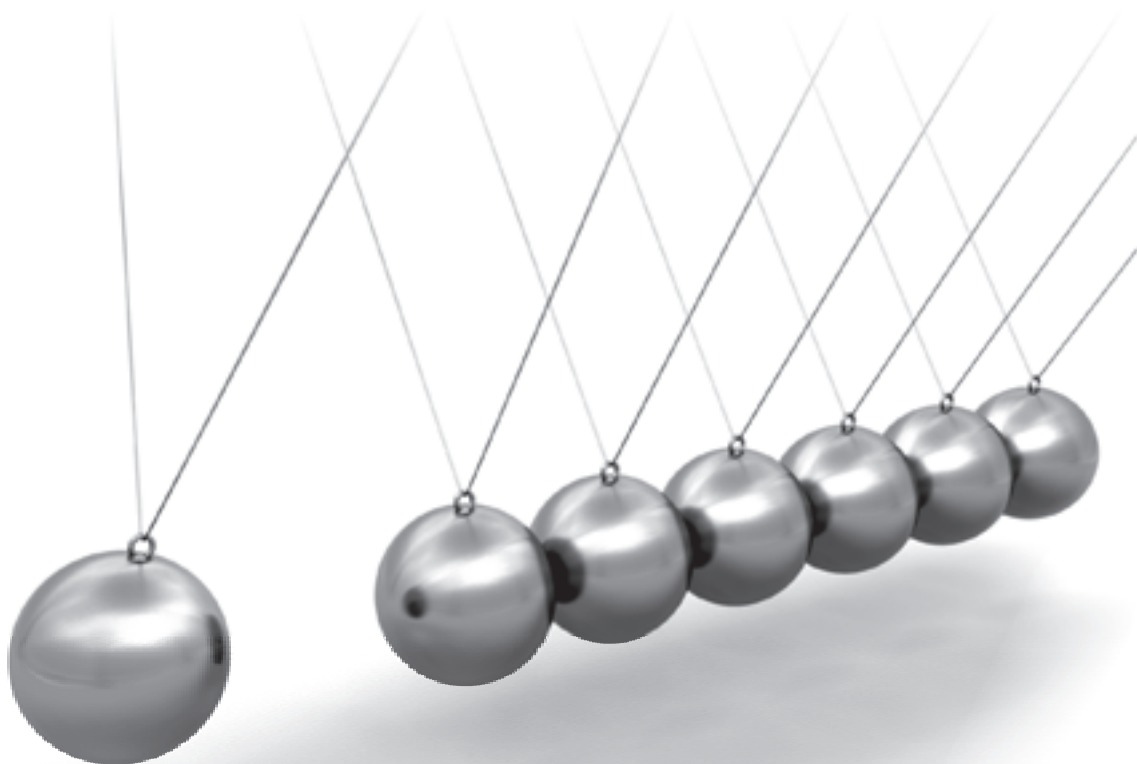


# Women in Times of Crisis

Edited by Irina Deretić



1838

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## CONTENTS

- 7 | *Irina Deretić*  
Preface
- 9 | *Aleksandar Kandić*  
Emancipation or Instrumentalization: Some Remarks  
on Plato's Feminism
- 21 | *Tamara Plećaš*  
Female Friendship in Ancient Greece and Rome  
in Times of Crisis
- 35 | *Irina Deretić*  
Aspasia: Woman in Crises
- 49 | *Dragana Dimitrijević*  
St. Monica as Participant in St. Augustine's Philosophical  
Companionship: A Woman's Voice in the Time of Crisis
- 63 | *Višnja Knežević*  
Hegel's Antigone: Crisis and Collapse of the Ancient  
Greek *Sittlichkeit*
- 75 | *Melina Rokai*  
The Balkan Sanitary Crisis in the British Women's Narratives  
during WWI
- 87 | *Jovan Bukovala*  
Isidora Sekulić: The First Martyr of Serbian Literary Scene
- 101 | *Marija Petrović*  
Dealing with a Crisis: A Note from Ksenija Atanasijević





Aleksandar Kandić\*

## EMANCIPATION OR INSTRUMENTALIZATION: SOME REMARKS ON PLATO'S FEMINISM

**Abstract:** The paper explores broader socio-historical circumstances which led to the famous Plato's argument in favor of gender equality in *Republic V*. The author will critically discuss some of the most relevant interpretations of the argument given by G. Vlastos, J. Annas, A. W. Saxonhouse, and other contemporary philosophers. While some influences of Pythagoreanism or even Spartan practices must be admitted, Plato's argument appears to be quite original and "revolutionary" for the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Athens. Of particular importance is to recognize the instrumentalist character of Plato's and ancient Greek feminism in general, through careful comparisons with the contemporary era.

**Keywords:** emancipation, instrumentalization, Plato's feminism, ancient Greece.

Prior to the feminist revolution, which gained pace mostly during the 1970s, Plato's considerations on the social role of women elaborated in the *Republic* were often neglected by the commentators or taken as an example of Platonic irony. Influential scholars such as Benjamin Jowett, Alfred E. Taylor, Allan Bloom, or Ernest Barker, offered superficial discussions on the topic and usually expressed disagreement with the key points of Plato's argument on female emancipation – even if the argument wasn't meant to be taken seriously. But then, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this entirely changed: the so-called Plato's feminism became one of the burning issues in women's studies, particularly because it represents the very first historical example of a systematic, rational-philosophical argument put in favor of gender equality. After Karl Popper's eerie silence on the feminist views expressed in the Book V of the *Republic*, which simply didn't fit his liberal critique of Plato's ideal society, we suddenly found ourselves in the midst of a fierce philosophical (and socio-political) debate. Were Plato's feminist ideas genuine, emancipatory in character, or was he

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only trying to exploit the gifted women to the benefit of his society? Are there any similarities between the contemporary and Platonic concepts of feminism? Should Plato's position in the *Republic* even be called 'feminist'? Thus, after paving his way into contemporary ethical, epistemological, and natural-philosophical debates, Plato's thought became quite relevant for gender studies as well. His dialogues are an almost endless source of provocative ideas which surpass the time in which they were conceived.

To shed light onto Plato's strategy in *Republic V*, first, we shall examine the historical circumstances in ancient Athens, as well as the most relevant philosophical and cultural influences under which Plato conceived his ideas on female emancipation. According to Luc Brisson (2012), Plato's project is "revolutionary" for the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Athens. Back then, human beings were differentiated by their bodies and physical traits. One of the main consequences of such differentiation was the distribution of social roles in which males dealt with public affairs, and females with private. Women were not allowed to participate in politics, to make meaningful decisions on governmental and other important state issues. Naturally, the distribution of jobs was also affected – due to their stronger physique, males were given tougher jobs, particularly within manual labor and the military. Women's position in classical Athens is, in fact, comparable to the female social role within some contemporary Muslim societies (Annas, 1976, p. 311). They had no rights to formal education, nor to ownership of property. Instead, they were educated by their mothers and relatives only to prepare for marriage and household work. But, as Brisson points out, in ancient Athens there was no particular religious, metaphysical or political theory that underlay such social order. It derived from a very simplistic world-view dominated by biology and human physical traits. Thus, it was quite natural for Athenians to (over)emphasize woman's reproductive function and to build their social structure and relationships on the basis of this biological principle.

However, the social role of women was not identical in all ancient Greek states. In Sparta, the greatest Athenian nemesis within the Greek world, women held noticeably more power (Pomeroy, 2013, p. 67). In contrast to Athenian laws and practices, Spartan women had rights to at least some formal education, as well as to own property.<sup>1</sup> Although they didn't actively participate in the military, they had more saying in governmental affairs and generally possessed more freedom than their counterparts in other Greek societies (which brought them the reputation for "promiscuity"). While there is no direct evidence that Plato's views on the social role of women were inspired by Spartan practices, he might have been

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1 This was, of course, sharply criticized by conservative Aristotle.

under the impression that the active role of Spartan women contributed to the battleground achievements of the army. Unlike Athenian society which excluded women from social life, and took much more interest in philosophical investigations and development of democratic institutions, Sparta was largely subordinated to military goals. Spartan way of the organization usually brought prevalence in military conflicts, particularly in the second Peloponnesian war. But, it is rather difficult to recognize aspects of female "emancipation" within Spartan society or Plato's ideal society in the modern, *libertarian* sense of the word. The inclusion of women usually meant *more boots on the ground*: more warriors, more workers and artisans, more available human power. Plato's political ideas resemble a call for full mobilization during the time of grave crisis. Even in Athens, women who renounced their projected child-bearing futures were welcomed in the military.

Another significant and often overlooked influence on Plato's social theory comes from the Pythagorean philosophy (Kandić, 2013). In her recent study on the Pythagorean women, Sarah Pomeroy rightly claims that:

Pythagoreanism survived among women also because some of its tenets were later absorbed into Platonism, which admitted female disciples. ... Both Pythagoreanism and Platonism emphasized mathematics as having not merely material value but also a spiritual power, and music was an audible expression of mathematical relationships. (2013, p. 56)

Pythagorean philosophical schools were, in fact, the first to admit women. Although some of the evidence is disputable and problematic, one can enumerate several influential Pythagorean woman-philosophers who lived before Plato, such as Theano, Damo, Myia, and so on. In the *Symposium*, Plato himself imagines the female character of Diotima of Mantinea, who reveals the true nature of Eros and the form of beauty to Plato's Socrates. She is not a "lover of wisdom" – she *is* wise and in possession of the highest knowledge, which, in a certain way, puts her in more authoritative position than Socrates. Perhaps the passages on Diotima, as well as the analogy between the Socratic method and maieutics in the *Theatetus* make a stronger case for Plato's feminism than the rigid, military program elaborated in the *Republic*, bringing it a little bit closer to contemporary values.<sup>2</sup> Pomeroy also provides us with the following important information, closely related to the discussion in the previous paragraph: "Pythagoreanism would seem to have a special attraction for Spartan women. The largest contingent of women were Spartans..." (p. 10). So, it appears that

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2 Arlene Saxonhouse appears to follow this line of thought, although she does not explicitly endorse it (1976). She also introduces the analogy between politics and the female art of weaving from the *Politicus*.

there is some interconnectedness between Plato's ideal state, Pythagoreanism, and Spartan practices. According to Pomeroy, we shouldn't take seriously Aristotle's testimony on the Pythagorean table of opposites in which the female is associated with "evil" and "darkness" (*Metaph.* 986a) since all the other evidence suggests that the Pythagoreans made the first, monumental steps towards gender equality.

In 2018, a young woman philosopher Caterina Pelò completed her doctoral thesis on the women in early Pythagoreanism at the Cambridge University. Her study represents a significant contribution to the understanding of the social role of women in early Pythagorean societies. The last chapter of the thesis examines the relationship between Pythagorean philosophy and Plato's feminist theory in *Republic V* in detail. Pelò concludes that although the influences of Pythagoreanism are "minimal," they are quite significant and undeniable. She also finds that "Plato develops the Pythagorean views on male and female natures into a non-gendered philosophical anthropology" (p. 67). There are several important differences between Pythagorean and Platonic conceptions of the female role in society. First, in Plato's ideal city, the educational practices mostly apply to the guardian women, while in Pythagorean societies they encompass the entire female population. Second, in Kallipolis, female rulers, or philosopher-queens are made possible, but in early Pythagoreanism there is no evidence that women were assigned ruling tasks. Third, the communism of property, which was present in early Pythagorean societies, is extrapolated to the communism of wives and children in the *Republic*. Even though the Pythagoreans called for philosophical education of women, they retained their traditional roles of wives and mothers, and unlike Plato, highly praised the traditional concept of "nuclear" family by making it fundamental to the unity of their classless society. So, the Pythagorean lifestyle inspired Plato's social theory in certain extent and set the stage for his revolutionary vision of the female role.

However, when it comes to Plato, Pythagoreans or Spartans, I find it hard to argue in favor of female "emancipation" in the contemporary sense of the word, which is based upon libertarian philosophy. All versions of ancient feminism inevitably suffer from the *instrumentalist* approach: their main goal is to find more *use* for women, not to set them free. The intellectual, technological and military development of human societies which gained pace during the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. not only in ancient Greece, but in multiple parts of the world simultaneously, generated demand for utilization of entire populations, and this meant tapping into all available human resources. While some of Plato's ideas, taken out of their historical and philosophical context, might be compared to contemporary

feminist views, this must be conducted in a very cautious manner. As Arlene Saxonhouse suggests (1976, pp. 196–203), Plato's feminism – and we may add, ancient feminism in general – is quite prone to de-sexualization of women. For the ancients, feminism was not about the free expression of intellectual, social and sexual desires. It mostly promoted the utilization of gifted women who were encouraged to contribute to society to the same extent as men. Thus, some women led *double lives* as mothers, and as professionals. In Plato, the instrumentalist paradigm is elevated to extreme heights, as the female natural, reproductive function is considered almost irrelevant in the process of labor division.

I will now turn to Plato's argument in *Republic V*, as well as some of the most relevant interpretations, particularly those given by Gregory Vlastos and Julia Annas. Irina Deretić offers a clear, straightforward analysis of the argument (2013, pp. 154–158). She points out the “big question” with which Plato's inquiry begins: “...whether female human nature is capable of sharing with the male all tasks or none at all, or some but not others, and under which of these heads *this business of war falls*” (*Resp.* 453a).<sup>3</sup> The general meaning of the argument is slightly distorted by this wording. One immediately wonders, does Plato aim to introduce gender equality within the military ranks only, or within all jobs? Is he genuinely interested in other fields of human productivity at all? The theme of warfare occupies the central spot. Nevertheless, the argument itself is very sound and logically founded. It revolves around the concepts of sameness and difference, which are, interestingly, central to Plato's cosmology in the *Timaeus*, as well as the philosophy of language in the *Sophist*. Sameness and difference appear to be fundamental concepts which are often employed by Plato when very important explanations must be given. The seeming contradiction between the two starting premises of the argument in *Republic V*, according to which we ought to allocate different pursuits to different natures and the same to the same, and that men and women can perform the same tasks, even though they have different natures (454b), is resolved through the realization that our understanding of the distinction between the same and the different, with respect to the issue of division of labor between men and women, is wrong and oversimplified. This distinction is not absolute, but contextually dependent: sometimes the two natures are different in one respect, but not different in another one. Thus, it is necessary to examine whether two natures are different or the same “*with respect to a particular function that they ought to perform*” (Deretić, 2013, p. 155). This sets the stage for the famous shoemaker analogy (454c). A good shoemaker possesses intrinsic nature that makes him

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3 Translated by Paul Shorey. My italics.

a good shoemaker, which implies that his physical appearance has nothing to do with his shoemaking ability. Him being bald, or long-haired, is completely irrelevant. Therefore, the main purpose of the argument is to show that physical, or biological differences between the sexes are irrelevant for the tasks which they are supposed to perform. For example, although women are *generally* not as strong as men, a *particularly* strong woman will be more suitable for construction work than a particularly weak man. Social roles must be allocated in accordance with individual traits. While women's physical and intellectual capabilities might be diminished during pregnancy, they are usually compatible with men's. More importantly, Plato's argument establishes equality at intellectual level. In Book IV, we have seen that all human souls possess identical tripartite structure, which implies that the female soul is fully capable of reasoning. From this follows that women should receive the same education as men (455e). This is in stark contrast to Athenian beliefs and practices of the time, as well as Aristotle's conservative, misogynist views. Plato's argument in *Republic* V is the first one in philosophical literature to directly challenge the biologically founded social order in which men have active roles, and women passive, as suggested by Luc Brisson. This is, in a certain way, revolutionary. Plato's feminism goes far beyond Pythagorean, or Spartan feminism.

On the other hand, one may wonder why Plato, a skillful writer, includes numerous sexist and misogynist remarks throughout the text of his *Republic*. If he genuinely stood for gender equality, wouldn't he be careful not to allow the Athenian prejudices into his vision of the ideal city, perhaps not even as examples of ill thinking and stupidity? In her essay, Arlene Saxonhouse (1976, pp. 195–196) conveniently reminds us of the statements in the dialogue which enforce the sexist views: that women will always be weaker than men (455e, 456a, 457a), that the plundering of the corpse is an act of small and womanish mind (469d), that women succumb easily to grief (388a, 605e), that they are like children (431c, 557c). On top of that, in Book VII the proposed inclusion of women in the ruling class is forgotten and has to be reasserted (540c), and in Book VIII the equality of sexes actually brings about the descent of democratic society into anarchy and tyranny. So, it's not one or two places, but multiple places which are apparently inconsistent with the argument in Book V. At this point, the reader of the *Republic* begins to doubt Plato's intentions, even without any consideration of the historical circumstances or influences under which the work was written. The discussion which we undertook in the first part of the essay only amplifies these doubts. Plato's feminist ideas originate from an entirely different social matrix and have very little in common with contemporary women's rights movement rooted in liber-

tarian and hedonist philosophy. For the ancients, "emancipation" usually meant "instrumentalization."

Gregory Vlastos aims to resolve the supposed inconsistency in Plato's reasoning in his controversial treatise "Was Plato a Feminist?" (1994).<sup>4</sup> Vlastos argues that even though Plato's position is multifaceted, being that some aspects of the *Republic* are obviously antifeminist, the ideas concerning the social role of women within the guardian class elaborated in Book V can still be considered feminist in the contemporary sense of the word. Vlastos acknowledges that Plato's personal view of the remaining majority of women belonging to other classes is misogynist, but explains that the sexist remarks scattered throughout the text of the *Republic* and enumerated in the previous paragraph actually refer to the traits of women "deformed and misshaped by the society which has reared them" (p. 18). Such remarks voice what Plato thinks of the Athenian women who grew up in corrupt society which "stunted them intellectually and warped them morally" (p. 18). While this might hold true, it still doesn't answer the main question, which is why did Plato decide to emancipate only gifted women in the guardian class, and not *all* women in *all* classes. Contemporary feminism is not selective, it encompasses all women regardless of their social and financial status, race, or ethnicity. If Plato was genuinely feminist, he would at least clarify that his sexist remarks represent a description of "misshaped" women in Athenian corrupt society, and then propose radical social reforms which dramatically improve the female position by including *all* women into his emancipatory project. Nowhere in the text we may find such clarifications or ideas. As Vlastos himself suggests, only schizophrenia would enable Plato to represent both feminist and antifeminist views simultaneously (p. 17). Either Plato's reasoning is inconsistent, or there is no inconsistency at all since the kind of feminism Plato promotes in *Republic* V has nothing to do with contemporary understanding of the term. Yet, instead of taking this interpretative approach, Vlastos' strategy seems to be to rip Plato's emancipatory ideas not only out of context of the *Republic* and Platonic philosophy, but out of the entire socio-historical context. Vlastos has no other choice, since he's quite persistent in his claim that Plato's feminism is somehow compatible with contemporary one. Paradoxically, this is precisely what enforces the "false impression of inconsistency" (p. 12) which Vlastos' argument is supposed to eliminate in the first place! To support his claims, Vlastos lists seven rights which were denied to Athenian women, but are now provided to the guardian women (pp. 12–14). These are the rights to education, vocational opportunity,

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4 Vlastos' paper was first published in 1989. I am using the re-printed version from the collection of essays under the title *Feminist Interpretations of Plato*.



unimpeded sexual intercourse, legal capacity, sexual choice, ownership and disposal of property, as well as political rights. Vlastos even employs wording from a proposed Amendment to the United States Constitution in order to clarify what he means by “feminism” (p. 11). But, can we even speak of citizen “rights” within Plato’s *Republic*? The modern concept of “human rights” is only a few centuries old. And the so-called ERA (Equal Rights Amendment), originating in the contemporary United States, has certainly nothing to do with the issues Plato is trying to resolve in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Athens. Vlastos cites several examples from Greek poetry as possible influences on Plato, but he doesn’t take Pythagorean philosophy, Spartan practices, nor the broader socio-historical circumstances into account. We have shown that this is very much relevant for the understanding of Plato’s argument in *Republic V*.

One of the most eloquent critiques of Vlastos’ paper was formulated by Morag Buchan (1999). Buchan writes:

Vlastos is among those critics who are guilty of adopting an anachronistic argument. He takes a 20<sup>th</sup>-century notion of feminism and superimposes it on Athenian society in the fifth century B.C. But this will not do, for there is no reason whatever to suggest that Plato regarded women as an oppressed group within society and sought to remedy this. (p. 144)

According to Buchan, there are two main problems with Vlastos’ argument. First, it is valid only if we accept the definition of feminism that is offered at the beginning of the paper. But there are no sufficiently convincing reasons to ascribe such definition to Plato. Second, if we do accept a definition of feminism which involves the notion of equal rights of men and women, then Plato could be considered either feminist or anti-feminist. There is no intermediate position. Since Plato’s stance alters from situation to situation within one dialogue, as well as between various dialogues, it is very difficult to portray Plato as “feminist” in the contemporary sense of the word. Surely, some of his ideas may be broadly compared to contemporary ones, but they’re not compatible, simply because the driving forces behind Plato’s feminism are completely different. As Buchan points out, the reason why Plato gives rights to women is not social fairness, but compulsion – his main goal is to exploit all talented individuals in the city-state, male or female, for the benefit of the whole society (p. 145). This is hardly the case with the contemporary gender rights movement. Vlastos appears to be carried away by his desire to portray Plato as a thinker whose ideas are relevant for contemporary feminist discussions. Perhaps they are, but certainly not in the way Vlastos has imagined.

Finally, we must recall Julia Annas’ deliberations on the topic which seem to capture the essence of Plato’s reasoning in the *Republic* to great



extent. Unlike Vlastos, Annas establishes sharp distinction between Plato's ideas on the social role of women and contemporary feminism. This is key to any consistent interpretation of *Republic V*. Annas makes several important observations about Plato's argument. Even though Plato undeniably establishes that biological differences between men and women are irrelevant for the distribution of jobs, he doesn't give up on belief that men are better equipped both mentally and physically (455b), as well as that men are able to outdo women in absolutely everything: "The one sex is, so to speak, far and away beaten in every field by the other" (455d). He only argues that there are no pursuits which are appropriate for women as such, but he doesn't even bother to show that there might be occupations for which men are unequipped. Therefore, while his argument introduces women into spheres previously inaccessible to them, it also cunningly preserves the existing inequality between sexes (only to a lesser extent). Contemporary feminism doesn't stand for such multifaceted values. Naturally, Annas also finds that Plato doesn't take women's desires or needs into account, which is the starting point of modern feminist philosophy. He is mainly interested in utilization of gifted women. In the *Laws*, his position is even a bit more conservative, though he maintains that women have rights to formal education. But, as Annas rightly observes, Plato did not have a word for "rights" (1976, p. 313). In his view, education is not supposed to provide women with better and happier lives, but to increase the number of skillful workers which are obliged to serve the state. Annas concludes her essay with the following remarks:

Mill begins *The Subjection of Women* with the statement that the subordination of one sex to another is wrong in itself. It seems to me that to be a feminist one has to begin from this point. But it is a point that Plato never reaches. And it is not surprising that he never reaches it, for he is not going in that direction at all. (p. 321)

It is not entirely inappropriate to speak of Plato's "feminism," providing that the nature of his feminist ideas is thoroughly investigated and explicated. As we have seen, Plato's social theory doesn't develop out of itself, but under the influence of various intellectual and socio-historical currents, such as Pythagorean philosophy, the rivalry between Athens and Sparta, the corruptness of Athenian society. Although Plato's ideas on the social role of women are *comparable* to modern ones, they are clearly not *compatible*. While contemporary feminism stands for libertarian and emancipatory values, Plato's feminism – as well as ancient feminism in general – appears to be mostly concerned with instrumentalization of intelligent, capable women. Is it even reasonable to acknowledge women's emancipation in Plato's ideal society? While the kind of emancipation

undertaken by Plato is not compatible with contemporary one, it must be admitted that his proposed social reforms do present at least *some* women in ancient Athenian society with fantastic new opportunities. In this sense, it is a step forward – greater than the one Pythagoreans or Spartans undertook. Even “revolutionary.” However, the entire project has military (authoritarian) undertones. They might be picked up at multiple places in the *Republic*. For Plato, the equality of sexes represents a convenient opportunity to strengthen the guardian class and expand the military capabilities of his ideal city.

Many papers examine whether contemporary notion of feminism might be applied to Plato, but none deals with the question of whether Plato’s version of feminism is represented in the real, modern world. This could be a topic for future historians. Today, the rapid technological and cultural development requires massive engagement of all talented individuals, male or female, to the extent never seen before. The goals of states, international alliances and huge multinational companies are put before any personal goals. Numerous women, particularly talented ones, are put under tremendous pressure of fulfilling both family and business duties at the same time. Some private companies silently encourage women not to bear children, in order to dedicate themselves fully to their professional careers. Numerous countries are introducing reforms by which not only women, but also homosexual and transgender persons may join the military. But the reasons for this are not always libertarian. The very complex security situation sometimes necessitates the inclusion of women in the military, police, and other similar public services. Having this in mind, perhaps we should make sure that contemporary feminism is genuine, and not of Platonic type under the cunning disguise of democratic principles and libertarian philosophy.

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## ЕМАНЦИПАЦИЈА ИЛИ ИНСТРУМЕНТАЛИЗАЦИЈА: НЕКА ЗАПАЖАЊА О ПЛАТОНОВОМ ФЕМИНИЗМУ

**Апстракт:** Рад испитује шире друштвено-историјске околности које су довеле до чувеног Платоновог аргумента у прилог родне равноправности у петој књизи *Државе*, као и неке од најрелевантнијих интерпретација тог аргумента понуђених од стране Г. Властоса, Џ. Анас, А. Саксонхаус, и других савремених филозофа. Иако се морају признати извесни утицаји питагорејства, па чак и спартанских обичаја, чини се да је Платонов аргумент веома оригиналан и „револуционаран” за Атину 4. века п.н.е. Нарочито је значајно препознати инструментални карактер Платоновог и старогрчког феминизма уопште, путем обазривих поређења са савременим добом.

**Кључне речи:** еманципација, инструментализација, Платонов феминизам, античка Грчка.

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