

CHAPTER TWO

PLATO'S *REPUBLIC* AND THE PERFECT SOCIETY

PLATO WAS NOT THE first but he was among the most prominent of the earliest philosophers to develop a utopian state model. Plato's *Republic*¹ was written in approximately 380 BCE. Applying his notions of a just society, Plato claimed to construct an "ideal city" through a fictional dialogue between Socrates and others. In fact, what he created is a totalitarian state. Although there has been much discussion among scholars throughout the centuries about Plato's intent in writing the *Republic*, his most prominent critic was none other than his onetime student, Aristotle. Nonetheless, the *Republic's* influence on subsequent philosophers and societies is clear. It is not difficult to find the germs of Marxism, National Socialism, Islamicism, and other forms of utopianism

in the *Republic*. Indeed, while all particulars clearly are not relevant, the *Republic*'s grand attempt to create the perfect society resonates throughout Western democracies, despite its rejection of democracy.

Plato's first proposal for the *Republic*'s Ideal City is described as a "true and healthy" model for utopian life. This city provides for only the most basic needs of its citizens—food, shelter, clothing, and shoes. It is constructed on a simple division of labor where each individual does a single job based on his most productive skills. Each individual accepts his position in the City and does what he is supposed to do for the benefit of himself and the other citizens. He does this because all of his needs are met.

There is no competition among the citizens, and since the City is perfectly just, there is no need for a government. The Ideal City does not have any luxuries—including furniture, entertainment, and meat (369–372c).

Plato acknowledges that this most basic city is not one with which many will be satisfied, because of its overly simple way of life (373a). Therefore, he constructs another Ideal City, which he describes as "feverish" and "luxurious," but which accommodates human desire (372e). In truth, what it promotes is, for most, the individual's subservience to the state—state control of private property, health care, the workforce, housing, and more. It establishes a strict class system and uses eugenics, euthanasia, arranged marriages, and the ongoing indoctrination of the masses to maintain unity in the "just society." And it is built on a foundation of falsehoods, propaganda, and censorship. The intention is to create an aristocratic ruling class of philosophers—Guardians—who will rule wisely and guide the City.² Of course, there is little to prevent

the ruling class from abusing its power and ruling on its own behalf, as history has demonstrated time and again.

The “feverish” City will allow certain luxuries, like “sofas and tables and other furniture; also dainties and perfumes and incense and courtesans, and cakes . . . and gold and ivory and all sorts of materials [that] must be procured” (373a). The Guardians determine who gets what.

The Ideal City will then need to enlarge its borders as it will “fill and swell with a multitude of callings which are not required by any natural want. . . .” (373b) Pasture and tillage land will also be needed, which Plato argues will have to come from neighboring cities, which will also threaten expansion (373d). This will require the City to develop the capacity to make war (373d). A warrior class of Auxiliaries must, therefore, be cultivated (373e–374a). They will be trained to be aggressive and ruthless, but must also be controlled so as to keep them gentle toward the citizens of the City (375e). The Auxiliaries serve the Guardians, the latter being the only class trained in reason. The Guardians are to be a pure race of leaders, originally bred from the best citizens (415a).

Plato takes his class structure very far. He invents the “noble lie”—a contrivance taught from the earliest age that each person is born of the earth rather than from a mother. Moreover, each individual is said to be born with a particular metal—gold, silver, or bronze—intermingled in his or her body. The metal determines the person’s status and relative worth in the City—the gold-souled citizens are the Guardians, the silver-souled citizens are the Auxiliaries, and the bronze-souled citizens are the Producers (although they are treated more like slaves) (415a).

The City’s unity and stability, essential in the *Republic*, require

that its citizens be conditioned to accept their positions and surrender their personal desires to the needs of the City. The individual's happiness is secondary to the general welfare of the City. Individuals are conditioned to suppress their personal desires in favor of acting for the common good. "The noble lie," therefore, is supposedly necessary because it promotes universal acceptance of the individual's class status. Citizens will feel more kinship with the City, eliminate political factionalism and civil strife, and promote patriotism (415d).

The City is structured to exercise absolute control, a top priority being to ensure purity within the classes. The Guardians have among their most important duties the strict regulation of the birth of children and, hence, the sexual activity of adults (415b). Only gold men may mate with gold women, and so on with the other classes. Sexual partners are chosen based on a phony lottery system, the outcome of which is arranged in advance by the Guardians. If somehow a bronze child manages to be born to a gold parent, the child is removed and sent to live among the bronze people (415c).

In the *Republic*, Plato also promotes eugenics—that is, the creation of a pure race. A "first principle" for rulers is "above all else, that there is nothing which [the rulers] should so anxiously guard, or of which they are to be such good guardians, as the purity of the race" (415b). The purity of the race is maintained through state-managed sexual activity—"the best of either sex should be united with the best as often, and the inferior with the inferior as seldom as possible. . . . Now these goings on must be kept secret which the rulers only know. . . . We shall have to invent some ingenious kind of lots which the less worthy may draw on each occa-

sion of our bringing them together, and then they will accuse their own ill luck and not the rulers" (459d–460a).

Obviously, the nuclear family is abolished. Men, women, and children live communally (423a). Children are removed from their mothers soon after birth and raised and educated collectively. The City replaces parents and their contemporaries become their brothers and sisters (414d). The purpose is to create a single extended family—the City itself. In this way, the individual will presumably become loyal to and reliant on the City, thereby eliminating competitiveness between the City and family.

Plato argues that private property has the potential of corrupting the Guardians, who are to act solely in the City's best interests. Therefore, they are to own no property. Plato writes: "Then now let us consider what will be their way of life, if they are to realize our idea of them. In the first place, none of them should have any property of his beyond what is absolutely necessary; neither should they have a private house or store closed against anyone who has a mind to enter; their provisions should be only such as are required by trained warriors, who are men of temperance and courage; they should agree to receive from the citizens a fixed rate of pay, enough to meet the expenses of the year and no more; and they will go to mess and live together like soldiers in camp. . . ." (416d–e)

The purpose of "both the community of property and the community of families . . . tend[s] to make them more truly Guardians; they will not tear the City in pieces by differing about 'mine' and 'not mine'; each man dragging any acquisition which he has made into a separate house of his own, where he has a separate wife and children and private pains and pleasures; but all will be affected as far as may be by the same wife and children and pri-

vate pleasures and pains because they are all of one opinion about what is near and dear to them, and therefore they all tend toward a common end. . . . And as they have nothing but their persons which they can call their own, suits and complaint will have no existence among them; they will be delivered from all those quarrels of which money or children or relations are the occasion" (464d–e).

Indoctrination is also crucial to controlling the citizenry. The City consists of a comprehensive "education" system." In addition to the "noble lie," censorship is widely practiced. For example, myths and music are suppressed to avoid any stories where authority is challenged or the Guardians are presented as anything other than good (379c). The style of music is regulated. Only certain modes and rhythms are approved, for "rhythm and harmony most of all insinuate themselves into the inner most part of the soul and most vigorously lay hold of it" (401d). Freedom of expression is banned for the Ideal City's health is more important than self-expression.

Having eliminated family ties, independent thought, and individual dignity, Plato turns to the City's standards for medical ethics. Only those who are otherwise healthy, but suffer either an injury or a seasonal malady, are entitled to medical care. The chronically ill are not beneficial to the City and will not be treated. "Medicine should not treat bodies diseased through and through" or those with "a naturally sickly body" (407d). The old and infirm are also denied treatment. "No one has the leisure to be sick throughout life" and should not benefit from "the invention of lingering death" (406b–c). Illnesses resulting from idleness or inactivity are not to be treated. Plato also proposes state-

imposed euthanasia for appropriate cases as determined by the Guardians.

With the City's construction completed, Plato explains his program for educating the Guardians and developing from their ranks the wisest and most just "philosopher" kings.

Underlying Plato's ruling philosophers and the Ideal City is the notion of "Forms" and "the Good." The Theory of the Forms guides Plato's search for the Good. Forms are by their nature independent from the sensible and physical world and are a sort of ultimate, perfect example of a thing or being.³ The idea of "the Good" is similar to the biblical concept of God or ultimate truth. It is the cause of knowledge and truth, but is beyond them both (508e). The Good is not being but is beyond being. In Plato's *Republic*, the Good governs all aspects of life. In his view, however, contemplating the Good and understanding the Good are far beyond the capabilities of the vast majority of people. Consequently, the City must be ruled by philosophers for they are the only people who are able to discern the Good. Only the philosopher can make judgments about what constitutes a "good person," a "good life," or a "good death." Good is synonymous with quality and is measured by an individual's contribution to the City. "Philosophers because of their love of the Forms, become lovers of proper order in the sensible world as well. They wish to imitate the harmony of the Forms, and so in their relations with others they are loathe to do anything that violates the proper order among people."⁴

Identifying and training philosophers from the Guardian class is a decades-long process. For the first twenty years of life, all ruling-class children are educated in "gymnastics" (training the

body) and “music” (training the mind in art and literature). At age twenty, the most accomplished students are chosen for “higher honor”—additional educational training in mathematics (plane geometry, solid geometry, harmonics, theoretical astronomy, and the introduction into the study of philosophy). (526c, 528b, 529, and 537c)

After ten years of intense training, the finest of these thirty-year-old students are selected for additional honor, training, and position. Those not selected are sent to careers in the military and government. Plato warns that the rulers must be especially careful to weed out entirely artistic students who are “filled with lawlessness” and are a great threat to the City (537e).

This select group is the most elite of all and is given five years to undertake the great honor of studying philosophy (539c). Then, for fifteen years, they become involved in the practical study of government, immersing themselves in the ways of the world. “[A]t the end of the time they must be sent down again into the den and compelled to hold any military or other office which young men are qualified to hold: in this way they will get their experience of life, and there will be an opportunity of trying whether, when they are drawn all manner of ways by temptation, they will stand firm or flinch” (540a). At the age of fifty, those who have distinguished themselves in every “action of their lives, and in every branch of knowledge” are ready to devote their lives to philosophy for the purpose of determining how best to rule the City (540a). From this group is chosen the leader, who rules not because he desires power, but because he knows it is his duty to be a wise and just ruler for the public good (540b). The Ideal City is complete.

Yet, Plato predicts that despite his just and wise City, it would

be nearly impossible to create and, if created, would be impossible to maintain, given man's imperfections.

First, Plato states that the City would only be possible when the true philosopher-kings are born in a State "despising the honors of this present world" (540e). This could only happen when the entire City is raised in Plato's education and class system. Plato declares that no one over the age of ten can be among the City's first citizens (541a). Of course, children would have to be removed from their families with the parents' consent or their parents would have to be eliminated to meet this requirement. Plato believes neither of these options is likely to occur.

Second, Plato acknowledges the impossibility of regulating sexual reproduction (546a). "All the wisdom and education of your rulers will not attain; the laws which regulate them will not be discovered by an intelligence which is alloyed with sense, but will escape them, and they will bring children into the world when they ought not" (546b). In short, human passion cannot be regulated by any mathematical formula, class structure, or state directive.

The resulting uncontrolled intermingling of gold, silver, and bronze citizens leads to the dilution of the pure race and the downward spiral from the wise and just City to a brutal tyranny. The first phase is a "timocracy," which is rule by a class of honorable but conflicted rulers (545d). The rulers revere honor in their official public life but are dissatisfied with the modest life they and their families lead. Over time, their commitment to honor is overtaken by their (and their spouses') passion for wealth (549b). The honorable rulers' children see this conflict and become obsessed with the acquisition of money, at first to please their parents, but in the

end to satisfy their own obsession (549d). They become the next set of rulers, who form an oligarchy—that is, rule by a wealthy few. They encourage the citizenry to borrow money from the rulers and, in turn, drive the citizens into poverty because they cannot repay their debts to the oligarchs (555c). The oligarchs refuse to spend money on such basic needs as education or a military (551e, 552e). In the end, the impoverished and resentful citizenry rise up and easily overthrow the oligarchy. In its place they install a democracy (557a).

Plato has harsh criticism for the democracy and in particular many of the democracy's citizens. He admits, however, that the democracy is the fairest and freest of the systems he describes (557c). But he argues that freedom and fairness without education and discipline is a recipe for disaster. The majority of citizens become undisciplined and easily seduced by unnecessary desires (558d). The oligarchs' deprivation and impoverishment of the citizenry causes the people to engage in vices and excess (561c–d). Tradition and authority are rejected for obsession with freedom (562e–563a).

Plato illustrates his concerns with familiar examples: parents treat their children as contemporaries and the children, in turn, disrespect and disobey their parents as a sign of their freedom (562e); teachers flatter their students out of fear and the students disrespect their teachers (563a); and the citizens “chafe at the least touch of authority . . . and cease to care even for the laws, written or unwritten; they will have no one over them” (563e).

Plato warns that the excesses that dominate the democracy will lead the undisciplined majority to become drunk with free-

dom (502d). As a result, the rulers must constantly strive to please the citizens (565a).

Eventually a great champion appears whom the people “set over them and nurse into greatness” (565c). He is seen as the citizens’ protector (565c–d). He is the ultimate populist, but is in fact a demagogue—the great panderer of the people (566e). Plato warns that the protector will become obsessed with power, the consolidation of power, and the preservation of power. He loses sight of the community’s well-being and can only see himself. Finally, he seizes absolute power as a political tyrant and the City becomes the most miserable of cities (576d).⁵

Plato, born of an aristocratic family, concludes: “Just as the philosopher is the best and happiest of men, so the aristocratic State is the best and happiest of States; and just as the tyrannical despot, the slave of ambition and passion, is the worst and most unhappy of men, so is the State ruled by the tyrant the worst and most unhappy of States.”⁶ For Plato, the tyrant and the philosopher have much in common. Both have a passionate love—the philosopher for wisdom; the tyrant for political power (573b).

The Ideal City is neither ideal nor a republic. Plato built and rebuilt his utopian society in the *Republic* and then abandoned it. Why? To his great credit, he accepted its impossibility, but it is unclear whether he believed its various manifestations were undesirable. He appears resigned to mankind’s inability to conform to his models. Plato insists the City cannot be built upon experience. He requires a clean slate. However, there is no way to effectively clear the mind of the supposed clutter of history and limit knowledge to that which has yet to come.

In the *Republic*, Plato is openly hostile to individualism, which he believes destructive of the collective good of the Ideal City. Although Plato is clearly exploring a wide range of human characteristics, including knowledge, education, family relations, etc., he does so not to embrace human nature, but to shape and order it. In so many ways, he drains the individual's lifeblood of free will and self-interest.

Yet, as Karl Popper, a critic of Plato and the *Republic*, wrote, "This individualism, united with altruism, has become the basis of western civilization. It is the central doctrine of Christianity ('love your neighbor,' say the Scriptures, not 'love your tribe'); and it is the core of all ethical doctrines which have grown from our civilization and stimulated it. . . . There is no other thought which has been so powerful in the moral development of man. Plato was right when he saw in this doctrine the enemy of his caste state; and he hated it more than any other of the 'subversive' doctrines of his time."⁷

Plato's caste system assigns roles and duties to people as if they are not people at all, based on his own preconceptions and prejudices. In this way, the individual loses his identity and can be directed toward the City's best interests. Ultimately, therefore, it is the rulers for which the City exists. These are Plato's masterminds. Only they are smart enough and expert enough, by birth and training, to properly manage the City. As Plato wrote, "Unless either philosophers become kings in our states or those whom we now call our kings and rulers take to the pursuit of philosophy seriously and adequately, and there is a conjunction of these two things, political power and philosophic intelligence, while the motley horde of the natures who at present pursue either apart

from the other are compulsorily excluded, there can be no cessation of troubles . . . for our states, nor, I fancy, for the human race either" (473c–d). In the *Republic*, it is as if Plato built a society over which he and the students of his Academy would rule—an elitism of philosopher-kings hatched of the same sort of arrogance too often found in the modern academy. Yet the overtones of egalitarianism persist, for within the three classes of the *Republic*, the individuals are mostly indistinguishable. They live as political, social, and economic equals without autonomy or even their own identities.

It is possible the *Republic* reflects Plato's hostility toward the fragile, off-and-on-again Athenian democracy that took the life of Socrates—Plato's mentor and teacher—and represents Plato's search for a "just" alternative. Socrates was considered a threat to the teetering Athenian government for his unrelenting and provocative questioning of its personages, institutions, and morality. But the intellectual methodology for which Socrates is known is denied most inhabitants of Plato's City. The "Socratic method" of inquiry, in which the common beliefs of the day are challenged through a dialectic process of questions and answers, is intended to sort out the weaknesses, strengthen, objections, alternatives, or support for those beliefs. But in the City, the individual is indentured to the state. Justice is synonymous with the well-being of the City. The classes exist to work as a harmonious collective to ensure order. Dissent, independence, and change are considered destructive. Ironically, it is unlikely Socrates would have survived long in Plato's City, given its totalitarian complexion.

Popper observed that "Plato . . . became, unconsciously, the

pioneer of the many propagandists who, often in good faith, developed the technique of appealing to the moral, humanitarian sentiments, for anti-humanitarian, immoral purposes. . . . He transfigured his hatred of individual initiative, and his wish to arrest all change, into a love of justice and temperance, of a heavenly state in which everybody is satisfied and happy and in which the crudity of money-grabbling is replaced by laws of generosity and friendship. . . . It is the expression of, and an ardent appeal to, the sentiments of those who suffer from the strain of civilization. (It is part of the strain that we are becoming more and more painfully aware of the gross imperfections in our life, of personal as well as institutional imperfection; of avoidable suffering, of waste and of unnecessary ugliness; and at the same time the fact that it is not impossible for us to do something about all this, but that such improvements would be just as hard to achieve as they are important. This awareness increases the strain of personal responsibility, of carrying the cross of being human.)”⁸

One profound lesson Plato teaches, albeit not by design, is that Plato himself, considered by many the greatest of all philosophers, could not construct the perfect society. He sought to avoid the disintegration of society and the onset of tyranny, but his solution was a totalitarian City destructive of human nature. Regrettably, Plato provided a philosophical and intellectual brew for a utopian society that would influence tyrannies for centuries to come.⁹