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PLATO'S THEORY OF DEMOCRATIC DECLINE

Brenner M. Fissell¹

Abstract: While democracy is derided for a variety of reasons in Plato's thought, his most damning critique of that regime type does not involve an observation about democracy *qua* democracy, but of the transition that it so easily engenders: the decline to tyranny. Regimes are composed of individuals and groups, though, and Plato is anxious to ascribe culpability for the degradation. Two actors are the primary focus of his analysis — the political leaders and the demos. At times he emphasizes the puissance of the demos, but in other passages he suggests it is the leaders who are most authoritative. This paper discusses these apparently contradictory passages, and works towards a reconciliation. It argues that neither is assigned sole culpability, as both work in complex synergy, and that the underlying cause of the decline — and the motivator behind both actors — is not simply freedom, but greed for material wealth.

I

Introduction

A cherished element of Athenian democratic ideology was the doctrine of collective wisdom.² Large groups were believed to be inherently wiser than individuals. Nevertheless, there were instances when the demos, after a period of reflection, came to regret an earlier choice. How could the reality of fallibility square with a faith in collective wisdom? This tension was usually resolved by creating a scapegoat.³ The danger, it was thought, came from outside the people — from nefarious elites who, through deception, led the virtuous people astray and turned government towards private ends.⁴ One can call this the public manipulability argument.⁵ An alternative position involved the rejection of collective wisdom altogether, and the belief that masses of people in fact make decisions less virtuously or wisely.

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² J. Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens* (Princeton, 1989), p. 163; J. Ober, 'The Orators', in *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought*, ed. C. Rowe and M. Schofield, pp. 130–41 (Cambridge, 2000), p. 135.

³ Cf. Ober, 'Orators', p. 136.

⁴ This is most famously stated by Aristotle in *Politics* 1281a–1282b. Aristotle, 'Politics', in *Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. R. McKeon, trans. B. Jowett (New York, 2001). It may be inappropriate to say that leaders were external to Athenian democracy, though, as they were necessary for decision-making. Cf. M.I. Finley, 'Athenian Demagogues', *Past and Present*, 21 (1962), p. 19. Finley calls them a 'structural element'.

⁵ Cf. J. Ober, 'How to Criticize Democracy', in *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy*, ed. J.P. Euben, J. Wallach and J. Ober (Ithaca, 1994), p. 157: distrust of elite orators was historically a part of democratic ideology in Athens.

While the relationship between the people and their political leaders was a common topic for ancient Greek intellectuals, there was in no way a consensus on the issue. In the *Iliad*, Homer depicts the Argive army enthusiastically following the exhortations of whatever leader it last listened to, flip-flopping between different courses of action.⁶ Similarly, the Theban herald in Euripides' *Suppliants* launches into an attack on democratic decision-making, arguing that orators 'puff up' the people with 'specious words'.⁷ The historian Thucydides seems to agree that leaders acted somewhat freely, writing that the noble Pericles exercised 'independent control over the multitude' and that his more unscrupulous successor, Cleon, was also 'most powerful with the commons'.⁸ These were not the only points of view, though, and others argued that it was the demos that held sway. The 'Old Oligarch' of Athens portrays the ignorant poor of the city ruling by the strength of their numbers, blaming leaders whenever they make a m.⁹ Herodotus's character Megabyzos, in the 'Constitutional Debate' of his *Histories*, states that a 'worthless crowd . . . pushes on matters with violent impulse and without understanding'.¹⁰ Finally, in his comedy *Knights*, Aristophanes attacks demagogues like Cleon, but also vacillates on the nature of the demos.¹¹ As we can see, amongst the intellectuals there was no 'party line' on this issue.

It is no surprise, then, that Plato weighs in on this important question. His critique of democracy contains many different strains,¹² but an important part of his argument deals with discerning the pernicious nature of the relationship between the people and their political leaders. Take, for example, the image of the Ship in *Republic* Book VI. Here, it seems quite clear who is the active power in a democracy, and who will prove to be its worst enemy: 'And sometimes, if [the sailors] don't succeed in persuading [the Shipowner], they

⁶ Homer, *Iliad*, trans. R. Lattimore (Chicago, 1963), II.110–470.

⁷ Euripides, *Suppliants*, trans. E.P. Coleridge (Studio City, CA, 1999), 410–412.

⁸ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, ed. P.J. Rhodes, trans. M. Hammond (Oxford, 2009), III.36, II.65.

⁹ Pseudo-Xenophon, *The Constitution of Athens*, trans. G. Bowerstock (Cambridge, MA, 1968), §§1.1, 1.5, 2.17.

¹⁰ Herodotus, *Histories*, trans. G. Rawlinson (Ware, 1996), III.81.

¹¹ Aristophanes, *Knights*, trans. A.H. Sommerstein (Warminster, 1981). I say that Aristophanes 'vacillates' because of some apparently contradictory passages. Compare lines 1120–30 with 1356–60. In the end, though, Demos is redeemed by becoming like the Athens of old (1320–25).

¹² There is a large body of scholarship arguing that Plato is more sympathetic to democracy than is generally thought. See M. Schofield, *Plato: Political Philosophy* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 61–2; J.P. Euben, 'Reading Democracy: "Socratic" Dialogues and the Political Education of Democratic Citizens', in *Demokratia*, ed. J. Ober and C. Hedrick (Princeton, 1996), p. 329; G. Vlastos, 'The Historical Socrates and Athenian Democracy', *Political Theory*, 11 (1983), pp. 495–516. For a general overview of the contours of this debate see A. Saxonhouse, *Athenian Democracy: Modern Mythmakers and Ancient Theorists* (South Bend, IN, 1996), p. 87.

execute the ones who do succeed . . . and then, having stupefied their noble shipowner with drugs, wine, or in some other way, they rule the ship, using up what's in it and sailing while feasting and drinking' (488c).¹³ The sailors, representing the politician-leaders, render the shipowner (demos) helpless, and exploit the situation for their private pleasure. What is most striking about this passage is Plato's description of the demos. Yes, it is described first as 'hard of hearing' and 'a bit short-sighted', but these physical defects pale when compared to the moral qualifier that follows: the demos is *noble* (488b)! Here, it seems as if Plato is an apologist for collective wisdom, upholding the public manipulability thesis so popular during his day.

However, the other famous image of democracy used in the *Republic* — the Beast — paints an altogether different picture: 'It's as if someone were learning the moods and appetites of a huge, strong beast that he's rearing — how to approach and handle it, when it is most difficult to deal with or most gentle and what makes it so, what sounds it utters in either condition, and what sounds soothe or anger it' (493a–b). Here, the demos is a terrifyingly powerful force — something to be respected because of its strength. All the cues come from the beast; the student does not learn to alter the beast's preferences or behaviour, but simply to appeal to its existing nature. The student conforms, and the beast remains unchanged.¹⁴

Two Platonic images (both in the same book of the *Republic*) appear to present opposite understandings of the relationship between the people and their leaders, with a different actor dominant in each. The goal of this article is to explore Plato's thought on the issue, reading the *Republic* alongside *Gorgias*.¹⁵ Along the way, we will find that the apparent contradictions do not end with these two images, and are present throughout both dialogues. By looking closely at what Plato said, though, we can make some suggestions as to how to approach the disparity. Our first question, then, is one of *power*. Who has it in a democracy, according to Plato? Given that he is a thoroughgoing critic of the regime type, though, an additional question emerges: Who is *culpable* for democracy's inevitable failings?

¹³ All Plato passages are taken from J.M. Cooper's Hackett compilation of Plato's complete works: *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. J.M. Cooper (Indianapolis, 1997). For the rest of the article, citations will simply note the dialogue and the Stephanus pagination number.

¹⁴ Cf. J. Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens: Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule* (Princeton, 1998), p. 236. The leader has himself undergone 'a sort of Pavlovian behavioral conditioning', but yet he 'claims to have mastered . . . the secrets of beast management'.

¹⁵ This article deliberately confines itself to Plato's earlier dialogues, focusing on *Gorgias* and *Republic*, so as to avoid becoming embroiled in the developmentalist question. For more discussions of this debate, see T. Samaras, *Plato on Democracy* (New York, 2002), p. 1; M. Lane, 'Socrates and Plato: An Introduction', in *Cambridge History*, ed. Rowe and Schofield, p. 156; Schofield, *Plato*, p. 60.

Most Plato scholarship has underemphasized the nuance with which Plato makes his conclusion. Building on strong passages from *Gorgias*, commentators often prematurely assume that his theory clearly posits demos as master of affairs, and see the question as easily answered.¹⁶ They have failed to read these alongside clear statements to the contrary in the *Republic*. No attempt has been made to grapple with the disparity between two forcefully asserted propositions in the Platonic corpus: the demotic power thesis (typified by the Beast image) and the pernicious leader thesis (as seen in the Ship image). It is tempting, but inaccurate, to paint this simplistic picture: the demos controls affairs, and it is corrupted by its excessive lust for freedom.

Unlike earlier commentators, I argue that Plato's theory of democratic decline does not heap blame solely on the people, granting them the only efficacy in the polis. Instead, a relation of complex synergy between people and leader is what results in the degradation to tyranny. Moreover, I depart from past scholarship that has too readily understood the cause of the actors' depravity to be their desire for freedom.¹⁷ Book VIII of the *Republic* surely supports such a proposition, but I believe that it also hints at another motivation, and one

¹⁶ See B. Rosenstock, 'Athena's Cloak: Plato's Critique of Democracy in the *Republic*', *Political Theory*, 22 (1994), p. 383. It is the democrats' desire to be ruled only by themselves, Rosenstock posits, that allows the tyrant to take power. Cf. R. Wardy, *The Birth of Rhetoric* (London and New York, 1996), p. 72: 'only the readiness of the ignorant "crowd" to be amused by the equally ignorant blandishments of rhetorical *logos* assures rhetorical success'; Ober, *Political Dissent*, p. 202: 'Callicles' attack on philosophy confirms what the reader should already suspect: . . . He is blinded by his socialization . . .'. These observations are often buttressed by the historical context of Plato's Athens. See Ober, 'Orators', p. 140: Historically, the orator had power, but he was really the 'creature and servant of the demos'. Cf. Ober, *Political Dissent*, p. 190. Ober again argues that, historically, the demos was truly in control, and used 'ideological hegemony' as its 'instrument'. Cf. Ober, *Mass and Elite*, pp. 168, 316, 321. The ideal orator was expected to be a 'mouthpiece of unspoken mass will'.

¹⁷ See Schofield, *Plato*, p. 120. Plato's project in Book VIII, Schofield argues, is to demonstrate the consequences of 'the elevation of freedom to supreme good'. Cf. K. Morgan, 'The Tyranny of the Audience in Plato and Isocrates', in *Popular Tyranny*, ed. K. Morgan (Austin, TX, 2003), p. 199. The tyrant pursues the 'illusion of freedom'. Cf. K. Raaflaub, 'Stick and Glue: The Function of Tyranny in Fifth-Century Athenian Democracy', in *Popular Tyranny*, ed. Morgan, p. 77. The views of Polus, Callicles and Thrasymachus represent the tyrant as the 'freest and happiest man in the world'. See also M.H. Hansen, 'Democratic Freedom and the Concept of Freedom in Plato and Aristotle', *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies*, 50 (2010), pp. 2–7, p. 23. Hansen notes that Plato's focus is on criticizing the freedom of 'living as you like'. Again, this seems to make sense based on historical context. Cf. R. Wallace, 'Law, Freedom, and the Concept of Citizens' Rights in Democratic Athens', in *Demokratia*, pp. 105–9: 'The ideology of freedom was central to Athenian democracy.' This consisted of 'living as you like', but other elements included frank speech, the equal right to speak, and equality before the law. Also see J. Hesk, *Democracy and Deception in Classical Athens* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 219; Schofield, *Plato*, p. 66; Ober, *Mass and Elite*, pp. 335–6.

which may be even stronger than abstract political or legal freedom: materialistic greed, or avarice. Thus, this article seeks to create a more robust account of Plato's theory of democratic decline by broadening the actors that it encompasses and highlighting that the pernicious dynamism of their relationship is initiated and sustained by a decidedly concrete and worldly concept.

II Power of the People

It is fitting to spend some time reviewing what many have already seen — the passages emphasizing demotic power. The first dialogue we will look at, *Gorgias*,¹⁸ seems to flit aimlessly among different themes. Upon closer inspection, unity is there.¹⁹ Oratory in Athens meant political power,²⁰ and thus, in the opinions of the political leaders, the power to do as you like with impunity. The discussion about oratory, then, reflects a deeper topic: How should one live irrespective of the question of rewards or punishments?²¹ This foreshadows the challenge Glaucon makes to Socrates in *Republic* II,²² to which Plato's Socrates²³ responds with the myth of the Ring of Gyges. Oratory functions in *Gorgias* as a *real world* Ring of Gyges. Because of this, it is appropriate that moral philosophy, punishment theory and the afterlife dominate the dialogue. Through all these arguments, Socrates endeavours to prove to Gorgias, Polus and Callicles that even *if* they had the 'power' they supposed they had in the city, it would actually be the worst thing for them.

For our purposes, a second layer of refutation is more relevant. Socrates has another point to make in *Gorgias*, which is this: political leaders do not even have the power that they *think* they have. Oratory does not allow someone to

¹⁸ Cf. H. Yunis, *Taming Democracy* (Ithaca, 1996), p. 119. In having the discussion take place after Pericles' death, Plato is consciously addressing a Thucydidean narrative: political leadership was supposed to have declined after Pericles with the rise of the 'demagogues'. In attacking the older, famous orators, though, Plato seems to be debunking this myth. See W.R. Connor, *The New Politicians of Fifth-Century Athens* (Princeton, 1971), pp. 133–41.

¹⁹ Cf. *Gorgias*, ed. E.R. Dodds (Oxford, 1959), p. 3. He calls *Gorgias* an 'ascending spiral'. Perhaps 'descending' is more appropriate, though, as the souls of Socrates' interlocutors get steadily darker with each substitution. Cf. T. Smith, 'Rhetoric and the Defence of Philosophy in Plato's *Gorgias*', *Polis*, 20 (2003), p. 66.

²⁰ Cf. M.H. Hansen, *Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes* (Oxford, 1999), p. 12; Connor, *New Politicians*, p. 116.

²¹ Cf. Smith, 'Rhetoric', p. 62. The 'great subtheme' of *Gorgias* is the debate between rival ways of life. See also Schofield, *Plato*, p. 66.

²² 'I want to know what justice and injustice are and . . . I want to leave out of account their rewards and what comes from each of them' (*Republic*, 358b).

²³ This article also avoids the debate surrounding the independence of Socratic views from those of Plato, or, the 'Socratic Problem'. When 'Socrates' is quoted, it is meant to imply Plato's Socrates. For an overview of the debate, see Lane, 'Socrates', p. 155.

do whatever he likes, breaking free from conventions like Callicles's lion cub (484a). In fact, Socrates proves that to engage in a life of oratory is precisely to chain one's self to conventions (majority opinion),²⁴ and to abandon the true individuality of the Socratic-philosophic life, which dares to challenge established *doxai*. He will show that Callicles is 'unable to contradict' his beloved demos (481c).²⁵ As noted above, scholars have seen this theme in *Gorgias* as strong evidence of Plato's position on the cause of democratic decline.²⁶

The argument is presented most clearly when Socrates suggests a way to achieve 'immunity to unjust treatment and great power' in the city without becoming a tyrant yourself — this is to befriend the tyrant and assimilate his character, becoming 'a partisan of the regime in power' (510e, 510a). 'So, if some young person in that city were to reflect, 'In what way would I be able to have great power and no one treat me unjustly?' this, evidently, would be his way to go: to get himself accustomed from childhood on to like and dislike the same things as the master, and to make sure that he will be as like him as possible' (510d). When Callicles agrees, the trap has been sprung. In a democracy, this principle has obvious implications for the political leader: 'In that case you should now be making yourself as much like the Athenian people as possible if you expect to endear yourself to them and have great power in the city . . . You mustn't be their imitator but be naturally like them in your own person' (513a–b). To have any sway in a democracy, you cannot just put up a democratic façade; you must *authentically* become one of the demos. For Socrates, the main problem with this is that such a conversion involves unacceptable ethical consequences.²⁷ Such a change is *also* problematic for Callicles, though, because his own *Weltanschauung* depends upon individual freedom from restraint, especially that of convention.²⁸ If power's acquisition requires conformity to majority opinion, the lion cub can never assert himself freely and independently. Here, Socrates shows that the demos truly holds the reins, and that orators' pretensions to the contrary are nonsense. In a democracy, the

²⁴ Cf. Ober, 'Orators', pp. 130–3: ' . . . an important element of the special skill (*technē*) taught by the rhetorician lay in making the speaker's rhetorical goals appear to be fully congruent with the audience's pre-existing beliefs and preferences'.

²⁵ Cf. E. Voegelin, 'The Philosophy of Existence: Plato's *Gorgias*', *Review of Politics*, 11 (1949), p. 29.

²⁶ See notes 16 and 17, above.

²⁷ 'Our choice of this kind of civic power will cost us what we hold most dear' (*Gorgias*, 513a).

²⁸ Cf. *Gorgias*, 484a–b. Some scholars argue that Plato deliberately makes Callicles an exaggerated figure so as to serve Plato's 'literary purposes'. See G. Klosko, 'The Refutation of Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias*', *Greece and Rome*, 31 (1984), p. 132; B. McComiskey, 'Disassembling Plato's Critique of Rhetoric in the *Gorgias* (447a–466a)', *Rhetoric Review*, 11 (1992), p. 214.

oratorical project — to claim the real-world Ring of Gyges — is a fool's errand!

Since the abstract argument is not enough to convince Callicles, Socrates appeals to the testimony of history to prove his point.

Tell me: didn't the people [Cimon] was serving ostracize him so that they wouldn't hear his voice for ten years? And didn't they do the very same thing to Themistocles, punishing him with exile besides? And didn't they vote to throw Miltiades, of Marathon fame, into the pit (516e)?²⁹

Even the most renowned leaders end their lives in shame,³⁰ cast out in ignominy by the always triumphant and always fickle demos. By the end of *Gorgias*, Plato has shattered the conceits of the aspirant leaders³¹ — they are really 'catamites', taking pleasure in their submission.³²

With this, Socrates has established that the demos has power in the city, but he has yet to show us why this is bad. Socrates waits until near the very end of the dialogue to make this attack, and here it is personal. Callicles threatens him again, in one of the many allusions foreshadowing the *Apology*. Socrates replies by launching into a memorable image attacking the People's 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', Socrates claims (521e). In his indictment the pastry chef (the leader) will say to the children (the demos), 'Children, this man has worked many great evils on you, yes, on you . . . He doesn't feast you on a great variety of sweets the way I do' (521e). The hapless doctor, Socrates the true statesman, would be utterly defenceless in such a situation: 'Yes, children, I was doing all those [painful] things in the interest of health', he'd say, '[and] how big an uproar do you think such "judges"

²⁹ Cf. Connor, *New Politicians*, p. 179. Were orators really 'in control' if they always ended their careers in disgrace? Cf. Ober, *Mass and Elite*, p. 109; R. Knox, 'So Michievous a Beaste? The Athenian *demos* and Its Treatment of Its Politicians', *Greece and Rome*, 32 (1985), p. 138, pp. 148–9. Knox, after compiling a complicated statistical matrix, discovers that these men had a 'political casualty rate' above fifty percent. He calls political life in Athens a 'minefield'.

³⁰ In Yunis, *Taming Democracy*, pp. 141–4, the author wisely notes that the connection between all the figures invoked is their role in the Athenian empire's expansion. These men reflect Callicles' ethical doctrines on an international level. This helps to make sense of the condemnation of Pericles *et al.* Cf. J. Henderson, 'Demos, Demagogue, Tyrant in Attic Old Comedy', in *Popular Tyranny*, ed. Morgan, p. 156.

³¹ Cf. Morgan, 'Tyranny', p. 194. The historical Gorgias had argued for the power of speech over an audience; thus, Plato's choice to begin the dialogue with him foreshadows the upcoming Socratic inversion of his doctrine. Plato was also aware of Gorgias' views. See *Philebus*, 58b: 'On many occasions, Socrates, I have heard Gorgias insist that the art of persuasion is superior to all other because it enslaves all the rest.'

³² *Gorgias*, 494e. Cf. Ober, *Political Dissent*, p. 205; Smith, 'Rhetoric', p. 70; D. Stauffer, 'Socrates and Callicles: A Reading of Plato's *Gorgias*', *Review of Politics*, 64 (2002), p. 642.

would make? Wouldn't it be a loud one' (521e). Here, we get a clear reason for the condemnation of demotic power; the people are likened to children, judging cases based on what is most gratifying. Earlier in the dialogue it is asserted that tragedians, like political leaders, 'treat the people like children' (503a). Here, they simply *are* children! While an insidious pastry chef indicts the doctor and flatters his jury, the jury itself is equally to blame, because it is by nature childish — receptive to such flattery and closed to the reasoned arguments of the doctor. The child 'judges' need no prompting from the chef when they shout down the doctor's defence; their own defects are sufficient to condemn him.³³

The dialogue's depiction of the demos as lord and master is certainly compelling, and it can also be found in the *Republic*. While Book VI contains the image of the Ship, which appears to contradict such an assertion, the tenor of the rest of the book is more in line with the opposite understanding — that of the Beast image. The *Republic* supports the theory of demotic power in other places as well. Just before the Beast passage, Plato pens one of his most damning condemnations of the Assembly and mass decision-making in general. Socrates asks Adeimantus if he agrees with the 'general opinion' that sophists corrupt the youth (492b), and goes on to claim that the true corruptors are the many themselves (those who make up 'general opinion'): '[they] are the greatest sophists of all, since they educate most completely, turning young and old, men and women, into precisely the kind of people they want them to be' (492b–c). This indoctrination takes place through the spellbinding effects of mob mentality, in which 'the very rocks and surroundings echo the din of their praise or blame and double it' (492c). When a young person witnesses this, he will be transported by the hysteria, ultimately becoming 'the same sort of person as . . . the crowd' (492d–e). This is 'education . . . [by] the mob' (492e). The similarity to *Gorgias* is striking; in the earlier dialogue, we see that one must authentically become like the regime in power if one wants to be powerful himself, and in the *Republic* it is asserted that nearly all individuals reared in a democracy are indoctrinated with a democratic soul anyway. The aspiring politician in *Gorgias* won't have to work at his transformation — he will be just like the crowd before he's even an adult!

It makes sense that after this passage on the mob as true 'sophist' we are presented with the Beast image, in which the supposed professional 'sophists' do nothing more than study the mob. In case this metaphor doesn't pull its argumentative weight, Plato makes his point explicitly: 'If anyone approaches

³³ In other passages in *Gorgias* we also see that the demos' judgment is inherently bad. Note the political metaphor in *Gorgias*, 465d. See also C. Bobonich, *Plato's Utopia Recast* (Oxford, 2002), p. 7. Bobonich argues that non-philosophers, in Plato's earlier dialogues, are fundamentally incapable of virtue or of finding happiness. In Yunis, *Taming Democracy*, p. 50, the author argues that Plato believes the masses are not 'insane', just stupid. However, I believe this is refuted by *Republic*, 496c.

the majority to exhibit his . . . service to the city and gives them mastery over him to any degree beyond what's unavoidable, he'll be under Diomedean compulsion, as it's called, to do the sort of thing of which they approve' (*Republic*, 493d). So far, the *Republic* holds true to the arguments regarding majority power put forward in *Gorgias*, with the one exception of the Ship image. Political leaders are indeed the playthings of the omnipotent demos.

III

Pernicious Leaders?

Given what we have already heard, it seems appropriate that most commentators have understood Plato's theory of democratic decline to place blame squarely in the lap of the demos. Here, though, we must depart, and call attention to a whole host of text that suggests precisely the opposite. In the later parts of the *Republic*, a new theme develops, and Plato seems to shift efficacy away from the demos, positing that malicious elites are the engine behind political outcomes. He flirts quite close to the collective wisdom and manipulability thesis described earlier. 'Then don't you also agree that the harshness the majority exhibits towards philosophy is caused by those outsiders who don't belong and who've burst in like a band of revellers', Socrates asks (500b). This seems to contradict the earlier statement following the Beast image, in which he concludes succinctly, 'the majority cannot be philosophic' (494a), nor can they 'in any way tolerate or accept the reality of the beautiful itself' (493e). Therefore, they will 'inevitably disapprove' of philosophers (494a). Now, the majority is not limited by its very nature, but is corrupted by 'outsider' charlatans. The 'band of revellers' can be interpreted to be a reference to Alcibiades and his friends crashing the party in *Symposium*, upsetting the ordered discussion of love (212d).³⁴ Alcibiades and his cronies, who typify the aspiring politicians of the city, are to blame for the majority's harshness; it is not just that large gatherings tend to 'echo the din' of praise and blame, but that elites contribute to the chaos.

To see this new theme developed in its most mature form we must turn to Book VIII of the *Republic*, which outlines the theoretical decline of the *kallipolis* to its nadir in tyranny. If Plato's most trenchant critique of democracy is that it facilitates such degradation, then Book VIII is ground zero for our analysis.³⁵ The 'principle' guiding Book VIII is 'simple': 'the cause of change in any constitution is civil war breaking out within the ruling group

³⁴ Cf. Saxonhouse, *Athenian Democracy*, pp. 95–7.

³⁵ There is debate surrounding the relationship between historical Athens and Book VIII. See generally Ober, *Political Dissent*, p. 246. He believes Book VIII is Plato's description of Athens. For an opposing viewpoint, see A. Saxonhouse, 'Democracy, Equality, and *Eidē*: A Radical View of Book 8 of Plato's *Republic*', *American Political Science Review*, 92 (1998), p. 274.

itself' (545d). For our purposes, we want to know (1) who is the ruling group, and (2) who is to blame for this civil war.

Because of the lack of structure and hierarchy in a democracy,³⁶ political leadership has only one qualification: the city honours him 'if only he tells them that he wishes the majority well' (558b). From what we have learned in *Gorgias* this is to be expected, and the leaders must kowtow to the demos' wishes. 'It . . . praises and honours, both in public and in private, rulers who behave like subjects and subjects who behave like rulers', Socrates states (562d).³⁷ While demos is by definition the 'ruling group' in a democracy, and is described as 'most powerful', there is still, however, a 'class of idle and extravagant men [that] manages everything' (565a, 564b–e).³⁸ These are political busybodies — political leaders who spend all their time in the Assembly. Plato calls them the 'dominant' class in the democracy, saying, 'its fiercest members do all the talking and acting' (564e). Later, we will see why the 'most powerful' are not 'dominant' in this case.

It is here, it seems, in this class of political men, that Plato assigns a share of culpability for democracy's decline. He calls the idlers 'the disease that developed in oligarchy and also in democracy, enslaving it' (564b). Trouble begins when the leaders begin to redistribute wealth, taking out big cuts for themselves in the process (565a). This angers the rich, who speak out in self-defence, and the poor react to this by denouncing them as oligarchs. Neither can see that it is the idle busybodies who are behind the class conflict. Each camp becomes more and more partisan, embracing the 'evils' of each extreme (565c). Division of 'the people' in a democracy fits exactly the principle described above: constitutions change when the ruling group fights with itself. Our two questions are answered: (1) the ruling group is initially everyone, but (2) the genesis of the civil war is not everyone's fault. 'But neither group does these things willingly. Rather the people act as they do because they are ignorant and are deceived by the drones', Socrates argues, 'and the rich act as they do because they are driven to it by the stinging of those same drones' (565c). Here, the catalyst for decline is quite clearly elite, selfish politicians. This becomes more and more obvious when the 'special champion' of the people arises from these leaders (565c). Like a puppet master, he uses his sway over the Assembly to effect his evil ends and consolidate his power. It is he who 'dominates a docile mob' (565e) and 'stirs up civil wars against the rich' (566a). In this narrative, Plato seems to say that it is the evil machinations of a few leaders — and ultimately one tyrannical madman — that are

³⁶ In Saxonhouse, 'Equality', pp. 273, 279, the author makes much of the 'formlessness' of a democracy.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 279: Democratic formlessness with regard to 'definitions' allows for the inversions of virtue and vice.

³⁸ Cf. Hansen, *Demosthenes*, p. 267. It was a small minority that actually dominated the speaker's platform in the Assembly.

able to destroy democracy by dividing the city. The people are ‘docile’, not strong as in other depictions, and the champion seems able to control affairs. As was noted, these passages have often been ignored by commentators, and they paint a picture that prevents any easy diagnosis of culpability.

IV

Complex Synergy

Just as with *Gorgias* and its theory of demotic omnipotence, the narrative recounted above, if read alongside the image of the Ship, might cause us to too quickly ascribe to Plato a monotone, simple understanding of the cause of democratic decline. I argue that he seeks to place blame not solely on one actor, though, but sees both as acting in complex synergy in moving the polis towards its doom.

The ascent of the tyrant recounted above cannot be read outside the context of the section preceding it, in which the extremes of democracy are detailed. The class of idlers, main players in the decline, are more numerous and ‘virulent’ mainly because of the ‘general permissiveness’ (563e, cf. 564d). The ‘disease’ of the idlers comes about only in a certain climate — a climate the idlers themselves did not create. The demos is the entity that has cultivated the fertile ground from which these people arise.

I suppose that, when a democratic city, athirst for freedom, happens to get bad cupbearers for its leaders, so that it gets drunk by drinking more than it should of the unmixed wine of freedom, then, unless the rulers are very pliable and provide plenty of that freedom, they are punished by the city (562d).

The *precondition* for the drunkenness is the thirst. While it takes ‘bad cupbearers’ to actually serve the demos its inebriating brew, it nevertheless gulps down each new goblet presented to it. In fact, we learn that the relationship is synergic, each actor working with the other in a downward spiral. This drunken demos is quite different from the ‘noble shipowner’ who was drugged; here it beckons for the wine and castigates those servers who are stingy!

Beyond this more passive role, in which the demos — by demanding ‘permissiveness’ — indirectly contributes to the ‘virulent disease’ of the idlers, Plato also envisions it as an active force in the champion’s installation as tyrant, consciously investing its champion with these extraordinary powers. ‘Now aren’t the people always in the habit of setting up one man as their special champion, nurturing him and making him great?’ Socrates asks (562d). The people make the tyrant what he is, slowly adding to his power as if ‘nurturing’ him.

As we have seen, while the vast majority of the passages describing the relationship between the people and their leaders in Platonic thought emphasize

the puissance of the demos, in that it controls day-to-day affairs, shapes opinions and can cashier its leaders at will,³⁹ there are also cases in which it appears that Plato might be contradicting himself, ascribing primary efficacy to those political men.⁴⁰ However, these passages are prefaced with reminders not only that the people's failings have created an environment receptive to these men's flattery, but also that they have been the active agents in the tyrant's installation. The relationship is one of complex synergy — each actor bringing out the worst in the other, hastening democracy's doom.

Remember that not all — or even most — political leaders become tyrants. If we realize this, the distance between *Republic* VIII's champion and the feeble politician of *Gorgias* makes more sense, perhaps as a descriptive difference between two qualitatively distinct situations. At one extreme we find a leader who is nothing more than a wistful dreamer,⁴¹ fantasizing about the tyrannical life, but in reality living totally subservient to the demos. These are characters like Callicles and Polus who talk a big talk, but never act on it. They toss around the idea of a lawless life, but they are merely students of 'the Beast'. At the opposite end of the spectrum, we find the 'people's champion' in *Republic* VIII, Archelaus in *Gorgias*, and the sailors in the Ship image. These politicians are not wistful dreamers but committed manipulators who actually attempt and succeed at accomplishing 'the most complete injustice' (344a–c). The difference between these two poles is one of opportunity, though, not motivation. All these leaders have the *desire* to live a lawless life as tyrant, but only some are in circumstances in which this is appropriate or possible to attempt.

At each end of this spectrum, the relationship between people and leader is characterized by instrumentalization, but the victims are different. In the case of the wistful dreamer, the leader's intervention in political decision-making is nugatory and he must go along with majority will. Here, the demos uses him as its instrument, extracting from him gratifying things and dispensing with him once it is no longer amused. The examples of Pericles, Cimon and Themistocles all show this tendency. Demos retains the power. In the case of the committed manipulator, though, the leader's intervention in politics is at a high level and he directs things according to *his* will, as is evinced by the 'people's champion' executing or exiling his opponent, regardless of guilt

³⁹ *Gorgias* 510d, 513a–d, 465d, 516e; and *Republic* 492b–e, 493a–d, 565d, 569a–c.

⁴⁰ *Republic* 488c, 500b, 564b–e, 565c, 565e, 566a–e; and *Gorgias* 481b, 503a, 516b. It should be noted that *Phaedrus* implies such a power as well (see 267d), but hopes to place enough qualifications upon rhetoric that it can be positive (see 277b–d). For an elongated analysis, see Yunis, *Taming Democracy*, pp. 172–3. *Phaedrus* is not analysed in this article, primarily because it lacks the explicitly political tone of *Gorgias* and the *Republic*.

⁴¹ Cf. C. Whidden, 'True Statesmanship as True Rhetoric in Plato's *Gorgias*', *Polis*, 22 (2005), p. 218. Callicles is a slave to social conventions and 'can only fantasize' about being free.

(*Republic*, 565e). In this situation, the leader uses the demos as *his* instrument, and does so in a very guileful way. By the time the people realize their errors, it is too late and he has consolidated power. They are now the ‘weaker trying to drive out the stronger’ (569a).

It is quite clear that the Ship image depicts a city that is on the cusp of this transition, while that of the Beast shows a polis that has a long way to go. What, then, is the catalyst of this devolution? What is the variable that initiates and sustains the city’s transformation? If the leaders’ aspirations are constant, what is the change in circumstances that opens a window of opportunity for him to realize them, and become the committed manipulator?

V

The Role of *Pleonexia* in Democracy’s Decline — Beyond ‘Freedom’

Beyond emphasizing that Plato’s account of democratic decline assigns culpability to both major actors, working in tandem, I argue that what initiates and sustains this relationship — what moves a city along the spectrum from Beast to Ship — is a simultaneous awareness between people and leader of a symbiotic potential. This symbiotic potential, though, is only seen as ‘beneficial’ to each party in the most depraved sense: both the leader and the people see each other as helping to advance the goals of their materialistic greed. Yes, the political and legal freedom to do as one likes is also a strong inducement for both, but we cannot stop our analysis here.⁴² Schofield astutely notes: ‘It is because democracy is a society governed by appetite that Plato thinks himself entitled to assume that the exercise of social freedom will inevitably win out in the end over respect for the framework that supports it and political freedom alike.’⁴³ While it is crucial to understand that the people’s liberated *orexis* is what ultimately causes the breakdown (and not merely freedom), Plato seems to be at pains to suggest that this is a very specific breed of appetite. Moreover, there is an additional conceptual move that is required; the leaders must be included in the appetitive calculus. I believe that in Plato’s theory, the most important cause of democracy’s degradation — in the sense that it is the strongest motivation for *both* people and leader, and is the defining feature of their relationship — is one that is less ethereal than the concept of political or legal freedom. It is greed: the excessive, selfish desire to obtain material wealth and property.

Preliminarily, it is worth surveying the various passages that emphasize freedom’s role in the decline, so as to understand why it has so readily been taken to be the primary Platonic indictment. At the outset, a mistaken conception of the Good orders and directs the lives of democratic individuals: ‘What do you think [democracy] defines as the good? — Freedom: Surely you’d

⁴² See note 17, above.

⁴³ Schofield, *Plato*, p. 112.

hear a democratic city say that this is the finest thing it has' (*Republic* 562c). Everyone has 'the license to do what he wants', and 'horses and donkeys are accustomed to roam freely and proudly' (557b, 563d). Freedom finds its maximal limit in lawlessness: 'And in the end, as you know, they take no notice of the laws, whether written or unwritten, in order to avoid having any master at all' (563e). Positive laws as well as those of nature, the Gods and of custom are thrown out.⁴⁴ Plato tells us that this is the 'impetuous' origin of tyranny: the lawlessness of extreme freedom (563e). One of the most direct ascriptions of blame for the decline comes in the form of a paradox: 'Doesn't the insatiable desire for freedom and the neglect of other things change this constitution and put it in need of a dictatorship' (562c). These are rather strong statements about the primacy of freedom in Plato's analysis of democratic decline.

Both actors appear, at first glance, to be motivated solely by this end. The *demos* is 'athirst for freedom' (562d), and bullies its leaders into providing more and more of it, turning ultimately to lawlessness 'in order to avoid having any master at all' (563e). The ideology of freedom motivates; democratic man seeks 'the license to do what he wants . . . [and] arrange his own life in whatever manner pleases him' (557b). After they realize their errors, 'the people get angry and say . . . that they didn't father him and establish him in power so that, when he'd become strong, they'd be enslaved to their own slave' (569a–c). They had wanted to be free, it seems. The case of the leader looks to be the same. Callicles' initial speech in *Gorgias* is a defence of the completely 'free' life. The task of the excellent man, the aspiring politician, is to achieve freedom from other people, as well as from his own internal scruples (492a).⁴⁵ Thrasymachus agrees, saying, 'injustice, if it is on a large enough scale, is stronger, *freer*, and more masterly than justice' (emphasis added) (*Republic* 344c). These wistful dreamers are really dreaming of the freedom to live as they like, that of doing 'whatever they see most fit to do' (*Gorgias*, 466e). This is why in *Republic* Book VIII Socrates says, '[the tyrant] is led to all the kinds of lawlessness that those who are leading him call freedom' (572e). Can we stop here, though — are these passages enough to come to a conclusion about why democracies fail?

To do this would be to ignore another strong current running throughout the dialogues: the role of avarice in initiating and furthering the decline. While the passages above seem to indicate that the leader and the people are ultimately motivated by an abstract, impudent desire to be the masters of their own lives, it is not clear that Plato believes this to be great enough an incentive

⁴⁴ Cf. Saxonhouse, 'Equality', p. 281. Impiety naturally follows lawlessness.

⁴⁵ Callicles argues that one 'ought to allow his own appetites to get as large as possible and not restrain them'. The connection between tyranny and democracy is personified by Callicles. Cf. Dodds, *Gorgias*, p. 13. He says that Callicles is 'at once a product of democracy and its deadliest enemy'. Cf. Yunis, *Taming Democracy*, pp. 120–2.

for either party to act. In fact, it may not even be the main incentive. It is important to acknowledge that something more basic does much of the heavy lifting, triggering and fuelling the complex synergy described above.

To be sure, avarice looms large over Book VIII of the *Republic*. While still working on the consolidation of his power, the leader ‘drops hints to the people about the cancellation of debts and the redistribution of land’ (565e–566a). Immediately, his first instinct is to appeal to material greed, not the promise of political liberties. Of course, both policies, debt cancellation and redistribution, are parasitic, and what benefits the people harms the rich. It is no wonder, then, that Plato says, ‘these rich people are called drone-fodder’ (564e). The leader capitalizes on this parasitic potential and facilitates the consumption of one group by the other. The adversarial relationship between the majority and the wealthy is what he seeks to inflame: The nascent champion is called ‘the one who stirs up civil wars against the rich’ (566a). But that which makes the relationship between the people and the wealthy parasitic is precisely what makes the leader–people relationship symbiotic. ‘The leaders,’ Socrates states, ‘in taking the wealth of the rich and distributing it to the people, keep the greater part for themselves’ (565a). By acting as their agent, the leader can simultaneously effect gains for the people and for himself. This is the epitome of symbiotic greed — the people get some, and the leader takes even more. There is only one victim (or at least, so it seems).

This relationship between leader and people becomes so regularized that all of civic life is reduced to an organized, parasitic division of the spoils. Plato writes: ‘[The poor] take no part in politics . . . but, when they are assembled, they are the largest and most powerful class . . . but they aren’t willing to assemble often unless they get a share of the honey’ (565a). Only greed — not abstract political concepts — can wake them from their slumber, and each time they do wake, they feel powerful and satisfied with the results. Whenever they come to vote they receive more property, and thus the people slip into a false sense of security. The tyranny-facilitating effect of this apathy cannot be underestimated. Tellingly, it is not the lovers of political liberty or equality that first denounce this growing threat, but the lovers of money: ‘And when a wealthy man sees this and is charged with being an enemy of the people because of his wealth . . . he’d be executed’ (566c). The adversaries of a political movement can reveal as much about its nature as do its adherents, and the wealthy man’s opposition shows us the most salient feature of the new order. Time and time again we are made to understand that avarice, not merely the desire for freedom, is the engine behind the devolution.

When the tyrant finally does reveal himself, the people also show their true colours. This retrospective lamentation at the new state of affairs is essential in understanding their expectations. When they realize they have been duped, they are angry that they are not free (569a–c), but they also reveal another erstwhile motivation: ‘They hoped that, with him as their leader, they’d be

free from the rich and so-called fine and good people in the city' (569a). Notice that this expression of regret is also a confession — they admit that they consciously nurtured him and gave him power, and did so for avaricious reasons. Later, when Plato discusses the newly established tyrant's policies, we are made to further understand the nature of their pacification: 'won't he smile in welcome . . . freeing the people from debt, [and] redistributing the land to them' (566e). Yet again, it is by playing on the people's greed that the tyrant continues to gain ground — he makes good on the 'hints' he had dropped earlier (565e). The process is not greased by freedom (as some legal or political enabler of lifestyles and actions), but by greed. The people set up the leader as their authoritatively sanctioned 'Robin Hood' — through his agency their avarice can be satiated.⁴⁶

Knowing the necessity of harnessing this impulse to his advantage, it is no surprise that the new tyrant stirs up a war not merely to keep the people in need of leadership, but 'so that they'll become poor . . . [and] concern themselves with their daily needs' (566e). Before he was established, he'd consolidated his power by bringing them out of poverty. Now he's on top, though, and the people's material self-sufficiency is a threat. He must reduce them to dependence through taxation, forcing them into a state of distraction in which their only care is subsistence. Property and wealth are the mechanisms of control both before and after he ascends.

The manipulation of greed allows for the run-of-the-mill political leader to become the people's champion, and ultimately the tyrant. The leader sees the potential to ride the wave of popular support as he consolidates his power, while the people are sated by property — almost bribed. Let us look at this a bit closer.

In falling prey to this trick, the demos commits two judgment errors: it believes that the leader will act lawlessly *on its behalf*, and it flatters itself with the conceit that it still has final say. First, these errors contribute passively, in that they provide the champion with the political leg-room to extend his strangle-hold without opposition. The average citizen feels most strongly the effects of those who are most near to him: the domination of his landlord and creditor chafe more than that of any rising leader in the assembly. Because of this, the people fail to see the secret consolidation taking place. Moreover, the evisceration of an oppressive class seems all the better when the fruits of its destruction are showered upon its former victims. Political apathy naturally follows from this focus on material wealth. The demos assembles only rarely, and only to get more of the spoils. The people are so bedazzled

⁴⁶ Cf. Schofield, *Plato*, p. 111: 'So, before all else, given the social freedom to do as one likes, what people in general *will* do under a democracy is the thing money gives them the *capacity* to do — satisfy their appetites.' See also G. Grote, *Plato, and the Other Companions of Sokrates* (London, 1865), Vol. III, p. 107. Freedom gradually becomes 'extravagance'.

by the spectacle — the destruction of their intermediate masters and the redistribution of the ‘honey’ — that they cannot see their champion transforming himself into an even greater overlord.

This helps to explain why the judgment errors also contribute more directly to the tyrant’s rise. The demos will not merely passively facilitate his ascent by inaction, it will vigorously aid the champion and invest him with more authority, believing he will perpetually gratify its greed (562d). However, to expect regularity in either intention or action is a grave misunderstanding of what it is to be ‘lawless’.

Both actively and passively, the errors of the demos create the opportunity for the leader, welcoming his change from dreamer to manipulator. Errors (a) and (b) are related: the greed that spawns error (a) is distracting and pervasive, thereby engendering the nonchalance and apathy of error (b). No inquiries are made as to the eventual outcome of the decimation of the rich; the people are too busy drinking their fill of that class’s lifeblood to care. This naïve selfishness is why the tyrant’s installation is said to be ‘aided by the foolishness of the people’ (575d) — a foolishness consisting of cupidity and myopia. The political leader is able to instrumentalize the people precisely because they are under the false impression that *they* are instrumentalizing *him*! Beyond this, by the time he has finished his work, the tyrant has eliminated all those with the means or the sophistication to oppose him or to launch a separate claim to rule. After all, he must be on the lookout for these ‘brave, large-minded, knowledgeable, or rich’ types even after he has ascended to primacy (567b–c). Fortunately for him, most of this work is already done by then.

Avarice is obviously not limited to the people, though, and also motivates the leaders. We have already seen that they ‘keep the greater part for themselves’ (565a) as they effect their redistributions in *Republic* Book VIII, but we can find evidence of this elsewhere. In the Ship image, after the sailors take over, ‘they rule the ship, using up what’s in it and sailing while feasting and drinking’ (488c). It is not just political power (rule) that they sought, but the goods in the ship’s hold. In this image, the feast and drink are the coffers of the city, now disposable at the whims of the tyrant and his cronies.

Similarly, in *Gorgias*, Callicles’ world-view illustrates the material-focused goal of the aspiring tyrant. He says, ‘it’s a just thing for the better man and the more capable man to have a greater share’, and he believes that, according to nature, the ‘superior rule the inferior and have a greater share’ (483d). The ‘freedom’ accompanied by ascension to autocratic political rule is accompanied by a very tangible benefit: material spoils — the ‘greater share’. Additionally, Callicles says that he yearns for a life where one is ‘free to enjoy good things without any interference’ (492b). His goal is not a freedom for its own sake, then, but as a facilitator of greedy pleasures. Furthermore, while he believes the best man ought not to be enslaved to anyone, that man should also ‘allow his own appetites to get as large as possible’ (491e). Again, freedom

from enslavement is not merely the removal of an impediment to living as he likes, but is directly tied to his pursuit of indulgence. All aspiring tyrants should act in furtherance of a deeper hedonic end: the Leaking Jar image is the truest picture of human motivations (494b).⁴⁷ In the discussion of the proto-tyrant's soul in *Republic* Book IX, we come to understand more fully the already obvious connection between hedonism and wealth.⁴⁸ The proto-tyrannical soul indulges in 'feasts, revelries, [and] luxuries', but this profligate lifestyle requires pecuniary wherewithal to support it: 'Consequently, he must acquire wealth from every source or live in great pain and suffering' (574a). Wealth becomes the tyrant's obsession.

VI Conclusion

Democracy declines because avarice perniciously alters the relationship between the leaders and the people — avarice is the independent variable controlling the spectrum mentioned earlier. It is not enough to say that the desire for 'freedom' solely (or even mostly) moves both parties, nor is it accurate to look at either in isolation. It is *both* actors that make decisions guided by greed, working in complex synergy — the leader aiming to support the flow into his Leaking Jar, and the people grasping for 'honey' — but only one is wrong in its long-term calculations. I believe that this account of Plato's theory of democratic decline offers a more multi-dimensional view than that of previous scholarship, in which culpability is assumed to be heaped upon the demos, with its primary ethical-political impetus being freedom.

It is fitting that Plato's own contribution to the debate surrounding the relationship between people and leader, and its political consequences, emphasizes the primacy of an ethical idea in determining outcomes. The way that individual and social life plays out depends upon what we are following: knowledge or opinion. The aspiring tyrant pursues the fruits that come from being the individual strongman, while the demos seeks material satiation by leeching off the rich.⁴⁹ Plato's accomplishment is that he moves us away from the simplistic 'blame game', where democratic apologists argue for the manipulability thesis, pointing their fingers at leaders when things go wrong. However, he doesn't place all culpability on the lap of the demos, either, as does the monotone narrative of the Old Oligarch.⁵⁰ Instead, he suggests that

⁴⁷ It is no wonder, then, that the pastry-chef orator of *Gorgias* 'aim[s] at gratification' (521e).

⁴⁸ Cf. Morgan, 'Tyranny', p. 198: this is an example of an 'explicitly political' discussion of the functioning of the soul.

⁴⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 199. 'Democracy exists in complicity with tyranny, and both constitutions bestow illusionary mastery.'

⁵⁰ Interestingly, the Old Oligarch also sees that freedom is connected to lawlessness, and that this is what the demos desires (Pseudo-Xenophon, *Constitution*, §1.8).

it is an impulse endemic to humanity, avarice, that is the engine behind democracy's decline, motivating *both* of the primary actors, who — in seeking to instrumentalize each other for their own gain — bring out the worst in everyone, and condemn the polis.⁵¹

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