

AN EVALUATION OF KARL POPPER'S CRITIQUE OF PLATO'S PHILOSOPHER KING: A POSTULATION FOR THE RE-MAKING OF NIGERIAN DEMOCRACY

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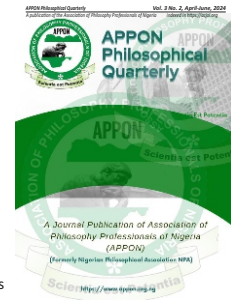
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ABSTRACT

Karl Popper is well recognized for his advocacy of freedom and critique of tyranny in the most challenging book on Plato written in the 20th century; Karl Popper fiercely assailed Plato's support for intellectual aristocracy and caustic critique of democracy. The severe dispute surrounding the 1945 publication of the book *The Open Society and Its Enemies* has subsided, but it is by no means resolved. For instance, the majority of academics contest the conventional wisdom that Plato was a fierce antidemocrat. The debate partly revolves around how one views Plato's utopianism. Is Plato's vision of the ideal just polis a revolutionary aspiration, a manual for change, a yardstick for assessing current constitutions, or something else entirely? For any of these options, a case can be made. It is clear that the ideal polis is not meant to be an attainable ideal because the bar for becoming a good philosopher is so high that even Socrates, by his own admission, does not meet it. This paper argues that despite Karl Popper's criticism of the Philosopher King, there is much to be taken to reposition Plato's philosopher king as the basis to restore hope in the remaking of the Nigerian democratic process. As such, this paper shall reinterpret Plato's thought on the philosopher king and attempt to reconcile the philosopher king as a necessary postulation to underscore democracy in Karl Popper's Social and political thought. The paper shall employ a critical analytical and qualitative research method to explore Karl Popper and Plato.

Keywords: Karl Popper, Plato, Philosopher King, Democracy and Nigeria

Introduction

Philosophies are usually products of their own environment; the environment determines the philosophers thought. Hence, to either critique or appraise the Philosophers thought and understand why such a Philosopher said what he said at the time he or she lived, the environment he or she lived in should not be taken for granted; basically as it pertains to social and political philosophy and philosophers as they constantly engage the state and society. Karl Popper himself agrees to this fact when he said:

If, as I believe the philosophies of Plato as well as Heraclitus sprang from their social experience, especially from the experience of class war and from the abject feeling that their social world was going to pieces, then we can understand why the theory of forms came to play such an important part in Plato's philosophy when he found that it was capable of explaining the trend towards degeneration. He must have welcomed it as the solution of a mystifying riddle¹.

Political philosophy and social philosophy both fall within the umbrella of the philosophy of practice², as has been noted. So, together with ethics, social and political philosophy is a component of the philosophy of practice. In the face of new knowledge, given that different civilizations have different rules, or new scientific knowledge regarding the causes or effects of some forms of behaviour, traditional notions of right and wrong, good and evil, start to be questioned³. Plato's rejection of democracy has in the past and present been widely interpreted or misinterpreted without

understanding the social context of analysing his fears, worries and exaggerated anxiety. In our contemporary society, the most popular critique of Plato is Karl Popper who openly rejected Plato's social and political thought in his work *The Open Society and His Enemies* first published in 1945. Yet, the influence of Plato's social and political thought has greatly influenced the building of strong institutions that will enhance a very stronghold on African democracies. African democracies at its current stage needs to adapt the concept of the Philosopher King if we must build strong institutions; while at the same time not rejecting the principles and values of democracy as it relates to the piecemeal social engineering of Karl Popper. This paper evaluates Karl Poppers position on Plato's reduction of democratic values and attempts to reconcile Plato's Philosopher King and Karl Poppers democratic values as seen in his deliberative democracy and piecemeal engineering. In so doing, the paper shall help in re-modelling democracy in Nigeria as we extract the social and political nutrients in the thoughts of both Plato and Karl Popper. To achieve this, the paper shall adopt and expository and analytical method in arriving at the way forward in consolidating our democracy in Nigeria.

The Context of Plato's Selection and Prescription of the Philosopher King

Aristocratic parents gave birth to Plato in Athens in 428 BC. His mother, Perictione, is said to be a descendant of Solon, an almost legendary Athenian lawgiver and the author of the city's first constitution, and his father, Ariston, of Codrus, the city's last monarch, according to historical accounts. Glaucon and Adeimantus, Plato's two brothers, are two of the principal figures in *The Republic*⁴. During the time that Plato was a child,

¹ K.R. Popper *The Open Society and Its Enemies* Vol. 1 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 38

² F.O.C. Njoku *Introduction to Social and Political Philosophy* (Enugu: University of Nigeria, 2019), 21

³ Ibid

⁴ <https://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/republic/context/> Retrieved Online 7th December, 2022

Ariston passed away, and Perictione remarried Pyrilampes, a companion of the Athenian statesman Pericles. The young Plato thus had excellent possibilities in Athenian politics due to his noble birth and intellectual abilities. His early political turmoil drew him into the public eye⁵.

Plato's social and political world in Athens seems very distant a period from his time to our own contemporary period. Nobody can best understand Plato and his environment more than himself as one who is a product of his own environment. Plato lived in a time when there were significant social inequities and political issues in Greece⁶. Being one of the greatest thinkers in classical Greece, Plato is also credited with founding political philosophy. *The Republic* is Plato's best work; it contains profound ideas and covers a wide range of topics, including politics, ethics, education, and the military. Its political philosophy, which can be considered to be particularly distinctive among them, not only reflects the social climate of the city-state at the time but also articulates Plato's own political aspirations and objectives⁷. In a time when democracy and tyranny were in bitter conflict, Plato was critical of both⁸. Ancient Greece's city-states were based on slavery. The methods, by which each city-state wields power, or the political system, are diverse, and in actuality, every type of political system has demonstrated its own traits and shortcomings. This is a major topic for philosophers. Plato examines and contrasts his ideal political system with other political systems in use at the time with the understanding that his ideal city-state is clearly the political incarnation of his concept/theory⁹.

Plato turned away from politics after two significant crises. The first was the two factions — the Four Hundred and the Thirty — taking control. At the conclusion of the Peloponnesian War, these affluent citizen factions took power and transformed Athens into an oligarchy. Plato had conflicting emotions on the coup. He had a connection to Charmides, one of the Thirty. However, he was critical of the government's authoritarian tendencies and instability due to his developing sense of reason. He actively promoted the restoration of democracy, but in 399 B.C. it was shown that the system was not entirely fair¹⁰. In that year, Socrates, Plato's instructor and a cult figure among young Athenians, appeared before a jury of around 500 citizens and was accused of rejecting the state's gods, creating his own gods, and corrupting the city's youth. In addition to these accusations, Socrates was put on trial due to his close friendship with other men who had lost favour with the Athens political system. Other accusations had to be made against him because a political offenders' amnesty had been declared. By a razor-thin margin, Socrates was declared guilty and given the death penalty.

Miletus, a Greek island, was the site of the birth of philosophy in the sixth century B.C. The early philosophers concentrated on problems of natural science attempting to formulate a few straightforward rules that would allow them to understand the world they were observing. Politics and ethical questions received scant attention. The values of society were discussed by poets rather than philosophers. Homer and poets like Hesiod described the characteristics of the ideal Greek man. The promise of a divine

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Levinson B.R *In Defense of Plato* (England: Harvard University Press, 1953), 38

⁷ Yali L. "An Analysis of Plato's Political Thought." In *Advances in Economics, Business and Management Research*, vol. 82. International Conference on Management, Education Technology and Economics (Atlantis Press: 2019), 416

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ <https://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/republic/> Retrieved Online 7th December, 2022

reward served as their source of inspiration for good behaviour. Two massive political revolutions in the fifth century B.C. called into question conventional Greek norms and placed ethical questions in the hands of philosophers. The Peloponnesian War, which Athens ultimately lost, took place between Sparta and Athens from 431 to 404. The horrors of battle called into question the military prowess of Homeric heroes, and the emergence of democracies, particularly in Athens, demanded a new civic virtue: the capacity to persuade in public forums and legal proceedings became more valuable than warfare¹¹.

The Sophists were itinerant teachers who would provide training in almost any subject if the student was ready and able to pay a fee, formed in this Athens context as a new social class. Their emphasis was on rhetorical techniques. They argued that persuasion should take precedence over truth. The Sophists took advantage of the current ambiguity surrounding enduring moral principles. There was no unified Sophism school, and the teachers' ideologies were very diverse. According to what is known about their thinking, they frequently held that whether a decision is correct or bad is less significant than whether it serves the agent's interests. Many have claimed that there are no such things as right and wrong and that there are no objective moral standards. Some ridiculed the notion of objective knowledge and rejected the existence of any possibility of objective truth. They argued that morality is a rule imposed on people by the social order's leaders. The Sophist, Thrasymachus, claims in *The Republic*¹² that immorality is a virtue since it helps us succeed in the life's competition. An even harsher viewpoint is attributed to a character by the name of Callicles in Plato's dialogue *The Gorgias*¹³ when he contends that traditional morality is

unfair because it seeks to deny the powerful their inherent right to exploit the helpless. While some Sophists, like Hippias, were staunch in their rejection of such teachings, there is evidence to suppose that there was a widespread tendency among Sophists to view justice as serving the interests of the powerful.

Socrates was driven by a desire to fight what he saw as forces eroding morality in this moral milieu. Socrates was troubled by what he saw as the moral laziness of the Athenians; he worriedly observed how they went about their daily lives in a self-centred, unreflective fog, concentrating on attaining and enhancing their own power and utilizing the doctrines of the Sophists to support their attitude. He came up with the idea of playing the "gadfly" and stinging his fellow Athenians into moral reflection. Every day he stood in the marketplace, trying to strike up a conversation with anybody he could. He would make everyone he encountered think about their lives, their views, and their goals since he believed that the unexamined existence was not worthwhile. As soon as Socrates executed Plato took over this task. He too wished to fight the still prevalent immorality and self-centeredness. He also wished to refute the other sceptical arguments of the Sophists, namely that there is no possibility of objective knowledge and that there is no such thing as objective truth.

Plato's Philosopher King

We must refer to Plato's *Philosopher King* in order to discuss Plato's political philosophy. Plato describes the three strata of rulers, auxiliaries, and producers that make up a proper political system. The *Philosopher King*, who is the ruler among them, has the central role. According to Plato, only those who are well-versed in philosophy can dominate political influence and so rule the entire nation. Therefore, the first step in

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Plato *The Republic* (New York :Books Inc,1943), 22

¹³ Plato *Gorgias* (Leipzig :Teubner, 1909), 43

establishing state power is to either teach philosophers to become monarchs or to allow the current rulers to become proponents of philosophical knowledge. That is, by combining their authority and intelligence, which is also a crucial step for the nation to take in the direction of justice¹⁴. To become philosophers, rulers must continually learn more than the average person and develop their skills so that producers and auxiliary workers will voluntarily help. The Philosopher King adopted the method of rule by man to rule the nation, which put forward higher standards for the quality of the rulers. Only those who receive a thorough and proper monarchy education, including learning the science of governing the nation, physical exercise, learning literature and art, and other things to cultivate a qualified ruler, will meet these standards. In addition to studying politics, literature, and the arts, rulers should also broaden their knowledge and develop their skills by studying mathematics, geometry, astronomy, music, and dialectics in order to better command their armies and seek the truth. Also crucial is that the monarchs of philosophy always cherish wisdom. They must be able to see the beauty of the truth with their hearts and keep an eye on the truth. They should, in other words, be able to see through the phenomenon and be eager to investigate the true nature of the object. Only in this way would the rulers be able to fully master genuine knowledge, sustain reason, and discriminate between good and evil.

In *The Republic*¹⁵, Plato uses metaphors of caves to help readers grasp philosophy. The idea of good is the foundation of all truth and reason, and the sun outside the cave represents the idea of flashing. The captives in the cave stand in for the vast majority of illiterate people who are unaware of the reality¹⁶. They believed the images to be real when they noticed the shadows on the cave walls. They are unaware of “ideas” that exist in the real world; only after eradicating the illusory world and people will submit to tyranny without checks under a system in which civilian leaders hold power if the incident is treated as a decoration¹⁷. Actually, this is a totalitarian regime. Civilian leaders are constantly terrified of their insecure position because they lack the talent and wisdom to govern the nation¹⁸. The ruler increased the level of protection as a result, and in order to maintain the cost of these guards, he had to keep exploiting the populace, which finally caused social discontent and suffering for the populace¹⁹. In response to these glaring flaws in the political system, Plato proposed the ideal monarchy in his heart.

According to him, the only truly ideal kingdom is the just city-state ruled by the philosophical king. Plato suggested that the monarch of philosophy should take on the role of a public mentor of knowledge and wisdom and be in charge of educating and directing other strata in order to construct a just city-state²⁰. An educated, intelligent, physically and mentally healthy class was necessary by Plato's educational programme in order to choose those who understood

¹⁴ Yali L. “An Analysis of Plato's Political Thought.” In *Advances in Economics, Business and Management Research*, volume 82. International Conference on Management, Education Technology and Economics (Atlantis Press: 2019), 417

¹⁵ Plato, *The Republic*.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ L. Yali, “An Analysis of Plato's Political Thought.” In *Advances in Economics, Business and Management Research*, volume 82. International Conference on Management, Education Technology and Economics (Atlantis Press: 2019), 418

experience. Plato acknowledged that he had created “the perfect city-state.”

Karl Poppers Criticism of Plato's Philosopher King

The contributions Karl Popper (1902-1994) made to the philosophy of science and epistemology are what make him a prominent philosopher. The majority of Popper's published works dealt with philosophical issues in the natural sciences, particularly physics, and Karl Popper stated that nature and not politics was his main area of interest²¹. The most well-known works by Karl Popper include his condemnation of totalitarianism as well as his promotion of liberty, individuality, democracy, and an “open society.” *The Poverty of Historicism* (1944) and *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945), two of his most significant political works, present a type of unified picture of science and politics.

Karl Popper had a straightforward, though not naive, and minimalist, perspective on democracy. Popper suggested a different question in place of “Who should rule?” as the central issue in political theory: “How can we set up political institutions in such a way that bad or inept rulers may be restrained from wreaking too much havoc?”²² According to Popper, this is really a concern of institutional architecture by identifying and analysing a tradition of totalitarian philosophy, whose most influential modern proponents were Hegel and Marx, it aims to defend liberal democracy against fascist and communist ideology²³. According to Karl Popper, Plato thought that all social and political change was negative and hence terrible. His Theory of Forms, views change generally as entailing imperfection by definition, and was linked to this mind-set. He also yearned for the vanished tribal unity of ancient Greece, where people coexisted

harmoniously and with a blind acceptance of accepted custom. Despite his historicism, one of his most profound philosophical goals was to prevent political change. His totalitarianism involved a strong authoritarianism that permeated every aspect of life, as well as complete subordination of the person to the interests of the state. It should be obvious that because of these beliefs, Plato is a ferocious foe of Karl Popper.

An Evaluation of Karl Popper's Criticism of Plato's Philosopher King

Popper's critique of Plato's political thought was not well-received in some quarters, while some scholars appraise his work positively, others were scandalized by it. Popper traced the roots of totalitarianism to early Greece and stated that Plato's *Republic's* city-state was an example of a closed society. Popper charged that Plato “emerged as the philosophical champion of the closed society and in the process, Plato laid the groundwork for future totalitarianism, he holds that in his *Republic* Plato betrayed his mentor Socrates and devised a system which would arrest all political and social change and turned philosophy into an enforcer rather than a challenger of authority.” Political functions are the sole preserve of the guardians because only they possess the necessary intellectual and moral qualities to exercise political power. However, his insistence on a strict and exclusive division of functions – the guardians must dedicate themselves to ruling, and the producers should be excluded from any role in the political life of the state – means that most of the population are excluded from the political order or at least experience it only as a form of external regulation.

The type of order necessary to secure social cooperation therefore does not extend

²¹ <https://iep.utm.edu/popp-pol/> Retrieved Online 7th December, 2022

²² Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* Vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945), 121

²³ Ibid, 123

to political cooperation between all members of the community. This implication is reinforced by Plato's insistence that an erosion of the strict separation of functions will result in corruption of the ideal republic and inaugurate a slide towards dissolution and anarchy, that is, towards chronic disorder. Plato therefore sought to stop this 'disorder' by creating a state with complete authority over all the lives of the citizens in his republic. William Gorton holds that this made Plato 'enforcers' of authority rather than 'challengers' of authority, this would also "revise the tide of individualism and egalitarianism that had emerged in democratic Athens establishing a hierarchical system in which the freedom and rights of the individual would be sacrificed to the collective needs of the society²⁴." This led to the allegations of authoritarianism levelled against him by Popper.

The Philosopher King and Piecemeal Social Engineering

Despite the totalitarian traits Popper discovered in the political philosophy of Plato, his idea of the Philosopher King cannot be completely discarded. This paper proposes that there are aspects of Plato's thought, which in combination with Popper's can benefit Nigeria in the bid to remake democracy. Plato's concept of the Philosopher King is projected as a leader who is trained and prepared for leadership and is picked from the best minds in the state. This means that the Philosopher King is best suited for leadership and most suited to practice or enforce social engineering. The Philosopher King is better equipped to rule and expected to be more capable of implementing social engineering.

Social engineering requires a step by step employment of new ideas to ensure social change. In the Nigerian situation, calling for a revolution entails a total overhaul of the structure of the society. This may result in violence. Popper wanted to avoid such revolution. The call for revolutionary change has been re-echoing in for years among Nigerians; but it is important that the right steps be taken to effect this change. Violent revolutionary change usually involves a total overhaul of all aspects of the state: political, economic, social. Such methods may not be necessary for a country like Nigeria which is already practicing democracy (although imperfectly). According to Hygenius C. Ezebuilo,

Just as the main task of the physical engineer is to design machines, remodel and service them, the task of the piecemeal social engineer is to design social institutions and to reconstruct and run those already in existence. Holistic or utopian social engineering as opposed to piecemeal social engineering aims at remodelling the whole of society in accordance with definite plans or blueprint²⁵.

Ezebuilo further argues that piecemeal social engineering does not address the problem of developing nations such as in African and may be more suitable for developed countries. He rather proposed a piecemeal-holistic reform which can be more effective to speed up social change rather than unproductive and time wasting one step at a time piecemeal engineering. Piecemeal-holistic engineering can tackle several societal issues as once without necessarily attempting to rebuild the whole

²⁴ *ibid*

²⁵ Hygenius C. Ezebuilo. "Poppers Piecemeal Engineering and Social Reform in Africa" *International Journal of Advanced Engineering Management and Science (IJAEMS)* Vol. 5, issue 1, Jan 2019, 76 <https://dx.doi.org/0.22161/ijaems.51.10>

institutions at once²⁶.

The problem with Ezebuilo's argument of tackling many problems at once also does not guarantee success because introducing change too fast might result in the problems popper was trying to avoid by suggesting the use of piecemeal social engineering. If a government adopts a policy that will create change in many sector of the society at once, without considering its effects and taking steps to cushion its effects, there might be serious problems at the end of the day. Piecemeal social engineering in our society should rather be directed towards making lasting positive change in the society by making such polices after considering its long term effects and as much as possible making plans to provide a means of cushioning the effects on the society. Wide spread change without proper planning or using the one pill approach to cure all illnesses will not solve all problems or create positive change in the society.

The Nexus between Popper and Plato in the remaking of Nigerian Democracy

Popper was not as interested as Plato on the question of who should rule, he was more interested in how to ensure that rulers or leaders rule well. He was well aware of the dangers of states slipping into totalitarianism and was more interested in how the scientific method which he held to be result oriented can be employed to ensure that leaders or rulers do as little damage as possible in the state. Adopting the democratic system of regular periodic elections and piecemeal engineering, he rejected violent revolutionary change as a means of achieving a just society. The Nigerian state can benefit from a merger of Plato's philosopher king and Popper's idea of democracy. Despite the many shortfalls in Plato's republic, the idea of the philosopher king is one that cannot be thrown away because it is important in political discourse.

Popper's concept of democracy will also be enriched if the philosopher king implements his piecemeal social engineering. This is because, it is not just enough to consider the limiting how much harm leaders can do by ensuring that there are periodic elections, the quality of a leader is also very important of piecemeal social engineering is to successful. Just as in construction one needs a qualified engineer, social engineering also requires that a leader be qualified and fit or the job.

This merger of Plato's philosopher king and Popper's piecemeal engineering is needed in the Nigerian state if she is ever to rescue and rebuild herself from her present state of disillusionment. The importance of a leader who is qualified and fit for leadership is as important as what ever method to be used to achieve the goals of governance in Nigeria. The philosopher king remains the best choice for leadership. Considering the situation in Nigeria, there is a common belief that the major cause of the problems we suffer as a nation is tied to bad leadership. There is therefore a need for Nigerians to be as particular as Plato on who is fit to rule. The choice of a leader will make or mar any process of development because if only consider the importance of Poppers piecemeal social engineering without considering the choice of a fit leader, we are bound to discover that a bead leader can do a lot of damage in only one tenure of office which is four years by Nigerian standards. It is therefore imperative that Nigeria must get it right when it comes to choosing leaders. The philosopher king remains the best choice for the practical implementation of Poppers social engineering because there have always been problems of proper formulation and implementation of policies in the country. The philosopher king will be more knowledgeable for the small scale reforms that the country seriously needs. It is important to take the right steps in making

²⁶ Hygenius C. Ezebuilo. "Poppers Piecemeal Engineering and Social Reform in Africa," 77

such reforms. The right steps at the right time will make such small scale reforms effective. There will be no need to make mistakes that can do irreparable damage to the fragile peace that the country enjoys.

Conclusion

Plato's philosopher king and Popper's social engineering do not need to be parallel ideas, this paper holds that they can complement each other and can serve as a solution to the problems facing Nigerian democracy. Popper's ideas on democracy as the type of political system because it goes a long way towards solving a nonviolence institutionalized and regular way to get rid of bad rulers by voting them out of office is laudable but Nigerians have seen the effects of bad leaderships for years despite voting these bad leaders out. It is now more important that we consider what kind of leaders we elect. The philosopher king is the kind of leader that Nigeria needs and such a leader is most suitable to ensure proper implementation of Popper's piecemeal social engineering.

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