

Then first I propose that the Air ye enclose
and the space 'twixt the Earth and the sky,
Encircling it all with a brick-builed wall,
like Babylon's, solid and high.
Aristophanes, The Birds¹

House and City

An analysis of public and private space in Plato's utopian *po-*

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The imagined social and political order in utopian writing has often been closely bound with the space of the city. Aristophanes, the ancient Greek playwright, went so far as to have men grow wings and construct a sky-bound town in his utopian satire *The Birds*. Pisthetarios [the persuader] learns to fly and convinces the birds to take advantage of their strategic position between the heavens and earth. His aim is to assume control over the channels of communication between the gods and human beings, gaining an advantage over the gods who appear to depend upon humans' sacrifices in the same way that humans depend upon their good will.

Although the word utopia is derived from the Greek and ancient writers certainly expressed ideals that could be described as utopian, the term was first used by Thomas More in the early part of the sixteenth century. Since that time, the term has been employed for different purposes and its meaning is often ambiguous.² Part of the ambiguity arises from the inherent

pun in the word itself. The initial letter 'u' comes from the Greek *ou*, meaning 'no' or 'not'. However, the 'u' can readily be associated the Greek *eu* [good or well], rendering utopia as 'ideal place' or 'good place'. More was well aware of the dual meaning of the word,³ as evidenced from the following lines from the "Meter of four verses in the Utopian language" appended to a sixteenth century English translation of the *Utopia*: "Wherefore not Utopie, but rather rightely / My name is Eutopie: a place of felicitie."⁴

Utopian thinking has always been characterized by an aspiration to the ideal, an aspiration that results in literary descriptions of a place that often has no specific location or no location that the reader has known or imagined. Yet, this does not preclude the possibility that descriptions of Utopia are influenced and conditioned by the author's engagement with their own time and place. This was certainly true in the case of More who, in a letter prefixed to the first edition of *Utopia*, portrays himself as overburdened by his participation in public life as a member of the legal profession and in private life as the head of his household. In commen-

ting upon the often competing demands of the public and private realm, More introduces the reader to one of the primary themes that will occupy the remainder of the work.⁵

The reconciliation of public and private has been a common feature of utopic writing; More recognized this feature in Plato's writings and used his views on the distinction between public and private as a basis for discussion in the Utopia. The relationship between public and private occupies a large part Plato's *Laws*, which is foreshadowed by the very title of the work. The Greek word for law is *nómos*, the etymology of which associates it with governing the practice of distributing privately held land to citizens in the colonies, a practice that *nómos* is thought to have been introduced to regulate in the seventh century B.C. The origins of the word are visible in the meaning of the word *neméis* [distribution] and the verb *nemó* [to deal out, to dispense], which appears throughout the epic works attributed to Homer. Throughout Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, a treatise on household management, *nemó* was used in relation to proper distribution or the allocation of things to their proper spaces, particularly within the residence.

The spatial aspect of the term *nómos* prevailed in ancient usage. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt, in support of this claim, connected the term back to the original meaning of laws or rules of conduct. She argued that the law of the polis⁶ was not the content of political action nor a catalogue of prohibitions, but rather a mandate that functioned like a boundary (*peras*) between public and private:

The law was originally identified with this boundary line, which in ancient times was actually a space, a kind of no man's land between the private and the public, sheltering and protecting both while, at the same time, separating them from each other.⁷

The boundary ensured that the public realm and the private realm were protected and preserved by separating them and, in Athens, this boundary was manifest in the enclosing wall surrounding the private space of the residence.⁸

The differentiation between public and private spa-

ce is clearly manifest in the question of private property and, in Athens, the distinction was made between the private space of the *oikos* (household) and the public space of the *polis*.⁹ The public space existed outside of the boundaries of the household; the private space was delineated by the boundaries enclosing the private property of the *oikos*, which included house and land (joined together in the Greek phrase *oikia kai chorion*).¹⁰

This paper will be limited to a discussion of the distinctions between the private space of the house and public space of the city in the utopian polis proposed by Plato in the *Laws*. In order to demonstrate the utopian nature of *Laws*, this paper will analyze Plato's denial of the boundary between public and private space, and demonstrate how this denial was a critique of the use of space in the ancient Greek polis of Athens. The analysis will be carried out by examining two instances where the boundary separating public and private space is transgressed, and therefore negated: i) the movement of women outside the confines of the private space of the residence via their participation in public dining groups; and ii) the encroachment of the public, i.e. the 'state', into the private space of the household.

The Negation of Boundaries in the *Laws*

Plato introduces the subject of housing in a section on the allocation of property in Book V of the *Laws*. This section outlines a system of property distribution in which each citizen would receive two plots of land, each with a house, one being close to the city and the other located in the countryside.¹¹ In Book VI, Plato states that men and women were to reside with their parents until married and, upon marriage,¹² men received one of the two houses in his allotment.¹³ Little is said concerning the building of houses; Plato states that because his construction is a 'verbal' one, he will deal with the laws governing marriage first, since

...when we come to the actual construction of the State, we shall, God willing, make the houses precede marriage, and crown all of our architectural work with our marriage laws.¹⁴

The following sections will discuss how these so-

called 'marriage laws' demonstrate the denial of the boundary between public and private space and, in doing so, reveal the utopian character of the Laws.

Abandoning Female Disorder: Private Space to Public Meals

From

During the first year of marriage, both husband and wife were required to take their meals in public messes. As Plato duly notes, this proposition would have been met with astonishment by his contemporaries in Athens, for it would have required women to transgress the boundaries of the household and enter into the public space of the polis.¹⁵ In the following passage on the public meal, Plato acknowledges his debt to Sparta¹⁶ while defending the decision to allow women:

...[In the case of Sparta] public meals for men are, as I said, rightly and admirably established by divine necessity, but for women this institution is left, quite wrongly, unprescribed by law, nor are public meals for them brought to the light of day; instead of this, the female sex, that very section of humanity which, owing to its frailty, is in other respects most secretive and intriguing, is abandoned to its disorderly condition through the perverse compliance of the lawgiver.¹⁷

The connection between the 'female sex' and its 'disorderly condition' is significant. Here Plato contradicts many other Athenian writers on the relationship between women, visibility and disorder. He argues that the failure to bring women out of the private space of the home and 'into the light of day' will contribute to what he describes as the disorderly condition of the female sex; in contrast, other writers suggest that a 'well-ordered' woman was one who did not see the 'light of day'.¹⁸ The movement of women outside of the household was also subject to legislative control, as seen in the following passage from a biographical account of the ruler Solon:

...[Solon] also subjected the public appearances of women, their mourning and their festivals, to a law which did away with disorder and licence.¹⁹

In ancient Athenian literature, the behavior of women was commonly appraised with words from the root

kosm-, which often meant the orderly separation of things. In a speech entitled *Against Simon*, the orator Lysias presented what was certainly an extreme segregation of women:

...he came there at night in a drunken state, broke down the doors, and entered the women's rooms; within were my sister and my nieces, whose lives have been so well-ordered (kosmiós) that they were ashamed to be seen even by their kinsmen.²⁰

Although it was a normative ideal and certainly breached, the value system expressed in ancient Athenian literature reflects a commonly held belief that women were expected to confine themselves within the walls enclosing the house.²¹

Athenian literature offers a variety of reasons for the relegation of women to the interior. Xenophon wrote that women were assigned the duties relating to the interior by the gods, arguing that women should attend to duties inside the house while men engaged in work outside.²² In the following passage from the *Laws*, Plato outlines some of the duties assigned to women:

...here's how we Athenians deal with the problem: we 'concentrate our resources', as the expression is, under one roof, and let our women take care of our stores and the spinning and wool-working in general. Or we could adopt the Spartan system, Megillus, which is a compromise. You make your girls take part in athletics and you give them a compulsory education in the arts.²³

This passage also reveals a distinct difference between Athens and Sparta, i.e. women were not confined to the private space of the residence, but were visible as a result of their participation in athletics, education and public meals. While Plato modelled the laws governing the movement of women on Sparta, he went even further in promoting their integration, and therefore their presence, in the public space of the polis.²⁴

Reproductive Rules and the Denial of Private Space
After setting down the rules governing female participation in the common meal, Plato turns his attention to reproduction. The newly married couple were charged

with producing "for the State children of the greatest possible goodness and beauty."²⁵ Officials known as 'women-inspectors' were responsible for ensuring that this charge was duly carried out, especially in cases where a child was not yet born. Whenever there was an 'abundant issue' of offspring, the period of procreation and supervision was to last for ten years; if no children were produced during this period, the women-inspectors met to decide the most advantageous terms for both parties, and the couple was then divorced. Should a dispute arise between the husband and wife in relation to the divorce, then

The women-inspectors shall enter the houses of the young people, and, partly by threats, partly by admonition, stop them from their sin and folly.

This proposal clearly indicates the utopian nature of the Laws, for the boundaries separating public from private, the walls of the household, are negated. The free movement of the women-inspectors across this boundary also represents the denial of the autonomy of the household, which was fiercely protected, especially in Athens.²⁶

There was a clear distinction between public and private life in Athens, between the equalitarian interaction in the polis and the hierarchic relationships within the oikos. The relationships between the members of the household were characterized by a strict hierarchy, with the male citizen assuming the role as the uncontested authority. On the subject of the social relations within the household, S.C. Humphreys has written,

Entry to the household emphasised the control of its head – he decided whether to rear a child or not, purchased slaves, and arranged marriages.²⁷

In the utopian polis developed by Plato, the state usurped the control over entry into the household. With regard to the question of children entering the oikos, it was not whether, but when. And, if the marriage did not produce a child within ten years, the union, and therefore the household, were dissolved. The radical nature of Plato's proposal can be seen in relation to Athenian family law which, although offered redress in cases where the head of the oikos was incompetent or unjustly exploited his authority, was often ineffectual. One of the reasons for the inadequacy of family law in Athens was certainly the insistence on the maintenance of a clear distinction between public and private, a distinction made manifest in the boundaries separating public and private space.

When the state assumes control of the household in the Laws, Plato is revising an earlier position characterized by the elimination of both the family and private property in the Republic. The concessions made in the Laws are clearly based on the construction of the city and the use of space in Athens; however, it is remarkable that the boundary demarcating the space of the household no longer ensured the autonomy of the citizen.

Conclusion

In both of the cases examined in this paper, Plato negated the walls of the household that functioned as boundaries separating public from private space;

boundaries that reinforced, and were reinforced by, the social structure of ancient Athens. A clue to the reasons behind this lies not in the *Laws*, but in the *Gorgias*. In this work, Plato quotes Socrates as saying that Athens is a city 'full of harbours and docks and walls and revenues' where there is no longer 'room for justice and temperance'.²⁸

Habour and docks generated the revenue to support the city of Athens; in contrast, Plato placed his ideal city inland and argued that it would be self-sufficient and support institutions like the public mess with its own agricultural production. Looking to Sparta rather than Athens, Plato denied the citizens a fortification wall.²⁹ In Athens, walls functioned as boundaries that ensured the autonomy of both the *oikos* and the *polis*: the fortification wall surrounding the city ensured the independence of the city via the protection that it offered;³⁰ and the walls enclosing the household preserved and protected the boundary between public and private space within the city.

Like More and other utopian writers in search of 'justice and temperance',³¹ Plato never fully reconciled the competing demands of the public and private realm, and the implications that this has for public and private space. It was perhaps this reason that led him to reconsider the distinctions made in the *Republic* and develop them further in the *Laws*. The 'marriage laws' both represent this development and, when viewed in relation to Athens, the utopian nature of his project.

Notes

1. Aristophanes. *The Birds*. tr. Benjamin B. Rogers (London, 1968). 550–551.
2. For a brief discussion of the causes of the absence of a clear definition of the term *utopia*, see Ruth Levitas. *The Concept of Utopia* (London, 1990). pp. 1–8.
3. In this respect, *utopia* is related to many ancient words in that had two opposite meanings; these words can be described as *amphibolic*, from *amphitypos* which, in epic language, meant two-edged.
4. *The Utopia*, first published in Latin at Louvain by Thierry Martin, appeared towards the end of 1516. Ralph Robynson provided the first English translation of More's *Utopia* and it was published in 1551. The "Meter of four

verses in the Utopian language" was omitted, but it subsequently appended to the second edition which was published in 1556.

5. Robbin Johnson has argued that there were three "defenses" undertaken in *Utopia*: i) a "defense" of More's own work which appears in the letters to Peter Giles that preface the main text; ii) a "defense" of private property in Book I; and, in response, iii) a "defense" of community property undertaken by Hythlodæus in Book II. (Robbin Johnson. *More's Utopia: Ideal and Illusion* (New Haven, 1969).).
6. The term *polis* has, in many cases, been questionably translated as city-state, implying a city that also functions as a state. The ancient Greek *polis* was a political unit that included both town (*astu*) and country (*chora*). For a thorough discussion of the term *polis* and its development and usage, see M.B. Sakellariou. *The Polis-State: Definition and Origin* (Athens, 1989).
7. Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1958). p. 63.
8. The following passage by Martin Heidegger serves to define the boundary as a concept in ancient Greek thought: "A space is something that has been made room for, something that is cleared and free, namely within a boundary, Greek *peras*. A boundary is not something at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is something from which something begins its presencing. That is why the concept is that of *horismos*, that is, the horizon, the boundary. Space is in essence that for which room has been made, that which is let into its bounds." (Martin Heidegger. "Building, Dwelling Thinking". In: *Poetry, Language, Thought*. tr. Albert Hofstadter (New York, 1971). p. 154.).
9. For further discussion of this distinction, see S.C. Humphreys. "Oikos and Polis". In: *The Family, women and death* (London, 1983). pp. 1–21. In this context, it is also interesting to note that many Greek tragedies were set at the threshold of the house; therefore, the dramatic boundary between the orchestra and the skene [the covered building with central doors through which the actors usually entered] reflected the boundary between the *oikos* and the *polis*. The interior world remained private, visible to the audience only as a tableau, usually of death, via the *ekkuklema* [a wheeled trolley that was used to present tableaux]. For a discussion of the relationship between women and visibility in Greek drama, see James Redfield. "Homo Domesticus" In: J.-P. Vernant, ed. *The Greeks*. (Chicago, 1995). p. 154.
10. The walls of the houses that defined the space of the street in ancient Athens formed clear and distinct boundaries. There were strict rules governing their encroachment onto the 'public property' of the street, both at

ground level and above. Aristotle states in the Athenian Constitution that there were ten 'City Controllers' in Athens whose duties included preventing "...the construction of buildings encroaching on and balconies overhanging roads, of overhead conduits with an overflow into the road, and of windows opening outward on to the road." (Aristotle. Athenian Constitution. tr. H. Rackham (London, 1972). 50.2). For a discussion of the relationship between public and private space in regard to agricultural land, see Kevin Mitchell. "Land Allocation and Self-Sufficiency in the Ancient Athenian Village". *Agricultural History* 2000, in press.

11. Plato describes the process of land allocation as follows: "...[the legislator] must divide up both the city and all the country into twelve portions. The twelve portions must be equalised by making those consisting of good land small, and those of inferior land larger. He must mark off 5,040 allotments, and each of these he must cut in two and join two pieces from each allotment, so that each contains a near piece and a distant piece-joining the nearest piece next to the city with the piece furthest off, the second nearest with the second furthest, and so on with all the rest. And in dealing with these separate portions, they must employ the device we mentioned a moment ago, about poor land and good, and secure equality by making the assigned portions of larger or smaller size." (Plato. *Laws*. tr. R.G. Bury (London, 1984) 745C–D). Leveque and Vidal-Naquet have argued that the system of land distribution in the *Laws* was developed in reference to reforms made by Kleisthenes, see P. Leveque and P. Vidal Naquet. *Clisthène l'Athénien* (Paris, 1964).
12. Plato makes two contradictory statements concerning the age of marriage: in 721B, Plato sets down a law which states that men shall marry when they are between thirty and thirty-five; and, in 772D, he says that men should be at least twenty-five and not more than thirty-five. If a man remained unmarried after the age of thirty-five, he would be fined each year in accordance with his property class.
13. This proposal to offer men one of the 5,040 allotments upon marriage is problematic, and is representative of the unfinished character of the *Laws*. In Book V, Plato declared that there were only 5,040 plots (divided into two portions), there could never be no more or no less. He also declared land inalienable; the lot remained forever in the possession of the citizen to which it was allotted, passing to his heirs (natural or adopted) after his death. Plato does state that the married couple must act 'as if they had gone off to a colony'; assuming that the father of the groom was alive at the time of marriage, then the only way for him to receive an allotment would be to actually go off to one of the colonies that Plato acknowledged as one of the ways in which to deal with a population surplus.
14. Plato. op. cit. 778B–C.
15. A distinction must be drawn between the women directly associated with the household of the Athenian citizen (i.e., the wife and daughters) and the women who were either slaves or poor. Slave women would have worked outside when necessary; poor women left their own households in order to work. In the *Politics*, when contemplating the need for a *gynaikomom*, an official to control the movement of women, Aristotle poses the following question: 'how is it possible to prevent the wives of the poor from leaving the house?'. Unlike free-born women, female slaves and servants were allowed to transverse freely the boundaries of the residence. For a review of the literature dealing with the role and position of women within ancient Athenian society, see S.C. Humphreys. "Women in Antiquity". op. cit. pp. 33–57.
16. The shared meals advocated by Plato were, to a great degree, based upon the *syssitia* at Sparta, where all male citizens came together for meals in common. It should be noted that Plato failed to resolve fully the incompatibility between his utopian society, which was organized around the family, and a society based on common meals. This difficulty did not arise in the polis outlined in the earlier Republic, for Plato abolished the family.
17. Plato. op. cit. 780E–781A. Plato goes on to reveal that he believes that his proposal would certainly be met with resistance, rhetorically asking "How then, shall one attempt, without being laughed at, actually to compel women to take food and drink publicly and exposed to the view of all?" (Plato. *ibid.* 781C).
18. The difference between the movement of Athenian and Spartan women outside the confines of the residence is associated with the way their physical appearance is described in ancient literature which, in turn, reflects certain value judgements concerning beauty. *Lysistrata*, in Aristophanes' play of the same name, complements a Spartan woman on her 'lovely color'; if she were speaking to an Athenian woman, it could well have been an insult for, in Athens, pale skin color was an attribute. In the Homeric poems, women who are described as beautiful are assigned the epithet "white-armed". A tanned face would have meant that a woman worked outside, an activity that would have been necessary for those who were either enslaved or impoverished. In the *Art of Love*, the Roman poet Ovid characterized a sunburn as a feature of an incompetent peasant woman.
19. Plutarch. "Solon". In: *The Parallel Lives*. tr. Bernadotte Perin (London, 1967) 21.5. Solon was supposedly elected to the office of *arkhon* in 594/93 BC to resolve the political

and economic problems facing Athens at the time.

20. Lysias. *The Orations of Lysias*. tr. W.R.M. Lamb (London, 1930). 3, 6.
21. The values associated with the transgression of the boundaries of the household are illustrated in the following fragment attributed to the playwright Menander: "You're overstepping, wife, a married woman's bounds – The street door of the peristyle/For a free-born dame the street door is the limit by convention fixed." (Menander. *The Principal Fragments*. tr. Francis G. Allison (London, 1965). p. 491.). In Greek mythology, women were identified with the goddess of the hearth Hestia. Plato, in the *Phaedrus*, states that it was only Hestia who stayed behind when Zeus sets off to carry out his duties: "Now the great leader in heaven, Zeus, driving a winged chariot, goes first, arranging all things and caring for all things. He is followed by an army of gods and spirits, arrayed in eleven squadrons; Hestia alone remains in the house of the gods." (Plato. *Phaedrus*. tr. Harold North Fowler (London, 1982). 247A.
22. In the *Oeconomicus*, Xenophon both emphasized the subordinate status of women and stated that they were capable of being educated to run the household in a rational way. This is noteworthy, for many authors, including Xenophon, defended the subordinate status of women on the basis of their inability to act rationally.
23. Plato. op. cit. 805–806. In Athens, weaving was the woman's most important contribution to the household economy. In the Gortyn Law Code from c. 450 B.C., weaving is explicitly mentioned in relation to the rules governing divorce: "If a husband and wife should be divorced, she is to keep whatever property she came to her husband with and half of the produce, if there is any, from her own property, and half of whatever she has woven within the house..." (R.F. Willets. *The Law Code of Gortyn*. (Berlin, 1967). II, 45–55.). On the subject of weaving, see Jesper Svenbro. *The Craft of Zeus: Myths of Weaving and Fabric*. tr. Carol Volk (Cambridge, MA, 1996).
24. Plato states that "For females, too, my law will lay down the same regulations as for men, and training of an identical kind." (Plato. op. cit. 804C) However, this statement is qualified almost immediately: "...the female sex must share with the male, to the greatest extent possible, both in education and in all else." (Plato. op. cit. 805C).
25. Plato. *ibid.* 783D.
26. The following lines from Euripides *Children of Hercules* clearly illustrate the point: "I for my land am battle-dight / Arrayed for hearth and home to fight, / To shear through danger with the sword, / For right of sanctuary." (Euripides. *The Children of Hercules*. tr. Arthur S. Way (London, 1971). 755–758).
27. S.C. Humphreys. op. cit. p. 2.
28. Plato. *Gorgias*. tr. W.R.M. Lamb (London, 1983). 518C.
29. Plato. op. cit. 778E–779B.
30. Unlike the later Roman town, the fortification wall surrounding the town was not a sacred boundary established by a series of founding rites. However, the construction of the wall is portrayed as one of the first acts associated with settlement. See Homer. *Odyssey*. tr. A.T. Murray (London, 1919). Book VI, 6–10.
31. In the final pages of More's *Utopia*, Hythloday states: "They invent and invent all means and crafts, first how to keep safely without fear of losing that they have unjustly gathered together; and next how to hire and abuse the work and labour of the poor for as little money as may be...But these most wicked and vicious men, when they have by their insatiable and covetousness divided among themselves all those things which would have sufficed all men, yet how far be they from the wealth and felicity of the commonwealth?" This quote comes from a 1961 edition containing Ralph Robynson's original 1551 translation (Thomas More. *Utopia*. J. Churton Collins, ed. (London, 1961) p. 141.).



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