Plato’s Cretan state of the Laws presents many significant similarities and dissimilarities to Sparta, even more than the ideal state of the Republic. One of them is to be found in the syssitia, the common messes.

This institution is characteristic of some Dorian states, the most famous examples being the Spartan and the Cretan. As is well known, the citizens of Sparta had a basic duty to pay the dues necessary to keep the mess going—failure to do so entailing loss of political rights—whereas in Crete the state was responsible for the expenses of the common meals.¹

Plato discusses the common mess several times in the Laws. He considers it a basic element of both the Spartan and Cretan constitutions, designed to serve chiefly as a means of perpetual readiness for war, and thus, especially in Sparta, an integral part of the military organization.²

At the same time, the philosopher believes that in addition to its original aim, imposed by military considerations, this institution could prove helpful also in the realization of other important ends: the establishment of order in the private life of the citizen, and consequently of public order and discipline. Accordingly, Plato is interested in including the syssitia in

¹ Artist. Pol. 1271a 28 sq.; 1272a 16 sq.; cf. 1263b 40 sq.; Ephor. ap Strab. 480; Plut. Lyc. 12; Dicaearch. ap. Athen. 4, 141c. On the Spartan syssitia in general see also Herod. 1, 65; Xen. Lac. Resp. 5; 15, 4. Plut. Lyc. 10; Mor. 226f. (6); 236f. Cf. G. Busolt/H. Swoboda, Gr. Staatskunde, 698ff., 754; H. Michell, Sparta (Cambridge 1964) 281ff. To be sure, this had not always been the practice in Crete. There is evidence that originally the citizens of many cities had to hand over their individual contributions to their messes. See, for instance, L. H. Jeffrey/A. Morpurgo-Davies, Kadmos 9 (1970) 124 (B. 11-12), 143f., 149, 151f. However, in the Fourth Century B.C., state responsibility was the general rule in Crete.

² Leg. 625c; 626b; 633a; 636a, etc. Plato is aware, however, of a possible negative effect of the syssitia; in some cases they constitute a factor in encouraging stasis (Ibid. 636b). See also J. Bisinger, Der Agrarstaat in Platons Gesetzen, Klio, beihfet 17 (Leipzig 1925) 74; F. Ollier, Le mirage spartiate 1 (Paris 1933) 260.
his state of the *Laws*.\(^3\) The introduction of this institution is an organic part of the general spirit of étatism prevalent in the *Laws* as well as in the *Republic*. In both of his most important dialogues in the field of political thought, Plato’s étatism is deeply inspired by Sparta.\(^4\)

The material concerned with the *syssitia* in the *Laws* does not enable us to give a coherent description of Plato’s intentions on their character and organization. The author gives us only some vague allusions, which we shall try to present according to their order in the text.

One paragraph affirms, as if by the way, that the magistrates’ way of life has to include *syssitia*, participation at them being considered compulsory, as was actually the state of affairs in Sparta for the ephors and all other magistrates.\(^5\)

Another passage regards the common meals necessary in the new state not only for men but also for women, a somewhat extravagant proposal without precedent in Greek practice wherever these clubs were in existence.\(^6\)

\(^3\) *Leg.* 780a, b; d, e; Bisinger (op. cit. 75ff.) overlooks almost completely these passages, presumably because they contradict his opinion about Plato’s unwillingness to adopt the institution in the *Laws*. G. R. Morrow tries to use Plutarch’s opinion (*Lyc.* 24-25) on the purposes of these clubs in Sparta in order to learn about their possible aims in Plato’s Cretan city. He concludes: “They are a part of education and discipline of adult life, designed to make the citizen accept more fully the ideal which the laws expound and which constitutes the essential purpose of the state.” (*Plato’s Cretan City. A Historical Interpretation of the Laws* [Princeton U.P., 1960] 392). It seems, however, that there is an additional, central reason for adopting the *syssitia*, namely, the philosopher’s intention to achieve uniformity and moderation in the lives of the citizens, and thus to enforce through them relative equality, as was done according to our sources in the so-called “Lycourgan” Sparta.

\(^4\) See Ollier, op. cit. 218ff.

\(^5\) *Leg.* 762 cd. Mention is made here of “archontes” and “agronomoi.” However, it must be borne in mind that Athens, too, could have provided some examples. See Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 42, 3; cf. Bisinger, op. cit. 74aa n. 1.

\(^6\) *Leg.* 780 e-781 d; cf. 806 e; 839 cd. Andreion, the original name for the *syssition*, based on the word “man,” indicates how strange such a proposal appeared to the Greek mind. Aristotle saw it as ὄνοια (Pol. 1274 b 11). Ollier (op. cit. 281) shows that in the *Laws* as well as in the *Republic* Plato took up some Spartan features and carried them to the extreme. “Mais, comme il faisait dans la *République*, il arrive à Platon d’exagérer les traits spartiates. Il n’hésite pas, par exemple, à imposer les repas en
The author even tells us in a passage of the Laws that the character of the syssitia and the legislation connected with them is to be discussed later on in more detail, but this promise is never completely fulfilled. He continues to ‘scatter’ notes throughout.

Thus, for instance, a much discussed passage of the Laws (806 de) proposes a social model similar in many of its features to that of the Spartan, and Plato touches again, as if incidentally and, most probably, inspired by Sparta, on the subject of the syssitia. Here he expresses the wish that in his state men and women be organized separately; each syssition will be either under the supervision of a man or of a woman (‘archon’ or ‘archousa’). In a later passage, Plato refers to the syssitia as an institution already established within his state, since, according to him, there is no difficulty in establishing it in Crete; no one there would question the usefulness of its purpose. As to their structure—Lacedaemonian, Cretan, or another, better than those already in operation—the author does not want to make a decision. The problem does not appear to him to be difficult to solve, and even if found its solution does not promise any considerable advantage; in fact he believes the existing arrangements to be satisfactory.8

Finally, another passage must be mentioned: this contains a suggestion that the rules covering the public meals in the state of the Laws be similar to those in practice in Sparta as regards the citizen’s duty to contribute his share.9

Broadly speaking, this is the content of the material offered us by Plato on the syssitia in the state of the Laws. The question which naturally arises is: why does he not give—despite his promise to do so—a full, comprehensive and detailed description of the character and organization of this institution?

The usual answer given in the research literature is that...
THE SPARTAN SYSSITIA

detailed legislation would have created enormous difficulties. Accordingly, some scholars argue that Plato finally changed his mind about this institution, finding no place for it within his state; or, as Morrow puts it, that he abdicated here "in the face of a problem too difficult for him to solve." Two main difficulties are pointed out: the incompatibility of this institution within an agrarian economy of small proprietors, and the incompatibility between a society organized according to the syssitia and one centred round the family structure.10

The validity of these arguments must be examined. As to the first difficulty, i.e., the incompatibility of the syssitia within the social and economic structure of Plato's state in the Laws, the scholars mentioned above emphasize that these clubs are appropriate to an aristocratic minority whose material needs are provided completely by slaves and serfs, and which can therefore dedicate itself solely to political and military activities. One passage in the Laws gives a schematic picture of the state which presents many similarities to such a Spartan-fashioned ruling minority based on serf labour,11 but it should be remembered that this isolated passage is in contradiction to the general picture of the society Plato imagines in his last dialogue. The citizens of the Laws' state are not similar to the Spartan "peers"—(homoioi); they are not meant to concentrate exclusively on military and political activities, as has too often been wrongly supposed in modern research,12 but are to be allowed certain economic activities, especially in agriculture.13 Those who insist on the difference between the Spartan society and that of the Laws are certainly justified. The passage mentioned above14 is, indeed, the exception rather than the rule. There is, however, no solid justification for

11 Leg. 806 de.
13 See, e.g., Leg. 743 d; 758 b; 763 d-764a; 807e-808b; 842 c-e; 845 ab; 849b. Cf. Bisinger, loc. cit.; Gernet, op. cit. p.c; Morrow, op. cit. 152, 396f.
14 n. 11.
the argument that this difference presented Plato with an insoluble problem.

To Morrow's credit it has to be said that he realizes his argument in this case is not sufficiently strong;\textsuperscript{15} it is, after all, a technical, administrative matter, not a basic problem. Moreover, it is evident that the social and economic structure in the state of the \textit{Laws} does not correspond exactly with the Spartan and Cretan form of syssitia, but requires certain changes in order to give the farmers the possibility of daily participation at the public meals without affecting their economic preoccupations. Again, however, the argument that this technical matter presented a difficulty in the face of which the philosopher found himself forced to abdicate does not seem valid.\textsuperscript{16}

As mentioned, the second difficulty raised by modern research is the incompatibility between the syssitia and a society organized round the family circle, as is that of the \textit{Laws}. In the \textit{Republic} the difficulty does not arise, because there the family in its traditional, accepted form, is abolished, the philosopher introducing a community of wives and children (for the first two classes). But restoration of the family in the \textit{Laws} creates the difficulty of integrating the syssitia.\textsuperscript{17}

This second difficulty is presented by Morrow as being graver than the first,\textsuperscript{18} but, in fact, it seems perhaps to be less serious. After all, Sparta herself may serve as a good example of possible and actual coexistence between the syssitia and the family side by side, in its generally accepted Greek form. Apart from some isolated cases, such as those of polyandry,\textsuperscript{19} there can hardly be any serious doubt that

\textsuperscript{15} Op. cit. 397: "Even so, common meals might be established; but they would obviously be quite different from the syssitia in Sparta or the andreia in Crete . . . ."

\textsuperscript{16} It is not difficult to conceive some not very complicated solutions to this problem, such as, for instance, a few members only to a syssition, a large number of syssitia situated in the neighbourhood of the farms, etc.

\textsuperscript{17} This point in particular is stressed by Morrow, op. cit. 397. His argument is based here also on the authority of Nilsson—"Grundlagen des Spartanischen Lebens," \textit{Klio} 12 (1912) 315ff., 331; cf. Gernet, op. cit. xcixf. See also n. 10 in this paper.

\textsuperscript{18} loc. cit.

\textsuperscript{19} Polyb. 12. 6b. 8. This is the only source that mentions polyandry. On
the family in its common Greek form was in existence in Sparta.\textsuperscript{20} It is true that some aspects of family life regarded by other states as being completely private were controlled in Sparta by the state, but Plato’s étatism in the \textit{Laws} from this point of view (i.e., state interference in family affairs) is certainly no less severe than the Spartan.\textsuperscript{21} It is worth mentioning in this context that the institution of \textit{syssitia} is adopted also by Aristotle in his ideal state of the \textit{Politics},\textsuperscript{22} and—as is well known—Aristotle can hardly be suspected of hostility towards the family.

It can only therefore be concluded that the difficulties usually raised by different scholars are not so perplexing as to have led Plato to abandon his original scheme on the \textit{syssitia}.

Another—strange—problem is pointed out in various works on the subject. It is argued that Plato’s legislation concerning the distribution of agricultural products\textsuperscript{23} indicates that the \textit{syssitia} are no longer taken into account, since this division is made for familial consumption.\textsuperscript{24} It is, however, this distribution of products which, among many other

\textsuperscript{20} On the family in Sparta see also W. K. Lacey, \textit{The Family in Classical Greece} (London 1968) 194-208: "... the family in the great period of Spartan power was always strong." (207-8).

\textsuperscript{21} See, e.g., \textit{Leg.} 721c sq.; 772d; 774a, e; 775 ab; 776ab; 783a; 785b, etc. On state interference in family affairs in Sparta, see, e.g., Herod. 6, 57; Xen. \textit{Lac. Resp.} 1, 3-10; 2, 2 sq.; \textit{Plut. Lys.} 30, 5; \textit{Mor.} 227f. (15); 230a (15); Iust. 3, 3, 8; \textit{Ael. Var. Hist.} 6, 4; 6.

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Pol.} 1330a 2 sq.

\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Leg.} 847e sq.

\textsuperscript{24} Ritter, op. cit. 260f.; Gernet, op. cit. xcix: "Au moment où Platon légifie sur la répartition des produits du sol, il est difficile de croire qu’il ne l’a pas perdu de vue car cette répartition est opéré à fin de consommation familiale." But see Morrow, op. cit. 395f. The passage under discussion (847e sq.) is considered by E. N. Tigerstedt as a proof for Plato’s willingness to adopt the Cretan model of common meals. See \textit{The Legend of Sparta in Classical Antiquity} I (Stockholm 1965) 294, 578, n. 551. However, this view cannot find support in Plato’s text, which refers to Crete only with regard to the general principle of a distribution of agricultural produce. Tigerstedt seems also to have overlooked two important passages contradicting his view, namely, 842b and 955e. See p. 5 and nn. 15, 16 in this paper.
measures, enables the citizen to contribute his due share to the syssition.

The difficulties raised being of no vital significance, it seems necessary to state firstly that the evidence provided by the material dealing with the syssitia in the Laws, even if meagre and fragmentary, leaves no room for doubt about Plato’s completely serious intention to adopt this institution in his state of the Laws. The disorder prevalent in the material about the public meals in the philosopher’s last dialogue was most probably caused by the absence of a final revision.

However, the main problem remains, namely, the non-existence of a comprehensive and detailed description of the syssitia’s foundation, character, organization and action. It seems that Plato himself provides the solution: upon further consideration, details appeared to him a secondary object, perhaps even an unnecessary one. This conclusion is based on the examination of a central passage mentioned above, which has received less attention than it deserves in the literature on the subject. The passage referred to is 842b; it gives the clue to the solution.

"... τὸ δὲ τίνα τρόπον, πότερον ὡς ἐνθάδε ἢ καθάπερ ἐν Λακεδαιμονί, ἢ παρὰ ταῦτα ἐστιν τι τρίτων εἴδος συσσιτίων ἀμφότεροι τούτων ἀμενόν ἔν ἔχον, τούτο οὕτ' ἔξευγείν μοι χαλέπον εἶναι δοκεῖ, μέγα τε ἁγαθὸν εὗρεθέν οὐδὲν ἄπεργασεσθαι. καὶ γὰρ νῦν ἐμμελῶς ἔχειν κατεκαθαμένα.""

"As concerns the manner of them—whether we should adopt the fashion in practice here (i.e., the Cretan) or the Lacedaemonian, or whether we can find a third fashion better than either—this does not seem to me a difficult problem to solve, nor indeed would the solution be of much benefit, since these meals are now actually arranged in a satisfactory way."

From the above quoted passage it is possible to understand that Plato was aware of the fact that his state’s syssitia could not be an exact copy of the Spartan or Cretan model. In speaking of a third, better form, he refers most probably to the technical, administrative, aspect of the problem, which is designed in one way or another, to meet the special conditions of the new social organization proposed in the
Laws.25 The conclusion that this technical-administrative aspect is intended here is strengthened by the fact that Plato sees no difficulty in finding a solution, nor much benefit therefrom. Had he really meant something of social significance and not the purely technical side, the philosopher would hardly have formulated his words as he did. Our paragraph shows, at the same time, that most of the details connected with the syssitia in their actual practice appear satisfactory to Plato. As to the methods of supporting the public meals, he suggests in another passage that the Spartan system, implying personal contribution to the syssition, be adopted in the state of the Laws.26

It would be useful to pay attention to the sharp contrast between Plato’s unwillingness to go into details about the syssitia and the abundant, impressive, even perplexing details concerning the smallest items in the rules designed to ensure the equilibrium and stability of the socio-economic structure: the preservation of the original number of oikoi on their respective lots of land—equal, inalienable, indivisible and unsaleable—as well as the maintenance of the severe limitations placed upon the differences allowed in wealth other than land.27

This contrast is significant. The idea implied is that when well-ordered social and economic conditions of life are ensured, only little concern is needed regarding the precise rules of the public meals. In other words, if the lawgiver succeeds in avoiding the contamination of the Laws’ state by the basic social evil prevalent in the Spartan society of the Fourth Century B.C.—concentration of lands in a few hands and acute economic polarity—there is no need to reject the Spartan rule imposing on the citizen the duty of personal contribution to the syssition.

Aristotle subjects the Spartan syssitia to severe criticism. In his opinion, entertainment ought to have been provided at public expense, as in Crete. Among the Spartans, every citi-

---

25 See p. 488 and n. 9 in this paper.
26 See p. 488 and n. 9 in this paper.
27 Leg. 705b; 736e; 737c sq.; 740a-e; 741b-745d; 855 ab, 856 de; 877 cd; 923c-925e; 929c, etc.
zen has a basic duty to contribute towards this, and many of them, being too poor to afford this expenditure, are deprived of their political rights.28

Comparing the passage quoted above from the Laws (842b) with Aristotle's criticism of the Spartan syssitia, Newman argues that the defect in the arrangements respecting the public meals noted by Aristotle does not seem to have occurred to Plato.29 Ollier accepts this view and goes even further, making a generalization on Aristotle's attitude to Lacedaemon as compared with that of his master.30

This fault-finding with Plato's critical spirit is unjust. When discussing the Spartan system of syssitia and expressing preference for the Cretan, Aristotle points to the result of the disease, to one of its severe symptoms, but not to its cause. After all, he is himself aware that poverty is the basic root of social evil.31 When adopting the Cretan system of the syssitia in his ideal state, he writes:

"δει δέ τούτων κοινωνεῖν πάντας τοὺς πολίτας, οὐ δάδιον δε τοὺς ἀπόρους ἀπὸ τῶν ἱδίων τε εἰσφέρειν τὸ συντεταγμένον καὶ διοικεῖν τὴν ἄλλην οἰκίαν."32

"But the common meals must be shared by all the citizens, and it is not easy for the poor to contribute their quota of the cost from their own resources and also to maintain their household as well."

This passage contains a clear allusion to the fact that Aristotle, in spite of all his proposed measures for providing a solid economic basis for the citizens of his ideal state, is not sure of his ability to avoid or eliminate completely the existence of poverty.

28 Pol. 1271a 27 sq.
29 The Politics of Aristotle II (Oxford 1887) 341, 344.
31 The problem of the unequal distribution of wealth and of poverty is stressed in the discussion about the Spartan constitution in the second book of the Politics. See, e.g., 1270a 19 sq.; 39 sq.; b 5 sq.; 10; and especially 1271a 30 sq. in the context of the syssitia.
32 Pol. 1330a 6 sq.
Plato, on the contrary, after paying attention to the diagnosis of the social disease and its roots, and after taking the trouble to find what seems to him a satisfactory solution to the social problem of avoiding extreme poverty, does not fear the Spartan system. He allows himself to remark that it is, in fact, quite satisfactory, and even suggests that he himself is ready to adopt one of its basic regulations.

E. David

The University of Haifa, Israel