
Plato's Attack On Democratic Politics

The idea of a democratic system started in Athens around 550 BCE; this system of government was intended to be a direct democracy where every citizen would have the opportunity to vote on every piece of new legislation. This new form of government allowed the ordinary Athenian citizen, the none-aristocrats, who had political ambitions to rise to the highest ranks of Athenian politics. Although to have the right to vote a common citizen did have to be free men who had completed military service. Therefore, in reality only about 20% – 25% of the population were enfranchised. Women had very few rights in Athenian society.

The Athenian philosopher Socrates who lived from 469 to 399 B.C was a total devotee of the democratic system but he earned the displeasure of his fellow citizens by constantly questioning the accepted gods and established practises. Socrates was sentenced to death by the Athenian courts and famously refused to escape when he had the opportunity as he respected the court decision as a part of a system he passionately believed in. He chose to committ suicide, by drinking hemlock.

Plato (427 – 347 BC) on the other hand was a pupil of Socrates who, although believing in the democratic principles of the system, had serious doubts about its failings. Plato did not have the passionate, blind adherence of Socrates and created extensive Dialogues (a genre of literary prose) to explain his misgivings. These have made it possible to fully understand his thinking. Socrates himself left no written records but Plato's dialogues have allowed an insight into his thought process and to how democracy matured and grew.

Plato was from a family of Greek aristocrats, his real name was Aristocles but he was given his nickname by a wrestling coach because of his broad shoulders, (Platon is Greek for broad). Plato decided against a career in politics and chose instead to pursue a more artistic life style, writing plays and poems however he abandoned this to follow Socrates. (Mark Joshua J Sept 2009)

In his writings Plato explains the differences between necessary desires and unnecessary desires. He describes Necessary desires as being desires we cannot overcome, such as our desire for shelter and sustenance. Unnecessary desires are desires that we are quite able to overcome but do not, these include luxuries and personal possessions. Plato believed that freedom is a desire that once tasted generates the demand for more which in turn leads to the rejection of authority and the expectation of liberty. It is at this point, Plato believes, that the democratically appointed leaders start to lose control and try to distract the people by creating problems such as wars which focus the minds of the populous and unite them in a single united purpose. To pay for these distractions taxes will have to be raised alienating their former supporters. The soldiers will then be employed to enforce unpopular decisions and to silence voices raised in opposition. More soldiers will be required to supress protest by force and consequently more taxes. Plato also discusses the danger of democracy turning into Tyranny. For example, Plato argues the democratic system allows power hungry figures to gain control through manipulation of the system and using the freedoms of the people to back a political cause and the perceived 'interest of the people'. This will allow the tyrannical figure to gain control and eventually silence any democratic challenges to his reign and silence the opposition

These democratically appointed leaders will now need protection from the very people who elected them to office, people who now want to overthrow them to form a democracy. Plato predicted that democracy would lead to nations being governed by bullies and brutes and history has shown a consistent pattern of subjugation, revolution and subjugation once again.

Plato's description of a democracy is rather thought provoking. It gives us pause and forces us to examine our own government. Could it be true that our leaders are the bullies and the political tyrants that Plato describes? Does democracy lead to entangling wars for the benefit of the ruling class? And are the people so subjugated by senseless laws and stiff taxes, that they are unable to resist in any meaningful way? Perhaps. History has shown a consistent pattern of subjugation, revolution and subjugation once again. (Van Bryan 8/7/2013)

In Plato's dialogue, *The Republic*, Plato's view on systems of government can be seen, as he describes five men each representing the states of aristocracy, timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny. It is clear that the Plato's favoured regime is in indeed aristocracy in which he believes the leaders are highly educated people who have experience and exercise good judgment and are 'philosopher kings'. This aristocratic system consists of three different castes, the ruling 'philosopher kings', the soldiers who are defined by their immense honour and lastly the majority class who represent the 'will of mankind'. Plato believed that this was the best governmental system as the people with the most knowledge are assigned to the most responsible and powerful roles in society. In contrast Plato shows dislike of the system of democracy favoured by his mentor Socrates. For example, he believed that a democratic society consisted of immense differences and disputes in which there was no common consensus and order. He is also believed that in democracy the rulers are obliged to perform the will of the lower classes.

Plato's philosophies still carry relevance in modern history, for example there have been many accounts of the collapse of democracies which have turned into full tyrannical rule. This was evident in the election of Adolf Hitler in 1932 in which he swept to power with a mandate based on the 'brutish' values which Plato has described. This absolute tyranny came in the form of fascism which swept across Europe with ease but however was defeated and democracy once again reigned supreme. Many modern leaders have recognised the Platonic critical view of democracy but also how it is the best political system which currently exists. For example, Sir Winston Churchill's quote that "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others." Holds to Plato's believe that democracy is fundamentally flawed but is however the most adequate system when compared to the others.

References

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