

The Dangers of Egalitarianism in a Democracy

Most Americans take for granted that democracy is an absolute good. If it can be said of an idea or a program that it promotes equality, Americans, whatever their political affiliations, will be loath to speak ill of the idea or to protest the program. “Of course,” they will think to themselves, “anything that fosters fairness and equal treatment must be good for society. Should we not strive to treat everyone the same? Is that not what America is all about?”

Well, no; at least not exactly. America strives to be the land of opportunity, a country where citizens are afforded equal dignity and are granted a say in their government. But the people do not control their government directly. They elect—or elect people to appoint—leaders who will represent their needs, values, and interests. We do so, not just for practical procedural reasons, but because we understand that there are certain people in our community whose skills for governing surpass those of their fellow citizens. In the same way, there are individual musicians, artists, and physicians whose skills in their respective areas are superior to the skills of others who share their aspirations for music, art, or medicine.

Imagine someone whose ruling ethic was that of egalitarian sameness trying to form a ballet troupe, an academic faculty, or a football team. I can't say that many of us would be willing to pay to see such a troupe, to enroll in such a university, or to place a bet on such a team. Although the popularity of “reality TV,” the persistence of quota-driven affirmative action initiatives, and the lowering and/or mainstreaming of educational standards suggest, alarmingly, that many in our country would like to see the elimination of any kind of ranking, distinction, or hierarchy, the common-

sense pragmatism of our citizenry has thus far prevented us from falling into the black hole of egalitarian mediocrity. We all recognize, in our best, noblest, and least envious moments, that just as we excel our neighbors in certain areas, they excel us in others.

Which is not to say that Americans would prefer a kind of rigid aristocracy in which only a very small number of upper-crust folk could engage, say, in drama or higher education or athletics. One of the strengths of our country is its widespread promotion of amateur theaters, community colleges, and local sports teams that involve people who may not have the skill to be the absolute best in their field, but whose significant gifts and talents allow them to make strong and meaningful contributions to their communities. The fact that there is only one Pope and a relatively small number of Cardinals has not prevented countless priests across the world from serving and enriching their local parishes.

In our American democracy, rulers hold power on the basis of popular election rather than hereditary right, politicians and soldiers swear allegiance to a code of laws rather than to a monarch, and average citizens have the right to appeal to and be protected by those laws. None of these political mandates necessitates a rejection of all hierarchy, rank, and distinction, though they do allow for more fluid movement within and between various social, political, and cultural classes. Still, democracy's empowerment of the people does set in motion the *potential* for a kind of mob rule in which the people—drunk with their own power and sense of entitlement—demand that their whims be catered to by politicians and other leaders, while unscrupulous and flamboyant demagogues—drunk with their own delusions of grandeur—pander to the crowd and make promises that can only be met by draining and destabilizing the state.

Such things can happen. They happened, in fact, to the world's first democracy.

Democracy was born 2500 years ago in the city-state (or polis) of Athens. And it was born in a surprisingly radical form. Whereas our country has a representational democracy by election, the ancient Athenians had a direct democracy by selection. The assembly of Athens was a rotational one, governed each month by a new roster of citizens who were not elected but chosen by lot (rather like the jury system in America). What that meant practically is that over the course of several years, all Athenian citizens would have the right—and obligation—to serve directly in the working of government and possibly to make decisions that would have a profound impact on the polis.

For several generations, Athens' radical democracy worked well. Led by strong and charismatic leaders, the citizens were forged together by the threat of invasion by the mighty Persian Empire. Athens, even more than Sparta, played the decisive role in protecting Greece from Persian aggression—first at Marathon in 490 BC and then at Salamis in 480 BC—and she emerged from battle as the supreme Greek polis. Flush with glory, Athens quickly formed a league around herself of allied states who paid her tribute to protect them from the threat of further incursions by the Persians. The league eventually morphed into an empire, and Athens, made rich by tribute, moved into her Golden Age: a period of remarkable cultural and aesthetic growth out of which Western civilization was born.

Even during this period of great wealth and power, however, Athens found the need to create a “safety valve” to release the prejudice and envy of her “entitled” citizens. If ever the citizens felt that a certain political or military leader was getting too big for his britches, they could vote to have him exiled from Athens for a period of ten years. As the citizens cast their votes by scratching the name of the offending party on a broken potsherd (or ostrica), this practice came to be known as ostracism. Sadly, over the course of her Golden Age,

the citizens of Athens—often riled up by partisan politicians—ostracized most of the heroes who had saved her from the Persian Empire.

Still, even this creative safety valve proved ineffectual after Athens fell into a disastrous war with Sparta and her allied states—a war that dragged on for a generation (431-404 BC) and that ended with the humiliating defeat of Athens. As she sank further and further into the quagmire of her ill-advised war with Sparta, Athens sacrificed, one by one, her high political ideals and allowed her military decisions to be guided by political expediency rather than by justice. Meanwhile, discontent grew amongst the citizens, as did the increasingly self-serving, inconsistent, and irrational demands they made on their leaders. In turn, their leaders—for it is very much true that citizens in a democracy get the government they deserve—devolved from statesmen into demagogues, trading in rhetoric for propaganda and persuasion for manipulation. The masses, flattered by these shameless demagogues, voted them just enough money, power, and troops to bring Athens to the brink of ruin.

After her defeat in 404 BC, Athens fell headlong into a five-year cycle of political chaos, her state veering wildly between radical “leftist” democrats and authoritarian “right-wing” dictators. Midnight arrests, kangaroo courts, seizures of property: an orgy of blood, revenge, and accusation. In time, Athens regained her stability, but not before she committed a terrible deed that has gone down in history as one of democracy’s darkest hours.

In 399 BC, a 70-year old Athenian philosopher was called upon to stand trial before an assembly of citizens, some of whom had accused him of corrupting the youth, advocating foreign gods, and generally making a nuisance of himself. Over the preceding decades, the philosopher had spoken freely in the marketplace (or agora), where he had challenged his fellow citizens to pursue knowledge and virtue above wealth, fame,

and power. When things were going well, the citizens rather enjoyed listening to him, especially since he was sure to entertain them by tearing down the pretensions of one of the rich members of the Athenian elite. But now he was getting annoying. In the face of military defeat and economic hardship, he continued to insist that the citizens do what was just rather than what was expedient or practical.

He even had the audacity to claim that justice was justice and injustice was injustice—even if a majority of the voting public thought otherwise! To make matters worse, during his trial he simply refused to kowtow to the whims of the crowd. Rather than flatter the citizens and weep to be shown mercy, he used his trial to teach them once again that they must admit their ignorance and seek after wisdom. What elitist, anti-social arrogance that an individual should suggest he possesses knowledge that supersedes that of the collective wisdom of the people!

The verdict: guilty; the punishment: death.

Citizen Socrates never wrote down any of his teachings, but his star pupil, Plato, was so enamored of his mentor that, in addition to recording for posterity the unsuccessful defense (or Apology) that Socrates made before the assembly, he made Socrates the main speaker in his philosophical dialogues. Though it is not always clear if and when Plato has Socrates espouse in his dialogues ideas that he (Socrates) would not have agreed with, I think it is clear that both Socrates and Plato were strong critics of the egalitarian excesses of Athenian democracy. Both men were concerned by the low and ignoble motives that democracy often fostered in its citizens and by the eagerness of citizens to hire teachers (the sophists) who would instruct them not in wisdom but in how to use a relativistic form of logic to achieve their ends.

In Book VIII of his best-known dialogue, [*The Republic*](#), Plato, perhaps thinking back on the Athens of 404-399 BC,

demonstrates how democracy, when it becomes too radical, evolves naturally, if tragically, into tyranny. Indeed, Plato boldly asserts that “the mightiest and most savage form of slavery results from pushing freedom to the extreme.”[1] In the topsy-turvydom that results when liberty and equality are taken too far, scenarios like the following become commonplace:

Praise and honor in public and private go to rulers who behave like subjects and subjects who behave like rulers. . .

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. . . the father will acquire the habit of imitating his children; he will fear his sons. The sons, in turn, imitate the father, showing their parents neither deference nor fear; this kind of behavior persuades them they are free. Citizen and alien resident also consider each other equals, and with the foreign sojourner it is the same. . . .

. . . teachers fear and flatter their students; for their part, the students feel contempt for their masters and tutors. All in all, the young mimic their elders, competing with them in word and deed. The old respond by descending to the level of youth. Exuding charm and amiability, they mimic the young in turn so that they may not be looked upon as arbitrary or unpleasant. . . .

The outer limits of public liberty are reached . . . when the slaves who have been purchased, male and female, are as free as those who bought them. And I nearly forgot to mention the spirit of liberty and equal rights that governs the relations of the sexes.[2]

I am well aware that most Americans who read the final “scenario” quoted above will hail it as a good thing, but for Plato, the “mixing” of the sexes and of slaves and freemen is just one more indication that society has lost its moorings and is spiraling out of control. A state that has lost its

sense of respect, of shame, of decorum, and of proportion is a state on the edge of dissolution.

Plato, by pointing out the dangers inherent in any culture that collapses all hierarchical structures, no more advocates the oppression of children, students, foreigners, slaves, and women than does St. Paul when he calls for wives, children, and slaves to respect their husbands, parents, and masters (Eph 5:22-6:9; Col 3:18-4:1). Plato's concern is that once liberty- and equality-mad citizens have created such a radically permissive and distinction-less society that they will willingly and willfully elect strong men to ensure that it continues. These strong men, Plato warns, will make promises to extend the egalitarian holiday by canceling debts and redistributing land, but all the while they will be aggrandizing power for themselves and laying the groundwork for a tyranny.

Radical egalitarianism leads to mob rule, which itself leads to tyranny. So it happened in Ancient Athens, and so might it happen in America today.

Books referenced in this essay, and others on this topic, may be found in The Imaginative Conservative [Bookstore](#).

Notes:

1. Plato's Republic, translated by Richard W. Sterling and William C. Scott (New York: Norton, 1985), p. 255 (Stephanus number 564a).

2. Ibid., p. 254 (Stephanus number 562d-563b).

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