

Plato's Republic: The decline of the state and the history of the World Wide Web

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October 2006

While reading through Plato's conversation with Socrates in his classic writings of the Republic, I noticed an almost utopian allegory in Book VIII in which they discuss the decline of the state. The decline discussed by the ancient Greek philosophers resembles the history of the web until now very precisely. I will give you my view of how I see this -maybe unorthodox- allegory.

Aristocracy

According to Plato's writings, the essence of the state lies in the aristocracy (*aristos* meaning "best," and *krateîn* meaning "to rule"). The principle of this state is the capability of reason of the philosophers. Because they possess this ability of reason, they are the best to rule. From this point on the state can only decline.

Since children of the philosophers might not be philosophers but commoners, other interests will tear the group apart. When they eventually cease to be philosophers nobody will listen to them anymore, and there will be no more respect for them from the warriors and commoners.

Looking at the early days of the Internet, which would later make possible the foundation for the Internet, we see the philosophical intentions and thoughts of the first users about what is perhaps to come. One of the early online communities called The WELL, which is still online today, is an example of early discussion of what was to come and become of the internet.

The very early Internet was used by scientists, engineers, librarians and of course the computer experts. There was no user-friendly, uniform interface and you had to learn a very complex system to actually participate in the first place.

There was a threshold for the participation, but once that threshold lowered it became widely available for the masses mainly by the introduction of the HyperText Markup Language (HTML) and the World Wide Web. The early Internet aristocrats saw their ideals and what they had built up suddenly exploited by the Internet providers.

To me they can be seen as the warriors, they merely use the technology and ideas provided to construct an infrastructure. The base of a state like the military. And the users are the commoners of Plato's days. The Internet became user-friendly, and therefore the users noticed that they could work with the Internet all by themselves without having to learn any complex computer system. All was equal and the threshold was gone.

Timocracy

[We take] the State first and then proceeding to the individual, and begin with the government of honour? --I know of no name for such a government other than timocracy, or perhaps timarchy. —Republic, Book VIII

The result of the decline of the aristocracy is the timocracy according to Plato and Socrates. The warriors are now the rulers. They have a monopoly of force, so why not use it? Timocracy means the rule of honor. But how does this decline into the next state? When the code of honor is broken and the children of the warriors will start to use their military powers to obtain wealth.

The Internet providers had a monopoly on the division of the Internet. They had the servers and the capabilities to bring the Internet and the World Wide Web in the living room of thousands of families. While at first this was an ideal, to bring Internet to every household and every desk at the office, this soon became a bloody battle for wealth with . With examples of AOL booming to immense heights and wealth in the late 90's –but also other national providers all over the world- the companies obtained wealth.

Oligarchy

I believe that oligarchy follows next in order.

And what manner of government do you term oligarchy?

A government resting on a valuation of property, in which the rich have power and the poor man is deprived of it. –Republic, Book VIII

And so we arrive at the next state which is dominated by wealth, value and property: The oligarchy. The desire of the rich is one of the main principles, but there is still quite some discipline involved because no one can simply live a luxurious life of pleasure and continue to be rich. But in the end, the lack of discipline of the children of the rich will be the downfall. Spending money that isn't really there anymore.

With the Internet we still face the problem of the digital divide, where the rich have the power (of the Internet) and the poor are deprived of it. The words of Plato can be copied and pasted directly on the problem of the digital divide, which still haunts the Internet today. This problem arose in the time that the Internet was distributed by the Internet providers, the time when Internet was available for the public, but only the public that could pay.

The wealth of the Internet providers, and the newly found dot-com companies who all wanted a piece of the pie, continued to boom in the second half of the 90's. The dot-com companies can be seen as the children of the Internet providers, sprouting from the new abilities of the available networks.

But when everyone discovered that the pie was actually not so big as expected, and the companies were spending money that wasn't really there (yet), the bubble burst resulting in the infamous dot-com bubble. This caused a time of economic recession in a lot of Western countries. Dot-com companies fell hard, and also some providers like the Dutch World Online went down with the bubble.

Most of the dot-com companies were static websites, not the read-write web. The "poor people" wanted to be able to speak up about their own lives, and they wanted their share of the Internet. Being a watchdog for the bigger companies –and the

jurassic big media- who failed in the dot-com bubble. After the burst of the bubble, the people took their chance to speak up resulting in Web 2.0.

Democracy

Next comes democracy; of this the origin and nature have still to be considered by us; and then we will enquire into the ways of the democratic man, and bring him up for judgement. –Republic, Book VIII

Now we have arrived in the state of democracy, the rule of the people. Plato sees the democracy as the most fair, or most beautiful of the constitutions. It represents the desire of the many, and anyone can have his or her say in what is going on. Every voice is equal, so this means that anything goes. What Plato talks about is that this equality will be the downfall for the democracy, since they will become increasingly undisciplined and therefore chaotic. This chaotic nature will result in the people wanting someone to give them laws, order and guidelines to quiet things down and stop the chaos.

With the rise of Web 2.0 and social media some bloggers, like journalist Dan Gillmor in his book *We The Media*, see this as a revolution in media and Internet. Finally the people have the power, no more top-down hierarchies but grassroots is the way to go. This is the current situation we are in, a democratic World Wide Web, or the read-write web. The people have a way of speaking their hearts out and this results in an incredible stream of information, mostly about personal thoughts, views and experiences.

What is needed, is guidance, laws and order for anyone to make sense of this massive amount of information. Someone, or something has to step up to stop the chaos. What Plato says in the Republic is this: *“The excess of liberty, whether in States or individuals, seems only to pass into excess of slavery.”*

Tyranny

And so tyranny naturally arises out of democracy, and the most aggravated form of tyranny and slavery out of the most extreme form of liberty? –Republic Book VIII

The tyrant will be the one that succeeds in quieting down the situation. After that, and when the people have faith in him, he establishes a new kind of government, and that is the tyranny. The state is still about desires (freedom, wealth), but these are now only the desires of the tyrant himself. In European history when can point out recent examples like Hitler and Mussolini, who made a democracy decline into a tyranny.

I am not going to fill in all the dots here on what will happen. But I think this process is something we are working towards. Not a tyranny in the old sense of the word, with war and bloody battles, but a monopoly we help set up because we all like to use it. I will give a hint: There is more than one website that can help you order the chaos, and if we don't start supporting other alternatives on ordering the World Wide Web we might be blinded by a single view of the World Wide Web and also of the world.

We need multiple perspectives on the world, and because of a person's inevitable way of following the masses the freedom is now in danger. This might sound worse than I really mean it, but I hope this makes you wake up and see that there are so many lenses through which you can view the World Wide Web and we only tend to use just one. Isn't that a shame? A waste of opportunity?

I would like to end my thoughts with one last quote from the Republic: *"The people have always some champion whom they set over them and nurse into greatness. [...] This and no other is the root from which a tyrant springs; when he first appears above ground he is a protector."*

Further reading and sources used

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