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AS ORIGENS DO PENSAMENTO OCIDENTAL

THE ORIGINS OF WESTERN THOUGHT

DOSSIER: ANCIENT DEMOCRACY REVISITED

Why Plato could not simply embrace Democracy? Misology and Democracy in Plato's Thought

Gabriele Cornelli [i]
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5588-7898
cornelli@unb.br

[i] Universidade de Brasília – Brasília – DF – Brasil

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Abstract: This paper aims to look at the ancient city of Athens and some of its political challenges through the eyes of Plato. I will do this by relating two concepts that permeate Plato's political concerns: democracy and misology. Beyond the tragic event of Socrates' death at democratic hands, there is perhaps something even deeper in

Plato's struggle to see democracy as something that can work, so to speak. Plato no doubt has a profoundly pessimistic view of the human being. And the city, who was traditionally supposed to educate men, is not delivering anymore (if ever). First of all, Plato clearly identifies the origin of political and social instability in the economic imbalance between πλοῦτος (richness) and πενία (poverty). Secondly, Plato's diagnosis, what his eyes are seeing, is even more perceptive and accurate. He outlines a second source of problem for democracy, one the probably resonate even more dramatically in our very present days: one that Socrates calls *misology* in the *Phaedo:* the hatred of discourses. Apart from the fact that there is a significant distance and a radical difference between the democracy of the 5th and 4th centuries, when Plato actually writes his dialogues, the most relevant question that emerges from the investigation is probably that a democracy itself is not something stable, an ontological object, not even today. And Plato was well aware of all this.

Keywords: Plato, Democracy, Misology, *Republic*, *Phaedo*.

The aim of this paper [1] is to revisit Plato's relationship with democracy, or at least to propose a route that allows me to complicate the textbook literature on the subject. I will start with two premises, which I want to outline very briefly and I apologise in advance for the excessive summarizing.

First of all, he relevance of the debate of ancient philosophers on the subject of democracy (and politics more generally) has declined sharply in recent decades. An example of this is the 2018 celebrated

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book by Levitsky & Ziblatt (2018) *How Democracies Die*, dedicated to analysing the last few years of American politics. The book doesn't name Plato or Aristotle. But if there is anyone who has thought about this in depth - the problem of the decay of political institutions, including democracy in particular - it has been Plato and Aristotle. Secondly, we must admit it wasn't like that throughout history. Plato and Aristotle were always pulled all over the place with regard to their political positions. Plato, especially more recently, has been heavily criticised for his troubled relationship with democracy. Perhaps the most well-known instance of this criticism against Plato is the publication in 1944 of Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Popper began writing *The Open Society and Its Enemies* in 1938 in New Zealand, under strong emotional pressure (when arrived there, he received the news of the Nazi invasion of his homeland Austria). There are two fundamental convictions behind his work: a) Popper is a liberal and considers Plato's political proposal to be illiberal and totalitarian: at the same time Nazi, because of eugenics, and bolshevik, because it is a certain collectivism; b) Popper is a reformist and believes that the only real possibility of political change in a country is through reform, whereas Plato evidently puts forward - I hope I'm not giving away any spoilers here – a utopian political engineering. In his own terms, therefore, Popper contrasts gradual mechanics with Plato's utopian mechanics. In short, Popper as a libertarian reformer cannot accept Plato's radical political proposals.

Popper accusing Plato of totalitarianism is not entirely original: he himself explicitly quotes Grote, Gomperz, Toynbee and Crossman. But the impact of Popper's critique is decisive for Platonist scholarship. From that moment on, we, the platonists, have been all engaged in successive attempts to rid Plato of these criticisms. These attempts have a common trait, quite marked and full of consequences for our discussion here today: they all tend to depower (if not simply neutralise, says Vegetti 2012, 275) the political footprint of Plato's political texts (cf. Vegetti 2012, 206).

> return the political Plato to his radical difference from the dominant positions of political thought, - of his time and ours, I would say - being able to make him once again 'good for thinking' also about the questions of our today politics - making him a precious observatory, by virtue of his distance (Vegetti 2012, 277).

And, if any possible, I would like to try to look at the ancient city of Athens and its political challenges through the eyes of Plato. I will do this by relating two concepts that permeate Plato's political concerns: democracy and misology. I haven't found any studies that relate the two, so I'm interested in drawing this relationship.

We should address the question that won't go away once and for all, let's face the elephant in the room: What is Plato's problem with democracy? Why can't Plato just embrace democracy?

The simplest and most straightforward answer I can offer to you today is that Athenian democracy…. killed Socrates.

I don't have time to prove this point. There is, of course, an almost infinite literature on the subject. I have already lightly discussed this point in an article of mine (Cornelli & Chevitarese 2010), dedicated to a historical discussion of this claim, as well as to the autobiography of *Letter VII* in the description that Plato himself gives of the impact that the death of the one he considers his friend, a man he does not hesitate to consider the most just of all those of his time, had on his social and political life.

I've been saying for some time (more recently in Cornelli 2014) that Plato's entire work is one big apology of Socrates: Plato needs to defend Socrates against many accusers, of course, but especially against the democracy that ended up killing him. Plato has always been committed to justifying in front of the Athenians (we'll see that these are the Athenians of the 4th century, not the 5th) that in a city like the one that condemned him to death, Socrates would have no chance of surviving, he would inevitably be condemned to death. Hence Plato's more general conviction that there was "an

irreconcilable conflict between the critical exercise of philosophical thought and the political dimension of the city" (Vegetti 2003a, 15). The city and philosophy are incompatible. And in this specific case, Plato can hardly see the possibility of a peaceful coexistence between the philosopher and the actual democratic city of Athens: where there is one, there is not the other, and vice versa.

Beyond the tragic event of Socrates' death at democratic hands, there is perhaps something even deeper in Plato's struggle to see democracy as something that can work, so to speak. Plato no doubt has a profoundly **pessimistic view of the human being**. Vegetti masterfully defined it as an "anthropology of πλεονεξία":

> Anthropologies of *pleonexía* means, in very schematic terms, a conception of the original, profound and immutable nature of the human being as dominated by the desire for reciprocal oppression, by the unrestrained drive to "have more", in terms of power, glory, wealth, and therefore domination" - instead of a balanced and equitable sharing of these goods (Vegetti 2003b).

A deep tragedy inhabits the human soul. Plato understand soul's tragic structure from his intense frequencies of ancient theatre, perhaps more than from his own troubled experience of Athenian politics at the end of the 5th century, the same one that leads to the death of Socrates. Plato depicts this tragic nature of the soul with quite expressionist traits in his psychology, especially in the image of a soul cracked into three irreducible parts and in continuous struggle between them, as in the *Phaedrus* and the *Republic*.

It is the πολιτική τέχνη that is responsible for looking after the soul - as Socrates says in the Gorgias (464b), following in the footsteps of the tradition of Simonides' famous motto (53D), according to which πόλις ἄνδρα διδάσκει (Plut. *An Seni* 784b), the city educates the man. The idea, therefore, is that politics should be in charge do something about this pleonetic soul.

The problem is that politics doesn't deliver. Because politics suffers from the same problem:

> The law of pleonexia applies both to relations between groups and individuals within each citizen community and to those between *póleis*, between cities themselves. The historical context in which this anthropological thinking developed can be precisely defined: on the one hand, Athenian imperialism, which, under the mask of a democratic enterprise, reveals the nature of the city as a *polis týrannos*, according to the expression that Thucydides (II,62) attributes to its greatest leader, Pericles himself; on the other hand, the internal conflicts between the rival groups of oligarchs and democrats, the stasis that breaks the pact of citizenship on which the historical experience of the polis was built. In short, again in the words of Thucydides, we are dealing with that "violent master" (bíaios didáskalos, III 82.3) that the Peloponnesian War was for the Greeks and their anthropological and political understanding (Vegetti 2003b).

One can find this same pessimistic anthropology in Thucydides.

> The first and most lucid disciple of this master was undoubtedly Thucydides himself. He writes that there is a "nature of the human being" (and in another passage he adds: "a necessary nature, *physis anankaia*, V 105.2), by which he tends to exercise the violence of pleonexía against common laws (III 82.2, 6), to acquire power (*arche*), because of an innate *philotimia*, a desire for victory and glory (III 82.8). For gods and men, in reality, there is one and only one law: those who possess power command *ou an krate archei*, regardless of right and reason (V 105.2) (Vegetti 2003b).

Those of you who have read Plato's *Republic* will easily recognise clear echoes of Thucydides' vocabulary in the words of Thrasymachus and Glaucon, of course. Thucydides knew it all!

The general context sketched here is therefore both Plato's biographical difficulty with democracy and an anthropology of the pleonexia embedded in the practice of power.

Let me now zoom in on a detail that can easily go unnoticed, and about which, again, I found no reference. The detail will help me relate democracy and misology, as I announced in the title of this paper.

The detail I want to expand on is found in Book VI of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. It is the year 415 BC. In the assembly of the city of Syracuse, fuelled by tensions between democrats and oligarchs, represented by their leaders, Hermocrates and Athenagoras, it was announced that Athens had sent its troops to conquer Sicily. This was the famous Sicilian expedition, strongly desired by Alcibiades.

> Meanwhile reports of the armada began to reach Syracuse from several quarters. For some time they were given no credence, but eventually an assembly was called at which speeches were made on both sides of the question, some crediting the reports of the Athenian expedition and others rejecting them. Among the speakers was Hermocrates the son of Hermon, who came forward in the belief that he was reliably informed in the matter and advised the Syracusans as follows: 'You may well disbelieve me, as you have others, when I tell you the truth about this armada, and I realize that those who either originate or pass on apparently incredible reports not only fail to convince others but find themselves regarded as fools (Th VI 32-33. Transl. Hammond).

More than simply the conflict of speeches, what I'm interested in pointing out here is how difficult it is for the political leaders' speeches to convince their fellow citizens. The dramatic nature of this distrust in the words of the political leaders is particularly evident because there is an imminent danger to the city. This is how Thucydides' narrative goes:

> Such was Hermocrates' speech. It provoked vehement argument in the Syracusan assembly: some asserted that there was no way that the Athenians could be coming, and Hermocrates was talking nonsense; others argued that, even if they did come, they would

> sustain more damage than they could inflict; and some outright cynics tried to ridicule the whole question. Only a small element believed what Hermocrates was saying and shared his fear of imminent danger. Now Athenagoras came forward to speak. He was the leader of the democratic party and at the time the most persuasive influence on the general public (δήμου τε προστάτης ἦν καὶ ἐν τῷ παρόντι πιθανώτατος τοῖς πολλοῖς). He addressed the assembly as follows: 'The Athenians mad enough to come over here and walk straight into our hands? Only a coward or a traitor would not welcome that prospect! But what surprises me in the people who are spreading these reports to alarm you is not the extremes to which they are prepared to go, but their stupidity in thinking that their motives are not transparent. They have their own reasons for being afraid, and want to put the whole city in a state of emergency so that their particular fears are concealed in a general panic. And this is what lies behind these present rumours; they do not come out of nowhere, but they have been deliberately made up by people who are always involved in this sort of agitation. You would be well advised to discount the reports put about by these men and instead base your view of the probabilities on what a shrewd and highly experienced enemy would do — and I certainly rate the Athenians as such. They are hardly likely to turn their backs on the Peloponnesians and a war in Greece which is far from settled, and deliberately set out on another war of comparable scale. Indeed, considering the number and strength of our cities, I imagine they are glad that we are not attacking them. (Th VI 35-36. Transl. Hammond).

The consequence of distrust in the speeches of oligarchic and democratic leaders (*fake news*, we would say today) is disquiet and terror, which end up paralysing the assembly's decision and its ability to take decisions in the face of imminent danger.

The zoom I wanted to give to this debate narrated by Thucydides in the Syracusan assembly has a double purpose: on the one hand, it allows me to glimpse a little of what Plato should view more precisely when he looks at political life; on the other hand, it allows me to draw a red line between the speech of the Syracusan assembly and the dangers of misology to which Socrates refers in the *Phaedo*.

I think we can agree with a certain degree of confidence that Plato, when looking at the functioning of a city like Athens, immediately diagnoses a political disease (πόλεως νόσημα, Pl. R. VIII 544c7). It is worth remarking that the disease is not limited to the democratic city, but to all political forms, as is evident from a page of the *Republic*:

> First, there's the constitution praised by most people, namely, the Cretan or Laconian. The second, which is also second in the praise it receives, is called oligarchy and is filled with a host of evils. The next in order, and antagonistic to it, is democracy. And finally there is genuine tyranny, surpassing all of them, the fourth and terminal (ἔσχατον) of the diseases of a city (πόλεως νόσημα) (Pl. *R.* 544c. Transl. Grube/Reeve 1997, with modifications).

All political forms are therefore profoundly sick, with tyranny being terminally ill (ἔσχατον, 544c).[2]

What Plato's eyes seem to be seeing, therefore,

> the most obvious symptom of the crisis of the city at this time, of the failure of the project of civilisation that the Greeks had sought to pursue in their history, is the lasting fracture of the polis into two hostile and conflicting parties, "the city of the rich and the city of the poor" (Resp. IV 422e), each of which is subsequently fragmented into a plurality of private interest areas (Vegetti 2012, 33).

Athens is therefore deeply cracked.

The theme of the need to unite the city, overcoming the division between rich and poor, is quite common in the contemporary literature surrounding Plato. It is a genuine ideology of the city, which marks the whole political thinking of the 5th and 4th centuries in Athens.

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[2] Cf. também a mesma critica a todas as formas política existentes no livro III das *Leis.*

Thucydides again reminds us of Pericles' funeral oration for those who died after the first year of the Peloponnesian War in this sense:

> Our constitution is called a democracy because we govern in the interests of the majority, not just the few. Our laws give equal rights to all in private disputes, but public preferment depends on individual distinction and is determined largely by merit rather than rotation: and poverty is no barrier to office, if a man despite his humble condition has the ability to do some good to the city (Th. II 60.2. Transl. Hammond)

Pericles' speech represents a widespread ideology, which is that of downplaying the economic-social conflict between rich and poor: without denying the existence of different socio-economic levels, the speech wants to privilege the arguments that poverty is not an obstacle to one's usefulness to the city and that poverty should not be a reason for shame or for a feeling of inferiority. All that matters is the hard work put into getting out of it:

> While there is no disgrace in the admission of poverty, the real disgrace lies in the failure to take active measures to escape it; our politicians can combine management of their domestic affairs with state business, and others who have their own work to attend to can nevertheless acquire a good knowledge of politics. We are unique in the way we regard anyone who takes no part in public affairs: we do not call that a quiet life, we call it a useless life (Th. II 40.1. Transl. Hammond).

Musti (1995, 157) rightly notes that this idea of labour as a source of pride was already in Hesiod, in his *Works and days*: "Work is no reproach, but not working is a reproach (v.311. Transl. West 1988)", but here it is essential for the self-understanding of that extraordinary political innovation that was born in Athens at the end of the sixth century B.C.E., by the work of Clisthenes, and which Herodotus (VI 131) will call *demokratía* for the first time (cf. Musti (1995, 39).

Evidence of this city's strong ideology, the mythical concord of a time between rich and poor, is emphasised as late as in 355 by Isocrates'*Aeropagiticus*:

> Poorer citizens refrained from envying those who had more to the extent [32] that their concern for large households was the same as for their own, for they thought that the prosperity of these entailed their own wealth. Those who possessed property did not look down on those who lived less well, but considered the citizens' poverty as a disgrace to themselves, and assisted them in their distress. They provided farmland at moderate rent to some, sent out some to engage in trade, and presented to others the capital for other enterprises (Isocr. *Aerop*. 31-32. Transl. Mirhady 2000).

Someone could rightly ask what exactly are we talking about when we talk about rich and poor. Claude Mossé asked herself once the same question, and answered, as always, with crystal clarity:

> We must therefore try to define more precisely who the political writers call the poor, oi aporoi. Are they the small peasants burdened with debt or heavy burdens, those who, like Aristophanes' heroes, called for the restoration of peace, for them a guarantee of security and well-being? Are they the craftsmen, the banausoi, whom some people want to keep out of the city when they are part of it? Is it the mass of people who, having nothing and nothing to lose, and concerned only with ensuring their daily subsistence, are ready & willing to accept anything when they are not, as in Athens, entitled to demand help from the State of which they are the masters? Faced with these increasingly worrying poors, the riches (oi plousioi, oi euporoi, oi tas ousias kektemenoi) were far from being a homogeneous group, at the beginning of the century at least. There was the old aristocracy, whose property was essentially land; there were the new rich, merchants, industrialists and bankers, despised by those who earned their livelihood from working the land; there were the politicians, magistrates, orators and strategists who in Athens were accused of making shameful profits at the expense of the city. Not all of them were oligarchs; not all of them threw themselves

> into the arms of Philip after Chaeronea (Mossé 1962, 27-28).

The image Plato uses to describe this city divided in two between oligarchy and democracy is that of a board game, called the "game of the poleis", which consisted of a chessboard with 60 squares, each called a polis, and divided into two sides, each one also called a polis. The image of the chessboard makes the Platonic description quite plain:

> each of them is a great many cities, not a city, as they say in the game. At any rate, each of them consists of two cities at war with one another (πολεμία ἀλλήλαις), that of the poor (ἡ μὲν πενήτων) and that of the rich (ἡ δὲ πλουσίων), and each of these contains a great many. If you approach them as one city, you'll be making a big mistake (Pl. *R.* 422e. Transl. Grube/Reeve 1997).

Plato's position is therefore adamantine: the ideology of the unity of the city, from Hesiod to Isocrates, never worked and, in particular, it is clear that it did not work in the fourth century, when there was a strong impoverishment of the social fabric - especially of the small landowner, but also of the artisan - and an increasing disparity between rich and poor, as well as a vertiginous escalation of a very wealthy social class, now no longer landowners, but entrepreneurs and people of finance, well represented, for example, in the character of Cephalus, in whose very wealthy house the dialogue *Republic* takes place.[3]

The underlying roots of the social conflict inherent in the city of Athens, hidden by the Unitarian ideology, are finally revealed in the fourth century and Plato clearly identifies that the origin of so much instability must be sought in the imbalance between πλοῦτος (richness) and πενία (poverty) in books 8 and 9 of the *Republic*. The

[3] For Plato's view of this, see Fuks (1977).

result of this situation is νεωτερισμός (*R.* 442a), social and political revolution (Vegetti 1998, 154).

It had already become clear that city laws, which even in Euripides' *Suppliants* was considered capable of creating isonomy in the city, would no longer be enough. [4] A *manifesto* of this same disenchantment is Aristophanes' *Plutus*, which significantly had a second version staged in 388, therefore in the same period in which Plato was probably writing the *Republic*.

It is possibly from the same Aristophanes' *Plutus* (559ff) that Plato takes one of the most realistic images of the serious disease that a city divided between the rich (said "carrying a lot of excess flesh") and the poor (said lean, skinny) ends up revealing when they meet together in activities such as festivals, missions and military campaigns:

> But when officeholders and those ruled (οἵ ἄρχοντες καὶ οἱ ἀρχόμενοι) in this condition meet on a journey or some other common undertaking—it might be a festival, an embassy, or a campaign, or they might be shipmates or fellow soldiers—and see one another in danger, in these circumstances are the poor in any way despised by the rich? Or rather isn't it often the case that a poor man, lean and suntanned, stands in battle next to a rich man, reared in the shade and carrying a lot of excess flesh, and sees him panting and at a loss? And don't you think that he'd consider that it's through the cowardice of the poor that such people are rich and that one poor man would say to another when they met in private: "These people are ours; they're nothing"? (Pl. *R.* 556c. Transl.Grube/Reeve 1997, modified by Lane 2023, 296).

Socrates's subsequent observation is that such a city is like a sick body (556e), which "needs only a tiny imbalancing-weight (σμῑκρᾶς ῥοπή) from outside to become ill.

[4] Cf. Musti (1995) for a reading of the tragedy in relation to Athens' democratic challenges.

I don't think there's the slightest doubt, therefore, that Plato criticises both democracy and oligarchy for making the city sick. And he puts forward various therapeutic strategies (Vegetti 2012, 33). It is well known that the therapy that Plato envisages for the city aims to address the problem at its economical root, which should be egalitarian, if not communist. With Carville, Plato would very much say: “it is the economy, stupid!”.

This solution is common to other utopias of the time, including Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae* (Women in Assembly) from 392 BCE:

> PRAXAGORA: My plan is that all property from now on must be shared. We must abolish rich and poor, with one man farming acres While down the road another lacks enough land for his grave. Or one man owning many slaves, another owning none. I now decree that everyone must share the same resources.
>
> BLEPYROS [butting in]. But how be ‘shared’?
>
> (...)
>
> I was just about to tell you that the city’s land and silver, as well as private property, will now belong to all. We women will use these common goods to feed the population: for we’ll control expenditure, and budget circumspectly.
>
> (...)
>
> PRAXAGORA. No one will suffer poverty. They’ll all have quite enough of bread and fish and cakes and clothes and wine and wreaths and chickpeas. (Ar. *Ec.* 588ss. Transl. Halliwell 1999).

I'm going to leave therapy aside for the moment, because what interests me most is the diagnosis of the city's illness.

Plato's diagnosis, what his eyes are seeing, is even more perceptive and accurate. We find another political disease among Plato's

concerns, one probably even more insidious in our present days, one that Socrates calls *misology* in the *Phaedo*, using a neologism. A disease that leads people to one of the worst evils, that of ending up hating speeches:

> 'Let's make sure that we don't fall ill with a specific disease' (τι πάθος μὴ πάθωμεν). 'What sort of disease?' I asked'. 'Becoming haters of arguments,' he said, 'like those who come to hate people. Because there's no greater evil that could happen to one (τις μεῖζον τούτου κακὸν πάθοι) than hating arguments (λόγους μισήσας). Hating arguments and hating people come about in the same way. For misanthropy sets in as a result of putting all one's trust in someone and doing so without expertise, and taking the person to be entirely truthful, sound and trustworthy, and then a little later finding him to be wicked and untrustworthy (Pl. Phd 89c-d. Transl. Sedley/Long 2011, with modifications).

Sócrates compares misology to misanthropy, which is obviously a political disease, being the opposite of the mutual trust necessary for political community. And it results from a lack of understanding of the human being:

> Now this is deplorable,' he said, 'and obviously someone like that was trying to deal with people without having expertise (ἄνευ τέχνης) in human qualities (τῆς περὶ τἀνθρώπεια), wasn't he? For surely if he had been doing so with expertise he'd have viewed matters as they really are: he would have recognized that both the very good and the very wicked are few in number, and that those in between (τοὺς δὲ μεταξὺ πλείστους) are the most numerous.' (Pl. *Phd* 89e. Transl. Sedley/Long 2011).

The flaw that generates misanthropy is of a technical nature, it's a lack of the necessary skills, the capabilities to live (to use Nussbaum's 2011 vocabulary): it's also an anthropological and ethical error: the misanthrope is unable to understand the μεταξὺ, what's in between (a concept central to Platonic philosophy, as you know): he doesn't see that most people are neither good nor bad, but something in between.

In the same way, says Socrates, closing the analogy, misology insinuates itself:

> when someone without expertise in arguments trusts an argument to be true, and then a little later thinks that it is false, sometimes when it is, sometimes when it isn't, and when he does the same again with one argument after another. This applies particularly to those who have spent time dealing with the arguments used in disputation. As you know, they end up thinking that they have become very wise, and that they alone have understood that there is nothing sound (οὐδενὸς οὐδὲν ὑγιὲς) or firm (οὐδὲ βέβαιον) in any thing or in any argument (Pl. *Phd* 90b-c. Transl. Sedley/Long 2011)

Obviously, it is to the sophistic speeches, the double speeches (ἀντιλογίαι) that Socrates is referring to here. Speeches that have a very precise educational and political pragmatics, as we know. Once again, the lexicon of disease emerges clearly: οὐδενὸς οὐδὲν ὑγιὲς, there is nothing sane about things and words! With a hint of nihilistic pessimism, which is on account of the repetition of the negation, οὐδενὸς οὐδὲν, obviously.

Socrates implores his interlocutors that this should not happen to all of them, that the belief that there is nothing sane in the speeches should not take root in their souls. On the contrary, we should think that we are the ones who are not yet healthy enough and that we need to be courageous and eager to be healthy: with ὑγιὲς, ὑγιῶς and again ὑγιῶς repeated three times in two lines, on the next page, 90e, indicating once again how the political vocabulary of illness is imbricated in Socrates' warning against the disease of misology.

Not coincidentally, immediately afterwards (91a), Socrates declares that he himself is worried about something: trying to persuade his friends that he doesn't fear imminent death, that he won't become like those who will do anything to convince their audience of the credibility of their speeches.

I believe that with the analogical approximation I have tried to make between the terrifying consequences of demagogic speeches in the Syracuse assembly, on the one hand, and the hatred of discourses (misology) that antilogic speeches end up creating in people, on the other hand, I am not finally in a position to sketch out an attempt to answer the question of what Plato's problem with democracy is.

I have deliberately introduced an adjective to qualify the speeches we are looking at: demagogic. Because, of course, Plato's problem is obviously demagogy.

What Plato does is – in Vegetti words - :

> an unrelenting criticism of demagogic democracy: a regime where those who govern, instead of guiding the masses, flatter their worst instincts, with the aim of using power for their own interests; a regime endowed with an extraordinary conforming and homologatory power, which makes it difficult to propose and practise system alternatives; a regime, finally, deprived of an order of values and abandoned to the anarchy of interests, irrational desires, occasional impulses (Vegetti 2012, 277).

Perhaps the most illustrative picture of this criticism can be found in the *Gorgias* (521d), within Socrates' analogy of himself with the doctor, accused by a cook and judged by a court of children. The demagogic speech of the cook (it's impossible not to think of the sausage maker in Aristophanes' *Knights*), who gives the children the sweets they want, is a reenactment of the self-fulfilling prophecy of the trial and death of Socrates, uttered just before. Socrates, after claiming to be the "only contemporary to have undertaken the true art of politics and practised it" (Pl. *Grg.* 521d), nevertheless confesses that he doesn't know how to defend himself in court:

> For I'll be judged the way a doctor would be judged by a jury of children if a pastry chef were to bring accusations against him. Think about what a man like that, taken captive among these people, could say in his defense, if somebody were to accuse him and say, "Children, this man has worked many great evils on

> you, yes, on you. He destroys the youngest among you by cutting and burning them, and by slimming them down and choking them he confuses them. He gives them the most bitter potions to drink and forces hunger and thirst on them. He doesn't feast you on a great variety of sweets the way I do!" What do you think a doctor, caught in such an evil predicament, could say? (Pl. *Grg*. 521e-522a. Transl. Zeyl 1997)

So, what worries Plato most, therefore, when thinking about the viability of democracy, is certainly its easy fall into demagogy. I would say that this is not something that is far away from our concerns today either.

But what is the real scope of this criticism? Which democracy is Plato looking at?

There is a frequent issue of perspective (Bertelli 2005, 309) in the scholarship on this point. A deception that Plato himself seems to deliberately create: Plato makes Socrates move on the stage of fifth-century democracy, but Plato is in fact writing for fourth-century democracy (in a more immediate debate with Isocrates and the rhetors, to be clear).

It is only in this sense, by undoing this problem of perspective, that we can understand Plato's critique of democracy. Plato can discuss the rigid limits, the ideology of what Robin Osborne calls "doctrinaire radical democracy" (Osborne 2003, 269), because he is writing in the fourth century, not in the fifth.

Here it's worth following Osborne's path:

> The strongest defense of democracy in the fifth century had been that it worked. The events of the end of the century revealed to Athenians that democracy did not necessarily work. Some Athenians doubtless went on believing blindly in the necessary virtues of democracy, and they are roundly mocked for it by Plato in *Menexenus*. But the constitutional changes made when democracy was restored, and those that continued to be made subsequently, reveal the death of doctrinaire radical democracy. Democratic commitment to selection of officials by lot not only is

> questioned by Isocrates, it was repeatedly compromised by decisions to select newly created magistrates by election (…) The death of doctrinaire democracy not only changed the discourse of practical politics, it also changed the discourse of political theory. In the fifth century, political theory either concentrated on explaining how fiendishly clever democracy was in protecting its own interests, as in the *Old Oligarch*, or working out a philosophical, and in particular an epistemological, basis for democracy. In the fourth century, Plato and Aristotle, and also Isocrates in his own way, engaged in far more wide-ranging and far more open-minded investigation of the varieties of constitution and their various strengths. Attempts to label Plato or Aristotle as pro- or antidemocrat endeavor to pigeonhole them in a way that might have been appropriate in the fifth century but was no longer appropriate in the changed discourse of the fourth century (Osborne 2003, 269-70).

So Plato thinks of democracy as a fourth-century writer thinks of it, that is, right up to the end, no matter what.

Leo Strauss' question (1964 - *The city and the man*) as to why Socrates didn't assign democracy the highest position among the inferior regimes doesn't make sense, therefore: “one is led to wonder why Socrates did not assign to democracy the highest place among the inferior regimes or rather the highest place simply, seeing that the best regime is not possible” (Strauss 1964, 131).

Plato didn't because he didn't need to, in a certain sense. The debate in the fourth century was completely different. He is writing about the democracy of the fifth century, with a hindsight to the democracy of the fourth.

I hope it's clear enough that none of this is necessary. It will no longer be necessary to "defend Plato from himself", as so much of the tradition did in reaction to Popper.

As Tolbert Roberts (1995) puts it verry well: "most of those who examine athenian democracy seek to identify it as an ontological with stable characteristics, and so to defend themselves against its teasing

and protean nature (Tolbert Roberts (1995, 259), i.e. constantly changing, of course, like Proteus.

Not only, therefore, are there radical differences between the democracy of the 5th and 4th centuries, but even democracy itself is not something stable, an ontological object, not even today.

And Plato seems to be well aware of this.

So, I think it's probably best to admit that the idea of democracy in Plato, instead of being a static image set in stone, it resembles a mosaic of elements that are progressively incorporated, and only by reflecting on the stages of this process can we grasp what Plato intended by democracy (cf. Bertelli 2005, 318).

In conclusion, I think it's worth adding two more notes along the way, always in an attempt to answer Plato's problem with democracy and open up for new insights to come.

The first is that, in essence, Plato's criticism of democracy is consistent with something that is a recurring feature of Platonic philosophy: its artificialism, i.e. the idea that reality, knowledge, human beings and society are something to be created, and therefore the result of a process that operates from an ideal model. In political terms, artificialism reveals itself in two senses: on one hand, in the anthropological pessimism that we mentioned, where the basic quality of the human being is poor; on the other hand, in the possibility of this same human nature being moulded, improved by the political investment of a good city (Cf. Vegetti 2003a).

The second is that Plato's criticism of the opposite of democracy, i.e. oligarchy, is equally strong. Oligarchy is unmasked as the power of the rich, exercised without too many scruples in order to increase their own wealth at the expense of the community. At stake here is another of Plato's anthropological presuppositions, which would be strongly defended by Aristotle: the "natural" right to private property and the family transmission of wealth. Without overturning this presupposition, according to Plato, any form of government exercised by restricted groups is destined to inevitably become a

power of exploitation and plundering of the civic body (cf. Bertelli 2005, 395). I would say that this collectivist solution proposed as an antidote to oligarchy is still one of the most radical suggestions ever put forward, right up to the present day.

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