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The Politics of Plato and His Objection to Democracy

ABSTRACT

Ancient Greek philosopher, Plato, had not only had political desires but had also tried to engage in active politics. But after a big frustration, especially with the trial of Socrates, he turned away from politics and criticized the political phenomena of his own time under the name of democracy. In his fascinating works we find his political ideas, ambitions, adventures, approvals and disapprovals. For Plato society or an ideal state must be organized and controlled not by masses, but by persons who really know what the norms are. The troubles of mankind will never cease until either true genuine philosophers attain political power or the rulers of states by some dispensation of providence become genuine philosophers.

Key words: Plato, politics, ideal state, justice, types of governments and democracy.

Plato, Greek classical philosopher, remarks in his *Seventh Letter* that “... People were dissatisfied with the existing constitution, and a revolution took place. As a result of which power was concentrated in the hands of fifty-one men...”¹. Aristotle, a teacher of Alexander the Great and Plato’s teacher, remarks in his *Politics*: “A democracy exists whenever those who are free and are not well-off, being in the majority, are in sovereign control of government, an oligarchy when control lies with

¹ Plato, 1973, *Phaedrus and Letters VII and VIII*, (transl. by Walter Hamilton), Penguin Books, London, p. 113. Eleven of these fifty-one men were in charge in the city and ten in Piraeus, thirty assumed supreme control of the whole state according to Plato.

the rich and better-born, these being few”². Both Plato’s own account explains why he turned away from public life even he had desires in his youth and Aristotle’s later distinguishing the forms of ruling by one (monarchy), a few (oligarchy, aristocracy) or many (democracy) in his *Politics* give us enough information about the problematic aspects of Athenian democracy of ancient Greeks and Plato’s reasons for disapproval.

In this paper, I would like to deal with Plato’s approach to the policy first, and to stress on his ideas about states, types of governments, ideal state, justice, democracy critics and ship analogy. Plato (428/7 BC-348/347 BC) had not only had political desires but had also tried to engage in active politics. In his *Republic*, *Laws*, *Letters* and *Politicus*, we find his political diagnoses and prescriptions, ideals and antipathies³. He was born into an aristocratic Athenian family, and grew up during the great Peloponnesian War (431 to 404 BC). Both parents came of distinguished families with many political connections. Through his stepfather he had a link with Pericles, who gave his name to the great age of Athenian history, and to whom Athenian democracy owed many of its characteristic features. His father Ariston died when Plato was a few years old. He witnessed many social and political crises in his youth. He became closely attached to Socrates who stood aloof from active life in distracting days of war and revolution to inquire what men should live for. He became a pupil of Socrates soon. The Peloponnesian War, which began just before his birth, lasted until he was twenty-three and ended in defeat and in humiliation for Athens. After Pericles death the more radical democrats were the most influential force in Athenian politics. They relied for their power on their ability to sway the popular assembly. Under the influence of Socrates, Plato’s thought, from first to last, was chiefly bent on the question how society could be reshaped so that man might realize the best is in him⁴.

As many people expect to embark on a political career in their youth, Plato did same thing. He was about twenty-three when the thirty tyrants, with his uncle Critias as their leader, came to power in 404 BC. He dreamed to solve the social problems because people were unhappy with the existing constitution. Actually he was called upon to do so under their regime. His relatives and friends in the government, his uncle Critias and his cousin Charmides⁵ invited him to join and help them. It was an obvious career for him.

At the beginning, Plato was hopeful about some changes from corruptions in administration, and he was eager to believe them about their aim for correcting the evils of democracy. But soon, he was very disappointed with what he experienced.

² Aristotle, 1981, *The Politics* (transl. by T. A. Sinclair), Penguin Books, London, 1290b7, p. 245.

³ Ryle, G., 1972, “Plato”, *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, P. Edwards (ed.), Macmillan, New York, vol. 5, p. 330.

⁴ Laertius, Diogenes, 1991, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, “Plato”, Book III (transl. by R. D. Hicks), Harvard University Press, London, Vol. I, pp. 277–375; Desmond Lee’s introduction for *The Republic*, Plato, Penguin Books, London 1955, pp. xi–lvi; F.M. Cornford’s introduction for *The Republic*, Plato, Oxford University Press, London 1941, pp. xv–xxix.

⁵ They were among its bloodiest and most extremist members of the regime.

They tried to involve Socrates in their actions. Socrates, instead of obeying, refused to participate in their infamous deeds with risking everything as Plato was waiting to watch them. But he was soon disgusted by their repressive measures and especially by their attempt to implicate Socrates in their murderous designs⁶. Socrates withdraws himself from the prevailing wickedness. But a total revolution put an end to the rule of the Thirty, and once again, Plato began to feel a desire to take part in politics and in public life, because democrats showed commendable restraint in dealing with their late enemies and Plato seemed to have been on the point of entering politics once more. But soon, they brought Socrates before the courts on a wicked charge, by Plato's words, with the accusation of being impious, and the court condemned and put him to death. The trial of Socrates and his death at the end plunged the young Plato into despair. Because there was no hope, sanity or moderation, either from oligarch or democrat⁷.

Plato, disillusioned by Socrates' condemnation to death at the hands of the assembly, abandoned his political desire and started to launch a devastating attack. As we will see later, he puts into question the peoples' ability to rule justly. He will denounce the use of lot to select officials as giving undue power to the less able and knowledgeable.

After watching the trial of Socrates, Plato lost again his belief for democracy and he started to question everything related to state and social life. He understood that it was difficult to take part in public life and retain one's integrity, and the more he observed the older he became. Nothing could be done without friends and loyal associates, but such men were not easy to find. Because of the corruptions he ended by growing dizzy at the spectacle of universal confusion. He thought that nothing could cure their constitutions but a miraculous reform assisted by good luck. And after this sadness, Plato told his famous sentence: "The troubles of mankind will never cease until either true genuine philosophers attain political power or the rulers of states by some dispensation of providence become genuine philosophers"⁸.

For Plato, to know something good was not enough, but there was a need to practice the goodness on all aspects of social life. Philosophy was not only a theoretical issue, but also a practical value. It was wisdom when practice and theory combined each other. Plato's interest and pursue on ruling, state, ethic, law and policy made him one of the greatest systematic philosophers of history. He was often described as the greatest western philosopher as Whitehead pointed out that the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato⁹.

⁶ Grube, G.M.A. 1980. *Plato's Thought*, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., Indianapolis, p. 259.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

⁸ Plato, 1973. *Phaedrus and Letters VII and VIII*, Penguin Books, London, p. 114.

⁹ Whitehead, A. N. 1978. *Process and Reality in Essays in Cosmology*, D. W. Sherburne, D. R. Griffin (ed.), The Free Press, New York, p. 39.

Plato tells us himself that his chief reason was an intensive feeling of shame lest he should find himself to be a mere builder of theories, when he was called upon by his friend Dion for education of the young Dionysus. And second time, he started to involve with policy with hoping to teach goodness and philosophy to Dionysus by encouraging Dion. Because, politics was a science aiming at making the citizens better men, and he would not have escaped from his responsibility. After a little bit hesitation, Plato accepted the invitation of Dion, left his lands and went to Syracuse. By doing so, he discharged the claims of hospitality and preserved himself from any reproach from philosophy, which would have suffered shame if he had played the coward and incurred disgrace by shirking his duty¹⁰. Unfortunately, his second attempt failed too. Because he understood that people listen only to what pleases them. People who consult him have completely abandoned the true principles of government and firmly refuse to return to the right track, and tell their adviser to let the constitution alone on pain of death and to confine himself to advising on the quickest and easiest way for them to obtain the permanent satisfaction of their wishes and desires. Plato calls the person who gave advice on these terms a coward and the person who refused it a brave man¹¹. After this failure, bad political experience, Plato questioned the system in which the masses dominate the rules. He was no lover of the Athenian democracy. He criticized the Athenians and liked Darius, the King of Persia, and called him as a good-law giver and king. Because Darius preserved his empire until his time with believing not to only his brothers or men brought up by himself, but only those who helped them relying on loyalty without any attack between them.

According to Plato, society must be organized and controlled not by masses, but by persons who really know what the norms are. Salvation for society lay in removing government from the untutored hands of the ordinary man in order that the state could be directed according to the findings of philosophy¹². For example, ordinary people do not know what ‘piety’ or ‘justice’ is. They claim to know the good in politics, but as their opinions never stand up to examination; their actions are likely to be wrong, being based on ignorance. Impiety and unjustness stem from ignorance. ‘Good man’ is as a happy man, because he is temperate and just, no matter he is big and strong, or small and weak, or rich or poor. If he is unjust, he is a wretch, and lives a life of misery, even if he does something what people commonly call “good”. Because things ordinary people usually call ‘good’ are misnamed. So-called evils are good for the unjust; and so-called ‘goods’ are evils for the wicked¹³. Here we see Socrates’ reflexions on Plato. He has no faith in ignorant masses and pays no attention to the life within them. When Socrates was executed in 399, Plato left Athens, as a disappointment man from political attempts. He thought that all states had not been governed well.

¹⁰ Plato, *The Republic*, *op. cit.*, 329, p. 119.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 331, p. 122.

¹² Plato, 1970. *Laws*, (transl. by T. J. Saunders), Penguin Books, London, pp. 23–24.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 661, pp. 97–98.

It was the reason for Plato to deal with philosophy and then to seek justice in every minutes of social life. But in his *Apology*, he explains his disappointment with these words: “It is necessary to that one who really and truly fights for the right, if he is to survive even for a short time, shall act as a private man, not as a public man”¹⁴.

In his *Statesman* and his *Republic*, Plato defines the ideal persons, ideal statesmen, and gives us the ideal form of government, the ideal form of main constitutions¹⁵. Naturally, after having studied philosophy, the ruler would know the true virtues and, therefore, he would be able to lead people towards wellness and prosperity, for sure. Without philosophical interest, for Plato, the problems of society will not end. And unless either philosophers become kings in their countries or those who are called kings and rulers come to be sufficiently inspired with a genuine desire for wisdom. Here we see that political power and philosophy meet together, by another saying entirely coincide, if not, there can be no rest from troubles for states and for all mankind; cities will have no rest from evils. There is no other way of happiness either for the state or for the individual¹⁶.

Plato describes these “philosopher kings” as “those who love the sight of truth” and supports the idea with the analogy of a captain and his ship or a doctor and his medicine. According to him, sailing and health are not things that everyone is qualified to practice by nature¹⁷.

In a state, there are three main groups: rulers, workers and warriors. Actually these groups, in Plato’s philosophy, are used as an image to illuminate the state of one’s soul, or the will, reason, and desires combined in the human body. Rulers, governing the state, are intelligent, rational, self-controlled, in love with wisdom, well suited to make decisions for the community. They represent the head. These correspond to the “reason” part of the soul and are very few. Workers are productive, like laborers, carpenters, plumbers, masons, merchants, farmers, ranchers, etc. They represent the abdomen and correspond to the “appetite” part of the soul. Warriors or guardians are protective, which represents the chest. They are strong, brave and adventurous in the armed forces. They correspond to the “spirit” part of the soul. The principles of Athenian democracy, as it existed in Plato’s day, are rejected as only a few are fit to rule. Reason and wisdom should govern the state, not rhetoric and persuasion.

In an ideal state, philosophers ought to be our rulers, for Plato. First of all, people have a clear view of their character. They desire all wisdom, not only some part of it. They have passion to see the truth, and their affections are set on the reality. They desire to know the whole reality, like to know not only beautiful things, but also the beauty itself.¹⁸ They apprehend the eternal and unchanging. Also they are

¹⁴ Plato, 1956. *Apology, The Dialogues of Plato*, A Mentor Book, New York, 31d, p. 437.

¹⁵ Plato, 1992. *Statesman*, transl. by J.B. Skemp, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., Indianapolis, pp. 62–63.

¹⁶ Plato, *The Republic*, *op. cit.*, pp. 178–179.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 182.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 474, p. 183.

distinguished by quickness of understanding, good memory, courage, and generosity. And for Plato, philosopher, genuine lover of the knowledge cannot love wisdom and falsehood; he cannot fail to strive after the whole of truth. Because justice is superior to injustice¹⁹, that's to say, goodness is superior to evil. Philosophers seek justice, not injustice. They want goodness not evil. Here we see that the ideal state is based on justice. And, justice is the sum of all virtue and philosophers who seek all virtues in each moment of life. And the main aim in constructing an ideal state was to find in it justice. Wise, brave, temperate and just are the virtues of this ideal state²⁰. But justice is only possible competitor of these qualities, for Plato²¹. Thus civil government is either democratic, aristocratic, oligarchy, or a monarchy or a tyranny.

Unfortunately, the ideal State of Plato, where justice flourishes, has never existed. He was aware of this fact. Because, there was a decline of society. And Plato tried to explain this gradual decline through intermediate forms of constitution and four types governments after his ideal system. This explanation is also an interesting argument to discuss which one is better. The main reason of ranking types of governments is also to show the deficiencies (Athenian) democracy. These deficiencies can be defined as inherent class tension; blind commitment to liberty and equality; and incompetent governance. According to Plato, after an ideal state (aristocracy), first type of governments is timarchy or timocracy, the constitution of Crete and Sparta of Plato's own period; second one is oligarchy (plutocracy), a constitution fraught with many evils; third one is antagonist democracy and despotism which is thought so glorious and goes beyond them all as the fourth and final disease of society. There is a transition between them and distinguishing criterion of these governments is pure justice or pure injustice, by another saying happiness or misery they bring to their citizens.

Timocracy is a state in which the ambitious man's love of honour²². It is the form of government ruled by warriors seeking virtues just as the aristocrats, but also pursuing power, which can lead them to wars and combats. For Plato, this is a kind of government that arises when aristocracy starts to degenerate. Oligarchy is based on a property qualification, where the rich are in power and the poor man cannot hold office. Money is valued above everything in oligarchy²³. The rich ones rule and the poor must obey. This, according to Plato, is a problem. Because rich people are not necessarily educated or wise, and when the power is in the hands of non-virtuous people, the rich will attempt to become richer and the poor might become even poorer. This is generating revolutions. The aim of life in an oligarchy is to become rich as possible. The power of the ruling class is due to its wealth. But for Plato, a society

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 427, p. 121.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 433, p. 128.

²² *Ibid.*, 545, p. 268.

²³ *Ibid.*, 550, p. 274.

cannot hold wealth in honour and at the same time establish a proper self-control in its citizens. One or the other must be sacrificed. Hating the men who have acquired their property and conspiring against them also causes revolution. This state falls sick and sometimes civil war begins with no help from without²⁴. When the poor win, the result is a democracy. Plato both decries the rule of the masses and refutes politicians elected by popular vote. He claimed that within Athenian democracy ordinary people do not elect the wisest and ablest to offices of power but they vote to the demagogues best versed in oration and rhetoric. Also, for him, it is better to be ruled by a bad tyrant, than be a bad democracy. In democracy everybody is responsible for actions, rather than one individual committing many bad deeds in tyranny. This idea is emphasized within *The Republic* as a ship analogy.

In ship-analogy, Plato likens the state to a ship. According to him, the ship of state needs expert governors at the helm. These governors should be well informed about justice, morality, economy, law, etc. Ignorant governors can be disasters states. At the same time, ordinary people cannot run the ship because of their ignorance. They do not know how to run the ship of state. They are not familiar enough with politics, law, economics, etc. They are very ambitious to run but they are not capable of it. Also in their ignorance, they tend to vote for politicians who deceive them with untruthful talk.

In Plato's ship analogy, democracy, the rule of the people is represented by the captain of the ship. The democratic politicians are the crew. The true philosopher is the ship's expert navigator and democratic politicians are decried as dishonest: "Imagine this state of affairs on board a ship or a number of ships. The master is bigger and burlier than any of the crew, but a little deaf and short-sighted and no less deficient in seamanship. The sailors are quarreling over the control of the helm; each thinks he ought to be steering over the helm; though he has never learnt navigation and cannot point to any teacher under whom he has served his apprenticeship; what is more, they assert that navigation is a thing that cannot be taught at all, and are ready to tear in pieces anyone who says it can. Meanwhile they besiege the master himself, begging him urgently to trust them with the helm; and sometimes, when others have been more successful in gaining his ear, they kill them or throw them overboard, and, after somehow stupefying the worthy master with strong drink or an opiate, take control of the ship, make free with its stores, and turn the voyage, as might be expected of such a crew, into a drunken carousal. Besides all this they cry up as a skilled navigator and master of seamanship, anyone clever enough to lend a hand in persuading or forcing the master to set them in command. Every other kind of man they condemn as useless. They do not understand that the genuine navigator can only make himself fit to command a ship by studying the seasons of the year, sky, stars, and winds, and all that belongs to his craft; and they have no idea that along with the science of navigation, it is possible for him to gain, by instruction or

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 557, p. 282.

practice, the skill to keep control of the helm whether some of them like it or not. If a ship were managed in that way, would not those on board be likely to call the expert in navigation a mere star-gazer, who spent his time in idle talk and was useless to them”²⁵.

The parable of the ship is the most devastating indictment to the Athenian democracy ever written and perfectly demonstrates the contempt, which Plato held for the democratic system. According to Plato, in democratic system, as it happens in the ship-parable, ordinary people fight each other, kill their opposites or banish others. They are free. Liberty and free speech are rife everywhere; anyone is allowed to do what he likes. Every man arranges his own manner of life to suit his pleasure. But for Plato full liberty leads to anarchy and social disunity is likely to emerge. Happiness and justice are more important than the liberty of ignorant masses. Also, liberal nature of democracy is in fact detrimental to the happiness of everybody and justice for all in a state. Because the freedom of democracy consists of all kind. For example, a person does not need fight when his fellow citizens are at war. This is a wonderfully pleasant life, but only for a moment. But at the same time it is an agreeable form of anarchy with plenty of variety and equality for equals and unequal alike.

Plato relates democracy with oligarchy after his ship-analogy. It is a son (child) of oligarchy, brought up under his father’s eye and his father’s way. There is a close link between them. In democracy, all must have their equal rights. Everybody can take a part in politics, leaping to his feet to say or do whatever comes into his head. He can seat out to rival someone he admires. His life is subject to no order or restraint, and he has no wish to change an existence, which he calls pleasant, free, and happy. This is the life of one whose motto is liberty and equality. Citizens, resident aliens, and strangers from abroad are all on an equal footing. The young copy their elders, can argue with them, and cannot do as they are told; and the old, anxious not to be thought disagreeable tyrants, imitate the young and condescend to enter into their jokes and amusements. The full measure of popular liberty is reached when the slaves of both sexes are quite as free as the owners who paid for them. And for Plato, democracy ruined by greed for its noblest possession, that is to say, liberty²⁶. The whole place is simply bursting with the spirit of liberty. And the citizens become so sensitive that they resent the slightest application of control as intolerable tyranny, and in their resolve to have no master they end by disregarding even the law, written or unwritten²⁷. And this is the seed from which springs despotism. For Plato the same disease that destroyed oligarchy enslaves democracy. Because any excess brings about an equally violent reaction. The only outcome of too much freedom is likely to be excessive subjection. Democratic state falls under the influence of unprincipled

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 488–489, p. 196.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 562, p. 288.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 563, p. 289.

leaders. As a result of democracy, maybe it is better to say that from democratic anarchy, according to Plato, despotism comes out²⁸.

For Plato, democratic common wealth is divided into three parts. One consists of the drones, despised and kept out of office in oligarchy. This group furnishes all the leaders, with a few exceptions. Its keenest members make the speeches and transact the business. Second group is constantly emerging from the mass. In this group, everyone is bent upon making money and they tend to amass the greatest wealth. This class, for Plato, provides provender for the drones²⁹. The third class is ‘people’, comprising all the peasantry who work on their own farms, with few possessions and no interest in politics. This class is the largest one in democracy, and, when once assembled, its power is supreme. There is constant conflict between ordinary people and rich people. And from this conflict, according to Plato, the people’s champion transforms into a despot. In the early days despot has a smile and a greeting for everyone he meets, disclaims any absolute power, makes large promises to his friends and to the public. But as soon as he has disembarrassed himself of his exiled enemies by coming to terms with some and destroying others, he begins stirring up, provokes one war after another, in order that the people may feel their need of a leader³⁰.

The term of democracy is a little bit ambiguous. It covers a wide variety of meanings. Because of Plato’s disapproving Athenian democracy, many people not only thought that he was not a democrat, but also an enemy of democracy. This inference is very common and sometimes it is very difficult to refuse this critic. For example, Karl Popper is one of the opponents of Plato on this issue. He disagrees with Plato about the definition of democracy and tyranny. If we have a look to his writings on this subject, we see that Popper distinguishes two main types of government. The first type consists of governments, which we can get rid of without blood-shed-for example, by way of general elections; that is to say, the social institutions provide means by which the rulers may be dismissed by the ruled, and the social traditions ensure that these institutions will not easily be destroyed by those who are in power. The Second type, for Popper, consists of governments, which the ruled cannot get rid of except by way of a successful revolution – that is to say, in most cases, not at all. And Popper suggests the term “democracy” as a short-hand label for a government of the first type. And the term “tyranny” or “dictatorship” for the second³¹. On the other hand, we know that Plato experienced democracy at Athens in the last years of Great Peloponnesian War. The ruthless imperialism of Athenian war policy and the cultural decay, which followed the war, must be traced back to certain sophistic movements, which began in the age of Pericles. Plato identified this form of democracy with irresponsible anarchy and condemned it both in itself and in being

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 565, p. 291.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 565, pp. 290–291.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 567, p. 293.

³¹ Popper, K. R., 1963. *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, p. 124.

the mother of tyranny³². He held that the skeptical, materialistic views of the sophists and rhetoricians of the Periclean Age sowed the seeds of Athenian degeneration. All existing states and parties were degenerate. He was bitterly opposed to the ruthless imperialism and militarism of later Athenian policy³³. In fact, he was trying to make clear the injustice and ineffectiveness of democracy. He claimed that outright liberty and political equality did not guarantee true happiness and justice both for the majority of citizens and for the state itself.

Beside the reasons of seeking justice and happiness for all, for poor or rich, we can say that some of Plato's arguments do not apply very well to democracy today. For example, his severe accusations against politicians and masses of his own time are not valid for today.

We cannot say that politicians are demagogues or masses are ignorant today. And we cannot put forward that they do not know what justice or injustice is. Also his argument that ordinary people (the demos) will control everything or impose their views onto others is also disputable. There are so many different view points on so many different issues that most people's opinions today are shaped by their close relatives and friends and not the demos because there are too many different view points. If democracy is defined exclusively in terms of majority assent, no matter what is assented to, then mass tyranny, the most awful kind, must be regarded as essentially democratic. But this is an impossible conclusion³⁴.

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³² Wild, J., 1953, *Plato as an Enemy of Democracy: A Rejoinder, Plato: Totalitarian or Democrat?*, Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N.J., USA, p. 106.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

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