



# Justice, power, and truth: Plato and twentieth-century biopower in Karl Popper and Jan Patočka

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## Abstract

The aim of this article is to demonstrate that even if Popper's and Patočka's interpretations of Plato originate in philosophical and intellectual traditions that have nothing or very little to do with each other, they share a common target, that is, modern biopower, which culminated in twentieth-century totalitarianism. If we examine Popper's and Patočka's interpretations of Plato from a biopolitical angle, it is possible to view them in a new light, that is, as two different, even opposing, intellectual and philosophical approaches to the very same tragic events that European culture and politics experienced in the twentieth century. Despite the radically divergent results of their readings, Popper and Patočka share a starting point, that is, the effort to outline a genealogy of European cultural and intellectual history in the light of Plato. The first section of this article explains why and to what extent Popper's and Patočka's interpretations can be considered genealogical readings. The second section elaborates on their different approaches to the relationship between justice and power in Plato. The third section concentrates on the relationship between Plato and twentieth-century biopower.

**Keywords** Jan Patočka · Karl Popper · Plato · Biopower · Biopolitics · Totalitarianism

## Introduction

The twentieth-century reception of Plato is known to be highly controversial because it resulted in a great variety of conflicting interpretations. Plato has been viewed, among other things, as the founding father of metaphysical tradition, the primal source of inspiration for the dialogical experience of hermeneutics, the archetype of the philosopher committed to political action, and one of the classical thinkers

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who have irreversibly defined Western rationalism.<sup>1</sup> The opposite extremes of this multifaceted reception comprise two of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century, namely, Karl R. Popper and Jan Patočka, who considered an in-depth examination of the Platonic dialogues to be an indispensable task for contemporary thought.

At first sight, the specific philosophical reasons that led Popper and Patočka to engage in a painstaking discussion of Plato could not be more different, and yet, it is the aim of this article to demonstrate that even if Popper's and Patočka's interpretations of Plato originate in philosophical and intellectual traditions that have nothing or very little to do with each other, they share a common target, that is, modern biopower, which culminated in twentieth-century totalitarianism.<sup>2</sup> It is my contention that if we examine Popper's and Patočka's interpretations of Plato from a biopolitical angle, it is possible to view them in a new light, that is, as two different, even opposing, intellectual and philosophical approaches to the very same tragic events that European culture and politics experienced in the twentieth century. The attempt to read Popper's and Patočka's interpretations of Plato from a biopolitical point of view must be qualified. As is well known, biopolitical studies have been inspired to a great extent by Michel Foucault and his groundbreaking investigations into a genealogy of power structures in Western political and social history. Over the last thirty years, many intuitions and ideas put forward by Foucault have been the starting points for new lines of research developed by various thinkers, such as Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito, and Achille Mbembe, to name a few examples.<sup>3</sup> For a variety of biographical, historical, cultural, and philosophical reasons, Popper and Patočka cannot be associated with the biopolitical canon, nor can they be considered biopolitical thinkers. Popper was a key figure in twentieth-century philosophy of science, and his political philos-

<sup>1</sup>On the twentieth-century reception of Plato, see, e.g., Sasaki (2012) and Bonazzi and Colombo (2020).

<sup>2</sup>"Biopower" and "biopolitics" are known to be ambiguous terms, which are employed with a great variety of meanings and in conjunction with various philosophical narratives. In this article, which focuses on twentieth-century totalitarian biopower, I adopt the definition provided by Agamben in *Homo Sacer* (1998), where he argues that sovereign power (i.e., the sovereign right to kill [see Foucault 1990, p. 136]) and biopower (i.e., the power over the biological life of human beings) are in essence one and the same (Agamben 1998, p. 6). Accordingly, Agamben considers modern democracy and totalitarianism as two different manifestations of the history of biopower (see, e.g., Agamben 1998, pp. 9–11). Even if I employ Agamben's definition of biopower in this paper, I do not subscribe to his theory or narrative of biopower. As is well known, Foucault outlines another account of biopolitics by differentiating sovereign power and biopower (see Foucault 1990, pp. 136–143). However, it must also be noted that Foucault's usage of "biopower" and "biopolitics" is far from being consistent (see Lemke 2011, pp. 33–52). He seems to use the terms interchangeably at times (see, e.g., Foucault 2009, p. 1) and associates them with various phenomena, such as liberalism and racism (see Lemke 2011, p. 34). Two aspects of Foucault's definition of biopower are nonetheless relevant to the purposes of this article. Foucault too argues that totalitarianism is defined by a specific form of biopower that overlaps with sovereign power (Foucault 2004, pp. 239–263). Also, I think his differentiation between "biopower" and "biopolitics" in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1990, pp. 136–143) should be maintained: "biopolitics" refers to the macrolevel of biopower (i.e., the form of biopower that targets the biological life of a human population as a whole), in contradistinction to the microlevel of biopower ("anatomy-politics"), which concentrates on individual bodies.

<sup>3</sup>For a general overview of biopolitical studies, see, at the very least, the useful introductions by Thomas Lemke (2011) and Catherine Mills (2018). For an anthology of influential texts that have defined the biopolitical canon, see the book edited by Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze (2013).

ophy went hand in hand with his epistemological positions. As far as Patočka is concerned, he was a leading exponent of the phenomenological movement (see Chvatík and Abrams 2011). Drawing inspiration from both Husserl and Heidegger, Patočka was able to produce an original philosophical work, which remains a pivotal contribution to twentieth-century European intellectual history, especially in East Europe. Even if Popper and Patočka are not, and cannot be viewed as, biopolitical thinkers, I contend that there is another way of pursuing a biopolitical reading of their interpretations of Plato, that is, it is possible to point out what biopolitical studies can learn from them, especially when it comes to rewriting the history of biopower.

In accordance with Foucault's interpretation of the history of power structures,<sup>4</sup> biopower and biopolitics have, for a long time, been associated with modernity. Recent research has started to revise this approach and voiced the need for a more comprehensive, nuanced, and accurate historico-philosophical understanding of these phenomena (see especially Ojakangas 2016, 2017; see also Backman and Cimino 2022). In this context, the biopolitical meaning of antiquity, especially the political theories and practices of ancient Greece, must be reassessed. Popper's and Patočka's readings of Plato can be very useful in this connection because they can help us to identify intriguing biopolitical elements in Plato's thought, even if they do not explicitly adopt the concepts of biopolitics and biopower. Popper's interpretation identifies a number of aspects of Plato's thought that are biopolitical in nature,<sup>5</sup> while Patočka draws inspiration from Plato to outline seminal ideas—notably, “the care of the soul” and “*living in truth*” (Patočka 2002, pp. 91, 97)—which can function as key concepts of what recent developments in biopolitical studies have defined as an “affirmative biopolitics” (see Mills 2018, pp. 81–107), that is, a form of politics in which life is no longer a passive target of biopower but resists, opposes, or eludes biopower.<sup>6</sup>

Popper and Patočka enable us to question Foucault's and Agamben's narratives of biopower in various respects. *Pace* Foucault, Popper's interpretation of Plato suggests that biopower is not an exclusively modern phenomenon but can be traced back to ancient Greece, because the biological life of human populations was already a crucial issue for both ancient political philosophers and ancient politicians. Even if Agamben deviates from Foucault's narrative and argues in favor of the ancient origins of biopower, he too fails to recognize the specific biopolitical meaning of Plato (see also Ojakangas 2022). Popper therefore allows us to refine or even question Agamben's narrative as well.

In this context, introducing Patočka's Plato makes things more complicated and interesting. Patočka's Plato can also be interpreted in biopolitical terms, albeit for exactly opposite reasons. *Pace* Popper, Patočka's Plato is not a totalitarian philosopher but a thinker who has articulated the ideas of “the care of the soul” and “*living in truth*,” which stand in stark contrast to attempts to reduce life to the biological

<sup>4</sup>See especially Foucault's definitions of “biopower” and “biopolitics” in *The History of Sexuality* (1990, pp. 136–143).

<sup>5</sup>Ojakangas (2016, pp. 14–15) has already pointed out in a persuasive manner the possibility of reading Popper's interpretation of Plato from a biopolitical point of view, especially when it comes to Plato's eugenic ideas.

<sup>6</sup>On the relationship between Patočka and Foucault, see especially Croce (2014). See also Szokolczai (1994) and Suvák (2019).

dimension. From the viewpoint of Patočka's narrative, modern biologism, which includes totalitarianism, emerges when those ideas have faded into oblivion. In other words, I am suggesting that Patočka's Plato can still be considered part of the history of totalitarianism, not because he has inspired totalitarian biopower, but because totalitarianism has distorted and tried to cancel the Platonic ideas of "the care of the soul" and "living in truth." For the very same reason, those ideas can be reactivated against twentieth-century totalitarianism. Patočka did just that with both his interpretations of the Platonic dialogues and his political commitment. From this point of view, Patočka's Plato has a biopolitical meaning because he embodies an example of affirmative biopolitics.

Popper and Patočka allow biopolitical research not only to ascertain the biopolitical meaning of Platonic thought itself, but also to understand how and why twentieth-century biopower has used and abused Plato to legitimize itself. In other words, Popper's and Patočka's interpretations of Plato are also to be considered part of their personal and philosophical struggles against the most conspicuous forms of twentieth-century biopower, which sought to secure ideological and cultural legitimation by appropriating the Platonic dialogues (see, e.g., Forti 2006; Chapoutot 2016; Bonazzi 2020). In this regard, the contrast between Popper's Plato and Patočka's Plato is striking and intriguing: a Popperian approach views Plato as a prominent intellectual source of biopolitical totalitarianism, whereas a Patočkian interpretation sees Plato as a seminal author who enables us to understand modern Europe's crisis and perhaps to envision a possible way out of the biopolitical deadlock. Despite the radically divergent results of their readings, Popper and Patočka share a starting point, that is, the effort to outline a genealogy of European cultural and intellectual history in the light of Plato. The first section of this article explains why and to what extent Popper's and Patočka's interpretations can be considered genealogical readings. The second section elaborates on their different approaches to the relationship between justice and power in Plato. The third section concentrates on the relationship between Plato, twentieth-century biopower, and the question of truth.

## Genealogy

Both Popper and Patočka developed their interpretations of Plato as reactions to the most momentous historical and political events of the twentieth century, especially the emergence of totalitarianism and the Second World War. Popper's controversial book *The Open Society and Its Enemies* is an attempt to locate the origins of totalitarianism by pointing out its philosophical sources,<sup>7</sup> which Popper thinks must be traced back to Plato and his ideal of "the closed society" (Popper 1969, p. 1: 176). Popper's attack on Plato is part of a more comprehensive attempt to reckon with Europe's intellectual history and targets other key figures such as Hegel and Marx.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup>The first volume (*The Spell of Plato*) is devoted to Plato, whereas the second volume (*The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath*) examines Hegel and Marx.

<sup>8</sup>A very useful presentation and contextualization of Popper's interpretation of Plato is provided by Forcignanò and Vegetti (2020).

A similar approach is adopted by Patočka in *Plato and Europe* (2002), even if his evaluation of Plato's role differs greatly from Popper's. Patočka tries to formulate a diagnosis of twentieth-century Europe's crisis by outlining a history of the idea of care, which in his view forms the core of Europe's cultural identity (see Gasché 2009, pp. 211–262; Merlier 2009; Cajthaml 2014; Tava and Meacham 2016). Patočka's argument can be summarized as follows: the epochal crisis Europe has been undergoing in modernity results from the fact that Europe has lost sight of the guiding idea of care, which originates in ancient Greek philosophy—especially in Socrates and Plato—and denotes the discovery of European spirituality. From Patočka's point of view, the idea of the care of the soul was articulated by the ancient Greek philosophers when they identified and thematized human subjectivity along with its various ontological, ethical, and political facets:

I suppose that perhaps it might be possible to dare suggest the thesis that *Europe*, especially Western Europe, but even that other one, arose out of *the care of the soul*—τῆς ψυχῆς ἐπιμελεῖσθαι. This is the embryo out of which arose what Europe used to be. (Patočka 2002, p. 89)

Thus, Popper and Patočka share a genealogical approach to Plato and Platonism, insofar as they trace historical, political, and philosophical phenomena of the twentieth century back to the Greek origins of European civilization and see a global continuity between the present and the past, albeit for different reasons. In doing so, they attach a crucial meaning to Plato, who is considered to have had a lasting impact on Europe's political, philosophical, and cultural history.

It goes without saying that interpreting European cultural history through the lens of Plato and Platonism is not specific to Popper and Patočka. This approach resembles that of many other intellectuals who presented their readings of Plato as cultural anamneses, that is, accounts of Europe's intellectual history that explain today's cultural, social, and political diseases. Various famous examples can be mentioned in this regard, such as Nietzsche and his critique of Christianity as Platonism for the people (Nietzsche 2014, p. 2), Heidegger's meditation on the history of metaphysics and the emergence of the idea of truth as correctness (1998, pp. 155–182), Arendt's analysis of the human condition (1974), and Derrida's deconstruction of speech and writing (1997). It should therefore come as no surprise that Patočka, who is part of the continental tradition and accordingly combines philosophical thinking with historical speculation, set himself to reconsider European cultural history in the light of Plato and Platonism.

Such an approach is, however, not self-evident in the case of Popper, who does not belong to the continental tradition. It is therefore striking that he too felt the need to outline his own anamnesis of twentieth-century Europe's diseases in a manner that is not far from the genealogical reconstructions developed by various continental philosophers. The opening pages of *The Open Society*, which explain why we must reread Plato (Popper 1969, pp. 1: 7–10), could also have been written by a continental thinker committed to a “destruction” (Heidegger 2010, p. 19) of the history of philosophy. Popper's target is historicism because it claims to have discovered the laws guiding the development of history as a whole. Popper connects historicism with racism insofar as the latter argues that “the biological superiority of the blood of the

chosen race explains the course of history, past, present, and future; it is nothing but the struggle of races for mastery” (Popper 1969, pp. 1: 9–10). In other words, there are specific biopolitical reasons that underlie the relationship between historicism and racism. Popper, moreover, argues that historicism also comprises Marx’s philosophy, which views history “as a struggle of classes for economic supremacy” (Popper 1969, p. 1: 10). In tracing back both forms of historicism to Hegelian philosophy, Popper explains why we must also examine Plato: Hegel’s philosophy of history is the outcome of a way of thinking that originates in antiquity, that is, in Heraclitus, Plato, and Aristotle (Popper 1969, p. 1: 10).<sup>9</sup>

In sum, we can also say that both Popper and Patočka adhere to Alfred North Whitehead’s often quoted dictum that the development of European thought “consists of a series of footnotes to Plato” (Whitehead 1978, p. 39). However, Popper’s and Patočka’s genealogical interpretations of Plato are not only academic or philosophical interventions. They can and should also be seen as political gestures of resistance that result from the tragic events both thinkers experienced first-hand. As a consequence of the rise of Nazism, Popper had to leave Europe and emigrate to New Zealand. It was precisely during his exile in New Zealand that Popper wrote his book *The Open Society and Its Enemies*.<sup>10</sup> The biographical and political context of Patočka’s engagement with Plato was no less tragic (see Kohák 1989, pp. 3–135), but he kept reading Plato to understand Europe’s crisis. Having witnessed the disasters of both Nazism and Communism, Patočka became a leading proponent of Eastern-European dissidence in the last years of his life, and his Platonic texts are part of this commitment, which is both intellectual and political.<sup>11</sup>

## Justice

At this juncture, it is important to elaborate on the specific philosophical reasons that led Popper and Patočka to consider Plato in opposing ways. Popper attacks Plato from the viewpoint of modern science and argues that we must dismiss Plato’s intellectual and political legacy, so as to build an “open society,” which is vital not only to politics but also to the development of science and critical thinking. Popper’s interpretation of Plato has very often been contested for a variety of philological, interpretive, and ideological reasons (see, e.g., Grant 1954). However, we should also try to understand and contextualize *The Open Society and Its Enemies* by taking into account the intellectual and political agenda behind Popper’s attack on Plato. Popper’s anti-Platonism should not come as a surprise if we consider that Plato was also used by various Nazi propagandists for ideological purposes (see Forti 2006; Chapoutot 2016; Kim 2018; Bonazzi 2020). More importantly, Popper’s attack on Plato results not only from his political tenets but also from his epistemology. Popper contests Plato’s essentialism

<sup>9</sup>The problem of historicism, which is one of the main components of Popper’s critique of Plato, is also addressed in Popper (1964).

<sup>10</sup>On the biographical context of Popper’s interpretation of Plato in *The Open Society*, see Popper (1974, pp. 1: 90–95).

<sup>11</sup>On Patočka’s political commitments, see Brinton (2021, pp. 20–61).

and explains why this position goes hand in hand with historicism (see especially Popper 1969, pp. 1: 18–56). According to Popper, Platonic essentialism must be seen as a reaction to the precariousness and decay that characterize human existence and as a symptom of Plato's political conservatism. In other words, the search for stability in the domain of political action translates into the search for stability in the domain of knowledge. The ideal of a stable political, social, and epistemic order, which also results in the rigid definition of classes, is therefore the core of Platonism, in Popper's view. It is clear that racist ideology, the theory of ideas (or forms), epistemological essentialism, dogmatism, and philosophy of history are aspects of one and the same philosophical stance that is incompatible with the method of modern science, falsificationism, and liberal political philosophy.

Patočka presents Plato and Platonism in the exact opposite way with the aid of a phenomenological approach that is clearly inspired by Husserl and Heidegger (Patočka 2002, pp. 15–37).<sup>12</sup> From Patočka's phenomenological viewpoint, the ancient Greek idea of "the care of the soul," which becomes particularly apparent in Plato (see, e.g., Patočka 2002, p. 77), denotes the self-inspection, or reflexivity, of human existence. Since human existence is phenomenologically seen in its relationship with other beings, "the care of the soul" also involves a structural connection with the openness or manifestness of things. In other words, Patočka reuses the phenomenological notion of intentionality so as to interpret Plato as one of the major ancient thinkers that emphasized the structural relationship between the human being and the other entities. From this point of view, Plato's essentialism is not contested but rather revisited in phenomenological terms.<sup>13</sup> In Patočka's reading of Plato and Platonism, there is therefore no room for the dogmatism and epistemological conservatism Popper attributes to Plato.<sup>14</sup> On the contrary, the phenomenological reading of Plato emphasizes the discovery of a fundamental openness articulated by means

<sup>12</sup>On Patočka's interpretation of Plato, see also Karfík (1993, 1996).

<sup>13</sup>Phenomenological philosophy very often goes hand in hand with attempts to revitalize the ancient notions of essence and eidetic insight. See, e.g., Arnold (2017).

<sup>14</sup>See also Patočka (2007, pp. 51–69). In other writings (see, e.g., 1989), Patočka introduces his own conception of a "negative Platonism," that is, the view that the discovery of ideas is intrinsically connected with the experience of freedom because it allows us to go beyond the status quo and that which is given. On Patočka's idea of "negative Platonism," see especially the excellent interpretation given by Tava (2016, pp. 1–32); see also Arnason (2007). Popper interprets Plato's philosophy, and Platonism in general, as a dogmatic form of metaphysics that posits the existence of eternal and stable forms, thereby devaluing the importance of the sensible world (see, e.g., Popper 1969, pp. 1: 34–56). In other words, Popper thinks the Platonic separation of the intelligible world of ideas and the sensible world clearly reveals his conviction "*that change is evil, and that rest is divine*" (Popper 1969, p. 1: 37). With his idea of negative Platonism, Patočka develops an opposite interpretation of Plato's thought, especially concerning the concept of separation. Patočka writes: "The Idea, as we understand it, is the only nonreality that cannot be explained as a construct of mere realities. It is not an object of contemplation because it is not an object at all. It is essential to understanding human life, its experience of freedom, its inner historicity. It comes to us and proves itself a constant call to go beyond mere objectivity, mere factuality whose outward presupposition is the human creation of novelty and our ever-repeated effort to break free of the decay to which we are condemned by dwelling solely within the given" (Patočka 1989, p. 204). I subscribe to the interpretation given by Tava (2016, esp. pp. 6–7), who explains in a very persuasive manner that this approach to the Platonic idea is no longer purely metaphysical but acquires a specific ethical meaning, because the experience of the idea is not a mere contemplation of a transcendent object but the repeated attempt to set ourselves free from the given.

of the ancient notions of care and soul and paves the way for a new interpretation of Platonism that lays special emphasis on the relationship between freedom and the manifestness of beings.

This divergence also results in opposing interpretations of Platonic justice. Popper contends that Plato's totalitarianism is clearly formulated with the aid of a very specific notion of justice, which becomes apparent both in the primacy of the state over the individual and in the fixed social order (see especially Popper 1969, pp. 1: 86–119). According to Popper, Plato is responsible for introducing the idea that justice comes down to the organic structure of the state, in which each member has its own specific function within the whole of society and is not allowed to occupy another place or position. On the contrary, when analyzing the Platonic concept of justice, Patočka emphasizes the fact that the care of the individual soul is structurally connected with the care of the political community:

from the cultivating of our soul arises the possibility of forming the state, the community that is necessary so that a person like Socrates does not need to die. You see, then, that the question of the polis and its constitution, its constituting, is again the question of the soul, its character and its examination—care of the soul. (Patočka 2002, p. 121)

In the context of this interpretation of Plato's concept of justice, the individual existence is not overpowered or dominated by the organic totality of the state. The just political community instead results from "the care of the soul," which in turn needs the community to fulfill itself.

The disagreement about Platonic justice also comes to the fore in the conflicting manners in which Popper and Patočka interpret the role and meaning of Socrates in their narratives. They both attach a great meaning to Socrates, who is viewed as the thinker of radical questioning. However, the ways in which they present the relationship between Socrates and Plato cannot be reconciled. Popper thinks Plato has betrayed and corrupted the authentic teachings of Socrates, especially the attitude of critical thinking (see Popper 1969, pp. 1: 194–201), whereas Patočka contends that Plato develops the Socratic understanding and practice of "the care of the soul" and radicalizes a way of life based on questioning (see, e.g., Patočka 2002, pp. 85–95).<sup>15</sup> The relationship between Socrates and Plato is therefore of vital importance to understanding the opposite ways in which Popper and Patočka interpret Platonic justice. According to Popper, Platonic justice is a "totalitarian justice":

What did Plato mean by 'justice'? I assert that in the *Republic* he used the term 'just' as a synonym for 'that which is in the interest of the best state.' And what is in the interest of this best state? To arrest all change, by the maintenance of a rigid class division and class rule. (Popper 1969, p. 1: 89)

In other words, Popper argues that Platonic justice coincides with the fundament of the totalitarian state, which does not allow any questioning and problematization. Plato's totalitarian state is a state in which Socrates, a truthful philosopher, must inevitably die because he poses a mortal threat to "the interest of the best state." On

<sup>15</sup>On Patočka and Socrates, see also Palouš (2011).



the contrary, Patočka underlines that Plato's conception of the philosophical life, that is, "the care of the soul," involves posing the question of justice and the problem of the just life (Patočka 2002, p. 104). This just community, which is based on the ideas of care, truth, and freedom, is the political space in which the philosophical life as an attitude of questioning and problematization can unfold. To put it another way, the just community envisaged by Plato is "the community that is necessary so that a person like Socrates does not need to die" (Patočka 2002, p. 121).

## Platonic biopower

In this section, I will reexamine the contrast between Popper's and Patočka's approaches to Plato from a biopolitical point of view and suggest that they outline opposing interpretations of one and the same problem, that is, biopower in Plato. This biopolitical reading can also explain why their respective takes on Platonic philosophy are an integral part of their attempts to cope with twentieth-century biopower: Popper depicts Plato as the intellectual father of twentieth-century totalitarian biopower, whereas Patočka views Plato as a key philosophical ally in dealing with totalitarianism and Europe's crisis. In other words, Popper attacks totalitarian biopower by exposing its Platonic origins, whereas Patočka introduces the Platonic notion of "the care of the soul," which can be interpreted as a form of biopolitical resistance to totalitarianism.

Proposing a biopolitical approach to Popper's and Patočka's interpretations of Plato calls for a number of caveats. When I suggest such a biopolitical reading, I do not intend to reconsider these interpretations from a Foucauldian perspective. On the contrary, reading Popper's and Patočka's interpretations of Plato from a biopolitical point of view can help us to test and rectify Foucault's conception of the history of biopower, insofar as Popper and Patočka allow us (i) to recognize the biopolitical meaning of Platonic thought itself, thereby corroborating and refining a number of suggestions put forward by recent scholarship in biopolitical studies; (ii) to identify a specific relationship between Plato and totalitarian biopower, with the result that we could outline an alternative intellectual history of totalitarianism; and (iii) to consider Plato's impact on twentieth-century intellectual history from a new point of view.

## The biopolitical meaning of Platonic thought

Popper and Patočka enable us to understand a number of shortcomings that often characterize the current and common use of the concepts of biopolitics and biopower, especially when it comes to the history of biopower. Moreover, their images of Plato compel us to review the Foucauldian narrative of biopower and to rectify other theses about the origins of biopolitics—for example, Agamben's.

Agamben has famously argued that the roots of biopower must already be identified in antiquity, especially in the context of the Greek understanding of the relationship between natural life (*zōē*) and political life (*bios*) (see Agamben 1998, pp. 1–12). The highly controversial aspect of Agamben's thesis is that he tries to shed light on this relationship by applying a concept extraneous to ancient Greek philosophy, that

is, the concept of exception, which he derives from Schmitt. The result is a disputable genealogy of biopower, which has been contested with good philosophical and philological arguments (see, e.g., Finlayson 2010). On the contrary, Popper's and Patočka's interpretations of Plato can provide more nuanced and plausible insights into the ancient Greek origins of biopower. In doing so, Popper and Patočka allow us to refine Agamben's thesis, according to which power has always already been biopower (Agamben 1998, p. 6), and reformulate it with more persuasive argumentation.

Popper's reading of Plato is very fruitful in this regard. His picture of Plato is biopolitical because the power over the biological life of the people is the core of the Platonic "closed society," both at the macrolevel of the population—"biopolitics," according to Foucault's definition in *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1990, pp. 136–143)—and at the microlevel of the individual bodies—"anatomy-politics," in accordance with Foucault's terminology (Foucault 1990, pp. 136–143). A number of phenomena that Foucault considers specific to modernity are actually already present in antiquity. We can certainly discuss whether and to what extent modern biopower is similar or identical to ancient forms of biopower, but it is indisputable that the biological life of the human being is a crucial target of ancient Greek political practices, theories, and policies.<sup>16</sup> Foucault's attempt to downplay and reject Popper's interpretation of Plato (Foucault 2010, p. 254) seems therefore highly questionable and misses the opportunity for a serious dialogue that could lead to a different narrative of biopower.<sup>17</sup>

Patočka's Plato is also germane to a biopolitical reading, albeit for different reasons. Patočka's interpretation of Plato allows us to see the relationship between life and politics in ancient Greece from a perspective that avoids Agamben's needlessly complicated conceptualization of the opposition between natural life and political life. Agamben tries to identify the origin of the political community in ancient Greece using the notion of exception (see, e.g., Agamben 1998, p. 7). According to him, the life of the political community emerges as a result of an "inclusive exclusion" of natural life. In *Plato and Europe*, Patočka's interpretation of the Platonic care of the soul offers a more elegant and compelling solution (Patočka 2002, p. 117). The Platonic care of the soul is the origin of both the political life of the community and the life of the state because it makes it possible to go beyond purely biological needs, thereby avoiding the reduction of life to its "elementary" and "primitive" sense. When summarizing the description of a primitive community that only aims to meet the "basic needs" of the people, such as reproduction and the maintenance of pure biological life, Patočka underlines that "it will be a primitive and modest community" (Patočka 2002, p. 117). Patočka's paraphrase draws our attention to the fact that Plato was very aware of the problem posed by Agamben, but it is not with the mechanism of

<sup>16</sup>In his seminal research on ancient biopower (see especially 2016, 2017, 2022), Ojakangas has explained in very convincing terms the extent to which biopolitics can be identified in antiquity as well, thereby questioning the Foucauldian tenet that biopolitics is in essence a modern phenomenon. According to Ojakangas, "[t]he idea of politics as control and regulation of the living in the name of the security, well-being and happiness of the state and its inhabitants is as old as Western political thought itself, originating in classical Greece" (2016, p. 1). A recent volume (Backman and Cimino 2022) comprises essays that attempt to refine and qualify Ojakangas's thesis.

<sup>17</sup>Ojakangas has pointed out why Foucault's dismissal of Popper's Plato is not convincing. See Ojakangas (2016, pp. 15–16).

exception that Plato explains the differentiation between natural life and political life. It is rather the question of justice that lies at the intersection of nature and culture. The primitive community described by Socrates is not political insofar as it is not confronted with the question of justice and injustice (see Patočka 2002, p. 117). According to Patočka, the gist of Plato's solution to the question of justice is precisely the idea of "the care of the soul," which comprises the care of the community. The political community is the intersubjective dimension in which the care of the soul can unfold (see Patočka 2002, pp. 104, 109–30).

We can conclude that Popper views Plato as the thinker who theorized, and tried to implement, the totalitarian management of the biological life of the city. From this point of view, Platonic justice is quintessentially biopolitical because it denotes the structure of the state as an organism in the strict sense of the word. In stark contrast to this interpretation, Patočka's Plato is the thinker who articulated the idea of a political community that is based on justice and goes beyond the biological. In sum, both Popper and Patočka clearly see the biopolitical meaning of the problem tackled by Plato—that is, the essential question of the relationship between the political and the biological—but end up portraying Plato in two diametrically opposed ways.

### **Plato and the origins of totalitarianism**

One of the most controversial points in biopolitical studies concerns the task of a philosophical genealogy of twentieth-century totalitarianism. Foucault connects biopower with totalitarianism in his discussion of the emergence of racism (see Foucault 2004, pp. 239–263), thereby concentrating exclusively on modernity. Agamben adopts a different approach by putting forward the provocative thesis about the nonaccidental nature of totalitarianism in Western history. According to Agamben, the logic of "exception," which underlies twentieth-century totalitarianism as well, has been a defining structure of sovereignty since Greek and Roman antiquity (see, e.g., Agamben 1998, pp. 8–12).

Popper's Plato certainly fits the Agambenian narrative. Popper too insists on the fact that an investigation into the pivotal philosophical and intellectual premises of totalitarianism should not confine itself to modernity. He claims that the sources of modern totalitarianism must already be identified in antiquity, especially in Plato (see, e.g., Popper 1969, pp. 1: 86–119). Both Agamben and Popper believe that totalitarianism is not an accidental event, because it is deeply rooted in Europe's philosophical, intellectual, and political history. Both Agamben and Popper contend that the way in which the ancient Greeks have conceptualized the relation between power and life has had a lasting impact over the centuries, thereby resulting in twentieth-century totalitarian biopower. However, they outline different solutions to the biopolitical deadlock. Popper propounds a liberal conception (see, e.g., Popper 1969, pp. 1: 169–201), while Agamben suggests a new ethic that must be the basis for a new political community (see, e.g., Agamben 2013). Popper's approach is based on critical rationalism, whereas Agamben seems to be suspicious of yet another form of intellectualism; his sources of inspiration are instead religious (see, e.g., Agamben 2005, 2013). In the end, Agamben views liberal democracy and liberalism in general as phenomena typical of biopower, in line with Foucault's approach (see, e.g., Agamben 1998, p. 10).

The primacy of chosen individuals or races and the biopolitical management of the whole of society, which are at the forefront of Popper's attack on Plato (see, e.g., Popper 1969, pp. 1: 138–156), are also crucial aspects in Foucault's and Agamben's approaches to Nazism (see, e.g., Foucault 2004, pp. 239–263; Agamben 1998, 1999). Foucault underlines that modern politics is biopolitical because political conflicts have been viewed as conflicts between ethnic groups fighting against each other for the sake of survival (Foucault 2004, pp. 254–263). This idea is in agreement with Popper's analysis, which emphasizes the intrinsic relationship between tribalism and closed societies: the primacy of certain individuals within a certain group is based on alleged racial, physical, or mental differences (Popper 1969, pp. 1: 138–156). In a similar vein, Agamben insists that eugenics and racism are typical facets of biopower, which reduces human existence to “bare life” to such an extent that all human beings are potential *homines sacri* exposed to sovereign violence (see, e.g., Agamben 1998, p. 115).

These significant convergences between Popper and Agamben should not overshadow an important difference, which can explain why they offer diverging narratives of biopower: Popper corroborates his claims by concentrating on Plato's eugenic and racist ideas, which are not crucial in Agamben's history of biopower. Agamben instead constructs his narrative by insisting on the structure of the “exception,” and surprisingly neglects those aspects of Platonic thought that play a key role in Popper's conceptualization and are in fact very pertinent to a biopolitical reading.

Patočka could, however, help us to outline an alternative history of biopower. He does not speculate about the ancient origins of totalitarianism but rather elaborates on the specific historical traits of modernity—notably, the primacy of the biological (see Meacham 2016) and the distortion of the idea of care—that have led to the tragedies of the twentieth century (see, e.g., Patočka 1996, pp. 119–137). From this point of view, his analysis is far from Popper's narrative and resembles Foucault's approach.<sup>18</sup> There is no room for a totalitarian Plato in this connection. From a Patočkian point of view, the crisis of modernity results, among other things, from the neglect or degen-

<sup>18</sup>On the similarities between Patočka and Foucault, see especially Meacham 2016, 115n31. In “An Outline of History” (2022), Patočka sketches an interpretation of modern biologism that is very intriguing and stimulating from a biopolitical point of view. Patočka underlines that since antiquity, the foundation of a political community coincided with the effort to transcend “the bare necessities of life” (2022, p. 311; see also p. 316), that is, the mere biological dimension of human existence. However, the relevance of the political becomes problematic in modernity because “[t]he political sphere itself [...], insofar as it was differentiated from the moral, was viewed from the economic perspective, and the economic sphere from the perspective of labor” (p. 315). This interpretation resembles Arendt's biopolitical view on the modern *animal laborans* in *The Human Condition* (1974). Importantly, when discussing the main ideological framework of the twentieth century, Patočka also draws attention to “the biological rationale of the Central Powers,” that is, the idea of “life chances for those who (whether justified or not) considered themselves the ablest” (p. 318). In other words, Patočka argues that at the beginning of the twentieth century, European nationalism was presented in biological terms and based on “instinct and a will to power” (p. 318). According to Patočka, this fundamental biologism and its emphasis on survival determined both socialism and nationalism: “the world was left to instinctively biological conceptions in two different modifications which were nevertheless deeply akin in their hostility towards everything that transcended bare life” (p. 319). Such a “biological thinking” was also the general premise of “a biological-technological race-based nationalism” (p. 320) in the interwar period. The resemblances between this analysis and Foucault's biopolitical discussion of modern racism (see especially Foucault 2004, pp. 239–263) are intriguing.

eration of the idea of care introduced by Socrates and Plato (see, e.g., Patočka 2002, p. 89; see also 1996, p. 83).

### Twentieth-century biopower and the question of truth

By redefining the history of biopower with the aid of Popper and Patočka, we can also see Plato and his role in twentieth-century intellectual and political history from a new point of view. As already pointed out, the twentieth-century reception of Plato does not only consist of scholarly discussions but is also an intellectual and political battleground (see, e.g., Sasaki 2012; Bonazzi and Colombo 2020). This means that Popper's and Patočka's interpretations must be contextualized within the ideological, political, and intellectual conflicts of the twentieth century. From this angle, the crucial issue is not so much the biopolitical meaning of Platonic thought itself or the various narratives of biopower as the biopolitical meaning of Popper's and Patočka's interpretations themselves, namely, the fact that these interpretations have a biopolitical function. In other words, their interpretations are both acts of intellectual and political opposition against twentieth-century biopower, but they approach Plato in diametrically opposed ways: Popper attacks twentieth-century totalitarianism by attacking Plato as well, whereas Patočka's Plato is the thinker who can help us to envisage a resistance to totalitarian biopower itself.

This important difference also becomes apparent when it comes to the question of truth. Popper's critique of Plato is an attack on the propaganda machine that goes hand in hand with totalitarianism. According to Popper, the ideological basis of totalitarianism comprises three fundamental ideas that are voiced by Plato as well: (i) the totalitarian state is the inevitable outcome of the laws that govern history; (ii) power must lie in the hands of a particular group of chosen individuals or races; and (iii) the whole of society must be organized and structured in accordance with the principles of totalitarian justice (Popper 1969, pp. 1: 7–10, 35–56, 86–119). When identifying these three integral components of totalitarianism, Popper points out that such ideological tenets are supported by a systematic use of propaganda, institutional lies, and illiberal education (Popper 1969, pp. 1: 138–156). In Popper's view, Plato is the thinker who has theorized such a totalitarian use of falsehood and untruth to maintain the fixed social order typical of closed societies.

On the contrary, Patočka's Plato is precisely the thinker who can help contest the ideological foundations of totalitarianism, thereby serving as a source of inspiration for what recent contributions to biopolitical studies have characterized as "affirmative biopolitics," that is, a politics of forms, or ways, of life that oppose biopower by contesting its attempt to reduce life to a biological target. The specifics of this new way of looking at Patočka's Plato can be seen from two angles. Firstly, Patočka uses Plato to argue that life cannot be reduced to the biological. According to him, Europe's crisis also involves the primacy of biologism, that is, a position that reduces life to the purely biological dimension; in this regard, we can see a clear convergence between Foucault's account of modernity and Patočka's diagnosis of Europe's crisis. Secondly, the biopolitical potential of Patočka's approach to Plato must also be identified in the idea of "*living in truth*" (Patočka 2002, p. 97), which Patočka conceptualizes with the aid of Socrates and Plato. Patočka's notion of "*living in truth*"

can be viewed as a form of biopolitical resistance to the propaganda machine that defines totalitarian regimes.

It is important to point out the specific *biopolitical* nature of the resistance that results from Patočka's Platonic ideas of "the care of the soul" and "living in truth." In Patočka's interpretation of Plato, "the care of the soul" and "living in truth" are the defining aspects of philosophy as a way of life, that is, the cultivation of the spiritual life (see especially Patočka 2002, p. 91). Patočka underlines that such a cultivation of the spiritual life "takes place through *questioning thinking at all*" (Patočka 2002, p. 91). In other words, the essential feature of the philosophical life lies in "the stance of constant inquiring and searching, inquiring searching," "questioning" and "problematization" (Patočka 2002, p. 92). This way of life, "the *ideal of philosophy as living in truth*" (Patočka 2002, p. 97), stands in clear contrast to the uncritical attitudes and the distortions of truth that characterize totalitarianism. This conception of the philosophical life can certainly nourish resistance to totalitarianism but also includes a specific biopolitical aspect because "the care of the soul" and "living in truth" involve transcending the mere biological and animal dimension of human life.

When outlining the history of European thought, Patočka emphasizes the fact that the emergence of "the care of the soul" coincided with the attempt to gain insight into the manifestness of the things and the world as such, which also led to the discovery of freedom, the possibility of questioning the given, and the foundation of a political space:<sup>19</sup>

Undoubtedly, at the time of its emergence philosophy was a new possibility of human being. [...] There is in it a freedom of human being towards what is, that replaced the former integration and subordination. But such a freedom contained concrete possibilities, the foremost of which was perhaps that of the construction of a political public space, a space not for the necessities of life but for rising above them. (Patočka 2022, p. 308)

It is therefore no coincidence that modern biologism went hand in hand with the decline and distortion of the idea of care. In his diagnosis of the crisis of modernity, Patočka explicitly refers to the fact that "the care of the soul" has undergone a process of degeneration. Its original element, that is, the cultivation of the spiritual life, "has been forgotten" (Patočka 2002, p. 97), while "the care of the soul" has turned into "a concern, or care about *dominating the world*" (Patočka 2002, p. 89). I think this narrative outlined by Patočka can also be further developed from a biopolitical point of view. On the one hand, totalitarian biopower can be viewed as a radically distorted form of care, that is, a racist and pervasive management of the alleged biological substance of the population (see, e.g., Foucault 2004, pp. 239–263; Agamben 1998, pp. 119–153). In stark contrast to this racist care of the political community, Patočka's Platonic idea of "the care of the soul" can be considered as an attempt to oppose the biologism that has defined modernity, including totalitarian biopower:

<sup>19</sup>Meacham and Tava (2021) provide a convincing explanation as to why Patočka's phenomenological idea of "the care of the soul" has a specific political meaning. They argue that from Patočka's point of view, "the care of the soul" involves both questioning extant political institutions (from this perspective, "the care of the soul" is analogous to the phenomenological epoché) and laying the foundation for a just political community.

there is and will be history only for as long as there are human beings who want not only “to live,” but who are ready, especially in contrast to bare life, to establish and defend the foundations of a community of mutual recognition. What is being founded in this way is not the securing of life being eked out, but freedom, i.e., the possibilities that lie beyond the level of bare life. These possibilities are basically of two different kinds, namely the responsible care for others and an explicit relation to being, i.e., truth. (Patočka 2022, p. 309).

In sum, Patočka’s idea of “the care of the soul” hints at the possibility of a way of life that goes beyond the biological level, entails freedom and “the responsible care for others,” and lies in a questioning attitude towards truth (i.e., the manifestness of being and the world). From this point of view, I suggest interpreting “the care of the soul” and “living in truth” as a form of affirmative biopolitics.

The concept of affirmative biopolitics has been introduced by authors who have tried to revise and develop the Foucauldian approach to biopower (see Mills 2018, pp. 81–107). They have underlined that we should not confine ourselves to considering life as a passive object of power. To put it very schematically, we can understand the concept of biopolitics in two different senses. First, we can interpret “biopolitics” as a politics of life in the sense of a *genitivus obiectivus*. From this point of view, life is considered as a passive object of (liberal or totalitarian) biopower. Alternatively, we can interpret “biopolitics” as a politics of life in the sense of a *genitivus subiectivus*, to the extent that life is the active (i.e., affirmative) source of politics and can result in modes, or ways, of living that resist, oppose, or elude biopower. Hardt and Negri explain this point very clearly:

But there is always a minor current that insists on life as resistance, an other power of life that strives toward an alternative existence. The perspective of resistance makes clear the difference between these two powers: the biopower against which we struggle is not comparable in its nature or form to the power of life by which we defend and seek our freedom. (Hardt and Negri 2009, p. 57)

Patočka’s Platonic ideas of “the care of the soul” or “living in truth” seem germane to this perspective and can therefore serve as an eminent example of affirmative biopolitics.<sup>20</sup> This suggestion can be substantiated by considering how Patočka paraphrases Plato when depicting the tragic fate of the philosophical “living in truth” in an unjust political community: “He will end up being accused and brought before justice. Because it is impossible that this man would not come into conflict with the community, he will necessarily be accused and will end up in horrible agony upon the cross” (Patočka 2002, p. 114). From a biopolitical point of view, we could also say that the truthful philosophers are willing to risk or even sacrifice their own body, the biological element of their life, when living a spiritual life defined by “the care of the soul.” Socrates is the well-known archetype of this life. A further case is Patočka himself.

<sup>20</sup>The reading of Patočka’s Platonic idea of “living in truth” as a form of affirmative biopolitics can also be corroborated with a concrete and famous example, namely, Václav Havel’s idea of “living within the truth.” On the relationship between Patočka and Havel, see Brennan (2016, pp. 40–90). Havel presented this idea in his compelling politico-philosophical manifesto “The Power of the Powerless” (2018). The relationship between Foucault, Havel’s conception of “living within the truth,” and affirmative biopolitics has been analyzed in Prozorov (2017). See also Forti (2016).

He has not only envisaged the possibility of such a dissident “living in truth,” he has also lived it out, thereby committing himself to political action. His death can therefore be considered an illuminating and memorable example of affirmative biopolitics or biopolitical dissidence inspired by Socrates and Plato.

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