

Patrizia Pinotti

Plato and the Ties that Bind



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1. When I arrived in Berlin in October 1991, I carried with me the memory of a very different city, where I had lived some years before, and a burning interest in the trauma of the reunification. In my earlier Berlin experience, the theme on which I worked, the history of Helen and her double, had been the lens through which I tried to decipher the enigma of a divided or "doubled" city. In his *Prinzip Hoffnung*, Ernst Bloch interpreted Helen as a metaphor for the relation between the bright utopia of socialism and the grim disenchantment produced by its historical realization. Not the real Helen, but her phantasm represented the unrelinquishable dream. Although guilty before human history, like every utopia, Helen could be declared innocent *sub specie aeternitatis*. Christa Wolf, in *Cassandra*, denounced this pleasing self-deception of maestro Bloch: in the besieged city of East Berlin, the phantasm of Helen did not represent the consoling utopia of good ideas, but rather the mystification of evil realities. Only with the tearing down of the wall, did it become clear that good ideas and

evil realities do not exist separately, but are woven together contradictorily in an experience whose entire weight must be borne.

When I returned to Berlin, the focus and frame of my research had shifted. The city into whose pursuit I again hurled myself, seemed to me, now that it was reunited, a diptych of deforming mirrors. Each of the two panels reflected its own memory of the past, remote and more recent, and cast a different perspective on events now underway. Rather than mutually clarifying each other, however, they jointly obscured all signs of continuity and rendered illegible all patterns of change. At first, biographical memories began to blossom forth. But they were soon rudely swept aside by a rage for exhuming the "truths" buried in the archives of the State Security Police. Together with Helen, Cassandra too ended up in the dock of the accused. Not only was utopia put on trial; but someone proclaimed, soon after the wall fell, the end of history. The scene that opened itself to our eyes, therefore, rather than being vacant, was teeming with disturbing *revenants*. Both scholarly and popular discussions opposed the need for individual liberty with the need for social cohesion, associating the bonds of solidarity with ethnic, cultural, and linguistic exclusivisms. Was this a "return of the repressed" or an ideological residue? Were phantasms returning from the past? Or were real problems of the present at stake? The disappearance of Helen, it seems, not only left behind the scattered ruins of the wall, but also unearthed individual and collective *Tagträume*.

2. J. P. Vernant observes that the problems a scholar poses in his research often echo the interrogatives that vex his society as a whole — questions about its identity, its roots in the past, and the present and future responsibilities that it must shoulder. The questions listed above were of this sort, and they naturally entered into many of my discussions with other fellows during this year. The trajectory of my research — focused this time on the relation between the theme of "binding", Platonism, and political philosophy — was profoundly marked by these intense and on-going exchanges.

For centuries, social relations were conceptualized in terms of ties, bonds, ligaments, webs, and nets. These metaphors describe, on the one hand, hierarchical structures and, on the other hand, communitarian forms of cohesion. But democracy, as Tocqueville observed, had broken the chain of the social hierarchy and separated its rings. How could it be mere chance that, at the turn of the century, there resurfaced a vitalistic biology and an organicist political philosophy inspired by principles of holism and hierarchy and characterized by recourse to the metaphor of "bonds"? Was this intellectual movement the vestige of a conception of the world in the process of collapsing? Or was it a theoretical reformulation, with an eye to the present, of the relation between individual, society, and

environment? I also asked myself if, more recently, something analogous had not occurred. Did ecological theories of the connective relation between organisms and environments and sociological reflections on the relation between individualism and cooperation embody old phantasms? Or were they serious attempts to reformulate real problems left hitherto unresolved?

Bonds, hierarchy, organicism, and holism converge in a powerful conceptual constellation that has governed large areas of biology, political philosophy, and sociology throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The same constellation, strikingly enough, formed the centerpiece of Platonic thought. I asked myself, therefore, if Platonism did not constitute the first chapter in the history of this constellation, and set out to trace some of the intermediaries through which Plato's thought had continued to exercise its unrivalled influence.

3. What strategy governed the choice and the use, on Plato's part, of metaphors, symbolic representations, and myths concerning the techniques of binding and weaving? On the one hand, such metaphors, symbols, and myths serve a heuristic function: they describe and identify a relation among different objects (cosmos, community, individual) and forms of speech (cosmology, politics, dialectic). On the other hand, they shed light on what Hans Blumenberg calls "the sollicitating force of mythical configurations", the urgency with which the questions implied in myths are reformulated philosophically. *Mythos* asks: Who and what prevents unbinding, disbanding, dissolution, unravelling? (And it answers: a divinity who threads destiny, weaves the cosmos, and ties its creatures to a law.) Faced with *mythos'* perspective, *logos* reformulates this question: does an objective connection really exist? The relation between this obsessive question, the vision of the world underlying it and the political project that it both inspires and requires, has been translated into a system of thought via a precise configuration. Three elements constitute this configuration: the metaphor of the bond, the category of mediation, and the tripartite scheme. The first structures the relation between vision, description, and constructions (dialectics). The second individuates the nature and the role of the subject who founds, on his capacity to see and describe connections, the power to reproduce them on the social plane (the king). The third articulates, at various levels, a hierarchical structure that guarantees the independence of the parts and the cohesion of the whole (the trifunctional soul and the trifunctional city).

4. Plato's objective was to compress, into a single mighty nexus, a knowledge capable of enchainning. As we all know, his political project failed and his theoretical edifice was pulled down. What survived nevertheless were his *maitresse des liens*, his intermediary figure of the sovereign, and

his idea of a hierarchy that articulates cosmos and community into another. That we are faced with phantasms who will not easily die is demonstrated by their repeated revivals on the scene of Western intellectual and political history. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, a criminal trial was awaiting them. Put under accusation by Karl Popper, Plato clambered up for the last time into the dock of the accused. Others liquidated the theology of sovereignty and the hierarchical mystique of community.

Can we consider this history over and done with? Have all the "guilty" verdicts been pronounced and the cases closed? Many recent events would suggest not. With my research, in any case, I hope to have contributed to a better comprehension of the long history of this powerful cluster of ideas. For the events that are occurring before our eyes, I do not deny, new perspectives and new vocabulary may well be necessary.

5. Besides my dissertation, which I hope soon to transform into a book, I authored, while in Berlin, an essay on the theme of animals in Plato (it was the expanded version of a lecture that I delivered at a conference in Italy), a long introduction to the Platonic dialog *Ion*, and the entry on *metaxy* in an encyclopaedia of Greek culture. The conversations that I had with those who were soon transformed from fellows into friends, not to mention the wonderful efficaciousness and good cheer of the librarians, decisively contributed to my ability to complete these works. As for the rest, I will only conjoin my voice to the chorus of others who report that they passed at the Kolleg one of the best years of their lives.