Dinner in Utopia: Why did Plato Propose "Amazing and Frightening" Meals in Common?

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"Let one open any book of history, from Herodotus to our own day, and he will see that, without even excepting conspiracies, not a single great event has occurred which has not been conceived, prepared, and carried out at a feast," so said Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin in the *Philosopher in the Kitchen* (1981[1825]: 54). Scholars of course know the faculty club and the conference dinner, where many events have been planned.

While Plato consistently recommended common meals, *syssitia* (literally "eating together"), and Aristotle accepted this one feature of Plato's political program, their recommendations of these public meals as political practices have been treated in a perfunctory manner, limited to military purposes (e.g., Finer 1997: 338 and de Mesquita *et al.*, 2004: 174). In later utopian theory and practice, Thomas More, Tomasso Campanella and William Morris, among other utopian theorists, incorporated such meals, as have utopian communities from Oenida to the Kibbutzim, all to little comment. Insofar as the seed for the practice is found in Plato, a close study of his recommendation of common meals enhances our understanding of what such meals can offer. Why in *The Laws* (780a-d) did Plato recommend meals in common and why did he say that they were "amazing" and "frightening," and perhaps not to be mentioned?[1] To better understand Plato's approach to *syssitia* this essay summarizes common meals in the context of classical Greece, examines Plato's discussion of political dining, emphasizes the role of women in common meals in Plato's political theory, considers the role of these meals in the second-best ideal commonwealth of the *Laws*, and draws several conclusions.

Syssitia

There is ample evidence, both archaeological and literary, that common meals were practiced in Sparta, Crete and elsewhere in ancient Greece (Roussel, 1976; David,1978; Pantel, 1992; Rundin; 1996; Fornis / Casillas, 1997); and Steiner, 2002). More generally on women in Sparta see Pomperoy, 2002). Herodotus in his *History* (I, 65) notes that common meals were a Spartan practice based on military training and experience, though there are also references to them in Homeric times (Rundin 1996: 205). Aristophanes in his comedy, the *Ecclesiazusae*, written perhaps twenty years before Plato's *Republic*, makes common meals integral to the communism of a utopia governed by women. In Sparta, *syssitia* provided a main meal for male citizens at the end of the day in communal dining halls, where tables were allocated to groups numbering about fifteen (Singor, 1999: 72; Rawson,1969: 7; and Bitros / Karayiannis, 2010: 69). A citizen went to a certain building and ate at a specific table in the company of the same persons for life (Fornis / Casillas, 1997: 43). In Sparta, male citizens lived much of their lives in public, and the collective surveillance that this public life brought supported self-discipline. The meals were a very large part of that exposure (Finley, 1981: 28). Boys served at the meals from age twelve and were gradually inducted into a table by twenty. In Sparta these groups engaged in confidential discussion of public business (Pantel, 1992: 62 and Fornis / Casillas, 1997:27).

Xenophon and Plutarch attribute the Spartan common meals to the reforms of the legendary King Lycurgus, one of many measures that created Spartan discipline.[2] They agree that Lycurgus' aim was to curb luxury. According to Xenophon (2013: 331), by making dining public, Lycurgus controlled extravagance, luxury and drunkenness. In Plutarch's (1914: 10, 254) account, common dining checked extravagance and display because the rich were prevented from flaunting their wealth while their characters were improved by dining with the poor. Common meals were also found in Crete, which, in contrast to Sparta, was notorious for luxury, perversion, and indulgence reminiscent of Persia. There is speculation that both polities reflect a mutual influence, perhaps Phoenicia, but if the practices had a similar origin, they took decidedly different turns (Drews, 1979: 47). There were, however, some instances of

limited public dining in Athens, for example, among members of the Athenian Council of the Areopagus (Steiner, 2002: 353).

It is worth noting that common dining served similar purposes. In the Middle Ages, "The feast's defining rhetoric of honorable equality and commensality enabled new relationships to be legitimately forged, often between participants of markedly different background or economic status" (Rosser, 1994: 432). The point is that common dining can be instrumental in producing certain ends; it is not, as a casual reading of Brillat-Savarin might suggest, merely an occasion for taking political or commercial decisions. Nor is this practice in Plato a mere epiphenomenon of the social arrangements of a society as it is in the utopias of Campanella and Morris. Commensality in their imaginary societies is closer to the mess in military life or the refectory in monasteries and convents. There is conversation and learning, no doubt, but bonding in such environments is restricted compared with that effected in battle or in chanting the holy office. Yet common dining can be a moral device for social integration, as shown in More's *Utopia*. It can be educational, formative, and unifying, especially for an egalitarian society. Hence Xenophon writes that common dining helped form boys' characters, and prepared them for the rigours of military **service** by keeping them lean, fit, and able to survive with limited food during military campaigns (Xenophon 1890-1897).

Plato on syssitia

Common dining on the Spartan model was not practiced in Plato's and Aristotle's Athens. For them to recommend common meals is to invoke Sparta or Crete, neither of which would be welcome exemplars to Athenian citizens. Why did Plato recommend the practice? Athenians were more familiar with the *symposion*, or drinking party.

This question haunts Plato's references to the *symposion* and *syssition* from the earliest of his dialogues to the *Laws*, usually taken to be one of the last, if not the very last. In the *Symposium*, wine is replaced with conversation, thus civilizing a frequently riotous occasion (Murray, 1991). In the *Republic*, he gives pride of place to "meals in common" (*Republic* at 416e).[3] In the *Laws*, common dining figures even more prominently. This communism of the table remained while he dropped many other features of the *Republic* in the *Laws*.

In the *Republic*, Plato refers to meals in common in Books III, IV, and V where the political institutions of the ideal city are revealed. They are an aspect of his

communism. In the discussion of the rulers of the ideal city, Socrates says that these guardians "will go regularly to mess together, like soldiers in a camp and live a life in common" (416e).[4] Only in Book V does he place common meals in the context of a general communism for the guardians, including women. Socrates says, "**all** of them [the guardians] will be together, since they have common houses and mess" (458d).

From these brief mentions in the *Republic* it is apparent that common meals are a part of the structure of rule. And that communism is one of the hallmarks of Plato's political theory in the *Republic*. But there the meals are justified by argument, not by reference to either Sparta or Crete. The importance of this justification lies in the utter rationality of the first-best ideal commonwealth, where abstract argument suffices.

In the *Laws*, as Aristotle notes, rational argument is reinforced by the lessons of history (see Dawson, 1992: 17). The case for *syssitia* there in particular is supported by examples from Sparta and Crete, the cities from which two of the participants in the conversation come. The Cretan, Kleinias, gives the dialogue a very practical turn when he tells his companions that he is part of a group charged with devising a legal code for the new Cretan colony of Magnesia (702b-c). Moreover, the *Laws* seeks the assistance of the Muses, the source of education (654a), to support a reasoned approach to establishing a virtuous political community, that is, one in which virtue is recognised as the "concord of reason and emotion" (653a-655a). Basic to this goal is the fusing of the Spartan *syssition* with the Athenian *symposion*, extending "aristocratic and military rites of commensality to the entirety of the … citizen class." Dining will become political (Murray, 1991: 88 and 99).

The discussion of common meals runs throughout the *Laws* yet has no systematic exposition. Nonetheless the importance of *syssitia* is signalled in the very first exchange when the Stranger asks, "For what reason has your law ordained the common meals …"(625c)? Kleinias having already noted that a god laid down the laws for his Cretan city replies, "these practices of ours exist with a view to war" (625e). He and the Athenian Stranger, agree (633a) that this is generally a good practice, but can sometimes be harmful (636a-b).[5]

After discussing administrative arrangements in each of the twelve local government districts of the city, the Athenian Stranger says that there "will be common meals [for officials] in each of the twelve districts where all of them **must** dine together" (emphasis added) for the first two years of a term. "If anyone is

absent from a common meal on any day" without an official reason, that absentee will be considered "as a deserter from the guard … and held in ill repute, as one who has betrayed his share in the regime" (762c). Missing a meal is nearly treason! While it might seem extreme to put absences from *syssitia* on the level of treason, Plato is simply inverting established wisdom: while a tyrant fears common meals because plots might be hatched there, the citizens of Magnesia might fear that absent magistrates and officials could be plotting in private. On the next page the Stranger notes that this food is "humble and uncooked" (762e). A civic office does not entitle one to depart from the regulations of the city; indeed, officials should set an example of obedience to the laws, which is why absence from the common meals is particularly disturbing. Nor should they expect sumptuous meals; that too is an education in frugality.

That aspect of dining in common is not the strangest. In outlining his proposals for marriage, the Athenian Stranger says: "we are going to assert that our grooms must participate in the common meals no differently, and no less, than in the time before marriage" (780b). He continues that the creation of the institution of common meals "aroused **amazement** at the beginning when it was first introduced," speculating that while it might have been an emergency measure in wartime, it had since become accepted. The Athenian goes on to say that it would not now be so amazing or "frightening" (780c2) to legislate common dining. What made common meals amazing? What made them frightening? And even more important, why would they no longer be so? Plato does not explicitly answer these questions in the *Laws*. The Athenian suggests a prejudice against them exists where they are not practiced but that is not "fright" (839d). Perhaps *syssitia* were regarded as the thin end of the wedge leading to communism: Aristotle claims in the *Politics* books I and II that legislators "introduced community of property in Sparta and Crete by the institution of public messes" (1263b).

There are parallels in both the *Republic* and the *Laws* with Aristophanes' critique in the *Ecclesiazusae* ("Assembly Women"). This play is less a reflection on communism than a censure of "the greedy, individualistic attitudes of certain Athenians" (Rothwell 1990: 11). This censure is framed as a kind of female coup, in which the women outwit the men in order to gain political power. That coup is moral as well as political, for the virtues that convince the masculine assembly to yield power are feminine. The protagonist, Praxagora, disguised as a man, depicts women as clever, thrifty and discreet. Women freely lend each other things such as clothes, and jewellery, and duly return them, whereas men are prone to deny their debts.

Women do not inform on others or sue them or conspire against them. Men, by contrast, are shown as selfish individualists. Women "never divulged the Mysteries of Demeter" writes Aristophanes, obliquely referring to the profanation of the Eleusinian Mysteries, either by drunken members of *symposia* or, worse, by aristocratic men who thought themselves above the gods and the law (Murray 1990). Praxagora must make this speech disguised as a man because no respectable Athenian woman should know what she does know about public affairs – and about men. Beneath the comedy is not only the *possibility* but also the *plausibility* of government by women, based on the virtues of women instead of the vices of men, a more disturbing challenge to the social order than, say, the fanciful reign of Jonathan Swift's Houyhnhms. The disguised Praxagora promotes the communal virtues of the home for the governance of the polity.

> *I propose that everyone should own everything in in common, and draw an equal living. No more rich man here, poor man there … I will establish one and the same standard of life for everyone … My first act will be to communize all the land, money, and other property that's now individually owned. We women will manage this common fund with thrift and good judgment. … the city [will be] one household by breaking down all partitions to make one dwelling… (Aristophanes, 2002: 321, 323, 339)*

The Stranger, of course, can only recommend the *appearance*, not the reality that Praxagora offered, of a single house for the second-best commonwealth of Magnesia (779b). Privacy there is presented as a concession to the attitudes of the Cretan colonists, but it is also inherent in the Athenian's civic theology, which requires that proper honour be paid to one's ancestors, inevitably a private, not a common commitment.

As for meals, these will not only be common but undistorted by preference and affinity: "I shall draw a lot for each citizen, which … will show the place where he must go to dine." In making community of wives and children part of her project and promoting equality of desire in sexual relations, Praxagora, like Plato, elevates the political community above kinship and natural affinity. All relationships become, in effect, political. Perhaps this is frightening: it is certainly amazing. To modern ears it even sounds totalitarian. That *Ecclesiazusae* is a protean utopian comedy takes the edge off its political message, but that message nonetheless stands as an accusation against the conventions of fourth century Attica (Fredal, 2002: 601). It likewise anticipates some utopian efforts to transcend family ties.

Women at the table

This brings us to the role of women in the *Laws*. As we have seen above, the Stranger says that when common meals were established in both Sparta and Crete, "probably dictated by a war or by some event of equal potency," it seemed "amazing." Although the idea came to be accepted as contributing to security, "women's affairs were in an altogether incorrect way left without legislative regulation, and the practice of common meals for them never saw the light" (779e-781a). According to Aristotle, who repeats Plato's arguments, "Lycurgus did attempt to bring (women) under the laws, but since they resisted he gave it up" (*Politics*, 1270a). The Stranger deplores this neglect and proposes to remedy it, because "if it were ordained that every practice is to be shared in common by women as well as men, it would be better for the happiness of the city" (781b). Then follows what reads like an aside: "In other places and cities, where common meals are not at all officially accepted customs in the city, it is not possible for someone of intelligence even to mention it" (781c). Not only are common meals amazing and frightening, but now that women are involved they are nearly unmentionable. If common meals cannot be sensibly discussed for men, it is even harder to discuss the arrangement for women. Plato did not need to spell out the obvious: conventionally women belonged in the home, not in public. Although Athenian attitudes towards the appearance of women in public varied in the 4th century BCE, Anton Powell points out that common meals would have been confronting for respectable women: "To mix with men would be degrading" (Powell, 2001: 351). He claims that many women "would have clung with determination to a cloistered life, partly as a reflection of high status" (*ibid.*: 371). That might be why the Stranger thought his proposal so astonishing, but from a Platonic point of view, clinging to "a cloistered life" is putting private concerns before the good of the political community.

It was clearly a radical proposal. Aristophanes had broached women's public participation using comedy and, in the *Critias*, Plato invokes the protection of history in recalling that, 9000 years previously, Athenian women could take a public role embracing even military service. This statement is no less confronting than women's *syssitia*:

> *military pursuits were then common to men and women, (and) the men of those days … set up a figure … of the goddess in full armour, to be a testimony that all animals which associate together, male as well as female, may, if they please, practise in common the virtue which belongs to them without distinction of sex. Moreover, the habit and figure of the goddess indicate that in the case of all*

> *animals, male and female, that herd together, every species is naturally capable of pracitising as a whole and in common its own proper excellence (Plato, 2008: 107).*

In short, women participated in the hegemony.

There is nothing in the *Laws* to indicate there is any interaction between women and men at *syssitia*, and no explicit reason is given for women and men to dine in the same room at the same time. "Suppose," says the Athenian, "there were separate common meals arranged for men, and **nearby** common meals for the members of their families, including female children and their mothers" (806e, emphasis added). It seems women dine at the same time either in the same room or at segregated tables or in segregated dining rooms in a female public space, which by the standards of the day, the Athenian Stranger notes, will seem quite shocking to most, including women themselves. Quite so, but the *Republic's* proposal of including women at men's tables would have been even more shocking. The tenor of the *Laws*, not to mention the context of fourth century Athens, suggests that women's voices would have been driven into silence by dominant males. ("The Muses would never make the ghastly mistake of composing the speech of men to a musical idiom suitable for women." [669c].) Instead, the *Laws* gives women their own tables each with a female table ruler or warden, where their speech – the kind that Praxagora has with her female companions – becomes part of civic discourse. Women in the Athenian Stranger's scheme would not have to disguise themselves as men to participate in *syssitia*.

Michael Kochin (2002: 107 and 110-113) argues that, "the purpose of common meals would seem to be the erosion of the bonds between husband and wife, and especially of the husband's power over his wife."[6] The Athenian wants to set limits to privacy, not abolish it, and as part of that strategy he wants women to have a public presence. Kochin takes the various measures to integrate women into this public life – education, military service, leisure – as an indication of a male-centred agenda to make "men" of women. Yet it is hard to see how things would look different from the Athenian's description if something like virtual equality were proposed for the sexes in Magnesia. Praxagora's regime might seem strange in Athens, but not in Magnesia.

In the *Republic*, Plato speaks of using all, not just half of the talent of a political community. He reiterates these views in the *Laws*, but this is no assertion of women's rights. Just as women's talents and participation in common meals could

enhance the welfare and security of the polis, so also their occupation of an unregulated domestic private sphere could endanger it:

> *half the human race - the female sex, the half which in any case is inclined to be secretive and crafty, because of its weakness - has been left to its own devices because of the misguided indulgence of the legislator. … You see, leaving women to do what they like is not just to lose half the battle (as it may seem): a woman's natural potential for virtue is inferior to a man's, so she's proportionately a greater danger, perhaps even twice as great (781a-b).*

While the translation of this passage has been disputed – some deny that it is about the moral inferiority of women at all – in context it remains inclusive (Samaras, 2010: 189).[7] The underlying problem of the *Laws* is the constant struggle (or war) for order, for virtue, and against self-interest. For wars occur not only between *poleis*, villages and individuals, but also *within* individuals. According to Kleinias, the Cretan, "not only is everyone an enemy of everyone else in the public sphere, but each man fights a private war against himself." (626d) The Athenian finds women the unacknowledged participants in such wars. They too must be subject to public laws; they too must be regulated. For if, as in Athens, the principal obstacle to good laws is the addiction of its citizens to luxury and indolence, then leaving half the population – women - unregulated would be sheer carelessness.

In book VIII, the Athenian asserts that setting up common meals elsewhere would be difficult but not in Crete "because they have long existed there, as well as in Sparta" (842b). In Crete the city supported common meals from its resources (847e). The contrast to Crete is Sparta where, according to Aristotle in the *Politics*, individuals paid subscriptions or forfeited citizenship (1271a).

In sum, the references to common meals in the *Republic* and the *Laws* are consistent. It is clear that common meals are regarded as essential and that Plato is not referring to them for the sake of tradition. The Athenian Stranger (whom we take to be the voice of Plato) says to his interlocutors that he would "like to explain the merits and disadvantages of this institution." He then goes on to discuss regulating the three instinctive drives for food, drink and sex. In this context, it seems that common dining for women is merely a way to regulate their appetite for food and drink but this cannot be the whole reason. In his earlier discussion of the virtues of the drinking party, the Athenian justifies drinking parties as opportunities to learn self-restraint amid the lures of pleasure (641a-650b). He clearly means more than learning to handle wine. Similarly, in prescribing girls' gymnastics and women's military training

he is not thinking merely of fitness or a reserve army. Self-restraint is a ruling value in the *Laws* (e.g., 635e, 644b, 696c and particularly 744a). *Syssitia* enable its development. They are an education in virtue, rather like the gymnasium (636a) or the symposium. They have direct parallels in the discussion of common dining for women. Later the Athenian stresses that public education will be compulsory for all, girls as well as boys (804e). Here, at least, equality is asserted and earlier qualifications based on the supposed weakness of women are abandoned. Hence, a "state of affairs … where men and women do *not* have a common purpose and do *not* throw all their energies into the same activities, is absolutely stupid" (805a). This comment recapitulates the statement in the *Republic (455d)*, "There is therefore no function in society which is peculiar to woman as woman or man as man; natural abilities are similarly distributed in each sex, and it is natural for women to share all occupations with men, though in all women will be the weaker partners."

Syssitia in the Second Best Regime

While extending common meals from men to their families is intended to break down the privacy of the family and the seclusion of women, the point in the *Laws* was not, as in the *Republic*, to abolish the family. The words of the Athenian must be kept in mind:

> *Our ideal, of course, is unlikely to be realized fully so long as we persist in our policy of allowing individuals to have their own private establishments, consisting of house, wife, children and so on. But if we could ever put into practice the second-best scheme we're now describing, we'd have every reason to be satisfied (807b).*

The family is to be administered in parallel with the polis (808b), but it is no longer to be a refuge from regulation – not all of which can be written into a legal code. Plato's radical intention is nonetheless clear. Though the education of women is significant, it is of limited duration, and domesticity might counter its effects. Similarly, women's participation in war is not a regular, much less a daily activity. *Syssitia*, however, are continuous engagements with public life and women citizens are required to participate in them just as were Spartan and Cretan men.

Participation in women's *syssitia* brings citizens whose ends are not aligned with the public good of Magnesia, into administered space (805a). More positively, Thomas Pangle (1980: 473) notes that common meals for women would promote civic

spirit among them. He and other commentators think the common meals for women are at segregated tables at the same time and place at which men dine (Morrow, 1993 [1960]: 394-395 and cf. Kochin, 2002: 107). One woman would supervise the conduct of members at each table, preside over libations to the gods, and dismiss the assemblies (Morrow, 1993: 395). These together are important public rituals as well as social activities. There is no detailed account of what would happen at these *syssitia*, but their purpose seems to foster in women a civically engaged disposition that is consonant with the laws of Magnesia.

Of course, it is not only women who must be engaged in the polis. Men must give up their private interests and learn to harmonise their inclinations with others for the collective good. The Athenian does not want supine obedience to laws, but a willing engagement with them. Harmony plays an important role in ordering the soul, the fundamental accord being that between pleasure and goodness. Kleinias notes that only in Sparta and Crete are the arts stabilised by legislation, while elsewhere the dissonant influence of novelties prevails (660b). The Athenian only half approves. Sparta and Crete produce fine warriors, but they err because, he says, "You organize your state as though it were a military camp rather than a society of people" (666e). The details of public administration should disappear from view once Magnesia is established and interests are harmonised in pursuit of virtue. Persuasion suffuses the *Laws*, most notably in Plato's discussion of the "Preludes," which give rationales for regulations. It is clear that the Athenian wants all citizens to obey the laws freely and without compulsion. As R. G. Bury (1937: 304) observed, "In civic life this free activity is to be displayed in voluntary cooperation with the State Law, which is natural because rational; and this Law enforces itself by persuasion rather than coercion." That end does not require the abolition of the family, but rather the positioning of the family partly in public space. Instead of common dining being regarded as surveillance of the family - and particularly women - a reading closer to Plato's spirit puts the *polis*, in its constituents, under surveillance from those gathered regularly at table where they may talk politics. Pangle (1980: 476-477) notes that the demands on women to attend common meals would necessarily be tempered by pregnancy and the other duties of child-bearing and motherhood. Those concessions, however, would place women at risk of becoming second-class citizens. Moreover, it seems that a similar concession would not be granted to men for religious observances, a traditional excuse in Sparta, because the Athenian abolishes private religious shrines and sacrifices (909d-910d) (Plutarch: 239 and Kochin, 2002: 107). How this prohibition squares with his approval of "rites celebrated according to law at private shrines

dedicated to ancestral gods" (717b) is obscure. If, indeed, common dining is integral to the structure of this second-best polity, its implementation seems, somewhat paradoxically, to run up against problems that would not occur in a first-best utopia, where the kind of family privacy allowed in the *Laws* is all but abolished. As Martin Nilsson (1941: 331), Glenn Morrow (1993[1960]): 397), and W.K. Lacey, 1968: 180 and 314 n 14) have pointed out, the *syssition* and the family are incompatible. Yet Plato does not seize the opportunity to model his marriage regulations on Sparta (Morrow *ibidem*). Unlike the Spartan grooms, who remain in their *phiditia* (mess hall with attached barracks) after marriage, those of Magnesia are required to take their wives from family houses and establish their own home. Then the process of family formation is checked at its very beginning by the requirement that newly weds should attend *syssitia*. The Athenian anticipates that this will shock people (780b).

Women's *syssitia* and private rituals are linked as elements of a project to build the unity of the *polis* by "subordinating all familial relations to the laws" (Kochin, 2002: 107). Hence Hestia, goddess of both the domestic and civic hearths, is to be promoted from her central place in the family home to a public position of guardianship with Zeus and Athena in the Magnesian acropolis. Morrow argues that it was not Plato's intention to forbid private shrines (Morrow *idem*: 493), but it is hard to disagree with Kochin's view that, "In banishing Hestia from the home and returning her to the acropolis, the Athenian Stranger intends to elevate the cult of the unity of the city at the expense of the sacredness of the family" (Kochin *idem*: 108).

Pericles remains admired as an enlightened statesman, yet in his famous funeral oration he said this about women: "Great will be your glory in not falling short of your natural character; and greatest will be hers who is least talked of among men whether for good or for bad" (Thucydides, 1998: 117). Plato goes well beyond that terse affirmation of tradition though there remain substantial criticisms of his treatment of women in the *Laws* (Saxonhouse,1985; Bluestone,1987), Coole,1988, or Moore, 2012).[8] Susan Okin (1979: 44ff) has argued that in retreating from his position in the *Republic* and reintroducing the family into the *Laws*, Plato subverts the emancipation of women. Regulations, such as those prescribing different ages when men and women may hold office (785b), or differences in their eligibility to bring law suits (937a) impair the ideal of moral equality presented in the *Laws*. These political and social limitations on women are considerably offset by their inclusion in public life, notably *syssitia*. Point taken, but as Lacey (1968: 177-178) observes, the restoration of the family is limited. Indeed, placing women and children 'nearby' to

men's tables in common dining areas substantially removes the family from the private domain by placing it into the public one.

Aristotle accepts common meals because, empirically, they had been a widespread and enduring practice (Dawson, 1992: 17). For him, the table is a class room for civic training and the skills of life, leaving women to the family, excluded from the lessons at *syssitia*, and more (Swanson,1992). Jeff Chuska (2000: 218) draws attention to Aristotle's view of the political function of *syssitia*: "knowledge tends to create trust of one another" (*Politics*, 1313a41). The mix of citizens at Aristotle's table opens the opportunity to form a community of kindred interests and aspirations characterised as friendship in his *Ethics* (Finley, 1970: 8 and Kraut, 1992: 111). Richard Kraut (*ibidem*) also cites the *Ethics* in suggesting that Aristotle believes common meals build a friendly unity among citizens. Friendship would indeed be a deep foundation to a utopian community. Although Aristotle's reasons for approving common meals are practical and supported by the experience of political communities as different as Sparta and Crete, these reasons do not quite echo Plato's advocacy of *syssitia*.

For Plato, commensality is a means to virtue. Aristotle and those who have followed him are right to pick out the political and sociological benefits of common dining, but the main point of syssitia for Plato is not to feed and socialise men, women and children. The end to which common dining is directed is not social control, but rather to make people free to be good and happy. "The whole point of our legislation was to allow the citizens to live supremely happy lives in the greatest possible mutual friendship" (743d). Forever a utopian dream!

Conclusions

Common meals have an instrumental value. They set minimum and maximum levels of consumption; they foster a concern for the welfare of others, and inhibit envy. Beyond these instrumental functions, *syssitia* offer a socially integrative and politically stabilising device. More: they put the virtues within the grasp of ordinary people. In bringing together small groups of citizens of different ages and social backgrounds who, over the years, have the opportunity to interact across natural and class divides, they exhibit a communism of talents (Hodkinson, 2000: 216). In learning

to appreciate the laws under which they live and not merely observe them, the citizens at *syssitia* approach the ideal of unity that will only, perhaps, be found among the gods (739). For Plato women are integral to common meals from the *Republic* to the *Laws*, and through them, they join in political life.[9] The effect of such a mix is to reduce the importance of private attachments, principally the family, and to promote understanding of and identification with the polis. Talking at the table is more important than the barley and wine consumed, how it is served, or financed. Plato designated table rulers – *archons* --in the *Laws*, so seriously did he take *syssitia* as occasions to learn from moral exemplars. These *archons* are women in the women's mess. No doubt their role was also to ensure that innovations and dangerous political novelties did not capture the imaginations of the table and lead to disharmony. It was normal in Sparta for citizens to discuss public affairs at *syssitia* and the age mix means generational transmission is inbuilt (Pantel, 1992: 62). The young serve at tables and in doing so inevitably audit the conversations and interactions of their seniors at the table, and thereby are gradually inducted into a table. This induction is part of the social reproduction of accepted values among citizens and citizens to be (Toynbee, 1968: 70). The public meals are, in that light, civic obligations (Roussel, 1976: 125).

The little communities at each table are stable and enduring components in the wider political community. Not only do they socialize their members in the proper conduct of free and equal citizens, but they also place them in the public eye each day. Exposure is a powerful socializing experience. They are on civic duty while dining in public; so serious is this duty that a failure of officials to attend is near treasonable, and not even newly weds are exempt from participation. The community at the table is a microcosm of the larger group in utopian theory and practice; by socializing the next generation it re-creates – moment by moment -- the community at each meal.

Plato, and later Aristotle, proposed a sustained and self-conscious effort at social mixing to give citizens continuing practice in the experience of public and moral life. Perfection is not the standard in the *Laws*; reason will not motivate it and human nature resists the regulation necessary to secure it. That being so, in the society imagined in the *Laws* the risk of placing of private interests above those of the polis is partly diminished through *syssitia*. This elevation of the interests of the whole is a common motif in later utopian literature.

* * *

We have suggested that persuasion suffuses the *Laws*. Yet there is also compulsion. Attendance at *syssitia* is mandatory. Compulsion and persuasion seem at odds in utopia, but by regulating meals Plato expects the pleasures of the table to persuade citizens of the advantages of *syssitia*, and recalling how plain the fare at the table is likely to be, the greater pleasure may be the companionship of others, as is often the case at clubs and conferences. As the end of the *polis* is a life of happiness enjoyed communally, Plato has first to show that such a life is worth having. Common meals demonstrate this value in microcosm. They are cultural as well as political affairs, amazing, frightening and unmentionable, he said, but only until experience reveals them as unifying, harmonising and pleasurable.

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Notes

[1] All references to Plato's Laws are to Thomas Pangle (1980), which is preferred for its literal translation. We give the Stephanus pagination for Plato and Aristotle's works, e.g., 780a-d.

2 On the use of Plutarch as a source, see Donald Kagan (1969), x.

3 All references to the Republic are taken from Bloom (1968), which is preferred for its literal translation.

4 Some suppose that all citizens live in communism in the Republic, e.g., Mayhew (1997): p. 7ff. We contend that the logic of Plato's argument only applies to the guardians, leaving those in the producing class may live as they please.

5 Figueira (1984: 95 n 24) says in passing that Plato sets the number of participants at the common meals at ten in this passage, but we can find no support for that assertion.

6 Kochin's argument is that the Laws is profoundly misogynistic and makes concessions to male homoerotic inclinations that have to be rectified by laws such as that compelling men to marry.

7 Samaras offers a wide ranging discussion but does not mention the role of women as table rulers, which we emphasize.

8 Our purpose is not to ajudicate Plato's feminism or misogyny, but rather to examine the implications of what he explicitly says, more than once, as a forerunner of later utopias.

9 There is reason to believe that Plato acted on his own advice; Diogenes Laertius in his Life of Plato (III, 46) lists two women at the Academy when Plato died.