

The Purged City and the United States

Plato has always been the primary figure when dealing with political philosophy, and indeed we focused much of our time in class discussing his views. Hegel, Heidegger and others, it seems, merely commented on Platonic notions, either adding or subtracting their own ideas, but generally remaining true to the bulk of commentary regarding society that Plato proposed. Thus, it should come as no surprise that this paper will concentrate greatly on Plato as pertains to the United States, specifically how our notions of community and politics match up with Platonic ideals of the Purged City. Instead of merely making my own observations as other philosophers have done, however, I will attempt to include contrasting thoughts from a great American thinker: Thomas Jefferson. My goal is to show that the US does indeed have a tradition of Platonism as regards society, yet it should also be evident that this thought is injected with a great deal of traditional pragmatism.

Jefferson had made clear during his life that while he respected Plato, he thought the bulk of Plato's work flawed. Strangely, Jeffersonian thought seems greatly influenced by the *Republic*, especially as regards the public educational system. Since education is a major key to Plato's Purged City, it behooves us to consider it for a moment. Plato is sure that the Philosopher Kings should receive the bulk of education, while "normal" citizens are merely educated insofar as they learn trades vital for the society to function. Jefferson was greatly concerned with public education for citizens, so much so that he implemented the outline that composes our current government-run education system. Ironically,

Jefferson was adamant that education was equivalent to freedom, and indeed Plato seems to agree. Only by becoming fully educated might an individual strive for anything other than a life of servitude. However, where Plato proposes a select few to this freedom, Jefferson wants it for everyone.

Deciding who should be a Philosopher King for Plato greatly depends on the ability to select those individuals that are endowed with the attributes necessary to carry out proper rule; temperance, intellect and physical superiority are all greatly respected and required for the Kings. Thus, it seems that Plato subjugates the populace to a life of servitude underneath the rule of arguably superior people, as described above. Yet, the rulers themselves are servants to the people, as they have been led to a life solely devoted to rule over their subjects. There is no ideal situation where a citizen might strive to become a leader, and the leaders have been molded to merely lead; they cannot produce anything of tangible value. Jefferson, however, in advocating education for all, sees the community as a collection of individuals, equal in power. The collective community is a notion that escapes Jefferson in the Platonic sense, as anyone might seek to come into rule, and indeed their civic duty requires such an event to take place. On one hand we have Plato supporting a stratification of classes to make society operate smoothly, and the on the other Jefferson opposes this notion, proposing a very liberal equality to all. The basis for both beliefs is rooted in the education of society, and both agree that education is the pivotal point in life that determines the success people will achieve. It appears that Jefferson agrees with Plato that a separation of society into a rigid class-system would

make for an arguably serene environment, but Jefferson adamantly injects the Christian ideals of liberty, which cannot truly exist in the Purged City of Plato.

Contrasting these views with present day America, we see that Jefferson proposed our educational system to create a society of individuals who could provide for themselves and survive without relying greatly on others, yet our current culture seems almost Platonic in nature. Education appears to be greatly respected, yet few people achieve anything beyond a rudimentary ability to read and write, and even that is suspect. There is a definitive system of classes, not rigidly defined per Plato, although very difficult to transgress. The poor, while able to gain wealth, almost seem to be content with their lot in life, and the rich control the political system and dictate social laws. We have a mishmash of idealism and the notion of equality for all, tempered with the pragmatic view that people are naturally inclined to follow strong leaders.

I'm not entirely sure as to just why this state of affairs has come about in the United States, as our *Constitution* and laws essentially dictate the idealism Jefferson proposed. I can't help but wonder if in fact Jefferson understood that Plato, while describing a system of education that undermines equality, was truly explaining the nature of human desires. It is possible that Jefferson wrote his criticism of the *Republic* as a way of misleading American culture into accepting G-d-given equality and denying the possibility that people tend towards a ruler-servant situation. It seems probable, yet I am not entirely convinced, as Americans tend to be extremely independent individuals who

enjoy their liberties, even if they sometimes succumb to a slave-mentality when dealing with the government.

Going back to education for a moment, supposing that the Jefferson ideal were in fact realized and everyone in the US was well educated in the arts, sciences and language. Would this change our society? I think there's something to be said for an educated public, and it seems that on the surface our society would arguably be better than it currently is. Those who spurn social limits and follow a life of crime usually do so due to lack of education (although there are those who are obviously criminal with exceptional educations, i.e. the Unibomber). It appears they resent others who have more advantage, and strive to circumvent the bounds the average citizen adheres to. Everyone is in fact educated, so crime decreases and social awareness increases. Jefferson, it appears, is right. Going to Plato, assume the bulk of citizenry has no education beyond that which is required for them to subsist in society, serving the greater good as a whole. Crime and turmoil decreases as well in this ideal state, as the average man respects the rule of those obviously greater than himself, and has no concept of anything other than a truly communal existence. It's difficult to rectify both of these views as there is much merit in adhering to either. It instead becomes a question of which view is more easily achieved, which is more pragmatic. Juxtapose this with American culture and we see the reason Jefferson was opposed to Platonic society. Only through providing a means of education for all would a community thrive given the bounds of reality: it seems nigh impossible to convince the masses that the rulers are infallible (even if they are), but given human nature, it is relatively easy to convince them that they are all capable of rule. It appears to

me, again, that Jefferson is merely advocating a pragmatic view that can be actualized, instead of dismissing Plato as being incorrect. Consequently, the American tradition of education is predicated on an ideal that, while never realized, can be strived for much more easily than the Platonic one.

The theory of justice is another important theme in Platonic thought, and consequently, Jeffersonian thought as well. In the *Republic*, Plato presents us with three views of justice, the most familiar being that of social contract. This is the view that Plato ascribes to common sense, the view that he asserts most people would admit to believing in were they asked to describe justice. The idea of social contract assumes that individuals adhere to laws of a community under the pretense that other people will do the same. Thus, justice is really a by-product of interactions of people performing ordinary tasks within a society. The merchant pays money to the farmer for his wheat; were the merchant to cheat the farmer, the community as a whole would see this as a breach of contract, and thus an injustice. There is nothing beyond the constraints of human etiquette, and justice seems transitory from community to community.

Plato then provides us with a story concerning the Ring of Gyges, a ring that provides invisibility to its user. The individual who possesses this ring is an average man who follows the bounds of justice per social contract. However, when invisible, he strives for power and commits murder and theft. Plato posits that this is indeed how most would act given the opportunity, if in fact justice relied on social constructs.

The final view describes justice as the logos of the kosmos, or the language of the universe. Plato suggests that justice is in fact the substance by which the universe operates, and is inherent within every act, regardless if observed or not. This last view, which I'll term "absolute justice", is precisely the notion of justice that Jefferson holds as true. However, Jefferson also proposes that social contract is indeed the common sense view of justice, just as Plato. While Plato insists that we must strive for the ideal and possibly eliminate all notions of social contract, attempting to learn the logos to fully understand the universe, Jefferson, again, is pragmatic. Indeed, G-d has designed the universe with justice as its logos, yet we cannot be so blind to think that everyone will act accordingly, and instead we must rely on human constructions to create a society that will function smoothly. Thus, we get the creation of the *Constitution*, a document that fully outlines those constructions which will provide a proper framework for the American society to flourish. It seems that Jefferson thinks everyone inherently knows justice to be the logos (though it seems he qualifies this by saying they must be followers of Christianity), yet it is ironic that social contract is still a vital part of his discourse. Whereas the Purged City does not require such laws, as the Philosopher Kings can settle disputes using their knowledge of the logos, American society requires that such institutions be in place. Jefferson appears to understand that humans by nature tend to be selfish, so instituting a system where citizens can strive for communal rule requires definitive restrictions upon everyone, lest a few individuals seek power over others. The consequences of liberty, then, are laws that limit the rights of people when they infringe upon the rights of others. I find it interesting that the social contract construction is thought solely to exist in community for Plato. It seems possible to rectify that idea with

the idea of logos by understanding contracts as a manifestation of the logos through humanity.

What is peculiar about Jefferson is his recognition of the Platonic notions of justice, coupled with fervent opposition to implementing the Purged City. He frequently appeals to the Christian ideas that providing for oneself (and consequently the immediate family) are of primary importance, and community is secondary to personal well-being. While he admits to absolute justice as proscribed by G-d, the only important relationship is of man and G-d, not of man and man. I think this is the primary difference, and the one that drives a wedge between Plato and Jefferson. Using another figure in recent history, it seems that Marx too admits that the Platonic ideas of justice are correct, but Marx ignores the relationship man has with G-d. Instead, the relationship primary for man is with other men, hence the community is more important than individual liberty. Only by existing in harmony with others can a truly happy life be gained. The ideas that Jefferson maintains about the man-community relationship echo faintly of Hegel, in that the family is vitally important. Like Hegel, Jefferson thinks that if the family is healthy and provided for, then society will benefit as a whole. This separation of the family from community is very important to Jefferson, for reasons outlined above.

Correlating the preceding ideas to contemporary America, there seems to have been a dilution of Jefferson and a move back to the totalitarian notion of justice per Plato. It appears we are in the City of Luxury, and justice is a product of our own making, yet we seek the rule of a government that outlines proper behavior per the logos. In an almost

contradictory way, our society both strives for liberty and seeks external constraint. Perhaps Plato would explain the current situation as the precursor to our purification, and consequently, only by properly educating the rulers could we purge the city completely. But just as the move seems to be towards totalitarianism, so too does the move strive to maintain liberty. Our society is in a state of constant turmoil, where the masses seem to internally understand the notion of logos yet dismiss their own ideas of the logos in hopes that the government will impose an “official will” upon the people. In an amalgam of a Marxist movement towards communal equality and Jeffersonian liberalism, the United States walks a fine line between true communism and the Purged City of Plato. While teetering on the brink of striving towards one or the other, it appears that the current state of affairs is deemed by most to be ideal. The current political rhetoric seeks to change specifics about liberties we maintain, not the actual model behind those liberties. The legal system of the United States, for example, is firmly predicated upon the welfare of the individual, i.e. innocent until proven guilty, yet the written law is obviously weighed towards communal harmony. Perhaps such a difference is nothing more than my own simple misunderstanding, yet I cannot help but wonder if Jefferson had already discerned this inevitable struggle when he set the boundaries for our government.

If indeed Plato would say we are moving towards the Purged City, I wonder how he would see it fully realized. If we push totalitarianism, or absolute communism, for instance, the citizenry would most likely revolt, deeming such changes as the product of draconic leadership. Perhaps Plato thinks that slight changes over time would bring about the complete transformation, and the push should be invisible to the average citizen. If so,

who decides what to change and when to change? We must already have a definitive upper class to undergo this change, those who have the drive to see the fruition of the Purged City. They must have an internalized notion of justice, fully aware of the logos, brought about by an education. If we look through a Hegelian lens, it is not difficult to see that some change has already occurred from the inception of the US through the 20th century. I'll revisit this topic after touching on economics, since I think only by understanding our own economy can we fully comprehend the Purged City.

It must be noted that Plato's idea of community was almost nearly restricted to the city-state. Reading the *Republic*, it seems to me that Plato would deny that communities in existence today would be capable of achieving the lofty goal, besides perhaps primitive tribes scattered throughout the world. Thus, I am not so sure describing Plato using contemporary examples is entirely fair, but there seems to be merit in doing so, if only to see the problems that arise. Plato introduces the concept of communal economy almost accidentally, as he never specifically places much emphasis on outlining such a beast. It's easy to glean his ideal economy, however, by examining the structure of the Purged City. At the bottom, we have the craftsmen, farmers and anyone who performs "mundane" tasks, essentially anyone not associated with rule or defense. The economic system is based on these people, and they are the backbone to society. The bottom tier of individuals provides everything necessary for the survival of the community as a whole, and they share their goods in a very Marxist way. The second group of the Purged City is the warrior class, composed of those who would protect the average man. Finally, we have the rulers, few in number, absolute in power. The economy of such a society is

simplistic: the masses provide everything of worth in exchange for protection and rule. There is no autonomous person, capable of surviving alone, as he is incapable of trading with anyone unless within the confines of community.

The Jeffersonian economy is nearly opposite in every regard, yet has a vague tertiary resemblance. Overlords do not exist, and capitalism is the norm. Individuals can choose to contribute to society as a whole, by charity for example, but the system performs properly when citizens seek to increase their own personal wealth. No communal coffers exist beyond those created directly by the people who control their assets. The people are responsible for both rule and their own protection, so the upper classes of Plato have no real purpose. The economy as idealized by Jefferson combines the duties Plato ascribes to the classes into a personal responsibility that each citizen must uphold themselves. Most peculiar is that Jefferson seems, again, to recognize that those duties Plato outlines are indeed correct, but liberalism has more importance than community, thus the creation of the citizen-soldier. Jefferson was also enamored with the idea of a purely agrarian society. He believed that living in a society, given the nature of humans, was only possible if everyone were to provide for themselves almost completely. Crops would be grown and traded when necessary for manufactured goods, but there was no real reliance upon the community as a whole to provide anything other than a backdrop for social conventions, specifically education and religious practice. Indeed, the town was fundamental in allowing citizens to get an education and worship, and perhaps socialize to diversify the genetic stock, but provided no other functions.

Looking at the economic system of the US, it is amazing that Jefferson was indeed the framer of the *Constitution*. Our economy is capitalistic in tendencies, but controlled heavily by governmental intervention. Instead of a society of farmers, we are urbanized beyond anything Jefferson thought possible, or healthy. The government dictates much of what occurs in the marketplace through sanctions, tariffs, taxes and laws that seek to protect the buyer or seller. The incomes of the individual are taxed and the money used for the communal good, much of it used to fund institutions that seem to exist on the whim of government. Yet, the people remain in control of much of what they earn, adding a great deal of complexity to the equation. The rich and poor have a great disparity between them in wealth, which seems to create a class system of the kind Plato envisioned. The government uses money gained through taxes to provide protection to all, and to further its own aims to institute governmental additions. We have a definitive three-tiered structure, again, as Plato envisioned.

As previously discussed, Plato seems to posit a slow, periodic change that takes place without confrontation, if the Purged City is to become reality. Does the US fit this mold? Examining the current economy, we have a class of those who rule, a class of protectors, and the every-man, whose labors provide a concrete basis for the other two to exist. The community is thought important beyond merely providing certain services that a person cannot produce himself. Yet, it was obviously not always so. Jefferson's ideas of economy, i.e. the self-sufficient man, were rigorously debated after the inception of the country, yet most were adhered to at least in appearance. Before the Industrial Revolution, rural living and subsistence farming were the norm, and cities were small,

sprawling entities, mostly composed of merchants who served the farmer. The government was composed of these same farmers who directly elected their representatives in the national government and ruled over their communities themselves. The movement from this rural lifestyle to a more urbanized society brought about the rise of governmental controls and a controlled economy. As people became more dependent on others for their goods, the economic situation in the country shifted from subsistence to comfortable living. This seems a direct parallel to the move from the City of Necessity to the City of Luxury in Plato, in that the stratification of economics and class was introduced almost out of need. Only because people wished to do more than simply subsist was the role of the government expanded and the socio-economic classes created. The US was formed out of a desire to eliminate totalitarian rule by an oppressive government that had complete control over economics and dictated a class system that allowed no movement between them. Hence, the Jeffersonian notion of community would serve well to create a state which allowed the elimination of that government. Suddenly, however, people begin to gain wealth, and sought a life beyond mere survival. Thus, the economic structure of the country shifted to the City of Luxury.

Taking these facts into account, I wonder if Jefferson himself foresaw such events as happening. It is obvious he wished for the average man to gain wealth, as this was truly the only way to achieve liberty in his eyes, yet Plato had explained the inevitable outcome of such an occurrence, the move towards totalitarianism, something that Jefferson vehemently opposed. Again, the question is raised: are we moving towards the Purged City, and if so, how slowly or quickly has the change happened? Marx seems to

have touched on this with his work on the industrialization of a society, and that such a society inevitably needs a central communism. Marx, however, would still deny that totalitarian government is the eventual result, as Plato states. Is economy forever linked with totalitarianism?

Supposing, for an instance, that Jefferson predicted the prior events; it should come to no surprise that he was adamant about resisting change and wished that advancements to society as a whole were non-existent. It seems that the larger and more advanced a society gets, the economy drives that society into totalitarianism, and steps every closer to the Purged City in its striving for justice to be achieved. How slowly does this movement occur? When will the US become purged, if ever? It is difficult place a time on such an event, and I think of Hegel and his conception of historical advancement. Perhaps the US has reached a point of stasis after a tumultuous past. Following the Revolutionary War, we had a long period of life that echoed Jefferson; after World War II, we became part of the global economy and rapidly approached the Platonic City of Luxury. Hegel might say that such moves are natural parts of history, and the stagnation that we are experiencing is the time in history that society functions close to perfection. By no means am I positing that the US is in fact a perfect society, yet we are without a doubt the richest and most powerful nation on earth. Unless the world changes globally as a whole, with a move towards justice, I cannot see our current state of change being anything other than dormant. Each major event in our history provoked us to change, and every change has been towards a more totalitarian government with a decline in economic freedom. Plato, it seems, was correct in that for a community to survive beyond

subsistence, we have to implement a rigid class system and economic constraints. Jefferson was aware of this and thought it a problem because liberty would be quelled.

Have we reached a Hegelian peak? Is our society truly on the path to the ideal that Plato wanted, but never achieved? I think in this regard Jefferson was far wiser than Plato; he feared totalitarianism, the Purged City, and setup a mechanism to delay its onset as long as possible. Though the Purged City might someday come about, the economic constraints placed by the *Constitution* would slow the transformation to a crawl, and liberty would be maintained. Our historical progress would be retarded artificially, simply by instilling the values Jefferson thought primary, that of personal autonomy. Major events in our historical development have eroded away at this barrier, yet it still remains a steadfast opposition to a complete communal reliance on government. At its core, economics does indeed drive the society into a state with the eventual result being the Purged City. Jefferson knew this and opposed the change. Plato, while right, could still be defeated.

Perchance the previous dialectic was a bit ridiculous in portraying Plato as a villain and Jefferson as the great American hero, but the fact remains that Jefferson was so opposed to wrenching economic control from the individual citizen that he devoted his life to ensuring fiscal liberty for everyone. Why did he fear totalitarianism? As stated earlier, Jefferson was a dedicated Christian, who believed that personal sovereignty, especially when concerning wealth, was a gift from G-d. Thus, it is logical that he would propose a system so radically different from the Platonic notions of community. It

appears Jefferson took Plato's work as a description of the society that would eventually result if those who sought power went unchecked. Only G-d, Jefferson argued, had domain over any one man, hence, guarding this power was primary to his cause.

Considering the length at which Jefferson wrote about G-d and Christianity specifically as applied to his politics, it is difficult to juxtapose his views with Plato's without at touching on religion for a moment. Plato, though, speaks little of religion; it seems that in the Purged City the role of G-d is taken up by the Philosopher Kings. Religion is either the pseudo-worship of the rulers or traditional ceremonies that pay lip service to the gods while truly not maintaining a faith. If Plato does indeed believe that religion plays an insignificant role in community, this might be a reason Jefferson is wary of his views. By giving men power over others, G-d is given no direct role in the community, thus Jefferson's liberty is suppressed. Only by allowing free reign in religious worship does Jefferson believe that true freedom can be maintained. I don't think Plato would argue that the Purged City is not free, and in fact everyone is a servant to society as a whole. Again, Jefferson is frightened of this, and offers a method for avoiding serving anything other than G-d. In modern America, religious freedom is a frequently debated topic, and the elimination of religious language from any part of the community seems rampant. Under constant attack are any notions of G-d and language mentioning G-d, most frequently Christianity. It seems like society is striving towards the Purged City once more; by eliminating religion from common parlance men might gain power over others, thus instituting the totalitarianism of the Purged City.

So far, I have focused on education, economics and justice, introducing religion in part. The major theme throughout has been the apparent transformation of the United States from the Platonic City of Luxury into the Purged City. Is such a transformation actually taking place? I have argued that indeed it does appear to be happening in some instances, while in others the change is either slow or stagnant. Further, I have provided evidence that Jefferson was in opposition to Plato because he was unable to accept a society where liberty was given up for the communal good; he understood the Platonic alteration as a distinct and foreseeable probability and had attempted to curtail it. Ironically, it seems that Jefferson knew his attempts to stop the transgression would fall short, given his cynical attitude of the future. He was certain that only by education would our community thrive, yet paradoxically, would strive towards the Purged City. The economy would shift from autonomous towards communal as society grew. Our country was founded, then, on principles that dictated a course of action disparate from Plato to combat the inevitable move towards being purged. Is this a fair assessment of Jefferson, much less Plato? Perhaps this question is best answered by this: is Platonic society truly the best society possible, an end in the evolution of community, or is it instead as Jefferson saw it, a wretched existence where humanity is subjugated by an entity they have no ability to discern from G-d? The answer, I think, is a combination of both. Plato envisioned a society that functioned analogously to that of ants, it seems. Worker ants provide the food for the community, the soldiers ward off intruders and protect the community, and the queen provides leadership by selecting a place for the hive. Ants operate solely to survive, the community being primary with their own needs or wants never realized, if having such a thing is even possible. Yet, isn't the Purged City

like the ant mound? It seems that the people in the city have no ability to comprehend anything beyond community, as they aren't individuals in the sense that ants are not individuals. Surely this society is harmonious, and there is no internal strife. Taking this into account, Jefferson's rhetoric seems apropos. Do we wish to become merely automatons, performing mindless tasks for a communal whole? Or, do we instead hope to realize our own dreams, fulfill our own aspirations? Given the option, I am sure most everyone would choose the latter, but the citizens of the Purged City cannot contemplate such an alternative. Perhaps that is the true fear of Jefferson: in the Purged City, people are no longer people, but instead parts of the whole. A clock cannot operate without each piece working properly, but individual gears serve no real purpose. For Jefferson, the worst possible fate is one where individual identity is lost, as the "I" is necessary for proper religious worship. I think this is the key issue: do we wish for a society that includes G-d, indeed, sets G-d as the ruler, or one where we ignore religion and instead create a community that serves our base needs?

In closing, I'd like to state that much like Jefferson, I too am worried about our society becoming like the Purged City. The individual personality that we all possess seems incapable of existing for Plato, as everyone has a purpose to serve, not a life to live. Perhaps I am just frightened of becoming a cog in the great machine of the world, but more importantly, in losing my capacity to worship how I wish. Plato's community seems almost Orwellian, with Big Brother controlling not only my actions, but my mind. Yet, Big Brother is nothing more than the collective consciousness of everyone, seeking

only to provide the best possible life for its constituents. Perhaps a few sardonic would be in order to lighten the severity of this conclusion, but I am only reminded of this joke:

Hegel, on his deathbed, complained "Only one man ever understood me."

He fell silent for a while and then added, "And he didn't understand me."