

PLATO ON DEMOCRACY, PART II, AND HOW DEMOCRACY LEADS TO TYRANNY (*REPUBLIC* BK VIII)

Come then, tell me, dear friend, how tyranny arises. That it is an outgrowth of democracy is fairly plain.

Yes, plain.

Is it, then, in a sense, in the same way in which democracy arises out of oligarchy that tyranny arises from democracy?

How is that?

The good that they proposed to themselves and that was the cause of the establishment of oligarchy--it was wealth, was it not?

Yes.

Well, then, the insatiate lust for wealth and the neglect of everything else for the sake of money-making were the cause of its undoing.

True, he said.

And is not the avidity of democracy for that which is its definition and criterion of good the thing which dissolves it too?

What do you say its criterion to be?

Liberty, I replied, for you may hear it said that this is best managed in a democratic city, and for this reason that is the only city in which a man of free spirit will care to live.

Why, yes, he replied, you hear that saying everywhere.

Then, as I was about to observe, is it not the excess and greed of this and the neglect of all other things that revolutionizes this constitution too and prepares the way for the necessity of a dictatorship?

How? he said.

Why, when a democratic city athirst for liberty gets bad cupbearers for its leaders and is intoxicated by drinking too deep of that unmixed wine, and then, if its so-called governors are not extremely mild and gentle with it and do not dispense the liberty unstintedly, it chastises them and accuses them of being accursed oligarchs.

Yes, that is what they do, he replied.

But those who obey the rulers, I said, it reviles as willing slaves and men of nought, but it commends and honors in public and private rulers who resemble subjects and subjects who are like rulers. Is it not inevitable that in such a state the spirit of liberty should go to all lengths?

Of course.

And this anarchic temper, said I, my friend, must penetrate into private homes and finally enter into the very animals.

Just what do we mean by that? he said.

Why, I said, the father habitually tries to resemble the child and is afraid of his sons, and the son likens himself to the father and feels no awe or fear of his parents, so that he may be forsooth a free man. And the resident alien feels himself equal to the citizen and the citizen to him, and the foreigner likewise.

Yes, these things do happen, he said.

They do, said I, and such other trifles as these. The teacher in such case fears and fawns upon the pupils, and the pupils pay no heed to the teacher or to their overseers either. And in general the young ape their elders and vie with them in speech and action, while the old,

accommodating themselves to the young, are full of pleasantry and graciousness, imitating the young for fear they may be thought disagreeable and authoritative.

By all means, he said.

And the climax of popular liberty, my friend, I said, is attained in such a city when the purchased slaves, male and female, are no less free than the owners who paid for them. And I almost forgot to mention the spirit of freedom and equal rights in the relation of men to women and women to men.

Shall we not, then, said he, in Aeschylean phrase, say 'whatever rises to our lips'?

Certainly, I said, so I will. Without experience of it no one would believe how much freer the very beasts subject to men are in such a city than elsewhere. The dogs literally verify the adage and 'like their mistresses become.' And likewise the horses and asses are wont to hold on their way with the utmost freedom and dignity, bumping into everyone who meets them and who does not step aside. And so all things everywhere are just bursting with the spirit of liberty.

It is my own dream you are telling me, he said, for it often happens to me when I go to the country.

And do you note that the sum total of all these items when footed up is that they render the souls of the citizens so sensitive that they chafe at the slightest suggestion of servitude and will not endure it? For you are aware that they finally pay no heed even to the laws written or unwritten, so that forsooth they may have no master anywhere over them.

I know it very well, said he.

This, then, my friend, said I, is the fine and vigorous root from which tyranny grows, in my opinion.

Vigorous indeed, he said, but what next?

The same malady, I said, that, arising in oligarchy, destroyed it, this more widely diffused and more violent as a result of this license, enslaves democracy. And in truth, any excess is wont to bring about a corresponding reaction to the opposite in the seasons, in plants, in animal bodies, and most especially in political societies.

Probably, he said.

And so the probable outcome of too much freedom is only too much slavery in the individual and the state.

Yes, that is probable.

Probably, then, tyranny develops out of no other constitution than democracy--from the height of liberty, I take it, the fiercest extreme of servitude.

That is reasonable, he said.

That, however, I believe, was not your question, but what identical malady arising in democracy as well as in oligarchy enslaves it?

You say truly, he replied.

That then, I said, was what I had in mind, the class of idle and spendthrift men, the most enterprising and vigorous portion being leaders and the less manly spirits followers. We were likening them to drones, some equipped with stings and others stingless.

And rightly too, he said.

These two kinds, then, I said, when they arise in any state, create a disturbance like that produced in the body by phlegm and gall. And so a good physician and lawgiver must be on his guard from afar against the two kinds, like a prudent apiarist, first and chiefly to prevent their springing up, but if they do arise to have them as quickly as may be cut out, cells and all.

Yes, by Zeus, he said, by all means.

Then let us take it in this way, I said, so that we may contemplate our purpose more distinctly.--[How?]-Let us in our theory make a tripartite division of the democratic state, which is in fact its structure. One such class, as we have described, grows up in it because of the license, no less than in the oligarchic state.

That is so.

But it is far fiercer in this state than in that.

How so?

There, because it is not held in honor, but is kept out of office, it is not exercised and does not grow vigorous. But in a democracy this is the dominating class, with rare exceptions, and the fiercest part of it makes speeches and transacts business, and the remainder swarms and settles about the speaker's stand and keeps up a buzzing and tolerates no dissent, so that everything with slight exceptions is administered by that class in such a state.

Quite so, he said.

And so from time to time there emerges or is secreted from the multitude another group of this sort.

What sort? he said.

When all are pursuing wealth the most orderly and thrifty natures for the most part become the richest.

It is likely.

Then they are the most abundant supply of honey for the drones, and it is the easiest to extract.

Why, yes, he said, how could one squeeze it out of those who have little?

The capitalistic class is, I take it, the name by which they are designated--the pasture of the drones.

Pretty much so, he said.

And the third class, composing the 'people,' would comprise all quiet cultivators of their own farms who possess little property. This is the largest and most potent group in a democracy when it meets in assembly.

Yes, it is, he said, but it will not often do that, unless it gets a share of the honey.

Well, does it not always share, I said, to the extent that the men at the head find it possible, in distributing to the people what they take from the well-to-do, to keep the lion's share for themselves?

Why, yes, he said, it shares in that sense.

And so, I suppose, those who are thus plundered are compelled to defend themselves by speeches in the assembly and any action in their power.

Of course.

And thereupon the charge is brought against them by the other party, though they may have no revolutionary designs, that they are plotting against the people, and it is said that they are oligarchs.

Surely.

And then finally, when they see the people, not of its own will but through misapprehension, and being misled by the calumniators, attempting to wrong them, why then, whether they wish it or not, they become in very deed oligarchs, not willingly, but this evil too is engendered by those drones which sting them.

Precisely.

And then there ensue impeachments and judgments and lawsuits on either side.

Yes, indeed.

And is it not always the way of a demos to put forward one man as its special champion and protector and cherish and magnify him?

Yes, it is.

This, then, is plain, said I, that when a tyrant arises he sprouts from a protectorate root and from nothing else.

Very plain.

What, then, is the starting point of the transformation of a protector into a tyrant? Is it not obviously when the protector's acts begin to reproduce the legend that is told of the shrine of Lycaean Zeus in Arcadia?

What is that? he said.

The story goes that he who tastes of the one bit of human entrails minced up with those of other victims is inevitably transformed into a wolf. Have you not heard the tale?

I have.

And is it not true that in like manner a leader of the people who, getting control of a docile mob, does not withhold his hand from the shedding of tribal blood, but by the customary unjust accusations brings a citizen into court and assassinates him, blotting out a human life, and with unhallowed tongue and lips that have tasted kindred blood, banishes and slays and hints at the abolition of debts and the partition of lands--is it not the inevitable consequence and a decree of fate that such a one be either slain by his enemies or become a tyrant and be transformed from a man into a wolf?

It is quite inevitable, he said.

He it is, I said, who becomes the leader of faction against the possessors of property.

Yes, he.

May it not happen that he is driven into exile and, being restored in defiance of his enemies, returns a finished tyrant?

Obviously.

And if they are unable to expel him or bring about his death by calumniating him to the people, they plot to assassinate him by stealth.

That is certainly wont to happen, said he.

And thereupon those who have reached this stage devise that famous petition of the tyrant--to ask from the people a bodyguard to make their city safe for the friend of democracy.

They do indeed, he said.

And the people grant it, I suppose, fearing for him but unconcerned for themselves.

Yes, indeed.

And when he sees this, the man who has wealth and with his wealth the repute of hostility to democracy, then in the words of the oracle delivered to Croesus, 'By the pebble-strewn strand of the Hermus, swift is his flight; he stays not nor blushes to show the white feather.'

No, for he would never get a second chance to blush.

And he who is caught, methinks, is delivered to his death.

Inevitably.

And then obviously that protector does not lie prostrate, 'mighty with far-flung limbs,' in Homeric overthrow, but overthrowing many others towers in the car of state transformed from a protector into a perfect and finished tyrant.

What else is likely? he said.

Shall we, then, portray the happiness, said I, of the man and the state in which such a creature arises?

By all means let us describe it, he said.

Then at the start and in the first days does he not smile upon all men and greet everybody he meets and deny that he is a tyrant, and promise many things in private and public, and having freed men from debts, and distributed lands to the people and his own associates, he affects a gracious and gentle manner to all?

Necessarily, he said.

But when, I suppose, he has come to terms with some of his exiled enemies and has got others destroyed and is no longer disturbed by them, in the first place he is always stirring up some war so that the people may be in need of a leader.

That is likely.

And also that being impoverished by war taxes they may have to devote themselves to their daily business and be less likely to plot against him?

Obviously.

And if, I presume, he suspects that there are free spirits who will not suffer his domination, his further object is to find pretexts for destroying them by exposing them to the enemy? From all these motives a tyrant is compelled to be always provoking wars?

Yes, he is compelled to do so.

And by such conduct will he not the more readily incur the hostility of the citizens?

Of course.

And is it not likely that some of those who helped to establish and now share in his power, voicing their disapproval of the course of events, will speak out frankly to him and to one another--such of them as happen to be the bravest?

Yes, it is likely.

Then the tyrant must do away with all such if he is to maintain his rule, until he has left no one of any worth, friend or foe.

Obviously.

He must look sharp to see, then, who is brave, who is great-souled, who is wise, who is rich, and such is his good fortune that, whether he wishes it or not, he must be their enemy and plot against them all until he purge the city.

A fine purgation, he said.

Yes, said I, just the opposite of that which physicians practice on our bodies. For while they remove the worst and leave the best, he does the reverse.

Yes, for apparently he must, he said, if he is to keep his power.

Blessed, then, is the necessity that binds him, said I, which bids him dwell for the most part with base companions who hate him, or else forfeit his life.

Such it is, he said.

And would he not, the more he offends the citizens by such conduct, have the greater need of more and more trustworthy bodyguards?

Of course.

Whom, then, may he trust, and whence shall he fetch them?

Unbidden, he said, they will wing their way to him in great numbers if he furnish their wage.

Drones, by the dog, I said, I think you are talking of again, an alien and motley crew.

You think rightly, he said.

But what of the home supply, would he not choose to employ that?

How?

By taking their slaves from the citizens, emancipating them, and enlisting them in his bodyguard.

Assuredly, he said, since these are those whom he can most trust.

Truly, said I, this tyrant business is a blessed thing on your showing, if such are the friends and 'trusties' he must employ after destroying his former associates.

But such are indeed those he does make use of, he said.

And these companions admire him, I said, and these new citizens are his associates, while the better sort hate and avoid him (*Republic* VIII 562a-568a).

NOTES: (1) When I read the highlighted parts above, I couldn't help but think about contemporary America, with its lawsuits brought to parents by their children, children being granted a divorce from their parents, the general tendency of the lack of respect for "elders" (be they parents, teachers or strangers) that we're seeing as the years go by, and other things. OK, I probably sound like Grandpa Abe Simpson (☺), but I do not think that we can deny all that Plato says here on that subject with respect to our country.

(2) When Plato says (right after the parts I highlighted) that in a democracy slaves and freemen would be considered the same, as well as men and women, I would like to note that Plato himself thinks that women are in theory completely capable of being rulers in his ideal state, so he doesn't think that there is some inherent, significant difference between men and women. As far as slaves go, on the one hand, Plato does allow for this elitist concept in thinking that some people are just better than others; on the other hand, Plato argues against slavery in his *Laws*, which are supposed to be the laws of the ideal state (also known as "Kallipolis," or the Republic). So it's a mixed bag, on my reading of Plato.