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Plutocracy

William Batchelder Greene

October 9, 1850

“Ours is no “plutocracy” but a Constitution of Grecian model.” – *Whig State Address*.

It was authoritatively determined, at the Council of the Whig Church recently held at Worcester, that the government of Massachusetts is, *not plutocratic*, but constructed on a Grecian model. One would suppose that plutocracy and Grecian forms of government, are anti-pathetic, like oil and water: for the whig logic seems to convey the idea that a constitution of Grecian model can never by any possibility be plutocratic, and that for the very reason that it is of Grecian model. What should we think of a man, wo, being asked if a house were painted yellow, should answer: No, for it is light coloured, and therefore can not be yellow? now we conceive that the government of Massachusetts might very possibly be plutocratie, and at the same time, constructed after a Grecial model; even as a house may be at once yellow and light colored.

Aristotle says, in his treatise on Politics:—“A few who are rich, and a multitude of poor, these are the directly opposing elements which divide a state. But these elements constitute

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Plutocracy is the subject of several of the articles William B. Greene contributed to The Worcester Palladium. The term would have been familiar to him from Pierre Leroux’s 1842 essay, “De la ploutocratie,” but it had also featured prominently in an address by the Massachusetts Democrats, which prompted the Whig denials that motivated this essay.

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the government, according as the prerogative of the one, or of the other, gains the preponderance. Hence two distinct kinds of republic, oligarchy and democracy." Book IV, Chap. 4. It would appear, from this extract, that the idea of a government administered by the wealthy classes of the community, was not altogether unfamiliar to the Greek mind. *Plutocracy* is a Greek word, signifying a government administered by the wealthy classes; and we are astonished to find that whig logicians conceive it to be sufficient to say that the constitution of Massachusetts is Greek; as though the people would thereby be tranquilized, and be convinced that their government is not plutocratic. Why not show first of all, that no Greek constitution can be plutocratic?—We conceive, for our part, that it would be impossible to point out any Greek constitution which is not plutocratic.

Aristotle gives his own idea of a *perfect* government: he says:—"But we will here consider the perfect government, that is to say, the government adapted to secure for the members of the social body the greatest possible amount of happiness. Now there is no happiness without virtue, as we have demonstrated; therefore, in a State whose government is perfect; and where, by consequence, the citizens are not relatively, but absolutely virtuous, no member of the social body ought to be employed in the mercantile speculations, or in mechanical trades, since such occupations are ignoble and opposed to the practice of virtue. Laborers must therefore be excluded from the exercise of political rights. For, without leisure, no one can acquire virtue, and give himself to the practice of public business. * * * * It is indispensibly requisite that men occupied with public affairs should be beyond the reach of want. They ought therefore to have such fortunes as will enable them to live at their ease: such, indeed, is the condition requisite for every true citizen. In fact, mechanics and laborers ought never to enter as a component part, into the body politic; for we have demonstrated (in the 3d Book,)

that their occupations are an obstacle to virtue. If therefore it is true that there is no happiness without virtue, if it is true that the State can be happy only in the proportion that, not a part, but the whole of its citizens are happy, it is evident that the class of citizens who exercise political rights, should be composed exclusively of men of wealth. Then your laborers will be slaves, barbarians, or naturalized foreigners.”—Book vii. chap. 10.—Is this the Greek model according to which the whig politicians conceive the Constitution of Massachusetts to have been moulded?

Plato describes a plutocracy, under the name of *oligarchy* (government by a few) as follows: “the oligarchy, said I, is the form of government which is founded on the estimate of men’s property; in which the rich rule, and the poor have no share in the government. Aye,—I understand, said he. Should we not, first of all, explain how the change is made from a *timocracy* (government by honorable men) to an oligarchy? We should. And surely the way in which this change is made, said I, is manifest even to the blind! How? That treasury, said I, which each one fills with gold, destroys the State: for, first of all, they discover for themselves modes of expense for which they set aside the laws; both themselves and their wives disobeying them. Very likely, said he. And afterwards, said I, I think, when one observes another, and enters into rivalry, the people generally become of this character. It is likely. And thence then, said I, as they advance in the intensity of the desire of acquiring wealth, the more honorable they account this, the more dishonorable they will deem virtue; for is not virtue so much at variance with wealth that supposing each to be placed in the opposite end of a balance, they would always weigh the one against the other? Justly so, he replied. While wealth is honored in the State, both virtue and good men must necessarily be held in dishonor. Instead then of being ambitious and contentious men, they will at last have become lovers of gain and wealth; and the rich they will praise and admire, elevating them to the magistracy, while

the poor man they will quite despise. Certainly, &c., &c.—The Republic, B. viii. c. 6. We conclude that the plutocratic form of government was by no means unknown to the Greeks.

But upon what particular Greek constitution do the whig politicians suppose the government of Massachusetts to have been modeled? Upon that of Sparta, perhaps. “It is an acknowledged principle,” says Aristotle, “that, in a good government, the citizens occupied in public business, ought to be free from the charge of providing for their own wants; but this principle is difficult to put in practice. The slaves of the Spartans are always speculating on public disasters. Too much gentleness renders slaves insolent, causing them to pretend to equality with their masters; but savage treatments, like those of the Lacedemonians, make of slave so many enemies and conspirators. It is therefore evident that the Spartan laws are not the best possible, so far as regards the Helots. * * * If a government exists which does not regulate women by any institutions by any institutions, the half of the state will be without laws. Now this is the position of Sparta. The women live there licentiously: they give themselves over to every excess of luxury and intemperance. By a natural consequence, riches are in high honor in such a government, above all since the men have a great liking for women, a liking sufficiently common among warlike nations. * * * To these vices of the Lacedemonian constitution, add an imperfect legislation on the distribution of property. Some possess immense wealth, while others own hardly anything; so that the whole country belongs to a few individuals. * * * It has resulted from this improvidence of the law, that the territory of Sparta, which might support 1500 horsemen and 30,000 footmen, counts at the present day only about 1000 warriors.” &c. It is evident that the whig address does not make reference to Sparta, for if there is any thing of which the people of Massachusetts can boast, it is of the virtue of their women—perhaps it makes reference to Athens; but we will not continue these quotations.

There is no analogy whatever between the Greek constitutions, and that of Massachusetts. In Massachusetts, we recognize the liberty and equality of the whole people. No Greek constitution could possibly go into operation except on the basis of slavery: and whatever may be said of other States, our particular constitution recognizes no such basis. The constituting element of our commonwealth, is the township: now nothing similar to our townships existed in Greece, neither could anything similar have existed there. In Greece, the citizen existed for the State, he was merged in, and swallowed up by the State. With us the government is organized according to the will of the whole people. The democratic resolutions charged the whigs with a desire to conform our government, not to its original constitution, but to the Greek plutocratic constitutions. It appears that the whigs, by a self-destructing, self-excluding statement, confess the truth of this charge in substance, even while they would seem to deny it.