*This is the author original manuscript. To cite, please refer to the Version of Record in Castelnérac, B., Gili, L., & Monteils-Laeng, L. (eds) (2024)* Foreign Influences: The Circulation of Knowledge in Antiquity. *Turnhout: Brepols*.

Xenophobia in Utopia: On the *Metics* in Plato’s *Laws*

*David Merry*

**Introduction**

In the *Laws,* the Athenian Stranger recommends limiting foreign visits to the city, on the grounds that foreigners may introduce ‘innovations’; travel abroad is also seriously restricted, with citizens only allowed to travel after their 40th birthday, and subject to an intense ideological examination on their return. The consequences of failing this examination are extremely cruel: those who come back beguiled by the dangerous thought of foreign states are to be completely isolated for the rest of their lives, to avoid allowing the contamination to spread.

In another passage, and apparently a different mood, the Athenian Stranger observes that the job of being a good citizen is a demanding one, and that citizens simply do not have enough time to cultivate other skills. To ensure that Magnesia’s citizens have access to doctors, carpenters, teachers and blacksmiths, the Athenian Stranger suggests allowing a considerable population of *metics* to reside in the city, apparently sanguine about any possible innovations.[[1]](#footnote-1)

These passages raise a number of questions: why must foreign visits be so closely controlled, if there is in any case already a large foreign population residing in the heart of Magnesia? How much interaction will these *metics* be allowed with the local population? And how do these positions relate to debates about immigration and foreign residency in and among the Greek City States of the 4th Century? Is the *Laws* ultimately a pro-*metic*, anti-*metic* text, or does it sit on the fence?

I will argue that, on these issues, the *Laws* is internally consistent but nonetheless playing a double game. For while a close reading of the passages about the *metics* reveals the same paranoia towards foreigners as the later passages regarding foreign influence, these recommendations are for a state thought to be well-governed. The Athenian Stranger will quite explicitly argue that badly governed states—a category that encompasses all actually existing states—have nothing to fear from foreign influence. Nevertheless, as well see, the conclusions the Athenian Stranger reaches in the *Laws* should be disquieting to anyone who is both optimistic about realising the ideals of a well-governed state, and believes that states play a central role in shaping the character of their citizens.

**Part One: The Two Magnesias**

In 1945, Popper published the first edition of *The Open Society and its Enemies.[[2]](#footnote-2)* He saw in Plato’s political philosophy an important blueprint to modern authoritarian states. Although he focuses on Plato’s *Republic,* Popper was also familiar with the *Laws,* and frequently points out that Magnesia is in no ways less totalitarian than Callipolis. In discussions of Magnesia’s approach to foreigners, Popper is often cited as one who saw in Magnesia a regime characterized by excessive isolationism and xenophobia.

Popper’s work is certainly an important part of the background of recent approaches to the question of Magnesia’s stance towards foreigners. For a reading of Plato according to which Magnesia implemented markedly xenophobic policies would fit in well with Popper’s understanding of Plato as an authoritarian. For those who wish to defend Plato against such charges, Popper has frequently served as a useful foil.[[3]](#footnote-3) Nevertheless, on the matter of Magnesia’s treatment of foreign residents, and its attitude towards foreign influence, Popper actually said very little. No doubt this is merely because Popper focused on the *Republic,* a work which sets aside such issues entirely; the *Laws* appears in Popper’s work primarily to reassure the readers that Plato the Authoritarian did not soften his positions in his old age.

The main proponent in relatively recent history of the view that the *Laws* takes a strongly anti-foreigner perspective is that of **Vidal-Naquet. In *Le Chasseur Noir*, Vidal-Naquet argues that Magnesia’s policy on foreigners was characterised by a profound ambivalence. Foreigners were recognised as necessary, and allowed to live in the very heart of the city.**[[4]](#footnote-4) **However, they were also seen as inferior to citizens, as craftspeople incapable, by their devotion to their profession, of cultivating virtue, and therefore as dangerous. Accordingly, the Athenian stranger recommends extraordinary measures for preventing corruption of the population by the foreigners on whom they depend, including separate villages and suburbs reserved that will be inhabited by foreigners, but colonized by the garrison and the gods.**

**This view of Magnesia as a segregated city was unacceptable to Saunders, who published two articles in which he argued that the villages and the suburbs were occupied by citizens as well as foreigners.**[[5]](#footnote-5) **Saunders’ reading matches other recent scholarship in seeing Magnesia’s policies on the treatment of foreign residents as differing primarily in detail from the Athenian practice, and offering a mixture of advantages and disadvantages for the *metic* that may overall have been a better deal.**[[6]](#footnote-6) ***Metics* in Magnesia had, among others, the following advantages: that they did not need a citizen to represent them in court, that crimes against *metics* were punished more severely than crimes against citizens, and *metics* did not have to pay the hefty *metic* tax, the *metoikon*. The main disadvantages, on these readings, is that *metics*’ stay in Magnesia were limited to 25 years, and their wealth was capped. The balance between benefits and disadvantages is quite different from on Vidal-Naquet’s reading, where *metics* in Magnesia would face a level of exclusion from mainstream society an order of magnitude greater than what metics would have faced in Athens.**

Part of my purpose in writing this paper is to take up what I see as being right in Vidal-Naquet’s position. My reasons for doing this will, as we will see below, be two-fold. First, I cannot make sense of Plato’s Greek in any other way than to understand it as laying out provisions for a segregated city.[[7]](#footnote-7) The second is that following Saunders introduces too strong a tension between policies on interactions with foreigners; in a different passage, the Athenian stranger will argue that mixing with foreigners is enormously dangerous for citizens of an ideal state. On Vidal-Naquet’s reading, we find Magnesia’s policy on *metics* striking a balance between the necessity of delegating artisanal works to foreigen residents, and the necessity of limiting contact with them. On Saunders’ reading, we do not. Furthermore, it seems to me a very serious mistake in the history of political thought to miss the segregation of Plato’s second-best-city.

The most recent treatment of these issues is LeMoine’s. Her reading of the conditions in Magnesia is similar to Saunders’, and as a result has not fully accounted for the harshness of Magnesia’s policy on *metics*. Nevertheless, she rightly picks up an overarching theme of friendliness towards foreigners in the *Laws*, and is motivated to account for the apparently anti-foreign policy proposals in light of this theme. Her approach is to argue that the *Laws* illustrates a dialogue in which at least some progress is made by an open-minded Athenian arguing against a xenophobic Spartan and a xenophobic Cretan. The policies in Magnesia may be less than ideal, but they are better than what is found in Sparta and Crete, so the Athenian has, in the space of a relatively short conversation, won some victories for foreigners.

Although I admire how LeMoine’s reading integrates literary, dramatic, historical and philosophical considerations, I think it is ultimately indefensible. It is indefensible in large part because her understanding of the contrast between Athens and Sparta is insufficiently nuanced. Nevertheless, her reading does solve a genuine exegetical problem that, for instance, Vidal-Naquet did not notice, and that is to provide a reading of the text that takes into account both the positive and the negative sides of Plato’s discussion of foreigners. For it seems strange, on the one hand, to argue fervently against the view that foreign countries represent the greatest threat to a city, but on the other to push for the exclusion and marginalization of foreign residents. It’s not beyond all possibility that Plato wished to argue for isolationism and against militarism, but I ultimately agree with LeMoine that Plato wished to argue against both, though I think his critique of isolationism comes with a serious caveat.

*Metics in Greek City States in the 4th Century BCE*

The *Laws* is a dialogue between three people from three different ancient Greek city states: Athens, Sparta, and Crete. Although it is tempting to see Athens as an ancient paradigm of open-minded, liberal cosmopolitanism, and Sparta and Crete as isolated and homogenous cities behind an ancient iron curtain, the situation is actually considerably more nuanced than that.

Athens appears to have attracted a considerable population of *metics*, no doubt in part because of its status as an economic and cultural powerhouse. Many *metics* did very well in Athens, achieving cultural and economic success. Furthermore, Athenians prided themselves on their xenophilia, as opposed to Spartan xenophobia; it was part of Athens’ strategy of portraying itself as a more humane and advanced civilisation than Sparta, in particular, in portraying itself as a city with the right to military dominance.[[8]](#footnote-8)

As much as Athenian friendliness towards foreigners was a point of pride, in reality *metics* living in Athens faced many challenges, and those who succeeded did so, as is usually the case with immigrants, very much against the odds. *Metics* were subject to a heavy tax, known as the *metoikon.* Unlike Athenian citizens, they could not represent themselves in court, but required a citizen to represent them. Commentators make a lot of this requirement, but to this it ought to be added that they would be tried by a jury of Athenian citizens, who did not always hold the most positives *metics*. *Metics* had no means of political representation, except through their connections with Athenian citizens; *metics* could only become citizens under exceptional circumstances.

Two themes in fourth century Attic politics illustrate the often hostile environment for *metics* in Athens. The first is the question of whether, as Xenophon urged,[[9]](#footnote-9) Athens should improve conditions for *metics* to attract more of them to the city. *Metics* were an important source of economic prosperity for the city; however, many Athenians resented the success of some *metics*, and saw them as forming a too-influential *metic* elite that threatened Athenian sovereignty over Attic affairs. That there was a lively debate about numbers of immigration suggests that a significant portion of the population held anti-immigrant attitudes. The second is the question of inter-marriage. Futo Kennedy has offered a fascinating study of how the legal status of intermarriage between citizens and foreigners developed over the 4th century BCE: at times it was legal, at times it was not. A restriction on marrying foreigners is an acute form of hostility and exclusion towards the foreign residents of a city.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In saying this I do not mean to judge Athenian policy by the standards of today. No doubt Athenian policy was relatively open-minded in comparison to other Greek city states, and arose in response to contemporary political challenges and ideologies. That these positions were in line with the politics of the time does not, however, detract from the real and material challenges these policies would have presented for *metics* living in Athens, and it is important for contemporary scholars to present the situation in Athens not only as it would have appeared to Athenian citizens, but also as much as possible from the perspective of *metics*. We ought not forget that it is from this city so proud of its *xenophilia* that would Aristotle flee in fear of rising anti-Macedonian sentiment.

In contrast with Athens, the status of *metic* seems not to have existed in Sparta. Nevertheless, foreigners did reside, sometimes for extended periods in Sparta, through sponsorship by members of influential Spartans. Spartans however saw foreign influence as particularly dangerous, and deemed it important to limit interactions with foreigners. In particular, foreigners brought with them temptations in the form of the misleading appeal of a luxurious lifestyle. Where Athenians thought marriage with foreigners needed to be restricted, Spartans were uneasy even about conversing too frequently.

The *Laws* itself mentions the Spartan policy of *xenelasia* as a potential source of hostility from other states.[[11]](#footnote-11) It was indeeda policy that Perciles appealed to in his anti-Spartan rhetoric, and the practice is portrayed in the *Birds* of Aristophanes, who portrays foreigners being driven from the city by blows. The evidence on what precisely *xenelasia* was, how often it was practiced, or how violent it was, is rather murky: what we can say is that it involved periodic purges of the foreign population. Some of these purges were particularly targeted towards artisans working in luxury crafts, suggesting a close connection between *xenelasia* and Spartan austerity. Although we do not know the frequency with which *xenelasia* was employed, it need not have been practiced often to produce an atmosphere of insecurity among the foreigners residing in Sparta.

The Athenian stranger also mentions Crete’s remoteness as a source of isolation from foreigners. Our evidence for the number, and living conditions of foreigners at Crete is even more scant than the evidence for the situation at Sparta. Nevertheless, the evidence we do have suggests a fairly stable and significant population living in Cretan cities: provisions were provided for a magistrate in charge of foreigners, the *xenios* (or *xenios kosmios)* and for conducting trials for foreigners (a policy adopted in Magnesia).[[12]](#footnote-12)

In actual fact, then, Athens, Sparta, and Crete all benefited from the presence of a significant population of foreigners, and at least Athens and Sparta mistreated and disenfranchised these populations in a variety of ways, although Sparta’s practice of *xenelasia* and lack of a framework made it less friendly toward foreign residents than Athens. As we turn now to the text of the *Laws,* we will see how the argument of the *Laws* both problematizes and endorses anti-immigrant sentiments in ancient Greek states.

**The Mixing Argument**

Although it lacks grace to proceed contrary to the order of a text, it is sometimes necessary to be vulgar. To understand the position of Magnesia’s *metics,* it will be of great value to turn first to the discussion of foreign influence in *Laws* XII, as this discussion is of a more general nature and better reflects the stance of Plato’s second-best-city towards foreigners. We find ourselves, then, at *Laws* 949e, where the discussion of Magnesian relations with the outside begins with the following passage:

*πέφυκεν δὲ ἡ πόλεων ἐπιμειξία πόλεσιν ἤθη κεραννύναι παντοδαπά καινοτομίας ἀλλήλοις ἐμποιούντων ξένων ξένοις: ὃ δὴ τοῖς μὲν εὖ πολιτευομένοις διὰ νόμων ὀρθῶν βλάβην ἂν φέροι μεγίστην πασῶν, ταῖς δὲ πλείσταις πόλεσιν, ἅτε οὐδαμῶς εὐνομουμέναις, οὐδὲν διαφέρει φύρεσθαι δεχομένους τε αὐτοῖς ξένους καὶ αὐτοὺς εἰς τὰς ἄλλας ἐπικωμάζοντας πόλεις, ὅταν ἐπιθυμήσῃ τις ἀποδημίας ὁπῃοῦν καὶ ὁπότε, εἴτε νέος εἴτε καὶ πρεσβύτερος ὤν.*

Now on the one hand exchange of cities with cities leads naturally to mixing of all kinds of customs with foreigners producing innovations in each other. Now, in those cities governed by correct laws, this will bring the greatest harm of all, although in most cities, which are not well-governed at all, it makes no difference to mix the things foreigners receive from them with those already in the city, or if anyone desires to go abroad, whether old or young. [*Laws* XII 949e-50a]

The above argument is a variation, possibly a parody, of a popular Spartan discourse concerning foreigners.[[13]](#footnote-13) We find its echoes in several sources. In Hesychius’ lexicon we come across a gloss of *xenelasia* as the prevention of ‘intermingling’ (*epimignusthai)* with foreigners, paralleling the use of ‘mixing’ (*epimeixia)* in the first line of the passage just cited. In Xenophon occurs the idea that the danger of mixture lies in the importing of foreign customs: according to his testimony, the purpose of *xenelasia* was to prevent Spartans from becoming “imbued with self-indulgence” from the *xenoi*. (*DL* 14[[14]](#footnote-14)) The Athenian stranger here is offering a line of argument that his interlocutors ought to find sympathetic, and one that shaped Sparta’s austere stance towards the outside*.*

The Athenian introduces a nuance in this argument, however, that upsets everything: although the introduction of innovations by foreigners is a serious threat to well-governed states, it makes no difference at all in states that are not well-governed. This is already to critique the adoption of the argument by the Spartans–for by this point in the *Laws,* we have determined that Sparta’s excessive focus on foreign, rather than internal, threats undermines the principles of its jurisprudence. The line of argument might hold in Magnesia, but it does not hold in Sparta (nor could it in Athens). Essentially, in his presentation of this argument, the Athenian stranger makes explicit a problematic assumption underpinning the logic of much xenophobia, namely, the assumption of the superiority of those seeking to exclude others. This is an assumption that one could argue the *Laws* itself undermines, by rendering vivid the distance between states ideal and actual.

Even in Magnesia, a state that is *ex hypothesi* superior to other states, the Athenian is unwilling to lend this argument his full endorsement, for a few reasons. The first is that the practice of isolating one’s state from others has bad consequences for international relations, as it gives the state a reputation for being difficult (χαλεπός) and stubborn (αὐθάδης).[[15]](#footnote-15) The second is that there are *some* advantages of mixing with foreigners. The Athenian mentions two: mixing with foreigners can remind one of the superiority of one’s own laws,[[16]](#footnote-16) and observation of foreign societies is necessary for maintenance of an advanced civilisation.[[17]](#footnote-17) Rather than advocating for total isolation, therefore, the Athenian stranger will allow some small concessions, including carefully regulated travel for older people of exceptional character, and participation in international sporting events.[[18]](#footnote-18) It is worth noting that the restrictions on mixing with foreigners are here, *pace* LeMoine, similar and if anything rather stricter than those of Sparta.

We ought not give too much weight, however to the exiguous space the Athenian allows for foreign influence. After all, he acknowledges that the mixing argument is essentially along the right lines: even given the considerations mentioned in the previous paragraph, contact with the vast majority of foreigners is considered a necessary evil, and one far from trivial. The basic point that in a state with good laws, contact with foreigners must be avoided so far as possible is here conceded; the Athenian stranger disputes only how far one may practically take such limitations.[[19]](#footnote-19) While in the *Laws* the existence of a good state is presented as a possibility merely theoretical, Plato does seem to have thought striving towards creating a well-governed state a worthwhile ideal, and from what we find here, he seems to think that careful control of immigration will be a necessary corollary of the achievement of this project. The *Laws* offers a critique of extant xenophobia, but at the same time dreams a state worthy of fearing outsiders.[[20]](#footnote-20)

So then, if a well-governed state existed, would we be able to respond to this argument? This question is worth exploring not only to understand the project of the *Laws,* but also because it should be highly provocative in itself. This argument underscores that the aim of creating a well-governed state is also one of making a state that is governed *better* than other states. But then, how is this state to relate to the ‘worse-governed’ states, and their people, with which it must co-exist? Minimising contact, at least, is an approach that unlike conquest or ‘liberation’ acknowledges the sovereignty of the ‘inferior’ states. Yet to those of us who are cosmopolitans, and even to many who are not, such isolationism is an entirely unacceptable result.

One promising avenue of response would be to question the assumption that citizens of a state are bearers of its legislative flaws. Just because a state is badly governed does not mean there is anything wrong with the people who live there; it is just that the wrong people have somehow managed, one way or another, to secure power, or even just that some serious errors were made in legislative decisions. It is one thing to refuse to be influenced by the political leaders of a country, another to refuse to be influenced by its populace. In authoritarian states, it seems particularly unfair to hold the people of the state responsible for the actions of the government. Even if the state in question is democratic, we might plausibly enough think that people have been unreasonably swayed by the mesmerizing haircut and seductively idiosyncratic grammar of a charismatic populist, rather than to believe that the choice of political leadership reveals that a large portion of the population of the country seems to have—to take an example of course by no means actual—alarmingly chauvinistic and racist values.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The approach to legislation in the *Laws* provides the Stranger’s response to this line of argument. Magnesia’s legal philosophy is based on a view of laws as fundamentally educative. The argument is that behaviour, and subsequently character, is shaped by expectations of pleasure and pain, and that it is the nature of legislation to control these expectations through the imposition of rewards and punishments.[[22]](#footnote-22) That the law influences behaviour through shaping expectations is certainly a common idea in modern political thought: talk of incentives and deterrents pervades discourse about legislative options. The view in the *Laws,* however, is more substantial. The *Laws* takes seriously the idea that being subject to a legal system has a cumulative and enduring effect on people’s characters. In a legislative discourse informed by an economics that abstracts from the differences between people and sees them as fungible rational decision makers, there is little room for the idea that legislation *changes* people; for if everyone is essentially the same, nobody changes in any essential way.

That the function of *punishment* should be one of education is also familiar, and its importance and relationship to power and control has long been a central theme of research across the humanities*.* Many people would like to see prisons as a place of rehabilitation rather than a place where vengeance is exercised through the state. But insofar as this idea plays a role in contemporary discourse, it stems from a construal of criminals as defective, abnormal and in need of help. According to this view, the state may play a role in correcting serious defects of character when these are the causes of criminal activity; most people are not, however, in need of the educative effects of the law, and the idea that we should consider the lasting effects of the law on free citizens’ moral characters, rather than on their immediate behaviour, is not exactly in vogue.

The unfamiliarity of this approach can perhaps be most strongly felt in the different punishments that the Athenian envisages for temple robbery. Foreigners and slaves are to be branded, whipped, and left naked beyond the bounds of the city. Although this punishment is harsh, it is less severe than the punishment for citizens, which is death.[[23]](#footnote-23) The justification for this lies in the consideration that citizens have been consistently subject to the full legislative apparatus of Magnesia for their whole life, while *metics* or foreigners have had a smaller dose of this educative regime. A citizen who commits a crime thus reveals themselves as incorrigible, whereas the same inference cannot be drawn for a foreign visitor or *metic*.[[24]](#footnote-24) What I want to highlight about this line of argument is that the prior exposure to legal systems is here used as an essential tool in understanding the state of the character of criminals: crime is just what the legislator expects from those who have not been brought up under the improving shadow of the Magnesian courts.

Another important feature of the conception of legislation in Magnesia is its breadth. In Magnesia, expectations of pleasure and pain are shaped not only by the use of punishment and reward, but also by many other forces, including the games that people play as children.[[25]](#footnote-25) According to the Athenian, we discover our greatest devotions in our childhood diversions; playing with little hammers will awaken a love for carpentry, and reciting lines of verse will awaken a love for meters.[[26]](#footnote-26) It is for this reason that young Magnesian citizens must play at the craft of being good citizens, so that they can expect to find their greatest happiness therein. This explains why, in Magnesia, we do not find allowance for the good influence of the legislative system, over time, to improve the character of *metics—*or even the children of *metics*—until it is as good as that of citizens. It is necessary to have been brought up Magnesian by Magneisans to have the characteristic Magnesian love of virtue. And as such, all foreigners are suspect.

As we follow the discussion of foreign influence further, we find (as mentioned earlier) that not all innovations foreigners may introduce are bad. The problem is that, in uncontrolled interactions with foreigners, there is no mechanism by which good innovations may be separated from bad. The Athenian proposes two methods by which innovations may be responsibly harvested from foreigners.

The first is through the permission granted to mature citizens of good character to go on a journey for a limited period of time to see how things are in other states. The traveler’s primary job is to confirm the superiority of Magnesia to the other states they visit. However, they are also to look for political arrangements that may be advantageous to adopt in Magnesia; on their return, they are to propose these changes to the council in Magnesia, and, if the council agrees, Magnesia will adopt these changes.[[27]](#footnote-27) The Athenian therefore recognises that even a good state such as Magnesia may have need to learn from other states; such studies must, however, be conducted systematically and with the utmost neuroticism and paranoia.

The second is through the Magnesians’ interest in seeking the help of exceptional geniuses of political philosophy. [[28]](#footnote-28) According to the Athenian, there are some people who have an exceptional talent for legislation, and these are equally likely to be born in any country. Magnesia is open to learning from such people, and indeed part of the job of travelers is to seek out the assistance of such people.

In spite of these two concessions, the Magnesian attitude towards foreign influence is overwhelmingly negative: Magnesia is to see itself as a well-governed state, and sees this governance as embodied in the hearts and minds of its citizens. As such, it must be careful to protect itself from the influence of foreign practices and characters. It is against this background of suspicion of foreign influence, rather than solely against the background of the debate about *metics* living in Athens, or against the differences in foreign policy of Athens and Sparta, that it is necessary to interpret the discussion of the population of *metic* craftspeople.

**3: The Two-Crafts Argument**

We can now finally approach the matter of Magnesia’s considerable *metic* population. The section outlining their living conditions starts with an argument that I shall call the two-crafts argument. We will set this out in detail shortly, but, in broad, the argument is that mastering two crafts is impossible, and that citizens must master the craft proper to citizenship. It will follow that they cannot devote themselves to other crafts; these must be undertaken by *metics*. We will see, in keeping with our above discussion of the mixing argument, that contact with these *metics* is minimized, although the *metics* constitute a considerable foreign population residing in Magnesia.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Whitehead argued that the policy of Magnesia is primarily anti-artisan, rather than anti-foreign.[[30]](#footnote-30) While he is correct to emphasise the anti-artisan implications of the passage, he sees these two concerns as too readily separable. For it is not as though Magnesians take any more warmly to foreigners who are not artisans. It is, however, true to say that being an artisan is a *cause* of foreignness in Magnesia, in that the plying of an artisanal trade excludes one from citizenship and renders one as among those whose influence is to be avoided and minimized. It may be fair to say that the artisans of Magnesia are treated *as* foreign *because* they are artisans. But even this is not quite correct, for they are also given a level, however, minimal, of *inclusion* in the city *precisely because* they artisans.

Here is the text in which our argument is to be found:

τὸ δὲ τῶν ἄλλων δημιουργῶν ποιεῖν χρὴ κατὰ τόδε. πρῶτον μὲν ἐπιχώριος μηδεὶς ἔστω τῶν περὶ τὰ δημιουργικὰ τεχνήματα διαπονούντων, μηδὲ οἰκέτης ἀνδρὸς ἐπιχωρίου. τέχνην γὰρ ἱκανήν, πολλῆς ἀσκήσεως ἅμα καὶ μαθημάτων πολλῶν δεομένην, κέκτηται πολίτης ἀνὴρ τὸν κοινὸν τῆς πόλεως κόσμον σῴζων καὶ κτώμενος, οὐκ ἐν παρέργῳ δεόμενον ἐπιτηδεύειν: δύο δὲ ἐπιτηδεύματα ἢ δύο τέχνας ἀκριβῶς διαπονεῖσθαι σχεδὸν οὐδεμία φύσις ἱκανὴ τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων, οὐδ᾽ αὖ τὴν μὲν αὐτὸς ἱκανὸς ἀσκεῖν, τὴν δὲ ἄλλον ἀσκοῦντα ἐπιτροπεύειν.

Regarding the other artisans, it is necessary to make arrangements as follows. First, let no local person be one of those who devotes themselves to artisanal skills, nor the slave of a local household. For a sufficient art, which requires much practice and study, falls to the man of the city: that of protecting and establishing the common order of the city, and this may not be carried out on the side. For hardly any human has a nature sufficient for devoting themselves accurately to two ways of life or two skills, nor indeed sufficient to practice one, while supervising the activities of someone exercising another.[[31]](#footnote-31) [*Laws* VIII.846d-e]

Some remarks to begin. Bury and Saunders use the term *citizens* throughout in their translation, however, the first mention of the citizens may better be captured in English with ‘local people’ (*ἐπιχώριος*). Further on we find *citizen man* although the standard term for this in Greek can also be understood as *man of the city* (*πολίτης ἀνὴρ*). In Magnesia, citizens are both permanent and established residents and bearers of political power and responsibility. By leading first with ‘local people’, and then proceeding to ‘citizen man’, the Athenian emphasizes first that citizens are residents, rather than that they are rulers.

# It is with this emphasis that we should read the argument, then: those local to a city are responsible for protecting and maintaining the common order of a city, which is something that requires much practice and study, and which cannot be taken on as a secondary concern. This ability of the citizens is described at once both as a way of life (*ἐπιτήδευμα*) and as an art (*τέχνη*): the citizen both has a skill and exercises it, and this is required for maintaining their duties. Anyone without this art is not local, and may not reside permanently.

In the *Republic,* just as in Aristotle’s *Politics* later, we will find the idea that the skill of governing a city is a specialised skill that must be developed over intense study within a lifetime, and that the right of governing falls only to those with that skill. Nevertheless, in those works, residing in a city and having a right to govern the city are taken to be separable. And, in those works, craftspeople are not foreigners; they are simply disenfranchised locals. In the *Laws,* however, the duty of protecting and maintaining the common order falls to all those who can rightly be said to live there.

The reason why the *Laws* sees the requirement to develop virtue as so closely connected to residency is presumably the same as in the mixing argument, although it has not yet been articulated. People who reside together influence each other, and introduce ‘innovations’ into each others’ lifestyles. And we can imagine, plausibly enough, that the lifestyle of, say, an excellent dancer will be different from that of an excellent philosopher. The dancer will want space to practice movement, will want to see dance performances, to stay in shape and look after their body, while the philosopher will wish to read extensively, to debate philosophy, and to watch the clouds drifting by. If a philosopher and a dancer were to live in close proximity to each other, it is quite possible that the dancer’s life would become more examined, and the philosopher’s more choreographed.[[32]](#footnote-32) So in the same way that people who grew up subject to different laws offer, according to the Athenian, a potentially dangerous source of influence, so do those who grew up devoted to a different art and way of life.

A final remark before we turn to the texts outlining how the *metics* are to live. It is not without importance that the Athenian Stranger states that there is scarcely any nature among *human ones* (*ἀνθρωπίνων*) which is capable of mastering two crafts. Highlighting the notion of *human* in this context emphasizes that the arrangements to be undertaken are, in an important sense, an accommodation to human limitations. If it were possible, it would be better that the citizens were also craftspeople, so that they might not need to share their space in any way whatsoever with those who may endanger the common order of the city.[[33]](#footnote-33) But it is better to allow, with restrictions, a significant foreign population than to compromise the political skill of the citizens.

With these remarks in mind, we may turn to the passages that outline the living conditions for *metics.* We will see that, in keeping with the darker reading outlined in the first section, the measures introduced in these passages aim to limit the potential risks of having a large foreign population in the city.

τὸ δὲ μετὰ τοῦτο αὐτοῖς οἰκήσεις δεῖ χωρὶς διατεταγμένας εἶναι: τάξις δὲ ἥδε πρέπει τοῖς τοιούτοις. δώδεκα κώμας εἶναι χρή, κατὰ μέσον τὸ δωδεκατημόριον ἕκαστον μίαν […] τὴν δὲ ἄλλην χώραν κατασκευάζειν πᾶσαν δημιουργῶν τριακαίδεκα μέρη διελομένους, καὶ τὸ μὲν ἐν ἄστει κατοικίζειν, διελομένους αὖ καὶ τοῦτο εἰς τὰ δώδεκα μέρη τῆς πόλεως ἁπάσης, ἔξω τε καὶ ἐν κύκλῳ κατανεμηθέντας, ἐν τῇ κώμῃ δὲ ἑκάστῃ τὰ πρόσφορα γεωργοῖς γένη τῶν δημιουργῶν συνοικίζειν. τοὺς δ᾽ ἐπιμελητὰς εἶναι τούτων πάντων τοὺς τῶν ἀγρονόμων ἄρχοντας, ὅσων τε καὶ ὧντινων ὁ τόπος ἕκαστος δεῖται, καὶ ὅπου κατοικοῦντες ἀλυπότατοί τε καὶ ὠφελιμώτατοι ἔσονται τοῖσιν γεωργοῖσι.

Next, it is necessary that dwellings be arranged separately for them. The arrangement for this will be as follows: there must be twelve villages, one in the middle of each of the twelve sectors. […] For the supply of the other areas, all of the artisans will be divided into twelve parts; one, established in the city, will again be divided into the twelve parts of the whole city, and be settled outside in a ring; and the kind of craftsperson useful to farmers will live in each town. Those in charge of the country garrisons will decide how many and which kind of artisan each area needs, and where they will live most harmlessly and most helpfully to the farmers. [*Laws* XII.848c-e]

I take this passage to be primarily about where the artisan population is to live. It stipulates quite that the dwellings for artisans are to be *separate* (*χωρὶς*) from the rest of the population. To this end, villages will be established in the country-side, in the middle of each of the twelve sectors, with market places and temples and a garrison. The artisan population will be divided into thirteen parts; the first part, which is to serve the city, will then be subdivided into twelve parts, each of which will be arranged *outside* (ἔξω) the city, and in a ring. The remaining artisans, those with skills useful in a rural setting, will be allotted to the villages.It is remarkable that, particularly anglophone, commentators have tended to advocate for readings according to which artisans and citizens live side-by-side. For instance, Morrow states that “the idea of a separate quarter for the artisans and the metics cannot be derived without an arbitrary interpretation of *sunoikountes* in 848a”, [[34]](#footnote-34) although as we clearly see from what I have set out just above the evidence for separate quarters is rather found in 848d-e, and requires no interpretation, arbitrary or otherwise, of Plato’s word-choice at 848a. Saunders, whose translation is used in Cooper’s collection, and so is probably the most influential among anglophone readers at present, reads the suggestion that this passage envisages separate living arrangements for artisans and citizens as “unlikely in the extreme.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

For Saunders, what we find in this passage is a description of the living arrangements for the whole population, not just for the artisans. This interpretation is rather curious, as the living arrangements of the citizens have been discussed earlier (at *Laws V.745bff.*), and are presupposed by this passage. Furthermore, this passage occurs in the middle of the discussion *of artisans* that runs from *Laws* [846d-850a]. Reading this passage as being about the dwellings of artisans*,* rather than the population in general, therefore lends the *Laws* a far more coherent structure–according to this reading, the previous arrangements for the dwellings of citizens are expanded to provide two new, separate spaces for artisans: areas at the outskirts of cities, and villages in the middle of the country-side. If we are to take Saunders’ reading, we must provide some kind of explanation as to why these spaces, for the whole population, are described in the middle of the discussion of artisans. Even if the *Laws* is not the most carefully structured work in the history of philosophy, one ought not multiply digressions beyond necessity.

Saunders struggles to see how to make sense of the provisions in the final section of the passage on the assumption that artisans and citizens have segregated living arrangements.[[36]](#footnote-36) According to Saunders, this passage foresees the *agrunomoi* as distributing the artisans among the country-side, and discouraging them from all living in the towns. There is, hoPwever, a way to interpret the point of this provision without following Saunders in ignoring the text’s explicit direction that the artisans helpful to farmers will live *in each village*. The *agrunomoi* after all perform a tour of each of the twelve villages; they can ensure that the artisans are settled so that each village has enough to provide the needs of the farmers, without having a greater population than is strictly necessary. If one village is lacking carpenters and another has too many, then the *argunomoi* can arrange for carpenters to be transferred from the one area to the other.

The next passage to look at concerns the right to reside in the city:

έναι δὲ τὸν βουλόμενον εἰς τὴν μετοίκησιν ἐπὶ ῥητοῖς, ὡς οἰκήσεως οὔσης τῶν ξένων τῷ βουλομένῳ καὶ δυναμένῳ κατοικεῖν, τέχνην κεκτημένῳ καὶ ἐπιδημοῦντι μὴ πλέον ἐτῶν εἴκοσιν ἀφ᾽ ἧς ἂν γράψηται, μετοίκιον μηδὲ σμικρὸν τελοῦντι πλὴν τοῦ σωφρονεῖν, μηδὲ ἄλλο αὖ τέλος ἕνεκά τινος ὠνῆς ἢ καὶ πράσεως: ὅταν δ᾽ ἐξήκωσιν οἱ χρόνοι, τὴν αὑτοῦ λαβόντα οὐσίαν ἀπιέναι. ἐὰν δ᾽ ἐν τοῖς ἔτεσι τούτοις αὐτῷ συμβῇ λόγου ἀξίῳ πρὸς εὐεργεσίαν τῆς πόλεως γεγονέναι τινὰ ἱκανήν, καὶ πιστεύῃ πείσειν βουλὴν καὶ ἐκκλησίαν, ἤ τινα ἀναβολὴν τῆς ἐξοικήσεως ἀξιῶν αὑτῷ γίγνεσθαι κυρίως, ἢ καὶ τὸ παράπαν διὰ βίου τινὰ μονήν, ἐπελθὼν καὶ πείσας τὴν πόλιν, ἅπερ ἂν πείσῃ, ταῦτα αὐτῷ τέλεα γιγνέσθω. παισὶ δὲ μετοίκων, δημιουργοῖς οὖσι καὶ γενομένοις ἐτῶν πεντεκαίδεκα, τῆς μὲν μετοικίας ἀρχέτω χρόνος ὁ μετὰ τὸ πέμπτον καὶ δέκατον ἔτος, ἐπὶ τούτοις δὲ εἴκοσιν ἔτη μείνας, ἴτω ὅπῃ αὐτῷ φίλον, μένειν δὲ ἂν βούληται, κατὰ τὰ αὐτὰ μενέτω πείσας: ὁ δὲ ἀπιὼν ἐξαλειψάμενος ἴτω τὰς ἀπογραφάς, αἵτινες ἂν αὐτῷ παρὰ τοῖς ἄρχουσιν γεγραμμέναι πρότερον ὦσιν.

Someone[[37]](#footnote-37) who wishes to live in the city may do so in accordance with the following: that there is a community of foreigners for the person ready and able to join it; that they will exercise a craft, and will stay for no more than twenty years beyond the date in which they first registered, that they will pay no *metoikon* at all aside from virtue, nor again any other tax on buying or selling: when the time is up, they will take all their things and leave. If, in these years, there is some reason because of a sufficiently good service to the city, and believes they can make their case to the assembly and council, either for an extension of their stay, or even that they may remain for their whole life, when they has made their case and persuaded the city, they will have whatever they have successfully argued. As for the children of *metics,* they will also be craftspeople from the age of fifteen, and let the time of their residence be judged from when they are fifteen, after this they can remain twenty years, and then let them go where they like. If they want to remain, let them first persuade and then remain in accordance with the same; and let the person who is leaving remove their name from the register, in which they earlier recorded their name before the magistrates. *[Laws VIII.850b-d]*

The provisions laid out in this text are mostly what we would expect on the assumption that the Athenian here is trying to outline the least harmful admission of *metics* into Magnesia. Their stay is to be limited, as is that of their children; the only *metics* allowed are those who possess a craft and are willing to exercise it. All of these provisions draw a clear line that ensures the continued foreignness of the *metic* population: *metics* will not be granted the right to permanently reside, as they do not master the craft of being a good citizen. As an attempt to balance the need to attract a population of artisans with the need to keep that population at arms length, the offering here makes good sense. Provisions for staying depend on proof of character, which allows Magnesia to strike a balance between ensuring *metics* do not stay long enough to have too great an influence, and retaining those who happen to be of better character and so less harmful influence. There are two considerations I would like to raise.

The first is that the passage is open to more and less permissive readings depending on how one takes the participle “οὔσης” in “ὡς οἰκήσεως οὔσης τῶν ξένων τῷ βουλομένῳ καὶ δυναμένῳ κατοικεῖν”. Bury and Sanders both take read it as a fairly straightforward statement that there will be a community for the foreigner to join, and the Greek does strictly speaking permit this reading. If this is so, it is an incongruity, though a small one, with the overall tenor of the *Laws* approach to foreigners. However, one can also read the force of the participle as providing a condition: the applicant can come, on provision that there is a place available. On this reading, the magistrates of Magnesia will consider, for example, if the person is a carpenter, if any of the villages or suburbs are in need of a carpenter, and if so, the *metic* can go there and set up shop. If not, however, the *metic* cannot take up residence in Magnesia. This would give a reading in nearer alignment with what we find elsewhere in the *Laws.* But it seems to me that not terribly much turns on which we accept.

The second point is the exemption of the *metics* from the *metoikon.* Scholars usually see this as a considerable improvement for *metics* compared to Athens, where the *metoikon* must have been a burden on the *metics.* And perhaps, after all, it is: Magnesians probably wish *metics* well, as they do with all foreigners; it’s just that they want as little as possible to do with those who lack the benefits of a proper, utopian education. But here again, another interpretation is available. *Metics* were a source of considerable prosperity in Athens, and the *metoikon* no doubt served as a welcome source of lining for the public purse. But unlike Athenians, Magnesians know better than to seek prosperity, and indeed, their lawmakers went to considerable trouble to avoid it, even locating the city inland lest it should become too wealthy.[[38]](#footnote-38) Given the discussion to this point, it would not seem too surprising if Magnesians wanted to avoid corruption not only by the presence of foreigners, but also by their cash.

The only qualification to be added is that real cities, flawed as they are, having nothing to fear from foreigners; for Plato, xenophobia was a utopian ideal.[[39]](#footnote-39)

1. The term *metic* is most commonly translated as ‘foreign resident’ or ‘resident alien’, yet these translations are somewhat misleading. A *metic* may not be foreign : in Magnesia, a *metic* may be the locally born child of another *metic,* for instance. In Athens, the class of *metics* also included, *inter alia,* freed slaves. Strictly speaking, a *metic* is a non-citizen who resides in a city. For detailed discussions of this term see D. Whitehead, *The Ideology of the Athenian Metic* (Athens : Cambridge Philological Society, 1977). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. K. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies.* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1945). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Most recently by R. LeMoine *Plato’s Caves* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. P. Vidal-Naquet, *Le Chasseur Noir.* (Paris: Francois Maspero, 1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For Saunders’ side see esp. T.J Saunders, “Notes on Plato as a City Planner”. *BICS.* 23. (1976), pp. 23-26, and T.J Saunders, “Artisans in the City-Planning of Plato’s Magnesia”. *BICS.* 29. (1982). Pp. 63-68. It is difficult to say in this exchange which side was more excessive in their summary rejection of the other’s view, but the exchange is rather too dogmatic to make for good reading. Vidal-Naquet has the best line, however, when he states in the English translation of *Le Chasseur Noir* that Saunders has confused the layout of Magnesia with of an “English Garden”. (P. Vidal-Naquet, *The Black Hunter* (Baltimore : Johns-Hopkins University Press, 1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See esp. Whitehead, *The Ideology of the Athenian Metic,* and R. Stalley, *An Introduction to Plato’s Laws* (London : Hackett, 1983). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I *can,* however, just barely make sense of Saunders’ translation of Plato’s Greek as compatible with an integrated city. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Whitehead, *Ideology of the Athenian Metic,* R. Futo Kennedy, *Immigrant Women in Athens : Gender, Ethnicity and Citizenship in the Classical City.* (Abingdon : Routledge, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For a discussion of Xenophon’s position on this, see Whitehead, *Ideology of the Athenian Metic.* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Futo Kennedy, *Immigrant Women.* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Laws* XII 950b-d. On the policy of *xenelasia* and the situation of foreigners in Sparta I am heavily indebted to T. Figueira, ‘*Xenelasia* and Social Control in Classical Sparta’, *Classical Quarterly* 53 (2003), pp. 44-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Gagaran, M. Perlman, P. *The Laws of Ancient Crete c. 650-400 BCE.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. That the Athenian stranger here adduces a common Spartan argument is good confirmation of DeMoine’s situation of the *Laws* as challenging Spartan attitudes towards foreigners, though DeMoine herself appears to miss this point. On the evidence regarding the origins of this argument, see Figuiera, *Xenelasia and Social Control.* [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cited in Figuiera, *Xenelasia and Social Control.* [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Laws* XII.950b [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Laws* XII.950e [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Laws* XII.951a-c [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Laws XII.*949aff. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Laws XII.*950b-d. In a way it is even more troubling that LeMoine seems to endorse this argument as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. So although my reading here is friendly to LeMoine’s in acknowledging a critique of Spartan practices, I think it is important to recognise how the *Laws* is also an endorsement of such practices as something to aspire to. In this way we might think of Aristotle’s description of the great-souled man in the *Nicomachean Ethics,* who graciously accepts honours although he knows they are inadequate compensation for how great he is. Aristotle must have thought that few people had the right to act like that: but one should aspire to be one for whom arrogance is becoming. My claim here is that xenophobia is an ideal for states in Plato in the same way that arrogance is an ideal for men in Aristotle. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Readers of the *Gorgias* may suspect that democratic leaders are likely to be similar to the populations of the countries they govern, as people will vote for candidates who are similar to themselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Laws I.630dff.* For a good discussion, see Stalley, *Introduction to Laws,* pp.40-45. This is also a major theme of Popper’s critique of Plato in *Open Society.* [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Laws IX* 854d-e [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. In the *Laws,* moral character results from a combination of nature and nurture, and for this reason, programs are put in place to try to ensure that citizens of Magnesia not only receive a good education but also are of good natures. We might expect that it would follow from this that foreigners were assumed to be of worse nature than citizens, but it seems that the Athenian sees the eugenic programs he imagines as of relatively limited effectiveness compared to the legislative programs. See *Laws* 737bff. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Laws,* I.643b-d [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. A fascination with meters is, I find, a most charming trait. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *Laws XII.*949aff. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Laws XII.*949aff. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The other considerable foreign population, that of slaves, is of course continually in the physical presence of the citizens of Magnesia; the Magnesians are to handle this situation by talking to their slaves as little as possible. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Whitehead *Ideology of the Athenian Metic.* [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Translations are my own, but I have made careful reference to: R.G Bury, *Plato with an English Translation. The Laws.* Loeb Classical Library. (London: William Heinemann, 1926), and T. Saunders, *Laws,* in J. Cooper and D.S Hutchinson (eds.) *Plato: Complete Works* (Cambridge: Hackett, 1997). Greek text is from J. Burnet, *Platonis Opera.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Which, one might add, would be mutually beneficial. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. This is therefore an example of what Sean Coughlin and myself have dubbed ‘The Necessity of Settling’, and which we argue is an important feature of Aristotle’s biology (*The Topics, Aristotle’s Biology, and the Necessity of Settling).* It is still unclear to us how broad a notion this is in Plato, although the context of the *Laws,* being the best city that is possible in reality, is one that is particularly fertile for examples of such necessities. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. G.R Morrow, *Plato’s Cretan City: A Historical Interpretation of the Laws.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 145 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *Artisans in the City-Planning of Plato’s Magnesia, p.* 45. More recently, LeMoine in *Plato’s Caves* simply assumes that the artisans and citizens live alongside each other, reflecting the strong influence of this reading on anglophone scholarship. It is notable that Saunders‘ translation, and Bury’s before his, see the αὐτοῖςin the opening of this passage as referring to citizens (Bury) or the population (Saunders) where a much more likely reading is the *artisan population.* [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *Artisans in the City-Planning of Plato’s Magnesia, p.* 45 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. I am translating in a gender neutral way here, as it is unclear to me whether these provisions apply to women. Traditionally, the artisanal crafts were divided into men’s crafts and women’s crafts, with weaving being seen as women’s work : under what conditions would *metic* weavers be allowed to settle ? The provisions for children given here indicate that the Athenian envisages that there will be some women ; would these only have been wives of *metic* men, and if so, would they too have had to exercise a craft? Half of the *metic* children, at least, would have been girls – did the same provisions apply to them ? I wish to leave these questions open ; perhaps Plato, in writing this passage, had not given them much thought. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *Laws* IB.705b [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. My warm thanks and acknowledgements to audiences in Auckland and Montreal for many helpful comments on this paper, and to Rebecca LeMoine for kindly letting me read sections of *Plato’s Caves* pre-publication. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)