

Unexamined Lives, Unchanging Opinions, Unknowing Wisdom!

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Who was Socrates?

Socrates was a classical Greek philosopher who has been credited as one of the founders of Western philosophy. He is also viewed as being the first moral philosopher of the Western ethical tradition of thought. And since he did not pen any of his own teachings, he remains a somewhat enigmatic figure, and what modern-day scholars know about his views comes largely from his students Plato and Xenophon.

When I was pursuing my studies in France quite a few moons ago, I had to wade through a couple of years of philosophy too, and Socrates was one of the compulsory topics. Riffing through the pages of my assignments (we used to call them travaux-dirigés in those olden days), I learnt for instance that Socrates wanted to establish an ethical system that would be based on human reason. He strongly believed that the greatest leaders are the ones who possessed knowledge, virtue and a complete understanding of themselves. Perhaps this is why one of his quotations, that "the unexamined life is not worth living", sounds quite banal in our digital and jarringly populist age today but it was nonetheless fundamental to Socrates' convictions.

But why am I suddenly inserting Socrates into the pages of a Telos magazine that is largely dedicated to the theological and practical challenges facing the Arab World? The answer lies broadly in the conversations that Socrates had with Adeimantus and Glaucon,

two of Plato's affluent brothers who were part of his inner circle. In his conversations with Adeimantus for instance, as reported by Plato in his Republic, Socrates suggested that a boat in choppy seas could well sink if it is navigated without a competent and wise captain, and went on to draw an analogy between democracy without wisdom and sheer demagoguery.

So do democracy and wisdom have to go hand-in-hand? Was he right for his era? And can I somehow transpose his thoughts to the MENA and Gulf regions in our contemporary times - at least from 2010 onwards when the hints of a novel Arab uprising began to make themselves felt across many Arab countries? Can one say that the protests, hiraks or revolutions (the label is irrelevant for me) that started with Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria and then volleyed into Yemen, Algeria, Sudan, Iraq and Lebanon were wrong or ill-fated events led by a population that has neither the competence nor the wisdom to captain its democratic rights?

Let me start by averring that democracy can indeed lead to demagoguery. I only need to look at the USA, Australia or even parts of Europe today (but not only today, mind you) to realise how some leaders appeal to the masses through their unfettered and jaw-dropping populism. Their raw words and crude deeds often have little to do with democracy, wisdom or competence let alone

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with truth but a lot with crass self-promotion and self-persuasion (construed at times as fake news). So how much different is that in the MENA & Gulf regions? Can I rebut this link between competence or wisdom and the concept of democracy?

Arab countries by and large do not enjoy or promote free systems. This is not a major revelation but a simple truism. The closest they come to democracy is benevolent dictatorship which is the example of a few monarchies. But most of the systems in the majority of countries are autocracies that control or hack ordinary men and women in their every decision - be that through oppression, suppression, confessional and sectarian affiliation or even political mantras and overweening charisma. There is no proper rule of law, no equality in front of the law and hardly any accountability. There is ipso facto no value to the concept of citizenry. Self-centred rulers (almost inevitably males) are disinterested in ordinary 'citizens' and treat them merely as subjects not expected to utter opinions or become involved in public office. Inevitably, corruption creeps in. This is why most Arab countries are run with an iron fist in an endorsement of the colloquial saying that 'it is my way or the highway'. With quite a few of the rulers alas deeply steeped in venality, how can one instil wisdom in those ruling classes and call them competent in the first place?

The protests in many Arab streets are clamouring for freedom, justice, dignity and all those gifts that distinguish us as a thinking species. But do the protestors have a roadmap that points the way forward? In other words, do they have the competence and wisdom

to undertake the task of running a country? Conversely, many rulers do not have the competence and wisdom either for the public good when they are swayed by unimaginable corruption, greed and often a large touch of narcissism. So Socrates' theory falters because it is difficult to define competence that is married with wisdom and then ensure that it is durable. This is why democracy is not necessarily secured by the masses in the streets nor by the elites in their ivory towers. Rather, robust institutions alone can safeguard our rights and correct any excesses by rulers and masses alike.

During the 19 years that I have penned my pieces in the epektasis web-site or elsewhere, and as I witnessed the high and low ebbs of politics, I have consistently advocated for justice and dignity let alone accountability and integrity as ways out of the morass that we witness in many countries. And today, all I can add in terms of hindsight let alone foresight is that the young Arab generations will have to go through the teething problems of changing the systems in their countries so they can install a sense of governance that is democratic, transparent and inclusive (in the sense of participatory and open for all), wise, and above all untethered. It will happen not only when corrupt politicians are swept away, but more critically when we establish and firewall institutions that defend the rule of law as well as the common wealth.

This will clearly take time, sacrifice, resilience and education, but the tenacious hold on power by the elites must be undone with patient courage rather than impatient outrage. Otherwise, the accusation often levelled at organisations, such as the 22-member Arab League, that they collectively are fatuous

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and achieve nothing cannot vanish simply because of some fancy PR campaigns in the Western capitals, or financial largesse thrown at lobbying agencies let alone - yes, you guessed it - unchecked demagoguery.

At various chapters in the history of the Levant, there has been a moment when a genie has been set free from its lamp and has soared for a while. But it was captured by those who dreaded free thought and put it back in its claustrophobic enclosure. However, another genie escaped the bottle in 2010 and this genie has eluded captivity despite the mammoth efforts of those with power or money. The time for change might well be tantalisingly close for the men and women of the Levant to find their voices and speak out against injustice, corruption and the muzzling of citizens who are left to drift listlessly whilst rulers - captains of ships - are happy with their loots. To use a metaphor that can be traced back to the likes of Sophocles' *Antigone*, Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* or Plato's Book VI of his *Republic*, they would not blink at rocking the ship of state on the Socratic choppy seas instead of gazing at the stars and altering their course.

For many years, I did not believe that I would witness this light of hope because the creativity of ordinary men and women was manacled by a potent blend of power, money and retribution. But I have changed my mind over the past decade because there is an impulse in the new Arab generations -

women and men alike - who are no longer willing to succumb to the humiliation of being put down, ignored, subdued or muzzled and occupied forever and who are defying serfdom with their pens, their education as well as their voices and tweets. Again, as Socrates said once, "It is better to change an opinion than to persist in a wrong one." But the journey will be as bumpy as Socrates' image of a ship minus a wise skipper sailing in choppy waters.

Despite the collective anger or frustration and the concomitant chapters of violence, I personally am filled with a sense of adventure rather than dread for the future. Call it hope - a basic ingredient in Christian teaching. In fact, as I envisage what the younger Arab generations of men and women might achieve when they work together, I also recall the wonderful GK Chesterton who wrote in *The House of Christmas* that "An adventure is only an inconvenience rightly considered. An inconvenience is only an adventure wrongly considered"!

Indeed, this is well nigh a theological lesson for us Christians, and so my wish for Telos readers today in all four corners of the Arab World is that the light of hope will outshine the darkness of structural or physical violence, and that the candle we all seek in moments of darkness will flicker untamed in their hearts and minds. After all, what is at stake is the future of the younger generations across a whole geography.