DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

Vices of Democracy:

Plato's Analysis and Its Relevance to Contemporary America

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It may seem an odd time at which to examine democracy's vices, with our own democracy at the peak of power and prosperity. However, it was only twenty-two years ago that a sitting President spoke plausibly of a national "crisis of confidence." We Americans are pleased and proud at our renewed national strength, as we should be[1]; but what has changed so quickly can change again.

History is littered with claims of invincibility. In dynastic Egypt, in republican and imperial Rome, in aristocratic Europe, people felt that their way of life would never come to an end, that it was supported not so much by governments and armies as by the unseen powers that control the universe. Moreover, they generally felt most strongly this way when, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that their decline had begun.

Unlike these great powers of the past, of course, America is a democracy, with freedom and equal rights for all. This makes us free of necessary internal enemies, as well as constituting our great claim to justice. But does it make us invincible? Political philosophers of the past said that freedom and equality create problems of their own. Are these concerns still plausible, given America's long history of rarely interrupted peace and prosperity?

Perhaps the concerns simply don't apply in our case. America is of course not simply a

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[1] An August 1999 poll by the Gallup News Service, as reported on *www.gallup.com*, finds that 62 percent of Americans are "satisfied with the way things are going in the United States at this time." The atmosphere at our elite universities seems less content; I will consider this interesting dichotomy in the dissertation.

democracy, but a liberal democracy, founded upon the doctrine of natural or "inalienable rights." Partly for this reason, our nation is far more prosperous than any democracy (or any regime of any kind) known to philosophers of antiquity. Nonetheless, so perspicacious an observer as Alexis de Tocqueville sought in America "an image of democracy itself, of its penchants, of its character, of its prejudices, of its passions."[2] I think this was a realistic aim, at least for so clear-sighted an observer as Tocqueville.

In this dissertation I propose to examine what I find the most cogent criticism of democracy, that of Plato. Focusing on three areas of American life—our legal system, how we educate our young, and family life—I will consider whether the problems or vices identified by Plato have indeed arisen here.[3] I will consider in each case the degree to which democracy (as against economic or other factors, including liberalism itself) is the causal factor. I will also examine whether scholars studying these areas of American life sufficiently appreciate the significance of democracy itself as the background in which events unfold. Our scholarship would be enriched, I will argue, by greater attention to the analysis of our way of life offered by Plato.

Of course the democracy Plato describes in Book VIII of the *Republic* is very different from ours. Above all it is a simpler democracy, unfettered by our notion of rights or by institutional arrangements such as representation and the separation of powers. I will argue, however, that the fact that we recognize ourselves in Plato's description suggests *a fortiori* that the qualities he identifies are endemic to democracy itself. The way a regime answers the simple question "who rules" exercises a profound influence on its character or way of life.

Before continuing, I must offer some definitions. By "democracy" I mean a government or regime where "the people" ultimately rule, rather than one or a few who are wealthy or otherwise

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[2] Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la Democratie en Amerique* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1981), volume 1, 69. All translations of Tocqueville are mine.

[3] By "vice" I mean two things: first, a characteristic which is impoverished, undesirable, bad; and second, one which tends to undermine democracy itself. Of course these two meanings are not always in accord. Regarding the first, a reader may disagree with my "value judgments," but the second involves questions of "fact" not "value." (I don't wholly accept the "fact/value distinction" as generally understood; in fact its popularity seems to me a product of egalitarian sentiment.)

privileged. (Of course there are different methods through which this can occur, such as direct democracy, sortition, and our primary mode, election.) Rule by the people need not mean rule by everybody, or even by a majority of native-born adults; but it must mean rule by ordinary people, not conspicuous for wealth, birth, or other qualities. America was already a democracy when it excluded slaves and women from participating in ruling; however, it seems to me it was less of a democracy than it is now, when all native-born adults (other than convicted felons) are entitled to participate. (On the other hand, a regime that included children and resident aliens--whether wisely or not--would, it seems to me, be still more democratic.)

We hear often of the virtues of democracy, and we experience them every day of our lives; but the drawbacks of our way of life are rarely discussed. Many among us are concerned that our democracy falls short of being a complete or even "genuine" democracy. Surely their observations are at least partly correct, but are the prescriptions that accompany them salutary? What dangers might complete democracy entail? Might there be problems or vices endemic to democracy that responsible citizens should try to resist? I don't mean to suggest in this dissertation that some other regime is superior to democracy. My aim is rather to raise questions that thoughtful Americans would do well to consider, not in spite of but because of their attachment to democracy.

OUTLINE

CHAPTER ONE

In my first chapter I will examine the description of democracy offered in *The Republic*. In Book VIII Plato's Socrates identifies four existing regimes: timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and tyranny. Though he concedes that there are hybrids among them, he asserts that these are the basic kinds of existing regimes.[4]

This division defines regimes according to who rules, rather than (to name alternatives favored by some modern thinkers) who owns the means of production, or social class, or how people worship. One might also compare this division with Aristotle's division of regimes into six types, where in addition to who rules, regimes are defined by whether the rulers aim at the common good or their own private good.[5] For Plato these other considerations have less weight.

Plato's division anticipates the character of the descriptions he gives of each regime in Books VIII and IX. While Socrates mentions some procedures and laws, most of what he says describes the various rulers, especially what they honor or admire. He indicates that this above all determines a regime's character or way of life.[6] (The dual meaning of "honor" in Greek as well as English should be borne in mind. A certain sort of man, whom Socrates calls a timocrat, strives for honor or the reputation of being noble and good; but all men strive for what they honor, what they consider noble and good, which is often something different than good reputation.)

Socrates describes actual types of regimes, not actual regimes. What I mean by this is that he ignores the complications that inevitably exist in any real city. No real city is so simply an oligarchy or a democracy. Religion in particular is strikingly absent from his descriptions. Thus

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[4] Plato, *The Republic*, translated by Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 544c.

[5] Aristotle, *The Politics*, translated by Carnes Lord (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 1279a.

[6] Plato, *Republic*, 551a, 554b, 561b-c, 562c.

we are shown pure forms of the four regimes, what Max Weber might call their "ideal types."

Moreover, the descriptions are all caricatures or parodies, with the possible exception of the description of timocracy. For example, Socrates describes oligarchs who care only for money, who despise honors and everything political, and who for this reason are eventually overthrown by the people.[7] As Aristotle tells us in the *Politics*, however, the greatest danger to oligarchies is not the private selfishness of the rulers, but their political ambition. Oligarchy gives way to tyranny more often than to democracy, when one of the oligarchs becomes preeminent and makes himself tyrant.[8] On the other hand, some oligarchies collapse through becoming overly sybaritic, which seems even further from the hard-nosed moneymaking Socrates describes.[9]

And yet Socrates's description of oligarchy evidently has something to it. Plato seems to present what oligarchs would be like if political ambition were less natural to men than it is, if men were more fully shaped by their regimes than they actually are or can be. One might say that he presents oligarchy not as it is but as it aspires to be. He presents it purged of the external influences that are always present in real life--including even to some extent the influence of human nature.

One might also say that Plato presents the direction in which oligarchy tends to move, since the longer a regime lasts, the more dominant its vision of the good becomes. Oligarchy as it collapses into democracy is more fully "oligarchic" than oligarchy as it emerges from timocracy.[10] This does not conflict with the tendency for regimes to deteriorate over time, for (except in the case of timocracy) this deterioration seems to consist precisely of the regime's vision of the good becoming increasingly dominant. Early oligarchy is robust because it is still partly timocratic; early democracy is robust because it is still partly oligarchic.

Thus Plato's parody of democracy shows what democracy might be like without the

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[7] Plato, *Republic*, 553c-e.

[8] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1305a40.

[9] Aristotle, *Politics*, 1305b40.

[10] Compare Plato, *Republic*, 551b and 556d. The first oligarchs are corrupt Spartans; the last are "reared in the shade, surrounded by a great deal of alien flesh."

restraints imposed by human nature and other external influences; and it shows the direction in which democracy tends to move. According to Plato, the fundamental characteristic of democracy is freedom or license. "In the first place, aren't they free? And isn't the city full of freedom and free speech? And isn't there license in it to do whatever one wants?"[11]

Freedom spawns equality; or rather the two are interwoven and almost synonymous. The love of freedom entails the love of equality, partly because of a reluctance to make distinctions that might demand political effort (e.g., punishing criminals, or preventing non-citizens from voting),[12] but more deeply because of a reluctance to make distinctions that might demand personal exertion or self-restraint. The democratic man "lives his life in accord with a certain equality of pleasures he has established. To whichever one happens along, as though it were chosen by the lot, he hands over the rule within himself until it is satisfied; and then again to another, dishonoring none but fostering them all on the basis of equality."[13]

Plato's democrats are intensely attached to freedom. They feel a hostility to the very thought of its being challenged, so that "if someone proposes anything that smacks in any way of slavery, they are irritated and can't stand it."[14] Equality for them is freedom's companion; they don't seem to feel a similar attachment to it for its own sake.

We Americans are accustomed to distinguishing love of freedom and love of equality; Plato reminds us that in the larger scheme of things they go together. A regime that embraces unlimited freedom is attracted to equality, for it experiences distinctions or judgments as implicit demands or restraints. On the other hand, a regime that embraces absolute equality may monitor allegiance to equality, but otherwise it is drawn to freedom, for resisting distinctions or judgments implies refusing to demand things of people.

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[11] Plato, *Republic*, 557b.

[12] Plato, *Republic*, 558a.

[13] Plato, *Republic*, 561b.

[14] Plato, *Republic*, 563d.

Nonetheless, these are two different patterns. Plato's democracy clearly resembles the former, while the United States today, I will argue, is in many respects closer to the latter. This difference enables us to see an important aspect of our democracy. I will argue that our democracy is the more complete or final democracy in this respect. Plato wrote at a time when no prominent democracy had lasted without interruption for more than a century, and when all democracies contained on the one hand prominent people who were opponents of democracy, and on the other hand slaves. These factors tended to limit how fully democracy could unfold.

Nonetheless, in a certain respect Plato's democracy makes more sense than ours. It's clearly desirable to be free, but how exactly is it desirable to be equal? Isn't it more important to have good things than to have what everybody else has? Our love of equality is largely rooted in pride, one of whose offspring is envy. It's a more complicated feeling than the love of freedom, which isn't to say that it can't prove stronger once it emerges. Perhaps it comes into full flower only when social conditions are more equal than they were in Plato's time. As Tocqueville says, "When inequality is the common law of a society, the greatest inequalities do not strike the eye; when everything is almost leveled, the smallest inequalities wound it."[15]

Socrates asks Adeimantus if democracy is dissolved by "greediness" for what it defines as good: freedom. "Does the insatiable desire of this and the neglect of the rest change this regime and prepare a need for tyranny?"[16] This question is followed by an exaggerated portrayal of democratic freedom, in which fathers fear their sons and teachers their pupils, slaves are as free as masters, and "anarchy" is "planted in the very beasts."[17] Only after this satiric portrayal does Socrates describe how democracy actually dissolves.

Here the desire for freedom plays surprisingly little role. Democracy is destroyed by idle, extravagant men whom Socrates calls "drones," some of whom are "equipped with stings." They

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[15] Tocqueville, *Democratie*, volume 2, 174.

[16] Plato, *Republic*, 562c.

[17] Plato, *Republic*, 562e.

engage in politics and seek to excite the people against the rich, so that they can squeeze out as much "honey" as possible. When the rich respond, the drones accuse them of trying to overthrow the democracy; as enmities grow, the people turn to one of the drones as their leader. If he isn't murdered, he eventually makes himself tyrant.[18]

Thus the passion that destroys democracy seems to be closer to love of equality than love of freedom. The "insatiable desire" for freedom seems to characterize not the city as a whole or most people in it, but simply the drones themselves. The drones are crucial to transforming the democracy, however, because they use the people's love of equality to enslave them and establish a tyranny. In a sense the drones *are* the democracy, for the people (as Socrates describes them) are as putty in their hands. In this sense Socrates's original suggestion is true: Excessive freedom, and the appetites it spawns, prepare "a need for tyranny."

Fortunately for us, the process Socrates describes depends upon elements not found in America, notably direct democracy and a majority of citizens owning little or no property. America is in some respects an oligarchy in Plato's terms: Most of us are diligent and moderately successful moneymakers. A third important way in which our democracy differs from Plato's portrait is that our regime was founded on the basis of certain philosophic doctrines, notably that of "rights." This is connected to another important difference between America and the actual cities of ancient Greece: the absence here of an established religion, to say nothing of a civic religion or a belief that our nation was founded by gods. As I have indicated, however, Plato makes it easier for us to apply his analysis to our case by abstracting from the importance of religion in the cities of his day; he tries to show the tendency of democracy when unencumbered by other influences.

Perhaps the most beautiful aspect of Book VIII of *The Republic* is Plato's portrayal of how every existing regime is constantly in flux, in the midst of becoming something different. The stability of America's history is the envy of many other nations; yet even here each generation is recognizably more "democratic" than its predecessor. This poses an obvious question for my

[18] Plato, *Republic*, 564b-565d.

project: In comparing America to Plato's description of democracy, am I talking merely about contemporary America?

This question helps clarify my argument. If a newly founded democracy resembled Plato's description, that might merely reflect preexisting factors external to the regime itself. If, on the other hand, during a long history a regime has generally become increasingly similar to Plato's description, it's hard to see how that can suggest anything other than the fundamental validity and predictive power of Plato's description—especially since Plato indicates that democracies become increasingly democratic over time.

I will above all try to characterize the *movement* of our history, in the areas of American life I examine. This is of course easier said than done. My general plan is to begin with the present, which is the most accessible time, as well as the one that Plato would expect to be most democratic. I will then offer suggestions about how we got from our point of departure centuries ago to where we are now.

CHAPTER TWO

Chapters Two to Four of the dissertation will look at particular areas of American life. Each of these chapters deals with a subject on which there is a huge scholarly literature; I will not attempt to confront the whole of each body of literature, but will rather use prominent works to develop a general empirical view of each subject. My concern is not to answer every important question, but to make rough empirical observations that might confirm or contradict Plato's criticisms. Having done so, I will then consider whether current scholarship would be enriched by greater attention to his analysis.

My subject in Chapter Two is America's legal system. Regarding criminal law, one might doubt that Plato's description of democratic lawlessness applies to America, a middle-class country where most people obey at least the most important laws, and where crime rates have recently been falling. (By "middle class" I mean people who live comfortably and perhaps own some property, but not enough to live without working.)

The recent decline in crime rates, however, merely abates an upward trend. A graph of violent crime rates throughout American history suggests an incomplete U-shaped curve, with rates declining during much of the 19th century and the first few decades of this century, a nadir in about 1960, and a significant increase after that. (I will develop much of this graph myself. No national crime data were kept before this century, but there have been historical studies of crime in individual cities which will enable me to estimate the missing parts.)

The decrease in crime rates from the early 19th century to the middle of the 20th reflected the spread of law-abiding norms of behavior. During this period the dominant middle class sought with considerable success to enforce and spread its principles. There were public efforts to inculcate virtues like diligence, decorum, and fidelity to marriage and family, especially among those outside the mainstream of American life. Such efforts were considered a necessary condition of democracy's flourishing, and more importantly a part of its practice or meaning. (The less democratic view was that those "beneath" middle class conduct could not be "improved.")

Thence grew the temperance movement, Sunday schools, and public schools, many of which began as non-denominational Protestant institutions aiming above all at character formation.[19] Crime rates fell as people who might otherwise have lived outside the law-abiding mainstream were prodded or drawn into it, while those who were immune to influence were removed from society.

Our growing love of freedom and equality eventually grew restive under this judgmental and exhortative spirit, which many writers and artists began to call "Victorian morality." This spirit also suffered a serious blow from its own success in enacting Prohibition. The Prohibition era was perhaps the first time that a large number of Americans pursued what Paul Johnson calls "downward mobility," the admiration and imitation of lower classes.[20] The fascination of middle-class young people with gangsters, and with the new music called jazz, was for the most part merely experimental and recreational; but this fascination reflected and reinforced a view of the world in which it had become appropriate to look "down" for models.[21] "Down" was now felt by many to be "up," the putative lower felt to be genuinely higher.

Though deprived of the fervor that had once animated it, however, the older judgmental spirit lingered until the 1960s. Then the feeling spread rather quickly among those who considered themselves liberal that expecting people to live "up to" middle-class standards was presumptuous, harsh, and hypocritical.[22] The new view held that the poor should be aided, not judged. Many, including President Kennedy, attributed their change of heart in part to Michael Harrington's *The Other America*, a book about poor people published in 1962.[23] One suspects, however, that this

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[19] A brief yet revealing description of the origin of public schools in New York City can be found in Diane Ravitch, *The Great School Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 8-10.

[20] Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 705.

[21] I don't mean to suggest that jazz was truly or simply lower than the forms of popular music it superseded. I think it was more raw, more vital, and more musical. However, it was clearly perceived by young middle-class whites as something a little bit forbidden, from the wrong side of the tracks.

[22] This transformation is described particularly well in Lawrence Mead, *Beyond Entitlement* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 55-61.

[23] Michael Harrington, *The New American Poverty* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984), 4.

book crystallized a transformation that was already occurring. The inclination to judge had grown feeble in the brightest and best-educated Americans of Kennedy's generation: They felt uncomfortable telling others to be more like themselves. While their parents had taken equality to mean that everybody should live up to a moderately demanding common standard, their own belief in equality was more demanding and more subtle. It forbade "value judgments," especially those directed against poor people or racial or other minorities.

Some conservatives speak as if liberals and radicals were a foreign element in America, a clique whose political power during the 1960s and 1970s was a kind of usurpation.[24] This view (or sentiment) fails to explain why we have so many liberals and radicals among us. Notwithstanding their tendency to criticize America, our democracy produces them just as surely as it produces people who describe each other as "nice" and mean the opposite of the dictionary's definition of the term. Liberals are simply people in whom the common faith in equality is particularly strong.

The best book I have read on crime in America is James Q. Wilson and Richard Herrnstein's *Crime and Human Nature*. I have drawn on this book in describing the judgmental spirit of America's past and the civic education which grew out of it and in turn supported it; but Wilson and Herrnstein do not in a significant way tie their analysis to the question of regime.[25] Contemporary scholarship could reap considerable rewards from analyzing democracy itself, in a manner informed by Plato's analysis.

I will also make some comments on civil law, which unlike criminal law seems stronger

[24] For a relatively thoughtful and generous example of this perspective, see Irving Kristol's *Two Cheers For Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1978). Kristol describes the emergence of what he calls a "new class," composed of academics, journalists, bureaucrats, and others who labor with their minds rather than their bodies. Kristol offers an explanation of why such people (at the time he is writing) tend to support socialism rather than capitalism; but he doesn't precisely consider this a result of democracy itself. Moreover, he doesn't confront the preference of such people for equality over liberty. He treats their socialism as a kind of "elitism," which may be partly true but is surely not the whole story.

[25] James Q. Wilson and Richard J. Herrnstein, *Crime and Human Nature* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985).

and more confident of its legitimacy with each passing decade. I will argue that this is fundamentally because civil law is in harmony with equality.

Plato indicates the presence of democracy by speaking of "lawsuits, and everything of the sort that's to the busybody's taste," and later of an honor-loving man "entangled with the court—suffering at the hands of sycophants."[26] He considers such activity endemic to democracy, apparently because people in a democracy tend to believe that equality, or at least greater equality than currently obtains, is just. Lawsuits exploit this belief, especially its implication that the poor deserve more than they have, and the rich less.

The courts form the only legally sanctioned arena in which the party who pays, the defendant, is not represented by the party who makes the decision to pay, the judge or jury. In America this was traditionally taken to mean that the law is a potentially exploitative weapon which must be treated with caution. Until the 1970s lawyers weren't allowed to advertise, and until earlier in the 20th century contingency fees were generally forbidden. It was thought that lawyers should be paid for their services, but that opportunities and incentives for encouraging litigation should be restricted. Lawsuits were presumed obnoxious unless shown otherwise.

The legal reformers of the early 20th century disagreed with this traditional view; the reformers of the 1960s and 1970s held almost the opposite view. They believed the world contained many hidden wrongs, perpetrated especially by the wealthy and powerful, which could be exposed and punished by an invigorated system of civil litigation. Therefore they sought to make the legal system more accessible, and in numerous ways they shifted the burden of proof from those making accusations to those defending against them.

These changes emerged at the same time that courts were expanding the rights of criminal defendants, and shifting the burden of proof in criminal cases towards the prosecution. The explanation of this paradox is simple enough: Judges were not immune to our nation's growing belief in equality. They increasingly felt it was appropriate to give the benefit of the doubt to those

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[26] Plato, *Republic*, 549c, 553b.

they saw as potential victims of the wealthy and powerful, which meant civil plaintiffs on the one hand, and criminal defendants on the other.

Two good books on the past century's changes in civil law are those by Walter Olson[27] and Peter Huber.[28] Although both books offer excellent descriptions of the new thinking that produced changes in the law, neither asks whether the unfolding of democracy was the ultimate source of that thinking. Therefore neither book grapples adequately with the question of how far the legal reforms can now be reformed.

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[27] Walter K. Olson, *The Litigation Explosion* (New York: Truman Talley Books-Dutton, 1991).

[28] Peter Huber, *Liability: The Legal Revolution and Its Consequences* (Basic Books, 1990).

CHAPTER THREE

In this chapter I will examine America's system of education. Plato's Socrates says that the teacher in a democracy "is frightened of the pupils and fawns on them, so the students make light of their teachers."[29] Plato means this as an exaggeration or satire; it has become a reality in some American schools. I will argue that this is ultimately due to our ever-growing love of equality.

For the most part we no longer allow teachers to hit or seriously discipline children. (We seem to be growing uncomfortable even with allowing parents to do so.) Our much lower level of concern about students hitting each other—a source of torment for many children—shows that it is inequality rather than pain or cruelty that we particularly hate.[30]

Of course being firm with a child doesn't necessarily involve physical punishment, but it does involve communicating that there are limits to what behavior is acceptable, and that unpleasant consequences will result if those limits are violated. With some children punishment is sometimes required. We find it increasingly difficult to confront such children; we seem to feel uneasy at asserting so naked a superiority as that implied by an adult's right to physically discipline a child.

Of course difficult children appear whether we're prepared to discipline them or not. One widespread response seems to be to try to sedate them. Critics of the use of ritalin and other psychopharmacological drugs in children argue that there are no physical indicators for so-called "attention deficit disorder" or "attention deficit hyperactivity disorder." The "disorders" may consist simply of having an unruly nature.

We have also become uncomfortable with the thought that some children are by nature

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[29] Plato, *Republic*, 563a.

[30] We are appalled no matter who the assailant is when actual bloodshed is involved, as in the massacre at Columbine High School in Colorado. When it's merely a matter of a student being hit or slapped, however, there is no comparison between the reaction to another student and to a teacher as assailant.

severely limited in what they can learn. I will examine the rise of so-called "special education" in America, which now consumes one in every eight dollars spent on education. Perhaps its most consequential aspect, however, is the ostensibly inexpensive process called "mainstreaming," whereby handicapped children are placed in regular classes with other children.

Special education is obviously at least in part a product of growing belief in equality. I will try to address what one might expect to be the most politically salient question about it, a question which is in fact rarely discussed in public, and which is indeed almost outside the bounds of polite discourse: Do the benefits justify the costs? Are the marginal resources being spent on special education producing more education than they would if spent elsewhere? Of course one can offer nothing better than an educated guess in response to a question of this kind, and one could write a book on this subject alone. I raise the question more to point to the political and psychological significance of its not being raised more often, than to provide a final answer.

Meanwhile, our system of education is growing increasingly practical or pre-professional. With each passing generation, the idea of educating young gentlemen (and, to a lesser extent, ladies) in the classics grows noticeably weaker. Of course most Americans never actually received this sort of education; but a few did, once upon a time, and this arguably had an effect on the character of our country. (Though Henry Adams doubts that he himself ever gained much education, the modern reader of *The Education of Henry Adams* is struck by how much respect was given to men who were thought to be educated, especially during Adams's antebellum youth.[31])

During the period in which secondary education has been virtually universal in America, there has been a moderate decline in standardized test scores, the source of which has been a significant decline in the performance of the most gifted children. The performance of the children in the middle has not significantly changed. I will argue that the increased emphasis on what it is useful for children to learn has kept the performance of most children fairly constant, despite

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[31] Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (New York: The Modern Library, 1931).

decreasing discipline and the costs associated with special education. This same emphasis, however, has not been fruitful for the best students.

Some of the effects of our difficulty in educating our brightest students are obvious, such as the influx of foreign students into our graduate programs, especially in the sciences. I will argue that some of the less obvious effects may eventually prove more dangerous. The decline in historical understanding of the average "educated American" may create problems should America ever again face a crisis similar in magnitude to the Great Depression. Will we be as immune to demagoguery as we were in times when most college-educated Americans knew what this word means?

The concern that citizens be able to resist demagoguery was part of what prompted the initial movement towards universal public schools.[32] This movement emerged at a time when the nation's universities expected students to read Latin, in part because of what were considered the salutary political lessons contained in ancient histories. Today's Harvard and Yale students are probably more intelligent than their counterparts of a century ago, at least as measured on standardized tests; but their unfamiliarity with ancient history means the loss of a rich lode of vicarious political experience. To borrow Plato's image, the American ship sails along with less and less concern that anyone be taught how to pilot it.

I have found little serious consideration in scholarly literature of democracy itself as the underlying cause of these changes. One partial exception is *The Closing of the American Mind* by my late teacher Allan Bloom; but Bloom's book has been mostly ignored by scholars in the field, and even it pays less attention to democracy than I think is warranted.[33]

More typical of educational "traditionalists" is E.D. Hirsch, who argues that "progressive" education has proven a failure, especially with those it is particularly eager to help, poor and working-class children. Hirsch identifies Rousseau and Romanticism as the source of "the

[32] Robert L. Church and Michael W. Sedlak, *Education in the United States* (New York: The Free Press, 1976), 5.

[33] Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).

Romantic beliefs of progressivism, which are still the dominant beliefs in the educational community."[34] However, he does not explain why these ideas became so popular in America. He raises the inevitable question of why progressive education has been immune to evidence and criticism. "The basic answer is this: Within the educational community, there is currently no *thinkable* alternative."[35] Given the poor performance of progressive education over the past two generations, this would seem to raise an obvious question: Why not? Why does the educational community in America resist even considering other ideas? Somewhat to the reader's surprise, Hirsch does not ask this.

Myron Lieberman contends that the problem with our public schools is that they are *public* schools.[36] While he makes a spirited case for privatization, however, his argument does not suggest that it would more than temporarily raise standards. Diane Ravitch, by contrast, would consider Lieberman's approach more of a problem than a solution. She, like many others, considers common public schools appropriate for democracy. She believes "that children should be taught those values which are basic to a free and just society, including respect for the individual's rights, a sense of social responsibility, and above all, perhaps, a devotion to comity, that precious value of a democratic society which grants the legitimacy of opposing views and permits groups to compete without crushing one another."[37]

In *The Revolt of the Elites* Christopher Lasch attacks this mainstream view from a perspective very different than Lieberman's. He argues that the democratic idea of public education was initially a departure from an older democratic view, which held that education occurs in practical, daily life, and that formal education would create a caste of educators removed from the real world. Universal formal education became necessary as the nation moved from a

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[34] E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Schools We Need* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 79.

[35] Hirsch, *Schools*, 69.

[36] Myron Lieberman, *Public Education: An Autopsy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[37] Ravitch, *School Wars*, 402.

largely agrarian society to a capitalist one with a high degree of division of labor; it was initially accompanied by a *decline* in real equality. Capitalism's need for workers and managers to replace the independent farmers and tradesmen of yore produced public education, which introduced into American life "the most obnoxious feature of class societies, the separation of learning from everyday experience."[38]

I myself find compelling this criticism of the separation of learning from experience. Boys who grew up following their fathers' ploughs in ages past learned far more about farming than most children today learn about anything; and many of them probably also imbibed a general sense of how to live their lives. (The phenomenon of "adolescent rebellion" seems to have originated or at least blossomed after most fathers began working outside the home.) However, one might wonder if this constitutes all that we mean by education. Moreover, it isn't clear where Lasch thinks we should go from here. He doesn't propose that we return to the pre-capitalist occupations of our great-grandparents, the most common of which we would now characterize as "subsistence farming." Lasch seems to blame capitalism for the weaknesses of contemporary education, without praising it for or even acknowledging the strengths.

It also isn't clear whether Lasch is more troubled by a lack of real learning in the current system of education, or by the inequality in American society that formal public education helps make possible. He is clearly unhappy with the prevalence of the illusion (as he sees it) of social mobility, which he also attributes to capitalism.

Lasch recounts that in 1949 a prominent sociologist named Lloyd Warner told Life magazine that social mobility, though only a "dream" for most people, "was the 'saving grace' of a hierarchically ordered world." Lasch comments that the idea of social mobility had become "a necessary illusion, the persistence of which reconciled people to inequality and softened the otherwise troubling contradiction between egalitarian ideology and the hierarchical division of

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[38] Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996), 64.

labor required by modern industry."[39] Warner was not bothered by this illusion, at least not decisively. Only since his time have the inequality that exists in America, and the illusions that reconcile ordinary people to it, become intolerable for many or most prominent observers, including Lasch. Most sociologists today would argue either that social mobility *isn't* an illusion, or that it is deplorable that people live their lives in the grip of an illusion which keeps them contentedly serving the elite.

In my view, Warner and Lasch are right that social mobility is an illusion for many or most people: Only a few rise far above (or fall far below) the station in which they are born. From this standpoint, the social mobility that we have in America simply means a rotation of the personnel at the top. Nonetheless, I don't find the existence of this illusion so troubling. When have most people not lived their lives under the sway of an illusion? Capitalism may influence the form of the illusions Americans hold (as may democracy), but surely it isn't the reason why such illusions exist. In this spirit one might wonder why Americans find so enthralling the prospect of success. Does wealth really constitute happiness, or do we humans inexorably tend to create and pursue mirages of happiness? As Nietzsche wrote: "We are from the very beginning illogical and thus unjust beings *and can recognize this*: this is one of the greatest and most irresolvable discords of existence."[40]

In my view insights like this one make old books an irreplaceable part of true education. Be that as it may, anyone who believes that formal education is valuable should be concerned about the obstacles it tends to encounter in a democracy. If one's concern is to make public education as good as possible, Lasch's analysis, though thought-provoking, is somewhat beside the point.

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[39] Lasch, *Revolt*, 52.

[40] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, translated by R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), aphorism 32.

CHAPTER FOUR

In this chapter I will (briefly) examine how marriage and the family are faring in our democracy. Plato suggests that the freedom endemic to democracy tends to undermine the family. He also playfully describes the rise of what we now call feminism, the belief in equality between the sexes rather than hierarchy or complementarity.

The family has undergone tremendous changes over the past century in America: women entering the professional workforce, dramatic increases in rates of divorce and birth out of wedlock, and child-rearing practices that have gone from Christian and authoritative to "child-centered" and egalitarian. One might say that it was not until recently that the American family came to resemble the regime outside it. At present we are engaged in a growing debate over whether legal marriage should continue to be confined to men and women, or whether men should be able to "marry" other men, and women other women.

I will try to gauge the extent to which unfolding democracy is responsible for each of these changes. This will involve considering other possible causes, such as the liberal element of liberal democracy, and factors which aren't primarily political, such as the migration of people from farms to cities and suburbs.

The two preceding chapters of the dissertation will generally focus more on equality than freedom; but our love of freedom seems to me the more important cause of the most troubling changes in American family life. Each generation of Americans seems less inclined than the one that preceded it to let family obligations stand in the way of pleasure or personal fulfillment. One can hardly blame people for trying to find happiness; but neither can one deny that doing so in new ways may create new problems. For example, it is by no means clear that the effect of parental divorce on children, especially early divorce, is as benign as we might like to think; on the contrary, the most serious recent work on the subject suggests that such children tend to become

unhappy and overly atomized adults.[41] In addition to being troublesome in itself, this may pose serious problems for the future of our democracy.

Of course there is a significant social science literature on this question alone, to say nothing of the others I have mentioned. My aim, especially in this chapter, is to raise questions about the influence of democracy as the background in which events unfold, not to provide all the answers.

In *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*, Robert Bork provides an analysis of democracy's effects on the family which resembles mine, though his emphasis on "culture" is somewhat at odds with a political emphasis on democracy itself.[42] His book has been mostly ignored by scholars in the field. Two recent authors I have found helpful on the subject are (again) Allan Bloom and Christopher Lasch. Perhaps surprisingly, Bloom's analysis of "relationships" and family life is the most incisive and subtle part of *The Closing of the American Mind*. He is acutely aware of the changes wrought by the unfolding of democracy. However, he does not address himself to scholars who specialize in this field, and he has been (as far as I know) wholly ignored by them. Lasch, on the other hand, is widely read and cited, but much of his description of the family under capitalism seems to me more properly a description of the family under democracy.

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[41] Judith S. Wallerstein, Julia M. Lewis, and Sandra Blakeslee, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce* (New York: Hyperion, 2000). For what it's worth, as a child of divorced parents who has known many other children of divorced parents, I am not surprised by the findings of these authors. I plan to draw on my own experience in discussing this delicate and subtle subject.

[42] Robert Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).

CHAPTER FIVE

In this chapter I will try to draw together the foregoing strands.

One strand I have mentioned is striking for its absence rather than its presence in Plato's portrayal of democracy. We Americans tend to believe in equality not merely as a description of what we observe, and not merely as an element of justice among men, but as a good in itself, even a principle towards which the universe somehow strives. Mistakes, even very costly ones, made for the sake of equality are felt to be forgivable and even praiseworthy; prudent measures that oppose equality inspire a certain uneasiness, as if gods stand ready to punish such *hubris*.

Humans seem to be built to believe in a world beyond or behind the world they see, a "true world" of gods or abstract principles which resemble gods. Some say that religion is stronger than politics in forming notions about this true world; but this doesn't seem to describe Americans today. Even devout Christians avert their eyes from the view that "it is shameful for a woman to speak in church," as Paul wrote.[43] What does this mean if not that the belief in equality goes deeper than the belief in the Bible?

The ruling principle of any stable government or regime acts on the imaginations of its people, as they assume that what is so powerful must somehow be appropriately or necessarily so. In all regimes other than democracy, however, some element of society is excluded from ruling, and is therefore reluctant to embrace the ruling principle. As Tocqueville observes, only in democracy does the ruling principle go unchallenged.

In aristocratic England, the Whigs were seen as the party of equality, and over two centuries they gradually pushed the nation (and themselves) towards democracy. (This is of course a very brief characterization of a long and complex history; I plan to expand on it in the dissertation.) In democratic America, no important party since the Civil War has held itself out as

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[43] *The Bible*, Revised Standard Version (New York: American Bible Society, 1980), 1 Corinthians 35.

favoring *in*equality; the prospect is almost unthinkable. Even apparently inegalitarian proposals like the abolition of welfare are defended with egalitarian language, giving us such counterintuitive notions as welfare recipients victimized by money they receive from the government.

Democracy has great advantages over other regimes in the areas of life I have examined. Dealing with crime is far easier when everybody is entitled to participate equally in the regime, so nobody can reasonably view himself as an oppressed outsider. An education system that tries to reach all young people is almost certain to enrich more lives than one that confines itself to children of privilege. Nobody sensible would expect to find more intimacy or happiness in the arranged marriages and hierarchic families that are common to aristocracy and oligarchy than in the bosom of the democratic family, at least as it's described by its greatest fans, such as Tocqueville, Rousseau, and Tolstoy.

However, these advantages do not necessarily increase as a democracy grows more democratic. On the contrary, our ever-growing attachment to freedom and equality has begun to make it difficult for us to fight crime, to provide a quality education to our children, and to maintain stable families.

As we see in the *Republic*, many regimes tend towards completing themselves in a way that is harmful. To be a good citizen of an oligarchy is not to seek to make the oligarchy more oligarchic; quite the contrary, it is to resist the oligarchy's tendency to move in that direction. Likewise, the best democracy is not the most democratic democracy, but the one where people live the best lives. If nothing else, I hope this dissertation encourages a few people to view our democracy and the choices we Americans face in this light.