Plato and Totalitarianism

In this paper I want to consider the popular thesis that Plato is a paternalistic totalitarian. It is a thesis held by many, but we can use Christopher Taylor's perspective as an expedient starting point for getting at some of the implications of this label. As an advocate of paternalistic totalitarianism Plato according to Taylor would propound a view where,

Citizens of a state of this kind are subjected to totalitarian authority for their own good; the justification for that subjection is their inability to achieve the good for themselves, whether through intellectual incapacity, individual weakness or character or collective political ineptitude.¹

Totalitarianism for Taylor connotes a state where there is a coincidence of authoritarianism and ideology. Authoritarianism he defines as "a system in which the ordinary citizen has no significant share, either direct or indirect, in the making of political decisions."² "Ideology" for Taylor means a "pervasive scheme of values intentionally promulgated by some person or persons and promoted by institutional means in order to direct all or the most significant aspects of public and private life towards the attainment of the goals dictated by these values."³ But Taylor somewhat muddies his account when he asserts that what he means by the "coincidence" of authoritarianism and ideology is the "identity of the locus of political power and the source of ideology."⁴ On the basis of such an identity it could be argued that the United States today is
totalitarian. Ideology appears to be a somewhat pejorative term for Taylor, who restricts his brief remarks on ideology to "closed" institutions like the Catholic Church and totalitarian states. But, of course, there are democratic ideologies that fit his definition. Apart from the definition I have given above, Taylor offers no further analysis of totalitarianism, thinking that for his purpose no further account is necessary. But, I believe that if any serious evaluation is to be made of Plato as a totalitarian, then the meaning of totalitarianism ought to be explored further to see if it does apply to Plato's thought in the Republic.

For our purposes Carl J. Friedrich's account of totalitarianism can augment Taylor's position. Despite the many criticisms and additions that have been made to Friedrich's "syndrome" of totalitarian characteristics, I think that it would be useful to consider the syndrome and some additional characteristics Friedrich and others develop in relation to the Republic's ideal state. Here I will refer to his pathbreaking work with Zbigniew Brezezinski for its listing of the constellation of characteristics which all must be present for the existence of a totalitarian state.\(^5\)

An ideology **per se** is not a totalitarian characteristic. It is "a set of literate ideas--a reasonable coherent body of ideas concerning practical means of how to change and reform a society, based upon a more or less elaborate criticism of what is wrong with the existing or antecedent society." But a totalitarian ideology is specifically characterized by the use of violence as a means totally to reconstruct the society and lead it on to a "perfect, final stage of mankind." Secondly, there is a single mass party made up of a relatively small percentage of the population headed by a more or less charismatic leader; third, (and this seems to be a characteristic insisted on even by