

PLATO'S IDEAL STATE AND CONTEMPORARY

NIGERIA

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This paper seeks to draw a link between the socio-political atmosphere of Plato's Athens of twenty-four centuries ago and twentieth-century Nigeria. The argument is advanced that the solutions which Plato recommended for the ills of the Athenian society of his time will perfectly suit the contemporary Nigerian society. No doubt our present political ills are akin to those of Plato's time despite the twenty-four centuries gap.

What link has Plato with Nigeria? What does his theory of an ideal state postulated centuries ago have to do with contemporary Nigeria? In answering these questions, let us have an insight into the socio-political environment in which Plato grew up in Athens.

II

Plato grew up in a period of turbulent political and economic crisis, one yielding place to another. He was born some three years after the outbreak of the Peloponnesian war. The war involved Athens, on the one hand, and Sparta, together with the other members of the Peloponnesian Confederacy, on the other. The war ended in 404 B.C. and was a disaster for Athens. A thirty-man commission was set up at the end of the war to draft a new constitution for Athens. The Commission was also to govern Athens until the completion of their assignment. In practice, the thirty men ruled high-handedly. They seized the opportunity to settle old scores, to oppress and suppress the citizens. In fact they became "Thirty Tyrants". It became clear at this juncture that the loss at the war had sharpened Athens' internal conflict. In a matter of eight months, Athenians were fed up with these extremists. The thirty were driven out of office and later killed, by the people. The era of the thirty-man commission brought a decline in the quality and temper of political life. People were struggling for personal survival. And "in the course of the struggle men had become familiar with a new ruthlessness, with a newly anarchic employment of power, and with a new disrespect for established usage and tradition".¹ In other words, apart from the loss of human life and the destruction of manpower and resources, there was a steep decline — in the quality and temper of political life as a result of the struggle. Basically

the three fundamental political evils of party- selfishness, incompetence and factionalism militated against the stability of government in the city state. Society was disorganised and individuals could not realise themselves within its deformed structure.

All these point to the incompetence of those who were entrusted with the organisation of society. This incompetence contributed in no small measure to the instability of the Athenian government and society. Differently put, there were two main camps in the city — the aristocrats and the democrats. The oligarchs, who had an insatiable craving for wealth, and profess to be the custodians of the wisdom of aristocracy while the democrats profess to uphold the constitutional equality of the many.² So it was a "war" between two extremes of poverty (servant) and wealth (master) with instability of government — and in most cases — war being its end-product.

*Plato attributed it (this conflict) largely to the discrepancy of interests between those who have property and those who have none. The oligarch is interested in the protection of his property and the collection of his debts whatever hardship this works upon the poor. The democrat is prone to schemes for supporting idle and indigent citizens at public expense, that is, with the money taken from the well-to-do. Thus, in even the smallest city there are, Plato said, two cities, a city of the rich and a city of the poor, externally at war with each other.*³

Such was the nature of Plato's Athens. A time of turmoil, with a lot of anxious moments as a result of party acrimony. Law and morality were deteriorating at a tear-away rate. There was large scale distrust, betrayal, mal-administration, disregard for essential traditional values and general moral degeneracy. Plato was convinced that all existing states were badly governed and that mankind would have no respite from trouble until something drastic was done to salvage the situation. He was therefore convinced that drastic reform was imperative. This paved the way for Plato's theory of the ideal state. There is no reason to doubt that one of his most powerful motives was to win back happiness for the citizens.

III

The emphasis here is on POLITICAL and SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROBLEMS and not the type of society or the degree of civilization.

The crux of the matter is that Platō was able to identify the socio-political and other problems that confronted his contemporaries and he set out to solve such problems by recommending ways via which the sufferings of his people could be alleviated. It is thus on the basis of PROBLEMS IN SOCIETY AND SOLUTIONS TO THEM that Athens of Plato's time will be linked up with contemporary Nigerian society vis-a-vis Plato's recommendations.

Like Plato's Athens, Nigeria (since independence) has always had a high degree of political and socio-economic problems. These national problems date back to the First Republic. At that time, there was bitter party rivalry, rigging of elections, the Western Regional crisis and the eventual collapse of the first Republic. The subsequent military interventions were like the Athenian thirty-man commission — they failed. As both civilians and the military display administrative incompetence, social ills escalated and culminated in three-year civil war. Apart from the human and financial waste that resulted from the war, there was an increase in social ills. Armed robbery, unemployment, corruption etc, became more pronounced. The military rule prior to the Second Republic could not salvage the situation. The Second Republic ushered in a high degree of electoral mal-practices, corruption, acrimonious party rivalry, incompetence of politicians, a sharp fall in the standard of living and an unprecedented social insecurity. The Second Republic fell but these socio-economic and political ills stood firm. In fact they were not shaken any bit. They have multiplied.

As can be seen from the above, the socio-economic and political crisis that dominated Plato's Athens have their parallels in our time. The ignorance and incompetence of politicians which Plato attacked some twenty-four centuries ago are very much predominant in Nigerian politics. Just like there were the Aristocrats in Plato's time, our society has its privileged class that continues to widen the poor-rich gap. All these negate the ideals of the good life — a life based on true happiness.

IV

The central concern of the paper is the problem of good government and true happiness for the people. Plato's Ethics is directed towards true happiness, man's highest good, the harmonious well-being of his whole personality. Intellectual activity and pleasant feeling must be mixed in proportion to make the good life of man. The good life is constituted by measure and proportion; and the compelling motive in the search for the

good life is the desire or longing for happiness. Happiness can be attained only by the pursuit of virtue. Only the truly virtuous man is the truly good man and hence a truly happy man. *The Republic* deals with the whole of human life. It has to do with the good man and the good life which, for Plato connoted LIFE IN A GOOD STATE.

Plato argued that if a government is to be moral, it must be conducted in accordance with moral knowledge and not mere moral opinion. He submits in his Epistemology that neither sense experience nor true belief can give us true knowledge. Yet absolute and infallible knowledge is attainable in scientific definition which is always of the universal. True knowledge is therefore knowledge of universal. And to each universal concept there corresponds an objective reality: each concept has an objective reference of a higher order sense perception. According to him,

*the highest object of knowledge is the essential nature of the Good, from which everything that is good and right derives its value for us. without that knowledge, to know everything else, however well, would be of no value to us, just as it is of no value to possess anything without getting the good of it.*⁴

It was this conviction that induced him to found the Academy in 387 B.C. The Academy was conceived of as a school for statesmen. It was to be a school where new breed of politicians could be trained. The statesmen would be produced with convictions founded on changeless truths — that is, to inculcate the spirit of true knowledge as the foundation for the city of Beauty (city ruled by Philosopher-Kings). These statesmen are those whose actions would be guided by their knowledge of the Good. Hence Plato draws the conclusion that the man who knows that Good ought to have decisive power in government and that it is his knowledge alone which entitles him to this.

"There is no hope for states unless power lies in the hands of those who know — who know, first, what tasks the good state requires and, second, what heredity and education will supply the citizens fitted to perform them"⁵ Hence Plato conceives government as the highest moral task to which men of knowledge and virtue ought to devote themselves and that those who know should rule over those who do not regardless of the latter's consent. Government should be an act depending on exact knowledge.

Plato draws the analogy of professional or scientific knowledge to

buttress his argument on Goodness and the State. The statesman ought to know the good of the state as the physician knows health. It is knowledge alone which distinguishes the true statesman from the false, as it is knowledge which distinguishes the physician from the quack. The statesman must really know what the Good is and consequently what is required to make a GOOD STATE. He must grasp the essence of the state and not merely its accidental variations. Plato's arguments on knowledge and virtue can thus be summed up as follows: Virtue subsists in knowledge and the ultimate goal of both the state and individuals is knowledge of the Good — the gateway to the ideal state and true happiness. This gateway he also calls the Form. Concluding his answer to Glaucon's question on the topic, Plato said:

This, then, which gives to the objects of knowledge their truth and to him who knows them his power of knowing, is the Form or essential nature of Goodness. Goodness is not the same thing as being, but even beyond being, surpassing it in dignity and power.⁶

In his description of the Ideal State, Plato was influenced by the psychological and biological theories of his time. He drew an analogy between the society and the individual seeing a difference only in the size. A society is the *individual writ large*. What makes an ideal (a happy) man is a matter of both physical and psychological perfection (health). The human soul is split into three parts — rational element, which is that part of an individual's soul which enables him to reason, to argue, to deliberate and to engage in all sorts of intellectual exercise; the spirited element is that which makes a man courageous or cowardly and gives him strength of will; the appetitive element consists of desires and passions, such as for games, drinks, sex and so on. In terms of this three-fold classification of the soul, Plato argued that a man will be psychologically healthy if the three parts of his soul (Rational, Spirited and Appetitive) function harmoniously. Reason should be in command of the appetites and the spirited element should, with its strength, buttress the dictates of reason to ensure that the appetites are kept under control.

Plato applies this same analysis to the State. A state comes into being because no individual is self-sufficient. Essential to the efficient working of society is functional specialization. A man and his society will be better off working at one trade than at many. According to him,

The conclusion is that more things will be produced and the work be more easily and better done, when every man is set free from other occupations to do, at the right time, the one thing for which he is naturally fitted.⁷

Beside, there are innate differences in individuals which fit them for different occupations. Consequently, an ideal state would be composed of three functional classes: legislators (rulers) protectors (warriors) and producers (all other citizens). To the first class belongs a small group of rulers, governors or administrators. They constitute the philosophical class who are devoted to the pursuit of knowledge. They know what is good for their society. They possess the capacity to grasp the universal. By virtue of their specialisation, they exercise supreme authority in the state. Having risen to the pure region of philosophy, these rulers are no longer interested in ordinary matters of this world.

Next to the rulers are the auxiliaries or protectors who lack the contemplative reasoning of the philosopher-rulers. They are highly courageous and defend the state in times of war and guard it internally in peace. They form the defence ministry and discharge military, police and executive duties under the command of the ruler-legislators. Their duty mainly, is, to protect the society and direct other citizens. Since their essential quality is courage, they must be prepared to fight always to the end without running away. Honour is their reward for their patriotic service.

The third and last class is the class of producers (money-making class). They form the largest part of the population in any society. To this class belongs farmers, truck-pushers, artisans, etc. Members of this class are devoted to trade, crafts and all forms of money-making. This is the labouring class which produces and supplies the material wants of the society. Members of this class are, according to Plato, generally gluttonous and have almost an insatiable appetite. Thus they necessarily have to obey the orders of the guardians. Plato based his division of society on the fact that there are three kinds of men. They are:

..... those who are fitted by nature to work but not to rule, those who are, fit to rule but only under the control and direction of others, and finally those who are fit for the highest duties of statesmanship such as the final choice of means and ends.⁸

Each of these classes corresponds to a division of the individual soul: The ruling class is the rational element of society, the protectors are its spirited element while the producers form its appetitive element. Like the healthy or ideal individual, the ideal society will be one in which all these elements function harmoniously with the warriors assisting the rulers to keep the rest of the citizenry under benign but firm control. It would have no conflicts within it and each class by doing what it is best fitted to do, would be happy and contented.

To achieve the maximum skill which is essential for the attainment of virtues in their respective field people must be made to work at one and only one trade. No man is self-sufficient because men have many and various wants. Accordingly, they take helpers and exchange with one another. This sums up society as a system of services in which every member both gives and receives. The state takes cognizance of this mutual exchange and organises the most adequate satisfaction of needs and the most harmonious interchange of services. The individual therefore possesses, primarily, a status in which he is privileged to act, and the freedom which the state secures him is not so much for the exercise of this free will as for the practice of his calling. Thus the philosopher — ruler is not peculiar but that his claim to power is justified by virtue of his specialisation; the same principle which is at work in every society. Specialisation is therefore the basis of all social interchange. Plato seems to consider society here merely as an economic structure providing for the lowest of needs, a healthy animal existence. Thus, both stratification and specialisation define the individual's function of "satisfying the economic needs of the whole state, and any improvement will be consequent upon the reform of their rulers".⁹

Plato emphasises education as the basis for whatever improvements and (or) reforms that the rulers may want to make. He placed his main reliance on education for the attainment of the ideal state.

*For education is the positive means by which the ruler can shape human nature in the right direction to produce a harmonious state.*¹⁰

Plato recommended a state-controlled system of compulsory education. The state cannot afford to leave education in private hands where it would be commercialised. The state itself must provide the needed means, must see that citizens actually get the training they require, and

must be sure that the education supplied is consonant with the harmony and well-being of the state. It is throughout this unique educational system that intelligent and wise rulers capable of ordering and maintaining a state would be produced. In such a state the inhabitants work together to realise their potentialities. This education in citizenship would be rigorous and continuous. The training would enable citizens to place civic welfare above everything else.

V

For various reason, and with various degrees of vigor, philosophers of succeeding ages have criticised Plato's theory. Karl Popper¹¹ dismissed Plato's political demands as "purely totalitarian and anti-humanitarian". It is also argued that Plato limited the powers and classes in society by failing to recognise the uniqueness of every individual. His lumping of individuals and their powers into a few (three) sharply marked-off classes may be said to be superficial. He has been severely criticised for subordinating the individual to the society, the social whole. This criticism stems from the fact that the individuals form society and without the individuals there would be no society. Plato's paternalism has also been seen as directed toward destroying creativity of people. This is because the state is expected to over-see not only the citizen's political and economic relations but also their moral behaviour. Plato was also accused of having almost deified the rulers by vesting supreme authority in them. History has indeed proved that absolute rulers in most cases, graduate into tyrants. The Idi Amins and Bokassas of Africa have proved Plato's critics right here.

It is in this regard that Popper sealed Plato's political demands as "purely totalitarian and anti-humanitarian".¹² He goes further to criticise Plato's moral code within this setting. Since he (Plato) recognises only the interests of the state, only actions which serve them are moral, and actions that endanger them, immoral. This, indeed, is a code of collectivist or political utilitarianism which makes the interests of the state the criteria of morality. This leads to the collectivist, tribal and totalitarian theory of morality. In this case "good is what is in the interest of my group, or my tribe or my state".¹³ The application of this type of morality has been the bane of many African countries. Liberia, Somalia, Ethiopia, Chad, Angola and Uganda are examples that readily come to mind.

The weak points of his theory notwithstanding, it is generally agreed that Plato was one of the greatest and most influential thinkers of antiquity.

Each of these classes corresponds to a division of the individual soul: The uity. There is no reason to doubt that one of Plato's most powerful motives was to win back happiness for the people: To recommend ways for attaining the Ideal or Happy State, a state where social ills will be at the barest minimum and where citizens will have the basic needs of everyday life — they will be happy.

The social malaise which Plato meant to cure in Athens resemble those in Nigerian today. If Nigeria is to survive and develop, she needs to borrow a leaf from Plato's recommendations. In this regard, education which is a fundamental human right should be taken more seriously by the state. The present educational system (6-3-3-4) should be taken more seriously. Continuous assessment should be emphasised at every level of our educational system. More emphasis should also be placed on aptitude and ability. Schools in rural areas should be given special attention as regards funds and facilities. Above all, education should be fully funded by the state. If this and other steps are not taken to restructure the educational system which is presently at its inchoate stage, it may remain so for centuries.

To save the situation, those who serve as leader must be selected by means of stringent academic, emotional and moral tests. In this respects contemporary Nigeria needs to cast an eye back on our traditional society in order to benefit from the perspective of traditional values. In the traditional African society, social stratification was based on experience, knowledge and wisdom which were believed to subsist in age. At least this was true in most cases where the leaders, guardians, priests and officers of various communities were elderly men and women. Those who were honoured in such traditional societies (e.g. with chieftancy titles) were men of virtue and integrity, quite unlike contemporary society where those values of old have been grossly debased and cheapened. The title "chief" is for instance being "sold" and "bought" with little or no regard for the duties that are attached to it — duties that are for the well-being and happiness of the whole society. With this trend nonentities are now made chiefs and mediocres hold key positions in government. The knowledge, experience, wisdom, bravery and uprightness in character which Plato wished should be the attributes of rulers were the criteria which traditional African societies used (among other things) in selecting a ruler. Such a ruler was expected not only to know his people, land and customs, but also to take interest in the welfare and happiness of his people. A ruler who neglected this point was dethroned or got rid off in various ways. This point clearly indicated that Plato's recommendation is

not new to Nigeria.

The demands upon contemporary leaders are higher than on traditional rulers. To meet up with present day social and political requirements, it becomes imperative that leaders should be averagely learned; that is, they should be conversant with, at least, the elements of international and human relations, history, psychology and social and political philosophy. They do not necessarily have to possess a degree in these disciplines. They must have traditional wisdom and competent subordinates to man administration.

This is where Nigerian Universities and intellectuals should render their services. They should help in mobilising the masses (the appetitive class) and educate society generally. They should organise regular seminars and courses for the leaders and our envoys to other lands. The same should hold for civil servants, members of the armed forces, teachers, businessmen, farmers, market women and even students who should meet (at seminars and conferences) to discuss the welfare of their respective communities. This is important because ideas spring from any quarters. If this is granted, then the provision of educational opportunities for all becomes imperative. The training of future Nigerian leaders should be rigorous, encompassing all aspects of life in the society. Discipline should be emphasised and the would-be leaders should be trained to be good followers. They should be made to declare their assets before taking up office. Nigerian universities should be structured to train the leaders. Suitable courses should be organised and courses outside the country should be discouraged. These would-be leaders could however be encouraged to visit other African nations. Such visits and travels will afford them the opportunity to exchange ideas with the leaders of such nations. It will help them discover the many areas of similarity between the different African countries. This will help them to find solutions to common problems in Africa and make our foreign policy in Africa a smooth one.

In the present situation in Nigeria, the "appetitive class", no doubt, overwhelmingly dominates. They are uneducated, hungry, sick, unemployed, with a bleak future. They are not happy. This group determines the success or otherwise of the leader. It is, therefore, pertinent that the leaders do everything possible to make life more abundant for them — for them to be happy. Because money is now the measure of success in Nigeria people see the holding of public posts as quick avenues for accumulating wealth. We see many professionals, viz., medical doctors, accountants, teachers, engineers, soldiers and so on, becoming

politicians overnight. This trend will change if and when we have leaders that are ready to serve. Leaders who are ready to use every sort of knowledge and training for the service of the society and mankind — in enhancing life in a happy state.

If properly applied Plato's theory will help Nigeria to a large extent. To a considerable level Nigeria needs to become "the individual writ large" — a kind of one for all and all for one. If there is unity and cooperation contemporary Nigeria will be able to cure most of her socio-political and economic malaise. At least Nigeria can learn one lesson from the preceding analysis of Plato's theory. It is that societies with distorted sense of values, and where mutual understanding, cooperation, a reasonable degree of literacy and interest of the society are lacking, hardly develop.

In concluding, I will like the point to be made clear that my exposition of Plato's theory of politics centres on its being a *prima facie* recommended solution to the socio-political and economic problems that abound in Plato's time. Added to this is the fact that the problems of Plato's time have relevance to Nigeria's problems. The following are therefore noteworthy:

1. like Plato's time social ills abound in contemporary Nigeria
2. a good government is the solution to such social problems
3. education is an essential element for the development of any society (state) — especially for the cure of political apathy
4. no matter the wisdom and academic qualification of leaders of a society, the happiness and consent of the people cannot be compromised
5. the state needs the individual for its survival as much as the individual needs the state.

Only a good government will not ignore these basic facts. A good government here means that which is exercised in the interest of the state as a whole and not necessarily Plato's ideal or any ideal as such. I make bold to say that a universally good form of government can hardly be possible in practice. This is because it is the kind of social problems coupled with the cultural background of a people that determine what sort of government is good for the situation and community. Whatever government is good for a state, the need for experts to formulate and execute policy must be generally recognised. However, due cognisance must be taken of the basic claims of democracy that the ultimate right to

approve or condemn that policy (made by experts) and to select other rulers (if they are dissatisfied with the achievements of their government) should lie solely with the people. Whatever government is good for any state, it must be a community of freedom, that is, where the people are free to approve or not approve policies. These are basic requirements for true happiness in any state as such and in Nigeria in particular. Agreed, the ideal is not always the manifest, those at the control-tower of governmental affairs should acquaint themselves not only with what is best or ideal for Nigeria in the abstract but also with what is best or ideal relative to circumstances. They should concentrate on making life more abundant and happy for the people.

Notes and References

1. Rex Warner, *The Greek Philosophers*, The New American Library, 1968, p. 67.
2. It must be noted here that the democracy of Plato's time was not the rule of the majority through elected representatives but was based on appointing an assembly and law courts by lot. It was the type of democracy predominant in most of pre-literate African society, that is, direct democracy (Mango-tree democracy).
3. G.H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory*, 4th edition by T.L. Thorson, (Hinsdale, Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc.) 1973, p. 56.
4. *The Republic*, 504D (translated by F.M. Cornford).
5. G.H. Sabine, *Op. cit.* p. 54.
6. *The Republic* 508C.
7. *Ibid.* 370D
8. Sabine, *Op. cit.* p. 63.
9. *The Republic*, 425D
10. Sabine, *Op. cit.* p. 68.
11. K.P. Popper, *The Open Society And Its Enemies*, Vol.I, The Spell of Plato, 1966, p. 41.
12. *Ibid.* p. 107.
13. *Ibid.*

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