From Democracy to Tyranny: Plato, Trump, and the Misuses of a Philosophical Trope

by *Cinzia Arruzza**

Abstract

Several political commentators have resorted to comparisons between Donald Trump and the tyrant of Plato's *Republic* in order to identify the causes of his election and to highlight the limits and dangers of the excess of democracy. In this paper I criticize this use of Plato's critique of tyranny on two accounts. First, I argue that Plato's critique of tyranny articulates a straightforward anti-democratic argument that should not be uncritically adopted by democratic commentators. Second, I show that Trump's election was characterized by both a conjunctural and a systemic deficit of democracy, rather than by its excess.

Keywords: Trump, Plato, tyranny, democracy, election.

Comparisons between Donald Trump and the tyrant of Plato's *Republic* had already become a commonplace by the fall of 2016, in the midst of the presidential campaign. The comparison is not entirely unwarranted if one draws analogies between Plato's description of the tyrant's psychic disorder and some of Trump's character traits. In Plato's description, the tyrannical man is driven by unlawful and unrestrained appetites, which lead him to indulge in incest, paraphilic sex with animals and gods, and impious murders (*Resp.* 571c3-d3). His powerful *eros*, with the help of madness, unshackles his appetites from traditional beliefs, social bonds, or mere shame. The tyrant lacks self-mastery, wages never ending wars, and uses political power as an instrument to satisfy his private interests. Making allowances for historical and literary context, we can argue that appetitive nature, sexual hubris, propensity to violence, and lack of self-

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restraint sum up some key features of Trump's public persona. The analogies with Plato's tyrant, however, become much more problematic when they extend beyond the analysis of the psychology of arbitrary power and pick up on Plato's key claim that democracy generates tyranny and that the tyrant is a child of the *demos*.

In a much-discussed piece published in *New York Magazine* last year, Andrew Sullivan offers one of the most articulated and precise arguments in support of this analogy (Sullivan, 2016). Leaving aside the differences between ancient democracies and twenty-first century liberal democracies, he argues that Plato's insights on the inherent instability of democracies and the dangers of the tyranny of the masses were on point. As Sullivan writes: «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. Voting rights were tightly circumscribed. The president and vice-president were not to be popularly elected but selected by an Electoral College […]. The Senate's structure (with two members from every state) was designed to temper the power of the more populous states, and its term of office (six years, compared with two for the House) was designed to cool and restrain temporary populist passions […]. This separation of powers was designed precisely to create sturdy firewalls against democratic wildfires. Over the centuries, however, many of these undemocratic rules have been weakened or abolished». In fact, according to Sullivan, direct democracy is intensifying its grip on American politics: his conclusion in this piece was that Clinton's candidacy could turn out to be the only way to save both American democracy and the political elite, for «elites still matter in a democracy. They matter not because they are democracy's enemy but because they provide the critical ingredient to save democracy from itself».

Sullivan has no qualms advocating for institutional mechanisms aiming at restricting the power of the electorate and popular sovereignty. His use of Plato to emphasize the dangers of excessive democracy, however, is not that distant from the many references to Plato's tyrant by more democratic-leaning authors. This applies in particular to the notion that democracy needs to be complemented by a self-critical ingredient, which – in the last instance – cannot but be external to the "masses" driven by their blind passions, and hence must come from a different political actor: either the political elite governing by compromise – as in the case of Sullivan – or the well-informed, intellectual, elite in the case of other commentators. Echoing Sullivan, for example, Sean Illing has argued that «the American founders were skeptical of democratic rule for all the reasons Plato spelled out. They created a firewall against the tyranny of the

majority, which is why we have a republic instead of a direct democracy. Trump is the firebrand they feared» (Illing, 2016). Along the same lines, Michael Weinman argued, «Sullivan has done us a tremendous favor by reminding us of the danger of an unlimited extension of the democratic impulse, especially in its majoritarian aspect» (Weinman, 2017). And Michael Frazer claimed that, «Plato argued that self-control is vital to democracy. To him, the greatest threat to democracies came from people who can't control themselves, who can't curtail their bad habits or rein in their appetites» (Frazer, 2016). The examples could multiply, for – especially after the publication of Sullivan's piece – the analogies between Trump and Plato's tyrant became a widespread and commonplace trope, to the point that BBC even devoted a series of *Viewpoints* to the question "Does Democracy Lead to Tyranny?"[1]. In the last instance this analogy became a variation on the evergreen "populism" trope, which associates phenomena as different as Sanders' campaign and Marine Le Pen's rise in France, Podemos in Spain and the Northern League and Five Stars Movement in Italy, the Brexit referendum in the UK and the constitutional referendum in Italy, and so forth.

What I will argue in this paper is first that the Trump/Plato's tyrant analogy is nothing but a straightforwardly antidemocratic argument, paradoxically articulated and put forward by liberal-leaning authors in the name of defending democracy. Moreover the effect of this commonplace comparison is to obscure, rather than illuminate, the actual causes of Trump's electoral victory, including the complicated issue of democracy's corrective institutional mechanisms. As I will argue, rather than being the outcome of an excess of democracy, Trump's election is characterized by a grave democratic deficit, both in terms of institutional electoral mechanisms and of popular sovereignty. Before I articulate these claims and reach these conclusions, however, I will very briefly discuss the nature and content of Plato's argument in the *Republic*: as I will argue, Plato's argument is not a gentle warning addressed to his democratic fellow citizens that democratic excesses can lead to tyranny, but rather a direct attack on the very core of Athenian democracy.

1. Tyrannical democracy in Plato's *Republic*

In recent years, a number of Plato scholars have attempted to defend the philosopher from accusations of proto-totalitarianism by arguing that the

[1] An exception to this trend is Nickolas Pappas (2016), who warned readers against comparisons between Trump and Plato's tyrant, stressing the antidemocratic character of Plato's argument.

political purpose of the *Republic* is not to attack Athenian democracy and that Plato is just a benevolent critic of democratic institutions, trying to warn his fellow citizens of the dangers of democracy's degeneration (for a discussion of the democratic readings of the *Republic*, see Fronterotta, 2010). The interpretive strategies adopted to demonstrate this thesis have been numerous and varied. Some interpreters have focused in particular on the dialogic character of Plato's work, on the pluralism displayed in his dialogues as far as philosophical and political views are concerned, and on the democratic features of Socrates' personality as presented by Plato in the dialogues (Griswold, 1995; Euben, 1996; Saxonhouse, 2009). Other interpreters have emphasized the rather benevolent presentation of the democratic regime in Book VIII of the *Republic*, which appears to be even better than the less degenerate oligarchic regime[2]. Finally, other research has focused on Plato's adoption of democratic themes and ideals in the dialogues, for example in the practice of *parrhesia* as applied to philosophical investigation and dialogue (Monoson, 2000). Read in this light, the *Republic* would articulate a critique of the limitations of democratic politics with the goal of reforming the latter, rather than simply opposing it.

A common problem with these readings is their confusion between liberal and democratic principles. What these readings usually emphasize are values such as tolerance, freedom of opinion and speech, pluralism, diversity, and dialogue, which are interpreted as marks of a democratic inclination. However, insofar as these are not the central features characterizing Athenian democracy, what these interpreters manage to demonstrate is, at best, that we can find in the dialogues elements that could be anachronistically labeled as "liberal" (Ober, 2017).

The central tenets of Athenian democracy were not pluralism, openness, and dialogue: it was direct participation of the citizenry in governance and popular rule through majority voting. Even democratic freedom should best be understood as freedom from a master and from any superior political authority. In theory and in practice, the *demos* gathered in the Assembly and popular courts had full sovereignty. A second tenet of democratic ideology in Athens was the educational role played by the *demos*' collective deliberations. What "appeared to the *demos*" had truth-value, collapsing in this way the distinction between objective truth and subjective political opinion (on the main tenets of Athenian democracy, see Ober, 1989; 1998). If we read Plato's *Republic* in the light of these two principles, then it is evident that the dialogue articulates a straightforward

[2] Saxonhouse (1996). Marshall and Bilsborough (2010) argue that there are not sufficient indications in the text to conclude that democracy is either worse or better than oligarchy.

attack against Athenian democracy. This appears ever more clearly if we pause a moment on Plato's treatment of tyranny and of the tyrannical man in Books VIII and IX.

Rather than targeting one or more actual tyrants, of whom Plato had both direct and indirect experience, Books VIII and IX mobilize an array of specific anti-tyrannical literary tropes tropes that played a key role for the Athenians' conceptualization of the nature and fundamental features of democracy. Fifth-century anti-tyrannical literary tropes contributed in an important way to the development of the democratic idea in Athens and to the self-understanding of democratic practices and way of life. After Athens' victory over the Persians, tyranny came to progressively embody everything that was opposed to democracy in literary depictions. The Persian invasions under Xerxes in 480/479 BCE, contributed in a decisive manner to shaping the Athenian negative attitude toward tyranny, as the Greek success was reinterpreted as the victory of freedom against the autocracy of the tyrannical Persian King. In this context, a new conceptual constellation emerged, characterizing Athenian democracy in terms of the combination of ἐλευθερία (freedom), ἰσονομία (equality of political rights), and ἰσηγορία (equal right of speech) in contrast to the Persian δουλεία (slavery).

Literary depictions attributed a set of conventional and stylized features to tyrants, emphasizing their exceptional nature, their transgression of the written and unwritten laws regulating human communities, and their violent and acquisitive behavior. The tyrant disrupts the order of the *polis*, turns its laws upside down, breaks its conventions, and perverts blood ties, both subverting the order of generations and questioning the separation of the divine and the human. Insofar as tyranny was presented as the complete negation of democratic principles, these depictions of both historical and mythical tyrannies and tyrants provided Athenian citizens with an inverted mirror in which they were able to contemplate by way of contrast the founding values of the democratic regime and way of life (see Lanza, 1977; Giorgini, 1993; McGlew, 1993; Morgan, 2003).

Leaving aside the complex moral psychology articulated by Plato in Books VIII and IX, most of the narrative and descriptive elements adopted in his analysis of tyranny are a patchwork of tropes coming from the previous literary tradition. If we take into account the discursive and political *function* of these tropes in democratic literature, Plato's anti-democratic strategy in these books becomes apparent. His genetic account of tyranny, which emphasizes its natural derivation from democracy, indicates that Plato's purpose in mobilizing these tropes is *to destabilize the dichotomy between democracy and tyranny that organizes this discourse*. While the democratic representation of tyranny emphasized its radical

opposition to an idealized democracy, Plato claims that tyranny is its natural child[3].

Plato's tyrant is the child of two main aspects of Athenian democracy: the institutional mechanisms proper to democracy that confer, in the name of political equality, supreme political authority to the *demos* and its opinions, and the democratic *ethos*, which Plato takes to consist of appetitive and hedonistic self-interest conjoined with the identification of freedom with license. In addition to challenging the traditional polar opposition between democracy and tyranny, Plato's critique of tyranny clearly displays the core reasons for his appraisal of the democratic regime as popular rule and the educational role of the *demos*' collective deliberations. Insofar as it directly challenges the key tenets of Athenian democracy and articulates a moral, psychological, and epistemological foundation for this critique, Plato's treatment of tyranny should be interpreted not as benevolent criticism aiming at warning democratic citizens that democracy needs institutional correctives and the contributions of a critical intellectual elite, but rather as a straightforward attack against democracy as such. To sum up, Plato's argument that democracy generates tyranny is in origin, content, and purpose an anti-democratic argument *tout court*, one – moreover – entirely contradicted by historical facts. For, in spite of Plato's somber diagnosis, democracy turned up to be the most stable and long-lived form of regime in Athens during the classical period: its end, after the 338 BCE Battle of Chaeronea, was caused not by an internal implosion or the rise of an internal tyrant, but by defeat at the hands of a foreigner invader, Phillip of Macedon.

2. The racist white working class

Democratic-leaning commentators indulging in the analogy between Trump's rise to power and Plato's alleged predictions concerning the tyrannical degeneration of democracy paradoxically mobilize an anti-democratic argument with the aim of denouncing the danger of American liberal democracy's self-dissolution. One may argue, however, that the anti-democratic origin of the trope of the rise of tyranny from democracy is not sufficient basis to criticize its adoption by democratic and liberal commentators worried that excess of democracy may indeed produce tyrants. Nothing, for example, prevents us from adopting insights coming from an anti-democratic thinker as a useful reflection on the dangers of a democracy deprived of the capacity for self-reflexivity, provided we are

[3] I develop this argument in my book, *A Wolf in the City. Tyranny and the Tyrant in Plato's* Republic (Arruzza, forthcoming).

well aware of the nature of the material we are dealing with. However, the application of Plato's arguments to the description of the rise of Trump in most cases not only fails to recognize their nature and purpose, but is also entirely unwarranted and contributes to misidentifying the roots of Trump's success.

Let me exit for a moment the realm of philosophical speculation and pause on a few trivial empirical facts: electoral data and the mechanisms of disenfranchisement still in place in the US electoral system. In the immediate aftermath of the presidential election, commentators went out of their way to blame the results on the racist white working class and worry about the excesses of democracy. The "racist white working class" trope, however, turned out to be nothing more than a myth. As shown by Kim Moody, this idea can be challenged on the basis of electoral and demographic data (Moody, 2017). The first pertinent fact is that the large majority of those without college degree did not vote at all. Further, of the 135,5 million white Americans without degrees, only about a fifth voted for Trump. As noted by Moody, upper-income groups were overrepresented in the voting population as a whole, and while both candidates capitalized on the votes coming from well-to-do voters, Trump was more reliant on high-income voters. Moreover, it is not so clear that the lack of college degree is an automatic indication of class membership. Indeed, of the 135,5 million white Americans without college degrees, only 70 million can be classified as blue-collar and service employees. About 15 million are small business owners, who, according to a 2016 survey by the National Small Business Association, are twice as likely to be Republicans as Democrats and have an average income of $112.000 compared to the average annual wage in 2016 of $48.320. If we add to this number the members of their families, we get a rather large group, which – moreover – regularly votes in national elections, contrary to the average of low income white people without college degrees. Finally, there are 1,8 million managers, 8,8 million supervisors, and 1,6 million in the police force whose jobs don't require a college degree. Based on these considerations, contrary to the tenets of the Trumpian white working class myth, the decisive class component of Trump's electoral win were the middle and upper classes.

3. The excesses of democracy

The "excesses of democracy" trope does not fare any better than the "racist white working class" one. In addition to not being capable of either describing or explaining the facts at issue, it also heavily contributes to hiding what are the actual flaws of American liberal democracy, especially the long history of electoral disenfranchisement, affecting in particular pe-

ople of color and the poor. In fact, the paradox of the uncritical adoption of Plato's diagnosis of the tyrannical dangers of democracy is that – while for Plato the rise of the tyrant is a natural consequence of the popular sovereignty that represented the core of Athenian democracy –, it is not that clear that we can even speak of popular sovereignty in the United States, if by this we mean that the majority of the population has the actual power of determining policy outcomes. This is due to two main factors. The first is the electoral disenfranchisement as a structural feature of the US political system; the second is the disproportionate influence that the economic elite and organized groups representing business interests have on US politics, as compared to the influence of the average voter.

Already the obvious fact that Clinton won 48,03% of the popular vote, against Trump's 46%, with a difference of almost three millions votes, indicates that Trump is, *ipso facto*, a minority President and that his victory is – in formal terms – a consequence of that Electoral College praised by Sullivan as an important corrective against the alleged excesses of democracy. But besides this obvious contingent consideration, there are further structural factors that indicate that the American political system suffers from a deficit of democracy and that this deficit of democracy has been key in getting Trump elected.

In addition to chronic low electoral turnout due to passivity or electoral politics' lack of credibility, millions of potential voters are systematically excluded from the exercise of voting rights through three main mechanisms. First, disenfranchisement via the criminal justice system: in 2016 the number of people non-eligible to vote by being in prison, on parole, under probation, or because of their criminal record amounted to around 7 million. Second, state laws regulating access to the ballot box: as shown by Jamila Michener, for example, state compliance with Section 7 of the 1993 National Voter Registration Act, which requires that public assistance agencies serve as voter registration sites, has varied greatly, within an overall context of progressive decline in the implementation of the federal law (Michener, 2016). State noncompliance is clearly connected to both racial and class structures. In the conclusion of her analysis Michener argues that, «On the broadest level, these findings speak to apprehensions over contemporary processes of de-democratization and highlight how specific patterns of policy variation help to sustain fundamental political inequalities in the United States. Rejecting conceptions of democracy as an ideal that we have already achieved, and embracing the notion that the extension of the American franchise has taken a nonlinear trajectory, even ostensibly positive electoral reforms falter under the weight of a racially biased federalist system» (ivi, p. 122). Between 2010 and 2012, twenty-one states enacted a series of restrictions allegedly meant to avert voter fraud,

and in the election of 2016 seventeen states had new restrictions on voting in effect that were not in place during the previous presidential election. According to a report by the Government Accountability Office, voter ID laws disproportionately affect black and younger voters (GAO, 2014).

The third mechanism is silent vote suppression through logistics: from cuts to early voting, purges of voter rolls, early closing of polling centers, and long lines to uncounted ballots due to various factors such as the malfunctioning of the machines that read the ballots. As documented by Gregg Palast, this silent vote suppression disproportionately takes place in areas with a strong presence of Black and poor voters (Palast, 2016). To give an example relevant to the discussion of Trump and democracy, Trump won the Michigan by 10.704 votes, but in that state a record 75.355 ballots were not counted, the large majority of these coming from Detroit and Flint, cities where Black Democratic voters are predominant. In North Carolina, where there were 158 fewer early polling places in counties with large Black communities compared to previous elections, African American voter participation was down 16%.

Finally, to the three mechanisms described above we should also add the role played by citizenship law, which denies the right to vote to 20 millions non-citizen adults living in this country. Electoral disenfranchisement and vote suppression, historically ingrained in the US electoral system since its inception, are already sufficient not only to question the notion that American liberal democracy needs yet more institutional correctives against the "tyranny of the masses", but also to make the race blindness of such arguments apparent. Moreover, insofar as the bulk of Trump's electoral basis is made of middle and upper-middle class white voters, the thesis that the systematic exclusion of black and poor voters may have worked in favor of Trump's candidacy is at the very least highly plausible.

In the final part of this paper, I would like to address the second major flaw of US liberal democracy. In *Democracy against Capitalism*, Meiksins Wood has eloquently argued that the universal extension of formal political participation in liberal democracies was possible because of the distinctively capitalist separation of the economic and the political, which has significantly limited the capacity of the political to govern the economic. In other words, universal suffrage has been historically possible insofar as the extension of citizenship did not have the power to compromise the interests of the owners of means of production as a whole (Wood, 1995, pp. 19-48). This would also represent a decisive difference between liberal democracies and Athenian direct democracy, insofar as through their democratic form of regime, Athenian small peasants and property-less citizens were able to significantly lower the amount of surplus extracted from them by the propertied aristocracy. This is also the reason why the

struggle between peasants, property-less citizens, and elites in Attica took the form of a political struggle within democratic institutions, rather than the form of social struggle. From this viewpoint, both Plato and Aristotle were right in considering democracy the regime where the poor rules over the rich, and Plato was correct in the *Republic* in presenting the democratic assemblies as instances in which the *demos* could significantly attack the economic interests of the aristocracy (Plato, *Republic*, VIII, 557a; Aristotle, *Politics*, III 1279b-1280a).

US liberal democracy suffers from the same limitations that Meiksins Wood ascribes to liberal democracies in general, but in a particularly acute form. In their famous paper from 2014, *Testing Theories from American Politics*, Martin Gilens and Benjamin Pages have detailed the disproportionate influence held by economic elites on the determination of public policies (Gilens, Pages, 2014). They concluded with the following considerations: «What do our findings say about democracy in America? They certainly constitute troubling news for advocates of "populistic" democracy, who want governments to respond primarily or exclusively to the policy preferences of their citizens. In the United States, our findings indicate, the majority does not rule – at least not in the causal sense of actually determining policy outcomes. When a majority of citizens disagrees with economic elites or with organized interests, they generally lose. Moreover, because of the strong status quo bias built into the US political system, even when fairly large majorities of Americans favor policy change, they generally do not get it» (ivi, p. 576).

Furthermore, they address the view of those who may welcome the predominant role of informed elite against the tyranny of the ignorant masses by raising what seems to me a rather well-grounded objection: there is no proved connection between informational expertise and the capacity or even willingness of transcending one's own interests and to care for the common good.

4. Conclusion: radicalizing democracy

In the conclusion of this paper let me briefly sum up my argument: Trump's electoral victory was characterized by a structural democratic deficit affecting the American political system. This deficit consists both of the systematic disenfranchisement of people of color, immigrants, and low-income voters and of the lack of participation by the majority of the population in the determination of key policies. Considering Trump's weak electoral appeal among African Americans and immigrants, the disenfranchisement of people of color certainly contributed to his election. Moreover, the combination between electoral mechanisms and the

systematic exclusion of working class and poor people represents more in general a fundamental limitation to democracy in the United States and to the possibility, for example, of the emergence of successful third party candidates. It may be worth considering that – based on a poll of July 2017 – Bernie Sanders is confirmed as by far the most popular politician in the United States. As Michael Sainato writes: «Sanders' image as an outsider appeals to voters who are disenfranchised by the current system. Voters appreciate his sincerity and that he reaches out to voters across the country. The Democratic Party could learn a lot from the way Sanders engages in politics. Instead, it is tied to wealthy donors and lacks a coherent message and set of principles that sets it apart from the Republican Party» (Sainato, 2017).

Trump's election *should* legitimately trigger a sustained debate about the limits of liberal democracies and of American democracy in particular. Under neoliberalism, liberal democracies have undergone a process of de-democratization, which has replaced the notion of active citizenship with those of utility, expertise, and competitiveness. This process of de-democratization raises the question of the democratization of both democracy and national borders based on active participation, mobilization, and political conflict. The problem with the adoption of Plato's argument concerning the relation between democracy and tyranny, however, is that this analogy turns this debate upside down. Instead of denouncing the fundamentally undemocratic nature of this election, it mobilizes a long-lived antidemocratic trope within political philosophy, that of the masses' constitutive incapacity for self-control and self-determination, their propensity to make decisions based on negative passions and narrow interests, and their lack of awareness of what constitutes the common good. While the use of this ideological trope by conservative thinkers and commentators who have no particular sympathy for democracy is entirely obvious and can be expected, its adoption within a liberal discourse that purports to be a defense of democracy against itself is nothing but paradoxical.

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