

# Book Review: Statesman: The Politics of Limits and the Liminal by Agnes Horvath and John O'Brien

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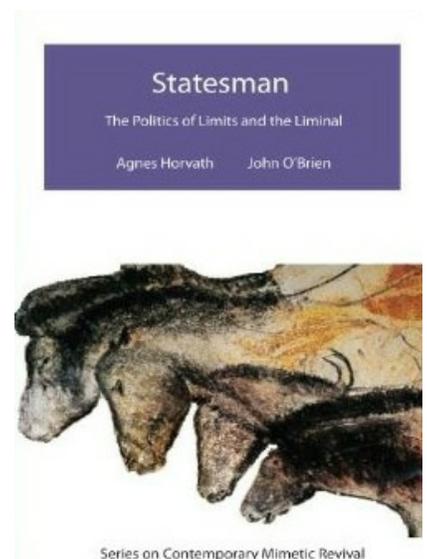
*The authors of this edited collection explore the potential contained in Plato's dialogue in *The Statesman for the times we live in*, based on the conviction that Plato is not simply a canonic figure of the distant past but our genuine contemporary. This volume is the second volume of the *Series on Contemporary Mimetic Revival* that explores the central anthropological themes of social life using a cross-disciplinary approach. This effort has much novelty to provide, especially to readers interested in a very insightful reading of political crises and the need not only to engage in critique, but also to promote a "good" society, writes **Marcos Gonzalez-Hernando**.*



**Statesman: The Politics of Limits and the Liminal. Agnes Horvath and John O'Brien. Tivoli Academic Publishing. June 2013.**

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*Statesman: The Politics of Limits and the Liminal*, edited by [Agnes Horvath](#) and John O'Brien in association with the [International Political Anthropology](#) journal, is structured around at least two daring claims. The first is that Plato – a thinker so dear, studied and often so criticised – has still many insights to provide for illuminating a political and economic crisis unfolding more than two millennia after his death. The second being that we might have something to learn from one late platonic dialogue in particular, "[Statesman](#)", that propounds the need to seek true and wise rulers and grant them with a power beyond what laws allow. In an age where the worth of democracy and the rule of law are rarely contested – whilst the authority of intellectuals, experts and politicians so often is – these are problematic arguments to support. Nonetheless, I would suggest that in the process of doing so, and whether we agree or not, the authors manage to enrich our understanding of our current predicaments.



The book – and the theoretical project that underpins it – brings together a group of researchers interested in liminality, mimesis, and politics coming from sociology, anthropology, international relations and political philosophy. The contributions are weaved together by reference to "Statesman" and engage in an interesting dialogue amongst themselves and with Plato, criss-crossed by allusions to more modern contributions by authors such as Gregory Bateson, Rene Girard, Reinhart Koselleck and Eric Voegelin. In the following lines I will attempt to unravel some of the key points that link together Plato's arguments with the overarching *leit motif* behind this volume.

The starting point of this work is the relationship between liminality, mimesis and social crises. By "liminal" the authors refer to situations where there are no clear boundaries between the good and the bad and where there is no available measure to discern what should be done, where one's place is not certain; without "proportion", as Plato would say. This uncomfortable position generally leads to two types of reaction. The first is "individuation"; that is, that in moments of radical uncertainty we become more self-interested and distrustful of others. Certainly many current examples, such as bank runs, come to mind. The second is mimesis: Plato claims that humans are prone to imitate, especially when there are no guidelines and they do not know what to do.

Thus, crises open a space for the emergence of models to mimic, which can be either beneficial or fatal for a

society. It is in this context that the greatest opportunity (in the form of the Statesman) and the greatest danger (in the shape of the sophist and the self-serving) appear. But what is, after all, a true Statesman? He is the ruler who possesses wisdom (*phronesis*) to rule and to recognise the good. The process of leading is, following Plato, similar to the art of weaving: that is, articulating a set of diverse citizens into a desirable order for all, where differences can coexist away from mimetic violence.

Nonetheless, this requires a few tricky concessions, relating especially to the issue of wisdom. Firstly, there must be some disposition in a polis to be lead and to recognise by whom it would be best to. Second, that a good government, if ruled by the wise, must move beyond laws if necessary. This is not to advocate a return to authoritarianism or anarchism, but the realisation that laws are a typified code and therefore insensible to the variability of the world; that explains why their application can be catastrophic in moments of liminality. Laws, in this sense, can only serve as guidance when wisdom is absent; but, in its absence, they are for Plato the best guidance indeed.

Plato has, to be sure, many adversaries. The obvious point of attack is the difficulty of distinguishing between a true Statesman and a tyrant or a sophist, for what is the line that separates them when we allow a Statesman to act beyond codified laws? Certainly Plato and his interpreters acknowledge this issue and, enigmatically, only offer as an answer “wisdom”. It is difficult, however, to substantiate this claim further, as wisdom is always sensitive to changing circumstances and is deeply rooted in a wise person and a context. This implies a form of trust that is hard to envisage nowadays and explains the common complaint regarding Plato’s conservatism. What is more, the book acknowledges that liminality itself makes it harder to differentiate between the true and the false, and therefore to identify a Statesman amongst tricksters. Nonetheless, it is hard to disagree completely with the idea that a new form of wisdom is necessary. After all, Horvath *et al.* suggest that maybe it is precisely a “good example” what we are lacking.

Although there are minor editing issues – and that the close focus on one text renders some passages repetitive – there are certainly quite a few relevant points to rescue from this work; the most important of which is, in this reviewer’s opinion, the platonic reading of social crises. Regrettably, apart from Tom Boland’s very insightful article on Occupy Wall Street and Ordo-liberalism – and how they, although politically opposed, share the contemporary mistrust on “wisdom” and “the good”, embracing instead a radical relativism – this book mostly stays away from more contemporary literature and does not focus very specifically on our current quandaries. Even so, there are many hints towards such a possibility.

Shortcomings aside, although seemingly anachronistic, this effort has much novelty to provide, especially to readers interested in a very insightful reading of political crises and the need not only to engage in critique, but also to promote a “good” society. In this sense, it should be of interest to students and researchers in politics, philosophy and anthropology. Even if we disagree about the need for a contemporary Statesman, the invitation, a very thorny but pertinent one, is to “move from critical thought to a philosophy capable of recognising the good” (p.192).

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**Marcos Gonzalez Hernando** is a PhD student in Sociology at the University of Cambridge, with a background in Social Anthropology, holding an MSc from the London School of Economics and a MA from Goldsmiths. He is interested in the sociology of time, knowledge and intellectuals, and particularly in forms of engagement between academia and social media, being himself an editor for a successful Latin American blog on current affairs, society and literature, [ballotage.cl](http://ballotage.cl). His doctoral research, supervised by Dr. Patrick Baert, focuses on the institutional and intellectual transformation of British think-tanks in the face of the economic crisis of 2008. [Read more reviews by Marcos.](#)

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