# On Plato's Criticism against Athenian Direct Democracy

## di **Erasmo Silvio Storace**

**ABSTRACT:** Democracy developed in the context of and with the Greek *polis*. The term *polis* refers to the political order that imposes itself in ancient Greece, since the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age. In many cases, *poleis* organized themselves politically according to the famous principles of *isonomia, isegoria, parresìa* and *eleutherìa*.
From the 7th century, some *poleis* began to organize themselves with protodemocratic forms of government. In this article, we will examine the democracy in Athens in its phase of decline, and we will attempt to reconstruct Plato's idea of democracy, retracing the main criticisms that Plato moves to democracy, from the *The Republic* to the *The Statesman* and the *The Laws*.
In conclusion, we will emphasise Plato's criticisms against the Sophists and their use of rhetoric, both on a moral and an ontological perspective.

**KEYWORDS:** *polis*, direct democracy, Plato, politics.

## 1. Introduction

Democracy developed in the context of and with the Greek *polis*. From its genesis to its decline, democracy's structure undergone several developments and alterations and it reached its maximum expression around the V century BC in Athene. To be more precise, when considering Ancient Greece, one should not consider democracy as an individual phenomenon but rather make use of the plural term democracies. This is because democracy, as a form of government not only assumed different forms within each single *polis* which scattered ancient Greece but also because the internal structure of each single *polis* itself tended to evolve-just like a living organism which originates, grows and dies – and to acquire different forms which are constantly evolving. This is mostly due to the fact that Ancient Greece, since the dawn of time, has always distinguished itself as open to dialogue and political debate.

In other words, democracy developed in different ways and in different city-state which means that even if one deliberately decides to focus his attention on a single and specific one of those *poleis* (Athene in this case), one has to take in mind that within each single and specific *polis* democracy acquired different characters.

As it is known, Athenian democracy shares only few common features with our modern representative liberal democracies. However, it represented one of the main models on which Modern Western shaped its own form and political institutions. Athenian democratic regime has often been presented as one of the

greater results of human's history most probably in order to frame such narrative and to legitimise modern democracies. However, ancient Greeks did not have the same conception and rather thought of it as an acceptable but unfair and at times liberticidal form of government. The stands taken by the main philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristoteles are well known, albeit with some variations, they all strongly distanced themselves from such a form of government and likewise did almost all other intellectuals, historians and Greek orators who reached an analogous conclusion.

This might sound very surprising for us who are used to think of democracy as the least worst form of government as the famous quote attributed to Winston Churchill declaims: "democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time". Nonetheless, Luciano Canfora reminds us that:

> It is a rather rooted opinion that democracy is a Greek invention. An effect of this approximate notion was seen in the drafting of the preamble to the European Constitution (May 28, 2003). Those who, after many alchemies, have elaborated that text [...] have decided to imprint the Greek-classic mark on the nascent Constitution by incorporating in the preamble a quotation from the epitaph that Thucydides attributes to Pericles (430 BC). In the preamble of the European Constitution the words of Pericles Thucydides are presented in this way: 'Our Constitution is called democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people'. It is a falsification of what Thucydides makes Pericles say. [...] Pericles Thucydides dissociates himself and he says: we use democracy to define our political system simply because we are used to refer to the criterion of 'majority', nevertheless we have freedom. [...] Even the current translations, however composed, and sometimes accommodating, fail to hide the detached and perplexed tone with which Pericles expresses himself. [...] There are no texts by Athenian authors that refer to democracy. It will not be by chance.[1]

These introductory considerations help us to understand why Ancient Greece main thinkers so intensely opposed the democratic form of government. In the following pages the paper will look at some of the critiques moved by Plato but firstly it is necessary to retrace some of Athenian democracy salient traits with regard to both its structure and its genesis.

## 2. The birth of the *polis* and democracy

The term democracy refers to a form of government which arose within the Greek *polis*. Nonetheless some authors such as Herodotus asserted that similar experiences developed elsewhere before the Greek civilisation.

However, in its strict sense the democracy refers to the specific form of government which reached its maximum expression in the V century BC in Athene as the result of a political, cultural, social and historical process that only in Ancient

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[1] L. Canfora, *La democrazia. Storia di un'ideologia*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2004, pp. 11-16.

Greece occurred in such a way to produce very decisive effects on Western history even at a two millenniums distance.

In order to understand democracy's main features, it is necessary to retrace some of the historical phases through which the phenomenon of democracy manifested and gradually perfected itself until it turned into the expression of the *polis* that could detain the hegemony over all the other *polis*: Athene.

Democracy represents a *polis*' outcome and, in order to have a sense of its essence, one firstly needs to understand what a Greek *polis* is as well as how and when it arose and how it turned towards its decline. Obviously, there is not a precise date in which such a political arrangement referred to as *polis* was born. The *polis* started to reveal itself as the outcome of a long jointly process which, from the passage between the Bronze Age to the Iron Age (about 1050 BC) to the VIII century BC improved itself and became the prolific terrain where democracy, an unprecedented form of government, could develop. Towards the end of the VII century BC it is possible to witness the first prodromal developments of the genesis of a proto-democracy. Consider, for instance, the laws issued by Draco in 621 BC thanks to the fact that *poleis* started to organise themselves around the previously unknown principle of *isonomia*.

It has been said that the term "*polis*" refers to the political arrangement that slowly imposed itself in ancient Greece since the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age which took place around the 1050 BC. Although the division into periods it is far from being univocal, it is possible to note that between the 1200 BC and the 1000 BC new iron tools and weapons started to appear. This, will led to an unparalleled transformation in the military field since the innovative iron weapons were extremely more resistant compared to those made out of bronze. Those who detained the new technology were able to dominate the enemies in an uneven struggle. It seems that this made it necessary for several (*polýs*) tribes located in the area of ancient Greece to congregate as a strategy to defend themselves to become lately, through an evolution which took almost two centuries, what today we refer to as *poleis* (city-state). In two centuries, those new urban aggregates got organised themselves on the basis of an unprecedented way usually referred to as the principle of *isonomia* (equality before the law). The principle of *isonomia* prescribes the multiple political actors to establish a form of self-government in which political power is allocated to the high-ranking share of the population and sovereignty resides in the many rather than in the one. As such *isonomia* replaced the traditional conception of power which assumes the latter to be understood as vertical and pyramidal. The *polis* was also characterised by other principles such as "*isegoria*" (the equality to speak during assembly meetings) the precursor of the democratic form of government, *parrhesia* (freedom of speech) and *eleutheria* (freedom).

Starting from the VII century some *poleis* (Chios, Megara, Elide, Mantinea, Argo) started to organize themselves according to form of government that could be referred to as precursors of democracy. However, to talk of democracy in its strict sense it is necessary to move the focus on the Athenian *polis* and to witness a long process passing through several different stages including Draco's laws (621 BC), Solon's reform (594 BC), Cleisthenes's restoration (510 BC) and Ephialtes' re-

form (462-461 BC) as well as Pericles' democratic reforms (which occurred during the Age of Pericles between the 460 and the 429 BC). In this time frame Athene won the Persian Wars (499-479 BC), achieved the hegemony over the Aegean and the Mediterranean Sea and experienced a tranquil period politically and socially as well as economically (this period is also known as "*pentecontaetia*" and it occurred between the 479 and the 431 BC). In this period Athene was in the position to lessen social inequalities and to allow a wider range of the population to take part in the administration of power. This period represents the famous era of the Athenian democracy which reverberates in the abused and often misinterpreted Pericles' oration and which the Western praises as one of the highest achievements of human history.

One might find himself perplexed finding out how often the Athenian democracy, which we tend to consider as one of the greater conquests of human history, has largely been criticised by the main philosophers of the time as well as by contemporary ones. From Plato to Nietzsche, philosophers have often criticised this apparently flourishing Age describing it as a period of downfall and decay. This is probably because the myth of the Athenian democracy as the perfect one developed afterwards and with the purpose of legitimising the new democratic forms of government (often very different from the Athenian one) that developed in modern Western. Herein we will attempt to recall and rethink Plato's objections to the democratic regime. In order to do so it is necessary to understand what the term "democracy" referred to in that time period in Athene, that is how such form of government appeared.

### 3. On the reasons of the birth of democracy

The Athenian democracy is generally associated with the Age of Pericles (460-429 BC). It is in this age that through several developments and evolutions the democratic system, of which we have broad testimonies and which evokes-more than anything else-the political imaginary of Ancient Greece, is established. It can be asserted that Athenian democracy represents a unique phenomenon in the history of Western politics since it scaled down – as never happened before-the archaic modalities of power legitimisation which was previously related to religion and arts. Among all the previous and the contemporary as well as the following civilisations up to the threshold of modernity political power used to be legitimised by means of a direct and strong reference to the sacral and religious sphere and to be inherited through bloodline. The Athenian democracy set aside and abandoned the latter aspects and it replaced them with a new logic according to which citizens (meaning adult men with citizenship status and not all those who inhabited the *polis*) could take part in the administration of power irrespectively of their being or not part of the aristocracy as well as of their wealth (for instance the less well-off citizens were allowed to take part in politics whether metics were excluded even if well off). As Plato explains in his *Statesman*[2] recalling the well-known myth of Kro-

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[2] M. Vegetti, *Chi comanda nella città,* Carocci, Roma, 2017, p. 10.

nos' Age, greekness differs from the rest of the world (from the previous one as well as the contemporary one) in the way citizens are ruled. In the rest of the world men are ruled in the same way in which a flock is run by his shepherd. According to Plato, the transition from Kronos' Age to Zeus' Age delivered a major change in the understanding of what it means to be a politician. The conception of politicians as demi-gods (*daimones*) is replaced by the idea of politicians as men between men – *pares inter pares*. This means men must establish a form of self-government which, according to Plato, can either be a democratic one or a corrective of other form of government developed in the Greek culture. As we will see later this led to some of Plato's critiques.

Mario Vegetti writes:

> It is certain that any hierarchically ordered social formation raises the question of legitimising or justifying the exercise of power [...] or the aspiration and the claim to this exercise. But it is in Greek society that the question was posed for the first time with the utmost urgency, constituting a central and decisive characteristic, so much that Greek thought represents a research laboratory on the subject of power capable of elaborating, and criticising, a fan of solutions to which later cultures would never cease to draw[3].

It is not easy to understand why Greek *poleis* reached the *isonomia* principle which, especially in the Athenian *polis*, created a fertile terrain for the development of democracy.

According to Mario Vegetti, this might be attributable to the "sovereignty crisis" experienced by *poleis* in ancient Greece around the IX century BC. Vegetti refers to such a crisis as the crisis of the "three main absences". These are the absence of a centralised state, the absence of a priestly authority and the absence of a unique secular and authoritative tradition (which Vegetti calls the absence of a "Book"). The first type of absence, which has a political essence, is caused by the lack of a legitimate mode of transmitting power which tended to be transmitted dynastically by blood. At the same time, ancient Greece lacked a centralised religious authority which usually serves not only as an influential identity glue but also as an instrument for the maintenance of stable hierarchies. In ancient civilisations, the more the religious power was stable and centralised the more it gets associated with the political sphere and legitimate political power. With regard to the third type of absence, Vegetti recalls the well-known passage of Plato's *Timaeus* on the meeting between legendary Athenian legislator Solon – also known as the father of democracy – and some Egyptian ministers who defined Greeks as *little boys* mainly because, differently from other civilisations such as the Egyptian through the hieroglyphic on pyramids or the Jewish people through the narratives present in the *Bible*, Greeks could not boast centuries of history. Vegetti argues that these lacks of sovereignty created a new space in which it was possible to rethink power horizontally rather than vertically. To think power horizontally means to set power between a group of citizens who recognise themselves as equal before the law

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[3] Ivi, p.11.

(according to the cited *isonomia* principle) and this led to the development of un an unprecedented understanding of the legitimisation of power.

Vegetti writes:

> The roles of power, by whomever they were detained, were neither legitimised by a priestly investiture nor by the hereditary right of dynastic monarchies. The power therefore had to be justified and legitimised from time to time by convincing reasons. It was therefore contestable and negotiable between opposing political and social groups[4].

Vegetti's analysis appears consistent with Carl Schmitt idea that: "not all the most pregnant concepts of the State's modern doctrine are secularised theological concepts[5]" a civilisation as the Greek one, in which the religious authority is neither unitary nor centralised and which does not have a unique and univocal sacral text, could only develop a conceptualisation of the political power as distributed rather than as centralised. Undisputedly, from a determinate perspective, it is possible to look at the Homeric poems as the equivalent of the Bible in the Judaic world. However, one should not forget that because of their own nature and of the typical Greek tradition, the myths included in the Homeric poems are open to a number of topics' variations. As musical fugues vaguely allow the same melody to be played again, Greeks used to convey the myths relating to their multiple and manifold goods and heroes always in unused manners and forms. In a context in which each one tends to tell well-known myths in an innovative fashion, each one tends to develop an autonomous political opinion. Moreover, from the VI century mythological tales started to be placed side by side to a model of knowledge, namely philosophical analysis, which not only held by the sacerdotal caste and which was believed to be more accessible and more "democratic".

The fourth explanation has to do with the alphabetic revolution[6] which, around the VIII century BC, transformed the facet of the Greek civilisation. The Minoan Age (3200-1450 BC) and the Mycenaean Age (1450-1200 BC) were respectively characterised by the employment of the Linear A and the Linear B. Linear Br was also used in the Hellenic Medieval (1200-770 BC), a period known for the Doric's invasion. The so called Greek alphabet was introduced in Greece around the 770 BC. The Greek alphabet works by ascribing Phoenician alphabet's characters new characteristics. Alphabets existing before the introduction of the Greek alphabet were "*abjad*", that is writing systems in which each symbol coincides with a syllable even where the folic sound is not expressed, rather than real "alpha-bets". The signs employed in these writing systems are not consonants but rather syllables wherein the vocal is implied. This means that in order to read these systems one has to be able not only to distinguish the different signs but also to

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[4] Ivi, p. 14.

[5] C. Schmitt, *La categoria del politico,* Il Mulino, Bologna, 2013.

[6] Cfr. E.A. Havelock, *La musa impara a scrivere. Riflessioni sull'oralità e l'alfabetismo dall'antichità al giorno d'oggi*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2005 and cfr. C. Sini, *L' alfabeto e l'Occidente*, Vol. 3\1: *La scrittura e i saperi*, Jaca Book, Milano, 2016.

interpret them according to the context in which they are inscribed. On the other hand, the Greek alphabet is alpha-bethical because it writes vocals and consonants separately. This brought about several innovations both in the short and in the long term. First of all, this alphabet represents a handier and functional instrument for trade: anyone who knows the signs can read what is written. The Greek writing system is also more "democratic" because anyone, or at least a wider part of the population, could potentially access it. Now, if the number of those who can access culture increases, the number of those who want and have the abilities to access the management of political power also increases. The higher is the number of people culturally emancipated, the higher is the number of people able to socially and politically emancipate themselves and the higher is the number of those who pretend and obtain to participate in the administration of the *res publica*. A more democratic writing system represents one of the conditions for the possibility (a necessary but not sufficient) of the development of a democratic society. The Greek alphabetic revolution has been one of the main technological revolutions of human history (it could be compared to the printing invention or to the internet arrival). Every time that a technological revolution takes place in a society, it has the capability and strength to modify the *forma mentis*, that is the *brainframe* of the humanity in which it takes place[7]. In addition, the Greek alphabet has a peculiarity which distinguishes it from all other writing systems: it allows to separate vocals from consonants. The vocalic sound does not require to be attached to the consonant sound in order to exist. Consonants, on the other hand, do not exist separately from vocals: consonants necessarily need to be accompanied by a vocalic sound in order to be articulated. The Greeks, by means of separating syllabic sounds into vocals and consonants, began to write something, the consonant, which did not exist before. The con-sonant, in other words, cannot exist or sound by itself but rather, as the term itself evokes, it can only exist or sound with a vocal. This implies that the Greek man's *forma mentis*, namely his *brainframe* can slowly modify itself to create the conditions of possibility for the development of a kind of thought which is definitely more abstract than it had been previously and elsewhere. The Greek man, writing something which did not actually exist by itself, is the first man who ideally began to develop abstract concepts. In addition, the Greek language possessed two elements that are essential, especially when working together, to think abstractly: these are the neutral gender and the determinative article. These two elements enabled the Greek man to say, for instance, "*to kalon*", to express the abstract idea of the wonderful in itself and for itself. As such, the term ceased to merely refer to a characteristic pertinent of things and became, for the first time, an abstract concept itself. This helps to understand why the *polis* represented a fertile terrain not only for the development of *isonomia* and democracy but also for the development of disciplines, such as philosophy and rhetoric, which respectively investigate the intrinsic formal and original structure of determinate things and the formal structure of language. This also had major political turns-up: a civilisation which is used to think philosophically and, thus, which can emancipate itself from

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[7] Cfr. P. Bellini, *Mitopie tecnopolitiche. Stato-nazione, impero e globalizzazione*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine, 2011.

mythological tales by setting the latter aside with an experimental knowledge, is a civilisation ready to distribute the political power among all citizens. The fact that Draco and Solon (the initiators of philosophy in Athens who were respectively born around the 650 and the 640 BC) are almost contemporary of Thales (who is considered the first philosopher and who was born in Miletus around the 624 BC) seems to imply ancient Greece around the VI century BC presented the right cultural and political contexts to begin a journey towards an unprecedented path.

All these cultural revolutions gave rise to the need to legitimise political power through thought, which is something shared by everyone and which everyone is able to exercise correctly if philosophically trained to use in the right manner logical inference, that is if rhetorically trained at using correctly the art of argumentation. Political practice, as abstract thinking, must aim at the truth and the latter can be achieved by anyone who acts according to the common good and reasons philosophically.

The democratic system well suited Athens until it allowed the city to conserve her hegemony over the other *poleis*. The system is usually idealised (especially in contemporary time), but it carries a variety of problems not only from a theoretic point of view, as argued by Plato, but also from practical and economical perspectives. The maintenance of the Athenian democracy was very expensive and could only be sustained by means of the exploitation of the other surrounding city-states. Franco Ferrari writes:

> With the Peloponnesian War the system will collapse on itself. As it is well-known, the Spartans' victory will lead to their settlement in Athens around the 404 and the 403 BC where they will set an oligarchic and pro Sparta regime, usually referred to as the regime of the "Thirty Tyrants". This will secret the end of the Greek democratic experience. Shortly afterwards, around the 403 BC, democracy will be restored thanks to the insurrection directed by the democrat Thrasybulus. However, this time the regime will result in a liberticidal and bloodthirsty system in which several people, including Socrates, accused by Anito (Thrasybulus' right-hand man) Licone and Miletus, will find death.

### 4. Athenian democracy and its decline after the Peloponnesian war

Athene was the biggest and the most densely populated of the 700 *poleis* of the Greek peninsula which also included over hundred colonies scattered in the Mediterranean Sea. Athenian population was divided into three classes: citizens, metics (inhabitants with foreign origins) and slaves. Membership to those classes (as well as sovereignty as it has been argued before) was inherited. However, the division was not characterised by an absolute immobilisation and, although uncommon, it was possible for an individual to move from one class to another one. Only citizens were allowed to own plots of land and as such they were the only ones allowed to participate in the administration of power. Citizens only represented

about the 10% or 20% of the total population which means more or less 20.000[8] men even though it is quite difficult to get a precise estimation of the Athenian population as well as of the other *poleis* since slaves were not took in the census. Nonetheless it is rationale to think that Athene had a population about 100.000 and 200.000 at his peak.

As mentioned above, the Athenian democratic system (which today we will refer to as an instance of "direct democracy") permitted, or at least allowed, all citizens to participate in the administration of power. This, in turn, poses the problem of how could 20.000 individuals meet to discuss the *polis* fate. From the sources and testimonies, we have got, it is possible to state that the Assembly (*ekklesia*) reached about 6000 citizens[9] at its maximum and this clearly highlights how difficult it must have been to have a real debate. Because of this, orations, which were related to the art of rhetoric which developed at the same time, constituted the Assembly's order of the day[10]. During the Assembly, orators (*rhetors*) were the ones debating from the podium while the majority of the citizens could only listen to them arguing and vote[11]. The *ekklesia* cooperated with other organisms such as the *boulè* (the Council). The Athenian *boulè* was made up by 500 magistrates. In addition, there were other political and juridical institutions. A very influential role was played by the nine archons, life time members of the *Aeropagus*. The distribution of power was not very neat compared to our time and, as Hansen argues, the ancient Greek system in general and the Athenian one in particular had a different division of power[12].

The Athenian democratic system worked well until the *polis* could maintain its hegemony over the other *poleis*. The system, often idealised (especially in our time) brought several problems which Plato would explore from a theoretic perspective. From an economical and practical points of view, the very high costs of maintaining the Athenian democracy could only be sustained by the exploitation of the other *poleis*. Franco Ferrari writes:

> The systematic exploitation of the relations of enslavement (more or less direct) established with cities and external territories (also thanks to its extraordinary naval power) allowed Athens to draw constant economic benefits and thus to sustain democracy's costs. The affirmation and consolidation of the latter do not really seem thinkable without the contribution of the hegemonic and imperialist policy Athens implemented

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[8] Cfr. M.H. Hansen, *La democrazia ateniese nel IV secolo a.C.*, Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto, Milano, 2003, p. 142; and cfr. also G. Daverio Rocchi, *Città-Stato e stati federali della Grecia classica* Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritti, Milano,1993.

[9] Cfr. M.H. Hansen, *La democrazia ateniese nel IV secolo a.C.* cit., p. 142; and cfr. also G. Daverio Rocchi, *Città-Stato e stati federali della Grecia classica*, cit.

[10] Starting from the 409 BC economic incentives were needed to promote participation at the assembly's meetings.; cfr. M.H. Hansen, *La democrazia ateniese nel IV secolo a.C.*, cit., p. 190.

[11] Ivi, p. 200.

[12] Ivi, p. 336.

in the decades between the end of the Persian Wars and the beginning of the Peloponnesian War. Both the reasons mentioned above present surprising and frankly disturbing) similarities with the situation of certain contemporary democracies, where hegemonic imperialism (see United States) constitutes a determining factor (also in terms of consensus) and where political personnel very often assume, especially in the higher levels, the form of a true and proper hereditary oligarchy (and also in this regard the case of the United States appears exemplary)[13].

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### 4.1. Plato, between Critias, Socrates and the Sophists
In this period lived and operated Socrates and Plato.

Socrates was born around the 470/469 BC and he was sentenced to death in the 399 BC. He lived his childhood in the calm and flourishing time of the *pentecontaetia* and he took part in the Peloponnesian War battles of Potidaea, Delos and Amphipolis beside Alcibiades (whose life was most probably saved by Socrates himself). Socrates' relation with Alcibiades, who was considered a traitor of Athens because he took the Spartans side, represented one of the dangerous relations that made Socrates appear in a bad light with the democrats when they came back to Athens after the downfall of the regime of the Thirty. Socrates did approve some aspects of the regime of the Thirty Tyrants while he disapproved some other aspects. For instance, Socrates refused to collaborate to the capture of the democrat Leone of Salamis. Certainly, Socrates had a good relationship with Critias, who was one of the Thirty Tyrants as well as one of Plato's uncles. Critias and Alcibiades had both been scholars of Socrates and this fact represented, for the democratic regime restored by Thrasybulus, the proof he was a corrupter of young people. In addition, Socrates had also been accused of calling into question the tradition, the culture and the religion of the Greek civilisation and, because of this, he had been charged for impiety. As Nietzsche argues, such a charge was well-founded since Socrates did revolutionised and transvaluated completely his epoch's cultural system (however the detailed analysis of this aspect would lead us on a different path). Taylor writes:

> The mistrust aroused by Socrates' relations with the "traitors" prompted the leaders of the restored democracy to submit him to trial in 400-399. Alcibiades and Critias were both dead, but the democrats could not feel

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[13] F. Ferrari, *Platone e la democrazia*, in *Platone, Contro la democrazia*, BUR, Milano, 2008, p. 24.

safe until the man they imagined had inspired their betrayals would still exercise influence over public life[14].

Luciano Canfora adds:

The five hundred judges who condemned Socrates constituted a significant champion of Athenian citizenship. [...] The five hundred people drawn by lot who judged him saw in him a disturbing critic of the current political system and, together, an example denying the gods and therefore the ethical bases on which the life of the community rested[15].

Plato (428/427-348/347 BC) was born 40 years after Socrates and he experienced a different reality in which *pentecontaetia* already was a distant memory. Plato spent his youth during the time of the Peloponnesian War which would end, as well as the Athenian hegemony would, before Plato started to write philosophy. It is often said that Plato's philosophy developed from *thaumazein*. The term refers to the English word meaning astonishment, and it refers to Plato's reaction to the fact that Athens, the fairest city, sentencing to death the most just man, Socrates, to whom Plato was deeply related; committed the most unfair crime. Plato was born in a well-off and aristocratic family and Critias was the young brother of Plato's mother.

For lineage and family, Plato was close to the aristocratic factions rather than to the democratic ones. In addition, in the 399 BC (when Plato was almost 30 years old) the democrats sentenced Plato's friend and teacher Socrates to death. This explains, from a biographical point of view, Plato anti-democratic attitude. However, these reasons, by themselves, would have not been enough. As it will be discussed below, Plato would also criticize the Athenian democracy on the basis of other reasons which do not relate to his biography but rather to Critias and Socrates.

Weather the democrats represent Plato's main political enemies, Sophists represent his main enemies from an ideological and philosophical perspective. It is not a coincidence then that most of the Sophists supported the democratic regime (with Crizias being an exception). Protagoras of Amber (486-411 BC), who is mostly known for his saying "man is the measure of everything", was one of the main representatives and initiators of the sophist school of thought. Together with others such as Anaxagoras and Zeno[16], who came to Athens around the 457 BC, Protagoras belong to the Circle of Pericles. According to Diogenes Laerzio, Protagoras was the first one to assert that there exist two opposing arguments on each single thing. This assertion represents the ground of the idea that each man is the measure of all things, which means that everyone's option is worth and, as such, it represents the fundamental principle of democracy. If the *polis*, with its evolution, its "shortages" (highlighted by Mario Vegetti) and its revolutions (such as the alphabetic one) constitutes the "material" substrate of democracy,

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[14] Cfr. E. Taylor, *Socrate*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze, 1952.

[15] L. Canfora, *Critica della retorica democratica*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2002, p. 3.

[16] Cfr. A. Capizzi, *I Sofisti ad Atene*, Levante editori, Bari, 1990, p. 105.

then sophist's thought constitutes the "ideal" substrate. In other words, to say that everyone's opinion is worth is to say that every aspect of knowledge could become a subject matter of discussion. This was not only applicable to philosophy but also to politics where every citizen was expected to express his own opinion. Sophists taught the words' art (rhetoric) in a political reality in which it was unavoidable to make persuasive speeches aimed at the building, achievement and maintenance of consensus.

Plato would outdistance himself from those positions which are based on the Greek principle of *isonomia*, both on a practical and a theoretical level. This principle of *isonomia*, ones expanded, provides the basis for the development of another principle with which Plato does not relate, namely the principle of equality. Plato's political doctrine is based on radical inequality at it aims at the enhancement of differences. According to Plato, in fact, only the respect of differences could guarantee the perfect functioning of the *polis*. As it is described in the Phoenician Myth of the III Book of the *Republic*[17], three types of men must coexist inside the *polis* in order to safeguard the *polis*' health. These are the guardians, the warriors and the workers. The existence of an equilibrium between these three different types of men represents the *polis*' health. Each class must be welling to occupy its own place and to recognise the guardians' sovereignty. If this does not happen, the ideal-city, also referred to as the wonderful-city (*kallipolis*), degenerates into the corrupted forms of government described in the VIII Book of the *Republic*[18]. Democracy represents one of these corrupted forms of government in which the most (the *demos*, namely the workers class) ceased to recognise the best ones' authority (the best ones are to the "philosophers" of Plato's sofocrazia who are the actual guardians) and start to pretend the political power (*kratos*). The *demo-kratia*, as such, is one of Plato's' main polemical targets from his earlier dialogues, as the *Protagoras* and the *Gorgias*, to his later dialogues, as the *Republic*, the *Statesman* and the *Laws*.

### 4.2. The Protagoras

In this Plato's early dialogue, Socrates, the main character, dialogues with the sophist Protagoras about the possibility of teaching political virtue. The dialogue is aporetic, however, the topic of the dialogue recalls the idea according to which only who has political competencies is able to manage the common good. Such competencies are the product of a training course but they also need an innate predisposition. As it has been mentioned earlier, Plato asserted that men are not all alike: only some of them are born with a predisposition for studying and for commanding and, as such, these are the only ones that can be the guardians of the *polis*. Although the predisposition is innate, if not cultivated it is insufficient: this is because such predisposition needs the preparation one only achieves through studies.

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[17] Cfr. Plato, *Republic*, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vols. 5 & 6, translated by P. Shorey, William Heinemann Ltd., London, 1969.

[18] *Ibidem*.

Those represent some of the reasons why the dialogue is said to be aporetic: the fact that the political virtue can be learned represents a necessary but not a sufficient condition for one to become a politician in a strict sense. According to the character Socrates, and thus according to the dialogue's author Plato, democracy is not a great form of government.

Protagoras distances himself from Socrates' position.

Protagoras maintains that man's survival cannot be guaranteed by "common techniques" (such as agriculture, joinery and craftsmanship) alone. Man's survival, Protagoras argues, necessitates of a "higher technique", which is politics and which guides the other techniques towards the common good. In the well-known myth of Prometheus, Protagoras imagines that politics is a gift from Zeus who distributed it indiscriminately to men. This justifies, according to Protagoras, why everyone has to be involved in the *polis*' politics.

Those words, together with the saying "*panton chrematon metron anthropos*" ("man is the measure of everything") constitute the ideological justification as well as the manifesto of the Greek democracy intended as a political system where all citizens can play a role irrespectively of their predisposition or preparation. As Franco Ferrari explains, according to Plato, each citizen has a minimal net worth of political knowledge which is sufficient for each citizen to contribute in the *polis*' life.

As Ferrari argues, it is here Plato's critique has to be inserted, on the fact that not everyone has the above-mentioned minimal net worth of acquired knowledge suitable to play a role in politics available nor everyone has the predisposition which allows them to develop such knowledge:

> The vast majority of individuals have neither the degree of competence, nor the level of awareness, nor the ethical-moral and psychological aptitude for actively contributing to the governance of the city[19].

According to Plato, the political virtue is reserved only for the few who are able to dominate their own impulses and to subject the latter under the rational soul philosophically aimed at wisdom which is the knowledge of the Good, that is the *polis*' common good.

### 4.3. *The* Gorgias

The *Gorgias* also contains, although less explicitly, some critiques of democracy. The *demos*, here, is compared to a crowd of children who are still lacking both the rationality and the capability to recognise who act on their wellbeing. It is well-known the example of the doctor and the cook: both of them give people suggestions but whether the first one is concerned with people body's health, the second one is rather concerned with offering people a kind of pleasure which can, sometimes, be harmful for health. The medicines that the doctor prescribe tend to

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[19] F. Ferrari, *Platone e la democrazia*, in Platone, *Contro la democrazia*, cit., p. 22.

be refused by children because of their bad taste while, on the contrary, the cook's sweets are largely accepted by the children who would eat a very huge quantity of them. This is because children do not know what is really good for them.

I will risk being judged as a doctor accused by a cook would be judged by a group of boys. You see how you could defend a doctor in such a situation, when the accuser said:

> Guys, how much he has done to you too; even the little ones he corrupts with iron and fire, he distresses them making them lose weight and suffocating them, he forces them to take very bitter drinks, he suffers their hunger and thirst; he certainly does not treat you like I used to prepare various tasty dishes for you. What on earth do you think a doctor could say if he were in such a bad situation? What if he told the truth? If he said: "Guys, everything I did, I did it for your health!"; how far do you think the cries of those judges would spread? Wouldn't they make a huge noise?[20]

In the democratic system power appears to reside in the people but, it actually resides in the demagogues who, by means of rhetoric, persuade people. People, like children, prefer those who are always ready to support their needs (although sometimes they can potentially be harmful) rather than those who attempt to educate them, that is to take them out (*ex-ducere*) from their minority status. This is the reason why rhetoric, in the *Gorgias*, is not considered a *techne* aimed at persuasion (*peitho*) but it is rather considered as a practical ability (*empiria*) aimed at adulation (*kolakeia*).

### 4.4. The Republic

In the *Republic*, more specifically in the VIII Book, Plato develops his most well-known and pregnant critiques against the Athenian democratic system. Plato, as it has been mentioned above and as revealed in advance by the Phoenician myth in the III Book, believed in the existence of the presence of a fundamental inequality between individuals. Given the existence of such inequality, Plato developed an idea of justice as the equilibrium between the different social classes. In the same way in which an individual is upright only when his rational soul dominates his strengths and his passion, a city is upright only when the wise men (*philo-sophoi*) govern both the citizens who hold the military and those who are involved with trading and farming. Soldiers and workers must both be submitted to the authority of the guardians: Plato is imagining a society which prefigures Michel Foucault Theory of bio-power. In such a society those who actually hold the power (the philosophers) do not impose it with strength and this is because soldiers and workers voluntarily subject themselves to the only ones who know and love the Good, the philosophers.

As it will be explored later, the two notions of "philosophers' power" and

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[20] Plato, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 3, translated by W.R.M. Lamb, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1967, 521d- 522a.

"the idea of the Good" not only have a theoretical and metaphysical value but also a practical and political significance that can also be actualised and used as a key for our contemporaneity. Before we reach such conclusions, it is valuable to explore the main critiques Plato moved to the democratic form of government in his *Republic*.

As it has been mentioned above, Plato does not only reject the idea of a fundamental equality between human beings (with regard to nature and predisposition and not with regard to laws) but also Protagoras' position. Protagoras maintained that all men as "the measure of everything" are irrespectively provided with an innate political virtue that is the capability to democratically take part in the administration of the common good.

In the VIII Book Socrates claims that the citizens of a democratic system of government appear free because they can freely express themselves and operate. Here, Plato argues the democracy's deceitful trick is nestled: at first sight democracy appears as the greatest form of government (we would say today the "least worst one"). In democracy tolerance reaches its highest level and dominates the democratic reality mainly because no one takes care of citizens' moral education[21].

Plato refers to the democratic man as the "*isonomic man*"[22], a man devoted to maximum freedom whose only aim is the satisfaction of his own instincts even when the latter implies to place his own utile before the common good (of which he does not have any knowledge). This is why democracy actually reveals itself as a form of anarchy in which no one really command although everyone does think of commanding (the Greek word "*a(n)-archia*" literally means "lack of command").

This general *chaos* represents a fertile terrain for the emergence of a charismatic figure, the demagogue who, would easily transform the democracy into a tyranny once he had gathered the *demos*' consensus. Plato writes:

> "Come on, dear friend, what is the character of tyranny? It is almost clear that it results from a transformation of democracy". "It is clear."[...] "The oligarchy was ruined by the insatiability of wealth and the carelessness of the rest, caused by avarice". "It's true," he said. "Now to destroy democracy is not also the insatiability of what it defines a good" "In your opinion, what defines this?" "Freedom," I replied. "In a democratic state, you will hear that freedom is the best good [...]" When, a democratic state, thirsty for freedom, is at the mercy of bad cupbearers and gets drunk drinking freedom well beyond due, then punishes its rulers with the accusation

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[21] Cfr. Plato, *Republic*, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vols. 5 & 6, cit., 557d et seq.

[22] "And thus, he leads his life, day by day gratifying the desire that presents itself to him: now he drinks wine at the sound of the flute, then he drinks only water and makes a diet; now he gives himself to physical exercises, sometimes instead he gets lazy and he doesn't care about anything, then he poses as if he was devoting his time to philosophy. He often takes part in political life, and jumps up to the platform to talk and act haphazardly. He lets himself be drawn in that direction, or to the businessmen, he turns to this other, and there is no order or obligation in his life, however, calling this form of pleasant, free and blessed life he dedicates to you his whole existence" (cfr. *ibidem*, 559e et seq.).

of being abominable oligarchs." "Yes, it behaves like this," he said. "And those, who obey the rulers, cover them with insults, treating them as people happy to be slaves and good for nothing, while praising and honouring privately and publicly rulers who are similar to the governed.[23]"

Democracy thus, intended as a system in which power resides in the most rather than in the best, represents the worst form of government, maybe even one more harmful than tyranny. Chaos and anarchy reign in the platonic democracy. This is because, by allowing themselves unrestrained freedoms, the most satisfy their lowest instincts, and thus allow the instinctual aspect of the human soul to subdue the rational aspect.

Government is entrusted with those who are naturally not inclined to command and also who lack the adequate preparation or formation to govern. In other words, those in which power resides fall short of the competencies characteristic of real politicians who are the ones who desire (*philein*), by nature, to be wise (*sophoi*) about the Good of the city and the bad of the city. In the *Statesman*, Plato will come back to those topics in the attempt to better define who should be the true politician-philosopher.

### 4.5. The Statesman

The *Thaetetus*, together with the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*, constitutes a trilogy characterised by transparent internal cross references. At the end of the *Thaetetus*, Socrates, introducing the *Sophist* dialogue, explains that the conversation will continue the following morning and, in the *Statesman* interlocutors would go on with the same discussion.

At the beginning of the *Statesman*, having reached a definition of the term "sophist", the Stranger of Elea and *Thaetetus*, assert it is now necessary to define the terms "politician" and "philosopher". Is thus not a case if in the dialogue of the same name he proceeds towards the definition of the term "politician" rather than the term "philosopher". Because of this, it has been argued that Plato intended to write another dialogue, the *Philosopher*, which, however he never actually ended up writing probably because of his old age. It has been argued that having reached the definition of "politician", the definition of "philosopher" did not need to be investigated since it automatically follows from the latter if, as Plato believed, the two figures coincide.

If one wants to understand who is the "true politician" then he firstly needs to understand who is the "false politician". For this reason, Plato, in the *Thaetetus*, starts with an analysis of the theme of the false. This theme will also be used to settle the central questions of the *Sophist*, in which it will be explained that the definition of the "sophist" can only be understood once it has been understood that he is the one who "says the false" that is the one who" makes appear the false speech as the right one and who makes the right speech to seem false (from this follow the ontological questions about the being as well as about the not-being and the highest genres). In other words, the sophist is as the false politician: he wants

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[23] *Ibidem*, 562a-d.

to appear as the real politician but, because he lacks the necessary competences to actually be a real politician, he rather pretends to be a real politician by making use of the deceiving instrument of rhetoric. The trick, obviously, mostly catches on the people since it does not know what is good for the city and what is bad for the city and thus it can easily be persuaded about what is mendacious, harmful and misleading.

The reasons above explain why Plato ferociously attacks democracy also in the *Statesman*. Plato, through the Myth of Kronos, distinguishes between two different ages. The first one is a mythical age of gold in which the politicians, those who hold up the *polis*, were of a divine ancestry and thus governed the people as a shepherd governs his herd. The second one is more modern and characterised by the fact that men are governed by other men. Plato here highlights the main difference between Hellenism and the rest of the world: only in Greece citizens are governed by other citizens, *pares inter pares*. This has both positive and negative throws up. Greece gives rise to a modern age in which power is not conferred by a divine investiture nor is it inherited by blood. However, this means men are not governed anymore by the "best ones", that is the ones who are the most compe-tent (those who desire to know the difference between the common good and the common bad). When this happens, men run the risk of falling in the "*isonomia*" and "democratic" abyss of chaos and anarchy which, Plato argues, characterises democratic systems. The demos, Plato argues, will never be capable of govern.

In the *Statesman*, Plato asserts that the mass will never have access to the regal science, that is the knowledge of the Good:

> "Well, does it seem possible that in a city a multitude is able to acquire this science?" "And how?" "But in a city of a thousand men is it possible that a hundred, or even fifty, have come to possess it satisfactorily?" "If so, it would certainly be the easiest of all techniques. In reality, we know that among a thousand men such a number of excellent players of pariah [game similar to chess, n.d.r.] never emerges, taking into account how many emerge among the rest of the Greeks; let alone if you give such a number of kings![24]"

Plato adds:

> A multitude of men, whatever they may be, will never succeed in acquiring this kind of science and in intelligently directing a city[25].

The real politician must be a "weaver of men". Plato here uses an image from the world of work (*technai*) that is similar to the one of the doctor compared to the cook and that suggests the real politician must, first of all, be maximally expert, competent and skilled with about the duty he is going to be in charge of.

The "real politician" is such in so far, he distinguishes himself from the false politician" which is the sophist who makes use of the rhetoric to persuade and to

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[24] Plato. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 12, cit., 292e.

[25] *Ibidem*, 297b-c.

get people consensus since in the Athenian democratic system of that time, people direct the *polis*' fate. How it has already been emphasised, Sophists were the main supporters of the principle of equality. A principle which Plato never embraced and on which it is based direct democracy.

### 5. Conclusion

All the above considerations may seem to be quite far from our current debate: "power to philosophers" and the "idea of the Good" seem to be outdated sayings and they do not seem to be relevant to our understanding of politics. However, it is possible to contextualize Plato's expressions and to translate them to our time, that is to look beyond their original sense and to transform them in a herald of a philosophical-political message which is actually relevant to our time. The philosophers Plato talks about, are not the lectures or the researchers of our Universities, not they are the ones interested in abstract debates. The "philo-sophers" are, according to Plato, the "lovers of wisdom". Here one should note that the term "philo-sopher", according to Plato, when inserted in a political context, refers to the one who is "interested in knowing" that is "the one who is interested in developing and maintaining specific competences related to the area he is involved with. In the *Gorgias* the philosopher is compared to the doctor while the orator-sophist is compared to the cook. The philosopher, in other words, does not, despite what most people wrongly tend to believe, merely dedicate himself to abstract questions. The philosopher is the one who has, in the same way in which the doctor does, a very refined competency which is the result of a natural predisposition he developed through a strenuous education program. The philosopher is the one who would do anything to attain a kind of knowledge which is not abstract nor purely theoretic but rather concrete, practical and political: that is the knowledge of the Good. Secondly, since philosophers have to be understood as expert and competent of the Good, it follows that the Good, once it got contextualise in the *polis* political practice, it cannot merely be understood as an abstract idea. It should rather be interpreted as an ideal regulator of political life. In other words, the Good the politician-philosopher is competent about, is nothing more than the "common good". This is mostly due to the fact that political fairness is intimately connected to the idea of Good, Plato writes:

> Who ignores in what ways the right and beautiful things are good, is a poor guardian. And no one can adequately know the right and the beautiful before knowing what the good is[26].

The common good, Plato maintains, must prevail over the good of the singles. Although the Good, as the sun light, is an "*epekeina tes ousias*" idea, meaning it is an idea over essence, it must beam itself over the world and it must permeate the political behaviour of citizens in communities. For those reasons, it must reveal itself in as more practical. The latter is the aspect connected with the Greek use of

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[26] Cfr. Plato, *Republic*, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vols. 5 & 6, cit., 506a.

the term "*agathos*" which, as others Italian colloquial expressions, can be translated as "being-good-at", "being-good-at doing something" or "be able to do something". The transcendent idea of the Good in itself and for itself is descended upon the political society as the citizens' capacity to be good and to contribute to the good of the community.

In this sense, it is easier to understand why philosophers should grant themselves to the government of the city: philosophers are the only ones who, combining their natural predisposition (that is their innate love, *philia*) for knowledge and wisdom (*sophia*), really know the Good. In other words, philosophers are the ones who are maximally capable of what is maximally good for the community and the ones who know what it is not good but rather bad and harmful for the *polis* and want to dissociate themselves from the latter.

To summarize, according to Plato, it is indispensable, for those who do politics, to be very competent about the common good.