

Plato and Rousseaus commentary on constitutional breakdown

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Plato and Rousseau's Commentary on Constitutional Breakdown (al Affiliation)

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Plato, just like some of the great minds of his time, criticized democracy as part of the constitution, especially after the death of Socrates under democratic law. In his book *The Republic*, he reviewed the four major types of government constitutions, which he deemed unstable and bound to degenerate with passing time (Rosen, 2008). Important, in this case, is Plato's view of democracy, which is brought about by the constitution. For Plato, by the constitution allowing for democracy, it fosters a life or no law and order. In this case, democracy leads to a continuous increase in the desire for liberty among the citizens, which in turn leads to disorder as people increasingly chafe without patience at any form of authority. With time, the people stop caring for both the written and unwritten laws as they quest to have no one above them. For Plato, an excessive increase in something would cause reactions directed in the opposite direction (Stein, 2011). Case in point, excess liberty, brought about by democracy, whether among individuals or in states, is highly likely to lead to excess slavery. Plato thus emphasized that democracy, just like oligarchy, draws a rift between the rich and the poor (Rosen, 2008). With the perceiving the rich as plotting against them, they seek protection through rallying their support behind a champion. With the increasing support of the mob, such a champion is likely to turn into a tyrant. For Plato, the law ought to be a defining factor for all the actions of individuals within a certain jurisdiction and that people have to lose their freedom for the sake of gaining peace and harmony. To prevent degeneration of the constitution, Plato postulates that

the law has to become the master of the government and the government to be its slave, so that every person is answerable to the law (Stein, 2011). In addition, Plato suggests that for a constitution to be effective then the government should be run by the best (aristocratic), so that the leaders are highly wise and that they receive proper training concerning how a state should be run.

Contrary to Plato's view, Rousseau believes that constitutions that fail to recognize the individual moral responsibility of the citizens is bound to degenerate with time. As such, for any constitutional coercions to be justified, they must be based on certain general agreements among the citizens (Plamenatz, Philp, & Pelczynski, 2012). Rousseau observed that constitutional governments were driven by an assumption that citizens within a given state, regardless of their divisions in terms of personal opinions, remain firmly in agreement concerning the desire to share the same political existence. With such an agreement, the citizens become willing to sacrifice their views for the interest of the shared action. As such, Rousseau maintained that a distinct skill of the constitution is to minimize the collective action's demand to the area of potential or actual agreement (Stein, 2011).

Thus, most constitutions fail in cases where limiting such demands proves to be impossible, as minority groups under such constitutions increasingly feel that the community values are of less importance to them as compared to the particular interests that they compromise on the community's behalf. Such an occurrence leads to the loss of constitutional legitimacy, upon which coercion can be based. Rousseau's argument is based on his view of the “

general will", where he observes that the society's citizens should be trusted with the ability to handle their individual responsibilities towards the good of the greater society (Stein, 2011). His solution to this problem is relaxation of the constitutional government's demands such that to allow for winning back of the minority who have been disaffected. On the other hand, the government may consider recognizing the rights of such minority and allow them to establish themselves independently as a political society.

References

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