In Praise of Recklessness

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In his afterword to *The Reckless Mind*, Mark Lilla does something that I find both odd and revealing. In the course of favorably comparing Plato to such modern thinkers as Heidegger and Foucault, he contrives to absolve Plato of the vice, if vice it be, of recklessness—the very vice he has spent the bulk of his book attacking in the moderns. At the same time, Lilla asserts that the kind of political recklessness evinced by the modern thinkers he profiles reflects a "new social type, for which we need a new name: the philotyrannical intellectual."[1] Because I disagree with Lilla about Plato, about the novelty of the intellectual phenomenon he describes, and about the costs and benefits of recklessness, I shall briefly reconsider Plato's ill-starred effort to realize his political vision in Syracuse and then suggest how, and why, Plato's behavior may prompt us to reconsider the value of boldness and daring—and recklessness—in the life of an exemplary philosopher.

Our knowledge of Plato's political experiment in Sicily is based on his "Seventh Letter." This is thought to have been written around 354 B.C., shortly after the assassination of Dion, Plato's friend, former pupil, and the leader of the anti-tyrannical party in Syracuse. In this letter, as Lilla reminds us, Plato rehearses the genealogy of his political convictions. Growing up in democratic Athens, Plato "thought of entering public life as soon as [he] came of age" (Plato 324b-c). In 404 B.C., shortly after he had come of age, the Athenian democracy suffered a coup d'état. Since, as Plato explains, "some of these men happened to be relatives and acquaintances of mine, and they invited me to join them at once in what seemed to be a proper undertaking"—and since, as Plato adds, he was young—the philosophy student rallied around the Athenian regime later known as "the thirty tyrants," a regime so bloody and ruthless that Plato "drew back from that reign of injustice" (Plato 325a). Five years later, the twenty-nine-year-old witnessed another kind of injustice when a democratic court condemned his teacher Socrates to death on trumped-up charges of impiety and corrupting the city's youth.

As a result of these formative experiences, Plato went into a kind of inner exile from his native city. He "refrained from action, waiting for the right time," taking the measure of current events based on two radical conclusions that he had already reached provisionally: "All existing states are badly governed and the condition of their laws practically incurable, without some miraculous remedy and the assistance of fortune," and "The ills of the human race would never end until either those who are sincerely and truly lovers of wisdom come into political power, or the rulers of our cities, by the grace of God, learn true philosophy."[2] Lilla mocks the idea that Plato ever seriously entertained a "mad scheme to institute the rule of philosopher kings." But on the evidence of this passage alone, it is clear that Plato did entertain some such scheme, whether "mad" or not.

Plato first traveled to Syracuse in 387, twelve years after the death of Socrates. It was on this trip that the forty-one-year-old philosopher met Dion and imparted to the younger man his own radical ideas about "what was best for man." Like most of the young men that Socrates had taught in Athens, Dion was very well connected: he was the brother-in-law of Dionysius the Elder, the city's all-powerful ruler, or tyrant. Plato returned to Athens, "waiting for the right time." Twenty years passed. Plato imbued his students with the ethos of reasoned inquiry and dialogue and trained them to subordinate the impure body to the pure soul. If his community of philosophers "could not govern a city, he wanted them at least to be able to govern their own selves."[3] He also wrote and circulated fictional

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works in the genre of the then-popular "Socratic conversations," often addressing political as well as moral topics. But apart from these not-insignificant, indirect means of addressing political matters, Plato remained largely aloof from the democratic life of his native city, as if participating directly in the freest and most open society of his day was beneath the dignity of a true philosopher. Then, in 367, word came from Sicily that Dionysius the Elder had died. Plato's protégé Dion implored him to set sail at once for Syracuse. Sovereignty over the city had passed to Dionysius the Younger, and Dion had the ear of the all-powerful but still unformed young ruler.

In his "Letter," Plato confides that he felt ashamed at the prospect of shirking this extraordinary opportunity, "lest I appear to myself as a pure theorist, unwilling to touch any practical task." But what decisively "tipped the scales," he explains, was "the thought that if anyone ever was to attempt to realize these principles of law and government, now was the time to try, since it was only necessary to win over a single man and I should have accomplished all the good I dreamed of."[4] The stakes could not have been higher: "If in [Dionysius'] empire there had been brought about a real union of philosophy and power, it would have been an illustrious example to both Greeks and barbarians."[5]

As everyone knows, Plato's experiment was a failure. His legendary persuasive powers fell on deaf ears. Suspicious of their true motives, Dionysius exiled Dion and placed Plato under house arrest before sending him packing. But that is not the really strange part of this saga. That began several years later, when Dionysius summoned Plato to his side again. Still bewitched by the prospect of accomplishing the good and hoping to help his friend Dion win back his citizenship, Plato did not flatly refuse. He temporized—and eventually journeyed back to Syracuse. There Plato quickly learned that Dionysius was still a lazy dilettante—and that the ruler was not serious about his promise to restore Dion to citizenship.

At this point in the "Seventh Letter," Plato launches into a long digression. This is the famous place where Plato adverts to his "unwritten" doctrines and complains that Dionysius was an unworthy student, unable to comprehend the ineffable essence of his teaching, and therefore tempted to spread misinformation about Plato's true ideas. In this part of the "Seventh Letter," Plato sounds like a typically vain genius, a man more obsessed with preserving his reputation than with doing the right thing. To make a long story short, Plato was again placed under house arrest, before negotiating an escape from the tyrant's clutches. Understandably chastened by this fiasco, he writes of his "disgust" at his "Sicilian 'adventure.'" And I suspect that the aftershock of this vehement feeling of disgust finds its way into Plato's *Republic*, helping to turn that work of Plato's maturity into the nuanced and subtle masterpiece that it obviously is.

I would draw three conclusions from my gloss on Plato's Sicilian experiment: First, I think it proves that Lilla is not describing a new phenomenon in *The Reckless Mind*. Second, I think it shows that Plato, *pace* Lilla, was by no means exempt from the vice of "philotyranny." "Supremely self-aware" though Plato may have been, I do not believe that he ever supposed that he had succeeded, once and for all, in uprooting "all tyranny" from his soul; the lover of wisdom's attraction to power does not admit of such perfection.[6] Third, and finally, I think that Plato's Sicilian experiment demonstrates the intractable difficulty, not least for Plato himself, of learning how best to harness an unruly will-to-power as constitutive of the philosophical life as eros itself.

As I understand him, Plato was an unflinching and passionate visionary: he was neither a cautious liberal nor a consistently self-controlled intellectual of the sort Lilla commends—and he was certainly not content simply to mind his own business and leave politics to the technocrats and "gradual progress" men of his own day in Athens. Plato, in short, had a reckless mind—not unlike Heidegger, Foucault, and others. Indeed, it is this wonderfully reckless mind that produced the *Republic*—and not just Plato's ill-starred experiment in Sicily.

So what is the moral of my version of this story? What is one to make of Plato's sort of reckless mind when it enters the political arena? On the one hand, I am strongly inclined to agree with the words that Plato puts into the mouth of Callicles in the Gorgias:

> Philosophers in fact are inexperienced in the laws of their city, inexperienced in the language to be used in business contracts, public and private, inexperienced in human pleasures and desires, utterly inexperienced, in a word, in human character. So when they come to action, public or private, they make fools of themselves.[7]

Plato made a fool of himself in Syracuse. Heidegger made a fool of himself in Freiburg in 1933. Foucault made a fool of himself after May 1968. The key difference I see in these three cases is that Plato and Foucault subsequently more or less acknowledged their folly and revised their thinking accordingly, whereas Heidegger, being a coward, could never acknowledge any such thing.

On the other hand, I cannot imagine wanting to live in a world that had been utterly purged of folly or of Plato's brand of intellectual passion. It is relatively easy to sail with the prevailing political winds and to make a virtue out of what conventionally passes for "moral proportion" and sober good sense. By contrast, to put radically unconventional political ideas to the test of practice is often difficult and sometimes dangerous. A politically naïve philosopher inevitably runs the risk of appearing foolish, or worse. Yet that is a risk that I admire Foucault and Plato—and, yes, Heidegger, too—for taking.

In an essay published shortly before the outbreak of World War I, the great American intellectual Randolph Bourne put it this way:

> The world has never favored the experimental life. It despises poets, fanatics, prophets, and lovers. Yet it has always been those who experimented with life, who formed their philosophy of life as a crystallization out of that experimentation who were the light and life of the world. Causes have only finally triumphed when the rational 'gradual progress' men have been overwhelmed. Better crude irrationality than the rationality that checks hope and stifles faith.[8]

NOTES

1. Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind* (New York: New York Review Books, 1991), 197.
2. Plato, "Seventh Letter," trans. Glenn R. Morrow, in Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 1646-67.
3. Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 60.
4. Plato, "Seventh Letter," 328b.
5. Plato, "Seventh Letter," 335d.
6. Lilla, *The Reckless Mind*, 213.
7. Plato, "Gorgias," trans. R. E. Allen, in Plato, *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Gorgias, Menexenus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 231-316.
8. Randolph Bourne, "The Experimental Life," in *Youth and Life*, reprinted in Olaf Hansen, ed., *The Radical Will: Randolph Bourne Selected Writings 1911–1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 157–58.