

How Tyrants Rise: Plato's Eerie 2,500 Year-Old Warning

How can the wealthiest people make democracies worse? Plato investigates the question in Book VIII of the *Republic*. Socrates suggests there that, in pursuit of more and more wealth, oligarchic citizens within the democracy will exploit the lower economic classes, even to the point of undermining their own oligarchic economic interests. In other words, the oligarchs' lack of virtue leads in time to an inevitable backlash within the democratic polity.

There can be a few rich citizens getting wealthy off the many, but the democratic populace will in turn harbor great resentment against this wealthy class that, in effect, rules over them and exploits them within the democracy. But the majority of the democratic citizens tolerate the effectual oligarchic rule because they are nonetheless still able to enjoy a very wide range of freedoms.

Yet if the democracy's wealthy rulers do not give to the many an ever-expanding menu of freedoms, freedoms for which they have acquired a taste and which now they desire more intensely, then the many will turn on the rich oligarchs with bitter accusations:

"When a democracy which is thirsting for freedom has evil cupbearers presiding over the feast, and has drunk too deeply of the strong wine of freedom, then, unless her rulers are very amenable and give a plentiful draught, she calls them to account and punishes them, and says that they are cursed oligarchs." (Plato, *Republic*, translated by Benjamin Jowett)

What form does this cursing of the oligarchs take? The process described by Socrates should strike us as uncannily familiar. When cynical citizens are alienated from the political

process, so much so that they take it as proverbial that the governmental class is corrupt, then these disenchanted citizens look to a champion to attack the oligarchs ruling over them and with whom they are disgusted.

Plato suggests that lone champion is the man who will become their tyrant. Socrates calls this man at first the “protector” of the many. The protector will protect the democratic majority’s class interests against those of the oligarchs who in effect rule over them, whom they resent as corrupt. But then a transformation occurs. The protector turns into a tyrant.

☒ Socrates asks, “How then does a protector begin to change into a tyrant? Clearly when he does what the man is said to do in the tale of the Arcadian temple of Lycaean Zeus.”

The reference here is to the mythical tale in which “he who has tasted the entrails of a single human victim minced up with the entrails of other victims is destined to become a wolf. Did you never hear it?”

The story suggests how a human person can become bestial: he eats the sacrificial remains of a human sacrifice in addition to those of other animal sacrifices. In this vivid image we see how a tyrannical ruler feasts upon the political victims he must seek out. Man becomes wolf. Protector becomes tyrant.

Socrates describes how the protector of the people becomes a wolf-tyrant feasting on the entrails of the rich victims. Because the wolf-tyrant is “having a mob entirely at his disposal, he is not restrained from shedding the blood of kinsmen; by the favorite method of false accusation he brings them into court and murders them, making the life of man to disappear, and with unholy tongue and lips tasting the blood of his fellow citizen; some he kills and others he banishes, at the same time hinting at the abolition of debts and partition of lands: and after this, what will be his destiny?

Must he not either perish at the hands of his enemies, or from being a man become a wolf—that is, a tyrant?”

It is the tyrant-wolf “who begins to make a party against the rich.” At the moment when he demands his sacrifice by making the rich pay, he has revealed his wolf nature in full. Even if he is now exiled, he will eventually make his return in the name of this crusade against wealth. And when he makes his strategic comeback, he will successfully defy his opposition and install himself as “a tyrant full grown.”

When the revenant wolf is at the door, the people realize too late the threat they have unleashed by having once enabled this man as their past protector. They may attempt “to expel him, or to get him condemned to death by a public accusation”; and should this prove to be unsuccessful, they may “conspire to assassinate him.” The urgency of the situation leads to these extreme measures.

Yet the tyrant is more than capable of responding with similarly extreme actions. He has armed men acting as his bodyguard, repelling all attempts to assassinate him. “Let not the people’s friend be lost to them”; this is the slogan he uses as he justifies the installment of armed force into the heart of what was previously a democracy.


Moreover, he recruits from among the citizens’ own households the resources he needs to protect himself and shore up his power base, by liberating a select few who resented their previous station in life. “He will rob the citizens of their slaves; he will then set them free and enroll them in his bodyguard,” says Socrates. The equivalent today would perhaps be something like the cancellation of debts and the installation into the state machinery of the grateful ones thus freed.

Socrates’ sarcastic remark is priceless: “What a blessed creature, I said, must this tyrant be; he has put to death the

others and has these for his trusted friends.”

In other words, those who purchase friends with revolutionary political favors are the most pitiable of all persons. The newly enfranchised members of the tyrant’s political base are “the new citizens whom he has called into existence, who admire him and are his companions, while the good hate and avoid him.” In some form or another, today’s tyrants will likewise strive to free an “oppressed” class in order to make them into a revolutionary power base.

Socrates makes another remark about the friendship of tyrants that is absolutely dripping with Socratic irony: “Verily, then, tragedy is a wise thing and Euripides a great tragedian... because he is the author of the pregnant saying, ‘Tyrants are wise by living with the wise’; and he clearly meant to say that they are the wise whom the tyrant makes his companions.”

The suggestion seems to be that the tragic poet missed out on  the most important philosophical observation to be made about tyranny; namely, that it is in essence friendless. While the intention of the poet seems to have been to point out that tyrants require good advisors, and that they acquire their wisdom from the wisdom of their good advisors, the wry rejoinder of Socrates points out that in fact tyrants surround themselves with lackeys who, grateful for having been freed from whatever oppression the tyrant lifted them out from, can offer nothing more than flattery to the tyrant. Their “wisdom” can in fact be nothing other than what the tyrant is already predisposed to hear, because they are not at all capable of being for him real friends.

This lack of friendship for the tyrant is the inevitable consequence of his method of operation. He had to install himself by using force in order to wage his class war against the rich. But like all people who practice politics according to an ideological template, the impossibility of real friendship is the bitter harvest that they must therefore

reap.

Tyrants can only rule by having enemies that they scapegoat. And the usual tactic of the wolf, as we have seen, is to make the rich pay:

“If there are sacred treasures in the city, he will confiscate and spend them; and in so far as the fortunes of attainted persons may suffice, he will be able to diminish the taxes which he would otherwise have to impose upon the people.”

Make the rich pay? *Sic semper tyrannis*, the lone wolves with no friends.

—

Christopher S. Morrissey, Ph.D., is a Fellow of the Adler-Aquinas Institute. This blog post has been reproduced with the permission of [The Imaginative Conservative](#). The original blog post can be found [here](#).

[Photo Credit: Ian Dolphin/Flickr, [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#)]