

From Plato, *The Republic*, Book 8 :

Democracy comes into being after the poor have conquered their opponents, slaughtering some and banishing some, while to the remainder they give an equal share of freedom and power; ..., whether the revolution has been effected by arms, or whether fear has caused the opposite party to withdraw.

In the first place, are they not free; and is not the city full of freedom and frankness --a man may say and do what he likes? And where freedom is, the individual is clearly able to order for himself his own life as he pleases?

Then in this kind of State there will be the greatest variety of human natures? **This, then, seems likely to be the fairest of States**, being an embroidered robe which is spangled with every sort of flower. And just as women and children think a variety of colors to be of all things most charming, so there are many men to whom this State, which is spangled with the manners and characters of mankind, will appear to be the fairest of States.

...And there being no necessity, I said, for you to govern in this State, even if you have the capacity, or to be governed, unless you like, or go to war when the rest go to war, or to be at peace when others are at peace, unless you are so disposed ...is not this a way of life which for the moment is supremely delightful ...See too, I said, the forgiving spirit of democracy, and the 'don't care' about trifles, and the disregard which she shows of all the fine principles which we solemnly laid down at the foundation of the city --as when we said that, except in the case of some rarely gifted nature, there never will be a good man who has not from his childhood been used to play amid things of beauty and make of them a joy and a study --how grandly does she trample all these fine notions of ours under her feet, never giving a thought to the pursuits which make a statesman, and promoting to honor any one who professes to be the people's friend.

These and other kindred characteristics are proper to democracy, which is a charming form of government, full of variety and disorder, and dispensing a sort of equality to equals and unequals alike.

The Democratic Soul

And so the young man returns into the country of the lotus-eaters, and takes up his dwelling there in the face of all men; ... and then modesty, which they call silliness, is ignominiously thrust into exile by them, and temperance, which they nickname unmanliness, is trampled in the mire and cast forth; they persuade men that moderation and orderly expenditure are vulgarity and meanness, and so, by the help of a rabble of evil appetites, they drive them beyond the border.

And when they have emptied and swept clean the soul of him who is now in their power and who is being initiated by them in great mysteries, the next thing is to bring back to their house insolence and anarchy and waste and impudence in bright array having garlands on their heads, and a great company with them, hymning their praises and calling them by sweet names; insolence they term breeding, and anarchy liberty, and waste magnificence, and impudence courage. And so the young man passes out of his original nature, which was trained in the school of necessity, into the freedom and libertinism of useless and unnecessary pleasures.

After this he lives on, spending his money and labour and time on unnecessary pleasures quite as much as on necessary ones; but if he be fortunate, and is not too much disordered in his wits, when years have elapsed, and the heyday of passion is over --supposing that he then re-admits into the city some part of the exiled virtues, and does not wholly give himself up to their successors --in that case he balances his pleasures and lives in a sort of equilibrium, putting the government of himself into the hands of the one which comes first and wins the turn; and when he has had enough of that, then into the hands of another; he despises none of them but encourages them all equally...If any one says to him that some pleasures are the satisfactions of good and noble desires, and others of evil desires, and that he ought to use and honor some and chastise and master the others --whenever this is repeated to him he shakes his head and says that they are all alike, and that one is as good as another.

Yes, I said, he lives from day to day indulging the appetite of the hour; and sometimes he is lapped in drink and strains of the flute; then he becomes a water-drinker, and tries to get thin; then he takes a turn at gymnastics; sometimes idling and neglecting everything, then once more living the life of a philosopher; often he-is busy with politics, and starts to his feet and says and does whatever comes into his head; and, if he is emulous of any one who is a warrior, off he is in that direction, or of men of business, once more in that. His life has neither law nor order; and this distracted existence he terms joy and bliss and freedom; and so he goes on.

Yes, I said; his life is motley and manifold and an epitome of the lives of many; --he answers to the State which we described as fair and spangled. And many a man and many a woman will take him for their pattern, and many a constitution and many an example of manners is contained in him. Let him then be set over against democracy; he may truly be called the democratic man.

Democracy to Tyranny

Democracy has her own good, of which the insatiable desire brings her to dissolution?

Freedom, I replied; which, as they tell you in a democracy, is the glory of the State --and that therefore in a democracy alone will the freeman of nature deign to dwell.

When a democracy which is thirsting for freedom has evil cupbearers presiding over the feast, and has drunk too deeply of the strong wine of freedom, then, unless her rulers are very amenable and give a plentiful draught, she calls them to account and punishes them, and says that they are cursed oligarchs.

Yes, I said; and loyal citizens are insultingly termed by her slaves who hug their chains In such a state of society the master fears and flatters his scholars, and the scholars despise their masters and tutors; young and old are all alike; and the young man is on a level with the old, and is ready to compete with him in word or deed; and old men condescend to the young and are full of pleasantry and gaiety; they are loth to be thought morose and authoritative, and therefore they adopt the manners of the young.

And above all, I said, and as the result of all, see how sensitive the citizens become; they chafe impatiently at the least touch of authority and at length, as you know, they cease to care even for the laws, written or unwritten; they will have no one over them. Such, my friend, I said, is the fair and glorious beginning out of which springs tyranny.

...Then, in order that we may see clearly what we are doing, let us imagine democracy to be divided, as indeed it is, into three classes; for in the first place freedom creates rather more drones ...in a democracy they are almost the entire ruling power, and while the keener sort speak and act, the rest keep buzzing about the rostrum and do not suffer a word to be said on the other side; hence in democracies almost everything is managed by the drones.

... They are the most squeezable persons and yield the largest amount of honey to the drones. And this is called the wealthy class, and the drones feed upon them.

The people are a third class, consisting of those who work with their own hands; they are not politicians, and have not much to live upon. This, when assembled, is the largest and most powerful class in a democracy.

True, he said; but then the multitude is seldom willing to congregate unless they get a little honey.

And do they not share? I said. Do not their leaders deprive the rich of their estates and distribute them among the people; at the same time taking care to reserve the larger part

for themselves?

...The people have always some champion whom they set over them and nurse into greatness. This and no other is the root from which a tyrant springs; when he first appears above ground he is a protector. ...having a mob entirely at his disposal, he is not restrained from shedding the blood of kinsmen; by the favorite method of false accusation he brings them into court and murders them, making the life of man to disappear, and with unholy tongue and lips tasting the blood of his fellow citizen; some he kills and others he banishes, at the same time hinting at the abolition of debts and partition of lands: and after this, what will be his destiny? Must he not either perish at the hands of his enemies, or from being a man become a wolf --that is, a tyrant?

...if they are unable to expel him ... they conspire to assassinate him. Then comes the famous request for a bodyguard, which is the device of all those who have got thus far in their tyrannical career --'Let not the people's friend,' as they say, 'be lost to them.' The people readily assent; all their fears are for him --they have none for themselves.

...At first, in the early days of his power, he is full of smiles, and he salutes every one whom he meets; --he to be called a tyrant, who is making promises in public and also in private! liberating debtors, and distributing land to the people and his followers, and wanting to be so kind and good to every one!ut when he has disposed of foreign enemies by conquest or treaty, and there is nothing to fear from them, then he is always stirring up some war or other, in order that the people may require a leader.

Can we avoid Plato's conclusions, relying on our differences from Athenian Democracy?

A city state versus a nation (empire?)

Homogeneity versus variety

Direct versus representative democracy (Assembly Council Courts)

More participants (Women and slaves) vs (Anyone could propose)

Checks and balances (Sortition, Limits on service, Courts)

A Contemporary Example:: Andrew Sullivan cites Plato on elites

The longer a democracy lasted, Plato argued, the more democratic it would become. Its freedoms would multiply; its equality spread. Deference to any sort of authority would wither; tolerance of any kind of inequality would come under intense threat; and multiculturalism and sexual freedom would create a city or a country like “a many-colored cloak decorated in all hues.”

This rainbow-flag polity, Plato argues, is, for many people, the fairest of regimes. The freedom in that democracy has to be experienced to be believed — with shame and privilege in particular emerging over time as anathema. But it is inherently unstable. As the authority of elites fades, as Establishment values cede to popular ones, views and identities can become so magnificently diverse as to be mutually uncomprehending. And when all the barriers to equality, formal and informal, have been removed; when everyone is equal; when elites are despised and full license is established to do “whatever one wants,” you arrive at what might be called late-stage democracy. There is no kowtowing to authority here, let alone to political experience or expertise.

...And it is when a democracy has ripened as fully as this, Plato argues, that a would-be tyrant will often seize his moment. He is usually of the elite but has a nature in tune with the time — given over to random pleasures and whims, feasting on plenty of food and sex, and reveling in the nonjudgment that is democracy’s civil religion. He makes his move by “taking over a particularly obedient mob” and attacking his wealthy peers as corrupt. If not stopped quickly, his appetite for attacking the rich on behalf of the people swells further. He is a traitor to his class — and soon, his elite enemies, shorn of popular legitimacy, find a way to appease him or are forced to flee. Eventually, he stands alone, promising to cut through the paralysis of democratic incoherence. It’s as if he were offering the addled, distracted, and self-indulgent citizens a kind of relief from democracy’s endless choices and insecurities. He rides a backlash to excess—“too much freedom seems to change into nothing but too much slavery” — and offers himself as the personified answer to the internal conflicts of the democratic mess. He pledges, above all, to take on the increasingly despised elites. And as the people thrill to him as a kind of solution, a democracy willingly, even impetuously, repeals itself.

Part of American democracy’s stability is owed to the fact that the Founding Fathers had read their Plato. To guard our democracy from the tyranny of the majority and the passions of the mob, they constructed large, hefty barriers between the popular will and the exercise of power. [Restricted franchise, Electoral College, Senators appointed, Supreme Court, Separation of Powers] Many of these undemocratic rules have been weakened or

abolished.But elites still matter in a democracy. ...we need them precisely to protect this precious democracy from its own destabilizing excesses.

Jag Bhalla criticizes Sullivan

Andrew Sullivan argues that ... the elite's safeguarding role has withered, and we're poised to play out Plato's dire prediction—democracy begets tyranny. Behold Trump.

The kind of democracy that Plato forecasts will inevitably evolve into tyranny is itself evolved from plutocracy. In this scenario, injustice is already built into the fabric of society. Severe inequities mean that there are, in effect, two separate city-states—that of the rich and that of the poor, “at war” with one another....The degraded denizens of the city of the poor rise up in fury. Ideas of justice have long been forgotten in the long decline from the republic that, for Plato, offered the very definition of justice. It's this kind of democracy, driven by the swoon-inducing, wealth-worshipping values of a plutocratic oligarchy, that Plato predicts will beget tyranny. A canny politician will read the desires for material gain with cunning accuracy, since he's in thrall to the very same desires, and, unimpeded by any inconvenient scruples, he'll promise the people everything. Perhaps he'll offer to teach them the art of the deal.

...There are unsettling analogies between the Trump phenomenon and Plato's darkest views about democracy. But one doesn't get at the accurate analogies by going on about “too much democracy,” while ignoring the economic inequalities that generate Plato's pessimism. Plato's relevance is nothing to do with dreaming of restoring an “elite” such as once ruled America, defined by race, gender, class, and wealth. Those men had about as much in common with Plato's trustworthy elites as Trump University has with Plato's Academy.

(<http://economics.com/trumps-rise-is-the-us-too-democratic-plato/>)