



The politics of the metaphysical imagination. Critiquing transnational corporate power via Plato's cave

Paul G. Tyson

Abstract

Plato's analogy of the cave evokes a complex picture of the way cultural power is imaginatively constructed in order to maintain prevailing norms and stratifications, via the use of technologies of collective belief manipulation. To Plato, collective imagination is central to the modes of spiritual enslavement which embed us in morally defective structures of power.

This paper will argue, along Plato's metaphysical trajectory, that without the positing of moral truth, critique is self-defeating and every type of power devolves towards mute violence in support of the interests of the strong at the expense of the weak. Following Plato's trajectory, this paper will seek to morally critique the post-political advance of transnational corporate power, drawing out both the manipulative and immoral technologies of collective imagination formation which underpins this trend, and the role of metaphysical imagination as a still viable path towards the moral reform of power.

Key Words

Plato, metaphysics / post-political power / neoliberalism / moral realism / socio-political imagination

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I. Introduction

This paper seeks to understand the role that imagination plays in normalizing an increasingly post-political global power dynamic. There is a complex matrix of dynamics entailed in this normalization process. The aspect of that matrix this paper will seek to explore is the manner in which imagination, metaphysical assumptions and the late-modern meaning and use of technology interact in order to consolidate transnational corporate power over governments and citizens.

Because the politics of imaginative belief and the technologies crafting the social construction of reality are understood as integral by Plato, his analogy of the cave is very useful in exploring the interconnections this paper is concerned with. Even so, Plato, and particularly Plato's metaphysical approach to politics, may seem out of place now, given that the very tenor of Western modernity is embedded in the turn away from Neoplatonist metaphysics from the 14th century on. Whilst it is largely true that modernity and Plato do not mix, Plato's influence has never disappeared from Western consciousness and keeps re-appearing in one form or another after every supposed eradication. This paper is broadly situated within the hermeneutic interest in Plato that Gadamer pursued, as given a theological tweak along Guardini's lines, mindful that both of those streams are influenced by Heidegger's understanding of the problematic nature of the reductive vision of modern scientific positivism with its accompanying problematic approach to technology and instrumental power.¹

This paper is explicitly engaged in critique. Here also the appeal to Plato is significant. In the light of Bruno Latour's fascinating reflection on the failure of critique, I will argue that recourse to a more Platonist outlook on reality and power may be able to revitalize critique in a manner that explicitly materialist approaches to politics may struggle to

¹ See Gadamer, H-G. (1983) *Dialogue and Dialectic*. New Haven: Yale University Press; Guardini, R. (1998) *The End of the Modern World*. Delaware: ISI Books. Though indebted to Heidegger, agreement with what Löwith identifies as the vulnerability of Heidegger to a morally perilous and anthropocentric nihilism, situates this trajectory on a theological line that is at odds with Heidegger and which ventures well past the agnostic respect for theology of Gadamer. See Löwith, K. (1998) *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*. New York: Columbia University Press. In the 21st century major texts within the trajectory out of which this interest in Plato is situated are: Desmond, W. (2012) *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*. Washington DC: Catholic University of America; Milbank, J. (2006) *Theology and Social Theory*. Cambridge: Blackwell. See also young and rising scholarly works in this areas such as Schindler, D.C. (2008) *Plato's Critique of Impure Reason*. Washington DC: Catholic University of America; and Pabst, A. (2012) *Metaphysics*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.



achieve.² This paper argues that we need a viable critique of the now almost uncontested dominance of the Neoliberal way of imagining reality in the context of global financial power, because this construct supports the set of assumed beliefs and operational norms that upholds the impossibly unjust, unreal, unsustainable and post-political meta-structures of power in which we now live.

This paper proceeds by firstly outlining the need for critique, then drawing on Plato in order to critique the imaginative structures of power under which we live, then by looking briefly at Latour's concerns about critique in the light of Plato's understanding of the connections between imagination and every understanding of reality.

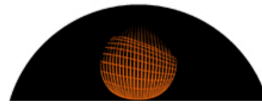
2. The need for critique

Largely as a result of globalization,³ liberal democracies have seen power steadily divulged away from popular sovereignty and parliamentary governance since the end of the post-war boom in 1971. This has happened even though the post 1971 era saw the end of the Cold War and the expansion of liberal democratic forms of government in former Communist states in Eastern Europe. This substantive weakening of the publically debated and citizen determined aims of liberal democracy, at the same time that the form of democratic parliamentary politics has expanded (and yet also been colonized by politically unaccountable forms of power)⁴ is what Michael Hauser calls the post-political trend

² Latour, B. (2004) Why has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern. *Critical Inquiry*, 30: 225–48.

³ Zygmunt Bauman's useful introduction to globalization locates a technologically enabled "space/time compression" at the centre of the manner in which localized power has been eroded in recent decades. See Bauman, Z. (1998) *Globalization*. Cambridge, Polity, 2. This is true, but the impetus to de-territorialize power which undermines the very possibility of exercising a meaningful sovereignty over the operational conditions of nation-states is, as Bauman well understands, far more complex than simply an inevitable consequence of new technologies. Technology itself is a function of a distinctive modern fascination with instrumental mechanistic power which is, ironically, anathema to the types of freedoms and substantive values necessary for the practise of democratic politics as a participatory and explicitly human activity. This technological determinism, as an ideology, is outlined with great insight by Jacques Ellul in his text *The Technological Society* (1973). New York: Random House.

⁴ In our times, transnational technocratic bodies, such as the Eurogroup, acting in a "realist" manner in the context of globalized high finance, have very little interest in the democratic determinations of sovereign nation states, as the Greek Referendum of 2015 demonstrated. Neither is the imperial operational logic of the globe's sole super-power amenable to the logic of liberal democratic accountability or the humanitarian logic of universal human rights. The USA has off-shore torture camps in places like Guantanamo Bay, it has over 700 extra-territorial military bases, it has a \$600 billion annual military budget, it uses drones to assassinate those on its Tuesday kill list as authorized by the Whitehouse, it vigorously opposes WikiLeaks transparency, it advances the economic encirclement of China via bilateral "free-trade" agreements; all these



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within liberal democracies.⁵ This is not just a trend within politics as such. In universities, for example, the trend away from collegiate governance towards the managerialization of power, and the running of the university towards quantifiable financial ends rather than qualitative pedagogic ends or pure epistemic ends, is another example of post-political trends and the increasingly monetized aims of power within liberal democracies.⁶

Hauser notes that depoliticization is legitimated by the “authorities of the existing order” which do not display themselves as overt competitors with elected governments and popular sovereignty, and yet, clearly, an unelected “power elite [whose interests are advanced by their control of] media [and] teams of experts sponsored by large corporations” is effectively displacing democratic governance from the real arenas of power.⁷

The switch event that inaugurated post-political power within liberal democratic forms of governance was the dropping of the gold standard by the Nixon administration in 1971.⁸ This is the turning point at which stateless international financial power begins to replace state located and citizen accountable political power.

The end of the gold standard signalled a radical change in the post-war capitalist world order. 1945 to 1971 were the golden years of the US aligned post-war boom of high production, high employment, real growth that genuinely lifted all boats, and strong government investment in the national infrastructure of first world liberal democracies. This boom was driven by the astonishing surplus economy of the USA, and by the global

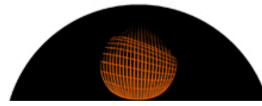
process operates in the “national interest” of the USA regardless of any other nation state’s democratic deliberations and with very minimal accountability to the US polity due to military secrecy provisions. In this environment, liberal democracy may be the dominant official form of political power, but it has very little impact on how real power actually works. See the manifesto for the Democracy in Europe Movement, 2025 for a concise outline of the substantive absence of liberal democracy operating in the political interests of citizens of nation state in Europe. <https://varoufakis.files.wordpress.com/2016/02/english-final-manifesto-long.pdf>

⁵ Hauser, M. (2013) The Twilight of Liberal Democracy: A Symptomatic Reading of Depoliticization. *Décálogos*, Vol 1: Iss 3, Article 4, 2013. <http://scholar.oxy.edu/vol1/iss3/4>

⁶ For example, this trend in universities within liberal democratic societies is well described in Hil, R. (2012) *Whackademia*. Sydney: NewSouth Publishing.

⁷ Hauser, M. (2013) The Twilight of Liberal Democracy: A Symptomatic Reading of Depoliticization. *Décálogos*, Vol 1: Iss 3, Article 4, 2013, 13. <http://scholar.oxy.edu/vol1/iss3/4>

⁸ See Varoufakis, Y. (2015) *The Global Minotaur*. London: Zed Books, 2015, 85–104. Yanis Varoufakis locates this switch point as the moment when the US government consciously abandoned its post-war surplus recycling economy, and set up a new global world order revolving around its own a deficit recycling economy. Varoufakis points out that this was also a switch from a common rise of living standards and relatively egalitarian wealth distribution before the 1970s in most Anglo-European post-war countries, and the ever increasing rise in income disparity after the 1970s. See also Pusey, M. (2003) *The Experience of Middle Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pusey provides a detailed look at the post-1970s trends away from egalitarian income distribution in Australia, with the rise of both the super-rich and the systemically poor putting increasing pressure on the middle class in Australia.



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re-investment of that surplus, facilitated through the Bretton Woods Institutions. That international financial architecture was originally designed to protect US post-war global hegemony, but also to put breaks on the dynamics that gave rise to the financial and humanitarian disasters of the 1930s. That post-war financial architecture collapsed after the US first ceased to run a surplus economy and was then forced to drop the gold standard. The collapse of the original Bretton Woods system was manifest in the widespread phenomena of stagflation in many first-world nations through the 1970s.

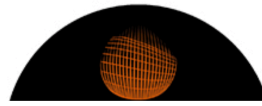
The dynamics of global financial power was being re-configured through the 1970s, and this had very direct repercussions on the dynamics of political ideology within US aligned nation states.⁹ In response to the troubles of the 1970s a new politics advocating the selling of state asset and the liberation of private business from unnecessary regulation emerged in the 1980s with Regan and Thatcher as its dominant exponents. By the 1980s, the US, the economy situated at the centre of post-war global trade, was no longer a surplus economy recycling its surplus in productive global investment – particularly in Germany and Japan – but became the deficit economy at the heart of the global structures of trade. Thus the return to financialized globalization, relying heavily on the creative (yet non-productive) manipulation of markets, was born here.¹⁰

This relative move away from investment in real production and towards abstract and speculative profit had a profound impact on production, employment and domestic politics. Now first-world labour costs were required to compete with third-world labour costs, and a new stratification between the rich and the poor within first-world states emerged. This gave us two speed economies in the first world, and consolidated relations of exploitation between transnational corporations originating from the global North, and the cheap labour, low regulation, minimal tax environments and the often systemic nation-state dysfunction of the global South. Wall Street and currency trading were liberated from their post-war constraints. Rather than investment in actual production, breakaway private sector inventiveness in high finance, and trading in the US dollar became the central pillars of the US's post-1971 form of global economic hegemony.

A clear example of this astonishing shift in global financial power dynamics is that derivative and currency trading were almost meaningless notions between 1945 and

⁹ The idea of “realism” in politics is a dynamic of slavish conformity to meta-trends within the machinations of high power. That is, “realism” is another word for a vassal mentality towards imperial power which, unsurprisingly, reinforces imperial power and undermines political and economic autonomy at a localized (in this context, national) level. Middle to small national powers – like Australia – often pride themselves on their “realism” and think it a great virtue to be moving with the times, as if (somehow) they are courageously leading the way rather than just passively following the Leader.

¹⁰ John Kenneth Galbraith, in (1989) *A History of Economics*. London: Penguin, and in (1994) *A Short History of Financial Euphoria*. London: Penguin, points out that greed and fear driven market volatility embedded in the trend towards escaping the realities of production and the provision of real human needs, for profit, has been a driving feature of international markets since the widespread use of modern credit in the 18th century.



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1971, but such financial activities are now far more lucrative than the global trade in real products. For example, despite the near catastrophe produced by derivative trading in 2008, derivative trading is now thriving again with its global market value estimated at \$700 trillion per year.¹¹ That is, derivative trading plays with ten times the amount of money than the value of trade in real products in the entire globe.¹² Yet currency trading is a lot bigger than derivative trading, now powering along at \$5.3 trillion a day.¹³ All this is to say that global financial power – which political power increasingly serves – is now astonishingly more committed to the realm of derivative and currency trading than it is in the realm of the provision of real goods and services to real people. Power is thus not only becoming post-political, it is now becoming post-real as well, and hence it is frighteningly unconcerned with the realities of human existence.

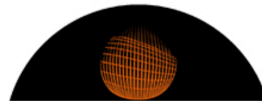
When it comes to power, in finance, size is everything. High finance has now escaped from the constraints of actual reality, thus the trade in real products and services is now a bizarrely secondary feature of global power. Further, as mentioned above, the pursuit of the profit motive in the realm of transnational corporate power is driving the structures and choices of global power away from the realities of moral, social, environmental and political sustainability. As we saw very starkly in the Greek referendum of June 2015, the democratic determinations of the people, as well as regard for their basic physical needs, means nothing if the country is indebted to international financial power.

We now live in a context of global financial power where we have transnational corporations like Goldman and Sachs that are too big to fail, transnational corporations such as Google and Apple that are effectively too big to tax, transnational corporations like News Corp and Microsoft that have annual turnovers much larger than many national GDPs, and where the promotion of bilateral trade agreements are being advanced with the aim of making the political deliberations of national governments irrelevant to transnational monetary agendas pursued within those nations. The effect of this is a global environment characterized by a predatory international financial megafauna of such gigantic size as to make their demands impossible to deny for most national governments. The reality of international financial power is the dominant meta-structure determining the limits and possibilities of domestic politics in many middle to small sized national economies. Neoliberal ideology normalizes and justifies that meta-power as both inevitable and fair. Functionally, we believe in the inevitability and fairness of this ideology, for we are embedded in a global context of high financial power and are dependent on it.

¹¹ George, S. (2015) *Shadow Sovereigns*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 25. George's source is the Bank for International Settlements Triennial Central Bank Survey, Foreign Exchange Turnover in April 2013: preliminary global results. For this source see <http://www.bis.org/publ/rpfx13fx.pdf>

¹² See Das, S. (2011) *Extreme Money*. USA: FT Press, for a fascinating account of the astonishing realm of high finance.

¹³ George, S. (2015) *Shadow Sovereigns*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 25. Again, these are 2013 figures drawn from the ISTCB survey.



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For those of us who are academics scraping for every grant, every short term contract, or struggling to justify our ongoing institutional existence to our highly remunerated university administrators, the sums of money being traded daily in derivatives and currency exchanges are simply unimaginable. For people living in impoverished regions of the global economy, the disparities in wealth distribution we are looking at make pre-revolutionary France look egalitarian by comparison. The high end of global power continually requires austerity from the low end of global power at the same time as high power requires less tax, more freedom and greater profits for itself. In short, there is money beyond measure floating around in the realm of high finance, but it does not exist in order to fund important real activities done by real people or even provide basic necessities and stability for the vast majority of the globe's population – money exists for the sake of money and for those who live off high finance. The scientific realities of climate change are there for anyone to see, but the mechanistic logic of the profit motive, disconnected from political accountability, means that big business will drive us over the edge of environmental destruction rather than take rational pre-emptive measures to stop before disaster strikes. The world has become the playground of a post-1970s global unelected elite who increasingly over-ride democratic power, or who shape the world of politics to suit their own agendas. These unelected elites meet at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, and they are working to implement their own Global Redesign Initiative¹⁴ centred around freeing up trade so that there are global structures of power that override national governments and that exist for the advancement of transnational corporate power. Of course, these plans are couched in terms of being both inevitable and good for all the “stakeholders” (not citizens) of the world. Whether you have reason to be suspicious of the real agendas of the WEF¹⁵ or not, what is clear is that corporate power is either bypassing elected governments or using governments to redesign the globe into a single structure of power which those with money control.

Now, even international organizations seeking to generate a politically acceptable form of global trading and legal order are simply being bypassed by the real centres of global financial power. The frustration of the transnational corporate sector of the global economy with the World Trade Organization has led to alternative avenues of power expansion such as the WEF and bilateral trade agreements such as the Transatlantic

¹⁴ For the GRI see http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GRI_EverybodysBusiness_Report_2010.pdf. For a brief summary of this massive document by Harris Gleckman, senior fellow at the Center for Governance and Sustainability at the University of Massachusetts, see https://www.umb.edu/editor_uploads/gri_uploads/The_Unique_Design_of_GRI.pdf.

¹⁵ Susan George makes very good claims throughout (2015) *Shadow Sovereigns*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 132–44, that WEF should not be trusted if we believe in power that is democratically accountable to the people who are governed. George makes a convincing argument that we are here seeing the re-assertion of a financial power elite governing as an aristocracy without account to anyone other than their own peers.



Trade and Investment Partnership and the Transpacific Trade Partnership.¹⁶ These are the active vehicles advancing Neoliberal ideological agendas and transforming the globe into exactly the type of profit making arena which powerful transnational corporations are spending so much time and money in setting up.

This post-political translation of power from the substantial realities of popular sovereignty to the private interest promoting interests of global corporate power is no conspiracy; the reality of this process is open and evident for anyone to see who cares to look. That we do not care to look, or assume that these transitions are either inevitable or to our advantage is a function of how powerful the mass propagated projections of the Neoliberal metaphysical imagination are in the Global North.

Let us now turn to Plato to try and understand the dynamics that sustain our acceptance of these Neoliberal framed meta-structures of global power in our times.

3. Plato's Cave

Consider these three tropes from the analogy of the cave in Plato's Republic:¹⁷

1. Imagine human beings living in an underground, cavelike dwelling, with an entrance a long way up, which is both open to the light and as wide as the cave itself. They've been there since childhood, fixed in the same place, with their legs and necks fettered, able to see only in front of them, because their bonds prevent them from turning their heads around. Light is provided by a fire burning far above and behind them. (Rep. VII: 514a.)
2. Iso behind them, but on higher ground, there is a path stretching between them and the fire. Imagine that along this path a low wall has been built, like the screen in front of puppeteers above which they show their puppets.... Then also imagine there are people along the wall, carrying all kinds of artefacts that project above it – statues of people and other animals, made out of stone, wood, and every material. And, as you'd expect, some of the carriers are talking, and some are silent... [The prisoners] are like us. Do you suppose, first of all, that these prisoners see anything of themselves and one another besides the shadows that the fire casts on the wall in front of them? ... the same is true for the images

¹⁶ George, S. (2015) *Shadow Sovereigns*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 56-96.

¹⁷ The translation used here is by G.M.A. Grube, revised by C.D.C. Reeve, from Cooper, J.M. (1997) *Plato, Complete Works*. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1132–35.



being carried along the wall... the prisoners... in every way believe that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of those artefacts. (Rep. VII, 514b–515c.)

3. Consider this too. If [a man who had climbed out of the cave then] went down into the cave again and sat down in his same seat... and tried to free them and lead them upwards, if they could somehow get their hands on him, wouldn't they kill him? (Rep. VII, 516e–517a.)

Plato constructs this analogy for a range of purposes, but one feature of this analogy which these three tropes illuminate concerns Plato's understanding of the politics of the social construction of reality.

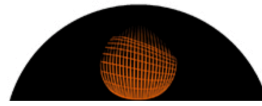
There are three classes of people in this analogy. There are the prisoners (trope 1), the artificers of the shadow show (trope 2), and the philosopher (trope 3).

The political relations between these three is interesting. The artificers and the philosopher, in different ways, both know that the shadow show is not reality, but the prisoners do not know this. There is an implied relation of power between the prisoners and the artificers such that the unknowing bondage of the cave dwellers (who, possibly, still have their backs to the real light) is being manipulated by those who keep them entertained and enslaved but who seem to be in a higher cavern with no access to natural light. The artificers are the elite keepers of artificial light and the constructors and users of artificial images. By these means they project images (imaginings) of self, other and reality onto the collective interactive arena of the awareness of the slaves.

Despite their common appreciation of the artificiality of social reality, philosophers and artificers have no direct dealings with each other. The philosopher does not climb up into the fire cavern, and the artificers do not come down to the prisoners where the philosopher is. Should the philosopher seek to disillusion the cave dwellers and liberate them from their servitude to the artificers, it is not the artificers who kill the philosopher, it is the prisoners. Interestingly, Plato depicts the arena of servitude as self-sustaining such that the artificers have no need to regulate or perpetuate its structures of bondage directly.

It must be noted that there is an intimate relationship between Plato's metaphysics and his political critique of what we would now call socio-cultural normality. Clearly, Plato is right to do this. As Berger and Luckmann pointed out some time ago, functional life-world conceptions of reality are collective imaginative constructs.¹⁸ Because metaphysics is imaginatively and collectively assumed within the most mundane practises of normality, it is embedded in power. So let us proceed, without embarrassment, and note how Plato ties metaphysics in with power.

¹⁸ Berger, P.L. and Luckmann, T. (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality*. New York: Random House.



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The absence of any real engagement between the powerful artificers and the politically peripheral philosopher illustrates Plato's understanding of the typical relationship between politics and both good and bad metaphysics.

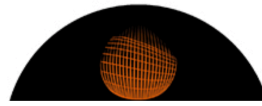
In Rep. 517b–c Plato explains that the shadows cast by the light of the fire is the realm of immediate sensation. The skill of the artificers is in their ability to craft and control the material objects of immediate sensation for their political advantage and, presumably, in regulating the orderly provision of material needs to those “enslaved” to the “reality” of this realm. Most importantly, the artificers project appearances of normality and meaning, derived from the realm of immediate tangibility, onto the screen of the collective imagination, as if those appearances were the full story about reality.¹⁹

Given the above profile, it is no surprise that the artificers are completely disinterested in the philosopher. Plato explains that the philosopher is interested in the light of the sun outside the cave. This is the light of Goodness, grasped in the mind, which is the source of all that is real, as distinct from the shadow show which is the only reality of the slaves, and the only realm of political interest to the artificers.

The difference between philosophers and artificers are well spelt out in Rep I, 338c–347e where Socrates vainly tries to reason with Thrasymachus. To Thrasymachus, power in any given society is structured by those in power to advance their interests, and the laws they make facilitate this aim. Thrasymachus, despite being taken to pieces by Socrates' dialectics, despises Socrates and thinks him hopelessly naïve. Thrasymachus displays an entirely instrumental and material account of power and reality, both towards matters of interest and towards law. He is, in modern parlance, a political realist. In contrast to Thrasymachus' conception of power, Socrates refuses conquest by superior force, seeking the freedoms of reason and the mind over the necessities of force and material need, goodness over mere advantage, beauty over mere sensual satiation.

The artificer and the philosopher are operating within two entirely different sets of metaphysical outlooks and teleological aims. This, alas, makes genuine dialogue between

¹⁹ In Rep. 517 b–c Plato makes it clear that the Goodness Beyond Being, which is the Sun of the realm of intelligibility, is also the source and ontological grounds of physical light, and of the realm of sensible appearance, and of material existence, so there is no mind/body dualism in the Cartesian sense here. To Plato, matter has its participatory and derivative being in the intelligible realm of Mind, thus Matter and Mind are not two distinct realms. Yet the philosopher is different from both the materialist pragmatist and the religious dogmatist in that the philosopher appreciates that, as Kierkegaard put it “paganism is direct relation.” Kierkegaard, S. (1992) *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 246. To Plato and Kierkegaard the “direct relation” of immediate experience to reality does not apply in any safe and complete way to either things mundane or divine. Here the false certainties of “pagan” religious belief in the masses is easily, indeed necessarily tied in with elite authorities of pragmatic and material power. Note, Kierkegaard finds “pagan” attitudes to religious belief entirely at home in the Danish church of his own day, and intimately connected with the material ambitions of the bourgeois class in Golden Age Denmark. On this see Kierkegaard, S. (2010) *The Present Age*. New York: Harper; and, Kierkegaard, S. (1998) *The Moment and Late Writings*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.



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Socrates and Thrasymachus impossible. Socrates elicits agreement from Thrasymachus that for the powerful to legislate and act in ways that always advance their own interests they would need infallible knowledge, which they do not have. Further, Socrates even makes Thrasymachus concede that a ruler, by definition, is concerned with the interest of those ruled. But there is no persuading Thrasymachus away from the logic of self-interested pragmatic power, even by his own mouth, and his response to Socrates' dialectic victory over his political realism is to assert that all Socrates is interested in is an empty argumentative victory, and then to simply leave the conversation. He has no interest in debating justice that is somehow above the law, where the law is somehow linked to more than protecting and advancing the material advantage of the strong. Any reasoned demonstration of his own incoherence is simply irrelevant. He has a practical and instrumental knowledge of how power works, whatever Socrates may say.

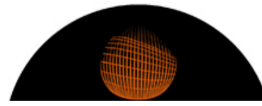
Plato wants us to see that artificers and philosophers have no grounds of contact with each other for metaphysical reasons. As Confucius put it, "with those who follow a different Way, to exchange views is pointless."²⁰ The philosopher's Way is guided by the light of Reason and Goodness situated within an understanding of reality that is bigger than immediate sensation. The way of the artificer is guided by a pragmatic and tangible vision of power which is situated within an outlook of reality fully defined by manipulative immediacy.

The power of the reality vision projected by the artificers is immediately appealing to the unreflective slaves such that they willingly participate in their slavery. The power of the reality vision of the philosopher requires a rupture from thinking of reality as entirely tangible such that crisis is unavoidable before a metanoia (change of mind, conversion) can occur, making a rational and moral practise of power a genuine, if always provisional, possibility.

Interestingly, both of these visions of reality are imaginative constructs. The belief that tangible immediacy is all the reality that there is, is itself a metaphysical belief requiring an imaginative if tacit conception of the nature of reality itself.²¹ In Plato's context, such a realist and materialist conception of merely immediate and merely contingent reality is counter-intuitive to the religious sensibilities of the time, and indeed, contrary to the

²⁰ Confucius (1997) *Analects of Confucius* 15.40, translation by Leys, S. London: Norton, 79.

²¹ Ratio-empirical certainty is well known to be unable to justify itself in terms of its own truth warrants, by both empiricists such as Hume and brilliant logicians such as Gödel. Clearly defining reductive, probabilistic, methodical yet forever provisional and instrumentally powerful scientific knowledge as either indubitable or true by definition is impossible. Hence the feat of treating the useful shadows of ratio-empirical knowledge as real, or as giving us knowledge that directly corresponds to even simply physical reality, is, in reality, an act of imaginative poesis. This is not to say that such poesis has no truth value, just that the manner in which we must comprehend any form of truth is always framed in imaginative terms. When Plato talks of the Sun in distinction to the shadows of the fire, he also uses imaginative imagery. But to Plato there are grades of truth and ways of distinguishing higher truths from lower truths, imaginations of greater truth from imaginations of lesser truth.



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moral, aesthetic and intellectual assumptions of the times. As Lloyd Gerson points out, belief in a timeless essential intellectual meta-strata to spatiotemporal contingent existence is what makes reason and meaningful language possible to both Plato and Aristotle, and to the mainstream of Classical Greek epistemology in general.²² Yet Plato also sees that notions of piety, legality, reason and morality are typically imaginatively defective in the non-reflective such that a practical reduction of meaning to the horizon of immediate tangible experience, without remainder, renders all belief a function of instrumental material power. Plato tries to point this out to us in the analogy of the cave by recourse to an alternative imagination of reality where the Sun is a metaphorical construct pointing to the importance of meaning beyond the small realm of tangible immediacy within the cave of merely material power. To Plato analogical imagination is indispensable for any sort of metaphysical belief, and metaphysical belief is intimately tied to every social construction of power.

Let us look briefly at the role of the technologies of the mass propagation of metaphysical imagination in Plato, via Jacques Ellul. For Ellul's understanding of the technological society and the role of propaganda within that society can be tied in with Plato's analogy of the cave in a very interesting manner.²³

Ellul points out that the replacement of every meaningful final goal with mere efficiency in instrumental means, directed towards the advancement of power over material necessities, defines the technological society. This is the triumph of material necessity over spiritual freedom, of mechanical force over qualitative reason, of faster, cheaper more powerful over every form a sacred meaning and every conception of intrinsic significance.²⁴ Thus, at a profound level, we have become the slaves of our instrumental tools and society itself is managed like a machine, but towards no intrinsically human

²² Gerson, L.P. (2009) *Ancient Epistemology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²³ Ellul is obviously indebted to Karl Marx and Karl Barth. He is connected to Plato more subtly by his respect for dialectical indeterminacy, his commitment to the spiritual horizon of human meaning, and his appreciation of the dialectic between both necessity and freedom in all human affairs. Ellul's two classic sociology texts, (1973) *The Technological Society*. New York: Random House, and (1973) *Propaganda* New York: Random House, are wrongly read as discourses in technological determinism where no attention is given to his theological texts with their deep respect for that which is beyond imminence and determinacy. This in no way detracts from his attention to immanence and the mechanisms and contingencies operating within any context of historical specificity within both society and religion, yet his respect for "the beyond" and the manner in which that unmasterable dynamic is embedded in mundane reality and in our imaginative meaning constructs, places his outlook in deep sympathy with what I see as a good reading of Plato.

²⁴ Marx and Engels famously noted that the bourgeois consciousness which now rules over "Modern Industry and the world market... has left no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous cash payment ... [such that] all that is holy is profaned." Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1967) *The Communist Manifesto*. London: Penguin, 82.



end.²⁵ We are now the ghosts in the machine of society. We are either a useful Human Resource needed to fuel economic growth, or else not needed, and of no use value (and hence of no value) at all.

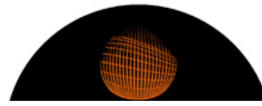
The mass media plays a very important role in advancing the technological society because it enables us to be willing participants in this profoundly de-humanizing form of spiritual slavery. It does this by creating and then feeding the deceptive narratives of consumer society fulfilment. These narratives are constructed out of sensual imagery, and they are flat materialist narratives which are ultimately banal imaginative substitutes for genuine knowledge, substantive values, and incompatible with relationships tied together by collective commitments to common goods. These narratives are incompatible with any metaphysically realist understanding of sacred significance, qualitative reality and spiritually meaningful purpose. The mass media is primarily concerned with re-enforcing the seductive promises of consumer society all the while atomising individuals to be concerned with discretely private meaning constructs centred around collective fears and personal sensual satisfactions, making us amenable to the technologies of mass society control. In Ellul's trajectory Paul Virilio, for example, has pursued the role of fear propagated through the news outlets and governing powers via the mass media, and Clive Hamilton, for example, has pointed out the manner in which consumerism is now the driving (and destructive) cultural force of our times.²⁶ The power class that benefits from this situation are those who rule – as Adorno put it – the culture industry that normalizes and materially embeds us in this way of life: these are the elites of transnational corporate power and global high finance. The ideology which undergirds the imaginative metaphysics of consumer society and its financial realism, is Neoliberalism.²⁷

Plato speaks to this context in a very interesting way. The matter which drives the shape of socio-political cultural imaginaries, and which justifies the technologies of cultural imagination and their power structures, is metaphysical belief. This insight can be appreciated whether or not you agree with Plato's understanding of reality.

²⁵ Extrinsic ends for human life are things such as survival and the satisfaction of material needs. That is, survival and the satisfaction of material needs are necessary means of living, they are not, however, meaningful in themselves as the end (telos) of life. One eats in order to live, one does not live in order to eat. Only a spiritual horizon gives human life an intrinsic meaning.

²⁶ Virilio, P. (2012) *The Administration of Fear*. London: Semiotext(e). Hamilton, C. (2005) *Affluenza*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

²⁷ On financial realism see Tyson, P. (2015) *The Siren Song of Financial Realism*. *Open Democracy*, 11 August 2015, www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/paul-tyson/siren-song-of-financial-realism. By Neoliberalism I have in mind the political ideology that advocates what Joseph Stiglitz calls the three pillars of the Washington consensus – fiscal austerity, privatization, and market liberalization. See Stiglitz, J. (2002) *Globalization and its discontents*. London: Penguin, 53. Neoliberalism is justified as a form of liberalism that explicitly rejects the idea of any positive qualitative common good should be advanced by governments on behalf of their citizens. See Friedman, M, and Friedman, R. (1980) *Free to Choose*. New York: HBJ.



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Where reality is understood as essentially immediate and physical – even if such a metaphysically framed life world is only believed tacitly, and even in direct contradistinction to explicitly stated religious beliefs – then Thrasymachus has the only viable outlook on power. Herein lies the cultural power of Neoliberalism and its astonishing grip on the social imaginary of the polities and politicians of the global North. In such a context the bonds between the artificers (global high finance) and the slaves (ordinary citizens of nation states, serving the operational logic of “the global economy”) is so tight as to need no external support from those wielding real power (the Davos class). But where reductive positivism is itself understood as an imaginative construct, and where human interests are not understood as reducible to entirely mechanistic functions of material self-interest, then instrumental power, and the rightness of the rule of the powerful over the weak for their own advantage, is relativized and the construction of morally framed and citizen accountable power becomes possible. In this manner Michael Hauser’s Marxist influenced understanding of the “material power of ideas”²⁸ points out that “realist” understandings of corporate and geo-political power are ideologies serving distinct political agendas that are entirely pretentious as statements of inevitable objective facticity. Here, we can craft the ideas that shape power however we like; there is nothing about the nature of reality that requires that reductive positivism and predatory self-interest must be the only viable grounds for political and economic structures. Along these lines, the “erratic Marxism” of Yanis Varoufakis²⁹ posits an openness of Marxist materialism to radical indeterminacy within human affairs such that the spirituality of the human condition finds deep connectivity with Socratic ignorance and with an apophatic respect for the mystery of our experiences of value and meaning. Here the reduction of politics to the amoral “imperatives” of mere physical power is astonishingly unbelievable. Varoufakis’ spiritual materialism can readily construct a view of political reality which entails notions like commonwealth, justice, state funded social security, the subservience of finance to real human production and services, and the sensible ordering of power towards the flourishing of humanist values within a democratic understanding of governance. Ironically, socialist and materialist metaphysical imaginations can uphold liberal democratic ideals in ways that now seem entirely impossible within a post-political neoliberal metaphysical imagination rightly described by George Soros as totalitarian.³⁰ The neoliberal metaphysical imagination finds it to be simply true that rational human deliberation and action can only be defined in terms of a banal and mechanistic

²⁸ Hauser, M. (2015) Europe in a labyrinth and the material power of ideas, Open Democracy, 25 March 2015, www.opendemocracy.net/michael-hauser/europe-in-labyrinth-and-material-power-of-ideas

²⁹ Varoufakis, Y. (2015) How I became an erratic Marxist. The Guardian, 18/2/2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/feb/18/yanis-varoufakis-how-i-became-an-erratic-marxist>

³⁰ Soros, G. (1998) The Crisis of Global Capitalism. New York: Public Affairs US, xxii. As much as I find Soros’ analysis of global finance fascinating, I have to say that Karl Popper, who Soros deeply admires, got Plato dead wrong. See Howland, J. (2004) The Republic. Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 16–30.



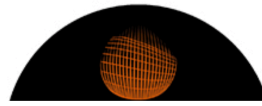
continuous advancement of competitive advantage for the big and strong over the weak and the small. Such an imagination denies politics as a deliberative and participatory configuring of power by citizens towards substantive common goods. But there is nothing in reality itself to show that this is both true and right. In simply disbelieving in the reality of the neoliberal metaphysical imagination, Marx and Plato can be read as standing together against post-political market fundamentalism.

But Plato's understanding of the ties between reality and imagination goes to places that every form of ontological agnosticism – including Marxist materialism – cannot go. Because dogmatic ontological agnosticism means that no imagined human configuration of power can be more real than any other, there can be nothing finally wrong with post-political global power, or even with Nazism, or Stalinism. Here all normative principles undergirding every given power configurations are equally imagined. This, I believe, undermines the moral power of hard Left political critique and may account for how readily Communism has embraced its own dictatorial and amoral instrumentalism in holding and maintaining power. So let us see what Plato might do to strengthen the truth capacities of the political imagination, thus strengthening critique and raising a decisive NO against instrumental amorality in power.

4. Moral Realism and the critique of Amoral Imaginations of Power

To start with it must be noted that Plato was never a literal or dogmatic Platonist, for in Plato there is a necessary relationship between imagination and truth such that truth always exceeds total epistemic capture.³¹ Indeed, as Plato's dialogue the Theaetetus points out, the most basic epistemic question – what is knowledge? – alludes epistemic capture. Yet, as Plato's dialogue the Sophist makes clear, the absence of epistemic capture does not, to Plato, justify epistemic nihilism. Epistemic nihilism cannot be accepted because, amongst other things, it justifies moral nihilism, which is a denial of reasoned collective deliberation, which brings us back to Thrasymachus' conception of power as mute violence upholding the advantage of the strong over the weak. So truth is something we have a partial grasp of, but unless we venture into thought in good faith towards the reality and truth of Goodness (which we will never master, but which we must aspire to

³¹ For example, when giving an explanation of the meaning of the analogy of the cave Socrates explains "whether it is true or not, only the god knows." Rep 517 b. This is not because Plato believes there is no truth in this analogy, as if it is a fiction of pure imagination, but because Plato is always aware that complete explanations which make imagination and mystery obsolete are always less than the full truth. Plato's commitment to dialogue within the metaxu (the inbetweenness) of the context of human life resists reduction to total imminence as much as it resists elevation to pure transcendence. Here there is always an openness and an imaginative dynamism in any partial apprehension of (and by) truth.



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have master us) we are not being serious thinkers and are not aiming at truth or reality, but are contenting ourselves with merely instrumental illusions.

To Plato the reality of moral truth gives rise to the production of valid political imagination, the particular imagery of which remains our own faltering and poetic construct, at the same time as it is genuinely possible to distinguish between better and worse imaginative attempts to grasp truth, because meaningful thought is a function of revelation. To Plato, the soul that thinks, thought itself, and the essential intellectual realities that give rise to thought and give value and meaning to the cosmos (which we never physically see in any imaginatively unmediated or epistemically complete manner), are all of divine origin. Hence, revelation is the basic grounds undergirding the mundane world of human meaning and action in which we live.

To Plato, right piety in the process of imaginatively constructing the moral configurations of power, in the light of divine essential and qualitative realities that stand above us and undergird us, is necessary for any aspiration towards creating good politics. Thus, it is only when we grasp that moral truth is a divine reality that we can never fully capture, but in which we unavoidably participate, that our imaginative power constructs can cut with the grain of the universe and foster particular, contingently imagined, ever incomplete and always dynamic, good societies.³²

This brings us back to Latour. Marxist critique falters, as Gadamer well saw, on the problem of the critique of the critique of ideology.³³ Latour wants to move past this problem via appeal to the phenomenological return to the irreducible meaning and value of the thing itself. The problem is, if the boundaries of our imagination concerning the nature of the real are materialist, this shapes our outlook such that there is no real meaning, no real value in the thing itself, or even in our knowledge of the thing. Here all meaning is nothing other than poesis such that imagination does not arise from an inherently qualitative and transcendent source. Here it is only matter that gives rise to the creative epiphenomenon of meaning. Within this imaginative reality cave, all meaning, when critiqued – including the meaning of critique – evaporates back into relations of meaningless physical contingency. Here mute force is the only final reality.

A materialist ontology of the Void seems to offer us the wondrous existential freedom to construct meaning and power however we choose, such that no belief structure

³² It is interesting that there is a class of thinkers who saw the Great Depression and the horrors of World War Two, and who were influential during the 1945–1971 post-war boom era, who were guided by an unapologetically moral vision towards constructing the good society. That vision was framed in terms of human rights, common wealth, egalitarian generosity and humane empathy. See, for example, Galbraith, J.K. (1996) *The Good Society*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. Increasingly that voice has been lost from power as power itself has become post-political and functionally amoral.

³³ Gadamer explains: "What I thought was lacking in ideological critique was ideological critique of ideological critique." As quoted in Grondin, J. (2003) *Hans-Georg Gadamer*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 308.

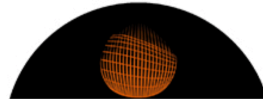


organizing power is itself of reality. Here, any system of power relations can be constructed any way we choose. But here every construct of power, and every construct of meaning must be critiqued as a mask for some brute materiality which is neither moral nor meaningful. In this context, no critique of power can be other than an ideology itself. Critique, as morally meaningful, implodes if meaning and value are only imaginative constructs. If there is only the cave wall, the fire, the shadows, the prisoners and the artificers – if there is no Outside that truly morally judges power – then whomever gets to run the fire show simply harnesses our slavery, and power and even language can be nothing other than a function of the brute amoral will to enslave.

But phenomenology is a revolt against that reductive modern and instrumental reality vision that fails to appreciate that things are never merely material objects. Whatever way of understanding the meaning and value of reality one has, reductive materialism is an inherently pallid and ephemeral outlook, which must be rejected if one is to take meaning, value, and even conversation seriously. Politics not grounded in some substantive understanding of the reality of moral truth is the politics of manipulative technologies of illusion. And it is just not true. There really is something wrong about systemic injustice, fantastic inequality, and the rule of the weak by the strong for the benefit of the strong. If this were not true Marxism would have no moral appeal. Moral reality is, as Aristotle might put it, a primary truth that cannot be justified, because it is the justification of morally valid power. But this primary truth cannot be grasped, and a moral politics premised on it cannot be imagined, if we accept the reality parameters of reductive materialism. As long as we imagine that the only final reality is the shadow game of mere matter and mere imagination, we give credence to the dynamics of post-political “amoral” transnational corporate power, and perpetuate its immorality.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to demonstrate that post-political power needs critiquing and reforming because it is both morally outrageous and orientated towards the mechanist logic of irrational force. Our meta-structures of political power are now embedded in a relation of servitude to the profit interests of transnational corporations and we are now materially dependence on the unimaginable quantities of monetary power governed by high finance. This power setup thrives at the expense of popular sovereignty, at the expense of transparent citizen participation in power, and at the expense of decisive political action grounded in reasoned deliberation. The metaphysical infrastructure that supports this entire edifice of power-embedded-in-material-relations is a materialist conception of reality. Plato’s analogy of the cave effectively critiques this situation in ways that neither the Left nor the Right that arise from modern secular functional materialism

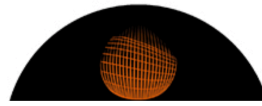


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can. Perhaps we need a return to moral realism if we want to change the governing imagined parameters that support the imperial thrust of post-political power which is propelling us towards catastrophic global disaster.



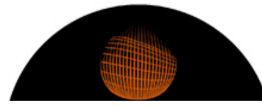
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