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Mixing Up Plato

Caitlin Desmond

Throughout the 18th century, ancient classical examples played an essential role in the formation of the United States and its government, both of which were based on antiquated theories, ideals, successes, and failures. The founding fathers of the United States were well-versed in a multitude of ideologies due to an intensive classical education, primarily focused on ancient Greece and Rome. Due to this expansive knowledge of the classics, the founders were drawn to certain philosophers, political theorists, and ancient government leaders when considering how to form their new nation. Through the writings and reports by influential ancient figures, government models were examined and analyzed by the founders, specifically when and why certain governments succeeded and failed. Still, not all classical examples were viewed in a positive light. These “undesirable examples” were weaponized and degraded by the founders when creating the new form of government. Moreover, these adverse examples were chosen selectively by the founding fathers, who, in turn, misconstrued their true message and history. In this paper, I will maintain that although Plato has been regarded as a highly respected philosopher and political theorist, both Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, founding fathers and presidents of the United States, unjustly discredited Plato’s political and ideological theories, neglecting Plato’s role in creating the mixed government theory, an instrumental component of the government of the United States.

Plato, considered the founder of Western philosophy, was an ancient Athenian philosopher who studied and questioned Greek society. Inspired by his teacher Socrates, Plato wrote many dialogues reflecting his ideas surrounding Athenian life, government, and ideals. His most well-known piece of work is *Republic*, which focuses on the nature and importance of

justice in civil society. Plato describes justice in the state as “the condition in which its three functionally defined parts – the rulers, the rulers’ auxiliaries, and the rest of the citizens – work in harmony, guided by the expert understanding of the rulers who grasp what is in the common interest” (Annas 2012). Plato and his dialogues have been respected and well-read because of their profound societal and governmental insights. Plato’s insights have allowed for future generations to adopt these ideas and theories into their societies and governments.

Like many early Americans, Thomas Jefferson valued the ancients and the lessons they bestowed on future generations. Throughout his political life, he drew conclusions from his favorite ancient figures Tacitus and Epicurus. In Jefferson’s own words, “Epicurus gives laws for governing ourselves...containing everything rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us” (Richard 1989, 432-433). From these ancient lessons, Jefferson formed his political beliefs, centralizing the free will of the people, rights of states, and republican simplicity (McColley 2021).

John Adams, similar to Jefferson, was a leading lawyer of his time as well as a president of the United States. He believed that ancient figures and attitudes, such as the patriotic nature of Cicero, should be copied when creating the United States. Adams describes the importance of classics, “the classics [are] imperative in a young democratic society that [is] in desperate need of republican role models” (Manning 1999).

The relationship between Adams and Jefferson is an intriguing aspect of American history. Despite their life-long competition on the political stage, the two corresponded through letters discussing political ideas, classical influences, and the formation of the United States government. In two letters, they discuss Plato and his insights after Jefferson had returned from a “long absence” and had the chance to “leisurely read” Plato’s *Republic* (Jefferson 1814).

Jefferson wanted to re-examine Plato's prestige and reputation as a prominent ancient source of governmental wisdom. His findings resulted in criticism, first calling Plato's work, "the heaviest task-work" because he needed to "wade thro' the whimsies, the puerilities, and unintelligible jargon of [the] work" (Jefferson 1814). After criticizing the writing style of Plato, he questions why Plato has been so highly valued across centuries, crediting his "foggy mind" as his largest flaw (Jefferson 1814). This identified "flaw" allowed Jefferson to conclude that Plato's investigation of Greek society and government was inherently wrong, therefore Plato should not be regarded as a "great mind of the ancient world" (Stein 2011). In response to Jefferson, Adams agreed, "[In reading *Republic*] I could scarcely exclude the Suspicion that he intended [*Republic*] as a bitter Satyre upon all Republican government" (Adams 1814). Adams, who strongly advocated for a strong, central, and representative government, was upset by Plato's view that a republican government is destined for failure. Adams could not fathom a successful and productive government that did not include the representation of its people. He also believed that Plato's interpretation of a republican government would be detrimental to the progress of the American republican system (Adams 1814). Adams determined that Plato's insights should not be regarded as an example for the American government. Jefferson and Adams agreed to discredit Plato as a political theorist, excluding him from their list of exemplary ancient figures.

The major mistake that Jefferson and Adams made when considering the credibility of Plato was critically examining just one of Plato's works. The two fixated on the radical ideas presented in *Republic*, ignoring the influential and sound ideas described in Plato's other works, such as *Laws*. *Laws* include one of Plato's most significant ideas: the mixed government theory. Mixed government theory is the foundation upon which the United States government was built; however, Jefferson and Adams overlooked the theory. In Plato's words, a successful government

is “best made out of a tyranny; and secondly, out of a monarchy; and thirdly, out of some sort of democracy; fourth, [incorporate] the capacity for improvement” (Plato IV). Plato argues that “mixing” beneficial elements of tyranny, monarchy, and democracy will lead to a successful, long-lasting government system. Plato clearly states the beginning of what would become an outline for many major government systems in the modern-day era, yet Jefferson and Adams still discredited him as an influential political theorist.

Although Jefferson and Adams did not acknowledge the mixed government theory in their analysis of Plato, both understood its success in previous governments and even incorporated a form of mixed government into their political views. Instead of recognizing Plato’s theory, Jefferson and Adams focused on Polybius’s description of the historic success of the mixed government. Polybius was an ancient Greek historian whose *Histories* went into detail about the mixed government of Rome which ultimately contributed to the overwhelming success of the civilization (Derow 2016). Although it was important to note that mixed governments were extremely successful, Jefferson and Adams completely disregarded where and why this form of government was created. Plato believed that civil war is one of the greatest dangers to society, therefore, to avoid such disaster, he decided that the people, along with an overarching government, could work together to prevent such a disaster. Mixed government allows for justice, order, success, and peace in a society, hence its overwhelming usage and success across centuries. While examining Plato’s theory, Jefferson and Adams would have noticed that Plato created this theory for future governments to follow by example. If they understood this reasoning, Jefferson and Adams could properly analyze Plato as a political theorist. Had they closely examined *Laws*, with a focus on Plato’s contemplative, nuanced theories, Jefferson and

Adams would have seen the overwhelming impact that Plato had on successful ancient governments, as well as his immense affect on the developing government of the United States.

The reception of Plato and his works by Thomas Jefferson and John Adams speaks to a larger issue in the modern world of selectively analyzing the classics. Although Jefferson and Adams had access to all of Plato's surviving works, the two decided to analyze Plato as an individual, philosopher, and political theorist, based on just one of his works. By choosing to focus on a singular work, Jefferson and Adams misjudged Plato and his competence, completely overlooking Plato's contribution to their political beliefs and new government systems. This mistake is not isolated to the founders. Misjudging and misrepresenting the classics is a prevalent issue in the modern world. Had Jefferson and Adams' opinion of Plato prevailed, the modern world would be unaware of Plato's vast effect on philosophy and government, essentially discrediting all his contributions to the modern world. This act of reception by Jefferson and Adams emphasizes the importance of examining all works by a classical figure before forming ideas and attitudes towards the individual, their ideas, and their contributions to society.

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