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## PLATO'S TWO DEMOCRACIES

The description of the degeneration of regimes in the eighth and ninth books of Plato's *Republic* is a strikingly perceptive part of the dialogue, yet it provokes little controversy among the commentators.<sup>1</sup> All seems fairly clear: first aristocracy, then timocracy followed by oligarchy and democracy, and finally tyranny. In the major works on the *Republic*, the comments on the degeneration argument occupy relatively little space. The aim of this paper is to give a certain interpretation to this argument and to place it within a larger context.

I will start by describing two peculiarities that distinguish Plato's democracy from the type of constitution that characterised all the previous stages: aristocracy, timocracy and oligarchy. The first – usually accepted in the commentaries – is that, properly speaking, democracy is not a constitution at all;<sup>2</sup> the second – rather ignored by the commentators – is that there are, in fact, two concepts of democracy in this part of the dialogue. In the sections that follow, I will try to give my own interpretation of the role of the non-constitution in Plato's argument. Finally, I will make a few remarks about the relevance of Plato's views on democracy.



Until democracy emerged, transitions from one regime to another were – to use a modern expression – of an evolutionary or rather devolutionary character: the changes unveiled themselves slowly, and the use of force was occasional and

<sup>1</sup> Most commentaries on the *Republic* entirely or almost entirely ignore this part of the dialogue. Among those that have some comments on it are: WILLIAMS 1973; STRAUSS 1978: 129–133; ANNAS 1981: 294–305; BLOOM 1991: 414–425; DORTER 2006: 253–286; SCHOFIELD 2006: 107–120.

<sup>2</sup> 'Politically [...] *democracy* stands not for a kind of constitutional government, but for a non-constitutional condition, the only principle of which is to treat all men as equal and to have no other principles' (CROMBIE 1962: 135).

not excessive (551b). The transition from aristocracy to timocracy, as well as the transition from timocracy to oligarchy, were both primarily triggered by a factor of wealth. In the first case, it was the party of wealth that, in its conflict with the party of honour, managed to make a compromise sanctioning private property; and while the lovers of honour had the political power and dominated the life of a community, it was the initial compromise instituting private property that set a stage for an evolutionary process changing people's mores and attitudes (547b7–c3). The political power was limited to external control and superficial forms of behaviour; what really mattered was property or lack thereof. Although – Plato says – the timocratic community likes warfare, its members

will be passionate about material wealth like those in oligarchies, and will fiercely revere their gold and silver under cover of darkness inasmuch as they have collected storehouses and private treasures with places to deposit and hide them and again walled up in their homes, literally private nests where they can spend and squander it on women and anyone else they choose (548a5–b2).<sup>3</sup>

The process of devolution which starts with aristocracy has a clear logic. As the system changes, the principle of government – which at the beginning was unity – undergoes disintegration. Gradually, various factors that constituted it began to fall off as a result of the destructive impact of wealth and of all those desires with which it is correlated. First, wisdom and intellectual qualities decline, then honour and military virtues, and finally, an interest in art, culture and education.

What emerges is precisely the situation against which Plato warned at the outset of his political argument in the *Republic*: when there is no sense of the community, particular groups, usually differentiated according to wealth, will regard themselves as different 'states', that is, they will be totally separated from each other, treating each other as enemies (422e–423b). The two 'states' thus form themselves – the rich and the poor. As the former lost political will to govern and degenerated into creatures 'lackadaisical where both pleasure and pain are concerned, and lazy' (556c1–2), the poor, seeing their enemies' 'panting heavily and know knowing which way to turn' (556d4–5), make a revolution by physically eliminating their opponents. 'A democracy emerges – as Plato explained – when the poor are victorious and put some of their opponents to death and exile others and give those left an equal share of the state and its government' (557a2–5).

<sup>3</sup> All quotations are from the *Republic's* 2013 Loeb Edition, translated by Chris Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy.

However, the revolutionary character of this act does not reveal itself only in the abruptness of the political change and the deep cleavage between the two hostile parties.<sup>4</sup> With the democratic revolution, the nature of the system undergoes – somewhat miraculously – a radical transformation. Whereas the previous societies were constitutions, albeit imperfect ones, democracy is, in real terms, non-constitution; it becomes anarchy, i.e. a society with no government, no authority, no law, no principle that could organise political life.

What follows this state of anarchy is the final stage of the degeneration – tyranny. The latter also establishes itself through a political takeover rather than through a gradual change in the mentality of a new generation. The masses ‘appoint someone outstanding to take charge of them’ (565c9–10) who demands ‘personal bodyguards in order that the people’s mainstay may be kept safe for their sake’ (566b7–8). Having been granted this, he brings down ‘having cast down many others he stands in the chariot of the state having ended up as an absolute tyrant instead of people’s champion’ (566d1–3).

Tyranny also marks another qualitative change in the process of degeneration. Whereas democracy signified a shift from constitution to non-constitution, tyranny is a regime that pushes the degeneration even further down: from the human to the non-human. Plato describes a tyrant as someone who ‘turned from man into wolf’ (566a4), showing the ‘untamed savage’ side of his nature (571c5), tasting ‘human entrails’ (565d9) and ‘shedding the blood of his fellow tribesmen’ (565e4), having ‘desires [...] of a terrifying, wild and unlawful kind’ (572b4–4). If the tyrant can be compared to a human being, then he will be a beastlike creature, ‘a madman with a deranged mind [...] who] expects he’s capable of ruling not only humans, but gods as well’ (573c3–5), someone whose unchecked desires are let loose – ‘trying to have sex with a mother [...] or with any other human being, or god, or wild beast [...] committing] any kind of bloodthirsty murder [...] not holding back from] any folly or shamelessness’ (571c9–d4).

The whole process of degeneration has thus three distinctive stages. The first, which covers aristocracy, timocracy and oligarchy, consists of a gradual disintegration of the original system. The second is a democracy, or rather anarchy, where no common and stable political principles are accepted. The third, tyranny, is a state where the power reappears but in a perverse form and where not only the political but also the moral principles on which human nature is based are rejected.



<sup>4</sup> The concept of ‘revolution’ seems to fit in some contexts, and no wonder some translators use it, for instance, SHOREY 1935; EMLYN-JONES – PREDDY 2013.

The second peculiarity about the notion of democracy in the *Republic* is that it is not consistent with everything Plato said about this regime. The one sketched above has its alternative in a somewhat different system, a populist democracy, politically and economically stratified and certainly not devoid of government. Plato discusses it at length in the sections describing the last phase of oligarchy and the last phase of democracy. In the populist model, democracy has three classes: the ‘drones’, politically active and efficient in their self-serving activities; the wealthy, who are ‘naturally best organized’ and who therefore succeed financially (564e6–7); and, finally, ‘the ordinary people [...] those who work for themselves and don’t take part in politics [...] the most populous and powerful group in the democracy whenever it is gathered together’ (565a1–3).

In a certain respect, this regime resembles a reversed oligarchy: there are two major economic classes – the rich and the poor, the latter dominating the former. What makes a difference is the existence of the third group – the idlers. The ultimate power is with the poor, but they do not use it often. When they do, however, it has an enormous impact: it is they who brought democracy into being by overthrowing oligarchy, and it is they who contribute to its destruction when afraid of the oligarchic restoration, they appoint a leader and give him power to crush, in the defence of their interests, a real or imagined plot of a wealthy minority. The actual management of the affairs is in the hands of the ‘drones’. The last group does not satisfy itself with action; it is also a party of ‘speaking’. In fact, it is the only group that articulates the views to be accepted by the rest. Both the wealthy and the poor are speechless in the sense that they do not challenge the drones’ monopoly of defining and interpreting the populist democracy’s narrative. What is more, both groups live in ignorance of the power that the party of speaking has acquired and do not see how deeply this power influences their own behaviour.

This type of democracy differs in at least two important respects from anarchy. First, it has a clear structure and – up to a certain point – a fairly stable form of government. The relationship between the rich and the poor is certainly not that between two hostile ‘states’, as was the case in the last stage of oligarchy. Nothing Plato says would suggest such hostility, and some things he says exclude it: the poor – it will be recalled – are not interested in politics, while the rich are ‘naturally best organized’ for pursuing their economic goals and have no political ambitions either. The only group that threatens the system is the drones. It seems that were it not for the drones and for the poor’s tolerant attitude towards them, the regime might have a longer life. One can infer this conclusion from Plato’s advice to ‘ensure that they can be eradicated as quickly as possible with

the honeycombs and all' (564c3–4). Still, in spite of the menacing presence of the drones, populist democracy has a certain limited degree of viability, which stems from the peacefulness of the two main social groups as well as from the unquestionable authority of one of them.

What has been said about this type of democracy does not apply to anarchy. Anarchistic democracy does not have a tripartite, or let alone dual structure, but is a society of thriving pluralism where no particular group or person holds power or even occupies a dominant position. No group interest is likely to emerge in a society where 'each individual would make whatever arrangements he likes for his own life there' (557bb8–10), and where the constitution resembles 'a cloak brightly embroidered with all kinds of flowers' (557c5–6). In fact, this society is ruled by egalitarian sentiments so deep that it eventually abolished the hierarchical distinctions between free men and slaves, parents and children, teachers and students, men and women, people and animals.

Second, in a populist democracy, the economic factor plays an essential role, both as a source of identification and as an ideological ploy to mobilise one group of society against the other. 'Everyone is aiming to make money', writes Plato (564e6) in the context of the few rich, who do best financially because of their discipline. The majority are less successful, but the economic motive is also important for them.

The essential role of the economic factor does not square with the anarchistic form of democracy. The democratic man living in a society of 'colourful variety' was a person of many desires and aspirations, wealth being one of them, and certainly not a privileged one. He insists – Plato writes – that desires 'are all alike and of equal value', and his life is a perfect illustration of this. Sometimes he indulges

in wine to the sound of the flute, and at others drinking water and pining away. Again, there are times when he takes exercise, but there are times when he's idle and neglects everything, while at others he's apparently engrossed in philosophy. He frequently takes part in politics and leaps up and says and does whatever occurs to him. And if he can ever admire some military men, that's the side he inclines toward; or if businessmen, then again, he inclines that way; and there is no order or necessity in his life, but he calls this existence truly pleasant and free and blessed and applies himself to it throughout the whole of his life (561c8–d10).

Of these two regimes – anarchistic democracy and populist democracy – the former seems more puzzling. The latter is a well-known concept in Greek political thought. Although Plato may have given it an original interpretation, the basic elements are not new. The economic division of the society (even if for the Greeks, the terms ‘the poor’ and ‘the wealthy’ also had a non-economic meaning, e.g. educated and non-educated), the group interest prevailing over the interest of the state, the ultimate power being with the majority (as contrasted with the regimes ruled by a minority and by one man), the poor being manipulated ideologically by the demagogues, all these ideas recur in most of the depictions of democracy in ancient writers from Pseudo-Xenophon to Aristotle.

Anarchistic democracy is a far more original notion. Some commentators, however, find it dubious on the ground that political pluralism does not represent Athenian experience.

If parts of his description – wrote with unconcealed irritation Julia Annas – are aimed at contemporary Athens, they miss. Plato presents democracy as defined by tolerant pluralism, but Athens was a populist democracy, with a clearly defined way of life separating those with power from those without, and about as tolerant of openly expressed nonconformity as McCarthyite America.<sup>5</sup>

Despite a somewhat misplaced comparison, Annas’s remark poses an important question: what type of experience was behind this rather unusual, by contemporary Greek standards, description of democracy?

No less amazing is the fact that Plato’s attitude to this regime is far from unequivocal. He may be mocking the extreme forms of equality, writing about the bitches being ‘like their mistresses’, and about horses and mules going about ‘in total freedom, always haughtily barging into those who get in their way, unless they step aside’ (563c6–10). He might find grotesque the decline of authority in family and in school where ‘old men humour the young with banter and are full of wisecracks and imitate the young so as not to appear disagreeable and authoritarian’ (563b1–4). All this, however, does not change the overall impression that Plato is not as critical of democracy as he should be, considering its evidently low

<sup>5</sup> ANNAS 1981: 300. Strauss made a somewhat similar point, speaking about ‘Socrates’ exaggeration of the licentious mildness of classical democracy. According to him, ‘Plato writes as if the Athenian democracy had not carried out Socrates’ execution, and Socrates speaks as if the Athenian democracy had not engaged in an orgy of bloody persecution of guilty and innocent alike when the Hermes statues were mutilated at the beginning of the Sicilian expedition’ (STRAUSS 1978: 132).

position on the scale of degeneration. He is definitely not as critical of democracy as he has been, say, of oligarchy, which is theoretically a less corrupted regime. Crombie maintains that

Plato's sentiments did not obey his reason, and it is evident that he despises the oligarchic man, whereas, about the democratic man, he says that such a man sometimes manages to find a place for all his desires and becomes a man of great versatility. Of one who thus succeeds, Plato says that he becomes *agreeable, free, and blessed*; I do not find it easy to take this simply as sarcasm. Socrates, after all, had loved Alcibiades.<sup>6</sup>

Whether Plato is really divided between his emotional and philosophical judgments is a moot point, but Crombie is undoubtedly right that sarcasm cannot exhaust the philosopher's attitude to democracy. Versatility that characterises the democratic man, even if superficial and sometimes caricatural, is not to be easily dismissed. Contrary to other human types, the man in democracy has all parts of his soul active. One may deplore the fact that they are not made proper use of, but one cannot doubt that they are at least partly capable of influencing people's behaviour. In particular, the democratic man still has some interest in philosophy and is not insensitive to higher aspirations.

Also worth reflecting upon is the fact that, unlike populist democracy, anarchy seems to have no obvious logical place within the structure of the degeneration part of the dialogue and of the whole argument of the *Republic*. That populist democracy has such a place is fairly obvious. Viewed from a broader perspective, this regime is simply a continuation of the struggle for wealth that, since the first cleavage in the aristocratic system, had been the essential motive in the process of degeneration. The revolution that established this system was to achieve what the previous system was incapable of achieving, namely, to give access to wealth to the majority of the population. It not only failed in that respect but also created the potential for further wealth-based conflicts, which finally resulted in the destruction of human relations among the members of society.



Pluralistic democracy does not seem to fit into those perspectives as it promoted neither a struggle for wealth nor a struggle for power. Whence this revolutionary

<sup>6</sup> CROMBIE 1962: 235.

spirit that, instead of promoting the interests of the poor, embarks on creating a rather abstractly conceived project of widespread equality and liberty? Does the regime cultivating colourful variety have any role to play in the argument, or should we rather see in it, as Crombie suggested, proof that Plato, despite his critical animus, was unable to sever his emotional links with the democratic tradition or, maybe, as Annas implied, the rampant pluralism is a caricature of those few elements of freedom that miraculously survived in the essentially intolerant Athenian democracy? I do not think there is an obvious and definite solution to this problem, the solution which the commentators, for some reason, have so far failed to discover. I will, however, try to argue for an answer which I think has some plausibility.

The answer is that pluralistic democracy, as conceived by Plato, is not only a stage in degeneration but also satisfies the essential condition that is required for the process of political regeneration. In other words, I will argue that if Plato ever thought of reversing the corruption of the regimes and intended, ultimately, to build the philosopher's state, he could think of pluralistic democracy as a society in which such a process might start.

One of the basic conditions that, according to Plato, must be fulfilled for political reform to succeed is a social and political *tabula rasa*. He mentions this notion twice in the *Republic*:

They [the ruling philosophers – RL] would take a state and people's way of life, rather as you do a writing tabled. First of all, they would wipe it clean – not an easy task. The point is, you know, they would immediately differ from other people in this: in not wanting to deal with either an individual or a state, or even draft laws, before they had taken over a clean slate, or had cleaned it themselves. [...] I think, as they complete the work, they would frequently look carefully in each direction: toward what is naturally just, good, and temperate, and all suchlike, and on the other hand to what they would put into human beings (501a2–b8).

'All those in the state who happen to be more than ten years old, let them [the same "them" as above – RL] send them all out into the fields, but let them take over their children and keep them away from the traditions which their parents hold and bring them up according to their own ways and customs, these being those we have discussed before' (540e5–541a5).

Of all regimes characterised in the *Republic*, anarchistic democracy comes closest to the 'clean slate' condition. Whereas other regimes reflected, in an

increasingly diluted form, the original idea of the best regime, in anarchy, there is no trace of the original order left. It is, politically speaking, an institutional vacuum, a zero state, from which we can either go further down – and this would be falling below the human level as illustrated by tyranny – or, theoretically at least, go up, trying to rebuild the institutions in the right way.

The 'clean slate' in democracy may be understood both negatively and positively. Negatively, it would mean that the democratic society is indeterminate and thus ready to take any form that is imposed on it. Having no institution and no political life in the proper sense allows the reformer to take the steps that other regimes would certainly defy. In other words, democracy is like building material that, in the hands of the ruler, will transform itself, without resistance of the democratic men, into an architectural construction. Plato may have implied here that democratic disintegration, though essentially a deplorable process, has at least one positive consequence that qualifies democracy above other less imperfect regimes. Those regimes may be more ordered, but they are also inherently one-sided, whereas the disintegrated chaos has laid bare all elements that were constitutive of the initial order. Under anarchistic democracy, all political tendencies are present, all desires and aspirations of the human soul are potentially available, and – one may hope – all, under propitious conditions, may be made beneficial use of.

This notion of anarchy as building material for a better regime has another side to it. Let us note that Plato never mentions coercion as a necessary measure, as if excluding the possibility that the ruler will have to resort to drastic means. In this, the *Republic* differs from Plato's later political dialogues, for instance, from the *Statesman*, where such drastic means seem to belong to a natural procedure of the ruler (293c–d, 308e–309a). This exclusion of the coercive measures makes sense only with respect to anarchy. If Plato says that the philosopher-king should 'take over their children and keep them away from the traditions which their parents hold', this, when applied to oligarchy or timocracy, would mean a violent assault on the existing communities. In anarchy, such a step does not seem particularly brutal, as such communities – at least Plato sees it that way – practically cease to exist. The same refers to other social hierarchies, which retained some viability from the original system and which, under democracy, disintegrated into omnipresent egalitarian amorphousness.

Looked at differently, the pluralist society may resemble a child or a young man who is still malleable in the sense of being as yet unformed and uneducated but who has many possibilities that may be actualised – not through coercion,

but through education. Indeed, Plato himself called democracy a ‘beautiful and youthful’ regime (563e3–4).<sup>7</sup> This naive light-heartedness of the democratic life, which Plato often portrayed with irony, could, of course, have a sinister aspect. While it was true that from this beautiful and youthful regime tyranny grows, it might be no less true that democratic youthfulness, like any other form of youthfulness, gave some prospect of hope. It was probably this aspect of democracy – absent in other more mature and, therefore, more rigid and less docile regimes – that mitigated Plato’s harsh critique of pluralism.

The ‘clean slate’ of anarchistic democracy may also have a more positive meaning: not only the state of formlessness but a certain inclination. The pluralist society is, Plato says, full of *exousia* where everyone ‘would make whatever arrangements he likes for his own life’ (557b8–10). The word *exousia*, meaning either *licentia* or *potestas*, suggests that this regime not only lifts the prohibitions or obstacles that stand in the way of human endeavours, but also provides people with opportunities to materialise their plans. This is said in the context of the democratic men who do not have coherent and far-reaching plans. Whether this would also apply to a situation when the philosopher-king who would try to reorganise the system totally is, of course, uncertain, but Plato’s words do not exclude such a possibility.

The *exousia* in the democratic pluralism – he says – makes possible political experiments. This system is, properly speaking, not one political regime but many regimes being in the state of constant experimentation: it is, as Plato says, a sort of general store for political systems, i.e. a society in which various forms of human cooperation are being tried, and none becomes the prevailing one. This should also give a chance, however slim, to philosophy-inspired serious reformers. Democracy is, and Plato’s words seem to support this hope,

the useful place [...] to look for the constitutions. [...] Because it contains all kinds of constitutions owing to the freedom allowed, and it’s likely when a person wants to build such a state, which we were doing just now, that he will have to go to a democratic state and choose whichever aspects of it please him, just like going to a bazaar displaying constitutions, and make one’s choice and so establish it (557c10–d9).

<sup>7</sup> According to Adam, the phrase *kalē kai neanikē* should be translated as ‘fair and proud’. The adjective *neanikos* means ‘youthful’, but also ‘vigorous’. Most translators prefer the latter meaning, which seems acceptable as far as it goes. But I do not see why not to render it as ‘youthful’. It makes perfect sense, considering that the democratic man seems conspicuously immature.

This need not mean that if the philosopher tried to establish his regime in a democracy, he would naturally find acceptance and obedience among the citizens. It may mean, however, that at least among some members of the pluralist society, if anywhere at all, a philosopher may find a sympathetic ear because it is in this society, not in any other, that – alongside the clean state condition and a penchant for political experiments – we encounter some sympathy for philosophy. And since the appreciation of philosophy and the authority of reason are the essential prerequisites of political regeneration, the democratic man is the most promising, if not the only possible, addressee of the philosopher-king's message.



Plato's attitude to democracy – if the above analysis is justified – is not only a historical phenomenon. Nor is it merely a matter of a textual exegesis that would settle a long-discussed question of the practicability of the philosopher-king's state. There are reasons to believe that what Plato said set a standard for several important arguments that were to animate the debate about the nature and viability of a democratic order, the debate which reappeared in the postmedieval world and has been going on until today. It would be interesting to trace the reception of Plato's arguments in later political philosophy, but this, of course, is a most complex task, far exceeding the size and framework of this paper. In the concluding paragraphs, I will mention only two of those ideas that, I think, were crucial in Plato's critique of democracy and that did not disappear with the fall of democratic Athens.

Plato was probably the first philosopher to raise the question of to what extent the order built on individual liberty and equality is negative; that is, to what extent it emerges through the disintegration or, more often, deliberate destruction of the bonds, institutions and moral practices that have been bequeathed to us through political continuity. His view was that revolution is a strong ingredient in establishing democracy and that the democratic spirit lacks a sense of, or tolerance for, such continuity.

The two concepts of democracy illustrate two aspects of the process. The destruction of the hierarchic institutions may present itself – as it did in the picture of anarchistic democracy – as a gradual spawning of pluralism, with all forms of life being possible and all arrangements feasible. However, this process leads to political amorphousness, as depicted by the clean slate metaphor, which, in turn, makes society susceptible to radical political experiments. Given that the argument from continuity has no longer any force, this society will likely fall into

various forms of radicalism. Whether this would also include Plato's proposal seems rather doubtful, but it is a problem for another study.

Populist democracy, although more stable, also essentially bases its functioning on disintegration, not on institution-building. The basic principle of the system – the rule of the poor over the rest – is systematically undermined by another power structure, the one managed by the drones, and the remaining groups – the demos and the oligarchs – are not aware of its scope, nor do they understand the control it exercises. The logic of the system, therefore, aims to eliminate the state, not to strengthen it.

The second view, which was to recur in later political philosophy, was – to use Tocqueville's well-known formula – the important role of general concepts in democracy. With the weakening of the social fabric and the disappearance of established practices, abstract concepts become the main tool to express the groups' aspirations, indignation and objectives. And Plato was aware of it. Without the democratic men's revolutionary passion for freedom and equality rather than for their own particular interests, there would have been only one type of democracy, as an anarchistic model would not have emerged. Obviously, Plato was not the first to discover this propensity of democratic men. Socrates and the sophists also recognised the connection between abstract concepts and democracy. Socrates attempted to give those concepts clear and absolute meanings, and the sophists tried to blur those meanings by relating them to a social context.

What Plato may be claimed to have discovered, however, is the connection between a process of political disintegration and a growing role of abstract concepts. Not only were those concepts the steering force in staging a democratic revolution to produce political anarchy, but also they had a role to play in populist democracy. Plato illustrated this by the drones who were in charge of defining freedom and equality (and probably other concepts, too), which gave them the instruments to hold power and to mobilise the masses against the alleged enemies of the democratic system.

Plato's general argument translated into a modern idiom would run as follows: democracy, though dependent on the abstract categories which, in the absence of traditional practices, express people's aims and help them communicate, has an inherent tendency to corrupt them by making them an element of a democratic pursuit of power; therefore, those concepts – i.e. freedom, justice, virtue, piety, goodness, beauty – cannot be supplied from within the democratic system and its self-proclaimed party of speaking but have to come from outside the mechanisms of democracy, that is, from philosophy practised as a disinterested pursuit of truth. To simplify, Plato left us with the following question: to what degree can

the democratic order be its own judge, and to what degree should it, let alone for the sake of its own survival, submit to some higher non-democratic standards?

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