

# “COMMONWEALE”: PLATONISM AND POLITICAL THOUGHT IN RENAISSANCE ENGLAND

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**Abstract:** The thesis developed in this article is that, concerning the elaboration of the notion of *Commonweale / Commonwealth*, the political thinkers of the English Renaissance were influenced by Plato’s philosophy. In fact, if we read the *Timaeus* in connection to the *Republic*, we find the idea that *political order* must be placed within the wider *cosmological order*, and this mechanism is at the base of the conception of *Commonweale / Commonwealth*, as is shown especially by *A Comparative Discourse of the Bodies Natural and Politique* (1606) of Edward Forset.

**Keywords:** Commonweale / Commonwealth, Platonism, *Timaeus*, political thought, Renaissance

## INTRODUCTION

My aim in this article is to explore the role played by Platonism in the theoretical construction of the English non-utopian political thought of the Renaissance (thus excluding Francis Bacon and Thomas More, whose political philosophies have received much attention by scholars)<sup>1</sup>. The working hypothesis is that Platonism exerted a great influence, especially at the level of the elaboration of the key notion of *Commonweale* or *Commonwealth* (the word undergoes through many changes in the spelling: from *common wyel* to *common weale* to *common weal*...) that is to say, the body politic that today we call the State.

With “the influence of Platonism” I mean here to indicate the impact of Plato’s dialogues, especially of the political dialogues: the *Republic*, the *Laws* and the *Statesman*, but also (as will be shown) the *Timaeus*. The contents expressed in these Platonic works were known

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<sup>1</sup> See Q. Skinner (1988). “Political Philosophy”, in Ch.B. Schmitt & Q. Skinner (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*. Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 389-452.

either through direct reading of primary sources (Marsilio Ficino translated Plato into Latin in 1484, and his commentaries and notes were published in 1496; Henri Hestienne produced the *Opera omnia* in three volumes in 1578, which is still the reference work today as far as the pagination is concerned) or through quotations and summaries found in secondary sources, of which perhaps the most influential were the works of Plutarch and Cicero, and the *Lives of the most eminent philosophers* written by Diogenes Laertius<sup>2</sup>.

It is true that Platonism, in the English political thought of the Renaissance, coexists with other philosophical elements, originating above all from the writings of Aristotle, and of others ancient philosophers, Greek and Roman. However, this *eclecticism* was a normal feature of Humanist and Renaissance philosophy, so we must not be surprised to find it also in the political thinkers of the age, who elaborated their own theories using an original *mixture* of elements deriving from different philosophical, historic and literary traditions.

I will attempt to show in which manner and to which extent the Platonic element was important for the construction of the key notion of *Commonweale / Commonwealth* in the political thought of the English Renaissance. I will focus on Plato's *Timaeus*, showing that the cosmological and mathematical order functions as the theoretical model for the harmonious order of the *Commonweale / Commonwealth*.

As today, political thought scholars have somehow neglected this dialogue, whereas the influence of Plato's "purely" political dialogues has long been acknowledged – suffice it to mention the studies on the city-soul analogy, developed throughout the *Republic*, and the famous theory of the philosopher-kings, that was re-read in Christian terms, and re-launched by the Humanists, for instance by Erasmus, in *The education of a Christian Prince* (1516), who wrote: "Unless you are a philosopher you cannot be a prince, only a tyrant". In fact, the *Timaeus* has been studied above all in connection with Medieval thought, since in the Middle Ages it was the only Platonic work available at length, though only through the partial translation made by Calcidius. What I will try to demonstrate, through an interrogation of primary sources, is that the *Timaeus*, with its ideas of order and harmony, was deeply

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<sup>2</sup> See J. Hankins & A. Palmer (2008). *The Recovery of Ancient Philosophy in the Renaissance: A Brief Guide*. Florence: Olschki, pp. 11-13. See also S. Jayne (1995). *Plato in Renaissance England*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.

influential also in the Renaissance (the painter Raphael knew and visually represented this, by placing the *Timaeus* in Plato’s left hand, in his wonderful fresco *The School of Athens*) and, in particular, it was influential in the English political thought with regard to the central notion of *Commonweale* / *Commonwealth*.

#### COMMONWEALE: A PROBLEMATIC NOTION

The word *Commonweale* / *Commonwealth* contains the idea of *bonum commune*, the good of the people, seen as the result of the politics carried out by a good government, that follows justice and, in general, what reason dictates. *Commonweale* also indicates the political community as a whole or the “body politic” – if we want to use the organic metaphor that originates in Plato’s *Republic* and the *Laws*, is developed in Aristotle’s *Politics* and then becomes a literary commonplace through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance<sup>3</sup>.

However, the conceptual structure of the word entails some theoretical problems, at least at three main levels. *Common-weale* can be intended as: 1. “the comuners”; 2. a form of “communism”; 3. a “republican” government.

The first difficulty is due to the particular social and political meaning of the word “common” in England, which reminds us of the “commoners”, and would leave out the nobles from civil society; which is why Sir Thomas Elyot, in *The book Named the Governour* (1531), suggested that it was better to substitute the expression “common weale” with that of “public weale”. The second problem is linked to the meaning acquired by the word in the history of philosophy: the characterization as “common” can easily be confused with the ancient idea that “all things should be held in common”, and this not only among friends (*koina ta ton filon*) but even in a civil society (*communio omnium in civitate*, writes Marsilio Ficino in *Platonis opera*, 1491, f. 208vb referring to the fifth book of the *Republic*)<sup>4</sup>. In a letter to Angelo Poliziano, Ficino wrote that “God wished the water to be common to all aquatic creatures and the earth to be in common to all terrestrial beings” and that it was man who “introduced into the world *mine* and *thine*, the beginning of all dissension and wickedness”. These ideas – threatening private property

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<sup>3</sup> See D.G. Hale (1971). *The Body Politic. A Political Metaphor in Renaissance English Literature*. The Hague-Paris: Mouton.

<sup>4</sup> See J. Hankins (2009). *La riscoperta di Platone nel Rinascimento italiano*. Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, p. 492, note n. 248.

– were perceived as dangerous in a society that was evolving towards a bourgeois pattern in economy – which at a political level was to be theoretically in-capsulated in modern liberalism (and it is also for this reason that Thomas Elyot suggested, in vain, the more cautious word “public weale”).

The third and perhaps the most controversial point, was the ambiguity contained in the original Latin term of which *Commonweale* was the vernacular correspondent: the term *Respublica*. Translation is also a transportation of meaning, and thanks to (or because of) Cicero and others the term *Respublica* and the English *Commonweale* could acquire a specific political meaning, indicating – as we read in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* – not only “the affairs of state”, “the public good” and “the body politic, the state”, but also “a state in which all citizens participate, a free state (opp. tyranny)” – it is not a case that, in mid-Seventeenth century, the government by Oliver Cromwell will bear the name of “Commonwealth”, and his followers will be called “Commonwealth’s men”... In sum, *Commonweale* / *Commonwealth*, just like *Respublica*, could indicate a form of republican government, conceptually opposed to monarchy, as had happened within the humanist debate of the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries on the best form of government: *comparatio rei publicae et regni*. In fact, the term is also used to translate *Respublica* in this more specific political meaning. Let’s take as an example Robert Peterson’s translation of Giovanni Botero’s *The Greatness of the Cities* (1606), where we read: “[...] I might here remember those citties that have been built by the power, and inhabited by the authority of great Princes, or some famous cõmon weales”<sup>5</sup>. Another example is found in Thomas Hoby’s translation of the *Book of the Courtier* (1561). In the first part of the fourth book, we find expressions such as: “[...] the soveraigntie of a Prince is more according to nature, then a Commune weales”, and “[...] it becommeth rather the fourme of a Commune weale, then of a Kingdome”<sup>6</sup>. In the trilingual edition of 1588 (Italian, French, English – in three parallel columns), the spelling of the word changes from

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<sup>5</sup> G. Botero (1606). *A Treatise, concerning the causes and the Magnificencie and Greatnes of Cities, divided into three bookes*. Translated by R. Peterson. London: T.P., p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> B. Castiglione (1900). *The Book of the Courtier*. Translation by Th. Hoby (1561). With an Introduction by W. Raleigh. London: Nutt, pp. 311-312.

“commune weale” to “common weale”<sup>7</sup>. Here, the opposition between the Italian word *Regno* (in French *Royaume*) translated as “kingdome” and the Italian word *Republica* (in French *Republique*) translated as “common weale”, is even more evident.

Interestingly, in the Italian-English dictionary compiled by John Florio, *A Worlde of Wordes* (1598) – listing *The book of the Courtier* among the sources used for the writing of the dictionary – we read the following definitions: “Regno”: *a kingdome, a realme, a dominion, a rule, a government. Also a raigne or space of raigning*; “Republica”: *a common-wealth, a free estate, the weale publike*<sup>8</sup>.

In the first book of his *Treatise concerning Policy and Religion* (published in Douai in 1606-1610, and reissued in London in 1652) the Jesuit Thomas Fitzherbert (1552-1640) uses the word *Commonwealth* in both senses (the State in general and the republic) in the same phrase: “[...] considering the natural mobility, inconstancy and infirmity as well of Common-wealth, as of man himself, and of all earthly creatures; no humane wit, or power, is more able to defend any Kingdom, or Common-wealth from declination and decay, then to preserve a man from all sickness and mortality, or other earthly things from corruption”<sup>9</sup> (the solution, for Fitzherbert, is turning to God’s grace through the help of the true religion: Catholicism).

*Commonweale* / *Commonwealth* (just like *Respublica*) are however more frequently used to refer *neutrally* to the idea of the State or body politic, without reference to a republican government. Perhaps (on the contrary) they are often used to refer to a State that is monarchical in nature. Let’s take again a translation as an example: Richard Knolles translating Jean Bodin’s *De republica libri sex* and *Les six livres de la république*. Knolles actually translates comparing both editions, the Latin and the French, and he entitles the work (published in 1606) *The Six Bookes of a Commonweale*. Knolles’s Bodin writes: “A Commonweale is a lawfull government of many families, and of that

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<sup>7</sup> B. Castiglione (1588). *The Courtier of Count Baldessar Castilio, devided into foure Bookes*. Translated by Th. Hobby. London: Wolfe, *passim* (the French translation is by Gabriel Chappuys).

<sup>8</sup> J. Florio (1598). *A Worlde of Wordes, or Most copious, and exact Dictionarie in Italian and English*. London: Blount, pp. 315-317. See M. Wyatt (2005). *The Italian Encounter with Tudor England. A Cultural Politics of Translation*. Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 223-254.

<sup>9</sup> Th. Fitzherbert (1652). *A Treatise concerning Policy and Religion wherein the infirmity of Humane wit is amply declared, with the necessity of the Grace of God, and true Religion for the perfection of Policy*. London: Roper, p. 45.

which unto them in common belongeth, with a puissant soveraigntie”<sup>10</sup>. Sovereignty (*summa potestas*) is a key notion in modern political thought. Here is Knolles’s Bodin definition: “Maiestie or Soveraigntie is the most high, absolute, and perpetuall power over the citizens and subjects in a Commonweale”<sup>11</sup>. Sovereignty does not necessarily refer to the power exerted by a sovereign king; for example, Hobbes will speak of a sovereign representative that can be either king or a sovereign assembly; while according to Rousseau la *souveranité* will be held by the people. But here Bodin is clearly thinking of an absolute monarchy, and the term *Commonweale* is chosen by Knolles without any fear of echoing the republican form of government.

But what is the connection between *Commonweale* / *Commonwealth* and Plato’s *Timaeus*?

COSMOPOESIS AND POLITICAL ORDER IN PLATO’S *TIMAEUS*  
Plato’s *Timaeus*<sup>12</sup>, as is well known, is a beautiful narration of the genealogy of the universe, but it also has a political meaning, as the opening scene strongly indicates, being the continuation of the dialogue that took place in the *Republic*. Socrates says: “I talked about politics yesterday and my main point, I think, had to do with the kind of political structure cities should have and the kind of men that should make it up so as to be the best possible”. And Timaeus replies: “Yes, Socrates, so you did, and we were all very satisfied with your description of it” (17C). It follows “a review of yesterday’s talk”. In his *Commentary*, Calcidius noted that Plato had analysed political justice in the *Republic*, and natural justice in the *Timaeus*<sup>13</sup>. The fundamental idea is that *political order* must be placed within the wider *cosmological order* (this idea will influence also the ethical and

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<sup>10</sup> J. Bodin (1962). *The Six Bookes of a Commonweale*. Translated by R. Knolles (1606). Edited by K.D. McRae. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> J. Bodin (1962). *The Six Bookes of a Commonweale*, p. 84.

<sup>12</sup> All quotations are from Plato (2000). *Timaeus*. Translated by D.J. Zeyl. Indianapolis-Cambridge: Hackett; also published in Plato (1997). *Complete Works*. Edited by J.M. Cooper. Indianapolis-Cambridge: Hackett, pp. 1225-1291. On the influence of Plato’s *Timaeus* in the history of philosophy see Neschke-Hemtschke A. (ed.) (2000). *Le Timée de Platon. Contributions à l’histoire de sa réception / Platos Timaios. Beiträge zu seiner Rezeptionsgeschichte*. Louvain-Paris: Peeters; see also the studies indicated in the Bibliography: pp. XXXIX-XLIV.

<sup>13</sup> In *Platonis Timaeum Commentarius*, I, VI: Calcidio (2003). *Commentario al Timeo di Platone*. Edited by C. Moreschini. Milan: Bompiani, p. 118.

political philosophy of the Stoics, who will bring it to the extreme consequences, and will speak of *cosmopolitism*)<sup>14</sup>.

While describing the creation of the world by the Demiurgus, the fabricator of reality, Plato writes: “The god wanted everything to be good and nothing to be bad so far as that was possible, and so he took over all that was visible – not at rest but in discordant and disorderly motion – and brought it from a state of disorder to one of order, because he believed that order was in every way better than disorder. [...] Guided by this reasoning, he put intelligence in soul, and soul in body, and so he constructed the universe” (30AB).

It is to be noticed that Platonic creationism is a semi-creationism<sup>15</sup>, and so is divergent from the full, absolute and radical creationism of the Hebrew and Christian traditions, the *creatio ex nihilo*, since the Demiurgus introduces proportion and measure in a previously chaotic but already existing Matter, creating order from disorder, *cosmos* from *caos*. In fact, the universe is generated by a mixture (*memeigmene*) of necessity (*ananke*) and intellect (*nous*) (48A). The rational principle operates on a given material, basically the four elements – air, water, earth and fire – bringing proportion and measure through the imitation of the intelligible order of forms and numbers, which functions as an ideal paradigm. As Marsilio Ficino comments: “All the followers of Pythagoras and Plato consider that the whole world has been compounded from these four elements, through geometrical and musical proportion, which are united to each other in such a way, however, that the harmony of the elements never suffers any discord in the heavens, although beneath the heavens some dissonance seems to arise at certain times and in certain places, but when it arises it is

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<sup>14</sup> “The *Republic* had dwelt on the structural analogy between the state and the individual soul. Now Plato intends to base his conception of human life, both for the individual and for society, on the inexpugnable foundation of the order of the universe”, F.M. Cornford (1997). *Plato's Cosmology. The Timaeus of Plato*. Indianapolis-Cambridge: Hackett, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> See G. Reale (1997). *Toward a New Interpretation of Plato*. Edited by J. Catan & R. Davies. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, pp. 359-431. See also G. Reale (1997). “Plato's Doctrine of the Origin of the World, with special reference to the *Timaeus*”, in T. Calvo & L. Brisson, *Interpreting the Timaeus - Critias. Proceedings of the IV Symposium Platonicum*. Sankt Augustin: Academia, pp. 149-164.

immediately and miraculously restored to a concordant form through the higher harmony”<sup>16</sup>.

The structural order of the universe is a mathematical order. Plato writes that “God is always doing geometry” (53B4). So that the four basic elements are constituted by geometrical forms, of which the most elementary is the triangle. By juxtaposing and multiplying the triangles, more complex figures are generated. Moreover, through the dimensional progression from the point to the line, from the line to the surface, and from the surface to the solid, all existing bodies are generated. Following and developing the Pythagorean’s view of the universe, Plato discovered, in Galileo’s words, that “il libro dell’universo è scritto in caratteri matematici”.

The city must participate in the cosmic order as much as possible, as Plato has emphasized in the ninth book of the *Republic*, writing that the model for the ideal city (the city within us – our soul – as well as the city without us – the political community) is to be found in the heavens<sup>17</sup>. We must keep in mind this Platonic background, in order to understand the elaboration of the notion of *Commonweale / Commonwealth*.

#### DEFINING THE “COMMONWEALE”

Let’s now quickly consider the evolution of the definition of the term *Commonweale / Commonwealth* found in a selection of political works written in English, during the period ranging from 1510 to 1606:

- Edmund Dudley (1462-1510), *The Tree of the Commonwealth* (written in 1510; published in 1859): “[...] the tree of common welth, which tichith people of every degree, of the conditions and demeanours which thei should be off. Forasmutche as every man is naturally bound not only most hartely to pray for the prosperous contynewance of his lyege souvereigne lord and thencrease of the common-wealth of his native countrie, but also to the vttermost of his power to do all thinges that might funder or sounde to thencrease and helpe of the same [...]”<sup>18</sup>;

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<sup>16</sup> M. Ficino (2010). *All Things Natural. Ficino on Plato’s Timaeus*. Translated by A. Fardell. Notes and Additional Material by P. Blumsom. London: Shephard-Walwyn, p. 37.

<sup>17</sup> See Th.A. Szlezák (1996). “Psyche-Polis-Kosmos. Osservazioni sull’unità del pensiero platonico”, in E. Rudolph (ed.), *Polis e Cosmo in Platone*. Milan: Vita e Pensiero, pp. 39-63.

<sup>18</sup> E. Dudley (1948). *The Tree of the Commonwealth*. Edited by D.M. Brodie. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Thomas Starkey (1499-1538), *A Dialogue between Pole and Lupset* (written in 1529-32; published in 1871): “[...] a veray & true commyn wele, wych ys no thing els, but the prosperouse & most perfayt state of a multytud assemblyd togyddur in any cuntrey cyty or towne governyd vertusely in cyvyle lyfe accordyng to the nature & dygnyte of man”<sup>19</sup>;
- Sir Thomas Elyot, *The Book Named the Governor* (1531): “A public weal is a body living, compact or made of sundry estates and degrees of men, which is disposed by the order of equity and governed by the rule and moderation of reason”<sup>20</sup>;
- Sir Thomas Smith (1513-1577), *De Republica Anglorum* (written in 1562-5; published in 1583 – despite the Latin title, the book is written in English): “A common wealth is called a society or common doing of a multitude of free men collected together and united by common accord and covenantes among themselves, for the conservation of themselves as well in peace as in warre”<sup>21</sup>;
- Richard Hooker (1554-1600), *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1593): “A *Commonwealth* we name it [a *Society*] simply in regard of some regiment or policy under which men live [...]”; “To take away all such mutual grievances, injuries, and wrongs, there was no way, but only by growing unto composition ad agreement amongst themselves, by ordaining some kind of government public, and by yielding themselves subject thereunto, that unto whom they granted authority to rule and govern, by them the peace, tranquillity, and happy estate of the rest might be procured”<sup>22</sup>;
- Edward Forset (1553?-1630), *A Comparative Discourse of the Bodies Natural and Politic* (1606) <sup>23</sup> : “It is not therefore called a

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<sup>19</sup> Th. Starkey (1989). *A Dialogue between Pole and Lupset*. Edited by T.F. Mayer. London: Royal Historical Society, p. 38. See Th.F. Mayer (1989). *Thomas Starkey and the Commonweal. Humanist politics and religion in the reign of Henry VIII*. Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>20</sup> Th. Elyot (1962). *The Book Named the Governor*. Edited by S.E. Lehmborg. London-New York: Dent-Dutton, p. 1. See J.M. Major (1964). *Sir Thomas Elyot and Renaissance Humanism*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

<sup>21</sup> Th. Smith (1982). *De Republica Anglorum*. Edited by M. Dewar. Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 57.

<sup>22</sup> R. Hooker (1989). *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. Edited by A.S. McGrade. Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 135 and p. 89.

<sup>23</sup> As was demonstrated by the historian Kevin Sharpe (see the last footnote) Edward Forset is a central political thinker in the English Renaissance. However, he continues to be neglected by the majority of scholars; see for instance J.H. Burns (ed.) (1991). *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450-1700*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and, more recently, M. Hörnqvist (2011). “Renaissance

Commonwealth, that all the wealth should be common; but because the whole wealth, wit, power, and goodnesse whatsoever, of euery particular person, must be conferred and reduced to the common good: and that in the same sort and semblance, as the distinct members of the bodie, being ordained to different vses, do yet concur in this consonance of intention, as to impart and referre all their helps and induements (to the vttermost reach of their abilities) for the procuring and preseruing of the comfort and continuance of this one bodie. All the members ioine their assisting aid, and effect their whole force according to their diuers functions, as well for the vpholding of the whole and euerie part in soundnesse, as also against a common enemy”<sup>24</sup>.

The latter definition is the most Platonic of all, and it also reveals the deep influence of Plato’s *Timaeus* in the political thought of the English Renaissance.

An important passage of the *Timaeus* is also quoted in the *Asclepius* of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Plato writes: “[...] the most sovereign part of our soul [...] resides in the top part of our bodies. It raises up away from the heart and toward what is akin to us in heaven, as though we are plants grown not from the earth but from heaven. In saying this, we speak absolutely correctly. For it is from heaven, the place from which our souls were originally born, that the divine part suspends our head, that is, our root, and so keeps our whole body erect” (90AB).

Forset has clearly in mind this Platonic passage when he explains his own political theory by the way of metaphor: “Plato imagined man to be an heavenlie plant; his head to be the roote; his bulke, the stocke; his armes and legs the branches; and his root to draw his fapp from the heavens to feede therewith the under parts, spreading downward towards the earth”. The text continues as follows: “Such a plantation do I conceive in the institution of a State politique: the sovereign head

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Political Philosophy”, in G. Klosko (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Political Philosophy*. Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 206-226; in both studies Forset is not even mentioned.

<sup>24</sup> E. Forset (1606). *A Comparative Discourse of the Bodies Natural and Politique. Wherein out of the principles of Nature, is set forth the true forme of Commonweale, with the dutie of Subjects, and the right of the Souereigne: together with many good points of Politicall learning, mentioned in a Briefe after the Preface*. London: Bill, p. 48. See R. Santi (2014). “Edward Forset: Why is the ‘Body Politique’ called a ‘Commonweale’?”, in S. Garrett Zeitlin, R. Santi, L. Borot, M.-I. Ducrocq, *The “Commonwealth as Political Space in Late Renaissance England*. Padua: Kluwer-Cedam, pp. 27-53.

to be designed, inspired, depending, and protected from above; and the body with the out-growing parts thereof, to receive nourishment, strength, flourishing, and fruitfulness from that root of a rightfull regiment”<sup>25</sup>.

This brief investigation on primary sources has shown that Platonism was the dominant paradigm in Renaissance England as far as the notion of *Commonweale* / *Commonwealth* is concerned. The central idea is that of *harmony* arising from disorder and chaos. In the words of the historian Kevin Sharpe: “What we would separate as private and public interest, the individual and the state, was harmonized in the concept of commonweal. Indeed the commonweal was represented generally as a condition of harmony”<sup>26</sup>. For the *Commonweale* / *Commonwealth* “there is a model in heaven” (*Republic*, IX, 592B) and this heaven is that described in Plato’s *Timaeus*.

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<sup>25</sup> E. Forset (1606). *A Comparative Discourse of the Bodies Natural and Politique*, p. 26.

<sup>26</sup> K. Sharpe (2000). *Remapping Early Modern England. The Culture of Seventeenth-Century Politics*. Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 51.

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