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The Platonic *Kyklos* and the State of Democracy

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The Course of Empire Thomas Cole (1833-1836)

Democracy in the History of Western Political Thought

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“Tyranny is probably established out of no other regime than democracy, I suppose—the greatest and most savage slavery out of the extreme of freedom.” Plato, the *Republic*, Book VIII

Is Plato an irredeemable foe to Democracy? Although it depends on who you ask, the weight of scholarship tips the scale towards an affirmative answer. Perhaps most famously, Karl Popper indicted Plato as the first and foremost enemy of his Open Society. A literal interpretation of the *Republic* agrees with Popper’s analysis. So does the *kyklos*: Socrates’ narration throughout Book VIII of the cyclical descent of the *politeia* from aristocracy—the rule by the best and most qualified—to the unjust regimes; timocracy, oligarchy, democracy and tyranny. A Popperian reading suggests a soft determinism in the cycling of regime types.

In the passage quoted above, the dialogue is at the stage of transition from democracy to tyranny. Socrates describes the whimsical masses in democracy, shunning all authority and making freedom their *summum bonum*. Freedom here is defined as a tyranny of appetites, as opposed to reason or *logos*, constituted as the regulative principle in the soul and psyche.

The tyrant then arises from within the system. Through demagoguery, he is able to instill fear of an incipient oligarchy in the people. The docile masses gather around his figure as he incites faction against the wealthy and promises to restore order. At inception, the tyrant panders to his base by redistributing land and pardoning debts as in a year of Jubilee. In time, he tightens his grip on power and fully subjugates the people, ruling solely by his own interest. Democracy undermines itself insofar as it carries within it, like a seed, the conditions for its own demise.

So, if we read Socrates’¹ description of regime change literally, then all we need to do is to locate where exactly our liberal democracies currently stand in the *kyklos*. To this purpose, The excerpt at hand is certainly evocative of the law-and-order figures that have emerged in the Americas, the Old Continent, and even the Philippines. It’s easy to argue, for example, that Donald Trump is a manifestation of the popular element within liberal democracy. He has mobilized the up-until-now losers of globalization, the *somewheres*, those incapable of anchoring their identities in the fluidity of the open society. In this narrative, the people have cast their ballot against oligarchic elites; against the ‘banksters’ behind the 2008 meltdown, bailed-out by the tax-paying, hard-working layman, with the consent of the political class. They’ve cast it against the *lügenpresse*, academic pontificators and their Ivy-League terminology.

¹ Admittedly, it is open to debate whether this is Socrates, Plato, the historical Socrates or the Platonic Socrates.

They've cast it against a rigged system that has robbed them of their economic security and spiritual truths. Donald Trump's figure maps-on perfectly to Leo Strauss' seminal article on the *Republic*:

“[Oligarchy] renders inevitable the emergence of drones, of members of the ruling class who are either burdened with debt or already bankrupt and hence disenfranchised, of beggars hanker after their squandered fortune and hope and political power through a change of regime.”²

Strauss speaks of ‘class-traitors’: oligarchic renegades who nevertheless possess the skills and network of corresponding to their social extraction, who defect from their position in society to lead the masses and institute a democracy.

Such a reading would place American liberal democracy, not in the democratic phase of the *kyklos*, but in its oligarchic prelude. In this light, Trump is a democratic drone; transactional Trump; the quintessential Queens native; three-times bankrupt, living in his father's shadow. The Trumpian archetype, however, seems to enter and leave history, like the sophists and demagogues of all ages. In fact, we needn't leave the United States to find successful national-populists of his kind. Consider the example of the vastly successful, now-forgotten People's Party in the late XIX century. Or Father Coughlin, a Catholic priest, who in the aftermath of the Great Depression boasted a weekly audience of 40 million radio listeners.

An alternative interpretation places the needle of time at a later stage of the *kyklos*. In it, Trump becomes the tyrant in the dialogue, emerging as a strongman out of the putative democratic chaos to restore order. Yet he remains a polarizing figure, far from a unifying force. The ‘fourth estate’ watches his every move, there is a fully-fledged investigation against him on accounts of collusion led by an eminent Republican, Bob Mueller, the Supreme Court has his hands tied, a divided Congress blocks him, and as I write these words, the Federal Government is paralyzed. In sum Trumpism, largely anticipated by the Founding Fathers, has been contained within the system.

The common denominator to both scenarios presented above is the popular element of liberal democracy sounding the war drums against the elite; whether revolting against an oligarchy or rallying around a strongman.

Additional data can be presented to argue that we stand in this-or-that moment of the *kyklos* convincingly. Notwithstanding, an allegorical reading of the *kyklos* better approximates Plato's intent and renders a deeper understanding of our current democratic predicament to us moderns. Along the way, it rescues Plato from democracy's blacklist.

² Strauss, *History of Political Philosophy, Plato*, p. 62

Here's why. Plato is well aware that the ideal 'city in speech' is impossible, largely because of the shared insufficiency of our knowledge. Plato's 'cities in speech' and regime types are not blueprints, but rather timeless archetypes in his expedition to locate justice in the soul. The immortal soul to him is both the starting point for everything—the *prima materia*—and immortal. It is the true object of inquiry of the *Republic*. Physical descriptions throughout the *Republic* are analogies for metaphysical notions and processes. The figurative aspects of the *kyklos*, like that of the 'myth of metals', are thus subordinated to this lofty intellectual endeavor.

Under this light, it becomes evident that a literal reading of the *kyklos* is as fruitless as a literal reading of the book of *Genesis*. A reading of the *Republic* as an anti-political tract for the education of the soul is suddenly possible. While actualizing the ideal city is beyond our reach, a just soul that is capable of self-rule is more realistically attainable. It's not surprising to discover that, as discussed during our lectures at the IEP, the *Republic* was precisely an educational text until late in the modern era.

The *kyklos* is a particularly effective introspective tool. Since there exists a direct parallelism between the nature of man and the nature of states, the nature of unjust states will illuminate the nature of unjust men:

"...do you suppose that the regimes arise 'from an oak or rocks' and not from the dispositions of the men in the cities, which, tipping the scale as it were, draw the rest along with them?... If there are five arrangements of cities, there would also be five for the soul of private men".³

The crucial insight here is that people and their psychologies are the fundamental building blocks of regimes. In glaring contrast, the social engineer would start by building-out the regime, to then attempt to mold its subjects. Plato constructs his allegorical cities out of men, and not his men out of cities. Human beings make the *kyklos*, and not the other way around.

The *kyklos* is not an iron law of history, but rather an allegory for the ebbs and flows of politics across time, as these stray further and closer to the Form of the Good. By examining how Plato's figurative regimes reflect the souls of the archetypal men that populate the cities, we have set aside a deterministic reading of the *kyklos*. There is a deeply metaphysical notion of time sustaining the *kyklos* that we have yet to explore.

³ Plato, *Republic*. 544 d-e or p. 222

Let us reconstruct a random follower of Plato's sense of reality and time. At one level he toils, constrained inside biological time and physical space, consumed in the minutia of his existence. Call this horizontal time. Simultaneously, he is aware that the physical world is but a *shadowlands*. He is able to think of himself toiling under the eternal forms outside time and space, above which the Form of the Good presides. Call this eternal time: a vertical arrangement between the terrestrial-temporal and the celestial-eternal. He knows his soul is immortal. From within horizontal time, under the weight of the heavens, he is able to catch glimpses of the eternal through contemplation.

Allegorical truths are particularly hard for moderns, just as metaphysical notions of time might at first seem alien to us. In a secular time like ours, to seek patterns in time seems to be the stuff of prophecy. If one attempted to read the signs of the times he would likely be accused of projecting individual biases. In our time, time is presumably empty and agnostic.

Upon closer examination, metaphysically-charged conceptions of time have never ceased to capture our imagination. Phoenix-figures have emerged across cultures and epochs. Aristotle's *Politics* lays down the measures necessary to curb the cycle of decay (enlarging the middle class chief amongst them). Machiavelli assimilates Polybius' *anakyklosis* in his *Discourses*. Thomas Cole paints his tragic-epic series *The Course of Empire*. Spengler calls optimism cowardice and compels Western man to hold on to the lost position, like the centurion that was found carbonized under Mount Vesuvius. The greatest Spanish-language novel since Cervantes, García Márquez's *Cien Años de Soledad*, is a chronicle of the rise and fall of the Buendía family through the ages. A meme circulates in alt-right circles on social media. It reads "Hard times create strong men. Strong men create good times. Good times create weak men. Weak men create hard times." In their quest for meaning, human beings are hardwired to seek out patterns in time. Or are they? Perhaps only postmodern conservatives of the IEP are given to such pathological behaviors.

If we look across the aisle, we find that the heirs of the Enlightenment have their own theories of time. What is the *Manifesto* if not a 'materialization' of Hegel's theory of history as a dialectic, in which the rise of the proletariat is inescapable. Or take Mill, the great apostle of liberalism. In his view, our past is made up of the forces of convention and the forces of improvement, pitted against each other. Progress creeps along in between them, just as a drop of water finds its own level. Granted Millian time and Whig history are linear (and not cyclical). They also place high relative importance on the individual as a 'center of improvement' and a driver of history (as opposed to historicist schools). But in a crucial sense, Marxist

and liberal accounts are no different apart to other conceptions of time: our theories about the past have a bearing on how we tackle the present and thus impact our future. Linear time is still a pattern subjectively observed and experienced; it's still a belief about the fundamental nature of time. As Chesterton put it, medieval people never worried about being medieval, but modern people worry horribly about being modern. Thus Mill's mode of time-apprehension trickled down from the salon to the layman and became commonplace. It is the backdrop against which we live out our lives.

Democratic time is our very own mode of time-apprehension, our *kyklos*. Why do I think this? Because I've left democratic time. If only for a quarter of an hour. Roaming around *Museu do Oriente*, I came across an instance of pre-modern time. It had the form of a XVI century Portuguese panel painting of the Nativity scene, mounted on Eastern woodwork.

What struck me as singular was that the characters and the landscape portrayed in the Nativity scene were not those of Biblical Judea, but those of XVI century European peasantry. The commissioning burgher, in his burgher attire, appeared kneeling in adoration at the feet of Jesus. What appears incongruous and 'anachronistic' to us seemed completely natural to the paintings' original audience. The panel evidences an oral and visual culture, with the priestly class as mediators between the temporal and the spiritual.

The burgher fits only awkwardly within the self-ascribed reasonableness of our horizontal dimension of time. Yet he fits squarely with a notion of times in which his existence in XVI century Europe and the Nativity are both vertically linked to the divine that is eternal. Vertical time, via the Aristotelian-Thomistic synthesis, is still latent in the panel, I dare speculate.



The gradual conversion to our current mode of time-apprehension likely began with the splintering of the Latin World and the advent of the printing press. Later on, the novel and the newspaper provided the technical means to represent nation-states in movement through time: what Benedict Anderson has called imagined communities. In his work by the same name, he nails down the causal link in detail. The nation moves as a sociological organism through secular-horizontal time, largely because through the press, man is able to portray it as such. National time emerges, one newspaper at a time. Representative parliamentary democracy becomes the receptacle for this new national sentiment and the mechanism through which the political community exerts its national sovereignty.

We need not look back into the past for nonlinear ideas about time. Suffice it to look outside the West. There is a popular anecdote involving a high-ranking Chinese official during President Nixon's pioneering visit to the Middle Kingdom in 1970. When asked to assess the impact of the French revolution, the official replied that it was too soon to tell. This vignette opens up the world of a secretive party elite: a shadow-monarchy, tacitly informed by Confucian philosophy, with a vision of time so protruded that it makes for an anecdote comical to westerners.

Non-Western civilizations have their own paradigms with respect to politics and time. In the collective imagination of the most nostalgic branches of Islam, the centuries past of al-Andalus are present in aspirations for the near future.

Returning to our analysis of the state of democracy, the case of China is more interesting due to its political implications. Its leaping success has caught the eye of many, particularly amongst developing countries. Aspiring nations that in the past may have fantasized with Western notions of freedom, packaged in the form of a Levis and Marlboro ads, now turn to Beijing as a model. The Chinese model runs on legitimacy through competence and not elections. It carries the advantage of transcending electoral cycles, presumably allowing for long-term thought in the national interest. The risk (or reality) is the annihilation of the individual. And it poses the obvious question: what happens when the government is incompetent? 'Retrospective voting' to vacate the incumbent is not an option as it is in the West. However, given Confucian ideas about time, the need to replace political leadership may well not be as immediate as ours in liberal democracies. After all, the party is the depositary of the Mandate of Heaven. While the Mandate lasts, and it seems to lack expiration date, China will always be the Middle Kingdom,

with a fixed place and time in the cosmos, and we'll always be the barbarians outside the gates of the forbidden city.

Is there is a lesson to extract for liberal democracies from our genealogy of time-apprehension? Why even bother thinking about our regimes and their ideas about time? Chiefly, because ideas have consequences. To paraphrase Keynes, men who think of themselves as practical are really the slaves of defunct economists (or political philosophers for that matter). I'll give the Bloomsbury man that much. Western man thinks himself as practical, secular and free, but his stock of faith has merely been reallocated to what we call progress.

Progress is not inevitable. It will not happen to us; it must be won. All too often, we are guilty of complacency. In such moments it becomes clear that our own conception of history as linear and progressive ends up requiring as much faith as ancient, cyclical and transcendent notions of time. Yet I am afraid to say that our modern disposition doesn't carry the wisdom of the ages found in the *kyklos*, nor its anthropological truth, or its psychological depth.

While it is undeniable that our material conditions have vastly improved under democratic time, it is harder to speak of moral progress, and even harder to give it meaning so long as we lack an idea of purpose and flourishing. Liberal democracies often fall short to this respect, often deliberately; they are eminently procedural regimes, all too often concerned with means and not ends. Amongst these means are citizenship and civil society, which only a confident liberal democracy can convert into ends unto themselves. Until then, our liberal democracies will continue to be empty receptacles. It is up to us to seek meaning and define success. It may be that it is right and just, that people ought to be left alone. But it seems to me the sirens and muses will sing their song, and the receptacle will soon be filled with ignoble causes, vociferous demagoguery, and power-hungry tyrants as it is.

Across Western liberal democracies, the popular element beats its chest in the face of the elite element. The perennial balance is tested against a backdrop of polarization, amplified by social media. Electoral cycles and short-term incentives surely work against the equilibrium. Both elements must give; there are concessions to be made, which will require a long-term vision of the sort that only committed statesmanship and sincere patriotism can inform. When looking for common-ground, let our leaders revisit Plato for clues about our timeless interests.

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