*, issuing his Great Rhetra to enact and record these reforms for posterity. The Great Rhetra itself was maintained by oral tradition since the Spartans kept no written records until well into the Hellenistic era. Of course, this made its authenticity subject to the authority of those entrusted with its official recitation.

A primary result of the Lykourgan reforms appears to have been the achievement of a more tightly controlled society in which the lives of most citizens were subject to some type of intense scrutiny, martial regulation and relative socioeconomic austerity. This process involved, amongst other things, the inculcation of accepted virtues through education along with considerable exposure to the state’s official ideologies. The customs changed, according to circumstantial necessity, over time and were given legitimacy as if they had always been part of the ancestral constitution. Sparta’s political restructuring throughout her history seems to have been a remarkable feat of social engineering if only inasmuch as it maintained a kind of static identity of Sparta, itself different at different times, with regard to the *other* (Greeks, Persians etc.). It is possible that many Spartiates and non-Spartiates drew little distinction between the official mask and the reality.

As indicated, not all of the alleged traditions of Lykourgos can be fairly attributed to the man himself. Some are clearly the products of 3rd century revolutionary reforms. Many were adopted in response to socio-political crises that arose at other times throughout Spartan history (eg, the protracted Peloponnesian Wars, the conflicts with Thebes and Macedonia). The process of self re-invention seems to have been ongoing from the time of Lykourgos up to and after 146 BCE when Rome permitted them to re-establish their ‘Lykourgan constitution’ that had been abolished by the Achaean general Philopoemen in 188. All such reforms were designed to hearken back to an idealised Sparta of old and claim legitimacy by purporting to come from the (orally recorded) Rhetra of Lykourgos himself.

Notable examples of this phenomenon are treated below according to subject, but let us presently consider the case of the Spartan cavalry. Thucydides attests that an equestrian military force was first introduced into Sparta in 424 BCE.³

He calls this change “contrary to custom”. However, Xenophon tells us that it was Lykourgos who divided the Spartans into six regimental units of cavalry and Plutarch, citing the 3rd century source Philostephanus, backs up Xenophon on the official Lakonian version of events.⁴ A new tradition appears to have been invented here in order to justify a significant change from heavy infantry-based tactics. Such an attribution to Lykourgos “was the only way to make socially palatable so radical an innovation, born as it was of military necessity”.⁵ This example highlights the fact that it is always wise to take the officially sanctioned Spartan traditions that claim ancestral legitimacy with a grain of salt.

Lykourgos and his revisionist successors were not working in a cultural vacuum. In terms of the nature of their reforms, there is a recognised borrowing and influence from afar. Kretan institutions, typically conservative but also having recourse to sophisticated legal codes, are a major case in point. As with Sparta, these too found champions amongst later philosophers. According to Herodotos, the Spartans of his era (fifth century BCE) maintained that their Lykourgan legislation was derived in part from that of Krete.⁶ Aristotle discusses one historical approach that attempted to make not only the reforms of Lykourgos but also those of Zaleukos and Charondas dependent on one Thaletas who was a legislator of Gortyn.⁷ Aristotle rejects this for chronological reasons (not unlike the case of the Spartan cavalry mentioned above) but agrees with the tribute to Krete that it implies. He says that “the true statesman wishes to make his citizens good and obedient to the laws; we have a good example of this in the Kretan and Lakedaimonian legislators”.⁸

Something like Sparta’s mixed constitution is favoured by Zeno of Cyttium in his *Republic*. A number of the policies in Plato’s *Republic* and *Laws* appear to reflect Spartan ways of thinking both real and imagined and this is particularly the case in terms of governmental organisation and the mixed constitution. The *politeia* outlined in the *Laws* is especially characterized by a selective blending of Spartan and Athenian elements. There are other connections with the utopianists discussed below.

Sparta’s own system inclined toward gerontocratic oligarchy with limited monarchical and democratic elements. They promoted this system with a zeal. “Honours given to the old at Sparta”, as Powell says, “represented the culmination of an elaborate hierarchy based on age and beginning in early schooldays”.⁹ As with Plato, it was essential to ‘get ‘em while they’re young’.

The apparatus of the Spartan government may be loosely described as follows. The *gerousia* was the actual governing council with more or less supreme authority. The pseudo-democratic *apella* was made up of the adult,

male citizens and had the right to either support decisions made by the *gerousia* through popular acclaim or, if they disagreed, to remain patriotically silent. The duarchy of the two kings existed largely for ceremonial and martial purposes, although some kings took more active roles in politics than others. The Spartan *ephors* were effectively a ‘watchdog’ branch of government, in charge of the public morality, who made certain that the laws and social mores were upheld by all. They could call any citizen, including in theory even a king or a member of the *gerousia*, to account. They could and did vie for power with the other branches of the government.

The *ephors* in particular serve a purpose that Plato deemed sufficiently valuable to import, albeit in modified form, into both his *Kallipolis* in the *Republic* and Magnesia in the *Laws*. Each of these utopian visions is to be a sort of gerontocracy strongly recollecting that of Sparta – with its Guardians of the Laws (*nomophylakes*) themselves over the age of fifty and the oligarchic Vigilance Committee/Philosopher Kings and Queens made up of the eldest of these. The Platonic *nomophylakes* have much in common with their Spartan counterparts, the *ephors*, in a sort of philosophically idealised way. As Morrow says, they add a Lakonian “monarchical element in the city” further indicating a preference for the “mixed constitution”.¹⁰ They would also have been an effective agency for ensuring obedience and conformity.

The fact that Sparta had undergone legal restructuring with observable results was perhaps a significant factor in its being considered especially worthy of study by later philosophers. Plato’s Sokrates praises Krete and Sparta on various occasions and, in the *Republic*, he cites “the Kretan and Spartan constitution” as an example of the best of the imperfect forms of government.¹¹ One of the main perceived faults of these constitutions was their inbuilt warlike inclinations. More importantly, they were seen to aim at only one principal part of virtue – courage – rather than the whole of virtue. As with the *Republic*, the *polis* in the *Laws* also aims at the greatest possible happiness (*eudaimonia*); and, this is inextricably linked with virtue (*aretē*). The Platonic lawgiver must aim at fostering all of the virtues – courage, justice, moderation and wisdom – in all of the citizens.

The similarities between Sparta (however idealised) and the constitutions of the *Republic* and *Laws* are too numerous to recount here. Plato employed lessons learnt from Sparta both within and without the realm of text. Plutarch tells us that, under Plato’s influence, Dion, the King of Syracuse, sought to establish a constitution “of the Spartan or Kretan type, a mixture of democracy and royalty, with an aristocracy overseeing the administration of important affairs”.¹² Plato

was not alone in terms of his interests in Lakonian ways. More than a few of his students in the Academy took their lessons in Spartan *cum* utopian politics abroad and influenced political affairs all over Hellas with varying degrees of success.

Aristotle is probably the most famous of Plato's students with close ties to the political leaders *par excellence* who would set the course of the Hellenistic world: Philip II of Macedon and his son, Alexander, later called the Great. The second book of his *Politics* contains a lengthy account of Kretan and Spartan customs, comparisons between them and a discussion of their historical relationships. Jaeger indicates that the materials used by Aristotle in this section of the *Politics* were assembled during the period of his residence in the Academy, as he says, "when Plato was working on the *Laws* and Kretan and Spartan institutions were a favourite subject of discussion".¹³ Aristotle is in good company here. Iamblichos reported that Pythagoras himself paid special attention to the subject.¹⁴ He was reputed to have had political dealings in Sicily, Lampaskos and Kroton (to name a few places), and he appears to have also held a strong interest in the constitutional formulations of Krete and Sparta. The indications that we have suggest a highly political aspect to early Pythagoreanism. That Pythagoras' teachings greatly influenced Plato, and thereby Aristotle, is generally acknowledged.

The interest in Sparta extends to the Stoics who also borrow from its traditions. This is probably due to the fact that Zeno of Cyttium follows in the footsteps of Plato and Aristotle and can be seen, perhaps most notably, in the Stoic preference for austerity, along with other Stoic ideals discussed below. But Zeno himself was indirectly influenced by a notable proponent of Spartan customs, Diogenes the Cynic, no doubt as a consequence of Zeno's own teacher, Krates, having been one of his students.

Such interest from prominent philosophers and thinkers as these highlights the fact that Sparta's achievements as a society are worthy of consideration. The Lykourgan reforms seem to have provided her with a relatively stable social order in which a minority of Spartiates ruled over a majority of subject peoples, many of whom were not infrequently inclined toward violent revolution. They had an exceptionally superb military machine and, from the end of the Persian wars up to their final defeat by the Theban and Boeotian alliance at the battle of Leuktra (371 BCE), they held an empire that rivalled and, indeed, eventually defeated that of Athens. Virtually all of this, it should be noted, was built on the backs of their many slaves and accomplished by way of calculated social controls.

Certain peculiarities and novel approaches characterise Spartan culture which also attracted the utopianists. Education, for example, was a carefully

ordered and influential institution of the *polis*. Most other ancient Greek cities had various forms of education, exercise and military training available. The Lakonian distinction may be found in terms of organisation. The Spartans referred to their system as the *agōgē*, which means a ‘leading’ or ‘rearing’ of youths who were organised into ‘herds’ for administrative and proselytising purposes. The Spartan *agōgē*, in keeping with their national character, appears to have been quite rigid and hierarchical. It consisted of letters and the building of endurance through sport and martial activities. Something very much like this system is espoused by Plato (with Aristotle in agreement) and, to a differing degree, Zeno as well in their respective treatises on political theory.¹⁵

The Spartans were amongst the first to make education obligatory and to organise it in so thorough a manner. It was “compulsory for all boys from the age of seven until they attained their socio-political majority (as opposed to physical maturity) at age eighteen”.¹⁶ There was also the *krypteia*, which was a form of military service for older youths akin to the later Athenian *ephebeia* – but with more sinister connotations in terms of social control.¹⁷ Xenophon’s idealised account of the Spartan system envisions a type of institutionalised, physical training to have existed for women as well, but evidently not on a par with that of men. This may have amounted to some degree of preparedness in defending the city if an enemy attacked or if slaves revolted whilst the menfolk were away fighting wars but it represents a marked leap over Athenian citizen-women’s level of public involvement. The apparent, albeit limited, education of Spartan females is a subject of much debate but, along with other aspects of their *agōgē*, it (or perhaps Xenophon’s idealised version of it) had a profound affect on Plato’s approach to the subject of pedagogy in his *Laws* and probably Zeno’s *politeia* too in regard to the near-equal education of women and men. Aristotle’s Macedonian tendencies may have influenced his (rather misogynistic) view on women, clearly at variance with that of Plato and Zeno, as it appears in his works.

The utopian educational programmes of Plato’s and Zeno’s speculative philosophy, and apparently that of Diogenes the Cynic too, strive to instantiate virtue in all citizens. The Spartans allegedly sought this same end albeit adapted to their own overriding agenda. The rigidly hierarchical approach of the Spartans too is incompatible with the somewhat anarchistic *politeiai* of Diogenes and Zeno. Even so, in Zeno’s ideal *polis* (or *antipolis*, as it may be rightly called), youths go barefoot like those in Sparta and comparable emphasis is placed on their physical and mental development. As Diogenes Laertius indicates:

“He used to affirm that training was of two types, mental and bodily: the latter being that whereby, with constant exercise, perceptions are

formed such as secure freedom of movement for virtuous deeds; and the one half of this training is incomplete without the other, good health and strength being just as much included among the essential things, whether for body or soul".¹⁸

As with Plato, the youths must be 'strapped-up' with physical and mental labour in order both to quell their natural *hybris* and to mould them into the officially accepted forms that they will take as adults. However, Plato's narrators have maintained that the Lakonian method needed some revision in particular with regard to its austerity. His Athenian Stranger criticises the systems in Sparta and Krete, in addition to their incomplete approach to virtue mentioned above, since they also compel their citizens 'to keep away from and not to taste of the greatest pleasures and entertainments'.¹⁹ This, he says, has left them unprepared for temptations of pleasure and therefore subject to defeat at the hands of those who have mastered them. There is some indication, later discussed, that this was indeed the case.

Music figured prominently into Lakonian education and socialisation, as it did for most ancient Greek *poleis* both real and imagined, but typically with marked differences and significant points of contrast. In fifth-century Sparta, "Tyrtaeus' elegies were still the most popular songs in the repertoire, but that was because of their moral tone and because they made good marching songs".²⁰ This type of music was designed to leave a powerful impression. "It was a dreadful but inspiring sight", declares Plutarch, the Lakonophile, evincing genuine admiration, "to see the Spartan army marching off for an attack to the sound of the oboe".²¹ Clearly music's potential for inspiring awe and reverence, along with fear in all its shades of significance, was well utilised as a means of social control and inculcation.

The officially sanctioned musical *repertoire* found in both of Plato's utopian visions self-consciously reflects Spartan practices more so than any other type.²² His carefully vetted choice of material for these least resembles the luxurious Persian styles, and evidently, much of the Athenian as well, since his narrator locates the sought-for quality of *andreia* (manliness/courage – as it may be manifested in music) particularly within the Spartan tradition. It seems somehow fitting, and certainly in keeping with Lakonian propaganda, that an idealized view of the Spartans should represent, for some, the quintessence of Hellenic manliness.

As we have seen, a central theme of the Spartan education, identified with virtue, was the inculcation of civic obedience. This is in part achieved through the social leverage allowed by shame. As in Plato's Magnesia, the "best people"

are said to hold “*phobos* [fear] in the greatest esteem, calling it *aidōs* [shame/modesty]”.²³ This reflects traditionally Homeric values associated with accepted social behaviour and underscores the connection with ancestral customs however idealised.

Xenophon wrote of Sparta that “there, great *aidōs* stands beside great obedience”.²⁴ This was apparently true in both a figurative and literal sense. A kind of ‘shame-culture’ figured prominently into their civic ideology. *Aidōs* entails the fear of public censure incurred by the breaching of accepted protocols. It served all over Hellas as an “embedded means” of controlling citizens’ behaviour, but it appears to have found its home in Sparta. The privileged relationship of *phobos* with the authority of the *ephors* is emphasised by “the spatial contiguity of the place where ephoric power was exercised” and the actual temple of deified *Phobos* itself.²⁵

The Spartan approach to social control appears at once brutal and, at the same time, sophisticated. Such practices of psychological and ideological manipulation were perhaps a significant inspiration for Plato’s notion of the so-called ‘noble lie’ (or virtuous fiction) in the *Republic* along with the use of paramyth – persuasive, if not always factual, legal preambles – in the *Laws*. However, the deployment of carefully stage-managed (mis)information by Sparta is not limited to musical censorship, the invention of tradition and the exploitation of shame. Spartan official deceit included not only lying to the helots about whether they would be rewarded or killed, misleading other enemies in wartime (which was a practice that Xenophon explicitly recommended to non-Spartans), but also misinforming their own citizens about the outcome of battles involving Spartan forces. Sparta was a fairly closed society that took special precautions to limit citizens’ access to various levels of information while striving to control such information that went into the outside world concerning Sparta itself.

Like Plato’s fictional Magnesia, the freedom to travel and learn about foreign ways was only granted to select individuals by special permission of the Spartan government (that is, the *gerousia* and the nobles). Officially, there was a concern that if Spartiates travelled abroad they might shed their native values under the (perceived) decadent temptations of alien customs. Some question remains as to when this reform actually took place. There is an account of it in Xenophon and this is in turn supported by other sources of his era.²⁶ However, the first time that we hear about the Spartans being seriously concerned over foreign travel is from Thucydides in reference to the events of the 470s BCE. At this time, the Spartan regent Pausanias was accused of Medism [EDITOR’S NOTE: Greek sympathy or

support for the Medes (Persians), Greece's ancient enemies] in part because he had allegedly adopted a Persian style of dress and other foreign manners. However, a political motivation may be seen behind this charge resulting from the fact that he was engaged in unofficial acts abroad amounting to his own private foreign policy, perhaps with designs to set himself up as the master of the Greek world. Recalled under threat of being made public enemy No 1, but eventually acquitted of all charges, he was not allowed to return to his previously high level of social standing and was compelled to remain at home in Sparta for the remainder of his life. It seems likely, as Flower suggests, that "the fall of Pausanias provides an appropriate context for the introduction of a ban on foreign travel without official authorisation."²⁷ This innovation was naturally attributed to Lykourgos and what had perhaps been a native inclination in the past thus became enshrined in law.

Another feature of Lakonian social control that impressed later philosophers was their command of the economy along modern-day communist lines. The Spartan lawgivers saw fit to limit the ownership of money and manage its movements within their sphere of influence. This is the policy outlined in Xenophon's account of Spartan currency after Lykourgos' alleged reforms:

"...such that even ten *minae* could not be brought into the house without the master and servants knowing as it would take up considerable space and require a wagon to move it; there were also searches for gold and silver, and if any was found, the possessor was punished."²⁸

In approbation of such an ostensibly beneficent policy, Plato's Athenian Stranger indicates that "to be exceedingly wealthy and at the same time to be good is impossible".²⁹ The absence of valuable legal tender is also compatible, in theory, with the policies in Plato's *Republic*, Zeno's *politeia* along with the utopian teachings of Diogenes the Cynic.

However, the real and the ideal appear at odds with regard to this tradition in Sparta; in short, it seems to have been a patent invention of later times and circumstances rather than part of the ancestral constitution. There is indeed some indication that the Spartans of earlier centuries were relatively unfamiliar with coinage in general perhaps due to their isolationist character and Sparta may not have minted her own currency. However, as Hodkinson says, "contrary to the programmatic statements in literary sources, a range of evidence indicates official possession and use of precious metal currency before 404".³⁰ The iron-ingot currency purportedly in circulation in ancient Sparta, even if it was not the only kind available, has never been discovered. The motivations behind this innovation in tradition appear again to have been political. Much as with Pausanias a generation prior, the Spartan admiral Lysander was amassing

considerable power in the Greek world and much of it appears to have been purchased with Persian gold (foreign currency). This was used for the bribery of Athenian sailors to join the Spartan fleet which probably facilitated his famous naval victories at Notium in 407 and Aegospotami in 405. Perhaps Lysander's opponents recalled that iron had once been used as a medium of exchange in antiquity and, "re-created an iron currency in the tense atmosphere of 404" as part of their aggressive reversal of his policies.³¹ Further complicating the claims of the Spartan revisionists is the fact that there was no coinage known to have been in circulation in Greece at the time of Lykourgos.

Sparta's command economy went beyond limiting the possession of currency. Strikingly similar to the Magnesians of Plato's *Laws* and the philosopher-citizens of Zeno's *politeia*, Plutarch tells us (and Xenophon concurs) that "Lykourgos absolutely forbade the Spartans from practicing a manual craft".³² In the speculative utopias of the philosophers, the reason for this exclusion is so that the citizens will be able to devote all of their energies to the pursuit of virtue. Sparta's case is more complicated. Herodotos, writing in the 420s, mentions no such prohibition against banausic labour. He indicates that a bias against those who practice a manual craft existed throughout the whole of Greece, especially amongst the Spartans and least amongst the Corinthians.³³ It is difficult to say precisely when this bias turned into Lykourgian law; however, an explanation may be found in the privations that Sparta suffered after carrying on the lengthy and expensive process of fighting protracted conflicts of attrition during the Peloponnesian Wars. This may have caused them "increasingly to represent themselves, and indeed to see themselves, as fundamentally different from their antagonists".³⁴ Again, Plutarch and Xenophon may be telling us only what the Spartans wanted us to hear.

The prohibition of dowries is another curious facet of Lakonian monetary policy and it, along with a division of citizenry presently to be considered, may represent circumstantial evidence for a stronger Platonic connection than is generally acknowledged. In the *Laws*, Plato's Athenian Stranger prescribes a ban on dowries in Magnesia and significantly limits brides' *trousseaux* in contrast to real-world amounts typically expended. This is consistent with the spirit of (later) Spartan ideals if not traditional practice. The reasons given by Plutarch for the alleged removal of dowries from Sparta were, in characteristically egalitarian tones, "so that none may be left unmarried because of poverty or sought eagerly because of affluence".³⁵ Even so, a transfer of material goods seems to have accompanied Spartan brides from the sixth and fifth centuries BCE until the reforms of Agis and Kleomenes in the third century. Aristotle's

reference to this as a *proix* (dowry) may be a loose way of describing the practice as analogous to the Athenian one.³⁶ He says that Spartan women had large dowries, loaned money at interest and were able to own and inherit property.³⁷ The third century claims that dowries were forbidden in Sparta since Lykourgos represent a later “invention of revolutionary propaganda”.³⁸

Dowries and land distribution were problems that haunted Sparta in the altered political landscape after her defeat at Leuktra. By 244 BCE, as Plutarch tells us, “not more than 700 Spartiates were left, and of these there were perhaps 100 who possessed land and allotment.”³⁹ These figures may not be wholly accurate but they nonetheless indicate a society *in extremis*. The Spartan response to this crisis, as usual, was to re-invent a Lykourgan tradition and they may have even had a certain fourth century philosophical text as their guide. We are told that King Agis wanted to divide the land into 4,500 equal and inalienable lots for citizens; although, the task was actually completed by Kleomenes who eventually settled for a citizen body numbering 4000.⁴⁰ In Plato’s Magnesia, there are to be 5,040 (a number readily divisible by 12, 10, etc.) administrative units for land-holdings by the citizens of the city (*Laws* 737e); each lot supports one family, the number of families is meant to remain at more or less a constant of 5,040 (740b-c). One of the male children will inherit the holding and the females are given in marriage where appropriate; excess offspring will be obliged to emigrate (740d-e, 741). While not precisely the same figure, this is strikingly similar to the reforms of Agis and Kleomenes. The indivisibility of the land units is even more suggestive.

Plutarch tells us in the eighth chapter of his life of Agis that Lykourgos had made this division in antiquity. This “tradition”, as it was related in the 3rd century, maintained that land could only be passed from father to son (or to the State for further re-distribution in the event of no heirs). Yet, in the Rhetra of Epitadeus from the early fourth century, we are told that Lykourgos allowed a citizen to bequeath his estate to anyone he pleased.⁴¹ This appears to be one of the main reasons why so much land ended up in so few hands and therefore came in need of redistribution in the third century. The whole concept of inalienable and indivisible lots of equal size was an invention of King Agis with no basis in historical fact.⁴² Its basis in Platonic literature and pro-Spartan idealisations seems to be a significant possibility, with a kind of bizarre interaction between idealisers, philosophers and an actual polity.

Other truly ancient Spartan traditions, such as the *agōgē* (mentioned above) and communal meals had also fallen out of practice by the third century and were reintroduced, with revisions, by the reformers Agis and Kleomenes. In the earlier

version of communal dining, each Spartiate contributed a set amount to the whole meal. Xenophon says of the Spartan common messes “that as long as they are together, their table is never without food”.⁴³ They had evidently grown elitist and exclusive as property and citizenship became more unequally distributed. Here too is another connection with Plato’s *Laws* and potentially Zeno’s *politeia*. The former has virtually the same institution and the latter seems favourable to such activities – even if they have not been precisely spelled out in the surviving texts – since communal life is espoused and extolled. While it is clear that this institution served a civic role in binding the Spartan community through shared meals, it also had an educative quality. The Spartan *syssition*, or “communal mess”, “was looked upon as a school of manners and deportment” and as a means of induction into the accepted modes of public deportment and discourse.⁴⁴

The common meals were also notoriously hotbeds of institutionalised same-sex activity. The subject of Spartan sexual mores is complex but relates prominently to the works of the utopianists. Same-sex intercourse appears to have been a norm of life in Sparta perhaps even more so than other *poleis* at the time. It is a concept that many of the later Stoics found acceptable and a system of state-sanctioned same-sex relationships of a Lakonian nature is famously proffered in Plato’s *Republic*.⁴⁵ Yet the Spartans reveal, not unlike many regions of the modern world, a contradictory quality with regard to what we take to represent their essential attitude toward sexuality. Xenophon says that Lykourgos forbade same-sex relations between boys and men apart from the virtuous, non-sexual type of relationship favoured by Plato (in his later works), Zeno and other philosophers in theory if not always in practice.⁴⁶ But Xenophon makes the notable and somewhat startling admission that customs had changed since the inception of these reforms.⁴⁷ On this account, Plato’s Athenian Stranger decries Sparta and Krete as city-states that, to their detriment, he perceives to have officially sanctioned same-sex behaviour. This is a point where Plato’s final utopian vision diverges from Spartan practices since same-sex relations are to be highly discouraged if not altogether outlawed in Magnesia.⁴⁸

Some details survive to back up the popular perceptions of Lakonian sexuality. In addition to the alleged proclivities of communal messmates, there is considerable evidence pointing toward a high level of homoeroticism pervading Spartan culture. For example, imagery found on bronze figurines, mirror-handles and *kylix* interiors [EDITOR’S NOTE: A *kylix* is a shallow cup with a tall stem, similar to an Italian *tazza*] not only tend to reveal scenes of an erotic nature between males but they often “portray girls and young women with underdeveloped or de-emphasised secondary sex characteristics”.⁴⁹ Certainly

there was same-sex behaviour and homoerotic art to be found in virtually any ancient Greek *poleis*, but Sparta's notoriety in this regard is significantly one piece of news that circulated widely beyond the 'iron curtain' of Lakonian influence. By the fourth century BCE, their youths had acquired a reputation for amorous proclivities in terms of same-sex intercourse to such an extent that Diogenes the Cynic, "being asked where in all Hellas he found good men, replied: 'Good men nowhere, but good boys in Sparta.'" ⁵⁰

Lakonian mixed-sex relations appear to have also been fairly unique in the ancient Greek world as well in no small part due to their adherence to an overall theme of communism. Xenophon's account suggests that their system permitted more freedom of choice for both partners (with limited contact after marriage) and, in some particular circumstances, allowed husbands to share their wives with other men. Even so, "a Spartan woman's primary role was not, unlike that of her Athenian sister, the performance of strictly domestic tasks – though she was expected to be able to run a home...the goal of her life was childbearing (*teknopoiia*)".⁵¹ The same attitudes appear, albeit in markedly different ways, in the sort of sexual communism espoused by Plato and Zeno in their respective *politeiai*.

Xenophon indicates that Spartan men often wedded women older than perhaps the Greek norm. Lykourgos allegedly forbade citizen men to marry until their brides were "in the period of physical prime",⁵² but some older men clearly still preferred younger wives. He does not say precisely what age the "period of physical prime" entailed. Plutarch gives evidence for a comparable 'minimum age' but pointedly does not specify a number.⁵³ The allegedly superior Spartan diet may have helped their girls to mature faster and thus wed earlier or, alternatively, the rigorous athletics might have delayed the onset of menstruation and, thereby, their weddings.⁵⁴ The precise age of marriage for Spartan women remains unknown.

Sexual communism seems to have been a dominant theme embedded in the Spartan cultural *psyche*. For example, we are told that they regarded adultery as hardly a crime at all.⁵⁵ Xenophon does not mention it in his works on Sparta while Plutarch curiously goes out of his way to deny that it existed. "Plutarch seems to have been technically correct", as Cartledge says, "and this is a remarkable comment on the emphasis laid on the extra-marital maintenance of the male citizen population at Sparta".⁵⁶ It may have been the case that there was no law on adultery in Sparta except amongst their royal families. Our lack of knowledge about these things with regard to the other citizen classes may be due to the small number of non-Spartiates who had the chance to hear



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about them. Polybius and Strabo both indicate that the *ephors* had encouraged sexual license between citizens and the *helots* as a means of survival in times of conflict when legitimate fathers were few and this precedent may have thence encouraged the decriminalisation of extra-marital intercourse.⁵⁷ If so, then this is another example of the re-invention of Lykourgan tradition on a most essential subject. The theme of sexual communism, moreover, was prominently taken up by the utopian philosophers.

I have sought to demonstrate that the Spartans were at once like and unlike their fellow sons of Hellas in significant ways and to indicate some of the potential impact that this difference effected in terms of the speculations of others. As we have seen, many of their institutions (whether real or imagined) impressed and influenced utopian philosophers such as Plato and Zeno of Citium who borrowed heavily from perceived Lakonian traditions. Organised education, stringent monetary policies, a mixed constitution and a powerful military aside, perhaps the greatest accomplishment of the Spartans was their ability to adapt and to cope with a changing world in which their Lykourgan values had to be constantly re-invented, doubtless out of sheer necessity, if they were to remain whole and distinct as a society. We have seen that the Spartans themselves, through both the enacting of official policies and the propagandistic promotion of their ideals, have shaped their society along directed paths. In some cases, they appear to have conflated the real and the ideal by later adopting some of the fictional traditions, as advanced by some of their more notable literary proponents, of which perhaps they themselves, at a different time and for different reasons, had originally a hand in the creation.

Far from simply being a static, cultural backwater entrenched in the archaic traditions of a legendary lawgiver, the Spartans were constantly engaging the world around them, interacting with it in their own unique way and adapting dynamically to it. I suspect that this quality was known and admired by Plato and others who undertook such intensive investigations into Spartan civilization and history. How could they who had such insight, and who were so close to the events in question, fail to observe this phenomenon? The ability to call a calculated 'something' into existence for the ostensible good of the *polis*, to give it a name and invent a convention that people will follow is no mean feat. This is 'the word' (*logos*) in action. It strikes at the very foundations of political philosophy and finds its home as much in the modern democracies of the industrialised West today as it did in ancient Sparta. ■

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NOTES

- 1 (1987), 118
- 2 Whitby (2001), 9. It was surely a combination of these and other matters of urgent necessity (e.g. the defeat by Argos at Hysiae c. 669—Pausanias II.24.8) that led to the changes
- 3 IV.55.2
- 4 *Lak. Pol.* 11.4, Plut. *Lyk.* 23. The number of these forces had changed between 424 b.c.e. and Xenophon's era. There were only 400 cavalry in 424 b.c.e. as opposed to about 720 in the early fourth century (*Hel.* IV.2.16). The division into six units appears to have happened when the number was increased so that which was attributed to Lykourgos in the *Lak. Pol.* was not even the original innovation but a subsequent modification of it
- 5 Flower (2002), 202
- 6 I.65
- 7 *Pol.* 1274a, 25-31. This Thaletas is the same Melic poet who was meant to have established the naked-boy dances (γυμνοπαίδιαι) at Sparta. Cf. *Rep.* 452c and below
- 8 *Nik. Eth.* 1102a, 8-11. The Athenian reformer Solon (c. 640-c. 560 b.c.e.) was reputed by some to have been helped in lawmaking by the Kretan Epimenides, Plut. *Solon* 12. Plutarch's source was likely an ancient one, possibly Theopompos; cf. Diog. Laert. I.109
- 9 Powell (1994), 276. Cf. Hdt. II.39 for customs of similar respect ethnographically projected onto Egyptians, Skythians and I.131 for the Persians to a lesser extent
- 10 (1960), 526. Cf. Richer (1999), 99-100
- 11 *Rep.* 544c; cf. too *Crito* 52e
- 12 Nepos, *Dion* II, IV.1-3; V.4-5; XI.2; XIII.1-4, LIII.2. The extent of his success appears to have been less than Plutarch's optimistic version of events, for more on which cf. von Fritz (1968), 5-62. On Plato and the Pythagoreans in Sicily cf. Cicero, *Rep.* 1.10; *Fin.* 5.29.87; *Tusc. Disp.* 1.17.39. Also, on Plato in Sicily, cf. Plut. and Plato, *Letter VII*
- 13 Jaeger (1923), 300-301, n.1
- 14 *De vita Pythagorica* XXV seq. On some of the pros and cons of using Iamblichos as a viable source on the Pythagoreans, cf. de Vogel (1966), 20 and esp. Appendix D, *On Iamblichos*, 204. Also cf. Kingsley (1995) on recent archaeological data that provides stronger links between the Neopythagoreans of Iamblichos' time and the earlier Pythagoreans than had been previously supposed
- 15 On Zeno, cf. Diog. Laert. VII.32-4, he favoured one-to-one education but indicated that all youths should be reared together by the community; on Platonic pedagogical theory in the *Laws*, 794a sq. Cf. 808c-d for the analogy between a 'herd' of children and that of beasts which recollects the Spartan 'boy herd'. Cf. too Aristotle, *Politics* VIII.5.1340a14-28 for his general agreement with the Platonic approach to early education in this area
- 16 Cartledge (2001), 83. Thucydides (II.39) says of this system that 'they from childhood seek after manliness through laborious training'
- 17 The *krypteia* allegedly "culled" any unruly members of the slave and resident alien populations, cf. Hesk (2000), 87, 100-1 on these and Winkler (1990), 34. Cf. too Vidal-Naquet (1986), 142 who indicates, 'What is true of the Athenian ephebe *at the level of myth* is true of the Spartan *kruptos* in practice'
- 18 *Diog. Laert.* VI. 70

- 19 ...μεγίστων ἠδονῶν καὶ παιδιῶν—635b5-6
 20 Marrou (1982), 21
 21 *Lyk.* 22
 22 629b. Cf. 653c-660c and see Barker (1984) 141-56 on Magnesian music
 23 *Laws* 647a
 24 *Lak. Pol.* II.2. *Phobos* had his own temple in Sparta and was probably attended by an all-male priesthood; relatively little is known about the religious features of *Aidōs*, but Richer (1999), 93, is ‘tempted *a priori* to see in *Aidōs* a form of *Phobos* for the use of women’
 25 Mactoux (1993), 280
 26 *Lak. Pol.* XIV.4; cf. Plato *Protag.* 342c-d and Arist. *Frag.* 543 Rose
 27 (2002), 203
 28 *Lak. Pol.* VI. 5-6; Polybios (*Hist.* IV, 45, 4-6) also says that money was esteemed of no value among the Spartans. Yet the apparently diminished significance of wealth probably represents an *ethos* from an idealised past that either never happened or was no longer in practice by the time of Plato’s *Laws*. As even Xenophon (*Lak. Pol.* XIV.3-4) reports, ‘in former days they were afraid to be discovered possessing gold; but nowadays there are some who boastfully display their property’
 29 742e6-7
 30 (2000), 167. Sparta minted no coinage of her own until the 260s or 250s. As Hodkinson says (*ibid.*), ‘several sources from the fourth century onwards claim that gold and silver coinage issued by other states was excluded by Lykourgos and that this prohibition remained in force until 404 when the booty sent to Sparta by Lysander was admitted for public use’. But this “exception” to the rule in 404 appears curious, see below
 31 Flower (2002), 194. This reversal of Lysander’s policies also included the removal of the 30 tyrants that he had set up in Athens and the eventual restoration of democracy
 32 *Lyk.* XXIV.2. Cf. *Lak. Pol.* VII.2-3 for Xenophon’s account that this sort of lifestyle left them free to pursue better interests—such as liberating cities from Athenian hegemony. The banausic retail trade is exclusively limited in Magnesia to a separate sphere of the *polis* encapsulating resident-alien and foreign visitors, cf. *Laws* 919d3-e2 and 920a3-4
 33 II.167
 34 Flower (2002), 204
 35 *Mor.* 227 sq., Hermippos fr. 87 *apud* Athenaios 555c. According to *Plut. Mor.* 242b, ‘a poor [Spartan] girl, being asked what dowry she brought to the man who married her, replied, “the family *sōphrosynē*”. Cf. Hodkinson (2000), 44-5, 72 and 93-4 for third-century Spartan revolutionary connections with Plato (and esp. the *Laws*). Cf. Cartledge (2001), 119-120 on Aristotle’s criticism of Kretan and Spartan dowries and inheritance laws
 36 Hodkinson (2000), 99. The *Code of Gortyn* (VI.9-12) also refers to the transfer of property to a bride by her father and indicates that, as in Sparta, it remained under her control
 37 Cartledge (1981), 98, argues that ‘what Aristotle calls “large dowries” were really... marriage-settlements consisting of landed property together with any movables that a rich father (or mother) saw fit to bestow on a daughter’. Cf. Pomeroy (1997), 55; for Hellenistic and Roman sources on Spartan ‘dowries’ cf. *Plut. Mor.* 227f-228a, *Lys.* XXX.5-6; *Ael. VH* VI.6; *Ath.* XIII.555c and *Justin* III.3.8
 38 Hodkinson (2000), 98; cf. Patterson (1998), 250
 39 *Agis* V.4. There is no way to confirm these figures but, even if it is an exaggeration, there

- seems to be every indication that a population/property crises arose at this time
- 40 *Agis* VII, *Kl.* XI
 - 41 *Agis* V. Flower (2002), 196, n. 25, indicates that the Rhetra of Epitadeus also has no historical basis for claiming Lykourgan legitimacy
 - 42 Flower (2002), 196
 - 43 *Lak. Pol.* IV, 2-5
 - 44 Michell (1964), 94
 - 45 *Rep.* 468b and cp. the speeches of Aristophanes and Pausanias in the *Symposium*
 - 46 Cf. *Diog. Laert.* VII.32-4; *Stoebaeus* II.66.6-8
 - 47 *Lak. Pol.* XIV.1-3
 - 48 *Laws* 636c1-6, 655e1-3, 733a7-8 and, on the slavery to pleasure that results, 777e6-778a4. Cf. Moore (2005), exp. Chapter VII, for more on this
 - 49 Cartledge (2001), 114. Cf. *Ibykos* (fr. 58) on these figurines and Cartledge *ibid.* n. 47. Cf. *Plut. Lyk.* XIV.4-7 on the public nudity of prepubescent Spartan girls and cf. Moore (2005), esp. chapter V, and also Dover (1978), 193 sq. for this same practice in the *Laws*
 - 50 *D. L.* VI.28; cf. also VI.46, VI.53-54
 - 51 Cartledge (2001), 84
 - 52 ε)ν α)κμαι=ς σ)ωμὰ'των... *Lak. Pol.* I.6-8; cf. *Plut. Lys.* XXX.7
 - 53 *Lyk.* XV.3, *Kleom.* I
 - 54 *Ibid*
 - 55 *Lyk.* 49c sq. and *Xen. Lak. Pol.* I.6-10
 - 56 (2001), 125
 - 57 *Polyb.* XII.6b5; *Strabo* VI.3.3 {279-80}; but as Pomeroy (1997), 56, indicates, this may be an aetiological myth to account for the pre-existing phenomenon of sexual license. Cartledge discusses the extreme views of Spartan female 'liberation', along with some counter-arguments, and concludes that a balance, or synthesis, of these was probably the case, (1981), 85

