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A Note on the Platonic and Aristotelian Critique of Democratic Man

H. Lee Cheek, Jr.

Editor
Humanitas
National Humanities Institute
Box 1554
Washington, D.C. 20013
USA

This paper is a study of the Platonic and Aristotelian criticisms of democracy. Most defenders of democracy neglect defining the term and usually confer on it a status reserved for religious symbols. Democracy should be viewed within the confines of an older tradition that stresses the combination of popular political participation and the pursuit of the moral life. As the praise for various forms of democratic government increases, these classical criticisms remain central to a more thorough understanding of democracy in theory and practice.

According to Fustel de Coulanges' classic study, *The Ancient City*, democratic Athens longed for enlightenment in some form throughout its existence.¹ As the deterioration of Athenian democracy began to spread, the older ordering principles of faith and tradition surrendered to the new guide—undisciplined discussion. The residents of the city-state desired to have every question debated. There was, however, much opposition to any settlement of the questions, as settlement usually required the end of the discourse. If Thucydides's recollection is correct, Plato provided Athens with a prophetic warning of its impending decline. His efforts were followed by his student, Aristotle, although the views of Aristotle require more exegesis. For Plato and Aristotle, the Periclean notion of society as a grand debating organization—an idea that was also defended by Pythagoras and other sophists—was the deconstitution of the political order. This idea of diversity for diversity's sake elicited much excitement and would become encapsulated as a cornerstone of the democratic state. This brief essay will attempt to examine an essential element of the Platonic and Aristotelian critique: the intrinsic weakness of the democratic soul and the subsequent ramifications for the political system.

Plato, unlike Aristotle, presents an indubitable understanding of the inadequacies of the democratic state in *The Republic*. For Plato, individualistic mass democracy was the great sansculottism. The formulation of democratic govern-

Professor H. Lee Cheek, Jr., is the editor of *Humanitas*, published by the National Humanities Institute, and a specialist in political theory at the Catholic University of America. He has taught at Western Carolina University and published in the fields of American and modern political thought.

ment was for the great votary of the One an indication of a deeper decline, an improper ordering of the soul. Aristotle understood democracy to have more of a role in governing, but he proceeds, nevertheless, to criticize what one might call the democratic impulse. In his study of 158 constitutions in *The Politics*, he objects less to those constitutions that contain limitations upon the masses. Aristotle leveled his harshest criticism of city-state constitutions at Carthage. He found the situation in Carthage the most objectionable, owing to the Carthaginian practice of circumventing the established sources of sovereign power.² The populace in Carthage was entitled to overrule the decisions of the king and the ruling elders. For Aristotle, this marked the greatest deviation from the "ideal" state. Such a regime could also "deviate" into an oligarchy, but this declension was most severe when the result was a more democratic form of rule.³

Tyranny, as the final condition of decline, was for Plato only an offshoot of the democratic departure. Ironically, democracy was not without some redeeming value. In a seemingly contradictory way, Plato's Socrates describes democratic life as "an agreeable anarchic form of society."⁴ The attractions of democratic life, namely, its elements of diversity and equality, detracted from the usefulness of democracy. Aristotle agrees with this proposal by presenting the most eloquent case ever made against solipsism. The life of moderation, based on the control of our natural appetites (of which the desire for unlimited personal freedom is our greatest weakness), would protect individuals from the extremes that could be produced in both social and political systems. While Aristotle is a proponent of diversity, albeit with some controls, the importance of virtue in the good state predominates over simple adjustments in everyday life.

Plato also diagnosed the alluring character of democracy; it is the attraction of unlimited freedom that made democracy so enticing, but to begin a path toward democratic society was to trek down "a garlanded procession of insolence."⁵ The human vulnerability for democracy presented itself in the form of an acquisitive desire, what we moderns might call self-aggrandizement or materialism. Such a propensity could be worthwhile in part because it allows the individual to increase the range of experiential knowledge and to differentiate better between the more essential aspects of human existence and those pursuits of lesser value. For Plato, though, a succumbing to the democratic life would leave the soul devoid of the capacity to distinguish the higher from the lower and make the vital search for the good, the true, and the beautiful impossible. Democratic man will be preoccupied by an equality of pleasures, choosing not to dedicate himself to the virtuous life.

Aristotle, pursuing a more practical argument, criticized the ruling order of Hippodamus's ideal state and the instability its democratic organization would create. Governmental offices under the system envisioned by Hippodamus would be filled by anyone who demonstrated interest in the office; in this governmental structure, an individual could be permitted to assume a position of great responsibility regardless of the individual's fitness for the task. A common agricultural worker, with no familiarity with military strategy and no commitment to his city-state, could be chosen to lead an army.⁶ Aristotle argued that such a lack of distinction among the citizenry would cause the downfall of the state.

Plato supplemented this understanding by examining the mind of democratic man. In such a condition, the mind would become a "vacant citadel" obsessed with "an invasion of pretentious fallacies and opinions."⁷ The important moral

dimension would be surrogated to fanciful and whimsical concerns. For the democratic soul and state the virtue of "spiritedness" often praised by Plato is displaced from the mind and the will of democratic man; in time of greatest moral or political crisis, democratic man cannot respond to the situation in an appropriate manner, even though the challenge might threaten democratic society. The democratic state would be controlled by citizens resembling Homer's lotus-eaters, and any association of governing with ethical living would be disparaged, denigrating any concept of an ontological order of being.

Aristotle considered the greatest problem confronting the democratic state to be the "waywardness" at its core: it was based on the rule of decree. Democratic government, not unlike democratic man, lacked any permanence. For Aristotle, the democratic state did not possess the most essential element, a constitution. The decrees of a democracy were identical to the commands of the tyrant, and constitutions allowed for the rule of law and such a legal and political order were prohibited in a democracy. The "law" of decree had no "general validity" and was temporal in orientation, allowing for the degradation of the political system and society as a whole.⁸ When democracies attempted to establish constitutions, their efforts ended in failure according to Aristotle because of the democratic affinity for honoring those practices which were most undesirable.

While questions of the soul and mind were important to both Aristotle and Plato, a typology of the leadership in the democratic state was essential. In his study of the various constitutions, Aristotle found that improperly designed constitutions, influenced by democratic ideas, could mark the downfall of a state. The Cosmi, for example, had a governing body that was dominated by a group called the elders.⁹ The Cosmi elders, in contradistinction to the elders of other city-states, were always elected from a body of citizens who had served on a ruling council. Without any form of constitutional restraint on their power, the elders soon took advantage of their lifelong tenure and other exemptions to usurp total control of the city-state.¹⁰ The only solution to the problem of a democracy, for Aristotle at least, was the installation of a constitution. With a constitution came stability, and any change in this constitutional structure should only take place with "the very greatest caution."¹¹

In Plato's democratic state, the individual and the political system were less likely to be redeemed. The dilemma of the democratic state consisted in the loss of all self-discipline. No longer could the state or citizens pursue the task for which they were best suited; all tasks and responsibilities related to the operation of the state became equal, as Aristotle discovered in Hippodamus's flawed constitution. In addition to the concerns about the leadership structure of the state presented by Aristotle, Plato argued that man in such a state would be less likely to participate in the critical areas of importance to the state. The citizen of the democratic state is so consumed by the pleasures of the moment that he is unable to direct his attention to the preservation of the state. His existence becomes so temporal and unrestrained that he is merely drifting from one impulse to another: "One day it's wine, women, and song, the next water to drink and a strict diet; one day it's hard physical training, the next indolence and careless ease, and then a period of philosophical study."¹²

This gift of diversity praised by both Plato and Aristotle becomes the Achilles heel of the democracy. Many critics of the Platonic and Aristotelian view of

democracy have suggested that these citadels of ancient thought are merely proposing statist designs of their own.¹³ Plato, especially in his promotion of a communal life for his Guardian class, might have initiated these criticisms; Aristotle even laments Plato's divisions and suggests that "the inevitable result would be two states within one, and these in some opposition to each other."¹⁴ But Plato is after all proposing the organization of a state to be ruled by philosopher-kings. Neither Plato nor Aristotle is defending a version of radical authoritarianism. Both are concerned with presenting the difficulties of a society based on an excess of freedom—or freedom as a permit or license. It is only through a devotion to the good that a society can be reclaimed. Some contemporary scholars have suggested a more sympathetic understanding of the classical criticism of democracy.¹⁵ Aryek Botwinick, in a recent article, defends a view of Plato that militates against the older perception. The thesis of his argument is that we moderns, hitherto limited in our understanding of politics by the cultural schizophrenia of modernity, can come to a new appreciation of Plato and the "critical lucidity" of his defense of moral action.¹⁶

The license of excessive freedoms in a democracy will eventually cause its destruction, according to Aristotle. In *The Politics*, Aristotle chooses to detail the fall of democratic forms of government as his first example, possibly to signify the important weaknesses of democratic rule;¹⁷ he possesses some sympathy, however, for democratic efforts as compared to Plato's more overtly negative view. Aristotle observes that some good can come out of a democratic rule, thus prompting his defense of the best practicable regime as containing a mixture of elements—both aristocratic and democratic—but in most circumstances democracy, owing to external excesses, will be replaced by a worse form of government. He cites the example of Cos, where a democratic city-state arose and declined as the "popular" leaders became ruthless in their modes of governing. In Megara, the democratically selected rulers became so infatuated with their personal desires that they forced an evacuation of their state only to have the emigres return to overthrow the corrupt ruling group.

The most dangerous aspect of democratic rule, as it is described in Aristotle's survey, is the electoral procedures used in the selection of the leadership for most city-states. Aristotle prefers a system where the candidates for office have some stake in the society that they would like to lead; without an immutable tie to the society, the prospective representative cannot fully serve the city-state. Specifically, he recommends that candidates be property owners. Without the discipline of a connective element, a perverse form of popular rule develops. The rise of popular control, unrestricted by constitutional or traditional prohibitions, could also result in the multitudes fighting against the multitudes, derision, and the dissolution of the city-state. True sovereignty for Aristotle requires rule by the propertied citizenry and a diminished role for the "people."

For both Plato and Aristotle, democratic man has become the victim of his passions. Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics* are efforts to recapture and to regenerate the lost soul of Athenian society. There should also be a mention of their differences; Plato rejects any proposal for governing that contains a remnant of democracy. Aristotle, knowing a just monarch may be difficult to find, defends the idea of a mixed regime containing both democratic and aristocratic elements. His view of justice incorporates the principle of a mixture by allowing for two

groups of citizens to participate in the assembly—the rich and the poor—and their respective votes are to be of equal importance, but in the case of a tie the group with the larger property holdings should prevail. Polity serves as the best practicable regime because it provides the restraint needed to preserve the political order and allows for some personal freedom.

While Plato's version of the ordered society might also appear to have utopian trappings, it is much more than simply a plan for an ideal state. Unlike some of Plato's contemporary interpreters, who prefer to see him as either a defender of undisciplined mass political participation or a supporter of despotism, he is instead forcing his reader to notice the potential pitfalls of democratic man and his society.

The Platonic and Aristotelian criticism of democratic man remains important today. To some degree, we moderns find the problem of democracy more bewildering and confusing than did the citizens of Athens. America has disregarded a portion of its constitutional infrastructure and commitment to moral duty for the effortless pleasures of the temporal. If we are to recover this heritage, we must adequately understand the limits of democracy by plebiscite.

NOTES

¹Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980, pp. 314-328.

²Aristotle, *The Politics*, translated by T. Sinclair, Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1987, pp. 156-157.

³*Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁴Plato, *The Republic*, translated by Desmond Lee, New York: Penguin, 1986, p. 376.

⁵*Ibid.* p. 380.

⁶*Op. cit.*, p. 135.

⁷*Op. cit.*, p. 379.

⁸*Op. cit.*, p. 251.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 156.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 155.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 138.

¹²*Op. cit.*, p. 381.

¹³I have the work of Karl Popper in mind here.

¹⁴*Op. cit.*, p. 118.

¹⁵Aryeh Botwinick, "Tacit Knowledge in Plato," *Commonwealth*, 1988, Volume 2, p. 59.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Op. cit.*, pp. 310-311.